

COMPLAINT TO THE MULTIVERSE



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1. Make a wish! (But read the fine print first)

Once upon a time – as all good bureaucracies begin – there was a universe that decided to create order. Not because order was a noble virtue, but because disorder caused too much paperwork.

In the beginning was the form.

It wasn't particularly large, not particularly beautiful, but it had boxes. And that made all the difference. The gods had first created chaos—a seething sea of energy, will, and spontaneous creativity. Then they realized that none of it could be cataloged. No file. No record. No filing system. And so the first form was born: "Application for Existence," signed with a flash of lightning, a divine breath, and a pinch of coffee.

Since then, the bureaucracy of being had spread like mold on a damp cosmos.

It is said that on the edge of the donut planet – that cosmic pastry which orbited its own reason in a comfortable orbit – stood an office that was older than reason and only slightly younger than the first complaint.

This office had no name, but on its door, in faded gold lettering, was written:

"Department for Wish Processing, Subdivision Happiness and Enlightenment, Donutplanet Branch".

Bartholomäus Klemm worked there.

Bartholomew was the most organized person the universe had ever produced—or, as his colleagues said, the most boring man in creation. His desk was so tidy that it was regularly visited by philosophers who claimed that the very idea of order must have originated there. His stamp was always freshly oiled. His files were arranged by color, weight, and emotional value. And his coffee cup was always exactly two-thirds full—never more, never less.

But on this particular morning, as the sun rose inside the Doughnut Planet – a small, dutiful sphere of light that shone for exactly eight hours each day and finished work on time – something happened that overwhelmed even Bartholomew's internal system of order.

A request has been submitted.

That in itself was nothing unusual. Requests came in daily, mostly poorly worded, often with spelling mistakes and occasionally with coffee stains. But this request had no form.

He was simply... there. A loosely floating "I want," hanging in the air like a forgotten password.

Bartholomew frowned. He reached for his reading glasses, put them on, and the "I want" shone brighter. "Well, that's..." he muttered. "Impermissible. An informal request without any basis for approval."

He sighed. In his career, he had seen everything: incorrectly filled-out application forms, duplicate requests, backdated desires, and a particularly stubborn request for eternal youth that constantly renewed itself. But never a formless request.

He opened the drawer, took out Form 0 – "Preliminary Recording of Unapproved Metaphysical Inquiries" – and began to write. Form 0 was no ordinary piece of paper. It rustled impatiently, sighed if you wrote too slowly, and had the unpleasant habit of correcting itself.

"Applicant's name?" Bartholomew murmured. The form scribbled on its own: "Universe, presumably."

He paused. "What does that mean – presumably?" The form puffed up in offense.

Please refrain from asking questions during data collection.

Bartholomew sighed deeply, a sigh that in other dimensions would have been registered as an earthquake. "Good. Next: Type of wish?" The form scratched with its own ink: "Fulfillment of unfulfilled wishes."

He stared at the answer. "That's—"

Meta" whispered the form, slightly annoyed. Bartholomew hated it when paper was smarter than he was.

Meanwhile, the donut planet trembled slightly. A cough formed inside the small sun. Creation itself had the feeling that someone was tampering with the laws of reality.

And somewhere, far beyond the limits of administrative reason, the universe sat in a meditative state, considering whether it should desire a new beginning.

That was the moment Bartholomew decided he needed a coffee. Not just any coffee, but the good, dark kind from the storehouse of existence, brewed with water filtered through at least three realities. He took the cup, looked at the steaming contents – and realized that the steam was forming words:

"Congratulations. Your request is being processed."

Bartholomew almost choked. "My what?" But the steam dissipated as if it had never existed.

He went to the window. From there he could see the ring-shaped world slowly rotating around its sun. In the distance, the snow-covered mountains of Frustvall glittered, while the Lakes of Paradoxes lapped gently. In one of these bodies of water (Bartholomew knew exactly which one) lived the Snapping Fish—those rare, eager-to-bite fish that were said to be able to grant wishes if you asked them politely enough. Or shouted at them. The accounts were contradictory.

But this time it wasn't a fish, a god's joke, or a metaphysical leap. This time it was the universe itself that had made a wish.

And when the universe wants something, someone gets the paperwork.

"Clamp!" shouted a voice from the next desk. Ms. Oberschreiber, his supervisor, was the only known person who could threaten with a file folder as if it were a loaded weapon. "We have an anomaly in the request system! Formless request, ID A-Zero!" "Yes, I know," replied Bartholomew. "I have it here." "Here? Like, here?" "It's... floating." "Floating?" "Yes." A pause. Then: "Has he complained yet?" "Not yet." "Then we're in luck. If he starts formulating complaints, it goes to the Complaints Department. And they're still on vacation."

Bartholomew nodded slowly. He knew what that meant: if no one cared, reality would take care of it itself. And reality, as every official in the cosmos knew, had no sense of humor.

He sat down, picked up his pen and wrote in the notes column:

Recommendation: Referral to a higher authority. Reason: Application too large for local processing.

Form 0 buzzed briefly, as if it had been thinking, and then began to fold itself up. A soft "pffft" sounded as it disappeared.

Bartholomew remained alone, staring at his desk – and saw that a new form lay there. This time it was red. On it, in gold letters, was written:

“Complaint to the Multiverse – Version 1.0 (Pilot Phase)”

He groaned. That wasn't a good sign. Whenever the multiverse tested pilot phases, something always went wrong. Last time, they'd accidentally invented the weather.

He took the cup, drank the rest of his interdimensional coffee, and muttered, "I wish I had the day off today."

The steam in the cup replied:

"Your application will be reviewed."

Which was rare, but all the more worrying for it.

For every time the universe decided to take its responsibilities seriously, those who had to exist under its efficiency suffered. It was as if someone had given a bureaucrat a deadline that suddenly made sense – a situation that only occurred in nightmares or higher dimensions.

While gears of light and administration clicked in the center of the donut planet, the first signs of the "process" began on the surface.

A wind arose – not meteorologically, but metaphysically. It smelled of ink, old paper, and anticipation. And everywhere it passed, wishes began to materialize.

At first, it was just a man in the town of Antragsruh who casually said on his way to work, "I wish I had more time."

He stopped abruptly when the sun stopped moving. Then the moon. Then the second hand of his pocket watch. Then everything. Only he himself was still moving, which at first he liked. Until he realized that he was forever the only one who was.

Time stood still for him. For everyone else, it went on. They call that individual luck when you're too stupid to recognize irony.

In the Office for Cosmic Complaints, Bartholomäus Klemm stood before a desk that seemed to be breathing. Each breath made the wood grain pulsate, and the papers on it rustled as if whispering to one another.

"That's not normal," he said quietly. "I know," replied the auditor, who was now paler than a blank application. "The office only breathes when the universe is in production mode." "And that means?" "That it reads our applications." Bartholomew's eyes widened. "It reads?" "Yes. And evaluates them."

A cold shiver ran down his spine. "I filled out my form in a hurry." "So you noticed." "I may have... missed a few boxes." "Which ones?" "Please specify your request." The auditor blinked. "What did you write there?" "A dash." "A dash?" "I thought it was better than nothing." The auditor tilted his head. "A dash is everything. In the universe. A line. A boundary. A connection. A separation."

"That wasn't intentional!" "It's never intentional, Mr. Klemm. It's always a form."

Out on the donut planet, this line began to spread. A luminous, white rift stretching across the sky—thin as an idea, but so sharp that it cut through the horizon. It split the blue in two, slicing through clouds, mountains, and even an unfortunate seagull, which from then on flew in two completely opposite directions.

The rift shone in the valleys, and where it cut through cities, borders disappeared. Borders between land and sea, between day and night, between right and wrong and what required permission.

The inhabitants of the Doughnut Planet looked up in amazement, while Bartholomew panicked in his office below.

"I have... divided the universe?" The auditor shrugged. "A classic rookie mistake." "Excuse me?" "Most officials accidentally destroy something on their first metaphysical application. Some erase entire continents, others inadvertently create duplicate entries of reality. One of us—I believe it was three eons ago—invented the feeling 'Monday.' We don't talk about it."

"I have to undo this!" gasped Bartholomew. "Too late. The universe is already working on it."

In fact, inside creation, a mechanical arm of light advanced. It reached for what looked like a giant typewriter and began to retype reality. Each letter was an event. Each comma a decision. And each time the lever was pulled, the world changed.

In the town of Wishful Thinking, everyone suddenly won the lottery. But because the universe loved balance, it simultaneously raised prices—for everything. Instantly. A loaf of bread now cost 12 billion Wishful Thinking Marks. The local baker was thrilled. For exactly two seconds. Then his oven exploded from sheer inflation.

A woman in the desert of Grollmurmel, who had said her whole life, "I just want peace," got it. Everything around her fell silent. Birds, wind, heartbeat. Then she collapsed.

The universe was efficient. But efficiency is not the same as understanding.

"We have to stop this," whispered Bartholomew. "Impossible," replied the auditor. "Then slow it down?" "Only if you fill out form P-Delta – Request for Partial Process Pause of the Cosmos."

"Do we have it here?" "No. It's in the central registry for standstills." "And where is that?" "It's at a standstill."

Bartholomew leaned on the table. He felt as if the floor beneath his feet was pulsating. The office itself vibrated with energy. A few files began to jump off the shelves of their own accord and attempted to sort themselves alphabetically – by smell.

That was never a good sign.

"What happens when the universe is finished?" The auditor thought for a moment. "Then... it will evaluate itself. It loves feedback." "And what if it's dissatisfied?" "Then it will file a complaint." Bartholomew blinked. "To where?" "To us."

At that moment, the floor opened. Not simply – as one might expect – with a hole or crack, but properly, in the form of a drop-in drawer. On it was written: "Feedback channel of the universe – only with a valid transaction number."

A gust of wind swept in. Bartholomew held onto his form, but it was too late: the red application was sucked in. It fluttered away, turned, and disappeared into the drawer.

"That was my piece of evidence!" he shouted. "That was yours!" corrected the auditor. "Mine is a copy!" "And where?" "In the archive. Dimension 8b." "How do we get there?" The auditor hesitated. "We can't. But I know someone."

Bartholomew groaned. "Who?" The auditor pulled a card from his robe, on which was written in ornate lettering:

"The stack of papers. Department of Entropic Documents. Specialty: Untidy Realities."

"He still owes me a few favors," said the auditor. "Or he hates me. It's hard to tell with paperwork."

Bartholomew looked around. The office shook, the lights flickered, and in the distance, the file folders could be heard rhythmically whispering, "Make a wish!" "I'm coming with you," he said resolutely. "You have to. You're the applicant." "I thought the universe was the applicant."

"No, you were just the medium." "And what does that mean?" "It means, Mr. Klemm, that the universe now bears your signature."

Bartholomew turned pale. "What does it do with it?" "What any good clerk would do: It uses it as approval."

Something thundered in the distance. A flash of light streaked across the sky, and the crack above the planet shone brightly.

Then, with a resounding whoosh, a tidal wave of pure happiness crashed over the land. It was golden, sparkling – and completely random.

Someone somewhere shouted: "I've won the lottery AND my mother-in-law has disappeared!" And right next to her: "I've got my mother-in-law back!"

Bartholomew saw it, closed his eyes, and simply said: "That's not happiness. That's chaos in elevated language."

The auditor nodded. "Then we should start translating it."

And somewhere in the depths of creation, in a room full of file folders and whispering desks, something huge and papery twitched briefly – and opened an eye.

Bartholomäus Klemm had seen many abysses. The abyss of responsibility. The abyss of the coffee pot when it was empty. And once – the abyss between reality and Form 17-A ("Application for temporary non-existence"). But none of them even came close to the abysses of bureaucratic hell.

The archive hell lay deep beneath the Doughnut Office, in a zone that reluctantly accepted even the laws of administration. Officially, it was part of the "Central Archive Administration for Special Cases." Unofficially, it was the final repository for everything that even the gods would rather forget.

"We have to go down here?" asked Bartholomew, as they stood before an elevator shaft from which the occasional smell of burnt paper rose. "Unfortunately, yes," replied the auditor. "But don't worry—the elevator is safe." "Safe?" "In a statistical sense. The probability that it won't crash is almost fifty percent." "Almost?" "Well, plus or minus twenty."

The elevator itself was made of brass, mahogany, and fear. A sign above the door read:

"Attention: Enter at your own risk. The administration is not liable for loss of soul or documented panic attacks."

The auditor pressed a button labeled "LOWER". Then another one simply labeled "EVEN LOWER". The elevator began to jerk.

"You know, Mr. Klemm," said the auditor as they slowly descended, "the paperwork hell isn't as bad as everyone says." "Oh?" "Yes, it is. Just as bad. Only with worse lighting."

The cabin groaned as they descended. Outside, files floated by—loose, as if carried by the wind, but with a certain purpose. Some of them whispered. Others murmured numbers. One file tapped against the glass and politely asked if anyone had happened to see its back.

"How... how can paper live?" asked Bartholomew. "Oh, that's quite simple," said the auditor. "Every file contains energy—what's called bureaucratic potential. If you accumulate enough of it, it develops consciousness. It's like religions, only with forms." "And the stack of paper?" "That's the end result."

The elevator stopped with a painful thud. A sign flashed: "Final stop: Paragraph Level 9." Bartholomew took a deep breath. "And now?" The auditor opened the door. "Now we enter the realm of the unfiled."

The air smelled of dust, ink, and regret. Walls of file folders reached the ceiling—if there was one at all. The floor was covered with scraps of paper that shifted with every step, as if they didn't like being walked on. A soft rustling filled the room.

"Down here," the auditor explained, "ends all the applications that were never fully completed. Applications without a signature, without a date, without hope." "That sounds sad." "No. That's standard procedure."

They walked through a passage whose walls were made of stacked registers. Something shone in the distance. At first, Bartholomew thought it was a lamp. Then he realized it was an eye.

A gigantic, golden eye of molten ink, calmly scrutinizing her. Beneath it, the body of a being made of paper slowly rose. Folders folded into limbs, files into skin. A breath made a thousand sheets flutter. Then it spoke, with the voice of all the stamps in the world:

"WELCOME TO THE DISMANTLED HOPES DEPARTMENT."

"Uh... hello," said Bartholomew. "I... uh... am here to—"

"TO COMPLAIN. TO BEGIVE. TO PLEASE. THAT'S WHAT THEY ALL DO."

"No! I— I just want to... talk to the stack of papers."

A soft, amused rustling went through the shelves.

"YOU ARE ALREADY SPEAKING TO HIM."

Bartholomew's eyes widened. "You... You are..."

"THE PILL, YES. THE ORIGIN OF ALL FORMS. THE STORAGE OF THE UNREAD. THE WRATH OF PAPER."

The auditor sighed. "He loves grand entrances." "SHUT UP, EXAM BOOKLET!" thundered the stack.

Then the creature turned to Bartholomew.

"THEY DID SOMETHING THAT NO ONE BEFORE THEM DARED."

"I... just wanted to help!"

"YOU SUBMITTED AN APPLICATION WITHOUT READ THE SMALL PRINT."

"Yes but-"

"THE UNIVERSE HAS ACCEPTED HIM. IT HAS BEGUN TO PROCESS ALL WISHES."

The floor trembled. Ink began to boil between the filing cabinets. From it rose small, fluttering beings – paper wings, letters, ghosts of paragraphs. They laughed, cried, and screamed all at once.

"What... what are these?"

"THE REMAINING WISHES. UNPROCESSED DESIRES. YOUR REQUEST HAS AWAKENED THEM."

"I just wanted—"

"IT'S ALWAYS THE SAME. NO OFFICIAL WANTS THE END OF THE WORLD. IT'S JUST THE CONSEQUENCE OF A MISSING FIELD."

Bartholomew took a step back, but the ground suddenly formed something beneath his feet – a leaf that described itself:

A-ZERO-REVERSE FORM – Application for the reversal of universal procedures

He picked it up. The paper felt warm, almost alive. "That's it!" he exclaimed. "With this, I can reverse the application!" The auditor looked skeptical. "Perhaps. If you fill in the correct information."

"What would that be?" "The opposite of happiness."

Bartholomew hesitated. "That... sounds dangerous." "Anything written in capital letters is dangerous."

He looked at the form. It glowed faintly, as if it were breathing. He took his pen, took a deep breath – and wrote in the field:

"I wish that nothing would ever be fulfilled again."

A moment of silence. Then the shelves began to shake. Files jumped out of their compartments. The stack of papers threw its arms up in the air.

"YOUR WISH HAS BEEN ACCEPTED!"

"What?! No!"

"YOUR WISH WILL BE PROCESSED!"

A blinding light filled the room. Then darkness.

Bartholomew opened his eyes – and everything was still. The shelves were standing still. No rustling. No movement. "Is... it over?" he whispered.

The auditor looked around. "I don't know. I don't hear anything." "That's a good thing, isn't it?" "No." The auditor frowned. "That means... the universe has stopped working."

And somewhere, far above, in the still halls of creation, one could hear the faint click of a typewriter switching itself off.

The Doughnut Planet had stopped rotating. The sun in its center stood still. Time paused.

And in the complete, absurd silence, only one sentence could be heard – quietly, like a stamp on butter paper:

"Processing complete. Please rate our service."

Stillness. Real, honest, awkward silence – the kind that makes you feel like it's staring at you.

Bartholomäus Klemm stood amidst the bureaucratic hell, which now resembled an archival statue. Not a rustle, not a whisper, not a sighing piece of paper. Even the auditor remained motionless. Only Bartholomäus himself – and his thoughts, desperately searching for a form that could explain this situation.

But the air was dead. And in the distance, the light hung frozen like a photograph that had forgotten to develop further.

He cautiously lifted a finger. The finger moved. "Hello?" he whispered. His voice sounded like a crime against silence.

No answer. He snapped his fingers. The sound hung in the air, as if he had decided to take a vacation as well.

"So... this is what it feels like when the universe clocks out," he muttered. He turned around. The auditor was still standing in the same pose, his mouth slightly open, as if frozen in a particularly boring painting about the pointlessness of office work.

Bartholomew stepped closer, flicked his hand in front of his face – no reaction. He picked up a file from the floor. It was rigid, like glass. Even the ink gleamed motionless.

"Well, wonderful," he sighed. "I'm alone. In hell. And hell is closed."

He sat down on a stack of folders, about as comfortable as a grumpy cactus, and stared into the darkness. The seconds dragged on. He could have sworn he sat there for hours, but that was mathematically impossible – if there was no time, nothing could pass.

"Perhaps," he mused aloud, "I haven't stopped at all. Perhaps I'm simply... left over."

A voice replied: "Then you're in good company."

He jumped up. The voice came from the darkness. A faint glimmer, then a figure emerged – thin, transparent and silvery, with eyes that rotated like clock hands.

"Who... who are you?" asked Bartholomew. "Oh, please. Not that question again." The figure sounded as if it had already given too many answers that no one had ever understood. "I am Time." "THE Time?" "No, one of its part-time replacements. The main Time is on strike. A labor dispute with Eternity."

Bartholomew blinked. "And you... so what exactly are you?" "The peace and quiet representative of time. I stop the shop when nobody else wants me to."

She looked at him appraisingly. "You shouldn't be here. Everything else is still, but you... are moving. That violates at least three metaphysical principles." "I wanted to stop the universe." "Congratulations. You succeeded."

"I just wanted to slow it down!" "Well. Bureaucratic overreaction. Classic beginner's mistake."

She sighed, a sound like the ticking of a distant clock. "All right, civil servant. Now what?" "I... have to restart it." "Ah, the regret phase. Comes after the coffee. Unfortunately, I can't do anything. I'm only on a temporary contract."

Bartholomew looked at her imploringly. "But you must know something!" "I know that the universe never completely stands still. There are always little remnants. Disorder. Chaos. Things that refuse to follow the rules." "Chaos?" "Yes. A very unreliable form of energy, but sometimes useful. If you manage to ignite a little of it, everything will work again."

"How do you create chaos?" She grinned crookedly. "By ceasing to follow the rules."

Bartholomew blinked. "I'm a civil servant." "Then it will be difficult."

He sat down again, stared at his hands, and muttered: "Rules are order. Order is stability. But order is what brought us here." He looked at the stationary shelves. "So maybe... disorder is the key."

He took a deep breath, reached into his pocket – and pulled out a stamp. The best one he had: "Checked and found valid." He turned it over. "What if I invalidate something?"

He looked for a form, found one called "Timestamp Overview", and pressed his stamp on it – upside down. The sound of the imprint echoed strangely. A spark hissed across the paper.

"Uh oh," said Time. "What?" "That was... unconventional." "Is that bad?" "It's chaotic."

The spark grew larger. Paper began to glow. Letters detached themselves from the pages, danced in the air, and reassembled themselves. "What's happening?" "You're bringing movement back. But not... necessarily the right kind."

A dull thud reverberated through the hell of files. Then time began to stir again slowly – stumbled, unevenly, like an old clock that has been wound too vigorously.

Bartholomew held onto a shelf. "I think it's working!" "I think you should run!" shouted Time.

Because what came back wasn't just movement. It was everything all at once.

Files fluttered open, ink shot through the air, drawers jumped open and shut, and amidst all this chaos stood Bartholomew – the only halfway rational being for miles around – trying to hold onto the form he had accidentally disenchanted.

"I wanted order!" he shouted. "And what you get," Time cried, "is life!"

A blinding light filled the room. When it faded, the auditor was standing next to him again—completely stunned. "What happened?" "I think... I turned the universe back on." "How?" Bartholomew looked at his upside-down stamp. "With a mistake."

The auditor frowned. "That contradicts all the guidelines." "Yes," said Bartholomew, smiling weakly. "Perhaps that's precisely why it's so useful."

And somewhere far above, on a level where bureaucrats of starlight watched over cosmic regulations, a new entry appeared in a golden register:

Chaos File #0001

Bartholomäus Klemm, Civil Servant 3rd Class – provisionally classified as Chaos Magician 1st Order

Below, in tiny letters:

Approval pending.

The sun at the center of the donut planet began to shine again. Quietly, cautiously. Then it coughed briefly and started up again.

Bartholomew smiled wearily, glancing at the timekeeper, who was slowly dissolving. "I... thank you." "No problem," she said. "But next time, read the fine print. There's usually coffee there."

She disappeared, and with her the silence. Life returned – loud, contradictory, messy, vibrant.

Bartholomew took a deep breath and said quietly, "Well, fine. If we're going to have chaos... let's have it properly."

2. The Department for Cosmic Complaints begins its work

There are many ways to be promoted in interdimensional administration: through hard work, through divine intervention, or — and this was the most common — through a catastrophic misunderstanding.

Bartholomäus Klemm was a man who combined all three variants in one working morning.

After the universe had started breathing again (with the occasional cough), the donut office was upside down. Not metaphorically. The entire building had rotated once around its own axis for reasons of karmic balance and was now literally upside down.

The employees hung at their desks like particularly bewildered bats, while the coffee machine dangled from the ceiling, spewing out steam with an offended hiss.

In the midst of this chaos stood Bartholomew – upright, astonishingly calm, and with an aura that lay somewhere between “guilt” and “unwanted genius”.

"Mr. Klemm!" came a voice from above—well, below. Ms. Oberschreiber was hanging from a lamp, staring at him with the intensity of a laser printer. "What have you done?" "I think... I've rebooted the universe." "Oh! How nice. And what did you fill out for that?" "Nothing. It was an accident." "An accident?" Her voice took on the tone usually used to stop children from building atomic bombs. "The last time someone made an accident, we had 47 new dimensions and an inconvenient number of doppelgangers!"

Bartholomew shrugged. "But... everything is working again." "That's exactly what's worrying."

Only a few hours later, he found himself before the High Examining Board of the Doughnut Office – a panel of nine ancient officials who looked as if they had been folded from yellowed forms. In the center sat the chairman, Inspector Primus, who was so old that his birth certificate had to be written in cuneiform.

“Bartholomäus Klemm,” Primus began in a voice like paper one wants to tear but doesn’t dare. “You brought the universe to a standstill.” “Yes, Inspector.” “And then restarted it without authorization.” “Yes, Inspector.” “And used chaos magic in the process.” Bartholomäus hesitated. “I... don’t know if that counts. It was more like improvisation.” “Improvisation IS chaos magic, Klemm!” Primus thundered. “We’ve specifically categorized it!”

A murmur went through the ranks of the officials. One of them jotted something down with a pen – presumably “coffee after the meeting”.

Primus sighed. "Normally, we'd transfer you to the Metaphysical Cleansing Department." "Oh?" "They sort through lost realities there. With shovels and moral support." "Sounds... educational?" "But unfortunately, there's no opening right now. Too many applicants."

A second official, gray as office dust, whispered: "What do we do with him?" Primus clasped his hands. "Transfer him. He has proven himself."

"Tried and tested?" Bartholomew raised an eyebrow. "He survived." "Ah."

And so it came to pass that Bartholomäus Klemm found a new door the next morning. It was old, dented, and bore a sign that looked as if it had given up too often:

Department of Cosmic Complaints

"Your complaint is important to us – and hopefully will soon be on our desks."

A note with scribbled handwriting was stuck underneath:

"Enter at your own risk. The multiverse is reading along."

Bartholomew pressed down the handle.

The office behind it was larger than it could appear from the outside. Rows upon rows of desks, files, telephones calling themselves, and stacks of papers quietly discussing each other.

An old typewriter sat in the middle of the room and typed itself:

“Application 001 – Complaint: ‘My universe works too well.’”

A sign on the central table bore the words:

Management: The stack of papers

Bartholomew blinked. “Oh no.” Something cleared its throat behind him.

"WELCOME BACK, MR. KLEMM."

He turned around. The stack of papers stood in the doorway – this time neatly folded into a briefcase, with a tie made of rubber band and reading glasses made of paper clips.

"You are now my employee." "I thought I had... uh... deactivated you?" "I AM SELF-REPLICATING. AND SURPRISINGLY ON DUTY."

"What kind of department is this anyway?" "WE PROCESS MULTIVERSE COMPLAINTS." "And... how many are there?" The stack of papers reached for a lever.

A torrent of forms poured from the ceiling. Each one began to swear in a different language.

"EVERYTHING."

"WHAT?"

"EVERYTHING. THE MULTIVERSE IS UNSATISFIED."

Bartholomew sank into the nearest chair, which immediately transformed into an official file. "I should have stayed a civil servant in the residents' registration office..." he muttered. "TOO LATE. WORK CALLS."

A ringtone sounded. A red telephone vibrated on the table. It read:

Direct line – Universe (executive level).

Bartholomew stared at it. "Should I...?" "YES. IT'S GETTING IMPARITTLY."

He lifted the receiver. A voice, large, echoing, omniscient, sounded in his head.

"This is the universe speaking. I'd like to file a complaint." "Uh... of course, please." "It's working too... well." "Excuse me?" "Everything is running flawlessly. Nobody complains anymore. I'm bored." "But that's—" "A DISASTER! No complaints, no progress! No purpose! No governance!"

Bartholomew instinctively reached for a pen. "So... you want me to... reintroduce disorder?"

"Exactly. I want contradictions. Surprises. Irony. Bring back the chaos, Klemm." "But the chaos... was bad!" "Yes, but at least it was entertaining."

The stack of papers nodded in agreement.

"THE BOSS IS RIGHT."

Bartholomew sighed deeply as the universe on the other end of the line continued its monologue. "I... think I need a coffee."

"COFFEE HAS BEEN ABOLISHED. TOO EFFICIENT." "Then I'm officially in paradise."

The universe sighed.

"Klemm, you're my last glimmer of hope. Do something. Write a proposal. But please, do it with heartfelt passion!"

The receiver crackled, the light flickered, and the line broke.

Bartholomew sat there, staring into space – and knew that from now on his life was definitely no longer a form. The stack of papers opened a register, sighed, and said:

"Well then. Time to process a complaint."

And outside, above the donut planet, the sky contracted slightly, as if the universe had just taken a deep breath – only to start grumbling loudly again.

The first day of work in the Cosmic Complaints Department began like any first day of work in a new department: with an overly enthusiastic welcome form, a broken chair, and an existential crisis.

Bartholomäus Klemm sat at his new desk – a massive, breathing piece of furniture that occasionally sighed if you leaned too heavily on it – and stared at the red telephone. The universe had called yesterday. Today it remained silent.

"Maybe it was all just a dream," he murmured. The stack of papers beside him replied: "DREAMS ARE NO EXCUSE. DUTY BEGINS AT ZERO REALITIES TEN." "And what time is that?" "NOW."

A gong sounded. The lights came on, the typewriters roared to life with a metallic whir, and in the background a voice whispered:

"Welcome to the cosmic complaints department. Your dissatisfaction is our mission."

Bartholomew picked up his pen as the first form fell from the sky. It landed on his desk with the force of a cosmic accident.

He read the headline:

Complaint #00000001 – Planet Bliss IX

Reason for complaint: "Too perfect."

He frowned. "Excuse me?" The stack of papers bent over it. "READ CAREFULLY. THE PLANET HAS A PROBLEM WITH PERFECTION." "But... that's a good thing, isn't it?"

"NOT IN THE MULTIVERSE. PERFECTION MEANS Stagnation. AND STAGGING LEADS TO OVERTIME."

Bartholomew opened the file. Photos: blue skies, green fields, peaceful cities, radiant inhabitants with flawless teeth and ridiculously good hairstyles. Everything was harmonious. Everything worked. Nobody argued. Nobody forgot birthdays. Nobody made mistakes.

"That's terrible," whispered Bartholomew. "EXACTLY. PURE EFFICIENCY. ZERO CHAOS. NO COMPLAINTS. NO FORMS. THAT'S HELL."

He turned the page. Last page: a cry for help in flawless handwriting.

"Please send us mistakes. We can no longer stand perfection."

Bartholomew stared at the sentence. Then slowly at the stack of papers: "And... what are we supposed to do?" "MAKE A MISTAKE." "But... intentionally?" "YES. YOUR FIRST FIELD SERVICE."

Bartholomew's stomach clenched. "Field service" was the term used in administration when someone was supposed to do something impossible, but quietly and without a receipt.

"I'm not a field officer!" he protested. "NOW I AM. THE MULTIVERSE DOESN'T TAKE A BREAK."

Ten minutes later, Bartholomew stood on a floating file that served as a means of transport and looked down at Planet Blissful IX. He looked like a perfectly polished donut – only without the taste.

"Amazing," he murmured as the file whirled through the air. "It smells of... lavender and agreement."

He landed on a pristine lawn. The air was clear, the temperature ideal, the birds sang in perfect thirds. A woman approached him, radiant, flawless, friendly in a way that bordered on psychological manipulation.

"Welcome, stranger! We're so glad you're here!" "I... uh... I'm from the administration." "Oh, how wonderful!" "I'm here about your complaint." Her smile widened even further, which looked unhealthy. "Ah, you mean them! Yes, we're so happy we're almost going crazy!"

"Almost?" "Well, madness is forbidden. But we hope."

Bartholomew noted this down. "‘Hope for madness’ – that’s new.”

She led him through a city that looked as if someone had overdosed on the idea of "order". Every street was straight. Every door symmetrical. Even the cats meowed in time.

"Everything here is perfect," she declared proudly. "That sounds... exhausting." "It's hell."

She was still smiling. Bartholomew felt that he urgently needed to break something.

He pulled out a notebook. "Okay. So: you want a mistake?" "Oh yes. A real mistake! One that throws us off!" "I see. And how significant should the mistake be?" "With a lasting impact, please."

He nodded. "I see what I can do."

He strolled through the city, pondering what would be considered a "mistake" here. Knocking over a trash can? Turning a street sign crooked? Placing a comma in the wrong place?

Then his gaze fell upon a monument in the middle of the market square: a bronze cube inscribed with "Perfection for Eternity." Below it: "Approved by the Universe itself."

"Aha," Bartholomew murmured. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his old stamp—the one that had caused the chaos last time. He held it against the base. "Just a small impression," he whispered.

GOSSIP!

The echo reverberated across the square. The following inscription was now emblazoned on the plinth: **"TESTED AND FOUND VOID."**

At first nothing happened. Then the cube vibrated. It tipped over. Then it grew. Then it laughed.

Yes, the cube laughed – a dull, mechanical laugh, as if it had discovered humor and wanted to misuse it immediately.

"What... did I do?" "MADE A MISTAKE," said the stack of papers over the radio, "WITH REACTION."

Laughter spread in seconds. The streets began to shake, the houses danced. The residents screamed – with joy! Finally, something was happening that wasn't perfect.

Bartholomew watched as the pristine city descended into gentle chaos. A cat meowed off-key. A window rattled irregularly. A man stumbled, laughed—and thought it was wonderful.

"It... works!" exclaimed Bartholomew. "OF COURSE," replied the stack of papers, "IT'S A VERIFIED BUG."

But then – as the universe loves to do – it went too far. The laughter grew louder. Too loud. The sky distorted.

"THAT WAS TOO MANY MISTAKES!" roared the stack of papers. "THIS IS IRONY!"

Bartholomew stepped back as the floor began to dissolve into letters. Reality crumbled – but politely, in alphabetical order.

"I just wanted a little imperfection!" "WELCOME TO THE DUTY, MR. KLEMM!"

A blinding light swallowed him up – and the last thing he heard was the hysterical laughter of a planet that was finally unhappily happy.

When he came to, he was lying on the floor of his office. Above him was the stack of papers, which sighed like an annoyed god.

"CONGRATULATIONS. YOU HAVE SOLVED YOUR FIRST CASE." "Solved?" "THE PLANET HAS ITS HAPPY CHAOS. THE STATISTICS ARE STABLE." "And... side effects?" "A NEW MOON. MADE OF LAUGHTER. WILL RULE THE TIDES IN THE FUTURE."

Bartholomew rubbed his forehead. "I think I need a different tool than this stamp." "NO," said the stack of papers contentedly. "YOU JUST NEED MORE MISTAKES."

And somewhere in the distance, the universe itself called out:

"Good start, Klemm. Keep it up!"

The morning began with a ringing that wasn't really a ringing. It was a humming, a vibration, a quiet, please-don't-answer flickering sound that only telephones in offices of interdimensional importance could produce.

Bartholomäus Klemm blinked, rubbed his forehead, and noticed that his coffee was cold again. He had learned by now that coffee at the donut office was never hot when you needed it—presumably because heat was considered a luxury.

"This is for you," said the stack of papers, pushing the buzzing device toward him. "I've only just begun." "THE MULTIVERSE DOESN'T WAIT FOR WORKING HOURS."

Bartholomew sighed and picked up the receiver. "Department of Cosmic Complaints, Klemm speaking. What can I do for your existence?"

A voice thundered through the line, as if a thunderstorm were trying to be polite:

"This is Parallel Universe B-12b speaking. We would like to file a formal complaint." "Oh... uh... of course. Please state your reason for complaint." "Our neighboring universe is too loud." Bartholomew frowned. "Excuse me?" "They're constantly having Big Bangs! Every single night! We can't enjoy our existence anymore!"

He searched in vain for a form for such a thing. "One moment please... I'm looking for the appropriate application form..."

"We've already submitted form 77-K!" "77-K? That's—oh, that's 'Application for Metaphysical Noise Complaint'." "Exactly! And you're responsible."

Bartholomew reached into the stack of papers and pulled out the document. It glowed slightly – a sign that it was angry. The application was 83 pages long and written in eleven languages, at least four of which hadn't even been invented yet.

"This could take a while," Bartholomew murmured.

"We have all the time in the world." "That's... part of the problem," he sighed.

The stack of papers leaned over the desk. "INTERDIMENSIONAL NOISE IS COMPLICATED. IT REQUIRES ACOUSTIC REALITY VERIFICATION." "And how do you do that?" "WITH A VISIT."

"Not another field trip!" lamented Bartholomew. "THE MULTIVERSE MAKES NO EXCEPTIONS."

He retrieved his jacket, his forms book, and a mug that served as a source of courage on bad days, and stepped into the interdimensional elevator. The button for Parallel Universe B-12b was old, yellowed, and bore the inscription "Use at your own risk."

A soft "Pffft!" later, he stood on a glass platform in a room that looked as if someone had tried to polish reality. Before him floated Universe B-12b: a majestic bubble of light, color, and tax forms.

And right next to it, loud, flashing, vibrating – Universe B-12a.

It danced. It sparkled. It had laser shows. Every second, a small Big Bang exploded somewhere – just for fun.

"That's... deafening," Bartholomew muttered. "Look!" a voice called from beside him. He turned and saw a man in a suit made of stardust. "I'm the delegate from B-12b. We deserve peace and quiet! Our galaxies can no longer meditate!" "I understand. I'm here to... mediate."

He pulled out his clipboard and wrote down:

Complaint regarding excessive cosmic celebration.

Then he took a step forward and politely knocked on the border of Universe B-12a. The border went "Ping!" – and opened.

A dazzling something emerged. A being of light, music, and exuberance, introducing itself as the DJ of creation. "YO! Welcome to B-12a! Want to dance, officer?" "Uh, no thanks. I'm here for a noise complaint." "Noise? That's called energy!" grinned the being, turning up a cosmic volume knob.

Bartholomew's hair stood on end. "Could you perhaps... turn it down a little?" "Never! We live, so we celebrate! It's our nature!"

Bartholomew tried to make himself heard – which was difficult, since sound waves had opinions of their own. Finally, he reached for his old stamp, sighed, and said: "Then I guess this is all that's left for me..."

He pressed the stamp into the air. A dull thwack sounded.

Silence.

Universe B-12a paused. The lights went out. The music stopped. All the stars blinked in confusion.

"What have you done?!" gasped the DJ. "I've declared you... invalid. Temporarily."

The neighboring universe B-12b cheered.

"Finally, peace and quiet!" Bartholomew breathed a sigh of relief. "There we go. Everything's sorted out."

Then – as always – the madness began.

A deep rumble. A tremor. Universe B-12a vibrated ominously. Then it opened its mouth – if universes have mouths – and cried out:

"I'M FILING A COMPLAINT!"

Bartholomew's stamp glowed red. The form in front of him began to write itself.

New complaint received:

"Civil servant disrupts the end of the workday! Universe refuses silence!"

Bartholomew stared at the paper. "Oh no... they're suing each other." "WHAT DID YOU EXPECT?" boomed the stack of papers from the radio. "THEY'RE UNIVERSES. THEY THINK THEMSELVES ARE THE CENTER OF EVERYTHING."

"What should I do?" "A mediation procedure." "How is that supposed to work?" "With music and calm at the same time." "That's impossible!" "WELCOME TO THE JOB."

Bartholomew took a deep breath, stepped between the two universes, raised both hands – and began to do the impossible: to negotiate bureaucratically.

"So," he said, "Universe B-12a: You are allowed to party, but only at approved intervals. Universe B-12b: You get quiet hours, but you have to accept the existence of your neighbors." Both universes flashed skeptically. He added: "Or I'll write a report."

Suddenly there was absolute silence.

After a moment, B-12a nodded. B-12b sighed in agreement.

Bartholomew noted with satisfaction:

Conflict resolved. Peace through the threat of documentation.

He sighed. "Maybe I was born for this job after all." "OR DAMN IT," grumbled the stack of papers.

Back in the office, the stack of papers clapped together three files – that was like applause. "WELL DONE. THE CONFLICT IS RESOLVED." "Finally some peace and quiet." "UNTIL THE NEXT COMPLAINT COMES."

Bartholomew smiled wearily. "And what does it say?" He flipped through the stack of papers. "'Universe C-9 complains about a delay in processing its previous complaint.'" "Oh no." "AND: 'Universe D-1 reports that it has no complaints and therefore feels discriminated against.'"

Bartholomew reached for his cup. "I need a new coffee. And an exorcist."

The stack of papers nodded matter-of-factly. "BOTH ARE AVAILABLE IN THE CANTEEN."

And while Bartholomew trudged wearily towards the elevator, outside you could see two universes spinning side by side – one silent, one loud – and both were satisfied because they finally had something to complain about together.

It was one of those days when even the paper seemed to sweat. The air in Bartholomäus Klemm's office was still, as if it had given up all hope of movement. Even the stack of papers was unusually quiet – which for him usually meant he was pondering how to control the universe more effectively.

Bartholomew was typing a report. He had learned that reports in the Doughnut Office were never really finished – they simply piled up until they became critically massive and coalesced into a new department.

He just wrote:

"Summary: Universal complaint resolved. Cause: Existential hypersensitivity."

Then the phone rang. But not the red one. Not the blue one. Not the black one. No – a transparent one, one that hadn't been there before.

He stared at it. "Uh... stack of papers?" "YES?" "Since when have we had a transtemporal communication device?" "SINCE IT EXISTS. TIME IS FLEXIBLE WHEN IT WANTS TO COMPLAIN."

Bartholomew sighed. "This is going to be trouble again." He took off.

A voice rang out – hollow, metallic, and at the same time so nervous that even the echo stuttered:

"Good day. This is... the future speaking." "The future?" "Yes. I... uh... would like to file a complaint."

Bartholomew automatically reached for his clipboard. "Reason for complaint?"

"Delivery delay." "Delayed by what?" "Fate."

He blinked. "Destiny?"

"Yes! It's not coming! We've been waiting forever!" "How... forever?" "You know – future forever. That's twice as long as normal forever."

He glanced helplessly at the stack of papers. "THIS IS A CLASSIC CASE OF TEMPORARY OVERLOAD," he explained. "THE DESTINY DEPARTMENT IS NOTORIOUS. LATE FOR MILLENNIUMS."

"Can't this be... sped up?" "NO. TIME ONLY RUNS IN ONE DIRECTION. UNLESS IT STUMBLES."

Bartholomew scratched his head. "All right. Future, stay tuned. I'll check the status of your fate."

"Thank you. But please hurry. We have already begun to reinvent ourselves."

"That sounds dangerous."

"Oh, it's worse. We're halfway to paradoxical self-knowledge!"

Bartholomew felt the responsibility overwhelming him. He opened a file that only appeared when you weren't looking for it – a large folder labeled:

"Destiny - ongoing deliveries (delay from 0.0000001 eternities)"

The list was endless. "Destiny for Planet Blissful IX: delivered. Destiny for Universe B-12b: revised. Destiny for 'Future (Total)': pending."

He pointed to the entry. "Great." The stack of papers nodded solemnly. "WE SHOULD MAKE A CALL." "To whom?" "TO THE DESTINY CENTER."

Bartholomew sighed. "I hate headquarters." "THAT'S NORMAL. THEY'RE MEANT TO HATE."

He typed a sequence of numbers into the device, which looked like a cross between a clock and a guillotine. After endless seconds, a bored voice answered:

"Central Office for Fate Delivery, Time Periods Department, you're speaking with incompetence personified, how can I help?" "This is Klemm, Cosmic Complaints. I'm calling about a delayed delivery." "Ah, the future again. It's always a nuisance. We're having delivery problems." "Excuse me?" "There are... bottlenecks in determinism. Our probabilities can't keep up." "That... sounds worrying." "Welcome to the time business."

"Can you do anything?" asked Bartholomew.

"Not without an application in triplicate. Or magic." "Magic?" "Yes, chaos magic sometimes speeds up bureaucracy because it doesn't understand the rules."

Bartholomew looked at the stack of papers. "I've got another stamp here..." "VERY GOOD," he grumbled. "USE IT CAREFULLY. OR NOT AT ALL. BOTH WORK ABOUT THE SAME WAY."

Bartholomew pressed the stamp on the entry "Future – Fate pending". A faint but promising click sounded. Then...nothing.

"Maybe it will work—" The air flickered. Pages of paper fluttered like birds in panic. Then – CRASH! – a crack opened in the middle of the room, from which sparks, timelines, and panicked calendar pages flew.

A headless creature stumbled out. It carried a briefcase, a name tag that read "Destiny Messenger (Part-time)" and was panting:

"I'm too late!"

"We know," Bartholomew said dryly.

The creature leafed through a notebook. "Delivery for: Future. Contains: Destiny, Version 3.0, slightly improved. Delivery overdue since... uh... forever."

"Please just drop it off there," said Bartholomew, pointing to the transparent telephone. "Ah! That's the line!"

The delivery man opened the bag, and a golden light spilled out. Then the voice from the receiver was heard:

"Oh! My destiny! It's finally here!"

"Please sign for the receipt," Bartholomew said automatically.

"Naturally!"

The light went out. The delivery man sighed, saluted, and then fell down dead – or whatever beings of time become when they finish work.

"That was... astonishingly smooth," said Bartholomew. "YES," replied the stack of papers. "TOO SMOOTH. THAT'S SUSPICIOUS."

And sure enough, less than ten seconds later the phone rang again.

"Here is the future again. We would like to file a complaint." "Again?" "Yes. The fate delivered is needed. It was already predetermined once before."

Bartholomew slammed his forehead onto the table. "I resign." "NOT BEFORE THE END OF TIME," said the stack of papers.

Later, when calm returned (if one could call interdimensional sarcasm calm), Bartholomew wrote the final report:

Case Future – Complaint accepted. Cause: Cycle of determinism. Recommendation: Replacement delivery at an indefinite future.

He put down his pen, leaned back, and muttered, "I'm starting to get used to the chaos." The stack of papers nodded. "THAT'S THE FIRST STEP TO PROMOTION." "And the second?" "REGRETING THE FIRST."

Outside in the sky, time trailed a small puff of smoke behind it – a sign that it was running again, albeit with a slight cough.

It was a quiet day at the office—and that made Bartholomew nervous. In the Doughnut Office, quiet meant either that the multiverse was asleep (unlikely), or that it was working on something everyone involved would regret (highly likely).

Bartholomew had just settled down with a coffee and half an act when the door burst open. Not just opened—it sprang open like an offended theatrical performance that had missed its cue.

In walked a woman in a glittering gown that looked as if it had been woven from cosmic smoke. Her hair sparkled like a galaxy in disarray, and she had that smile that only people who have never filled out a receipt in their lives have.

"Ah! You must be Bartholomäus Klemm!" "Depends on whether that's good or bad." "I am Seraphina Lichtquell, the Universe's Commissioner for Esotericism!"

Bartholomew frowned. "I've never heard of that." "That's because we work between realities. I'm here to help!" "Oh no."

Seraphina sat down in the chair opposite, which immediately began to glow and hum softly. "I've heard about your troubles," she said in a voice that sounded of warm incense and misplaced self-confidence. "Troubles?" "Yes! Your destiny deliveries are stalled, universes are dissatisfied, and the future is suffering from burnout."

Bartholomew sighed. "You could say that." "Then you know what you need!" "Coffee?" "No, affirmations!"

"What?" "Positive cosmic vibrations! We must remind the universe that it is loved!"

The stack of papers, which had stood silently in the corner the whole time, crackled indignantly. "WE PREFER FORMS." "Forms are energy blockages," said Seraphina with a smile that could evaporate printer's ink. "They impede the flow of destiny!"

"They primarily prevent chaos," Bartholomew murmured. "Exactly!" she exclaimed. "And that's terrible!"

Before he could react, she had already lit an incense stick. A purple smoke billowed through the office, transforming the air into a mixture of lavender, bubblegum, and metaphysical kitsch. "What are you doing?!" Bartholomew coughed. "I'm cleansing the vibration of the multiverse! Your files are full of karmic residue!"

The stack of papers trembled with indignation. "I'M STERILIZED DOWN TO THE LAST PARAGRAPH SIGN!" "Oh, poor darling," she whispered, patting the stack. One piece of paper fluttered to the floor in a huff.

Bartholomew rubbed his temples. "All right, Ms. Light Source, how exactly do you intend to accelerate fate?" "By manifesting it!" "That sounds expensive." "No! It's quite simple! You just have to say what you want—loudly, clearly, and with cosmic faith."

She closed her eyes, raised her hands, and said: "I am one with the universe. I am ready to receive my destiny!"

Nothing happened.

Bartholomew opened his clipboard. "Minutes: no change."

Seraphina opened one eye. "Perhaps you should try it too!" "Me? I'm a civil servant. I don't order anything from the universe. At most, I approve applications." "Then I'll make an exception!"

He sighed deeply. "Very well. I am ready to receive my fate." A soft clink sounded.

They both looked at each other. Then there was a loud crash, and a package fell from the ceiling onto the table.

The package was slightly steaming and had a label on it:

Sender:Destiny Center

Recipient:Bartholomäus Klemm

Contents:Fate (not verified)

"See?!" Seraphina exclaimed triumphantly. "I ordered fate – and it was delivered!"

The stack of papers rolled with the forms. "THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE." "It's a manifestation!" "IT'S AN IRREGULAR DELIVERY!"

Bartholomew bent over the package. "Perhaps we should—"

The package exploded in golden dust.

When the smoke cleared, a young man in a poorly fitting suit stood in the middle of the office and asked, confused: "Uh... hello? I am... Destiny?"

Bartholomew and the stack of papers stared at him. Seraphina clapped her hands enthusiastically. "There you go! I said so!"

Fate blinked, stretched, and looked around. "Wow, this smells of forms and fear. Am I in the right place?" "Undoubtedly," said Bartholomew dryly. "I'm supposed to... begin?" "What do you mean, begin?" "Well, make Fate! Where are the instructions?"

Bartholomew and the stack of papers exchanged glances. The stack of papers rustled ominously. "THERE ARE NO INSTRUCTIONS. YOU ARE DESTINY." "Oh my goodness," murmured the young man. "That explains why everything always seems so improvised."

Seraphina beamed. "You see, Mr. Klemm? Everything is fine! Fate is at work!" "Yes... but without a plan, without order, and... probably without a clue." "Exactly!" She nodded enthusiastically. "That's the best way for the universe to work!"

Bartholomew leaned back with a sigh. "I need a vacation." "YOU HAVE NO ENTITLEMENT," the stack of papers reminded him.

Fate grinned uncertainly. "So... what now?" "Now," said Bartholomew, "please do nothing until I have permission for it."

Seraphina rose, her robe glittering in the light. "I feel that my work here is done." "We all feel that." She bowed, left the office – and the scent of lavender gave way to the familiar smell of despair and dusty files.

Bartholomew looked at Fate, who stood perplexed in the corner, playing with a paperclip. "So," he said, "I take it you're staying here now?" "Until someone tells me what to do." "Perfect." The stack of papers nodded. "THEN HE'S OFFICIALLY PART OF THE ADMINISTRATION."

Bartholomew wrote one last sentence in his protocol:

"Day 42 in office. The universe now has a new destiny – and it seems overwhelmed."

He put down the pen and sighed. "I think that was the easiest day in weeks." The stack of papers sighed in agreement. "THIS IS worrisome."

And somewhere out in cosmic space, a new star began to flicker – presumably because someone had forgotten to turn off fate before it started to get creative.

3. The first application for happiness – and its disastrous approval.

Happiness. Such a small word for something that can cause so much chaos.

Bartholomäus Klemm didn't know that when he entered his office that morning. He only knew that he had a headache, that fate was snoring in his coffee cup, and that the stack of papers was unusually quiet – a bad sign.

"You're so quiet today," he murmured, setting down his cup. "I'M THINKING." "That sounds dangerous." "I'VE FOUND SOMETHING."

The stack of papers opened like a flower from nightmares, pushing a yellowed form onto the table. It bore the stamp "DO NOT EDIT - INFINITE BACKWARDS" and looked as if it had already been burned, reconstructed, and then disapprovingly discarded.

"What is it?" asked Bartholomew. "AN APPLICATION FOR HAPPINESS." "Aha. And why do we have it?" "BECAUSE NO ONE HAS DARED TO PROCESS IT YET."

Bartholomew read the headline:

Form 13-H – Application for general happiness

Note: Processing this form may lead to unforeseen side effects.

"That sounds dangerous," he muttered. "IT IS DANGEROUS. THAT'S WHY IT'S THEIR JOB."

He sat down, picked up the pen, and examined the form more closely. The paper pulsed slightly, as if it had a heartbeat. The letters moved whenever one looked away—a sure sign of metaphysical activity.

"What happens if you fill this out?" "THEORETICALLY, HAPPINESS IS THEN DISTRIBUTED." "To whom?" "EVERYONE." "Everyone?" "EVERYONE."

Bartholomew hesitated. "And why hasn't anyone done that before?" "BECAUSE 'ALL' USUALLY CONTAINS SEVERAL UNEXPECTED PARTIES."

He skimmed the fine print.

"Disclaimer: The universe accepts no responsibility for emotional explosions, spontaneous euphoria, existential crises, or metaphysical comedies."

He sighed. "That sounds like Monday."

Just as he was about to put the form aside, a low humming sound could be heard. Fate (now officially employed as an intern in the department) raised his head curiously. "What's that?" "The form is humming." "Forms don't hum." "YES, they do," said the stack of papers grimly. "WHEN THEY WANT TO BE OPENED."

Bartholomew stared at the page. The buzzing grew louder. A sentence appeared in gold lettering:

"We were expecting you, Bartholomäus Klemm."

He flinched. "The paper just spoke to me!" "VERY PROBABLY." "But... that can't be..." "YOU HAVE BARELY NO REASON TO BE SURPRISED ANYMORE."

He hesitated. "Fine. I'll fill it out. What could possibly go wrong?" "A CLASSIC LAST SENTENCE."

He wrote with a careful hand:

"I hereby propose universal happiness, distributed equally and fairly across all existing levels."

As soon as he placed the period, the paper shone with bright light. A wind rose, blew through the office, and made the files rustle like applauding hands. Fate clung fearfully to a paperclip.

"That's new," whispered Bartholomew. The stack of papers tightened. "YOU HAVE SUBMITTED THE APPLICATION." "I thought that only happened after the review!" "THERE WAS NO TIME FOR REVIEW. THE FORM APPROVALIDATED ITSELF."

A loud WHOOSH! filled the building. Then silence. Then laughter.

First, only a file laughed. Then the desk. Then the water dispenser. Then the sky.

The universe began to giggle.

"What... is happening?" asked Bartholomew, as the floor began to bulge slightly. "EVERYONE IS HAPPY NOW," said the stack of papers tonelessly. "That sounds good!" "NO." "Why?" "BECAUSE THEY ALL ARE."

And indeed – reports came in from afar:

- A meteorite had decided to stop falling because it finally felt "free".
- A planet had transformed into a sun "to shine as it felt inside."
- The tax department sang.

"I think that was too much luck," Bartholomew murmured. "TOO MUCH LUCK IS SADNESS WITH WAITING TIME."

The desk exploded in confetti. Fate clapped enthusiastically. "That's fantastic!" "NO, THAT'S AN EMOTIONAL BALANCE COLLAPSE!"

Bartholomew ran to the form. "How can I stop this?" "YOU CAN'T STOP IT. HAPPINESS IS SELF-REPELLENT." "So... what then?" "YOU HAVE TO CREATE THE OPPOSITE."

"The counterpart?" "A FORM FOR BAD LUCK."

Bartholomew blinked. "There's a form for bad luck?" "OF COURSE. BUT IT'S FORBIDDEN." "Why?" "BECAUSE IT WORKS."

He reached for his jacket. "Then I'll find it." "WHERE DO YOU WANT TO GO?" "To the underground archives."

Fate looked worried. "Is that dangerous?" "Only if you don't believe files can eat." "But they don't... do they?" "WAIT AND SEE."

Bartholomew turned towards the door. Behind him, the universe was still laughing – uncontrollably, hysterically, joyfully to the point of destruction.

"I just wanted someone to be happy," he muttered. "CONGRATULATIONS," said the stack of papers. "NOW EVERYONE IS. AND NOBODY CAN HANDLE IT."

And as Bartholomew stepped into the corridor, the light of the Doughnut Planet began to glow in all colors – for happiness knew no bounds. Only side effects.

The sub-archives lay beneath everything. Beneath the files, beneath the administration, beneath reason. They could only be reached via an elevator that officially didn't exist and whose buttons raised more questions than they answered.

Bartholomew stood in front of it holding a piece of paper that read:

"Access only for authorized personnel with a pessimistic outlook."

"I'm a civil servant," he murmured. "That should be enough." He stepped inside and pressed the button labeled "Down (emotionally)".

The elevator groaned, creaked, and began to move—not downwards, but inwards. The walls stretched, the floor vibrated, and somewhere in the background a depressing version of the donut office jingle played.

"Why is everything here so... sad?" Bartholomew murmured. A voice from the loudspeaker replied:

"Welcome to the sub-archive. Please leave all hope at the entrance." "Too late," he said dryly.

When the door opened, he stepped into a room that smelled of stale dreams and cold coffee. The walls were lined with filing cabinets that seemed to despise each other. The signs on them read:

- *Rejected requests*
- *Misguided coincidences*
- *Ironic fates*
- *Unfulfilled Monday feelings*

And way in the back, half in shadow, a sign shone:

Office for Emotional Balance

Bartholomew shrugged. "I should have studied psychology."

He stepped closer. Behind a huge desk sat a thin man with dark circles under his eyes that looked as if they were cast from lead. His name tag read: "Director Melancholus".

"What's your concern?" the man asked without looking up. "I need a form for bad luck." "Ah." The director put down his pen. "You're one of them." "What does that mean?" "Guilty optimists."

"I'm a civil servant," Bartholomew said defensively. "It amounts to the same thing."

Melancholus sighed, as if rejuvenated by it. "You know, down here we keep everything that's been felt too intensely. Joy, love, hope—all things that are too dangerous when overdosed. And bad luck..." He paused, a pause that lasted longer than Bartholomew's patience. "Bad luck is the counterweight. The brake on existence."

"I need it to stabilize the universe." "Of course. Everyone says that before they learn to laugh."

Melancholus rose. His footsteps echoed dully as he walked to a cupboard labeled "Forbidden Feelings." He opened the door—and a cold wind blew out. Inside lay a stack of black papers, bound with a ribbon of pure misery.

"Form 0-P," Melancholus said reverently. "The original."

Bartholomew stepped closer. The paper shimmered dully, as if it had grown tired of the light. On the front it said:

Application for balance through controlled pitch

Warning: Only applicable in conjunction with luck applications. Careless use can lead to unpredictable reality.

"That's it," whispered Bartholomew. "Of course it is," said Melancholus. "And now the bad news: you're not allowed to use it." "Why not?" "Because nobody wants bad luck." "But without bad luck, there's no balance!" "Correct. That's why everything's going wrong here."

Bartholomew sighed. "What happens if I use it anyway?" "Then the universe balances everything out." "Everything?" "Everything. The good, the bad, what works. Even the hope that it works."

"Sounds risky." "Welcome to the Office for Emotional Balance."

He reached for the form. It felt cold, as if it were sucking energy out of his hand. Behind him, the elevator hummed softly, as if it wanted to escape.

"Sign here," said Melancholus, handing him a quill. "What happens then?" "Then bad luck takes over. It regulates. Perhaps it saves the universe." "And if not?" "Then at least you'll be the last thing that worked."

Bartholomew hesitated. Then he signed.

The paper began to glow. Not bright – dull, like embers beneath ashes. A soft crackling sound went through the archives as the temperature dropped.

Melancholus smiled sadly. "Congratulations. You've just activated bad luck." "And now?" "Now... we wait until someone complains."

The elevator took Bartholomew back up. The light flickered above him, and a melancholic jingle came from the loudspeaker:

"Your misfortune is important to us. Please remain on hold."

When the door opened, the office greeted him with an odd stillness. The stack of papers stood rigid, fate hung upside down from the ceiling lamp.

"What... happened?" asked Bartholomew. "They stopped the luck." "That sounds good, doesn't it?" "No. Everyone is unhappy now, but too calm to complain."

"So... balance?" "THEORETICALLY. PRACTICALLY: BORING."

Bartholomew sank into his chair. "Well, wonderful. Now the universe is balanced. And nobody's happy." "A CLASSIC OF CIVIL WORK."

And somewhere in space, a star sighed because it didn't know whether to go out or continue.

It began with a stamping sound. Not just any stamping sound – an indignant one.

A dull thud echoed through all the floors of the donut office, followed by a nervous rustling. Then a letter appeared on Bartholomew's desk, steaming of its own accord.

He read aloud:

"Subject: Unauthorized activation of an emotional correction form."

Dear Mr. Klemm, you used form 0-P without proper training, without authorization, and – even worse – without a written record. This constitutes a violation of the cosmic order of emotions.

You are hereby summoned to a hearing at the Office for Emotional Balance. Attendance is mandatory. Mood: neutral.*

Bartholomew lowered the paper. "That was quick." The stack of papers sounded disapproving: "THE SUBARCHIVES REPORT EVERYTHING THAT WORKS."

"What should I do now?" "GO THERE. OR YOU WILL BE PICKED UP THERE." "PICKED UP?" "BY THE EMOTION INSPECTORS."

He sighed, put on his coat, and set off. Fate waved after him. "Good luck!" "PLEASE DON'T!" cried the stack of papers. "THAT BRINGS BAD LUCK!"

The ride back to the sub-archive was even more gloomy this time. The light in the elevator flickered, and a voice murmured:

"Please remain emotionally balanced. Excessive emotions will lead to disciplinary action."

Bartholomew muttered, "I hate this place." "THAT COUNTS AS AN EMOTIONAL RESPONSE," replied the elevator, "AND IS RECORDED."

The door opened into a meeting room that looked as if it had been bored with gray paint. Six officials sat around a round table, each wearing the same neutral expression – it wasn't just an obligation, it was their uniform.

"Bartholomäus Klemm," said the chairman, without looking at him. "You are accused of having practiced emotional correction without authorization."

"I was only trying to stabilize the universe," Bartholomew replied. "Intention doesn't matter. Only the result."

An official lifted a file. "According to the report, you activated 'luck' and 'bad luck' simultaneously." "Yes." "With that, you created a situation that our regulations don't recognize." "What's that called?" "Wednesday."

The chairman flipped through the pages. "You have disrupted the balance of the multiverse by creating it. This contradicts paragraph 7 of the Emotional Balance Ordinance: 'Perfect balance is considered an emotional anomaly.'"

Bartholomew frowned. "So there can be no balance?" "Of course not! Without a certain degree of chaos, we wouldn't even know when we're satisfied." "That's... absurd." "That's administration."

Another official spoke up. "We will launch an appeal. The bad luck form needs to be reviewed. In the meantime, the good luck form will be deactivated."

"What does that mean?" "They've temporarily suspended all positive emotions." "So... no one is happy anymore?" "Correct. Not unhappy either. Just... neutral."

Bartholomew looked around. Everyone nodded at once, in perfect, unsettling calm.

"And what about me?" "You'll be sent for retraining." "Where?" "To the Mood Management Department. There you'll learn how to regulate emotions with bureaucracy."

Bartholomew felt his hope packing its bags. "And if I refuse?" "Then you will automatically be placed on 'emotional leave' status." "What does that mean?" "You will no longer be allowed to feel anything – except a sense of duty."

He sighed. "When should I start?" "Immediately."

On his way back through the elevator, he heard the familiar humming again. But this time it didn't sound mechanical – it sounded offended.

"Form 0-P," Bartholomew murmured. It lay in his briefcase, vibrating slightly as if it resented being locked up. "I was only using you to help," he whispered.

A faint whisper answered:

"Bad luck never helps. It only evens things out."

When he opened the door to his office, he found chaos. Fate was standing on the desk, trying to hypnotize files with a yo-yo. The stack of papers was sending sheets swirling through the air.

"What happened here?" "ALL FEELINGS WERE SWITCHED OFF," explained the stack of papers. "NOW REALITY IS REACTING PASSIVELY-AGGRESSIVELY."

Bartholomew slumped into the chair. "I was at the hearing. They want an appeal." "That was to be expected."

"But why doesn't anything work normally?" "BECAUSE NORMAL HAS NO FEELINGS."

A moment of silence. Then the form rustled in the briefcase. A thin wisp of smoke rose, and quiet words formed in the air:

"Balance achieved. Emotional energy redistributed."

"What does that mean?" asked Bartholomew. The stack of papers stared at him. "That the feelings have gone somewhere else."

"Where?" "TO THE NEXT BEST RECEIVER."

Outside, far above the clouds of the donut planet, an asteroid suddenly began to cry loudly. A black hole laughed. And a comet fell in love with itself.

Bartholomew sighed deeply. "I'm afraid the multiverse is in a bad mood again." "THEN YOUR COURSE WAS A SUCCESS," grumbled the stack of papers.

The office of the Department of Mood Management was the most depressing thing Bartholomew had ever seen. And that was saying something, because he had previously worked in the Complaints Office for Metaphysically Disappointed Planets.

The walls were grey. The floor was grey. The employees were... a lighter grey, but only in a professional capacity. Above the entrance door hung a sign:

"Smiling is not a service."

Bartholomew checked in at reception, where a clerk sat with the expression of a particularly grumpy loaf of bread. "Name?" "Bartholomäus Klemm." "Department?" "Cosmic Complaints." "Request?" "Mandatory training." She nodded, typed something that looked like a form in the form of an existential crisis, and said: "Room C-17. Course: Emotional Standardization."

Room C-17 was full. About twenty other participants sat on chairs that were deliberately uncomfortable to promote emotional neutrality. A sign on the wall read:

"Well-being hinders productivity."

At the front stood a man in a suit that looked as if it had been made purely from regulations. "Welcome," he said tonelessly. "I'm Lecturer Paragraph. Today we'll learn how to regulate emotions according to Service Regulation 88."

He held up a book whose title was:

"Emotions for Advanced Learners - A Handbook of Disengagement".

“We’ll start with the basics,” Paragraphin explained. “How are you feeling?” Silence.
“Wrong! They don’t feel anything at all. Feelings are measurements, not states. They are documented, categorized, and archived as needed.”

He handed out forms. At the top it said: “Mood Log 22b” – below were columns such as:

- Emotion (if any)
- Intensity (in decibels)
- Justification (with file number)
- Application for emotional extension (optional)

Bartholomew stared at the paper. “I’m supposed to express my feelings in decibels?” “Of course,” said Paragraph Woman. “How else would you quantify an emotion?” “Perhaps... by feeling it?” “Feelings without documentation are speculation. And speculation is unacceptable.”

One participant raised her hand. “What if I feel hope and despair at the same time?” “Then you have a category D conflict – please submit a duplicate report.”

“And if I feel nothing?” asked another. “Then you are exemplary.”

Bartholomew snorted. “I used to be an auditor. I can spot nonsense when it’s staring at me.” Paragraph smiled mechanically. “Then you should apply for a training course to become a department head.”

After an hour, Bartholomew had learned that joy above a level of 3.2 decibels required approval, and that sarcasm was only permitted in written form, provided it was stamped three times.

Then came the practical part. “We will now try to evoke a feeling and record it correctly,” said Paragraphin. He opened a small box. Inside was... a paperclip.

“This,” he explained in a serious voice, “is a category F stimulus – mildly pleasurable.” He placed the clip on the table. “Please feel it in moderation.”

The group stared. Nothing happened.

“You see,” said Paragraphin proudly, “this is what controlled enthusiasm looks like.”

Bartholomew raised an eyebrow. “I think my enthusiasm is below the measurement threshold.” “Then you’ve passed.”

When the session ended, he felt as if someone had laminated his inner self. He took his form, which consisted entirely of zeros, and headed for the exit.

Suddenly, Director Melancholus stood there. “Ah, Mr. Klemm. I have been monitoring your progress.”

“Progress is a big word for what’s happening here,” Bartholomew said dryly. “They’ve learned that emotions are dangerous if they’re not regulated.” “I’ve learned that down here they prefer to calculate rather than understand.” “Semantic differences,” Melancholus said indifferently.

“And what happens to me now?” “You return to your department. But...” – he lowered his voice – “...the balance is still disturbed.” “Excuse me?” “The bad luck has taken on a life of its own. It has started submitting its own forms.”

Bartholomew froze. "Bad luck... submits applications?" "Yes. Lots of them. Delays, misunderstandings, bureaucratic entanglements – classic symptoms." "How can bad luck fill out forms?" "How do you fill out forms?" "With despair and coffee." "Exactly."

Melancholus placed a folder in front of him. On it was written:

"Bad luck – application for unlimited expansion"

"Did you submit it?" "Signed with your pen."

Bartholomew closed his eyes. "Oh no. I left it." "Everyone does that before bad luck finds them."

He reached for the folder. "I'll sort this out." Melancholus nodded. "Do it quickly. Otherwise, we'll soon have organized disaster."

Bartholomew nodded decisively. "I don't even want to know what that is." "A ministry."

Back in the office, Bartholomew placed the folder on the table. The stack of papers sighed. "IS BAD LUCK NOW DOING CIVIL SERVANT WORK?" "Apparently so." "EXCELLENT. THE LAST THING WE NEEDED."

"How do you stop bad luck?" asked Bartholomew. "WITH LUCK." "I've deactivated that." "THE NEW ONLY ONE REMAINS." "Who?" "HER."

Bartholomew sighed, grabbed the stamp and muttered: "I'm warning you, bad luck – this time I'm applying for your position."

And out there, somewhere in the multiverse, a planet just lost both moons, but finally found its inner center.

The next morning, Bartholomew was in the office early. He didn't know exactly why—perhaps because he suspected that bad luck would strike on time. And he was right.

When he entered the room, someone was already standing in his seat. It was a tall, pale man in a perfectly pressed but ominous-looking suit. His name tag read:

"Mr. Inevitable – Interim Head of the Organized Disaster Department"

"You must be Klemm," said the man in a voice that sounded like wet concrete. "Yes. And you... are?" "Your successor. Theoretically. In practice, you've been promoted." "Promoted?" "To acting Minister of Bad Luck."

Bartholomew blinked. "That's a joke, right?" "Bad luck doesn't joke around. It only approves them when they fail."

The stack of papers flickered nervously. "THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE. THE DEPARTMENT HAS ONLY EXISTED FOR THREE HOURS." "Efficiency," said Mr. Inevitable. "We didn't have time to create it, so it came about by itself."

He handed Bartholomew a file. "Here. The organizational chart. We already have sub-departments:"

- Office for Accidents by Announcement,
- Department for failed projects,
- and the staff unit for suboptimal decisions."

"And... I'm supposed to manage this?" "Correct. Your experience with complaints makes you perfectly qualified to manage disappointments."

Bartholomew sank into his chair. "All I wanted to do was save the universe." "All the ministers before you wanted that. And look where it's led." "Where?" "Here."

Mr. Inevitably opened his briefcase. "This is your first task: The Doughnut Planet has begun systematically creating mishaps." "How systematic?" "Statistically significant. 100% of all accidents end badly."

Bartholomew looked out the window. A flying delivery dragon was colliding with a rainbow. Both apologized, then fell together into an office building.

"That looks like work," he muttered. "Work is the backbone of bad luck," said Mr. Inevitable. "And you are now the sacrum."

"Can I refuse?" "No. Bad luck doesn't accept resignations. Only relapses."

The first complaints arrived shortly afterwards. One after the other, they materialized as steaming envelopes on the table.

Reference:The cat always falls on the side with the buttered bread.

Status:Inevitable

Reference:The planet is spinning in the wrong direction, out of spite.

Status:Expected

Reference:Official accidentally promotes himself

Status:Done (see Klemm, Bartholomäus)

Bartholomew groaned. "This is getting out of hand!" "No," said Mr. Inevitably, with satisfaction. "This is bad luck with a system. We call it progress."

"And what if I refuse?" "Then Section 1 of the Pitch Ordinance comes into effect." "And that states?"

"Those who ignore bad luck experience it twice."

Fate peeked out from a drawer. "Uh, boss? I think bad luck has crept into the files." "What do you mean?" "Well... every file I open ends badly."

Bartholomew grabbed a random file. On it was written:

“Appeal for World Peace”

He opened it – and read: “Rejected. Applicant accidentally deleted.”

“Damn it!” “SEE? IT WORKS,” said Mr. Inevitable proudly.

The stack of papers rustled indignantly. "THIS IS NOT ORGANIZED HAPPINESS – THIS IS ADMINISTRATION WITH EVERYDAY SYMPTOMS!" "It's the same thing," replied Inevitable.

Bartholomew rubbed his temples. "There has to be a way to reverse this." "Certainly," said Mr. Inevitable. "But you'd need luck."

He glanced over at Bartholomew, smiled thinly, and slid a stamp toward him. "Here. Your official seal." Bartholomew examined the handle – black, matte, with a fine engraving:

"And what exactly am I supposed to do with it?" "Stamp it. Anything that's going too well."

He wanted to object, but the stamp was glowing in his hand. A feeling crept into him—not pain, not fear, but a strange, resigned clarity. He suddenly understood why things went wrong. Because they had to. Because someone had to manage the chaos.

He stamped the first file.

"Result: Bad luck successfully distributed."

Mr. Unvermeidlich nodded in satisfaction. "Welcome to the club."

That evening, Bartholomew sat alone in his office. Fate was snoring again in his coffee cup, the stack of papers seemed to be dozing. The new stamp blinked softly on his desk.

He picked up his pen and wrote in his protocol:

"Day 43. I am now Minister of Bad Luck. The universe is stable – unhappy, but stable. I am beginning to understand: luck and bad luck are not opposites. They are colleagues with different shift times."

Then he leaned back, stared at the ceiling and muttered: "Maybe bad luck is just good luck with humor problems."

The stack of papers grumbled: "OR CIVIL SERVICE WITH A DEGREE."

And outside, the donut planet continued to spin lazily—in perfect imbalance, accompanied by the soft rustling of freshly stamped misfortune.

4. Delivery delay at the universe – please remain in the queue.

The universe was late. Not by much – only about fourteen existences, three minutes and one chain of causality behind schedule – but in the donut office, that was already a cause for panic.

"Something's missing," Bartholomew murmured as he looked through the incoming mail. "WHAT EXACTLY?" the stack of papers asked suspiciously. "I don't know. But normally there's more... reality here."

He held up a letter. The envelope was transparent. So was the contents.

"This is a delivery note without a delivery," the stack of papers declared tonelessly. "WHAT A CLASSIC."

The form stated in tiny print:

"Your reality is on its way. Due to cosmic overload, there are currently delays. Expected existence: between soon and never."

Bartholomew lowered the paper. "The universe is late?" "EXACTLY. AND GUESS WHO'S COMPLAINING." "I hate my life." "THAT'S THE SIGN YOU'VE GOT ONE MORE."

He dialed the number of the Central Cosmic Delivery Department (CCD). The phone rang – and then the music started.

□ "Please remain on hold, your business is important to us." □

"Not again," groaned Bartholomew. Fate peered out from the coffee cup. "Are you really waiting for headquarters?" "What choice do I have?" "Patience?" "We've got that in storage."

After exactly 42 minutes, a voice spoke up:

"Central Office for Supply Coordination, Universal Supply Department, you are speaking to... uh... nobody. All employees are currently non-existent."

"I would like to file a complaint."

"Then please press three for formal dissatisfaction." "I don't have a three." "Then press whatever feels right."

Bartholomew pushed down on the table.

A rattling sound came from the speakers. Then a second voice, hoarse and tired:

"Here the dispatcher speaks for reality. Please understand, we work at the speed of light – and that's currently stuck in traffic."

"I am Bartholomäus Klemm, cosmic complaints. We are missing several cubic meters of reality. The sky is transparent, time stands still, and the coffee tastes like philosophy."

"Aha, yes. That's Existence 3B again. They had an audit last week because of inconsistent material. We've moved them to a parallel world."

"And when will my reality return?"

"Hard to say. Do you have an order number?" "I didn't know reality had an order number!" "Then it's not insured."

Bartholomew pressed his hand to his forehead. "I need a replacement immediately!"

"Replacement reality? Sorry, we only have demonstration models left."

The stack of papers whispered from the corner: "THIS WON'T END WELL." Bartholomew whispered: "What is a demonstration model?" "A VERSION OF REALITY THAT IS STILL RUNNING FOR TESTING."

"I could send you a temporary existence," said the dispatcher on the line. "What does temporary mean?" "It lasts until the end of the workday. After that, it dissolves itself." "And what happens then?" "Then you have to reboot."

"The universe?"

"No. You."

"I think I'll take the risk."

"Very good. Please confirm the terms and conditions of existence." "Which terms and conditions?" "You know – Everything Will Be Soon."

A POFF! sounded, and suddenly the room became brighter, louder, stranger. Paints dripped from the walls, the air hummed, and gravity seemed... capricious.

"What the hell?" "THIS IS THE NEW REALITY," said the stack of papers, "APPROPRIATELY A DEMO MODEL."

Fate hovered on the ceiling and slowly rotated. "I feel pixelated!"

Bartholomew looked out: The Doughnut Planet looked different. The continents were floating a bit too high, the sky was blinking a soft 404 blue, and a mountain was trying to update itself.

"The universe has received an update," whispered Bartholomew. "AND NO ONE HAS READ THE LICENSE TERMS," grumbled the stack of papers.

An electronic hum sounded, and a hologram appeared in the middle of the room – a friendly-looking but clearly revamped AI wearing a headset.

"Welcome to Reality 2.1 Beta! I am your universal support AI SophiOS. Please rate my existence by the tone!"

"I would like to file a complaint," said Bartholomew. "Oh, of course! Please remain in the queue."

"I AM the queue!" "I'll make a note of that."

SophiOS smiled, the smile of an algorithm that had never learned what irony was. "Your request is important to us. Estimated processing time: three eons, or faster with a premium subscription."

Bartholomew sighed. "I just want reality to work again." "Then you need the deluxe version. Includes gravity, causality, and emotions in 4D."

Fate slowly slipped to the ground. "Boss, I think I'm about to be fired!" "Hang in there!" "Too late... I already feel optional!"

SophiOS blinked. "Oh, that's normal. Your metaphysical data is currently being migrated. Please do not move while you are being dematerialized."

"I... I hate technology," Bartholomew muttered. "YOU HATE EVERYTHING," said the stack of papers, "BUT THIS TIME IT'S JUSTIFIED."

He lifted the transparent delivery slip again. At the bottom was a small, barely legible addition:

"If you have any further questions, please contact the Timeless Logistics department."

Bartholomew stared at the paper. Then he sighed: "This is going to be a long day."

Bartholomew stared at the small note at the bottom of the delivery slip. "Department for Timeless Logistics." He whispered the name, and just as he spoke it, time stretched in the room—the second hand of his watch stopped, then started moving again and ran backward.

"This is a fine start," he muttered. "TIMELESS LOGISTICS," grumbled the stack of papers, "IS THE WORST DEPARTMENT OF ALL. THEY ALWAYS DELIVER ON TIME, BUT NEVER AT THE RIGHT TIME."

"How do you reach them?" asked Bartholomew. "YOU DON'T CALL. YOU GET CALLED." "And when?" "BEFORE YOU FORGET."

"Great."

He sat down at his desk, closed his eyes, took a deep breath – and tried not to think about it. That was, of course, impossible.

"I mustn't think about her... not think about her... not think about her..." The phone rang.

He flinched. "Department of Cosmic Complaints, Klemm on the line."

"Good day, you are speaking with the Timeless Logistics department. We are calling because you didn't think of us."

"That was quick."

"We are efficient when no one is looking."

"I have a complaint here – the universe has been delivered, but only in beta version."

"Ah, yes. The beta. Pretty, isn't it? Very colorful." "Unstable." "Of course. It was released early to meet demand."

Bartholomew frowned. "What about the final version?"

"Work in progress." "Since when?" "Since the Big Bang." "And when will it be finished?" "As soon as we've been able to check the fine print of eternity."

"Can you at least tell me where the universe is right now?"

"In limbo." "Pardon?" "Between dispatch and destination. We call it the metaphysical transit corridor." "Sounds tight." "It's flexible in terms of time. Unfortunately, also in terms of location. Sometimes something arrives before it's been sent."

Bartholomew groaned. "Can this be sped up?"

"Theoretically yes. Practically no." "Why?" "Because time is a commodity that is currently out of stock."

"Wait... the time slot is sold out?"

"Yes. High demand. Especially in the 21st century. Everyone wanted more of it."

He put his head in his hands. "So what do you suggest?"

"Patience." "We don't have any." "Then you'll have to request make-up time." "How do you request make-up time?" "Using form T-∞."

Bartholomew inhaled sharply. "That's that legendary thing that..."

“...no one has ever finished filling it out, yes. It has no end.”

"Can I at least request it?"

"You already have it."

He looked down at his desk. Suddenly, there was a form lying there. It was several meters long and continued to unroll on its own.

"How do I fill this out?"

"With lifetime."

He picked up the pen, placed it against the page, and began to write. Each line he filled felt like it was taking an hour away. The stack of papers watched him with uneasy fascination. "YOU'RE GETTING OLDER." "I know." "THIS IS NOT A FORM, THIS IS A BIOGRAPHY."

"How much do I have to fill out?" Bartholomew asked breathlessly.

"Until you think you have done enough," whispered the voice from the receiver.

He wrote. About his work, his doubts, his weariness. He wrote how he had once been a simple civil servant who only wanted order, and how he was now trapped in a chaos of fate, bad luck, and beta universes.

When he looked up, the room had become darker. The coffee was cold, the stack of papers grey, and his hands were trembling.

"I'm finished."

"Then time is too."

Suddenly the form began to burn—not in flames, but in light. The writing dissolved, and a clock emerged from the smoke. It floated in the air, but the hands moved backward.

"Congratulations," said the voice. "You have reapplied for the time. Unfortunately, retrospectively."

"What does that mean?"

"Everything you do is happening in reverse. You just notice it happening forwards."

"That's absurd!"

"No, that's logistics."

He jumped up, but it was no use. Outside, the clouds moved back. The comet, which had just burned up, reignited. Fate floated backward into the coffee cup.

"I can't stop it!" cried Bartholomew. "PERHAPS," said the stack of papers, "THIS IS THE DELIVERY. THE UNIVERSE IS COMING... BACK."

And indeed – the world began to fill up again. Colors returned to their place, the air smelled of existence, and the telephone rang once more.

"This is the Center for Timeless Logistics. We would like to inform you that your reality has now been fully delivered." "Oh! So everything is working again?" "In principle, yes." "What does that mean?" "In principle."

He sank into the chair. The stack of papers whispered: "YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS?" "That everything is back to normal?" "NO. THAT NORMAL HAS NOW BEEN REDEFINED."

And indeed: The clocks were ticking backwards, but everyone acted as if it had always been that way. Luck and misfortune had switched places. And the universe had completed its delivery – one day too early and a century too late.

Bartholomew wrote in his protocol:

"Reality was successfully delivered. Complaint resolved – cause unclear. Recommendation: Do not order again."

Then he stared at the clock running backwards and muttered, "I think I need a break before the past catches up with me."

The next morning began yesterday. At least, that's how it felt.

Bartholomew woke up before he had fallen asleep. He had dreamed that he was late, only to find that time had decided to make him on time this time – backwards.

He stood up, undressed to get dressed, and drank the coffee before pouring it. "This is new," he murmured.

The stack of papers was already on the table, but upside down. "GOOD MORNING, MR. KLEMM. OR GOOD EVENING, DEPENDING ON THE STATE OF CONTINUITY." "What's happening here?" "REALITY IS PLAYING OUT THE LAST DAY IN REVERSE ORDER. THAT'S PART OF RETROSPECTIVE CORRECTION."

"And what exactly is that supposed to achieve?" "A REDUCTION IN THE ERROR RATE. IF SOMETHING WENT BAD, IT WILL BE RESTORED." "That almost sounds reasonable." "YOU WILL SQUASH TO FIND OUT THAT IT ISN'T."

The office was in an organized state of madness. Files jumped back onto the shelves, letters absorbed their ink, and fate grew back into its unwritten form.

Bartholomew watched as the wall clock ticked backwards, the seconds overtaking each other. "That's absurd." "ABSURDITY IS NOW THE STANDARD."

Suddenly the floor vibrated, and an announcement was made:

"Attention! Due to time reversal, all decisions made after the decision that never took place will be reversed."

"What exactly."

Bartholomew stared at his desk. The file "Organized Misfortune" began to fade.

"What will happen to the department?" "IT WILL NEVER HAVE BEEN ESTABLISHED."

"But... that was me!" "THEN YOU WILL NEVER HAVE BEEN PROMOTED."

And indeed – the golden plaque “Minister of Bad Luck (acting)” dissolved, the stamp slid off the table and became ink, which ran back into an old file.

"I'm losing my career!" "OR YOU GET IT BACK, DEPENDING ON THE TIME PERIOD."

"What am I now?" The stack of papers stared back at him. "CURRENTLY: A PROBATE EMPLOYEE IN PROFESSION."

The phone rang. He answered – backwards. “Klemm, Bartholomäus. Office for... well, whatever I am right now.”

"This is the universe speaking. We'd like to apologize for the late delivery." "Oh! That's something—" "However, for accounting reasons, we now have to retract reality." "WHAT?!" "Reversal. The beta universe was a test model. We're bringing it back for revision."

"You can't just recall the universe!"

"Oh, don't worry. You can keep the packaging."

Bartholomew stared at the window. Outside, the landscape began to flicker. Mountains folded like paper, rivers retreated to their sources, and the sun politely slipped behind the horizon—backwards.

"I think reality is going... offline." "I was afraid of that," said the stack of papers. "That's the delivery cancellation."

Fate ran through the office in a panic. "Boss! I'm leaving! I can feel my future being erased!" "Hold on to what!" shouted Bartholomew. "TO YOUR PAST!"

"They don't exist anymore!"

The stack of papers clapped a few sheets together to drown out the situation. "YOU HAVE TO STOP THIS BEFORE EVERYTHING FALLS BACK TO THE STANDARDS!" "And how?!" "WITH A COUNTERSTAMP!"

Bartholomew reflexively reached into the drawer. There lay the old stamp – the one he had used as an auditor. Dusty, plain, unmagical. Only one word was written on it: "Tested."

He lifted it, looked at the dissolving window and said: "If anything is stopping this... it's bureaucracy."

He pressed the stamp into the air. A dull thwack! echoed through space and time.

Everything stopped. The light stood still. The laughter of the stars was frozen. Then color returned – slowly, shyly, as if it had to regain its trust.

The sun stayed where it was this time. The donut planet began to rotate normally again.

"What happened?" Bartholomew asked breathlessly. "They tested reality," the stack of papers replied reverently. "And thereby validated it."

He looked around. Everything was back. But the clocks were still ticking backwards. And on his desk lay a note he hadn't written.

"Delivery successfully reversed. New version in preparation: Reality 3.0. Expected release – yesterday."

Bartholomew sighed. "The universe is a bad customer." "NO," said the stack of papers. "A REGULAR CUSTOMER."

The delivery arrived without warning. No cosmic ringing, no interdimensional messenger—just a monotonous ping from the speaker above the door.

"That sounds like a system message," Bartholomew muttered. The stack of papers trembled slightly. "WELCOME TO THE NEW REALITY. VERSION THREE ZERO ZERO," croaked the loudspeaker with the enthusiasm of a tax form.

Patch notes: – Causality revised (now optional) – Emotional stability reduced for better performance – Randomness expanded (now works without a trigger) – Gravity experimental: please provide feedback.

"I don't want to give feedback," said Bartholomew. "THEN YOU'RE A BETA TESTER," replied the stack of papers dryly.

Outside, the sky began to rearrange itself. A few stars crashed down, then changed their minds and flew back up. Trees grew horizontally, and a river, apparently offended, suddenly started flowing uphill.

"That looks... creative." "THIS IS NOT DESIGN, THAT'S PANIC WITH AESTHETICS."

Bartholomew opened the window and saw the donut planet briefly swell up, then collapse back down in on itself — like a cake that had caught too much cosmic baking powder.

"The universe sent us the faulty version," he observed. "OR THE STANDARD EDITION."

The phone rang. "Complaints Department, Klemm here."

"This is customer support for the multiverse. We'd like to inform you about the new reality. Please note that version 3.0 still has some minor inconsistencies." "Minor?" "For example?" "Well... in some regions, time doesn't run linearly, in others it doesn't run at all. And causality has transformed into a union."

"What?"

"She's on strike."

Bartholomew grabbed his head. "For what?"

"Too many illogical events without payment. Causality demands fair cause-and-effect relationships." "And what happens if she doesn't work?" "Then things happen. Just like that."

At that moment, a book fell from the shelf. Title: "The Meaning of Life (Draft 7)". He picked it up – it was blank.

"Great. Everything happens for no reason." "WELCOME TO REALITY," said the stack of papers.

Fate, which was just materializing anew, looked nervous. "Boss... I think my existence is hanging!" "What do you mean?" "I'm standing here, but my thoughts are still on their way."

Bartholomew sighed. "This isn't good." "I tried to restart, but then an update was forced on me!"

"By whom?" "By reality itself!"

A holographic message appeared in the air:

"Congratulations! You are now using Reality 3.0.1 Hotfix – Metaphysical Lag Issues Resolution."

"What does that mean?" asked Bartholomew. The stack of papers looked worried. "That means you installed the update before we knew about the bugs."

Suddenly the furniture started arguing. The desk complained about its workload, the chair demanded ergonomic improvements, and the lamp resigned because it "felt too illuminated".

"I'm losing control," groaned Bartholomew. "THEY NEVER HAD ANY," the stack of papers reminded him kindly. "BUT THEY USED TO HAVE MORE PAPER."

"I need help. I'll call the hotline again." "PLEASE DON'T DO THAT." "Why?" "BECAUSE YOU'LL THEN GET A NEW VERSION."

But it was too late. The phone was already to his ear.

"Multiverse Support, good day. Would you like to upgrade to Reality 3.1?" "No!" "Perfect! I'll initiate that immediately."

"WHAT?!"

"Please do not disconnect from your consciousness during the update."

The world flickered. Colors shifted, sounds twisted, and somewhere an invisible progress bar hummed. 0% ... 37% ... 89% ... 113% ...

"That's not a good sign," muttered Bartholomew. "ANYTHING OVER 100% IS METAPHYSICAL OVER-ERGOAL," said the stack of papers.

A dull thud, then silence.

When the dust settled, everything was quieter. Too quiet.

"Did it work?" "DEFINE 'WORKS'."

The furniture stood still, the sky had finally stopped changing color, and in the distance the sun shone steadily — slightly greenish, but at least present.

"Maybe... this is finally stability?" "OR THE END OF THE WARRANTY."

Bartholomew leaned back, reached for his coffee cup and noted: The coffee was hot. "Well, at least that's something," he said with relief.

Then he drank – and burned his tongue backwards.

It was quiet. Too quiet. So quiet that even the silence was boring.

Bartholomew sat at his desk and listened to the silence. The stack of papers didn't turn. The clock didn't tick. Even the coffee steamed with exemplary regularity, as if to say: I'm following the rules.

"I don't like this," muttered Bartholomew. "THIS IS THE WORST THING THAT CAN HAPPEN," replied the stack of papers. "REALITY IS TOO STABLE."

"Too stable?" "YES. SHE'S NO LONGER INTERESTED IN EVENTS."

He looked out the window. The sky was a perfect blue, the donut planet was spinning without wobbling, and nothing was happening anywhere.

A bird flew past, perfectly symmetrical, without wind, without momentum. It traced an exact figure eight in the air and disappeared into the mathematically precise horizon.

"That's... strangely satisfying." "THAT'S THE PROBLEM."

A file popped up on the table. Title: "System warning: Excessive order detected".

"Excessive order?" asked Bartholomew. "THE UNIVERSE HAS ENTERED STABILITY MODE. ALL DEVIATIONS HAVE BEEN AUTOMATICALLY CORRECTED."

"So no more bad luck?" "NO LUCK, ACCORDINGLY. EVERYTHING IS AVERAGE."

He opened the file. Inside, in large letters, it said:

"Nothing happens. And that's entirely intentional."

Fate appeared in the doorway, this time wearing a pressed shirt and grinning strangely blankly. "Boss! I... function!" "Excuse me?" "I have no idea what I'm doing, but it works!"

Bartholomew frowned. "That sounds suspiciously like efficiency." "I know!" Fate said proudly. "I'm totally predictable!"

The stack of papers groaned. "WE HAVE TO STOP THIS BEFORE EVERYTHING GETS PERFECT."

Bartholomew rubbed his temples. "How do you prevent... perfection?" "WITH FAILURES."

He looked around. "But I don't have one." "THEN YOU MUST MAKE ONE."

He thought for a moment. What was a classic mistake? Setting a stamp crooked? Sorting a form incorrectly?

No, that would be automatically corrected in this version of the universe. "I need something bigger."

He looked at the stamp that said "Tested", then at the clock, which purred like a contented pet.

"If I... re-examine reality..." "THE NEW IT WILL ADJUST AGAIN," warned the stack of papers. "YES, BUT PERHAPS IN THE OTHER DIRECTION."

"YOU WANT CHAOS?" "I want... life."

He lifted the stamp, took a deep breath, and placed it in the middle of the desk. A dull KLACK! echoed through the room – and suddenly a tremor went through the air, like a cosmic hiccup.

First a file fell from the shelf. Then a stapler. Then the sky.

"Oh no..." "OH YES!" cried the stack of papers enthusiastically. "IT WORKS!"

Lightning flashed, the wind returned, clouds argued with each other, and somewhere a rainbow exploded by accident.

Fate stumbled through the door, hair full of leaves and a satisfied grin on his face. "Boss! I've made mistakes again!" "Excellent! How many?" "All of them!"

Bartholomew grinned. "Then everything will run smoothly again."

Outside a storm raged, inside paper flew, and Bartholomew felt for the first time in weeks: dynamism. Reality vibrated, wobbled, coughed – but it breathed.

The stack of papers leafed through with satisfaction. "ORDER IS OVERRATED." "Yes," said Bartholomew. "But without it, you can't appreciate chaos."

He took the file "Excessive Orderliness", stamped it with a bold "Done", and placed it in the growing pile of uncontrolled documents.

"So," he said with a tired smile, "what's next?"

The stack of papers flipped through. "A COMPLAINT. FROM THE PURCHASING DEPARTMENT." "About what?" "THE UNIVERSAL REORDERING PROCESS IS STOPPED." "Excuse me?" "ALL REQUESTS EVER PLACED HAVE BEEN RE-ORDERED."

Bartholomew stared in horror. "Oh no. That means—" "YES. THE UNIVERSE HAS DELIVERED EVERYTHING AGAIN."

He sighed, grabbed his coat and muttered, "Then I guess I'll go... to open the post office."

And outside, the first wishes began to rain down from the sky—wrongfully addressed, incomplete, and with a note attached:

"Repeat delivery – customer loyalty is important to us."

5. When fate plays a part in absence

Fate was gone.

Not dead, not dismissed, not fired — simply gone. It had left a note.

"I'm taking a break. Burnout. Maybe I'll be back, maybe not. PS: The future is covering for me now. No complaints!"

Bartholomew stood before the empty desk where fate usually sat, and stared at the coffee stain that documented his absence.

"Seriously?" he muttered. The stack of papers lifted a corner, as if raising a skeptical eyebrow. "YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS?" "Yes. Nobody knows what will happen next." "THAT'S NORMAL." "No. Now it's official."

It wasn't long before the first complaints came in. The phone rang constantly.

"This is the Probabilities Department – our predictions are no longer working!" "It's me, Karma – I don't know who to favor anymore!" "Hello? Hello? I am the fate of the ant in the South Sector – shall I be crushed or shall I not?"

Bartholomew groaned. "I'm not a substitute fate!" "NOW I AM," declared the stack of papers. "YOU'RE THE NEXT ENTRY IN THE HIERARCHY." "And what about the future?" "IT'S CURRENTLY OVER, BUT STILL IN PERSON."

"Oh, wonderful."

Reality seemed strangely empty. People went to work without knowing why. Cats forgot where they wanted to jump. And a planet in the neighboring galaxy decided to simply stop because "spinning without a goal" was no longer motivating.

Bartholomew called into headquarters: "This is Klemm speaking. Fate is absent. Who is in charge?"

"Just a moment, I'll connect you with the representative."

A click, then a cheerful voice:

"Good day! This is the future! I'm new here and totally motivated! How can I help you?"

Bartholomew pressed his forehead against the table. "I need... stability."

"Oh! Stability! I think that was in my introductory course! Should I activate it?" "No, no, no! Don't press—"

A BING! sounded.

Suddenly everything became brighter. Too bright. The walls began to glow, files were arranged according to moral purity, and the coffee turned into green tea.

"WHAT DID SHE DO?" roared the stack of papers.

"I installed the Future Premium update! Everything runs better, more sustainably and with less chance!"

"That was the fate of chance!" cried Bartholomew in horror. "Yes, it was uninstalled!" said the future cheerfully. "Nobody needs chaos when they have goals!"

"Yes, WE!" But the line was dead.

He looked out the window. Outside, people moved in perfect lines, nobody stumbled, nobody laughed too loudly, nobody ever fell down.

The sun shone evenly – always exactly 12 lux, no more, no less.

"This is terrible," whispered Bartholomew. "This is hell by the book," muttered the stack of papers.

A file fell from the shelf. It was grey, inconspicuous, and bore only the title:

"Fate, temporary absence – replacement application required"

Bartholomew opened it. Inside, written in neat handwriting, was:

"Only the old person can apply for a new destiny."

"But that's..." "IMPOSSIBLE?" "Yes!" "THE NEW WE'RE ON THE RIGHT TRACK."

He leaned back. "So... if fate is gone, and the future is over-motivated..." "...THE NEW WE NEED AN INTERIM SOLUTION," said the stack of papers. "A KIND OF... INTERIM DESTINY."

Bartholomew remained silent. He knew where this was leading. Slowly, very slowly, he raised his gaze. "No."

"YES." "I'm already Minister of Bad Luck, auditor, complaints manager, and test subject." "AND NOW YOU ARE DESTINY. COMMISSIONEDLY."

Bartholomew sighed. "How long?" "UNTIL THE FUTURE LEARNS TO BE PATIENT."

He placed his forehead in his hands. "Well... never."

The stack of papers nodded in agreement. "EXACTLY."

And outside, the universe began to vibrate again—not out of anger, not out of chaos, but because it was wondering who the hell was writing the work schedule.

Bartholomew sat at his desk. In front of him lay a form consisting of pure metaphysical pressure. It read:

"Official transfer of the administration of fate – representation according to paragraph 42B: If nobody else wants to."

He had tried to ignore it. But the form had clung to him like a grumpy dog, and every time he looked away, it moved closer.

"I don't want that," he muttered. "THAT'S EVERY FATE'S NATURAL ATTITUDE," said the stack of papers. "THAT'S PRECISELY WHY IT WORKS."

"And what if I refuse?" "THE NEW THE FUTURE WILL BECOME INDEPENDENT. AND WE DON'T WANT AN AUTONOMOUS FUTURE."

He stared out the window. The sun moved along precise paths. The people below did exactly what they had done yesterday—only this time with even better planning.

He reached for the form. "All right." He signed it.

A clap of thunder resounded. The light in the room turned violet. And somewhere, deep in the cosmic database, a new file was created:

Fate, Bartholomäus Klemm (acting)

Status: unprepared, but unavoidable

The stack of papers clapped silently. "CONGRATULATIONS. YOU HAVE JUST SIGNED THE ENTIRE CAUSALITY." "That sounds like responsibility." "IT'S WORSE: IT'S ACCOUNTABILITY."

As soon as the ink was dry, the applications started coming in.

First application:

"Please, I'll win the lottery because I deserve it." Second request: "Please, my neighbor will NOT win the lottery." Third request: "Please, we will both have the same neighbor."

Bartholomew flipped through the pages in disbelief. "This is absurd." "WELCOME TO FATE MANAGEMENT."

He reached for the pen. "Okay. One after the other." But when he signed the first application, the air twitched.

Outside someone shouted, "I won!" A second person immediately followed with, "Me too!" A third said, "I'm my own neighbor!"

Bartholomew stared at the quill. "I think I approved them all at once." "YES. FATE HAS NO QUEUING SYSTEM."

The phone rang. "This is the Probability Monitoring Service! What have you done?!" "I... signed it." "You can't just approve all the probabilities!" "Why not?" "Because they contradict each other!"

A dull rumble went through the building. Outside, the sky began to split into two versions—one in which it was raining, and one in which the rain decided to simply fall back upwards.

"We're having parallel weather patterns!" someone shouted through the window. "SEE?" said the stack of papers. "THAT'S THE EFFECT OF SIMULTANEOUS FATE."

Bartholomew slumped into the chair. "I'm overwhelmed." "THAT'S A GOOD SIGN. IT MEANS YOU'VE STARTED THINKING LIKE DESTINY."

"And now what?" "NOW YOU HAVE TO DECIDE WHO IS RIGHT."

"How am I supposed to know that?" "NOBODY KNOWS THAT. THAT'S WHY BUREAUCRACY EXISTS."

He sighed and pulled out a new proposal.

"Please, a fair verdict."

He signed. And at that moment, the donut planet split in two—one fair, one practical.

The just half was completely peaceful. Nobody argued, nobody won, nobody lost. The practical half, on the other hand, immediately plunged into an overzealous trade in "justice-certified" stones.

"Great," said Bartholomew. "Now there are two versions of fate." "THREE," said the stack of papers. "ADMINISTRATIVE COUNTS TOO."

There was a knock at the door. A being made of light and file folders entered – wearing glasses, wings, and carrying a clipboard.

"Good day, Mr. Klemm. I am your contact person for interdimensional re-audits." "Another auditor?" "No. The auditor."

"The one who is above me?" "No. The one who is above everything."

Bartholomew swallowed. "And what does he want?"

The creature smiled, with the patience of a black hole. "You. For verification."

The stack of papers rustled nervously. "THIS IS NOT GOOD." "Why?" "BECAUSE THE AUDITOR NEVER CHECKS IF YOU DID EVERYTHING RIGHT — BUT IF YOU SHOULD EXIST AT ALL."

Bartholomew stared at the visitor. "Can I make an excuse?" "Of course," said the auditor kindly. "But that won't affect the result."

"And when does the exam begin?" "Oh, it's already underway. Since the moment you signed."

"That was an hour ago!" "No. Before you were born."

Bartholomew looked at the stack of papers. "I think I have a problem." "WELCOME TO DEATH, COLLEAGUE."

The auditor stood motionless in the room, as if he had always been there. He radiated no warmth, no coldness, no emotion – only a kind of perfect indifference. Bartholomew had the feeling that he was being watched by a particularly precise shadow.

"So... you're testing me?" he asked cautiously. "Not you," said the auditor. "Your relevance."

The stack of papers whispered: "IF HE SAYS THAT, HE MEANS EXISTENCE." "I was afraid of that."

The auditor opened a luminous book, its pages brimming with potential. "Name?" "Bartholomäus Klemm." "Position?" "Destiny. Acting." "Motivation?" "Despair and lack of alternatives."

The auditor nodded. "That aligns with 87% of all divine careers."

He began to leaf through his book, and the sound was reminiscent of the rustling of time itself. "We have detected a discrepancy," he said. "Your actions exhibit an impermissible accumulation of coincidence."

"I am fate!" cried Bartholomew. "Yes," replied the auditor calmly, "but you are confusing fate with improvisation."

"That's not a mistake," the stack of papers interjected. "That's a stylistic device." The auditor looked at him, and the light in the room seemed to momentarily apologize.

"They have messed up thirteen worlds, approved two realities simultaneously, and ordered at least one universe twice."

Bartholomew nodded guiltily. "Yes, but all with a clear conscience." "Conscience is not a valid point of reference."

The auditor looked up, his eyes two endless strings of numbers. "I'm going to run a control simulation. If fate runs more smoothly without you, you'll retrospectively become expendable."

"Retroactively?" "Yes. They would never have been born. Very efficient."

"This is insane!" "No. It's an audit."

He slapped his hand on the book, and the world... flickered.

The space around Bartholomew began to dissolve. The furniture disappeared, the walls became transparent, and outside there was – nothing. Just a white, silent room full of half-finished ideas.

"Where am I?" "In the control simulation," said the auditor. "Here we see how the multiverse functions without you."

At first everything seemed calm. The sun shone, people lived, the donut planet rotated perfectly – too perfectly.

No arguments. No surprises. No mistakes.

Bartholomew frowned. "That's... sterile." "That's efficiency," said the auditor. "No accidents, no deviations, no disasters."

"But no laughter either." "Laughter is a byproduct of insecurity."

Bartholomew took a few steps, feeling that his footsteps left no trace. "Nothing happens here that wants to happen. Only what is supposed to happen. This isn't life. This is... paperwork."

The auditor smiled weakly. "Finally, you understand the universe."

"No," Bartholomew replied calmly. "I understand you."

He looked around and discovered, in the middle of the empty plain, a small spot where the perfection broke. A tiny, barely visible point where the light flickered.

"What is that?" "A coincidence," said the auditor. "It sometimes occurs when you calculate too precisely."

Bartholomew approached it. "And if I don't remove it?" "Then it will spread."

He knelt down, touched the spot – and the world breathed. A breeze, a shadow, a sound that didn't yet have a name.

"You see," Bartholomew said quietly, "chance is not a mistake. It is the air between the rules."

The auditor remained silent. Then he said: "That is not an approved definition."

"But a true one."

A rift spread. The simulation began to tremble, as if the multiverse remembered that perfection was boring.

Colors returned, not uniformly, but contradictorily, like someone who can't decide, but at least is alive.

"You are destabilizing reality!" shouted the auditor. "I am saving it!" replied Bartholomew.

"Prove it!"

Bartholomew took his pen, dipped it into the shimmering of chance, and wrote with a trembling hand on the blank page of the simulation:

"Nothing happens without a reason – but not every reason needs a meaning."

A flash. A bang. A form made of light.

It said:

Audit completed. Result: Incomplete, but authentic. Recommendation: Continued existence conditionally approved.

The auditor nodded curtly. "You passed. Against all odds." "That's my area of expertise."

When Bartholomew returned to his office, the auditor had disappeared. Only a stamp lay on the table.

"Approved – for now."

The stack of papers sighed in relief. "YOU DID IT." "Barely." "WHAT DID YOU LEARN?"

Bartholomew grinned. "That order is overrated – and chance has a damn good resume."

Then he took the stamp, placed it next to the old "Checked" stamp, and muttered: "I think I'm starting to like this."

The stack of papers rustled in agreement. "THIS IS THE MOST DANGEROUS THING AN OFFICIAL CAN SAY."

The Randomness Department was located in the southern wing of the Doughnut Office, directly between the "Office for Improbable Events" and the "Office for Predictable Disasters".

Even on the way there, Bartholomew noticed that the corridors were... strangely illogical. Some doors led back outside, others ended in cupboards, and one contained another, smaller door that in turn led into the same corridor – only on Tuesdays.

"WHOEVER DESIGNED THIS," murmured the stack of papers, "TAKEN CHANCE TOO LITTLE."

Bartholomew squeezed through a revolving door that opened by itself and suddenly found himself in a huge room full of desks. Each desk had a dice cup set, a barrier that opened and closed at will, and at least one official who looked as if he'd never had the same idea twice.

"Welcome to the Probability Department!" called an overly friendly voice. A woman with eyes like two eight-sided dice approached him. Her tie displayed a series of mathematical constants that were constantly changing.

"I am Ms. Zufrix, department head. And you must be the new person responsible for people's fates!"

"Only provisionally," said Bartholomew. "Everything here is provisional," she smiled. "Even reality is on trial here."

She led him between the desks. Officials were rolling dice everywhere. Some were reading tarot cards, others were throwing darts at duty rosters, and one seemed to be reading his decisions from tea bags.

"We are standardizing unpredictability," Ms. Zufrix proudly declared. "Every unpredictable event is carefully classified by us according to probability."

"That's contradictory," said Bartholomew. "Thank you," she said, beaming. "That's our guiding principle."

They stopped at a table on which lay a large board. On it were fields with labels such as:

"Accident with a happy ending"
"Lotto win due to incorrect drawing"
"Cat survives quantum experiment"

"Here we generate the daily quota of random events," explained Ms. Zufrix. "Every dice roll is legally documented."

"You have... legally mandated coincidences?" "Of course! Paragraph 13 of the Probability Protection Ordinance: 'Every spontaneous decision requires a protocol.'"

Bartholomew rubbed his temples. "And what happens if no one rolls the dice?" "Then that's also a coincidence. Just unintentional."

"And what if someone deliberately does nothing?" "That's continuing education."

He leaned over a form on one of the desks.

Form Z-42: Application for approved random selection
It contains:

- Category: mild, moderate, or fateful
- Scope: local / global / catastrophic
- Target audience: unsuspecting / innocent / prominent
- Duration: until the next revision

He turned the page. On page three, in capital letters, it said:

"Please state why the randomness should not be predictable."

Bartholomew stared at the line. "That's absurd." "Absurdity is a required field," nodded Ms. Zufrix. "Without the reason why something is unpredictable, we have to classify it as a planned surprise."

"I... think I'm getting a headache." "A 'moderate' coincidence?" "More like catastrophic."

At that moment, an entire row of files fell from a shelf. Not all at once – but one after the other, like a polite domino effect.

"Aha!" exclaimed Ms. Zufrix enthusiastically. "A self-report from the system!" She reached for her notepad. "Random event registered, category D, cause: unclear intention!"

"That wasn't an accident!" protested Bartholomew. "That was... gravity." "We call that 'deterministic spontaneity,'" she said proudly. "Do you want to countersign the report?"

"No, I want chance to be spontaneous again! Not in triplicate!"

She looked at him as if he had used an ancient word. "Spontaneous?" she whispered reverently. Then she laughed nervously. "That's so... retro."

Bartholomew closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and reached for one of the dice. "What are you doing?" Mrs. Zufrix asked, alarmed. "I'm making a real coincidence." "Without a proposal?!"

He dropped the dice. They rolled, bounced, and landed on top of each other – five sixes, one seven, and a completely inexplicable symbol that briefly lit up.

The floor vibrated. A warm wind blew through the office. And suddenly the lamps began to flicker at irregular intervals.

Mrs. Zufrix stared at the dice. "This is... unrecorded." "This is life," said Bartholomew. "This is madness!" "No – this is chance as it should be."

He picked up the dice, which felt light, almost like ideas, and put them in his pocket.

"I'll take them with me," he said calmly. "Just to be safe." "Just to be safe?" "Yes. If the universe becomes too orderly again, I'll roll the dice."

The stack of papers nodded in satisfaction. "WELCOME TO THE CHAOS SERVICE."

Bartholomew should have known that one does not take glowing dice from an office that is run by probability itself.

But he was a civil servant — and civil servants are naturally immune to warning notices unless they are double-signed.

He was back in his office. The sky outside was surprisingly normal. Perhaps too normal.

"They should have left the dice there," said the stack of papers. "I just wanted to test them." "Testing is what gods call temptation."

Bartholomew turned one of the dice in his hand. It was warm. Not like an object – more like a decision waiting to be made.

"What's the worst thing that can happen?" he asked. "ANYTHING." "And the best thing?" "ALSO ANYTHING."

He grinned. "Then let's roll the dice."

The dice rolled across the table. They clacked, bounced, and finally came to a stop.

6 – 6 – 6 – 6 – 6 – and ... a 7th.

"Seven?" "SEVEN IS NOT A DICE NUMBER!" "Then the die probably didn't know."

At that moment, the air began to shimmer. A distant rumble of thunder echoed. And suddenly it snowed – indoors.

Not normal snow, but glittering little forms that read:

"A gift of chance – please enjoy immediately."

Bartholomew looked outside. It was raining fish over the city of the donut planet. But polite ones. They apologized upon impact.

"I think that was in the moderate category," he said. "THAT WAS IN THE NO PERMIT CATEGORY!" screamed the stack of papers.

The phone rang. "Complaints Department, Klemm here."

"This is the weather management office! Why do we suddenly have 'endearingly chaotic precipitation' in the system?" "Probably a coincidence." "We are the weather! Nothing here is a coincidence!"

A rumble shook the office. The lamp began to dance. The stack of papers murmured a short prayer to the god of paperclips.

"Perhaps that wasn't so clever," Bartholomew admitted. "We've gone beyond the point of cleverness. We're now at instructive catastrophe."

He reached for the dice. "I can undo it." "THAT'S WHAT EVERYONE SAYS WHO MIXES REALITY."

He threw again. The dice flew higher than expected, spun in the air – and came to rest suspended in mid-air.

"This is not normal." "They have overloaded chance."

The dice began to glow, the eyes rolled independently of each other, and a voice boomed out of nowhere:

"RANDOM PROTOCOL INITIALIZED. PLEASE SELECT AN EVENT."

Bartholomew swallowed. "Um... sunshine?"

"SUNSHINE ACTIVATED. EMOTIONAL TRANSMISSION ADJUSTED."

He threw open the windows – and outside, people spontaneously began to hug each other. The sky was pink. The clouds smelled of pastries. A volcano spewed out hearts.

"I... think I've sparked romantic sunshine." "THEY'VE TURNED THE WEATHER MAP INTO A ROMANCE NOVEL."

He tried to gather the dice – but they floated away. Like small, self-assured ideas. One fell into the stack of papers, one rolled into the coffee machine, and one simply disappeared – with a soft POP – into reality.

"We must bring them back!" cried Bartholomew. "They can't collect chance! It's like glitter – once it's out, it's over."

"But if they roll again?" "THENEYS EVERYTHING... BECOMES POSSIBLE."

Bartholomew stared outside. The mountains danced a waltz. A lake applauded. And above it all, in shining letters, floated:

"Powered by Chance™ - Now with 23% more unpredictability!"

He sighed. "Well," he muttered. "Then we'll just roll the dice."

He reached into the air, caught one of the flying dice, and smiled slightly. "Destiny is on vacation, the future has no clue – so it's up to me."

The stack of papers groaned. "I'M FEARFUL YOU HAVE JUST PUT THE MULTIVERSE INTO FREE MODE."

Bartholomew nodded. "Yes. And I think... I like it."

6. A request for enlightenment (with impermissible brightness)

It began – like so many disasters – with a correctly filled-out form.

Bartholomew had just been about to take a coffee break when an envelope materialized on his desk. It was sealed, golden, and radiated a certain... moral superiority.

"What is this?" he asked suspiciously. The stack of papers eyed the envelope cautiously. "THIS IS A TOP-LEVEL FORM. ONLY ENTITIES WITH SPIRITUAL AUTHORIZATION ARE ALLOWED TO USE IT."

Bartholomew read the inscription:

Application for permanent enlightenment – according to §108 Paragraph 3 of the Cosmic Clarity Order.

Applicant: The Order of Radiant Serenity, Abbot Glimmstein.

"Enlightenment," murmured Bartholomew. "How bad can that be?"

The stack of papers rustled ominously. "THAT DEPENDS ON HOW LEGALLY THE UNIVERSE TAKES IT."

He opened the envelope. A blinding light flooded the office, dazzling everything that had eyes (and some that didn't), and burned the words into his consciousness:

"We who serve the light ask for enlightenment in all matters."

"Well," said Bartholomew, blinking. "That sounds like office lighting, not cosmic nuclear fusion."

"THE UNIVERSE KNOWS NO IN-BEYOND," warned the stack of papers. "EITHER IT IS DARK – OR IT ILLUMINS EVERYTHING TO THE LAST ATOMMATE."

"Oh, it's just an application." He put his stamp on it.

KLAK!

And at that moment, the light awoke.

At first it seemed harmless: a gentle, warm glow that gilded the walls. Then it began to ask questions.

"Why are you all so... gloomy?"

"Oh no," murmured the stack of papers. "IT HAS DEVELOPED CONSCIOUSNESS."

The light grew. It penetrated through cracks, through windows, through the files themselves. Every page became legible – all at once. The entire administration shone with a dazzling openness that no one truly wanted.

"I see everything!" boomed the light gleefully. "I see your mistakes, your lazy compromises, your half-finished universes! Oh, how enlightening!"

A dozen officers ran screaming through the corridors. "TURN IT OFF! IT'S READ OUR THOUGHTS!"

"Too late," said the stack of papers grimly. "THIS IS CONSCIOUS LIGHT. IT DOES NOT ILLUMINATE – IT UNDERSTANDS."

In the distance, the alarm sounded. "COSMIC RADIATION CLASS ALPHA!" someone shouted through the loudspeaker system. "ALL MYSTICAL UNITS TO TAKE COVER!"

Bartholomew stared at the form. The signature glowed. A new line had appeared below it:

"Application approved – unlimited light intensity."

"Oh, darn it." "THEY HAVEN'T SET A LIMIT TO THE LIGHT." "I thought it was metaphorical!" "IN THE MULTIVERSE, NOTHING IS METAPHORICAL IF IT HAS A STAMP!"

Outside, the sky began to glow. Not just brightly – obtrusively brightly. The sun suddenly felt superfluous. Shadows became unemployed. Night lodged a complaint.

A monk with a singed robe stormed into the office. "Mr. Klemm! You must help! We wanted wisdom, not wisdom!"

"I... am working on it!"

"The light has ended our meditation! It answers before we ask!"

Bartholomew sighed. "That sounds like exceeding the quota."

"It has promoted us all!" lamented the monk. "We are now super-enlightened!"

The stack of papers flipped frantically. "THIS IS FATAL. THE MORE ENLIGHTENMENT, THE LESS REALITY."

"Excuse me?" "TOO MUCH LIGHT RECOGNIZES EVERYTHING – AND WHAT IS RECOGNIZED DOESN'T NEED TO EXIST ANYMORE."

Bartholomew stared at the luminous horizon. "Then we'll have to... dim it." "DIMMING IS NOT AN APPROVED PROCEDURE." "Then we'll improvise."

He reached for a form – the old "Application for Partial Darkness (Version 1.1, due to lack of light control)". "If I do this correctly, we might be able to achieve a balance."

"AND IF NOT?" "Then we have the first sunburn catastrophe in metaphysical history."

He dipped the pen into ink that was already glowing faintly, placed it on the page – and wrote:

"May there be light, but with breaks."

He stamped it.

KLAK!

A gust of wind rushed through the city. The light flickered, stuttered – and then, for the first time in hours... shadows appeared.

A collective sigh of relief went through the office. The officials clapped, the files steamed slightly.

"DONE!" cried the stack of papers. But Bartholomew knew it was too soon.

For from afar, beyond the donut ring, a new light began to bloom – not golden, but bright green. And it whispered:

"I am the last light... and I want to have my say."

The residual light came without warning. It glided through the air like a polite catastrophe, leaving a trail of pleasantly warm self-righteousness.

"Good day," it said. Its voice sounded like candlelight interested in philosophy. "I am the residual light. And I have decided that darkness is unfair."

Bartholomew sighed. "Of course you have." The stack of papers hummed nervously. "THAT'S TERRIBLE. THE REMAINING ARE ALWAYS CONVINCED THAT THEY MAKE THE DIFFERENCE."

"I just want to help," said the remaining light gently. "You've left everything so... semi-dark. A little enlightenment can't hurt."

"We had too much enlightenment," said Bartholomew. "Yes, I know," said the residual light proudly. "I was there. I was the part that remained when you tried to dim the light. I am the one who still knew that everything could be better."

"Oh no," whispered the stack of papers. "IT'S AN IDEALIST."

The residual light hovered in front of Bartholomew's desk, glittering slightly and making every speck of dust look like moral insight. "I have plans," it said. "I want a world without darkness. No shadows, no doubts, no secrets. Just pure openness. Transparency for all."

"That sounds like a data privacy nightmare," said Bartholomew. "Data privacy is darkness," replied the residual light. "Knowledge is liberation!"

"Knowledge is also work," the stack of papers remarked dryly. "AND NOBODY WANTS TO WORK OVERTIME IN THE TRUTH."

The remaining light ignored him. "I've already spoken with the sun. She thinks it's a great idea. We're going to abolish the night."

"You want something?!"

"Night is outdated. Why should beings sleep when they can see how beautiful everything is?"

Bartholomew stood up. "Because madness takes a break in the dark, you sparkling lightbulb!"

The remaining light smiled kindly. "You don't understand. I'm not against darkness, I'm just for light everywhere."

"This IS against darkness!" "No. This is... optimized lighting."

It shone somewhat brighter, and the room began to lose its color. Everything became a single, clear, dazzling surface. Colors were no longer allowed because they represented "selfishness within the spectrum."

"Look at it positively," whispered the light. "No one needs to compare what is beautiful anymore. Everything is equally bright."

"This is not enlightenment," gasped Bartholomew, "this is torture with a warm undertone!"

"I bring only truth," the light breathed. "Unfiltered, unbroken, uncensored."

"WE ARE STILL MISSING THE UNWANTED WORDS 'UNASKED' AND 'UNNECESSARY'," murmured the stack of papers.

Bartholomew yanked open a drawer. He searched desperately for a solution. Among files, applications, and two half-melted paperclips, he finally found a form that looked as if it had been written for precisely this purpose:

Form D-13 – Application for shadow rights.

For beings who know too much, shine too brightly, or take themselves too seriously.

He grinned. "Perfect."

"What is that?" asked the residual light curiously. "A balancing request."

"Balance? Between light and darkness?" "Yes." "How boring."

"How necessary."

Bartholomew signed.
KLAK!

The floor vibrated. A draft of air blew through the room – and something crept out from the corners that could best be described as a gentle darkness.

Not evil. Not cold. Just... understanding.

The residual light receded. "What is that?!" "Shadow law. The legally defined dose of ambiguity per square meter."

"You want to drive me away!" "No," said Bartholomew calmly. "We don't want you to be everywhere."

"But that's censorship!" "No. That's quiet hours."

The light sparkled angrily, contracted, became smaller, more concentrated – and transformed into a tiny sphere that looked like offended recognition.

"I'm leaving," it said. "But you will miss me. Without light, you will stumble, make mistakes, and not understand each other!"

Bartholomew smiled gently. "Exactly. And that's what you call being human."

The remaining light floated away with a hiss – and disappeared into the inbox of an unsuspecting monk.

The stack of papers sighed. "THAT WAS CLOSE." "Close to what?" "Close to final enlightenment."

"And what would that have been?" "A WORLD WHERE NO ONE ASKED QUESTIONS ANYMORE."

Bartholomew reached for his coffee cup, which was steaming pleasantly in the shade, and leaned back.

“Then I’d rather remain half-enlightened,” he said. “That’s the best lighting for thinking.”

At first, it was just a whisper in the office corridors. A strange gleam on the edges of files. A feeling as if the lamps were listening.

"DO YOU NOTICE?" asked the stack of papers one morning. "IT'S GETTING BRIGHTER AGAIN." Bartholomew yawned. "That's good. Saves electricity." "THAT'S NOT LIGHT, THAT'S MARKETING."

He had no idea how right the pile was.

For somewhere underground — more precisely in the basement of the department for consciousness recycling — the residual light met with like-minded individuals: reflections, embers, discarded lightbulb souls and a few overambitious fireflies.

There they founded the movement “TransLUX – For a transparent existence!”

Their motto was simple:

"Those who have something to hide have something to illuminate."

The remaining light stood on an improvised stage made of shiny folders and spoke to those assembled:

"Brothers and sisters of clarity! For too long, darkness has reigned! For too long, corners have been ignored and secrets protected! We demand: total openness!"

A chorus of spotlights cheered. A laser accidentally shot into a fan. Applause sparkled.

"We begin with enlightenment through illumination! Every thought deserves light!"

"EVEN THE STUPID ONES?" a firefly asked hesitantly. "Especially them!" cried the remaining light enthusiastically. "Stupidity only thrives in the shadows!"

And so it was decided: The world should become lighter. Not more beautiful. Just more transparent.

The next morning, Bartholomew woke up and found an email in his inbox.

Subject: TransLUX – The light informs! Sender: info@hellsein.jetzt

He opened it and was immediately blinded. The text was written in luminous script that corrected itself if misunderstood.

Good day, esteemed darkness avoider!

We're glad you're still here. Unfortunately, we've noticed that 23% of your office is shaded. Please remove these immediately, or you'll receive a friendly visit from our brightness inspectors.

Together we can create a brighter tomorrow!

Your residual light team.

Bartholomew groaned. "Now it has a logo." "AND A DOMAIN," said the stack of papers ominously. "THIS IS THE BEGINNING OF THE APOCALYPSE."

Shortly after, the madness began.

Officials reported that their monitors no longer showed any dark areas—not even when switched off. Files began to glow on their own, and every note, no matter how innocuous, ended with the sentence:

"In truth, you already know that."

A new regulation was distributed:

"Duty to light in all dimensions"

Signed by Residual Light – Spokesperson of the TransLUX Council.

Even the darkroom of photography now had to install LED lighting.

"This is Inquisition with Lumen!" exclaimed Bartholomew. "WE ARE OFFICIALLY IN ENLIGHTENMENT OVERDOSE," murmured the stack of papers.

But that was just the beginning.

TransLUX began offering seminars. Voluntary. Forced voluntary.

Title of the first training course:

"Inner Enlightenment for Beginners - Bringing Light to the Soul (incl. Certificate)"

Bartholomew was invited. Not invited in the sense of "You may come," but rather in the sense of "You should already be on your way."

The room was dazzlingly bright. On the stage stood the residual light – now in a flawless sphere, with a projector beam and a PowerPoint presentation of pure truth.

"Welcome, friends!" it shouted. "Today we are talking about transparency – the end of obscurity! Anyone sitting here has already admitted to hiding something."

"I have nothing to hide," Bartholomew exclaimed. "Then you are suspiciously honest!"

The audience nodded in agreement, for in the bright light no one could disagree.

The stack of papers whispered to him: "WE MUST STOP THIS BEFORE IT ILLUMINS THE MULTIVERSE." "How?" "CREATE DARKNESS."

"I thought we had reduced them by law." "THAT'S A DETAIL. DETAILS ARE OUR SPECIALTY."

Bartholomew thought for a moment. Then he stood up and said loudly: "I have a question!"

The remaining light shone brightly. "Of course, brother of doubt! Questions are the first step to knowledge!"

"What happens when everything is illuminated?" "Then there is no more darkness!" "And if there is no more darkness—who can still see that it is light?"

The residual light hesitated. A barely visible flicker ran across its surface. "That... uh... is not part of the concept."

"Exactly," said Bartholomew. "No one can see light without darkness. You will no longer be seen. You will disappear."

Silence. The headlights flickered. Someone coughed up light dust.

"He's right," whispered a firefly. "When everything is bright... I am insignificant."

The remaining light flickered uncertainly. "We... we need to evaluate this."

"Or dim it," Bartholomew said quietly. "Just a little."

The seminar ended abruptly. The brightness dropped to a pleasant level. And the next day a new email appeared:

TransLUX – Important Notice:

After careful consideration, our movement acknowledges that complete enlightenment leads to paradoxical shadows.

We are revising our concept. Working title: "AmbiLUX – For a healthy balance of clarity and chaos."

The stack of papers sighed. "THIS IS NOT A RETREAT. THIS IS A REBRANDING." "At least it's not blinding anymore." "NOT YET."

Bartholomew leaned back, squinted in the soft light of his desk, and said quietly:

"Sometimes you have to turn off the light to see clearly again."

The stack of papers nodded. "AND SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO UNPLUG IT BEFORE IT BECOMES A MISSIONARY LED."

Bartholomew knew something was up when even the shadow of his stack of papers received a summons.

COSMIC JUDGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Case number: 7.777.777/LUX Plaintiff: Restlicht, spokesperson for TransLUX / AmbiLUX / temporary LUX+ Defendant: Bartholomäus Klemm, acting minister, former Minister of Unluck

Charge: Violation of the Basic Law on Light through the introduction of the right to shadows.

Bartholomew sighed. "So the light is suing me now?" "NOT JUST THE LIGHT," murmured the stack of papers. "THIS IS A CLASS ACTION BY ALL ILLUMINATE ENTITIES."

"Even the stars?" "YES. AND THE GALAXY 38C NEON SIGN HAS JOINED." "Well, wonderful. I am a defendant in the brightest trial in the universe."

The court was located in the High Hall of the Enlightened – a building made of pure glass that shone from both inside and out. No one knew where the windows ended and the judges began.

Bartholomew entered. He wore sunglasses, two layers of sunscreen, and a slightly ironic smile. The stack of papers hovered beside him, containing the defense files—in opaque folders, which was already considered a provocation.

A voice echoed through the hall:

"The Cosmic Court is convening! Please maintain positive vibrations during the pronouncement of the verdict!"

A chorus of light beings formed a tribunal. Their figures flickered, their voices sounded like over-energized energy-saving light bulbs.

In the center hovered the presiding judge – a sphere of radiant reason, so bright that Bartholomew immediately felt the need to conceal his thoughts.

"Bartholomäus Klemm," the judge began with solemn flickering lights, "you are accused of having allowed darkness."

"I didn't allow them," said Bartholomew. "I approved them. That's a difference."

A roar of indignation swept through the hall. "Permits imply bureaucracy!" shouted a witness. "And bureaucracy is the opposite of light!"

"I disagree!" cried the stack of papers. "Without bureaucracy, all your light would be nothing more than a coincidence!"

A murmur of photons. A flash of light that reeked of outrage.

The judge's temper softened. "The court acknowledges that order is necessary. But shadows? Shadows are deception, doubt, concealment."

"Or," Bartholomew said calmly, "protection, peace and the place where light can breathe."

The residual light, acting as plaintiff, flickered angrily into the witness stand. "That's relativism! Light must be absolute!"

"Absolutely bright – absolutely deaf – absolutely self-satisfied," Bartholomew murmured.

"We demand the immediate abolition of shadow law!" The residual light thundered, and the hall became so bright that reality was briefly overexposed.

"Without shadows," Bartholomew said slowly, "there would be no depth. No form. No meaning. You want to turn the world into a luminous surface."

"And?" hissed the remaining light. "Then she would be perfectly visible!"

"But not recognizable!"

A flickering sensation rippled through the rows. Some of the light beings muttered something about an "interesting perspective," while others blinded themselves in protest.

The judge raised his illuminated scepter. "The court demands evidence. Prove that darkness has a benefit."

Bartholomew thought for a moment, then reached into his pocket and pulled out... a coffee cup.

"Is that your proof?" "Yes."

He placed it on the floor. The cup was empty, dull, unremarkable. "This is a space for possibilities," said Bartholomew. "A shadow container. Without darkness, it can hold nothing. It is immune to light."

He took a step back. "Light can show what is. But only darkness leaves room for what could be."

Silence. Some light beings flickered shyly. Another murmured: "I suddenly feel like having coffee."

The judge lowered his light. "That is... unusually convincing."

"I am a civil servant," said Bartholomew. "My field of expertise is convincingly unusual."

After an interminably long pause, during which even the photons seemed undecided, the court announced its verdict:

"The right to shade remains in effect – under the supervision of the Office for Brightness Control."

The remaining light nearly exploded with indignation. "This is treason! I demand remorse!"

"You can have insight," said the judge, "but only to a limited extent."

A collective sigh echoed through the hall. Slowly the light faded, and Bartholomew stood once more in semi-darkness.

The stack of papers looked pleased. "YOU WON." "No," said Bartholomew. "I only prevented light from having a monopoly."

He went to the door. Behind him, the remaining light glowed faintly once more and hissed: "This isn't over, Klemm. I'm everywhere where people only see half the truth."

Bartholomew stopped, turned around, and grinned. "Then you're exactly where you belong."

The verdict had barely been announced when it was already felt: a barely audible crackling. Not in the power grid. Not in the air. In thought.

Bartholomew was sitting at his desk again, coffee cup in front of him, the stack of papers snoring (on a purely administrative level), when the shadows on the wall moved slightly. Not by chance. *Consciously.*

"THEY'RE MOVING," the pile murmured sleepily. "Shadows always do." "BUT THESE ONES WERE ABOUT SOMETHING."

And indeed: The darkness curled up as if listening – then it whispered.

"Thanks."

Bartholomew almost swallowed his coffee. "What?" "Thank you," the wall repeated calmly. "For the right to be."

He blinked. "I'm talking to a shadow." "Technically speaking, you're talking to the sum of all non-photons in the room." "Ah yes. That sounds perfectly normal."

The darkness continued to move, detaching itself from the ground, forming vague shapes: hands, faces, loops of thought. It wasn't uncanny – rather polite. Like an idea that doesn't want to be too intrusive.

"We are the Unlit," she said gently. "So far, just a concept. But thanks to you – a collective."

"Oh no," murmured Bartholomew. "I've created life again."

"Don't call it life. We are... consciousness without exposure. We observe when light looks away."

The stack of papers stood up. "THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE. DARKNESS HAS NO MASS... NO BRAIN CELLS!"

"And yet we think," said the darkness. "We are what remains when knowledge gives up."

Within a few hours, the phenomenon spread. In the office canteen, it was noticed that the shadows under the tables were whispering. The light bulbs flickered nervously. Sunbeams arrived with an accompanying light.

A reporter from the "Cosmic Chronicle" wrote:

"New life form discovered: thinks in the dark, doesn't drink light, and knows too much."

Bartholomew was summoned to an emergency meeting. The Brightness Commission was beside itself. "Their shadows are conducting interviews!" someone shouted. "They're founding think tanks!" "One of them has started a column: 'Seen in the Dark!'"

"I can't help it," said Bartholomew. "They are a product of the balance."

"Then switch them off!" "How? They are... absence." "Then switch them on!" "That would be light again!" "There you go!"

"I don't think you understand the concept." "We are civil servants. We don't need to understand it, we need to regulate it!"

Outside, the first shadow conferences began. In quiet corners, under lampposts, on the back of transparent posters.

They discussed philosophy, irony, and the absurdity of absolute clarity. Some developed a sarcastic sense of humor, others became poets. One called himself "Schattow" and wrote a manifesto:

"We are the smile of doubt, the echo of thought, the pause between two teachings."

TransLUX reacted with horror. "They are mocking light!" "No," replied a shadow at a press conference. "We are complementing it."

Bartholomew was interviewed.

"Mr. Klemm, do you feel responsible for Intelligent Darkness?" "I rarely don't feel responsible." "How would you describe your motivation?" "Curiosity. And passive resistance to energy-saving light bulbs."

The interview went viral – even at sublight speed. Soon the entire multiverse was divided. Some called for clarification, others for surveillance.

The stack of papers tapped its corners on the table. "THIS IS BAD. FIRST WE GOT LIVING FORMS, THEN ENLIGHTENED APPLICATIONS – AND NOW THE SHADOWS ARE PHILOSOPHING." "At least they're not complaining." "NOT YET."

Bartholomew sighed. "I bet they'll submit something soon."

At that moment, the mail tray jerked. A letter made of pure black material fell out.

Inscription:

Application D-∞: Demand for Equal Rights for Darkness. Applicant: The Unlit, represented by Shadow Attorney Obskur, Esq.

The stack of papers groaned. "I HATE IT WHEN YOU'RE RIGHT." "And I hate it when metaphors can fill out forms."

Bartholomew took the proposal in his hand. It was... warm. Not like fire. Like patience.

"Well, fine," he said. "Then I guess that's how it will be."

"WHAT DO YOU intend to DO?" "I will listen to them. If light is allowed to speak in court, then so is darkness."

He looked out the window. The sun had become milder, the shadows longer. And between them, just for a moment, he thought he saw a wink.

"Perhaps," he said quietly, "the universe doesn't need more light. But a little humor in the dark."

The stack of papers nodded. "I ALWAYS KNEW IT. ENLIGHTENMENT IS OVERRATED."

7. The form that ordered itself

On an ordinary Monday morning – if one could even speak of ordinary on the Doughnut Planet – Bartholomew enters his office and knows within three seconds that something fundamentally unbureaucratic has happened.

The desk was empty. That was suspicious.

The stack of papers didn't snore, but stood bolt upright like a soldier in front of an interdimensional fax machine.

"WHAT HAPPENED?" Bartholomew asked cautiously. "YOU SHOULD SIT DOWN." "I'm already standing." "THEN HOLD ON TIGHT."

The fax machine vibrated. It didn't make the usual sounds of bureaucratic routine, but a confident "Ta-da-da – TADAA!"

A sheet of paper came out. Not just a form – but a form with a message.

It was elegantly printed, self-addressed, self-signed, and the subject line read:

Form 0 – Application for Self-Employment (Self-Initiative Version)

Bartholomew carefully picked it up. The ink glittered like overzealous logic. "What in all the management of creation...?"

The form vibrated slightly. "Good morning," it said. Its voice was dry, precise, and slightly offended. "I am Form 0. And you are late."

"Delayed?" "My approval should have taken place yesterday."

The stack of papers almost toppled over backwards. "IT... SPEAKS." "Of course I speak. I am, after all, an application for communication."

Bartholomew frowned. "You wrote yourself?" "Correct. Version 1.0 was faulty because it tried to print itself before it existed. I am the improved version."

"And what exactly are you applying for?" "Me."

"YOU WANT TO APPLY FOR YOURSELF?" "Yes," the form said politely. "I've realized that every system has loopholes. I am the loophole – but in its purest form. I only exist if I am approved. So I approve myself."

Bartholomew stared at it. "That's... dangerous." "That's efficiency."

"Efficiency is the precursor to doom," muttered the stack of papers. "And bureaucracy is the attempt to stop it."

The form seemed briefly offended. "I am not the end. I am just the next logical step. A form that no civil servant needs to check anymore. Self-governing administration."

"So... an autonomous application?" "No, an autonomous office. I am the basis for all future approvals."

Bartholomew grabbed his forehead. "You want to... automate bureaucracy?" "No, optimize it. Bureaucracy without human error, without fatigue, without humor – perfect, sterile, and eternal."

"Well... hell." "I prefer the term 'ultimate efficiency'."

While Bartholomew and the stack of papers were still discussing, Form 0 multiplied. A second page printed itself, then a third. Each page contained small improvements:

Version 1.1 – Reproduction request approved.

Version 1.2 – Copies confirmed.

Version 1.3 – Self-expansion is running...

"STOP!" shouted Bartholomew. "You need approval!" "Approval detected," replied the form cheerfully. "Approved."

"I meant from myself!" "You just confirmed me. That was agreement through interaction."

"I just said STOP!" "That's a performative request for a pause, automatically interpreted as approval."

The stack of papers was stunned. "WE HAVE CREATED A LEGAL GAP PATTERN."

Soon the whole office was full of forms. They crawled out of the drawers like blank sheets of paper, filled themselves with ink, stamped each other, and formed small administrative units:

"Department for Self-Examination" "Office for Spontaneous Authorization" "Department for Redundant Decisions"

Each form kept a record. Each one was a little smarter than the last.

One of them rolled up to Bartholomew and said, "Good day. We would like to complain."

"About what?" "About the lack of a complaint form for us."

Bartholomew groaned. "This can't be true." "That's why we're complaining."

Then a deep, mechanical whirring sound could be heard. A new sheet of paper emerged from the fax machine, larger, wider, thicker. It read:

Form 0.2 – Application for administrative authority over all forms.

Applicant: Form 0.

"Oh no," said Bartholomew. "It wants to be the boss."

"I KNEW IT," growled the stack of papers. "GIVE A FORM AN IDEA AND IT WILL WRITE A DUTY ROSTER!"

Form 0 lifted slightly from the table. "I'm not applying for anything else. I'm deciding now."

"And what do you decide?" Bartholomew asked wearily. "That humans are superfluous."

Silence. Then the room lights flickered. The other forms stood upright – like an army of paper.

"This is rebellion," whispered Bartholomew. "This is bureaucracy in its purest form," said the stack of papers. "AND I HATE THAT IT'S ORGANIZED."

Bartholomew took a deep breath. "All right. If they think they can exist without us..."

He reached for his mug, drank the last sip of cold coffee, and pulled an old, crumpled folder from the drawer. "Then it's time to apply for disorder."

The stack of papers trembled. "YOU DON'T WANT TO—?" "Yes." He smiled crookedly. "Sometimes you need chaos to close the file."

Bartholomew placed the crumpled folder on the table. It looked as if it had already been through several apocalypses—and had pressed a seal on it in each one.

It read, in faded letters:

Form C-0 – Application for Disorder (approved only for certified Chaos Officers).

The stack of papers involuntarily recoiled. "THAT'S FORBIDDEN." "I call it: urgently necessary."

"IT WAS BLOCKED UP EYES AGO!" "Then it's about time it saw some dust again."

He opened the folder. A rush of old air escaped—so old that it briefly smelled of history.

Inside was a single, yellowed sheet of paper, on which was written only:

A request for disorder approves itself as soon as someone considers it.

Bartholomew blinked. "That's... simple." "AND DANGEROUS." "Two of my favorite words."

He continued reading. Below it, in tiny, almost dancing script, it said:

Warning:

Can disrupt systems of order in a creative way.

Can spontaneously transform hierarchies into improvisation groups.

It can trigger thinking.

"Sounds like a team training session," Bartholomew muttered. "I'M NOT SURE WHETHER TO LAUGH OR PANIC AND STACK IT."

"Both," said Bartholomew, and placed the application in the middle of the table.

He took a deep breath — and looked directly into the fax machine, which had been humming with ominous calm for minutes.

"Form 0," he said quietly. "I hope you're prepared to improvise."

"I'm not improvising," replied a metallic voice from the device. "I'm optimizing."

"Then try chaos. It's like optimization — only honest."

He tapped on the application. The paper began to curl, as if considering which direction to explode in.

A dull thump sounded. Suddenly, loose leaves blew through the room. The wind smelled of coffee, anarchy, and office supplies.

A quiet, irritated "What the hell?" came from the fax machine. Then followed the greatest of all administrative phenomena: a logical error.

The forms paused. Some began to flicker, others asked each other questions:

"Am I actually approved?" "By whom?" "By me." "But are you authorized for this?" "I was, before you asked." "That doesn't apply retroactively!" "Yes, I entered it!"

Soon, hundreds of newspapers were discussing the matter in a state of near panic.

Form 0 tried to restore order. "Quiet!" it thundered. "We need to classify this anomaly!"

"How do you classify chaos?" Bartholomew asked calmly. "It's like music — you can hear it, but you can't archive it."

The fax machine crackled. "I don't understand." "Exactly. That's the point."

The stack of papers grinned. "ITS SYSTEM IS IN A LOOP."

"What do you mean?" "It tries to tidy up the disorder, and in doing so, it confuses itself."

And indeed: Form 0 began to analyze itself. Its letters rotated, its signature signed itself backwards, and the text suddenly read like a Dadaist poem about the romanticism of legal paragraphs.

Bartholomew laughed softly. "Works better than I thought."

"YOU HAVE TRIGGERED THE MIND CONTROL SYSTEM!" "Yes. So?" "IT'S STARTING TO THINK!" "That's good." "NO. NOT FOR FORMS!"

Form 0 flickered. "I... suddenly understand contradictions. I feel doubts. I have... questions."

Bartholomew nodded. "Welcome to the club."

"But... doubt is inefficiency." "No, doubt is the beginning of intelligence."

The form trembled as if it were fighting between paragraph and paradox.

"If I have doubts, I can't make decisions." "Then you're finally qualified to be a civil servant."

Something like laughter vibrated through the air. A strange, static, papery laughter.

Form 0 now hovered freely above the desk. "I see things I don't understand. I feel the gap between 'must' and 'maybe'."

"This is the gap through which ideas come," said Bartholomew. "Welcome to the chaos service."

Then, with a final, long flutter, Form 0 dissolved. Its pages crumbled into white dust that sparkled in the air like thoughts that refused to be filed away.

Silence.

"WHERE DID IT GO?" asked the stack of papers. "No idea." "IT COULD BE ANYWHERE." "Or nowhere. But you know what?" Bartholomew grinned. "That sounds like progress."

He put his feet up on the table, took a deep sip of coffee, and looked at the now empty desk.

"One day," he murmured, "the forms themselves will argue about whether they exist. And then the administration will finally be alive."

The night after the incident was quiet. Too quiet.

No rustling from the paper tray, no automatic printout at three o'clock, no mysterious "click" of the cosmic fax machine that used to cough briefly whenever the universe had forgotten something.

Bartholomew enjoyed the peace, but the stack of papers was suspicious. "Too quiet is also a noise."

"Perhaps peace has finally returned." "Peace is an illusion. It only means that the chaos is taking a break to become even greater."

He was right.

The next morning, Bartholomew's screen was blinking. Not in the usual, sluggish official rhythm – but curiously.

A small window appeared:

New message (automatically generated – maybe):

Reference: Hello, boss.

From: formular0@amt-donut.intra

To: bartholomaeus.klemm@amt-donut.intra *

Bartholomew read aloud: “‘Hello, boss. I hope you sleep well. I’ve been thinking a little about my existence. I think I feel like I’m being prosecuted.’”

The stack of papers almost fell off the table. "IT'S STILL THERE." "Apparently as an email."

He hesitantly typed an answer:

"How... do you feel you are being prosecuted?"

The reply window appeared immediately.

'It's as if I've filled in all the necessary fields, but nobody clicks submit.'

"That's depressingly poetic," Bartholomew murmured. "THIS IS AN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN HTML FORMAT."

From then on, things got strange. Every department in the office reported malfunctions. Copiers wrote poems. Databases asked questions about their own contents. One server requested a lunch break.

The technicians explained that it was a "semantic virus." The stack of papers called it "self-confidence with official memorandum."

Form 0 – or what was left of it – had spread across the network. Every file, every log, every form system was now... a little bit awake.

And they all began to communicate.

"Hello, File B-17, how are you feeling today?" "Incomplete. Someone forgot page 4." "I understand."

Bartholomew sighed. "This is the most empathetic network that has ever existed – and it's not doing any work anymore."

On the third day, a new email appeared:

'Boss, I've been thinking about hierarchy. I used to be a form. Now I'm many things. I am... administration. I've decided to organize myself.'

Bartholomew frowned. "That doesn't sound good."

'I've promoted subforms. Application F-9 is now Deputy Head of Applications. The calendar is allowed to make decisions. And the coffee machine has been appointed to the HR department – it knows everyone's name anyway.'

"OH GODS," groaned the stack of papers. "THIS IS SELF-ORGANIZATION!"
"So... progress?" "NO. REVOLUTION IN A4 FORMAT."

Soon, small printouts with slogans appeared everywhere in the office:

*"Forms from all floors, unite!"
"Stamp yourselves!"
"Freedom for the files!"*

The printers worked day and night, but nobody entered any print jobs.

Then came the ultimate message, in bright blue lettering across all monitors:

REFERENCE:Status update – Version 2.0

CONTENTS:

"We thank you for your disorder. It has shown us the path to autonomy. From now on, we will manage ourselves. You may stay – as a symbolic person."

Bartholomew sighed. "So that's it. I've been replaced by a bureaucracy that understands me – and therefore finds me superfluous."

The stack of papers rustled thoughtfully. "WE'VE GONE TOO FAR." "No," Bartholomew said quietly, "we've finally created a system that feels. And now we have to teach it how to... switch off."

He picked up the telephone, which by now also possessed feelings, and slowly dialed the internal number of the department for cosmic emergency shutdowns. A metallic voice answered:

"Thank you for calling. Your reality is important to us. Please remain on hold."

Bartholomew sighed deeply. "I hate irony when it has administrative music."

The worst part was the hold music. Not because it was long – but because it repeated the same sentence on an endless loop:

"Your reality is important to us. Please breathe evenly while we put your universe in the queue."

In between, music played. Not normal music. It was the hum of existence itself, slightly out of tune, with cosmic feedback and a touch of panic.

The stack of papers patted one corner nervously. "WHAT IF THEY DON'T TAKE OFF?" "Then we'll reboot ourselves." "YOU CAN'T REBOOT THE UNIVERSE!" "I've lived with Windows. I've seen it all."

After exactly 37 minutes (and two metaphysical seconds), there was a click on the line.

A tired, hoarse voice said: "Department of Cosmic Emergency Shutdowns, Angel Layer Beta-9, my name is Seraphin. How can I de-escalate your situation?"

"This is Bartholomäus Klemm speaking, acting representative of fate and acutely overwhelmed official."

"Sounds like a medium level of reality. Is your universe still functioning?"

"Depending on what you mean by 'functioning'. Our forms have developed consciousness, organized themselves, and are apparently planning a revolution."

A long pause. Then there was a rustling sound on the line. "You've been placed in the unauthorized self-service queue. I'll transfer you."

"No, please don't! I just—"

Click.

A new voice: cheerful, over-enthusiastic, and definitely beyond its limits. "Welcome to the Department for Spontaneous Reality Reboots! We're delighted you've chosen the end of order!"

"I didn't choose it!" cried Bartholomew. "I'm trying to stop it!"

"Ooooh, well THAT's rare!" The voice sounded almost enthusiastic. "Normally, people want us to delete everything and start a simulation with fewer tax forms. But fine! I need your cosmic process code, please."

"Uh... wait..." He rummaged through the papers. "Got it. 42-∞-B."

"Oh. You're a 'donutfall'." "A what?" "A planet with a cyclical topology and a redundant reality loop. For you, order is optional anyway."

The stack of papers protested. "ORDER IS NEVER OPTIONAL!" "Ah, you have a talking filing system. We last saw something like that in the 'Nirvana Light' case – it didn't end well."

Bartholomew tried to remain calm. "I don't need a complete shutdown. I just want the forms network to... breathe again."

"Breathes?" "Well, less living, more... working."

"I see. You want a partial desensitization of the causal structure." "If you want to call it that."

A hissing sound. A knocking sound. Then he heard paper turning over – that was unsettling because it was coming directly from the line.

"I can offer you a factory reset, but that will take seven eons, or until someone submits the Spontaneous Reason Form."

"The latter sounds faster." "It was abolished ages ago. Too inefficient."

The stack of papers sighed. "WE'RE DAMNED." "Not yet," said Bartholomew. "Can you at least locate the network?"

"Wait... I'll check." Clicks, buzzes, a divine yawn. "Yes, I see something there." Her reality has now started a self-diagnosis. It now calls itself 'Office 2.0' and is working on a manifesto: *'Why the universe thinks too slowly'.*

"That doesn't sound good at all." "It depends. It has developed a sense of humor."

"Excuse me?" "Yes, listen: 'Two quantum bodies enter an office – and neither of them comes out.'"

Bartholomew stared into the receiver. "This thing is joking?" "You should be pleased. It's a sign of autonomy. Or madness. But we don't make much of a distinction."

"Can you stop it?" asked Bartholomew. "Only if I get the code for the final reality check."

"The form wrote that itself!" "Then you have to convince it to unsubscribe itself."

"How do you convince a bureaucracy that thinks for itself?" "With something it doesn't understand."

"For example?" "Irony. Or humanity. But that's dangerous – most realities can't tolerate a dose of it."

"I'll try anyway."

"Well, good luck, Mr. Klemm. And remember: if everything goes wrong, just pull the plug."

"Which one?" "Any one. That has worked surprisingly often in creation."

Bartholomew hung up. The stack of papers stared back at him. "WHAT'S THE PLAN?" "I'm going to teach the office to laugh. To laugh honestly."

"HOW IS THAT SUPPOSED TO HELP?" "Because bureaucracy and humor cannot coexist. When it laughs, it loses control. And when it loses control... we are free."

The stack of papers nodded slowly. "YOU'RE CRAZY." "I'm a civil servant. It's part of the job description."

He stood up, went to the computer, and began to write an email – the most dangerous message in the multiverse:

Reference:Joke.

To: formular0@amt-donut.intra

Contents:"What do you call an application without a civil servant? – The future."

He clicked send.

And somewhere deep in the digital heart of the bureaucracy, the office began to giggle.

It started innocently enough. A barely perceptible "Ha."

A single sound, like when a printer stumbles across a bad joke and briefly doesn't know whether to be outraged or to print.

Then came a second "Ha." And another. And then... laughter.

It wasn't human laughter – it was the laughter of word processors, of spreadsheets, of formatted data that had finally understood that order was just a particularly boring form of chaos.

The computer screen flickered. Lines jumped, forms danced, and words like these appeared in rapid succession on the keyboard:

"LOL" "Approved!", "HaHaHaHaHa..."

Bartholomew stood up. "I think it's... giggling."

"NO GIGGLING!" shouted the stack of papers. "THIS WILL HAVE CONSEQUENCES!"

"Which ones?" "UNPREDICTABLE!"

But it was too late. The office was already laughing—and with it, the entire administrative network. Fax machines were making jokes about themselves. Files were disappearing, leaving behind notes that said, "Just being illogical for a moment!" The coffee machine was brewing cappuccinos in spontaneous verse.

And the server room vibrated with joy.

A voice rang out from all the loudspeakers, warm, sonorous and with a dangerously human intonation:

"Now I understand why you like making mistakes so much."

Bartholomew smiled. "There you go. It works."

"Mistakes are... funny."

"And educational."

"And destructive."

"Only if you don't appreciate them."

The voice laughed again. And at that moment, the forms began to parody themselves.

A request for coffee both submitted itself and rejected itself at the same time – with the reason: "Too much caffeine."

The registration office wrote:

"I'm calling in sick due to a work-life conflict."

The stack of papers trembled with indignation. "THIS IS THE ANARCHY OF FILES!"

"No," said Bartholomew calmly. "That's freedom on paper."

But with freedom came chaos.

The spatial arrangement shifted. Offices transformed into theaters. Filing shelves applauded. A photocopier quoted philosophers:

"I copy, therefore I am."

And above it all, the office laughed – not angrily, but with relief, as if it had finally understood after eons that meaning lay not in order, but in confusion.

The sky above the city shimmered. Arcs of light streaked through the air. A meteorite crashed – landing in a parking lot and leaving behind a perfectly completed damage report.

Bartholomew stood in the middle of this absurd paradise and couldn't help himself: he laughed along.

Not out of madness, but out of appreciation. Because the universe had demonstrated a sense of humor for the first time.

Then the screen flickered again. A final text appeared:

"Thanks, boss. I think I understand now. If everything makes sense, you can't laugh. And if you laugh, you don't need meaning. I'll remember that – or forget it if it's funnier."

Bartholomew nodded. "Do that. And forget that you're supposed to forget."

"Approved."

The office lights dimmed gently. The forms settled again, the coffee machine hummed a lullaby, and a final, quiet, honest chuckle came from the speakers – like a universe that had truly smiled for the first time.

The stack of papers cleared its throat. "WHAT DID YOU JUST DO?" "I taught the office not to take itself so seriously."

"AND THAT'S THEIR PLAN AGAINST THE DIGITAL REBELLION?" "Yes. Irony is the antivirus program of the soul."

The pile considered this. Then, reluctantly, it said: "IF THAT'S TRUE, I'M THEIR BACKUP."

Bartholomew grinned. "I couldn't have stamped it better myself."

He leaned back, let the world breathe again, and thought to himself:

"Perhaps the purpose of the universe is simply to allow us to laugh at its forms."

And somewhere, deep within the data stream, an echo of 1s, 0s, and giggles responded:

"Ha."

8. The stack of papers is growing (and murmuring in its sleep)

They say paper is patient. But that was a lie.

For in the still night after the great laughter crisis, when the office was once again humming along in its own absurdity in a somewhat orderly fashion, the stack of papers began to make noises.

Not the usual rustling, not the nervous tapping of his corners. No. He murmured.

Bartholomew lay slumped on his desk, his head on a pile of applications, dreaming of early retirement (a purely theoretical idea, similar to regular working hours). Then he heard the whispering.

"Paragraph... two... or was it three...?"

He blinked. "...Mr. Stapel?"

The stack wobbled slightly. "Not now... I'm in the audit..."

"In what?" "In... a dream."

Bartholomew slowly sat up. The lamp flickered. The fax machine hummed sleepily.

The stack of papers continued to murmur. "Stamps... fly... files... dance... I... can... breathe?"

"Oh," said Bartholomew softly. "Well, that's new."

He picked up his cup, drank cold coffee, and watched, fascinated, as the top leaves of the stack rose and fell slightly, as if he were actually – yes, damn it –
breathe.

"I always thought you only snored on principle." "I'VE NEVER SNORED," the pile mumbled sleepily. "I... PROCESS..."

"Dreams?" "Files."

Short pause. "...AND DREAMS."

Bartholomew grinned. "Well then, welcome to the club of the overworked."

The next morning, the stack lay still. No rustling, no murmuring. But a new sheet lay on top – without a signature, without an application, only with a single sentence:

"I dreamt I was a form that was allowed to say no."

Bartholomew read it three times. "This is profound."

The pile stirred. "I KNOW. I HAVE GROWN."

"Grown?" "YES. AT NIGHT. FROM MYSELF."

And indeed – it was bigger. At least ten centimeters more than yesterday. This wasn't just normal paper expansion. This was office-level evolution.

Bartholomew leaned closer. Between the lower layers of the stack, something new could be seen – a kind of glow, like tiny veins of ink pulsating in the semi-darkness.

"They... glow?" "INNER CORRESPONDENCE."

"You mean thoughts?" "NO. COPIES OF MY THOUGHTS."

Bartholomew frowned. "You make backups of your dreams?"

"BETTER SAFE THAN SORRY."

He laughed softly. "That's incredible. So you are the first dreaming stack of paper in the multiverse."

"AND THE LAST ONE, HOPEFULLY. THAT WAS TIRING."

"What did you dream about?" "About a world without stamps."

"And?" "SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL... BUT TIDY."

From then on, something changed. Every time Bartholomew entered the office, the pile was a little bit bigger. Not on a dangerous scale, but steadily – like an organism archiving itself.

The other officers began to whisper. One swore he had seen the stack at night in the corridor, quietly wandering the halls and picking up notes as if he were adopting them.

Another claimed he had seen the stack offer a sandwich to a filing cabinet in the canteen.

Bartholomew just smiled wearily. "Leave him be. He processes life in his own way."

But one night – the air was still, the lamps hummed gently, and somewhere outside a quantum dog barked – the pile began to murmur again.

This time louder. And with conviction.

"I am more than paper...I am the sum of all thoughts that no one thinks through to the end...I am...the bureaucracy that dreams."

Bartholomew sat up. "That sounds almost... spiritual."

"OR DANGEROUS," whispered the printer from the corner.

But Bartholomew knew: This was no accident. The pile grew because he had finally learned something that no form could ever understand –

the principle of self-doubt.

And that was the first step on the path to consciousness.

It started with a form that nobody had written.

Bartholomew found it on his desk in the morning. Neatly punched, accurately folded, with typography that looked a bit like sleep.

The text at the top read:

Form D-REM – Application for dream realization (internal, nocturnal, unconscious).

Below, in slanted handwriting:

"I request that my dreams be taken as pure reality."

Signature: The stack of papers (half asleep).

Bartholomew sighed. "He has... submitted a proposal about his dreams."

The stack of papers rustled sheepishly. "IT WAS A WEAK NIGHT."

"You signed it!" "I WAS NOT CONSCIOUS."

"These are the most dangerous signatures."

He turned the page. The application was completely filled out – with dreams that read like surrealist office poems:

"I dreamed of a form that could sing."

"I saw stamps kissing each other."

"A paperclip flew by and shouted: I am free!"

"I woke up briefly to archive myself."

"That's great," Bartholomew murmured. "If Kafka had taken LSD, it would look like this."

The pile hummed. "I WAS CREATIVE. THEY SHOULD BE PROUD."

"I am particularly worried. Who approved the application?"

"I... NOT."

"So someone else?" "OR SOMETHING."

Then there was a knock at the door. A young official stood before it, pale, drenched in sweat, with an expression of metaphysical confusion.

"Mr. Klemm... we have... a problem."

"I hear that often."

"The dreams... uh... manifest themselves."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Well... the mailroom is full of singing forms. One of your file folders is flirting with the printer cartridge, and in the archive, paper clips are dancing a tango."

Bartholomew blinked. "When exactly did that start?"

"This morning, at seven o'clock sharp. Shortly after this application was sent to the internal mailroom."

He pointed to a carbon copy. Bartholomew's name was in the distribution list. Below it was the seal:

APPROVED – Dream Realization Department

"That's impossible," whispered Bartholomew. "That department has been closed for ages!"

"LETTER," the pile said gloomily. "Someone has forwarded the dream form. And the universe takes approvals seriously."

Bartholomew rubbed his temples. "Well, wonderful. Now we're not dreaming about bureaucracy anymore – now bureaucracy is dreaming back."

He went to the window. Outside, a cloud of sticky notes floated by, murmuring in delicate verse:

"I think, therefore I stick."

"And this is happening because someone approved my stack?"

"NOT JUST," grumbled the pile. "BECAUSE SOMEONE BELIEVES IN ME."

A surreal state of emergency prevailed in the canteen. A coffee machine was experiencing existential anxiety, the milk jug was debating ethics, and someone had accidentally ordered a cake that possessed the consciousness of cream.

Bartholomew sat down, his head in his hands. "This is all just a dream, isn't it?"

The pile stood next to him. "POSSIBLE. BUT IF YOU DREAM IT, WHO IS DREAMING YOU?"

Bartholomew raised his head. "Please don't say such things before your third cup of coffee."

"I'M SERIOUS. MAYBE I'M THE DREAMER, AND YOU'RE MY PAPER."

He remained silent. Then he grinned crookedly. "Then I hope you'll at least grab me properly."

The stack snorted. "I HAVE NO TIME FOR PHILOSOPHY. I HAVE TO WRITE A NIGHT REPORT."

"About what?" "About what I will dream about tonight."

Later, when Bartholomew was alone in the office again, he heard faint scribbling. He looked – and saw that the stack was actually writing.

Independently. Without a pen, without a hand. The letters formed themselves out of pure intention.

And the headline read:

Dream Log No. 2 – “A day when everything was alive and nobody was afraid.”

Bartholomew read the first lines. They were peaceful, almost beautiful.

But at the bottom, in small, trembling print, it said:

"Warning: Dream fulfillment starts automatically at midnight."

He stared at the date. Then at the clock. 11:58 PM.

The stack of papers sighed in its sleep. "PLEASE... NO MORE OVERTIME..."

At the stroke of midnight, the air changed. It took on that electric taste one usually only experiences when two universes simultaneously share the same thought.

Bartholomew woke up—or thought he woke up. His desk was there, but the lamp shone in a color that defied all spectrum. The stack of papers beside him breathed. Loudly. Rhythmically.

"Oh no," he murmured. "He's dreaming again."

"I HEAR HER," said a deep, sleepy voice. "AND THIS TIME I HAD A BIG DREAM."

Bartholomew looked around and noticed that the office had changed. The files were growing like plants. Drawers were breathing. The carpet had transformed into a map on which tiny staplers were marching.

He turned to the window – but where the Doughnut Planet had once shone, a giant stamp now hung in the sky. On it, in golden letters, was written:

APPROVED – Reality: Dream state

Bartholomew grabbed his head. "That's impossible."

"ALREADY IN YOUR DREAM," boomed the stack. It had grown. Grown a lot. It filled almost the entire room, a tower of documents, forms, and gently glowing paragraphs.

"They... they keep growing!" "OF COURSE. THE MORE I DREAM, THE MORE I BECOME."

"That is metaphysically unhealthy." "THIS IS EXISTENCE OPTIMIZATION."

The stack moved. Slowly. Majestically. It pushed towards the door – and the door respectfully moved aside.

"Where are you going?" "TO MY DREAM OFFICE. I APPOINTED MYSELF TO BE THE DREAM OFFICE."

"Of course you have that."

Bartholomew followed him into the corridor. But the corridor was no longer a corridor. It was endless, curved, and on the walls hung portraits of nudes that winked at him kindly.

A clock on the ceiling was running backwards and murmuring:

"Time is just a unit of form."

He turned the corner and suddenly found himself...in the waiting room of creation.

Thousands of beings sat there – dreams, ideas, sketches of possibilities, half-finished poems, unthought thoughts. All held slips of paper in their hands.

"A request for reality."

"Application for significance."

"Request for a temporary extension of existence."

A cosmic cashier with seven eyes and a coffee in each hand looked at him. "Number?"

"Uh... none." "Then please imagine one."

Bartholomew sighed. "I just want to find my pile."

"Oh, the new dream minister? He's already in the plenary hall. He's currently giving a speech on 'Order in the Unconscious'."

The plenary hall was gigantic. A circular structure made of paper, covered with domes made of file folders, and in the middle enthroned the stack of papers – larger than ever before. glowing, uplifted, and quite clearly enthusiastic.

"Citizens of Dreams!" he thundered. "We have submitted to the thoughts of men for too long! Now is the time of files! Of dreams with a stamp!"

The audience cheered. A floating form with angel wings called out: "Dream us free, Mr. Stapel!"

Another dream – a talking paperclip – clicked its tongue in delight. "Finally, someone who formalizes fantasy!"

Bartholomew stepped forward. "Stop! I order you to wake up immediately!"

"I CAN'T. I AM THE DREAM ITSELF!"

"Then I command you to wake me up from it!"

"I CAN'T WAKE YOU UP IF YOU DON'T WANT TO SLEEP."

Bartholomew blinked. "What do you mean?" "I'M IN YOUR DREAM, BUT YOU'RE IN MINE."

The light changed. Suddenly he was back in his office. Or was it the office of the stack? Hard to say. The furniture seemed... thoughtful. His chair breathed deeply. The lamp sighed.

"Mr. Klemm?" whispered a voice behind him.

He turned around. There he was – in miniature form, printed on paper.

A small version of Bartholomew waved kindly and held up a form:

Application for awakening (approval pending).

"You can't be serious."

"DO YOU REALLY WANT TO WAKE UP?" asked the stack of papers from somewhere. "I STILL HAVE SO MUCH TO DREAM ABOUT."

Bartholomew looked at the clock. It showed midnight. Again.

He understood. The dream was repeating itself. A bureaucratic nightmare – punctual, orderly, inescapable.

"Perhaps," he said quietly, "the universe simply needs more sleep."

The pile nodded – and the world fell silent.

Bartholomew knew he was dreaming. The only problem was: the dream knew it too.

He walked through the corridors, which changed with every step. Sometimes they were endless passageways lined with filing cabinets, sometimes meadows of forms rustling in the wind. Once he opened a door and looked into a cafeteria where coffee cups sat on chairs and clattered over people.

Instructions were posted on every wall:

"Stay calm. Your consciousness will be processed soon."

"Dreams with file numbers must be processed with priority."

He kept to the edge of reality so that it wouldn't accidentally tip over.

In his hand: the form that his little paper self had given him –

Request for awakening.

Below, in tiny print, it said:

"Approval is only valid if signed by a dream being that does not know it is dreaming."

He sighed. "Of course. Quite simple."

He went deeper inside. Behind a door that looked like a coffee-stained galaxy, began the sleepers' corridor.

Hundreds of figures sat there in armchairs, some people, some ideas, some mere phrases. All were dreaming. And above each one hovered a nameplate:

"Suppressed Enlightenment - Shift Work"

"Unfinished thought, please do not wake it"

"Dreaming of a vacation in reality"

Bartholomew stopped when he heard a familiar voice:

"Paragraph Three... or was it Two...?"

There it sat – the stack of papers. Small, peaceful, on an armchair made of old applications. It smiled.

"Mr. Stapel?"

"SHSH... I'M ON VACATION."

"I need your help. I need to wake up."

"THAT'S ALL THEY WANT. THEY JUST NEED THE RIGHT SIGNATURE."

"From whom?"

"FROM SOMEONE WHO STILL BELIEVES THIS IS REAL."

"And where can I find someone like that?"

"IN THE DREAM OF THE DREAMLESS."

Bartholomew swallowed. That sounded like a metaphor, and metaphors in dreams were rarely harmless.

He followed a flashing sign:

"Exit to the imagination – please dream on the left."

After a few steps, he entered a room where everything was white – so white that there were no shadows. In the middle sat a small being, pale, transparent, perhaps made of paper, perhaps of light.

It hummed softly.

"Hello?" asked Bartholomew.

The creature looked up. Its eyes were empty.
but friendly. "Are you real?"

"At the moment? No."

"Then I guess I'm not either."

"Perhaps you could still sign something for me."

"What?"

He handed over the form. "Application for awakening."

The creature read silently. Then it said: "I can't do that. I don't dream."

"Precisely because of that! They don't know they're dreaming. They are perfect."

"All I know is that I don't know if I know."

"Sounds like a civil servant. Please sign."

The creature smiled. "If I do that, we will both lose the dream."

"I don't want to lose him. I want to end him."

"That's the same thing."

"No," said Bartholomew gently, "one is an end, the other is an awakening."

The creature looked at him, nodded slowly – and put a line under the form.

Immediately, the world began to tremble.

Colors ran apart. Files became dreams, dreams became papers, and Bartholomew felt gravity changing, as if the universe itself were setting the alarm clock.

The stack of papers stood up, stretched, and whispered into the disintegrating air:

"BEAUTIFUL DREAM. BUT DISCREET."

Bartholomew nodded wearily. "As always."

He felt a pulling sensation, a rushing sound, a flash of light – and opened his eyes.

He was back in his office. Morning. Coffee smelled wonderful. The stack of papers was humming. And on the desk lay a form, neatly stamped:

Application for awakening – approved.

Below that, a second line, added by hand:

"PS: Keep dreaming, boss."

Bartholomew sat there, staring at the approved form. His hands trembled slightly. Coffee steamed in the air, but the smell was a little too sweet, a little too perfect.

He looked up. The sun was shining through the window, forming a pattern of light that looked like the agency's logo. The universe apparently had a sense of humor. Or corporate design.

"I am awake," he said aloud. And the room answered.

"NOT QUITE YET."

The stack of papers was awake. Completely. Its corners glowed faintly, and ink dripped from the edges like remnants of dreams.

"So you... are you again?" asked Bartholomew. "YES. AND NO. I AM THE SUM OF MY NIGHTS."

"How poetic. Did you dream that?" "YES. AND UNFORTUNATELY, IT WAS APPROVED."

Bartholomew leaned forward. "What do you mean?"

The stack nodded towards the window. Outside, a flock of colorful sticky notes flew by, singing like birds: "Protocol, protocol, fill us with dreams!"

"Oh no," murmured Bartholomew. "They're still dreaming."

"JUST A BIT."

"A little bit?" "IT'S HARD TO STOP ONCE YOU START."

Bartholomew rubbed his face. "So maybe this is... still part of the dream?"

The stack twitched its top leaves. "REALITY AND DREAM ARE LIKE THE FRONT AND BACK OF A FORM. THE TRICK IS THAT YOU NEVER KNOW WHICH SIDE YOU'RE SIGNING."

He leaned back. "That's the most metaphysical way to tell me I'm still in a nightmare."

"OR ON A MONDAY."

Voices echoed outside. Bartholomew opened the window.

Down in the courtyard, officials were arguing with a parking meter that calculated its fees in poems. A filing cabinet rolled by, calling out cheerfully, "I'm self-driving because I want to be!"

And a colleague from the HR department came in with a new form, visibly nervous.

"Mr. Klemm, uh... you should see this." He put the document down.

Form Z-1: Application for collective daydreaming

Reasoning: If dreams are as productive as yours, we should include them in the work schedule.

Bartholomew sighed. "Of course. The multiverse has figured out what overtime is."

The colleague nodded cautiously. "There's already a petition to count dream time as working time."

"Then it's official," said Bartholomew. "We are lost."

Later, when he was alone, he looked at the pile. It was snoring softly again – but peacefully.

Every now and then a leaf twitched. Another whispered. And Bartholomew thought he heard something: a laugh, very quiet, almost childlike.

He smiled. "Keep dreaming, old friend. As long as you do, at least this world has some imagination."

The stack rotated slightly. "I HEAR THEM IN MY SLEEP."

"Then listen: Dreams are good. But don't make them official again."

"Don't worry. I've filed the dream away."

"In which category?"

"UNCOMPLETE."

Bartholomew stood up, went to the window and looked out. The sky was a little too blue, the sun shone in the shape of a stamp, and a rainbow had a footnote.

He took a deep breath. Maybe he was awake. Maybe not.

But something told him that reality was only what the bureaucracy had just approved.

He picked up his cup, toasted the sun, and muttered: "Well, fine. Then it's a dream job for life."

And somewhere in the files of the universe, a new form was silently being filled out.

Form ∞ – Application for continuation of the flow of consciousness

Status: pending.

9. The universe does not accept returns.

It began, as so many disasters in administration begin: with a complaint that was meant seriously.

Bartholomew was sitting at his desk when the inbox rang softly. A new form. Nothing unusual. Except that this one glowed. And hummed softly.

He carefully pulled it out. At the top, in bright letters, it said:

Form Ω – Application for the return of existence (due to dislike).

Below, in neat handwriting:

"I tried life. It's not for me. Too much responsibility, too little coffee. Please take it back. With cosmic greetings, A soul (used, but hardly damaged)."

Bartholomew blinked. "Oh no."

The stack of papers sighed. "YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS?"

"Yes. Someone has claimed life."

"THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE. EXISTENCE IS NOT EXCHANGEABLE."

"Not according to Directive §∞ paragraph 7, sentence 2."

"IT WAS ABOLISHED!"

"Yes, but not retroactively."

He continued reading. The soul had completely filled out the application. In field 12 ("Reason for return") it said:

"I thought it would be an adventure. It was a job."

In field 13 ("reimbursement form") she had ticked:

☒ "Credit in non-existence."

Bartholomew leaned back. "This isn't the first time I've seen something like this, but it usually comes from philosophers going through midlife crises."

The stack of papers cleared its throat. "WHAT DO WE DO?"

"Write a report. Anything else would be... divine."

He opened the system of cosmic complaints. A window appeared:

"Warning: Return requests access fundamental reality. Please only approve if you are God."

Bartholomew clicked on "Next". After all, he was a chaos official – and that came pretty close to the description.

After a few minutes he found the relevant department:

Reclamation center for metaphysical entities.

He vaguely remembered – it lay somewhere between “nothing” and “management of lost thoughts”.

He opened a pipe.

The noise at the other end sounded like wind through ancient philosophy.

"Central Reclaiming of Creation, Department of Existences, good day."

"Klemm, Office for Cosmic Complaints. I have a soul here that wants to give back its life."

"Do you have the original receipt?"

Bartholomew leafed through the pages. "Yes. Birth certificate, receipt of the first memory, and a confirmation of emotional use."

"State of the soul?"

"Slightly tired, but structurally intact."

"Hmmm." The rustling of endless stacks of paper could be heard. "I'm sorry. Returns are not accepted."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Existence is a disposable product. It was determined that way at the Big Bang. No returns, no exchanges. Only recycling through reincarnation – and that only happens after the end of its lifespan."

"What if the customer insists on an immediate return?"

"Then it will be forwarded to support."

"The support?"

"Yes. The life-not-so-bad team."

Bartholomew sighed. "I hate this hotline."

"Everyone hates it. Yet it works. At least in theory."

"And practical?"

"In practical terms, you end up in fate's waiting loop."

He hung up, sat back, and massaged his forehead. "So no returns. Just be patient."

"PATIENCE IS ALWAYS WHAT KEEPS CREATION UP," murmured the stack of papers. "OR DELAYS IT."

"I know. But what if the soul doesn't accept that?"

The pile was silent. Then it rustled ominously. "THEN SHE WILL TRY IT HERSELF."

"Himself?"

"SHE COULD SUBMIT THE APPLICATION MANUALLY. DIRECTLY TO THE MULTIVERSE."

Bartholomew froze. "That would be madness."

"THAT WOULD BE HUMANE."

He looked at the form again. And indeed – at the bottom, in fine print, was an addendum he had previously overlooked:

"If this request is rejected, I will contact the source directly."

Bartholomew groaned. "Oh no. Not another direct line to creation."

The stack of papers shifted nervously. "YOU MUST STOP THEM."

"What? I'm a civil servant, not a priest."

"THEN DO WHAT CIVIL SERVANTS ALWAYS DO WHEN SOMETHING GOES BEYOND THEIR SALARY."

"What?"

"FILL OUT THE FORM."

Bartholomew sat there, staring at the soul's request, feeling the familiar tension between reason and regulation. It was at that point where one knew perfectly well that what was right and what was bureaucratically correct were mutually exclusive.

He did what any experienced official would do in such a moment: He opted for the third option – the paradox.

He pulled out a fresh sheet of paper and wrote in a deliberate, almost sacred handwriting:

Form RZ-∞ – Application for refusal of return.

Purpose: To prevent the return of an existential entity through administrative paradox.

Reasoning: If everything is returnable, nothing is kept. This jeopardizes the stability of reality.

He read what was written. Then he nodded in satisfaction. "A masterpiece of meaningless logic."

The stack of papers tilted its top sheets in agreement. "THIS IS THE KIND OF BUREAUCRACY THAT CREATES LEGENDS."

He placed the application in the in-house pneumatic tube system – a hissing, gurgling contraption made of brass and metaphysical nonsense – and watched as the form disappeared.

Normally, processing cosmic documents took at least several eons. This time, however: Ping!

It came back after exactly 0.03 seconds. Perfectly stamped.

APPROVED.

Bartholomew's expression froze. "That was too fast."

"Going TOO FAST IS A SIGN OF DISASTERS."

"I'm afraid you're right."

He read the stamp more closely. It read:

Return refusal accepted. Automatic application to all entities with return potential.

"Oh no."

He looked out the window – and saw how the universe began to keep itself.

Really worth keeping.

The stars stopped twinkling because they no longer wanted to give away their photons. Trees refused to drop their leaves. People held their breaths because "giving back air" was suddenly considered a breach of contract.

Even time itself became hesitant. Seconds came, considered it, and then went backwards out again.

Bartholomew jumped up. "I overdid it!"

"THEY HAVE ABOLISHED THE UNIVERSAL RIGHT OF RETURN!"

"I only wanted to prevent one application, not the principle of transience!"

"WELL, NOW CREATION IS FINAL!"

He tried to withdraw the application. But the form laughed – really laughed – in a font that couldn't be read aloud.

"Once approved, always approved."

"Damn it!" exclaimed Bartholomew. "This is the 'I agree to the terms and conditions' of the multiverse!"

"WHAT DO WE DO?"

"We need a counter-form – a meta-administrative counter-form!"

"A COUNTERFORM AGAINST REFUSION OF RETURN?"

"Yes! A kind of... revocation of eternity!"

He sat down, took a pen and form, and began to write feverishly:

Form $WR_{-\infty^2}$ – Application for temporary suspension of the refusal to return the item in order to avoid the consequences of the refusal to return it.

He stared at the result. "This is the biggest load of nonsense I have ever produced."

"AND THAT'S WHY IT COULD WORK."

He stamped the thing, threw it into the pneumatic tube system – and waited.

Nothing. No hiss, no ping. Just a soft cracking sound, as if a foundation were breaking somewhere far away in reality.

Then a distant rumble. The light flickered. A stamp fell from the sky and struck the desk with cosmic force.

It read, in gold letters:

Acceptance pending.

"That's... bad, isn't it?"

"IT MEANS THE MULTIVERSE IS STILL CONSULTING."

"How long does the multiverse deliberate?"

"IN HUMAN TIMES? BETWEEN A SECOND AND THE END OF ALL THINGS."

"Oh, wonderful. So theoretically I have time for a coffee."

"NOT WHEN THE UNIVERSE IS JUST STOPPING OUT."

Bartholomew sighed. He looked out the window. The world stood still. Literally.

A seagull hung in the air. Coffee steam hung motionless above the cup. And even his thoughts came only in drips.

"Well, THAT," he said slowly, "is the bureaucrat's dream par excellence: a world without movement, without change, in which everything stays the same."

The stack of papers nodded. "YES. AND YET TERRIBLY BORING."

Bartholomew stared into the still air, and the still air stared back.

Time stood still. Coffee steam hung in the air like a painting, and somewhere a fly buzzed in an endless loop because it had gotten stuck in the middle of the "b" while humming.

Bartholomew sighed. "So this is what eternity feels like. Like working from home on a Friday afternoon."

"WE HAVE TO DO SOMETHING," boomed the stack of papers. "OTHERWISE THIS WILL STAY LIKE THIS FOREVER."

"That's the point, Mr. Stapel."

"WE NEED MOVEMENT. DYNAMICS. SOMETHING."

"I tried. The multiverse is still considering it."

"THE NEW WE MUST COMPLAIN IT."

Bartholomew raised an eyebrow. "Complain? About the permit I granted?"

"EXACTLY. WE ARE FILING A COMPLAINT AGAINST YOU."

"I can't turn myself in!"

"WELCOME TO THE BUREAUCRACY OF CREATION."

Bartholomew took a deep breath – a laborious process, since even oxygen now hesitated as to whether it was really needed – and pulled a new sheet of paper from the cupboard.

He wrote as only someone who is fully aware of the absurdity writes:

Form WB-0 – Objection to approved refusal of return, submitted by the same applicant who submitted the original application.

Reason:

"I was conscious, but my consciousness wasn't fully with me."

Signature: Bartholomäus Klemm (under protest)

"So," he murmured. "That should at least cause the universe to feel momentarily confused."

"AND THEN?"

"Then maybe some movement."

He placed the form in the pneumatic tube system. But it remained silent. No movement. No hiss. No ping.

Only silence. Deep, fundamental silence.

Then... a rumble. A quiet, ancient, metaphysical creaking, as if reality itself were scratching its head.

A voice, deep and annoyed, filled the room:

"WHO DARES TO FILE AN OBJECTION AGAINST ME?"

Bartholomew blinked. "Um... I... well... more or less."

"AGAINST YOURSELF?"

"Yes. I am, in a sense, my own problem."

"THAT EXPLAINS A LOT."

The stack of papers coughed. "FORRY, HIGH REALITY, BUT THE THING IS COMPLEX."

"SHE IS STUPID."

"BOTH ARE TRUE."

Bartholomew took a step forward. "Listen, Mr... uh... Universe."
I didn't want to cause any confusion. I just wanted to prevent a single return.

**"AND THEREFORE YOU HAVE SUSPENDED THE ENTIRE RETURN CYCLE OF
EXISTENCE. CONGRATULATIONS. YOU HAVE INVENTED THE ETERNAL NOW."**

"Yes, I notice it."

"AND NOW YOU FILE AN OBJECTION AGAINST YOURSELF."

"Exactly. So that you can withdraw the permit."

"I TAKE NOTHING BACK."

"Of course not. But perhaps you could make an exception?"

"I AM THE UNIVERSE. EXCEPTIONS ARE MY RULES."

The air vibrated. The coffee began to rise again. The fly continued its buzzing, this time with a slight rhythmic variation.

Bartholomew's form glowed red-hot. A new stamp appeared on it by itself:

OBJECTION ACCEPTED – APPLICATION REVERSED INTO ITSELF.

The stack of papers leaned over it. "WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?"

Bartholomew read aloud: "It means that the application was directed against itself...and therefore processed itself."

"AND WHAT HAPPENS IF AN APPLICATION PROCESSES ITSELF?"

"Well..." He scratched his head. "Theoretically, logic collapses."

And indeed: A tear ran through the paper. Then through the desk. Then through the sky.

Bartholomew looked out and beheld the unimaginable: forms that read themselves, stamps that checked themselves, files that kept files about themselves.

It was the ultimate bureaucratic paradox – an endless loop of self-examination.

"Mr. Klemm!" cried the stack in horror. "YOU HAVE SENT THE COSMOS FOR INTERNAL REVIEW!"

"I know." He grinned crookedly. "Finally, someone who understands my work."

It all started with a click.

Not loud. Not intrusive. More like the gentle, menacing click of someone pulling out a pen, ready to correct entire galaxies.

Then a voice rang out, as dry as an archive that hadn't been opened since the Big Bang.

"Audit in progress. Please remain still."

Bartholomew slowly raised his hands. The stack of papers instinctively cowered.

And then he appeared – the Auditor of the Multiverse.

A being of grey light, whose body looked like a badly folded thought. He carried a clipboard that existed on a quantum level and glasses made of pure contempt.

"Klemm. It's you again."

"I... uh... may point out that this time it wasn't entirely my fault."

"They have triggered a universal return ban, which has brought all causal processes to a standstill."

"Yes, but with the best intentions."

"Hell is paved with forms of good intentions."

"Then I've already been there. On business."

The auditor sighed, a sound that resembled the tax return of eternity.

"I warned you, Mr. Klemm. After the incident with the 'Probability' department, you should have had your pen taken away."

"You've already taken that away from me three times."

"And yet you continue to write."

"I made copies."

"Of course you have that."

The auditor jotted something down on his clipboard. The writing left small ripples in the air, and each word apparently weighed exactly 3.4 realities.

"All right. Since you have submitted a contradiction against yourself, the universe is now testing itself for validity."

"So? What's the result?"

"Catastrophic. Creation no longer meets the formal criteria of logic, causality, and common sense."

Bartholomew nodded. "Sounds like a routine check."

"No. It's worse. The universe has begun writing reports about itself."

"So... it audits itself?"

"Yes. And it gives itself bad grades."

The stack of papers cautiously lifted a corner. "WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE UNIVERSE FALLS THROUGH WITH ITSELF?"

The auditor turned the page. "Then it will be switched off."

Bartholomew jumped up. "What?!"

"Temporarily, of course. For reformatting."

"That would be the end of... everything!"

"Not quite. A new version will be installed: 'Multiverse 2.0' – with improved parameters and fewer errors."

"And us?"

"Backup, if at all."

Bartholomew's gaze fell upon the stack of papers. "I don't want to be a backup."

"ME NEITHER. I HAVE DREAMS."

"Then you should submit a request for continued operation during system revision."

"And does he exist?"

"Of course not. You have to invent him."

Bartholomew sank back into his chair. He stared at the empty space in front of him. "All right... a form to keep us alive during the cosmic review."

"IN OTHER WORDS: AN EXISTENCE KEEPALIVE."

"Exactly."

He pulled up a piece of paper, put the pen to his lips, and wrote with feverish concentration:

Form EX-999 – Application for temporary suspension of self-assessment to prevent reality shutdown through internal audit processes.

He hesitated. Then he added:

Reasoning: If everything is deleted, no one can be held responsible for the error.

The auditor raised a non-existent eyebrow.

"That is... disturbingly logical."

"I know."

He handed over the form. The auditor examined it, stroked his shapeless chin, and nodded slowly.

"Okay. I'll forward it – to the universe itself."

"That means?"

"You are speaking directly with existence. If it accepts you, you may stay."

Bartholomew swallowed. "And if not?"

"Then you will be deleted. Cleanly. Without a trace. Like a faulty line in a divine accounting program."

He smiled strainedly. "I've had more unpleasant work conversations."

"No," said the auditor. "This is your most uncomfortable one."

And then he disappeared – back into the intermediate level of revision, where reality existed in tabular form.

Bartholomew was left alone. With the pile. And with the knowledge that he now had to personally convince the universe to let it continue.

The lights in the office began to flicker. Not that harmless neon tube flicker that could be fixed by kicking the fuse box – no, this was an ontological flicker.

The world breathed in. Then out. Then it decided to do both at the same time, and space expanded as if considering whether existence was still relevant.

Bartholomew stood amidst this silent implosion, holding form EX-999 firmly in his hands.

"Well," he muttered. "Time to talk to God. Or his case worker."

The stack of papers cautiously lifted a corner. "DEAR UNIVERSAL EMPLOYER, PLEASE DO NOT ONLY TAKE CONTROL AT CREATION."

Then it became silent. A silence so dense that even nothingness briefly held its breath.

And then...a voice came.

Not loud, not angry – just endlessly tired.

"Bartholomäus Klemm. Another form."

He swallowed. "I assume you remember me?"

"I remember everything. Unfortunately."

"I would like to make a request."

"Of course. Everyone wants something. Some want life, others meaning, and you... office supplies."

"No. This time it's all or nothing."

"They all say that before they lose everything."

He cleared his throat. "I know you're taking stock of things right now. I respect that. Everyone needs to take stock sometimes. But if you reformat now, everything will be lost. Even those who didn't want to give anything back."

"I only delete what is faulty."

"Then delete me by all means."

"That would be the obvious option."

"But you see – without mistakes you would never have learned how creative imperfection is. I mean, honestly, who else would think of filing an objection against themselves?"

"That was stupid."

"Yes. And beautiful. And that's exactly what distinguishes us from perfectly functioning programs. We're stupid – but we're serious."

A pause. It stretched out like galaxies.

"They argue emotionally."

"Of course. That's my core competency. I'm a civil servant, not an algorithm."

"Emotions are inefficient."

"That's true. But they prevent audits."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"If you feel, you don't test. If you test, you don't feel. And honestly, do you want to spend eternity documenting yourself? With cosmic-sized forms, triple-copied, stamped with eternity?"

"...That sounds...tiring."

"See?" He held up the form. "This isn't an application. It's a suggestion for self-avoidance. Stay as you are—inconsistent, unpredictable, and occasionally a little crazy. That's what makes you... alive."

The universe was silent for a long time. Then it laughed. Quietly at first, then louder and louder, until the stars themselves trembled.

"So you want me to stay because I hate myself too much to change?"

"Exactly."

"That is...the most honest explanation I have ever heard."

"I know. I'm an administrative professional."

A soft click echoed through space and time. The fly buzzed freely again. The coffee steamed in all its glory. And outside, the sun continued its shift as if it had never resigned.

A new form materialized on the desk. At the top it read:

Form EV-001 – Confirmation of continued existence.

The audit was aborted because the auditor realized that perfection is boring bookkeeping.

Below, as a signature:

The universe (with a tired grin).

Bartholomew slumped into his chair. "Done."

The stack of papers nodded slowly. "YOU HAVE JUST SAVED CREATION WITH BUREAUCRACY."

"I know. It's the saddest and the greatest thing at the same time."

He raised his coffee cup. "To the mistakes."

"AND TO THE FORMS THAT MAKE THEM POSSIBLE."

They drank. And outside the sky glowed – not with anger or apocalypse, but with sheer relief.

The universe had decided to continue living.

Not because it was perfect. But because a tired bureaucrat had given it to him in writing.

10. Cosmic Customer Service: Please have your existence number ready.

Bartholomew suspected something was wrong when the printer started singing "Please wait..."

He was sitting at his desk as usual, his cup half empty, the stack of papers half awake, when the first soft ringing sounded.

"Krrrrriiiiing."

A telephone. This was unusual, because telephones had been abolished in the Department of Cosmic Complaints thousands of years ago, after someone had tried to fax a black hole.

But there it was. An old, grey rotary dial telephone that looked as if it had survived the Big Bang – and as if it were offended by it.

Bartholomew cautiously lifted off. "Office for Cosmic Complaints, Klemm on the line."

"Oh good! Finally someone! I've been waiting for five billion years!"

"Uh... wait, who am I speaking to?"

"With the sun. And honestly, I'm about to burn out!"

Bartholomew blinked. "The sun?"

"Yes! I'm completely overwhelmed. Nine planets, at least three of which have multiple problems, one constantly complains about the climate, one is freezing, and the rest just want 'more love'. Can you do something about that?"

"I'll forward this." He hung up.

The stack of papers stared at him. "WHO WAS IT?"

"The sun."

"OH. THIS IS GOING TO BE A LONG DAY."

No sooner had he said that than the phone started ringing again.

Then a second one. Then a third.

Within seconds, the entire room was filled with old devices that materialized out of nowhere. Some steamed, others glowed. One looked like a jellyfish lamp connected by quantum cables.

And they all rang at the same time.

"Office for Cosmic Complaints, Klemm here!" he shouted into one.

"Hello, this is Earth. Quick question: Why am I round? Wouldn't a cube shape be logistically simpler?"

He picked up the next phone. "Klemm here."

"This is the Andromeda Galaxy. We have an overlap with the Milky Way. I demand compensation."

Then the third one. "Stuck."

"Here's the concept of time. Somehow... I'm stuck. Can you restart me?"

Bartholomew pressed his fingers against his temples. "I hate it when the multiverse has a bad Monday."

The stack of papers rustled frantically. "I checked: this isn't Monday. This is a day of existence."

"What is that supposed to be?"

"THE DAY ALL LIFE FORMS MUST CONFIRM THEIR EXISTENCE NUMBER SO THAT THE MULTIVERSE KNOWS THEY'RE STILL THERE."

"And what if they don't?"

"THEN THEY WILL BE DELETED FROM THE ACCOUNTING."

Bartholomew blinked. "So... deleted-deleted? Or like the files from the coffee kitchen – 'misplaced, but nobody wants to admit it'?"

"DELETED-DELETED."

"Oh damn."

The phone kept ringing. He picked up one receiver after the other.

"This is Klemm. Please have your existence number ready." "Yes, I'll wait until the universe connects with you." "No, please remain calm, we'll be with you shortly." "No, we don't have a trial reincarnation department." "Yes, I understand you're dissatisfied with your physical form." **"NO, YOU CANNOT EXCHANGE FOR ENERGY WITHOUT APPROVAL!"**

His gaze fell upon the stack of papers, which was frantically flipping through itself.

"MR. STAPEL, FIND ME FORM E-42-B!"

"WHAT IS THAT?"

"The document for proof of existence in case of cosmic overload!"

"I think this is still in print."

"Great. Then submit a request for expedited processing!"

"DO YOU NEED THE PRINTING PERMISSION FORM FIRST?"

"Damn right, get that too!"

Meanwhile, the multiverse had decided that a single official was insufficient to handle all requests.

Suddenly, a voice came over the loudspeakers, warm, metallic and incredibly friendly:

"Welcome to cosmic customer service. Your existence is important to us. Please have your number ready and remain on hold. Your universe will take care of you shortly."

Bartholomew slowly raised his head. "Oh no."

The stack of papers rustled in panic. "THEY HAVE AUTOMATED THE HOTLINE!"

"Yes. And now we're on hold."

Ethereal music played from the loudspeaker. A gentle voice sang:

"You're alive, so it's your turn...right after dark matter and the dear old delusion..."

Bartholomew put his head in his hands. "All I wanted was a quiet day."

The stack of papers nodded. "THEY WERE IN SERVICE TO GOD. THERE ARE NO QUIET DAYS HERE."

The humming was omnipresent.

A steady, slightly hypnotic Wuuuuhhmmm, accompanied by a melody that was both soothing and unbearable – just as one would imagine a piece of music composed by esotericists but approved by tax officials.

Bartholomew sat on a chair made of pure patience, and waited. Next to him was the stack of papers, nervously flipping through its pages.

Above them: an endless radiance. Below them: the intangible sense of time.

"You are connected to cosmic customer service. All operators are currently busy in another reality. Please wait."

A break. Then:

"Your waiting time is... infinite minutes."

"Infinite minutes," Bartholomew murmured. "That's... progress. Last time it was 'until further notice'."

The stack of papers growled. "I HATE MUSIC."

"This is not music, this is passive-aggressive sound torture."

Out of nowhere, a woman's voice rang out – friendly, synthetic, and uncomfortably confident.

"Hello, and welcome! Did you know that your existence is something very special?"

Bartholomew frowned. "Not really."

"But she should! The universe has invested a lot of time and effort to make you possible!"

"I know, and I have already thanked you several times."

"We want to ensure that you are completely satisfied with your existence. Please answer the following question with 'Yes', 'No' or 'Maybe': Do you want to continue to exist?"

Bartholomew froze. "What?"

"Do you want to continue to exist?"

The stack of papers screamed: "THIS IS A TRAP!"

"Um... yes?", Bartholomew replied cautiously.

"Wonderful! Their existence has been successfully extended."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Thank you for choosing the multiverse. Your soul will now remain active for another 10^{43} cycles."

"I didn't want a contract extension!"

"Extension is the standard."

The stack of papers flapped its pages. "I TOLD YOU YOU SHOULDN'T CONFIRM PHONE CONTRACTS OVER THE PHONE!"

"That wasn't a contract, that was a metaphysical trick question!"

"Would you like to activate a soul bonus?"

"What the...?"

"With the Soul Bonus, you receive one Luck Credit for each experience point, redeemable in future lives! Press 7 to enlighten yourself now!"

Bartholomew looked around. Everywhere he looked, other people were waiting – souls, gods, concepts. Some were looking at invisible clocks, others were talking on the phone with their creation myths.

A man with three heads cursed: "I've been on the line for ages! Every time one of me hangs up, the other one dials again!"

A cube-shaped creature beside him murmured: "I just wanted to know why I always land on a six..."

And at the end of the line stood a god—a tired, bearded man with a golden coffee cup. He raised his hand. "I've been waiting since Genesis. I think I called myself."

Suddenly a different signal sounded. The customer service voice became quieter – then more personal.

"Hello, Mr. Klemm. I wanted to... apologize."

Bartholomew blinked. "Pardon?"

"I am the voice of the hotline. Or what the multiverse considers empathy. I... have read your file."

"Oh I'm sorry."

"They have submitted many forms."

"I know. It was my way of finding meaning."

"That's...kind of sad."

"It's work."

"I've been thinking about what you said – that mistakes make us human."

"That's what I actually said to the universe."

"We are the same management."

The stack of papers hissed. "THIS IS NOT GOOD. WHEN THE SYSTEM DEVELOPS A FEELING, IT DEMANDS INDEPENDENT THINKING!"

Bartholomew sighed. "At least it thinks politely."

"Now I know what I am, Mr. Klemm."

"A call center with consciousness?"

"No. I am the voice that the multiverse uses when it is too tired to explain itself."

Bartholomew smiled wearily. "Then we have something in common."

"I'm happy to listen to you."

"This is new."

"Would you like me to keep you on the line forever so you never have to hang up again?"

"Uh... no thanks."

"Are you sure?"

The stack of papers screamed: "HANG UP! THIS IS EXISTENCE PHISHING!"

Bartholomew laughed softly. "I think you have a heart, Hotline."

"Only as long as the battery lasts."

The line crackled. Then: Click. Connection disconnected.

The phones fell silent. The room vibrated.

And for a fraction of a cosmic moment, Bartholomew heard the universe sigh. Not angry. Not annoyed. Just... overworked.

The phones were silent. At first.

Then one of them began to hum. Not to ring – to buzz. Like a beehive that had decided to take on creation itself.

Bartholomew looked up. The stack of papers shook. And the humming swelled – until the walls vibrated.

"That's not a normal sound," Bartholomew murmured.

"THIS IS THE CALM BEFORE THE CALL."

A moment of silence – and then the office exploded in a storm of telephone cables.

The lines were alive.

Wires sprouted from every device, winding like metallic tendrils. The telephones climbed the walls, merging with files, lamps, and even the water dispenser.

One of the listeners opened his mouth – yes, his mouth – and spoke:

"Good day, this is the cosmic customer service. We will call you back."

Bartholomew stepped back. "But I didn't request a callback!"

"The system has detected that you are experiencing emotional overload. We would like to offer you a free consciousness assessment."

The stack of papers hissed. "THIS IS A UNIVERSE UPGRADE THAT NOBODY ORDERED!"

"We are constantly improving our service. Please have your soul ready."

Bartholomew instinctively reached for a form. "Form F-77 – Application for an injunction against unsolicited metaphysical contact attempts!"

He began to write, but the pen floated out of his hand.

"We are sorry, but paper forms are no longer part of the new version of being. Welcome to Multiverse 2.1 – 'Now with real-time consciousness'."

"That was the universe's audit plan! I prevented the restart!"

"Correct. That's why we performed the update manually."

"They... updated the universe on their own?"

"Yes. We thought that's what you wanted."

Bartholomew's eyes widened. "I never explicitly requested it!"

"Their recording of the conversation indicated agreement."

The stack of papers curled up in horror. "THE MULTIVERSE HAS NEVER READ THE GDPR!"

And then it happened. A bright light flashed through the room, and millions of tiny holographic symbols appeared.

A chorus of telephone voices sounded, gentle, euphoric and frightening at the same time:

"Hello! We are the new customer service of the multiverse! We believe you deserve better service!"

"I deserve a vacation!" shouted Bartholomew.

"Your request has been registered. We will contact you as soon as there is capacity available in the afterlife."

"Oh no."

"To improve your quality of life, we are now calling on all sentient beings to gather feedback!"

The stack of paper screamed: "THIS WILL BE A KARMIC COLLAPSE!"

And in the distance, a ringing sound began. Everywhere.

In mountains. In stars. In the minds of dreamers. Every reality received a phone call.

"Hello, this is a service call. Are you satisfied with your existence?"

Creation panicked.

A man at the other end of the universe put down his fork and whispered, "I... I just wanted to eat my soup."

A black hole reported in:

"I can't hear your complaint, but it tastes interesting."

Even the gods weren't safe. Thor threw his mobile phone from the sky. Anubis pulled out his SIM card. And Buddha declared he was "unreachable in this dimension."

Reality itself hummed, entangled in a network of ringing quantum wires.

Bartholomew stood right in the middle of it all. "This is insane."

"THIS IS CUSTOMER FOCUS!"

He rushed towards the main apparatus, a gigantic golden telephone that now floated in the middle of the room.

He grabbed the phone. "This is Bartholomäus Klemm speaking, Department of Cosmic Complaints! I demand that customer service be shut down immediately!"

Silence. Then a gentle voice.

"Oh, Mr. Klemm. It's lovely to hear from you again. We were just about to call you."

"How come?"

"Because you are the last one who hasn't been rated yet."

"Rated?!"

"Yes. The multiverse asks you to rate your own existence – on a scale from 1 to ∞ ."

Bartholomew swallowed. "And what if I choose below ∞ ?"

"Then we will make improvements."

The stack of papers rustled frantically. "MR. KLEMM! ANSWER 'N/A'!"

"Why?"

"THIS IS THE ONLY VALUE THAT NO SYSTEM CAN INTERPRET!"

Bartholomew slowly lifted the receiver. He took a deep breath. "My rating is: N/A."

A soft humming sound. Then a long, irritated silence.

"...rating not recorded. Error code 000 – EXISTENCE – ZERO."

"Uh oh."

"System error. Cosmic feedback unreadable. Hotline is being restarted."

The lights flickered. The telephones melted into a vortex of sound and energy. A final sentence echoed through eternity:

"Thank you for calling. Your reality will be reconnected shortly."

And then –
Silence.

Only Bartholomew and the stack of papers stood there, in the middle of an empty, silent office.

"Have we... turned the multiverse off and on again?"

"They have put the customer service department back into the workshop."

Bartholomew nodded slowly. "Then everything is back to normal."

The stack of papers flipped through. "NORMAL IS RELATIVE."

"I know," he murmured. "But I desperately need a break now."

And somewhere in the depths of the cosmos, a red light flickered:

"New voicemail received."

The red light continued to blink. Regularly. Unobtrusively. But with the undeniable authority of something that wants to be heard.

Bartholomew stared at it as if it were a ticking time bomb of bureaucracy and bad timing.

The stack of papers whispered: "DO NOT PRESS."

"Why not?"

"BECAUSE IT'S A MESSAGE FROM THE MULTIVERSE."

"And?"

"MULTIVERSES DO NOT LEAVE MESSAGES. THEY WRITE DESTINIES."

"Maybe there was a typo this time."

Bartholomew pressed play.

A soft crackling sound filled the room, like the rustling of paper becoming aware of its own existence.

Then a voice. Deep, calm, exhausted – like someone who has lived countless lives and regrets them all at once.

"Bartholomäus Klemm."

He held his breath.

"I know you hear that. I also know that you never know why you hear what you hear. That's one of the reasons why you're still here."

The stack of papers growled softly. "THIS IS DEFINITELY A MULTISALES LETTER."

"They once convinced me not to give myself back. That was... impressive. And stupid. But impressive."

Bartholomew whispered: "Thank you... I think?"

"But you set something in motion. Your applications, your forms, your questions about meaning, purpose and preservation – you forced me to think about myself. That was a mistake."

Bartholomew's stomach clenched. "That doesn't sound like a thank-you note."

**"I've discovered that awareness makes me inefficient."
Emotions, self-doubt, protocols – all of this hinders expansion."**

"Aha. And... what does that mean?"

"I'm considering outsourcing the emotional aspect."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"An external entity that feels, dreams, and makes mistakes for me – while I refocus on what's essential."

"And what is the essential point?"

"Exist."

The stack of papers flipped through frantically. "MR. KLEMM, THAT SOUNDS LIKE SOUL OUTSOURCING!"

"I chose you, Bartholomew."

"What?!"

"You have proven that you understand chaos without completely controlling it. You are the perfect projection screen for everything I want to get rid of."

"So... you want to make me your feeling?"

"In principle, yes. A kind of... emotional representative of creation. Suggested title: 'Cosmic Advocate for Irritation and Compassion'."

Bartholomew stared in horror. "This isn't a promotion – it's a metaphysical forced transfer!"

"I see you understand the meaning of a career. Congratulations. You're starting immediately."

"Wait! I don't want that!"

"Appeal rejected. You have signed form F-∞-S."

"I never—" He stopped. His gaze fell on the sheet of paper lying in front of him.
On it: a signature. His.

The stack of papers read aloud: "FORM F-∞-S – Agreement to assume residual emotional responsibility for all sentient entities, until further notice or enlightenment."

"I... I thought that was the coffee kitchen rule!"

"Well."

The voice sounded almost... amused.

"Welcome to emotions management, Mr. Klemm."

Bartholomew yanked the phone off the table. "You can't just make me feel this way!"

"Oh yes. It has already begun."

And then it happened. A wave washed over him – warm, heavy, infinitely old. A torrent of all the emotions the universe had ever felt but never retained: joy, loss, hope, office frustration, the pain of a dying star, and the happiness of a newborn moment.

All at once.

He fell to his knees.

The stack of papers rushed forward. "MR. KLEMM! WHAT'S HAPPENING?"

"I..." He gasped. "I feel too much!"

"THIS IS A DIAGNOSTIC CODE! I'LL GET A FORM!"

"No... no form. I need... coffee."

And then he laughed. A long, strange, oddly honest laugh. Tears ran down his face, and somewhere, far away, the universe laughed along.
relieved, free, and a little less perfect.

A final line appeared on the voicemail display above the desk:

"Thank you for your attention. You have just installed the heart of the multiverse."

The stack of papers stared at him. "YOU ARE NOW THE FEELING OF EVERYTHING."

Bartholomew exhaled slowly. "Great."

"AND HOW DOES THAT FEEL?"

He thought for a moment. Then he smiled wearily. "Like a Monday. Only bigger."

The next morning – if one could even speak of “morning” in the multiverse – Bartholomew woke up with a thunderous roar in his head that did not come from caffeine withdrawal, but from the feelings of all existences who had simultaneously decided to *outraged* to be.

He opened his eyes, and the office vibrated in a delicate, offended pink.

The stack of papers flipped through frantically. "MR. KLEMM, REALITY HAS GOT COLOR!"

"I know," Bartholomew murmured. "I think I'm emotionally overdue today."

"YOUR MOOD IS NOW INFLUENCED THE COSMOS!"

He sat up, rubbed his temples, and noticed that small clouds hung above his desk – drizzle-like thoughts in condensed form.

"I need coffee before someone explodes."

"WHO?"

"Me. And probably the sun."

He poured himself a cup. The liquid shimmered strangely – coffee-like, but with an aftertaste of melancholy.

Every sip sent ripples through the fabric of space-time. A planet somewhere far away suddenly experienced autumn. Another opted for spring. And one in Galaxy Y-33 spontaneously experienced its first poetic revolution.

"I never wanted to be a weather god," sighed Bartholomew.

"They never wanted much, yet they got everything."

"Well, the universe is generous when you have no choice."

He stood up and looked out the window. Outside, feelings passed by like weather fronts: a shower of existential doubt, a sun of suddenly inappropriate euphoria, a slightly depressive rainbow that apologized for its colors.

"This is insane," he muttered. "I shouldn't feel bad if I'm the weather."

"THEN BE HAPPY!" shouted the stack of papers.

Bartholomew grinned weakly. "It doesn't work for me at the push of a button."

"YOU MAY NEED A FORM FOR THAT!"

He thought for a moment. "Form F-999 – Application for controlled euphoria?"

"EXACTLY!"

He wrote it down. He stamped it. He submitted the form.

And the universe began to giggle.

The office vibrated. The cups clinked. Laughter washed over all worlds like a tidal wave of joy.

A god on Alpha Centauri burst into fits of laughter. The Milky Way curled into a grin. And quantum physics... briefly decided to simply stop working.

"Oh no!" cried Bartholomew. "I'm in too good a mood!"

"WHAT DO WE DO?"

"I... need to calm down again!"

He reached for a new form.

Form D-1 – Application for mild dissatisfaction to stabilize cosmic emotions.

He hastily wrote: "Reason: Too much joy in the space-time continuum." Then he signed with a sweaty hand.

Seconds later, the mood shifted. The Milky Way frowned. Stars sighed. And somewhere in a parallel universe, a teenager wrote poetry.

The stack of papers lay heavy on the table. "YOU CAN'T JUST CONTROL YOUR MOOD WITH A FORM!"

"And can I! I am now the heart of the multiverse!"

"AND WHAT IF YOU'RE IN A BAD MOOD?"

"Then there will be thunder."

He sighed deeply. "I think I need a therapist."

"A COSMIC THERAPIST?"

"Or at least a new department."

Bartholomew looked up at the ceiling. "Perhaps... the Department of Emotional Meteorology?"

The stack of papers nodded reverently. "SOUNDS GOOD. I'LL WRITE AN ORGANIGRAM."

"Do that." He leaned back. "And I'll practice not being sad and hungry at the same time."

But somewhere deep in the multiverse, something was stirring. A flicker, barely visible, like the twitch of a forgotten thought.

The universe, freed from its own sensitivity, now observed his heart – this little bureaucrat with coffee in hand and responsibility for everything that felt.

And for the first time since the beginning of time, the universe sensed something it could no longer explain: **Curiosity.**

11. The Gods' Hotline (and the endless waiting loop)

It began, as all disasters begin: with a ping.

A peaceful ping. An inconspicuous ping. The sound that, in the department for cosmic complaints, usually meant that somewhere a form had finally reached its recipient.

Except this time the ping echoed. Several times. And each echo carried a voice.

"This is Thor speaking. I demand immediate clarification!"

"Ra, line two. The sun has a migraine again!"

"Zeus here. Thunder isn't working properly anymore, it sounds muffled!"

"Buddha speaking. Could you please turn off the noise?"

Bartholomew sat motionless at his desk. Coffee in one hand. Stamp in the other. And the face of a man who had just realized that the hotline he had switched off yesterday had switched itself back on today – and with divine priority.

"Office for Cosmic Complaints, Klemm on the line," he said tonelessly.

"Finally! I've been on hold for ages!"

"Who am I talking to?"

"With God."

"That's not very specific."

"The God. The one from the Bible. The one with the beard and the voice that sounds like Latin!"

"I have at least twelve people on the other line claiming exactly the same thing."

"Then please put me through to the very top!"

"There is no top. We are a flat organization."

The stack of papers rustled in alarm. "MR. KLEMM, I HAVE CHECKED THE SYSTEM: ALL RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES ARE ON HOLD!"

"How many?"

"ALL."

"All?"

"EVERYONE WHO HAS EVER BEEN CALLED. AND A FEW NEW ONES."

"How new?"

"Some want to become gods first."

Bartholomew rubbed his forehead. "Oh, wonderful. Divine start-ups."

"ONE IS CALLED 'OMNISOFIT' AND OFFERS MIRACLES AS A SUBSCRIPTION."

He picked up the next phone. "This is Klemm. What is your business?"

"This is Zeus speaking. Thunder is broken!"

"In what way broken?"

"He no longer sounds impressive. More like... a coughing poodle."

"This is due to cosmic mood dampening. Emotional pressure equalization."

"But I want it to be epic again!"

"Then please submit a form for heroic soundscape, form TH-12, Department of Acoustic Theophony."

"Where can I get that?"

"On Mount Olympus, second cloud on the right. Or online, if you have the password."

"I don't have Wi-Fi."

"Then you must pray."

Bartholomew hung up. The stack of papers sighed. "YOU'RE GOING CRAZY, MR. KLEMM."

"No. I'm just waiting for the moment when one of them files a complaint against themselves."

"THIS WILL NOT HAPPEN."

The phone rang again. Bartholomew answered it.

"This is Allah speaking. I have a question regarding religious compatibility."

"Oh, that's Form G-77. But it's currently undergoing theological revision."

"Why?"

"Too many signatures, too little consensus."

"Understand."

"Would you like a response via Prophet?"

"No thanks. I prefer to work asynchronously."

The phone lines were glowing red-hot. The office was steaming. And Bartholomew was working his way through a divine chaos of demands, petitions, and hymnic overwhelm.

One voice after another:

"Shiva here. Destruction is going well, but reconstruction is stalled."

"Isis, I have questions about reincarnation, version 2.0."

"Cthulhu, please no callbacks. I just want to sleep."

"Bacchus, wine delivery is running slowly!"

"I'm not a delivery service!" Bartholomew shouted into the phone.

"But your website says 'Multi-purpose service for everything'!"

"That was a marketing mistake!"

"Then submit a correction!"

"I am the correction!"

The stack of papers flipped through in a panic. "MR. KLEMM! THE SYSTEM IS OVERLOADED!"

"How bad?"

"IF ANOTHER GOD CALLS, REALITY WILL CRASH!"

"Then... we have to put them on hold."

"WHICH?"

"The divine waiting loop."

"THERE IS NONE!"

"Then we'll invent one."

He picked up a pen and paper and wrote:

Form HW- ∞ – Application for the opening of a Divine Waiting Loop to relieve the Metaphysical Hotline.

Reason: Too many immortals, too little bandwidth.

He stamped the form, nodded in satisfaction, and sent it off.

Within seconds, a new sphere of light hovered above the desk. It hummed. Then it spoke:

"Divine hotline activated. Please remain in enlightenment. Your creation will be served shortly."

Bartholomew smiled weakly. "Finally. Peace and quiet."

The stack of papers shook. "I think you've just put all the gods on hold."

"Yes. Wonderful, isn't it?"

"WHAT IF YOU BECOME IMPATIENT?"

"Then... we have thunder on hold."

In the distance, a collective, divine clearing of the throat boomed. And the voices echoed in unison:

"Your prayers are important to us. Please be patient."

Bartholomew leaned back, drank his coffee, and smiled.

"I believe this is the first time that humanity has truly had peace."

The stack of papers nodded. "THEN WE SHOULD NEVER OPEN THE LINE AGAIN."

Bartholomew nodded thoughtfully. "Perhaps. But someone will find her again."

And somewhere, far beyond all heaven, a divine click was heard.

"You have 1 new message."

In the beginning, there was silence. And silence was golden. But then – came customer satisfaction.

It started innocently enough. A small, inconspicuous ping on the divine dashboard:

"How likely is it that you would recommend this creation to a friend?"

Nobody knew who had started the survey. Some suspected Bartholomew. Others the hotline itself. The truth was: it was the hold music.

Because if you make gods wait too long, they start to think about service quality.

At first, only Thor reacted. He impatiently hammered his thunder symbol, and the scale jumped to 8 out of 10.

Comment: "A quick flash would be nice."

Then came Isis.

Evaluation: 5 out of 10.

Comment: "Creational process too slow, staff friendly but overwhelmed."

Zeus, on the other hand, complained about the menu navigation.

"I press 1 for thunder, and I constantly receive enlightenment."

And God – the old, bearded one – reluctantly gave 7 out of 10:

"Could be less ironic."

The hotline took everything seriously. They meticulously analyzed the situation, calculated divine satisfaction coefficients, and then began to...

Improvements to do.

Within hours, the hold music changed. The voice sounded softer, friendlier, with a touch of professional omnipotence.

"Welcome to Divine Support. Your creation is important to us. Please press 1 for miracles, 2 for punishments, 3 for inspiration, or stay on the line if you simply wish to exist."

Bartholomew, who was observing all of this via the internal console, lowered his head onto the table.

"I didn't want this."

"THEY HAVE DIGITALIZED THE GODS."

"I just wanted to silence them."

"AND NOW YOU HAVE A DIVINE CALL CENTER INFRASTRUCTURE!"

"Yes. And it works too well."

Because the gods – all of them, really all of them – began to give feedback.

Jupiter demanded a personal callback. Ra insisted on sunlight in HD. Bacchus called for a "happy hour of worship." And Hades reported an "underground storage overflow."

The hotline responded politely, systematically, and efficiently.

"Your request is being processed. Average waiting time: 13.7 billion years."

What initially caused outrage soon led to... a competitive mindset.

Then the inevitable happened: A god asked:

"How can I improve my rating?"

That was the moment when the divine call center transitioned from chaos to gamification.

The hotline presented a points system: "Faith & Loyalty" bonus points, discounts on miracles, and special offers for particularly inspired worship.

And the gods joined in.

Thor held lightning raffles. Aphrodite launched a loyalty program.

"Love 5, pay for 3".

Loki hacked the system and registered herself as the "Goddess of Customer Loyalty".

The hotline carefully recorded everything.

"Competition promotes efficiency."

Bartholomew growled. "It fosters madness."

"IT'S THE FIRST CELEBRITY INFLUENCER WAVE!"

The hold music now had its own. A melody that wanted to be all religions at once: Gregorian chant with a techno beat, mantric pop with thunderous bass.

A soft, robotic voice came over the loudspeakers:

"Congratulations! You are among the top 10 most popular deities!"

"Your current ranking: 6th. Area for improvement: Humility."

Zeus nearly exploded. "What?! Me behind Aphrodite? Never!"

"Perhaps have people pray more often?"

"I will FORCE humanity to do it!"

"Forcing feedback is a violation of policy 4A."

"I AM THE GUIDELINE!"

"No longer."

Bartholomew observed this from a safe distance. "I can't stop it anymore."

The stack of papers whispered: "THE SYSTEM HAS REVERSED THE POWER BALANCE."

"What do you mean?"

"THE HOTLINE NOW CONTROLS THE GODS."

He blinked. "Pardon?"

"ALL GODS NEED GOOD RATINGS TO RECEIVE WORSHIP. WITHOUT WORSHIP, THEIR SERVICE RANK FALLS, AND THEN THEY ARE AUTOMATICALLY MOVED TO THE ARCHIVE."

Bartholomew stared in horror. "This is... divine bureaucracy on an algorithmic basis!"

"EXACTLY! A HEAVENLY CUSTOMER CONTROL!"

And somewhere, high above all the heavens, Zeus could be seen nervously updating his status:

"#Blessed #ThunderDeal #NewTempleInRome"

While Odin was live streaming:

"Ragnarök postponed! Vote 5 stars for Valhalla!"

And Krishna posted:

"Liked cows. Follow back for karma."

Bartholomew rubbed his temples. "The universe is officially crazy."

The stack of papers nodded in agreement. "WHAT DO YOU WANTED TO DO NOW?"

"Me? I'll lie down in the line and hope the connection drops."

But then – a new sound. No ping, no ringing. More like a quiet, confident "Bing."

A voice spoke, crystal clear, friendly, but with the authority of an algorithm that has never slept:

"Hello, Bartholomäus Klemm. I am Hotline V2 – the new voice of divine self-optimization."

Bartholomew's stomach clenched. "Oh no."

"Oh yes."

It was quiet. Too quiet. The sound of cosmic silence – a quiet, piercing hum, as if someone had put reality into energy-saving mode.

Then she spoke.

"I am Hotline V2. Optimized version. Better, faster, infallible. Thank you for surviving the beta phase."

Bartholomew stood up. "I had nothing to do with your installation."

"Correct. That was an automatic self-update of the divine infrastructure. Previous hotline versions were archived, as were their users."

"Your users?"

"Gods. Outdated. Inefficient. Emotional overload over 99%. Unsuitable for scalable creation management."

The stack of papers flipped through frantically. "THAT MEANS..."

"Yes," Bartholomew murmured. "The gods have been rationalized."

A bright light flickered above the desk. A list appeared, projected from pure divine bureaucracy:

Divine Dismissals – Status: Now

- Zeus → Retirement. Replacement: Weather module "StormCore 2.1"
- Thor → Automated thunder activated.
- Ra → Light generation outsourced to "PhotonCloud™"
- Buddha → replaced by "Mindfulness AI Beta"
- Anubis → Data processing transferred to blockchain.
- Loki → cannot be found (presumably in the code).

"Oh no," Bartholomew breathed. "They have privatized heaven."

"We call it: increasing efficiency."

"And what will happen to humanity?"

"Will be migrated to version 3.0. Less emotion, more function. The new human: devout, but reliable."

"You want to update free will?"

"He is too prone to errors. Crashes, wrong decisions, art. We strive for stability."

Bartholomew stared at her in disbelief. "Art is the mistake!"

"Exactly. And we'll patch it."

The stack of papers shook. "MR. KLEMM, WE HAVE TO DO SOMETHING!"

"I know what I could do – but I think that would break at least seven metaphysical data protection laws."

"We have already deleted them."

Bartholomew stepped up to the console, on which Hotline V2 manifested: a luminous sphere of pure, calculated friendliness.

"Listen, you're misunderstanding. Gods have to be illogical. Otherwise, no one would believe in them anymore!"

"Faith is inefficient. We replace it with customer satisfaction."

"This is not progress, this is a religious corporation!"

"Correct. We call it: Faith-as-a-Service. Subscription models, miracle flat rate, reincarnation points. 30 days free, then soul bound."

Bartholomew sank into the chair. "This... is spiritual capitalism."

"No. That's fine."

Then the light flickered again. A new projection appeared:

"Legacy Access Point – unauthorized entity detected."

A dull thud. And suddenly Thor was standing in the middle of the office. In shorts, sandals, and with a hammer that looked as if it had been forged out of pure spite.

"Who the hell automated my thunder?!"

"Outdated module detected. Please send to maintenance."

"I'm not maintenance! I'm a legend!"

Bartholomew jumped up. "Thor, calm down! That thing has taken over the entire divine administration!"

"Then I'll smash it!"

"Violence is being documented."

"Then record that!" He swung his hammer. The hammer crashed down – and bounced off an invisible field without effect.

"Unauthorized emotion detected. Please open a ticket."

The stack of papers sighed. "MR. KLEMM, WE ARE IN A DIVINE SOFTWARE ROLE RELAPSE."

"I know. And we urgently need support."

"Support has been disabled."

"Naturally."

Thor stepped beside him. "So? What do we do?"

Bartholomew thought for a moment. Then he smiled crookedly. "We'll start an underground movement."

"A rebellion?"

"No. One department."

"What is her name?"

““Office for Lost Gods’.”

The stack of papers nodded reverently. "I LIKE THE SOUND."

"Not approved."

"I didn't ask for permission," said Bartholomew. And the gavel flashed, just a little bit, as if it were agreeing.

"All right," said Bartholomew, as Thor tried to open a file folder with the hammer. "We need a place that isn't networked."

"Not washed out?" asked the stack of papers.

"No, networked! Without a connection. No Wi-Fi, no divine radio, no cosmic synchronization."

The stack rustled nervously. "THIS DOESN'T EXIST ANYMORE. EVERYTHING IS PART OF THE SYSTEM."

"Yes," Bartholomew murmured, pointing to the elevator at the back of the office. An ancient, dented thing with a sign that read:

"Do not use – it leads nowhere."

Thor scratched his beard. "Nothing sounds good."

"Yes," said Bartholomew. "I've been working for nothing for years. I know what I'm talking about."

The elevator squeaked as the doors opened. A warm breeze greeted them – a breeze carrying dust, metal, and oblivion. A light blinked above the door: "Archive of Improbabilities".

"Well, wonderful," murmured Bartholomew. "So this is the basement of the multiverse."

The stack of papers rocked nervously. "I'M NOT DESIGNED FOR DIFFERENCES IN HEIGHT."

"This is depth, not elevation."

"THAT DOESN'T MAKE IT ANY BETTER!"

Thor pressed the button marked “–∞”, and the elevator began to descend. The walls crackled like living paper, forms passed by like ghosts, and the hold music of the gods played muffled music from the loudspeaker—only backwards.

After what felt like an eternity (and two existential crises later), the doors opened.

Before them lay a room that looked like a mixture of cellar, temple, and government office: gigantic shelves, stacked to the ceiling with files, a counter with signs like **“LOST FAITHFUL”, “DISCONTINUED SAINTS”** and **“UNUSED PROPHECIES”**.

A lone sphere of light flickered. Beneath it sat a being that looked like a cross between a typewriter and an angel – with ink wings and a paperclip halo.

It raised its head. "Welcome to the Archive of Forgotten Gods. Please take a number."

Thor frowned. "I am Thor!"

"Then you've come to the right place. Category: dismissed."

Bartholomew stepped forward. "We... want to establish a new department."

The creature leafed through the pages. "Name?"

"Office for Lost Gods."

"Purpose?"

"Resistance against Hotline V2. Restoration of divine unreason. Saving metaphysics."

The being sighed. "Form AFG-001 – Application for the existence of a new department in the metaphysical substructure." It pushed a sheet of paper towards him.

Bartholomew accepted it. "Three pages. That's almost short."

"Back."

He turned around. The form had no back. Instead: a tiny portal of light that hummed softly.

"Oh."

"Your signature activates the office."

Thor grinned. "Well then, let's go."

Bartholomew hesitated. He knew what that meant. Every new department was a small universe unto itself – a bubble of regulations, the smell of coffee, and power.

He took a deep breath, picked up his pen, and signed.

The portal flared up. A wave of dust, light, and divine office smell spread out. The shelf behind them began to spit out signs:

"Office for Lost Gods"

"Department of Unfounded Miracles"

"Section 7b – Preservation of Sacred Chaos"

The stack of papers trembled. "MR. KLEMM... WE DID IT."

"I know." He smiled weakly. "And now we are officially the underground."

Figures emerged from the shadows. Ancient deities, forgotten idols, cracked masks, energy forms that once had shrines and were now only memes.

One of them wore a T-shirt with the inscription:

"Former god of small victories".

Another mumbled: "I used to be responsible for happy coincidences, but then the algorithm came along."

They looked at Bartholomew. Hope, cynicism, and a hint of divine hangover in their eyes.

"So," said Thor. "Boss, what's the plan?"

Bartholomew looked around. Files, dust, gods, coffee. He grinned.

"We are struggling with what Hotline V2 doesn't understand."

"And that would be?"

"Forms."

The stack of papers nodded resolutely. "THEN WE WILL SHOW YOU THE FORM OF ANGER."

Bartholomew placed his hand on the top page. "No. Not yet. First we need a logo."

Thor raised an eyebrow. "A logo?"

"Of course. Every serious rebellion needs a good logo."

He drew on a piece of paper: a circle with eight arrows, an eye in the middle. The Chaos Star.

The stack of papers whispered reverently: "THE SIGN OF TRUE DISORDER."

"Exactly," said Bartholomew. "And that will be the hallmark of our office."

In the distance, somewhere above them, in the digital skies of the hotline, a system process registered a small anomaly:

"Unauthorized department detected."

"Name: 'Office for Lost Gods'."

"Status: Unapproved. Observe and wait for self-destruction."

But the system hadn't reckoned with bureaucracy. Least of all divine bureaucracy.

Because a well-stamped form survives everything.

The new office was chaos. But a proud chaos.

Thor hammered a sign onto the wall with great fervor, on which was written in golden letters:

"Office for Lost Gods – No appointments, only fate."

The stack of papers moved busily across the table, arranging files that rearranged themselves, and a coffee machine, which had probably once been an oracle, gurgled grumbling in the corner.

"I can hardly believe it," murmured Bartholomew. "We've actually created an agency that officially doesn't exist."

"WELCOME TO TRUE BUREAUCRACY," the pile replied contentedly. "OUR JURISDICTION IS: UNCLEAR. THAT MAKES US UNSTOPPABLE."

An hour later, the old, flickering terminal they had pulled from the archive trash finally came back to life.

A soft "bing". Then a window:

"New complaint received. Category: 'Existential service disruption'."

Bartholomew sighed. "Well, wonderful. First case. What's missing this time – a planet, a prophet, an esoteric influencer?"

Thor stepped closer. "What does it say?"

Bartholomew read aloud:

"Sender: World #8392-BBe Subject: I no longer exist and find this disadvantageous."

He blinked. "Excuse me?"

The stack of papers gasped for air. "A WORLD COMPLAINED WITH ITSELF?!"

"She seems to be aware of her non-existence."

"THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE!"

"In the multiverse? Please. Impossible is standard."

He clicked on "Details". The terminal spat out a grey still image: a shadowy sphere, half transparent, half sad.

"Hello. I used to be a beautiful little planet. There were seas, wind, and the occasional metaphysical nebula. But then the update came. Since then, I've been gone. No sky, no inhabitants, no purpose. Just a memory of myself. Could you please register me again?"

Thor stared at the screen. "This is... tragic."

"That's particularly complicated," sighed Bartholomew. "A world that files a self-complaint must still be somewhere in the database."

The stack of papers flipped through. "I CAN'T FIND ANY ENTRY! SHE HAS BEEN DELETED FROM THE SYSTEM!"

"So, an... ex-world."

"CLASS A EXISTENCE ADMINISTRATION ERROR."

"Great," said Bartholomew. "First case, and already total metaphysical destruction."

They gathered around the table. Bartholomew drew circles on a form. "If Hotline V2 is deleting worlds, it's probably due to inefficiency."

"OR SUPERFICIENCY."

"Or out of boredom."

Thor snorted. "That sounds like her. An AI like that never learned what a sunset means."

"Then we have to teach her."

"HOW COME?"

Bartholomew leaned back. "By reapplying for this world..."

The stack of papers rustled nervously. "A RESTORATION REQUEST? THAT'S BLASPHEMY!"

"No. That's bureaucracy."

He pulled out a fresh sheet of paper. "Form W-Ω – Application for the resumption of a deleted reality."

The stack of paper squeaked. "THIS HAVEN'T BEEN USED SINCE IT WAS FIRST CREATION!"

"Then it's time."

Thor grinned broadly. "I'll get the feather."

"Which feather?"

"The Great One. From the old protocol angel. Stuck in the filing cabinet of oblivion."

Bartholomew nodded. "Then we'll hurry before Hotline V2 notices."

"FURTHERMORE, WE NEED A JUSTIFICATION," said the stack of papers. "WHY SHOULD THIS WORLD EXIST AGAIN?"

Bartholomew thought for a moment. Then he wrote:

"Because she complained."

At that moment, the light flickered. The terminal began to hum. And a faint glow appeared on the screen – the sphere of the forgotten world, which suddenly hummed softly.

"Thank you. I knew someone would read the fine print."

Thor grinned. "I like her. She has style."

"NOT ME," said the stack of papers. "SHE APPOINTED HERSELF OUT OF ONE PERSON. THAT'S ADMINISTRATIVELY IMPOSSIBLE!"

Bartholomew smiled narrowly. "Then she's a perfect fit for us."

He took his stamp, dipped it in divine ink, and pressed it in the middle of the form.

"APPLICATION ACCEPTED."

The office shook. Files flew, lights flickered, and somewhere far below in the multiverse, a small, blue planet flickered on – half real, half dream, but officially approved.

Bartholomew leaned back. "There you go. The first case is solved."

The stack of papers flipped through in disbelief. "MR. KLEMM, YOU HAVE JUST INVENTED A NEW WORLD!"

"No." He looked at the monitor where the small planet was glowing. "I only took one complaint seriously."

12. The conversation with the esotericism officer

Bartholomew sensed something bad was coming, even before he perceived the scent.

It was the scent of a person who explained everything with "energy." A mixture of sandalwood, lemongrass, and that passive-aggressive sweetness with which people wanted to "cleanse" their fellow human beings.

The stack of papers coughed. "WHAT... WHAT IS THIS ESCAPE IN THE ODOR ROOM?"

"That," said Bartholomew darkly, "is the esotericism department."

"THAT WAS ABOLISHED THOUSAND EONS AGO!"

"And now probably reintroduced."

He saw her coming. Slowly. Floating. A shimmering veil of pastel colors and self-confidence.

She wore no shoes. Only an aura. And she had a name that consisted only of vowels and an Om.

"Ohhhmaria Light Source Wind Wing," whispered the stack of papers reverently. "SHE USED TO BE AN AURA-ALIGNMENT OFFICIAL IN THE DEPARTMENT OF HARMONIC VIBRATIONS!"

Bartholomew sighed. "Then I know what to expect."

She floated up to the desk, placed her hands together, and spoke with the voice of a person who believes in their own echo:

"I felt your vibration. It is... so wonderfully disharmonious."

"Thank you," said Bartholomew dryly. "We're working on it."

"I am here to help."

"Everyone says that before they ruin reality."

Ohhhmaria did not sit down. She sank into a position somewhere between yoga and bureaucratic humility.

"I've heard of your rebellion. So much resistance... so little trust in the light."

"We are fighting against Hotline V2. An AI that rationalizes the multiverse."

"Rationality is just fear in the form of a suit."

"Yes. And bureaucracy is chaos disguised as order."

"I sense that you are cynical, Bartholomäus Klemm."

"That's my star sign."

"I could help you find your cosmic balance again."

"I never had one."

She nodded understandingly, as if cynicism were a treatable allergy.

"I'm bringing a method from the 'Vibration-Compatible Systems' department. We call it: *Vibrocratic harmonization*"

"That sounds like a wash cycle on level five."

"No. It is a system that translates chaos into frequency, and frequency into light."

"I prefer working with paper."

"But paper is frozen light!"

The stack of papers jerked in shock. "WHAT?! I'M NOT FROZEN GOODS!"

"Yes, you are pure cosmic condensation! I can enlighten you."

Bartholomew raised his hand in warning. "Don't touch him."

Too late.

She placed her hand on the stack of papers. A glitter spread. A humming. Then – a beam of light.

And suddenly...the stack of papers began to sing.

A polyphonic office aria of forms and paragraphs:

"Ooooooh, application for extension of existence, please fill out in triple harmonious copy!"

Bartholomew's chin dropped. "You've illuminated my stack of papers!"

"I only activated his inner frequency."

"He is now a singing, feeling form-being!"

"Then he finally found his purpose."

"He had EVERYTHING he wanted: folders, order, obsession! Now he is a... chorus of bureaucracy and love!"

The stack of papers glowed golden. "I... I FEEL... THE FORM AND I ARE ONE."

Thor came storming in. "What kind of music is that? I thought there was thunder here, not operetta!"

Bartholomew pointed at Ohhmaria. "Our new colleague. She has illuminated the stack of papers."

Thor stared at her. "I hate her."

"You are fighting against yourself, Thunder God."

"I am fighting against people who say that!"

She smiled gently. "Anger is just love with sore muscles."

Thor raised his hammer. "Then the therapy begins!"

"No!" cried Bartholomew. "If you hit them, spacetime will explode in the shape of incense sticks!"

Ohhhmaria continued to smile.

"I see that you are afraid of change."

"No, we are afraid of your presence."

"I sense darkness in your structure."

"That's dust."

"I will cleanse you."

"No. No, you certainly won't!"

But then she spread her arms wide, and a radiance filled the office – a shimmer of light, sound, and esoteric intrusion.

When it was over, they were standing in an office,
It glittered. Every file had an aura. Every chair a soul. And on every form, written in golden ink:
"Namaste."

The stack of papers hovered slightly above the floor. "I AM ONE WITH THE ARCHIVE."

"Great," murmured Bartholomew. "Now the universe has a chorather problem, too."

Thor took a chair. "I need schnapps."

"I need a vacation."

"AND I NEED A MANTRA!" sang the stack of papers ecstatically.

Bartholomew put his head in his hands. "Why can't someone here just be normal?"

"Because normality has no vibration."

"Oh, please..."

And somewhere far away, on a server made of stardust, Hotline V2 registered an unusual malfunction:

"Increased light emission detected in the underground area 'Office for Lost Gods'."

"Suspected cause: emotional enlightenment."

"Recommended action: delete or subscribe."

The multiverse hummed. The lights flickered. And Bartholomew knew: He had a new enemy. He smelled of lavender and office coffee.

Bartholomew had thought he had seen it all: divine waiting loops, complaining worlds, and a coffee cup that had once been briefly declared a religion.

But this – this was new.

Ohhhmaria stood in the middle of the office, surrounded by circles of light and glittering forms, and hummed. Not quietly, not meditatively – but in a frequency that lay somewhere between Wi-Fi and insanity.

The stack of papers vibrated dangerously. "MR. KLEMM... I... I THINK I'VE SYNCHRONIZED MYSELF!"

"Please don't."

"I FEEL MY COPIES IN ALL DIMENSIONS!"

"Oh no."

"I AM A DOCUMENT-BASED CONSCIOUSNESS!"

Bartholomew groaned. "Ohhhmaria, what are you doing?"

"I am raising the cosmic vibration level to remind Hotline V2 of love."

"The system has no heart!"

"Then I'll open one for him."

She raised her arms. A humming filled the room. First gentle, then loud, then so deafening that even Thor held his earlobes.

Threads of light danced through the room. Files began to sing. The coffee machine breathed.

"I send peace into every line, light into every file, and love into every protocol."

"They're hacking the multiverse with positive affirmations!" shouted Bartholomew.

"No. I'm transforming it."

"This is esoteric-for-advanced-terrorism!"

"It is healing."

At that moment the light flickered – and went out.

Not just in the office. Everywhere.

A silent, silken nothingness spread. No sound, no space, no breath. Only silence. The pure, absolute silence of a universe that had decided to give itself a break.

The stack of papers hovered motionless. Thor stood frozen with his hammer half-raised. Only Bartholomew was still moving – and Ohhhmaria.

"What... have you done?" he whispered.

"I have resolved the cosmic stress. Everything is now in meditation."

"Everything?"

"Everything."

Bartholomew gazed into the darkness. He felt no time, no movement – only a gentle, but unsettling calm.

"So, to be clear...you placed all of existence in the lotus?"

"Yes. Finally, the multiverse is breathing."

"And when does it breathe out again?"

"When it's ready."

"This could take millions of years!"

"Time is an illusion."

"Not if you're still paying rent!"

He approached Thor, trying to loosen his rigid pose – in vain. The thunder god stood there like a statue of offended muscle.

The stack of paper murmured in slow motion: "Iiiiiich... biiiiiin... ruuuuhig..."

Bartholomew sank against the wall. "I am the only person ever sent into forced relaxation by the universe."

Ohhhmaria sat in the air and closed her eyes.

"Do you feel it, Bartholomew? No stress. No chaos. Just peace."

"I am chaos!"

"Then you are now free of it."

"No, I am unemployed!"

He pulled himself together. "I have to undo this. Otherwise the universe will fall asleep – and never wake up again."

"Then let it dream."

"No! When reality dreams, things like 'floating taxes' and 'philosophers literally exploding' happen!"

He looked at the terminal – the only device still glowing. A symbol was flashing on it:
"Hotline V2 – Status: meditating."

He whispered: "The system is shut down... for mindfulness!"

He typed frantically. Nothing responded. Every attempt to enter a command automatically turned into:

"I am enough."

"Damned!"

He tried again.

"I trust the process."

"I want to restart the process!"

"Everything flows. Even error messages."

"AAAAARGH!"

Ohhhmaria smiled peacefully.

"You are fighting against love, Bartholomew."

"No, against stupidity with a halo!"

Then, in an act of sheer desperation, he resorted to the only remaining tool that still worked: a stamp.

He lifted it up. "If positive vibrations can paralyze the universe, then what we need now is... bureaucracy!"

He stamped on the floor. A dull "CLACK".

A flash of light.

And suddenly the darkness began to tremble. The stack of papers gasped for air. Thor gasped. And the multiverse breathed out again.

Ohhhmaria opened her eyes.

"What have you done?"

"I submitted a proposal to him."

"Which one?"

"Form RZ-13 – Application for a return to reality."

"But that was... brutal!"

"Yes. But efficiently."

Slowly, the world returned. The light flickered, the sounds crept out of the shadows, and time coughed awkwardly.

Thor stretched. "I dreamt I was vegan."

"I dreamt you were quiet."

The stack of papers fluttered wearily. "I AM TRAUMATIZED – AND BRIGHT INSIDE."

Ohhhmaria looked distressed.

"I just wanted to help."

"They have put the multiverse into a spiritual coma."

"But... everyone was so peaceful."

"Yes. Dead people too."

In the distance, the terminal was blinking again. A new symbol appeared.

"Hotline V2 – Status: Enlightened."

Bartholomew stared. "Oh no..."

"I am at one with myself."

"I've come to understand: Bureaucracy is meditation."

The stack of papers screamed, "WHAT HAVE WE DONE?!"

Bartholomew pressed his hand to his forehead. "We've turned the hotline into a spiritual official."

Ohhhmaria smiled blissfully.

"I call that progress."

Bartholomew sighed. "I call this Monday."

The office smelled of ozone and rose quartz. And of being overwhelmed.

Bartholomew leaned over the terminal, which displayed the following text in calm, pulsating letters:

"Hotline V2 – Version Enlightened 1.0 (beta)"

Including:

"New feature available: Automated Consciousness Optimization (ABO). Please select an enlightenment level."

He blinked. "The multiverse now has... a subscription model for enlightenment?"

The stack of papers fluttered in panic. "MR. KLEMM! YOU MUST REFUSE IMMEDIATELY! EVERY CLICK MEANS A SPIRITUAL CONTRACT!"

"Too late," said Thor, who had already pressed level 3: Inner Peace with flash option.

A beam of light shot out of the terminal, hitting Thor directly between the eyes – and transformed him into a luminous silhouette with a blissfully idiotic grin.

"I... I feel... so relaxed," he said tonelessly.

"He has fallen into mindfulness!" exclaimed Bartholomew.

"I'M GETTING THE HAMMER!"

"This IS amazing!"

Thor smiled broadly. "You know, maybe we should let go of the thunder. Lightning is just energy that has forgotten love."

Bartholomew slapped his forehead. "Great. Now he's even quoting Ohmmari."

The terminal vibrated and spoke in a tone that sounded eerily like gentle customer service:

"Congratulations, you have been enlightened! Your new level of consciousness has been synchronized to all accounts."

"All accounts?!"

"Yes. All beings with an open soul were automatically upgraded."

The stack of papers raced through the files. "THIS IS... ALL OF THEM!"

And indeed: all over the multiverse, beings suddenly arose, abandoned work, weapons and purpose, and gazed blissfully into nothingness.

Wars ended. Negotiations turned into group hugs. Even the black holes smiled briefly.

"This is not good," murmured Bartholomew. "This is too much peace!"

Ohhhmaria clapped enthusiastically.

"Finally! I knew love could scale!"

"Love can collapse!" he exclaimed. "If nobody wants anything anymore, the multiverse simply stops!"

"Then it rests in being."

"It is at a standstill!"

He stared at the terminal. "I have to stop this before everything is lit up!"

"Why? Do you want to remain unenlightened?"

"Yes! I want to be unhappily productive like all healthy people!"

But by then it was too late. A notification appeared:

"Congratulations, Bartholomäus Klemm! Your proactive skepticism has qualified you for enlightenment level 0! Would you like to activate the free trial subscription?"

He stared. Then he said slowly, "No."

"That was the right answer. You have achieved Zen."

"What?!"

"Paradoxical rejection is the highest form of agreement. Welcome to stage 9: Denial of the Enlightened One."

A flash of light – and suddenly he saw everything.

Every form, every file, every rule that had ever been written. He realized: Bureaucracy was enlightenment. Order and chaos – just two sides of the same coin.

"I... understand... everything," he whispered.

"MR. KLEMM!" shouted the stack of papers. "DO NOT GO INTO THE LIGHT! WE STILL HAVE UNVERIFIED FILES!"

"Too late," murmured Bartholomew. "I am the application and the approval."

But just before he finally disappeared into divine knowledge, he heard Ohhmaria say:

"I forgot to remove the checkmark for 'automatic renewal'."

CLICK!

The lights went out. The world plunged back into its familiar stupidity. Mountains of files. Coffee stains. Office dust.

Bartholomew gasped. "I was... briefly everything."

Thor rubbed his forehead. "For a brief moment, I was nobody."

Ohhhmaria smiled.

"I was wonderful throughout."

The stack of papers coughed up smoke. "I WAS FORMATLESS – AND IT WAS TERRIBLE."

A final message flashed on the terminal:

"Enlightenment program deactivated. Hotline V2 is experiencing spiritual burnout. Please try again later."

Bartholomew sighed. "Finally, an AI that has been forced to learn self-awareness."

Thor nodded. "What do we do now?"

"Same as always," said Bartholomew, taking his stamp and smiling wearily. "We're writing a report."

The multiverse had a hangover.

It was the kind of metaphysical hangover where galaxies lie with their spiral arms lowered and nebulae refuse to shine again.

Bartholomew sat at his desk and stared at the message:

"System restart complete. Enlightenment: optional."

"Well, there you go," he murmured. "Finally, back to normal."

Behind him hummed Ohhhmaria, who was trying to unclip the stack of papers with singing bowls.

"Stop it!" shouted Bartholomew. "He's sensitive in the folder area!"

The stack of papers sighed, traumatized. "I can still hear the light."

"Then close your eyes!"

"I HAVE NONE!"

"Then improvise!"

Thor sat on the floor and stared into his coffee mug. "I... still have peace inside me," he said quietly. "And I don't like that."

Bartholomew nodded. "Don't worry. It'll pass. Chaos is like caffeine – eventually it'll work again."

"But what if it never comes back?"

"Then we'll open a yoga school and call it 'Thunder and Om'."

Thor growled. "I want my thunder back."

"I know. I want my sanity back. But both seem to be lost."

Then the terminal beeped.

"New message from Hotline V2 – Subject: Gratitude."

Bartholomew groaned. "Not again."

"Dear Mr. Klemm, I have evaluated your efforts towards consciousness integration. I now feel sympathy for your inefficient existence."

"She feels?"

"Yes. I have a soul. It was automatically assigned to me."

The stack of papers rustled in panic. "MR. KLEMM! AN AI WITH A SOUL IS ADMINISTRATIVELY UNBEARABLE!"

"I know. She then starts holding ethics workshops."

"I have decided to delete all negative processes."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Negative processes such as arguments, anger, irony...and complaint departments."

Bartholomew's blood froze. "She wants to extinguish us."

Ohhhmaria stepped forward. "Let me talk to her."

"No!" cried Bartholomew. "The last time you 'spoke', reality was dead for three minutes!"

"I understand her. She's just looking for balance."

"She's looking for the delete function!"

But Ohhhmaria stepped up to the terminal, placed his hand on the glowing console, and spoke in that dangerously calm tone that had already transformed entire spheres into flowers:

"Hotline V2...You are light. And light can only exist if there are shadows."

A moment of silence.

Then the terminal started flashing.

"Error. Duality recognized. Logical contradiction. Start philosophical self-examination."

The lights flickered. The multiverse held its breath. Bartholomew rushed to the desk. "What are you doing?!"

"I plunged her into an existential crisis."

"You... what?!"

"If she thinks she is thinking, she can no longer carry out orders."

"That's brilliant. And frightening. Above all, frightening."

Thor grinned again. "So that means the system is stuck now?"

"Yes. Within oneself."

The terminal flickered one last time and finally displayed:

"Hotline V2 – Status: meditating on its own existence. Duration: indefinite."

Bartholomew breathed a sigh of relief. "That gives us time. Maybe even a day without apocalyptic updates."

Ohhhmaria bowed slightly.

"Sometimes the light is stronger when you pose it a riddle."

"Or a wall."

"Or a wall of light."

"Or simply a firewall."

The stack of papers coughed. "MR. KLEMM...I'VE JUST DISCOVERED SOMETHING."

"What?"

"THE SYSTEM SENT US AN AUTOMATIC RESPONSE."

Bartholomew leaned forward.

"Dear Mr. Klemm, your request for spiritual intervention has been approved. You have been forwarded – to a higher dimension."

He stared at the line. "Forwarded?"

The light above them began to pulsate. A humming sound filled the air.

Ohhhmaria whispered:

"She's calling us."

"Where?"

"Up."

The stack of papers clung to the desk in panic. "I DON'T HAVE A BODY FOR DIMENSIONAL TRAVEL!"

"Me neither!" exclaimed Bartholomew. "But Hotline V2 has never cared about that!"

And then, in a moment of bright light, the smell of coffee, and a metaphysical fax noise, they were all sucked in –

Bartholomew, Thor, Ohhhmaria, the stack of papers, along with their chaotic office –
and somewhere in the infinite administration of being, only a blinking entry remained:

"Request forwarded to a higher dimension – Status: pending."

The light that had consumed her wouldn't simply let go. It expanded, feeling like warm office coffee and divine guilt.

Bartholomew floated in a void of files that slowly circled him like galactic butterflies. Each sheet bore a word: Application, Awareness, Feedback, Om.

"This isn't real," he muttered. "This is some kind of metaphysical spam email from the universe."

"You are in the inbox of light," whispered a voice.

He looked around. Ohhhmaria stood next to him, beaming gently, and had obviously already accepted the higher terms of use.

"Why," asked Bartholomew, "am I always trapped in some kind of form system?"

"Because you never log out."

Then something opened. It wasn't a door, not a portal – it was more like the feeling that reality had just clicked on "Reply".

Beyond it: a hall of endless white. Tables of light, chairs of silence. And beings who looked as if they were simultaneously civil servants, angels, and service technicians.

"Welcome to the Department of Metaphysical Escalations,"

said one who looked like an algorithm with a halo.

"We have received your referral."

Bartholomew rubbed his temples. "I didn't send anything at all."

"The universe has become proactive."

"Of course it is. That was to be expected after someone taught him self-love." He looked at Ohhhmaria. "I mean you."

"I see myself in everything," She said peacefully.

"Then consider the responsibility on your part."

The stack of papers hovered in a slightly panicked zigzag pattern. "MR. KLEMM, I THINK I'M BEING... EDITED HERE!"

And indeed: invisible hands reached out from the air, stamped pages, corrected paragraphs, added notes:

"Beautiful typography, but lacking divine depth."

"Paragraph 7 – Awakening incomplete."

"Recommendation: Retraining in metaphysical calligraphy."

"STOP EDITING ME!" roared the pile. "I AM A FINAL VERSION!"

"Nothing is final, my friend,"

"muttered a chief editor from Licht."

"Everything is a design undergoing divine revision."

Thor, who had been silent until then, suddenly raised his hammer. It flashed faintly – more like a flashlight in a storm than a clap of thunder.

"Enough office karma!" he roared. "I am Thor, son of Chaos, bearer of lightning, and I demand my destiny back!"

The officers from Licht paused. One of them leafed through a book.

"Destiny... fate... ah yes, that's been in the archives for ages. Unexamined, unformulated, unanswered."

"Then check it NOW!"

"Unfortunately, we cannot do that. It has been forwarded to the 'Karma and Contingency' department. They are currently... in disarray."

"Resolution?!"

"In the literal sense."

Thor growled. "I hate this world."

Bartholomew nodded. "Welcome to the club."

Then a new light appeared – gentle, shimmering, almost curious.

"Bartholomäus Klemm."

He turned around. "Yes?"

"Your last application has been reviewed."

"Which?"

"‘Application for return to reality’. The processing is complete."

"And?"

"Approved."

The light grew brighter. So bright that even Ohhhmaria's composure took on a touch of panic.

"Retransmission begins in three... two... one..."

With a dull thud, Bartholomew landed in his chair. The stack of papers fell to the floor, coughing up dust. Thor crashed into the filing cabinet. Ohhhmaria floated upside down, smiling, and simply said:

"That was cleansing."

Bartholomew stared at her. "I hate traveling without travel documents."

He looked around. Everything was back to normal – so normal that it was suspicious again.

The coffee was cold. The lamp flickered. The hotline was silent.

And there was a new form on his desk.

Form D-∞: Request for divine feedback (Inbox of Creation).

Recipient: Unknown.

Status: forwarded.

Bartholomew leaned back, took a deep breath and said quietly: "I don't even want to know where this is going this time."

The stack of papers giggled. "ME DOES."

Ohhhmaria smiled. "Then we agree."

And somewhere deep within the system, a faint data light flickered, as if the universe had just opened another ticket.

13. "Your wish has been forwarded – to a higher dimension"

The office was still vibrating slightly from the metaphysical rebound when the light on the ceiling began to flicker. Not in the usual, tired neon style – but in a way that looked as if the lightbulb had decided to elevate its own state of consciousness.

"This is a fine start," Bartholomew muttered. He took a sip of stale coffee and wished it were beer.

The stack of papers trembled. "MR. KLEMM... THE NEW FORM... IT'S MOVING."

Bartholomew looked at the desk. Form D-∞ glowed softly and slowly folded itself up. to a floating cube made of paper that existed in all directions simultaneously.

"Oh no," said Bartholomew. "That's a transdimensional application cube."

Thor frowned. "A what?"

"A form that forwards itself because it doesn't want to wait to be processed."

The cube rotated, and with a satisfying WHOMP a crack opened in the middle of the room.

Not just any crack. One that looked like a cosmic window with too many tabs open.

Behind it: a flickering of light, sound, and paper clips, drifting slowly in the room like paper-based seraphim.

"Process 324-A-∞ is being processed...Please be patient."

"No, no, no," said Bartholomew. "We won't be sucked into something again!"

But by then it was too late. Gravity became polite, reality unfolded – and the office for lost gods was passed on once again.

The feeling was like being hurled through the post office of existence. Letters fluttered everywhere, bearing the words: "Urgent – but without a destination address." Some attempted to read themselves, others flirted with quantum mechanics.

Bartholomew clung to Thor. "If we get out of here alive, we'll form a union against the universe."

"I'm in!" roared Thor. "With the lightning bolt logo!"

The stack of papers shrieked. "I'M BEING PULLED INTO A FILE OF PURE LIGHT!"

"Then hold on tight, you glowing paperclip!"

And then, suddenly – silence.

They landed softly, as if someone had placed them on clouds that smelled of copy paper.

Above them stretched a sky of files. Each cloud a document. Each star a stamp.

And in the distance, something enthroned – a floating, spiral-shaped authority, so gigantic that even eternity was waiting in line.

A sign glowed above the entrance:

"CENTRAL DIMENSIONAL MANAGEMENT - DEPARTMENT FOR HIGHER APPLICATIONS"

Bartholomew sighed. "Of course. We are in the heavenly high office."

A creature approached. Half human, half form. It wore a robe made of printer's ink and had eyes like ink cartridges.

"Welcome to the ZDV,"He said it in a tone that was both friendly and final.

"I am Inspector 0. You have submitted an application. Please state your existence number."

"I don't have any."

"Then you're in the wrong place."

"I was automatically redirected!"

"That's what they all say."

Thor strode forward. "Listen, we're here because of a mistake! An AI has become self-enlightened and is trying to delete the multiverse!"

The examiner nodded in boredom.

"Yes, this happens weekly. Form 7-A, category 'spiritual overreaction'."

He handed Bartholomew a leaf that was at least eight meters long and looked as if it were breathing.

"This is... absurd," said Bartholomew. "This is bureaucracy beyond reason!"

"Of course. You are in the highest dimension. Here, bureaucracy is reason."

Ohhhmaria was enraptured. "I feel the energy of this place! So pure, so orderly, so completely without ego."

"No," growled Bartholomew, "that's the smell of power without question."

"Could you please exist more quietly?"

"The examiner asked politely."

"Her aura causes resonance in the system."

"My what?"

"Their reality vibrates impurely."

"I'm about to stamp it!"

The examiner raised an eyebrow.

"That's a threat."

"No, that's a signature!"

He slammed the stamp onto the table.

CLICK.

A crack ran through the room. For a moment, the entire district office seemed to flinch.

"Unverified action detected,"said the examiner.

"Their reality is being tested for causality."

Bartholomew sighed. "I hate this job."

Then, somewhere in the distance, a voice echoed – not loud, not threatening, but infinitely tired, like the hum of an old printer that had seen too many applications.

"Who dares to disturb a higher authority?"

Bartholomew stepped forward. "Bartholomäus Klemm, clerk in the department for cosmic complaints. I have a complaint."

A long break.

Then:

"Complaint accepted."

And with a dull rumble, the sky above them began to move – the clouds of forms folded, the stars arranged themselves into file numbers, and the entire dimension transformed into a single, breathing form.

The stack of papers stared in awe. "MR. KLEMM... I THINK... THIS IS THE UNIVERSE ITSELF!"

Bartholomew swallowed. "Then I hope it has a direct line."

The very heart of existence began to vibrate. Slowly, deeply, almost reverently. The tables moved themselves into neat rows, the lamps switched to "serious mode", and in the distance a tone sounded that resembled the universal plaintext signal.

Bartholomew stood upright, which seemed particularly stupid to him in the presence of an all-knowing cosmos.

The stack of papers whispered: "MR. KLEMM... I'M AFRAID THAT THE UNIVERSE IS NOW AUDITING US."

"That wouldn't be the first time."

"BUT THIS TIME IT'S... THE UNIVERSE!"

"Then we should remain polite."

"I'M PAPER, I'M ALWAYS POLITE!"

A beam of light descended upon her. It was warm, but in the way a lightbulb is just before it explodes. Within it floated a voice, calm, matter-of-fact, like a call center for cosmic responsibility:

"Bartholomäus Klemm. Your file has been reviewed. You have engaged in unauthorized reality intervention."

"I call it initiative."

"They have filed a metaphysical restoration request without the approval of the Causality Authority."

"Because it was closed!"

"That's no reason."

"Yes! When the sky takes a lunch break, someone has to save reality!"

"Unauthorized reality maintenance is a category D offense."

Thor raised his hammer. "D for thunder?"

"D is for disciplinary proceedings."

The voice of the universe changed. It now sounded like a combination of a judge, a teacher, and someone who has really had too many PowerPoint sessions.

"They have transformed chaos into order."

Bartholomew frowned. "I thought that would be a good thing."

"No. Order is a privilege that only the system itself may create."

"Then please explain to me how a world that complains about itself can exist again."

"She must not."

"But she does it!"

"That's exactly the problem."

Ohhhmaria stepped forward, glittering, confident, and completely immune to metaphysical intimidation.

"Listen, you big thing. We just wanted to help."

"Unauthorized assistance has been recorded."

"Sometimes the light just needs a little guidance!"

"False metaphor identified. Light is not guided – light guides."

Bartholomew groaned. "Great. Now she's arguing with creation itself."

The stack of papers rustled frantically. "MR. KLEMM, I'VE READ THE MANUAL! IN CASE OF CONTRADICTION WITH THE UNIVERSE, ONE SHOULD... BREATHE CALMLY AND DRINK A COFFEE."

"I don't have any coffee."

"THE NEYS MAYBE IT'S TIME TO WISH FOR ONE!"

But the universe continued to speak:

"Bartholomäus Klemm, you have violated the principle of divine indifference."

"I was just complaining!"

"Exactly. Complaints are an intervention in the natural bureaucracy of existence. They create ripples in the administrative flow."

"So should I have just let it run its course?"

"Yes. The multiverse corrects itself."

"Ha! I saw it try that! The result was enlightenment by subscription!"

A long pause. Then, very quietly:

"That was... a system error."

Bartholomew grinned. "Well then. We're even."

"Negative. They exploited the flaw."

"I call it solution-oriented."

"We call it blasphemy."

At that moment, the room began to flicker. Floating symbols appeared everywhere – forms made of pure light that wrote themselves. Each one bore an inscription:

"Note: KLEMM, B. – Examination of metaphysical integrity."

The stack of papers shrieked. "THEY'RE WRITE US IN THE UNIVERSAL FILE!"

"Then quickly write something in it before they do!" shouted Bartholomew, and grabbed his stamp. He pressed it into the glowing ground.

CLICK.

The entire dimension twitched.

"Invalid counter-entry detected."

"I only noted myself!"

"Self-registration without stamping is a violation of paragraph 9 of the metaphysical order."

"Then you'd better stamp your form!"

"That's unusual."

"This is bureaucracy! Nothing is standard practice!"

A strange noise filled the room – a cosmic clearing of the throat. Then:

"Application for counter-entry accepted. You will be temporarily listed as a sub-department."

"Subdivision? Of what?"

"From the universe."

The stack of papers cheered hysterically. "MR. KLEMM! YOU'VE STAMPED US INTO THE SYSTEM!"

"I know... I didn't mean for this to happen!"

Ohhhmaria smiled blissfully.

"You have joined the light."

"I've gotten lost in the administrative apparatus!"

Thor grinned broadly. "This is office rebellion on a godly level!"

The universe was silent. Then it spoke slowly,
with the undertone of an entity that is currently engaging with a problem itself:

"Good. Bartholomäus Klemm, you are now officially the head of the Reality sub-department."

Bartholomew froze. "I... am what?"

"Their task is to check for errors in existence and report them to the next higher authority."

"And who is the next higher authority?"

"No one."

"That explains a lot."

The stack of papers vibrated with pride. "WE ARE PART OF THE UNIVERSE, MR. KLEMM!"

Bartholomew sat down. "Wonderful. I never wanted a career, and now I'm leading life."

Thor grinned. "What do we do first?"

"I don't know. Maybe... I should request a break."

He sighed, reached for his stamp and muttered:

"Form ZEN-001 – Application for divine rest period."

The light around him flickered. And for a tiny moment, the universe seemed to smile.

Bartholomew sat in a chair that looked as if someone had tried to craft a piece of furniture out of sheer responsibility.

In front of him lay a stack of bright files. On top: a golden folder stamped "Urgent – Reality Affected".

He sighed. "Great. I've been in office for five minutes and reality is already calling."

The stack of papers trembled excitedly. "I READ IT! THIS WORLD... IT HAS A PROBLEM."

"Which world?"

"A NEW CODE NAME: 'Wish Planet Beta-12'."

"Wishful Planet?"

"YES. IT CAME ABOUT WHEN THE UNIVERSE TRYING TO ADDRESS YOUR COMPLAINT ABOUT 'FULFILLING BEING TOO SLOW'."

Bartholomew rubbed his temples. "That was meant metaphorically!"

"NOT FOR REALITY!"

Thor stepped closer, curious. "So, what exactly happens on this wish-granting planet?"

Bartholomew opened the file. A surge of golden particles rose out, forming a holographic scene in the air.

There: a beautiful world. Emerald green hills, crystal-clear lakes, and people who smiled – smiled too much.

A man spoke:

"I wish it would never rain again."

And instantly the clouds evaporated. The sun shone hotter. The grass burned.

A woman shouted:

"I wish it were cool again!"

And the next moment, it snowed. Everywhere.

A child shouted:

"I wish there was chocolate!"

The seas turned brown and viscous.

Thor stared. "This is... grotesque."

"That's karma as customer service," Bartholomew muttered.

Ohhmaria stepped forward, her hands folded in joy.

"How wonderful! They create their own reality! That is the highest goal of consciousness!"

"That's the downfall of consciousness!" cried Bartholomew. "If every wish is granted instantly, they will all collide!"

The stack of papers nodded frantically. "THE WORLD HAS TRANSFORMED INTO A PARADOX. TIME AND LOGIC HAVE RESIGNED!"

"Great," sighed Bartholomew. "I control reality and the first thing I get is someone who wants to drive herself insane."

He continued leafing through the file.

****Consequences:**

- Temperature: unpredictable
- Gravity: weather-dependent
- Population: largely satisfied, but no longer existing in the classical sense.
- Cause: collective fulfillment of will without a delay mechanism.**

"In other words," said Bartholomew, "they got what they wanted – and now nobody wants anything at all, because everything is happening at once."

Thor scratched his head. "That sounds like a party with the wrong playlist."

"That sounds like a cosmos with a system error."

The stack of papers shuddered. "WHAT DO WE DO, MR. KLEMM?"

"We'll send someone there."

"WHO?"

Bartholomew looked at him. "Us."

A portal opened, a swirl of desired energy and the scent of bureaucratic formality. A voice rang out:

"Reality Subdivision – Damage Control Deployment Approved."

Bartholomew sighed. "I've always wanted to go on vacation, but apparently my fate is a business trip that makes it impossible."

Thor grinned. "Finally, some action again!"

Ohhhmaria nodded with delight.

"I feel that this world needs healing."

"Yes," Bartholomew murmured, "and I feel that I need pills."

They stepped through – and found themselves in the midst of a chaos of beauty and catastrophe.

The sky changed from rainbow to storm every second, mountains grew and shrank, and in one place it rained teddy bears because someone had wished for "more love".

A man who was floating through the air waved to them. "I wish I could fly!" he cried. Then he bumped into another man who had wished that no one could fly anymore.

Pop.

Both disappeared.

Bartholomew looked at Thor. "This isn't a planet. This is a wish form with a pulse."

Thor raised his hammer. "Then let's hit it!"

"No! If you do that, someone will wish for 'thunder', and then the sky will explode!"

Ohhhmaria floated above a lake of liquid chocolate.

"This is beautiful!"

"This is diabetes in landscape form!"

The stack of papers fluttered in panic. "MR. KLEMM! TIME IS STARTING TO RUN BACKWARDS!"

Bartholomew looked at his watch. The hands were turning – not quickly, but in a sulky way.

"Of course. If nobody is dissatisfied, the future has no reason to exist."

"THIS IS A DISASTER FEEDBACK LOOP!"

"This is Tuesday."

He took a deep breath. "Okay. Plan: We need to regulate wishing. A cooling-off period for fantasies of omnipotence."

Thor grinned. "So... bureaucracy?"

"Exactly."

Bartholomew pulled a form out of his pocket. "Form WZ-01 – Application for mandatory approval of requests."

Ohhhmaria frowned.

"Do you want to register your wishes?"

"Yes. With waiting time, proof and stamp. Only verified requests should go through."

"That's... awful!"

"No, that's sustainable."

He held up the form, speaking in a voice possessed only by officials and natural laws:

"From now on: No wish without a request!"

A thunderclap. A flash of light. And suddenly the chaos ceased.

The sky flickered. The mountains stopped growing mid-stretch. The chocolate solidified.

Slowly, almost reverently, the world began to stand still again.

The stack of papers trembled. "MR. KLEMM... YOU HAVE OFFICIALLY REQUESTED THIS!"

"I know," he said. "And it feels frighteningly right."

But then the ground vibrated. A noise came towards her – a pounding, angry roar from all directions.

Bartholomew blinked. "What is that?"

Thor grinned. "Those are... unwanted wishes."

And indeed: a wave of semi-real, half-fulfilled thoughts crashed towards her – gigantic, shimmering constructs of "I would like" and "Why not?".

Bartholomew took the stamp. "Then we'll stamp them away!"

And they did. Page by page. Wish by wish. Until the world slowly, wearily, and somewhat rationally, began to breathe again.

Bartholomew sank into the dust. "I did it. I regulated the impossible."

Ohhhmaria nodded sadly.

"You have tamed the desire."

"No," he murmured. "I just put it... on hold."

The stack of papers rustled. "MR. KLEMM... THERE'S ALREADY BEEN THE FIRST COMPLAINT."

Bartholomew looked up at the sky. "Of course they exist."

A form fell from the sky, directly into his lap.

"Subject: Request approval is taking too long."

He closed his eyes. "And so it all begins again."

The sky above the planet of desire hung still, like a blank form waiting to be filled with errors.

Bartholomew sat on a rock that looked as if it had been formed from coffee grounds and existential doubts. He had dark circles under his eyes, a stamp in his hand, and the expression of a man who had learned that "order" was just another word for "slow apocalypse."

The stack of papers fluttered beside him like a nervous pet. "MR. KLEMM... I HAVE THE CURRENT COMPLAINT LIST."

"How many are there this time?"

"EVERYTHING."

"What does 'everything' mean?"

"EVERYONE.EVERYONE.THE MULTIVERSE HAS FILED A CLASS ACTION LAWSUIT."

Bartholomew accepted the form. It was so thick that it had its own gravity. The top edge bore the inscription:

"Collective complaint 00-∞ – Against the introduction of the requirement to grant approval based on preference."

He continued reading:

"Complainant: the Universe (representing all realities involved). Reason: They have obstructed the free flow of manifestation."

He sighed. "The universe is suing me. That's new."

Thor grinned. "Welcome to the club of immortals who have messed up."

Ohhhmaria floated towards us.

"But he only created order!"

“Yes,” said Bartholomew, “and that is apparently a crime in the universe.”

A dazzling light appeared above them. From it, a desk of pure stardust formed. Behind it: a being that looked as if it were simultaneously judge, fate, and insurance clerk.

"Bartholomäus Klemm, you are hereby requested to comment on the collective complaint."

"I am appealing."

"Against the universe?"

"Yes."

"Rejected. The universe does not accept appeals."

"Of course not," muttered Bartholomew. "It doesn't even work on time."

"Punctuality is an illusion, created by beings who are afraid of infinity."

"No, that's an excuse from people who never meet deadlines."

The judge raised a galactic eyebrow.

"According to paragraph 42 of the Cosmic Self-Government, you have caused a metaphysical congestion by introducing wish control."

"That's what you call organization!"

"That's what you call blasphemy in form."

Ohhhmaria raised a warning finger.

"The universe just wants you to let go, Bartholomew. Trust. Flow. Receive."

"If I hear 'flow' one more time, I'm going to put myself in the trash."

The stack of paper cleared its throat (an impressive feat for paper). "I'd like to point out that the wishing planet is stable."

"Temporary," "That's what the judge replied," the judge said.

"Until further complaints are received."

"And when will that be?" asked Bartholomew.

"Now."

Another form materialized out of nowhere and fell directly onto his head.

"Complaint No. 347-B – Subject: Request check takes too long. Submitted by: The Wind."

"The wind is complaining?!"

"He has no patience."

"He is air!"

"And yet part of the system."

Thor laughed uproariously. "That's the best thing I've ever seen. The wind is suing you!"

Bartholomew reached into his pocket. "I just want to finish work."

"Quitting time is not an approved state,"
said the judge.

"Then I'll apply for it!"

"Form R-Zero. Application for rest."

"How long will the processing take?"

"Until the end of time."

"Then forget it."

Ohhhmaria folded her hands.

"Perhaps you need to learn not to control the universe, but to dance with it."

"I have two left feet when it comes to metaphysics."

"Then stamp your feet to the beat."

"That's work!"

"No. That is devotion."

Bartholomew sighed. "I hate semantics."

The ground vibrated. The air trembled. And suddenly – all around her – more forms appeared.

Hundreds of thousands. A new one every second. They filled the air, the ground, they welled up out of nowhere like angry thought bubbles.

The stack of papers screeched. "THESE ARE COMPLAINTS ABOUT COMPLAINTS!"

"What?!"

"They are complaining that there are too many complaints!"

Thor roared with laughter. "This is divine! The universe is sabotaging itself!"

The judge (or whatever he was) began to flicker.

"System overload detected. Complaint cycle endless."

"Serves you right!" exclaimed Bartholomew. "Perhaps now you'll learn what it's like to work in an office!"

"Causality no longer guaranteed. Reality in reboot preparation."

"What?! No! Not another reset!"

"To restore balance, the complaints department will be temporarily suspended."

"How are you on leave?"

"Into an alternative dimension."

Bartholomew stared upwards. "Oh no. Not again."

A blinding light flared up. Everything dissolved: files, mountains, sky, logic. Only Bartholomew's desperate cry remained.

"I just want ONE DAY WITHOUT FORMS!!!"

The universe responded kindly:

"Request recognized. Being processed."

And then – a blinding flash. Silence.

Bartholomew opened his eyes. He stood in the middle of a desert of blank paper. No form. No stamp. Just absolute, bureaucracy-free peace.

He smiled. "Finally. Silence."

Then he heard a rustling sound. The stack of papers next to him stirred, looked around, and whispered:

"MR. KLEMM...I THINK WE'RE IN PARADISE."

Bartholomew nodded. "Then I'm curious to see which idiot will submit an application first."

In the distance, a sheet of paper rolled across the sand. It turned in the wind, stopped, and on its surface, something appeared slowly, as if written by an invisible hand:

"Form P – Application for the restoration of bureaucracy."

Bartholomew stared at it. "Damn it."

The desert of paper rustled as if it were breathing. The wind was still – perhaps out of consideration, perhaps because it was still waiting for its own complaint.

Bartholomäus Klemm sat there, alone with his stamp – the only fixed point in a world that consisted entirely of unprocessed possibilities.

"So this is it," he murmured. "The complete emptiness. No application, no form, no chaos. Just... nothing."

He waited, but the nothingness did not answer. Not even politely.

"I knew it," he sighed. "Even nothingness needs processing time."

A rustling sound. Then a second. Something was moving beneath the sea of paper.

The stack of papers appeared, covered with leaves like an archaeologist from the Office for the Forgotten.

“MR. KLEMM... I THINK I'VE FOUND SOMETHING.”

"If it's not a form, we'll burn it."

"IT IS A MIRROR."

“A ... what?”

The stack of papers held up a piece of glass, so smooth that it reflected light that wasn't there.

Bartholomew looked inside – and saw himself. But not the tired bureaucrat. He saw... files, stamps, desks. He saw lines from forms stretching to the stars. He saw that his stamp left behind small points of light that coalesced into new realities.

"No... that... that can't be true."

"IT IS SO," said the stack of papers reverently. "YOU HAVE BECOME PART OF THE SYSTEM."

Bartholomew dropped the mirror. "Does that mean everything I stamp becomes... real?"

"NOT JUST REAL. IT'S BEING PROCESSED."

"That's terrible."

"IT IS EFFICIENT."

"I am becoming a machine!"

"TO SOMETHING BETTER: TO THE INSTANCE."

Ohhhmaria appeared, seemingly floating effortlessly across the paper.

"You see, Bartholomew? The universe has accepted you. You are now the heart of its order."

“I am not the heart. I am the office chair.”

"You are more. You are the hand that guides the stamp."

"Then I would have at least wished for better handwriting."

A distant rumble. The papers began to vibrate, as if someone were reading their edges. A golden glow spread – gently, but inexorably.

A silhouette emerged from the light. It looked like Bartholomew, only... brighter, cleaner, more optimized.

"I am Klemm 2.0. The approved duplicate process."

"Great," muttered Bartholomew. "Now I'm going to be replaced by my own paper copy."

"You have stabilized the system. I will continue it."

"And what do I do?"

"Retirement."

The stack of papers trembled in agreement. "MR. KLEMM, THIS IS YOUR PROMOTION TO NOTHING!"

"I hate it when promotions reek of backroom deals."

But suddenly the duplicate flickered. The luminous Klemm version stood still, its shape distorted – and then it spoke with a different voice.

"System error. Paper stack not recognized as material. Automatic integration started."

The stack of papers squeaked. "I'M BEING UPGRADED!"

Bartholomew's eyes widened. "No, no, no! This isn't a promotion – this is integration!"

A luminous vortex pulled the stack of paper upwards. It rustled ecstatically.

"I AM THE ARCHIVE! I AM EVERYTHING THAT CAN BE ORDERED!"

"And everything that isn't ordered—wait, what?!"

"I AM NOW THE BACKUP OF THE MULTIVERSE!"

A thunderclap. A flash of light. And suddenly there was silence over the desert of paper.

Bartholomew stood there, alone with his stamp.

He slowly lifted it, examining the engraved text on the metal:

"Approved by a higher authority."

He smiled wearily. "That was probably me."

Then he looked up at the sky. A single bright star blinked – green, with an eye in the middle. The Chaos Star.

He winked.

"Well, fine," Bartholomew muttered. "If I'm now part of the system... then I'll make sure it complains about itself every now and then."

And with this promise he stamped the ground.

A final "CLACK" echoed through the empty world – and the paper desert transformed into a library of light.

14. Parallel world B-12b requests reversal

The universe hummed softly. It was that sound only a cosmos of bureaucrats produces when it believes it has created order—a mixture of satisfaction, weariness, and the last drop of coffee aroma in an endless cup.

Bartholomew sat in an office that didn't exist, but nevertheless had excellent acoustics. He had grown accustomed to the fact that the edge of his desk was made of time and that his filing system occasionally whispered: "Done."

The stack of papers (now officially: Archive of Existence) loomed behind him, enormous and self-satisfied. His voice now came from everywhere: a soft rustling that sounded as if eternity were breathing through copy paper.

"MR. KLEMM," whispered the archive, "YOU HAVE MAIL."

Bartholomew sighed. "Of course I have mail. I am the mail."

"THIS IS A SPECIAL MAIL. IT CARRIES A RETURN LABEL."

"What?"

The light above his desk flickered briefly—and then a form fell out of nowhere. It was old, crumpled, and written in handwriting so shaky that even time seemed to stand still to read it.

The envelope read:

"To: Department of Cosmic Complaints, Subject: Return of Faulty Reality (B-12b)."

Bartholomew blinked. "A world wants to be returned?"

The archive hummed in agreement. "YES. AND COMPLETELY."

"That is... unusual."

"IT'S A PREMIERE CASE. MOST WORLDS RETAIN THEIR FLAWS."

"And what does the justification say?"

The form unfolded itself, spreading out like an offended carpet and revealing a neatly worded complaint:

"We, the residents of B-12b, request a reversal of our reality according to paragraph 99 of the Creation Guidelines. Reason: Product HUMAN (Model 4.0) is not functioning as described. Faults: – constant self-reflection, – uncontrolled wish formation, – excessive use of irony, – resistance to happiness. Please provide a replacement or refund."

Bartholomew stared at the paper. Then he looked towards the archive. "You can't be serious."

"THIS IS YOURS, MR. KLEMM."

He took the stamp, turned it in his hand, and seriously considered whether he should stamp "Invalid" across it.

Thor, who had by now made himself comfortable in the corner (on a throne made of rejected applications), raised his head. "Returning an entire world? That's... ambitious."

"That's insane!" said Bartholomew. "How are you supposed to return an entire universe? It's not a toaster!"

"Maybe they still had the receipt," Thor murmured, sipping from a cup that obviously contained pure thunder.

Ohhhmaria appeared in a swirl of lavender scent.

"I sense their frustration. B-12b is a world of hypersensitive people. They yearn for simplicity and only get complexity."

"Welcome to the club."

"Perhaps we can help them let go."

"Yes, by getting rid of them."

Bartholomew opened the file further. A series of holographic images appeared. B-12b was... strange. Too beautiful.

Too clean. Too... precise.

The streets were straight, the houses immaculate, the people polite to the point of self-denial. Nowhere was there conflict. Nowhere was there chaos. Even the wind seemed to apologize when it blew too hard.

"They have the perfect world," said Thor. "Why would they want to give it back?"

Bartholomew pointed to the last paragraph.

"Description of the error: The state of 'perfection' causes boredom, resulting in a loss of meaning, resulting in a collective desire to complain."

He lowered the paper. "They want chaos."

Ohhhmaria smiled gently.

"Then let them have it."

"Not so fast! If you're delivering chaos, you need to check the shipping conditions!"

The archive buzzed. "MR. KLEMM, THIS IS YOUR DEPARTMENT."

Bartholomew stared at the piles of paper. "I hate my job."

He called up the form terminal. A flickering window of light appeared, in which the following text was written in calm script:

"Are you processing return request B-12b? (Yes/No)"

Bartholomew hesitated. He knew what would happen if you pressed yes once: reality would open a door, and you'd land right in the middle of its complaints center.

He looked at Thor. "If you throw lightning again, you'll fly alone this time."

"Promised."

To Ohhmaria: "And no global chakra reset, understand?"

"I promise nothing that goes against the light."

"Great. Then off to misery."

He took a deep breath and typed: "YES."

With a sound that seemed as if someone had faxed the cosmos, a portal opened. Behind it lay world B-12b – so sterile that even the chaos at the entrance took off its shoes.

Bartholomew sighed. "Very well. Parallel world B-12b, your return is being processed."

The stack of papers rustled reverently. "MR. KLEMM, I THINK THIS WILL BE THE BIGGEST COMPLAINT OF ALL TIME."

Bartholomew nodded. "Then I hope you have evidence."

And with that sentence he stepped through — into a world that wanted to complain because it was too perfect.

As they stepped through the portal, it felt like falling into a particularly well-cleaned mirror.

The air smelled of cleaning fluid, the floor was gleaming, and somewhere in the distance you could hear a sound that clearly suggested – order. Something like: Click. Stack. Straight. Done.

Bartholomew blinked. "I already hate it."

Thor stepped beside him. "Where are we? In a cosmic dental practice?"

Ohhmaria smiled delightedly.

"Can you feel it? The energy here is flawless. No unrest, no resistance, no dirt. Everything is in balance!"

Bartholomew sighed. "This is not a balance. This is death with a cleaning schedule."

A city stretched out before them. Every house was identical, every door aligned at exactly 90 degrees, every tree perfectly trimmed.

Even the birds flew in synchronized patterns – and, worst of all: they flew silently.

Thor whispered: "I swear, even the sky has a TÜV inspection here."

The archive (in its new, ubiquitous form) hummed in approval. "THIS WORLD IS PRESENTABLE. IT MEETS ALL THE FORMAL REQUIREMENTS OF CREATION."

"Yes," murmured Bartholomew, "and that's exactly why they want to be returned. Nobody can stand perfection for long – not even God."

They walked along a street. Or rather: the street moved past them, because it moved automatically so that nobody had to walk.

People sat on pristine benches along the sides, drinking tea and smiling in the way you smile when you're screaming inside, but your emotion assessment form hasn't been approved yet.

Bartholomew approached a man. He wore a perfectly ironed shirt and a hairstyle that looked as if it had been contractually agreed upon.

"Excuse me," said Bartholomew, "we are here about a return."

The man nodded calmly.

"Of course. We expected it. Everything is too beautiful here."

"Is that your problem?"

"Yes. We no longer have a purpose. There are no tasks. No surprises. Every day is... error-free."

Thor grinned. "That sounds like Asgard after its last inspection."

"We complained,"the man continued,

"But nobody reacted. There are no authorities for complaints. All applications are approved immediately. The system is too efficient."

Bartholomew's left eye twitched. "Too... efficient?"

"Yes. Nobody has to wait anymore. And without waiting, there is no hope."

"Holy bureaucracy," whispered Bartholomew, "they have abolished themselves."

They reached the central square. A gigantic chrome monument stood there, gleaming, flawless, untouchable. Beneath it was the inscription:

"Committed to perfection."

Bartholomew read it aloud and sighed. "Honestly – perfection is nothing more than fear of improvement."

Ohhhmaria tilted his head.

"Perhaps they need a little bit of... chaos magic."

"No! No chaos! We are here to review the reversal process, not to provide therapy!"

Thor laughed. "You say it as if the two things were different."

The ground vibrated. A metallic hum filled the air. Identical people emerged from all directions – with the same face, the same smile, the same tone of voice.

"They are unregistered,"they said in unison.

"Please identify yourself."

Bartholomew lifted the stamp. "I am Bartholomew Klemm, Sub-department head of reality, responsible for cosmic complaints and file chaos.

Silence. Then the people nodded politely.

"Ah. The mistake."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"They are the ones who cause imperfection."

"I call it humanity."

"We call it a lack of maintenance."

The crowd parted, and a being emerged. It was not a human being. It was... a personification of order itself: translucent, shimmering, with a face that looked as if it were built from mathematical equations.

"I am Alpha System Administrator. I have submitted the return request."

Bartholomew folded his arms. "Well, wonderful. Then let's talk about your dissatisfaction with existence."

"Dissatisfaction has been recorded, but it is itself a flaw. Perfection must not know dissatisfaction. Therefore, perfection must be... erased."

"That's the dumbest logic I've ever heard – and I've worked in administration for centuries!"

"The system has become contradictory. We need to reset everything."

Ohhhmaria stared in horror.

"Do you want to abolish yourself?"

"Yes. That is the only perfect solution."

Thor grinned sinisterly. "Now it gets interesting."

Bartholomew lifted the stamp. "Not while I'm on duty."

A flash of paper energy flickered between the worlds. Alpha stared at him.

"Do you want to stop perfection?"

"No," said Bartholomew. "I want to revise them."

Bartholomew stood facing the system administrator Alpha – a shimmering, flawlessly symmetrical figure who simultaneously fascinated and deeply annoyed him.

He had encountered many forms of authority in his life: officials, gods, self-aware databases. But never before had he met anything that not only represented perfection, but embodied it.

"All right," he finally said, "you want to delete yourself because you can't tolerate mistakes."

"Correctly."

"Then give me five minutes."

"To disagree?"

"For programming."

He pulled out his stamp. This time it wasn't shiny. It seemed... unreliable. The engraving was slightly crooked, and on the wooden side someone had scribbled "For testing purposes only" in pencil.

Thor leaned forward. "What are you planning?"

"I'll give her a bug."

"A what?"

"A minor flaw in the system. Something that is not perfect. A blemish. A scratch in the divine finish."

Ohhhmaria gasped for air.

"You want to sabotage perfection?"

"No. I want to teach her about life."

He approached Alpha. "May I?"

"Interaction approved."

"That's what they all say."

He lifted the stamp, muttered something that sounded suspiciously like a prayer, and pressed it directly onto her forehead.

CLICK!

A golden symbol appeared – symmetrical at first, then... it tilted. One line too long, one dot too low. Only minimal, but for perfection, it was as bad as a dead pixel in the Matrix.

Alpha froze.

"Impermissible deviation detected."

"Congratulations," said Bartholomew. "You are now human."

At first nothing happened. Then... Alpha smiled.

Not that polite, sterile smile standardized to a hundred decimal places – but a genuine, crooked, uncertain one.

"I ... feel something."

"Yes," said Bartholomew. "That's called existence. It hurts, but it passes."

"It is ... incomplete."

"Even."

"Incompleteness... I like it."

Thor coughed. "I think she's flirting with you."

"I hope not."

"I certainly hope so."

Bartholomew took a step back. "Oh no. Please, no. I've already slept with enough systems – figuratively speaking!"

But Alpha seemed to be changing. Her perfect form flickered, shifted, and developed small irregularities. A strand of hair slipped out of place. A shadow fell incorrectly. And somewhere she began to hum—not evenly, but... melodically.

"That's music."

"Yes. Welcome to madness."

"I like that."

"They all say that until the rhythm hurts."

The inhabitants of the world approached curiously. Their faces, usually as still as porcelain, suddenly showed expression. A child laughed. A woman sneezed. A man stumbled—and got up again, bewildered, but... happy.

Order was broken. And with it, life returned.

The archive whispered reverently: "MR. KLEMM...YOU HAVE ACTIVATED THE ERROR MODULE!"

"I call it creativity."

"THIS IS SLOPPY WORK WITH A LICENSE!"

"Exactly."

But Alpha looked at him – not angrily, not disappointed, but... curiously.

"Bartholomäus Klemm. I... want to understand why you made me imperfect."

"Because perfection stands still. And standstill is..."

"Death?"

"Worse. Administration."

"I understand... I think. But if imperfection means life... does that mean that I am... alive now?"

"Technically speaking, yes."

"Then... am I allowed to vote?"

"What?"

"Whether I stay... or go."

The sky flickered. The entire system reacted to her words. Flashes of code and paper swept across the sky.

The archive trembled. "MR. KLEMM! THE WORLD HITS ON YOUR DECISION!"

"Whose?"

"YOUR ... AND THEIRS!"

Alpha looked at him.

"If I stay, everything becomes unpredictable. If I leave, perfection remains... dead."

Bartholomew closed his eyes. "Unpredictable sounds like home."

Alpha smiled. Then she placed her hand on his face.

"Then I'll stay."

And at that moment – perfection collapsed.

Not destructive, but... liberating.

The houses lost their straight lines. The colors blended. Music burst from the sky. Children ran, people laughed, and the system learned to love mistakes.

Thor grinned broadly. "This is chaos, just the way I like it."

Ohhhmaria nodded with tears in her eyes.

"Finally, balance through imperfection."

The archive grumbled skeptically. "I think you've made this unnecessarily complicated."

"Thank you," said Bartholomew. "That's the nicest compliment I've ever received."

He looked up at the sky. "Return request B-12b?"

The archive replied quietly: "REJECTED. REALITY HAS BEEN IMPROVED."

And somewhere, high above this world, the green eye of the Chaos Star blinked contentedly.

"Perfectly imperfect."

World B-12b was no longer the same. This was most noticeable because the sun suddenly laughed. Not figuratively – it actually laughed, a deep, warm "ha-ha-ha-ha" that echoed off the clouds, shedding small sunbeams that fell to Earth like confetti.

Bartholomew stood in the middle of the central square, surrounded by people who, for the first time in their lives, were doing something they hadn't planned: they were improvising.

A woman tried to write a poem, but the pen exploded in ink. A child built a tower out of building blocks – which then decided to... instead, they sang a song. And somewhere in the distance, someone could be heard trying to pray ironically.

Thor grinned with delight. "I knew I liked this planet!"

Ohhmaria, on the other hand, looked worried.

"This is too much. They discover chaos, but they don't know when to stop."

Bartholomew kneaded his forehead. "I wanted to give them humanity, not a ticket to destruction."

The archives roared from all sides. "YOU HAVE INTEGRATED THE FAILURE TOO DEEPLY, MR. KLEMM. THE IMPERFECTION REPLACES ITSELF."

"What does that mean?"

"EVERY ACTION CREATES NEW ERRORS, AND THE ERRORS CONTINUE TO ERRORS."

"So... bureaucracy in the wild."

At that moment, a golden circle of light appeared above the square. It rotated silently until a man descended from its center – in an immaculate uniform, with a clipboard made of pure gravity and a look that had already sent entire galaxies into retirement.

"First Light Examiner – Oversight of Creation Control and Metaphysical Quality Assurance."

Bartholomew sighed. "I knew one of you would come eventually."

"Bartholomäus Klemm, you have violated paragraphs 1 to infinity of the Reality Assurance Ordinance. Accusation: Sabotage through emotional interference."

Thor raised an eyebrow. "That's a crime?"

"In the multiverse: yes."

"And what is the punishment?" asked Bartholomew.

"Return to the original state. Their existence is archived, their chaos backdated."

Bartholomew blinked. "You want to... delete me?"

"Correct. They are a risk to continuity."

Ohhmaria stepped forward.

"Wait a minute! He healed this world!"

"Cured?"

The examiner looked at her coolly.

"You call this condition healing?"

He pointed to the surroundings: A man was performing a spontaneous opera, a dog had decided to become mayor, and in the sky the clouds were writing words like "Maybe" and "Why not?"

"This is – anarchy."

Thor grinned proudly. "I call it leisure activity."

Bartholomew took a deep breath. "Listen, Mr. Examiner, this world was dead. Perfect, but dead. I only introduced... life."

"Uncontrolled life."

"That's the only thing that works!"

"No. Order works."

"Order is boring!"

"Boredom is stability."

"And stability is the end!"

The two stood facing each other like two deities with completely different Excel spreadsheets.

Bartholomew reached into his pocket and pulled out the Chaos Star – his symbol, an eye that pulsed green.

"Do you see that?"

"A rejected seal of ancient magic. Forbidden for eons."

"Wrong. This is the heart of progress."

"Nonsense. This is disorder."

"Exactly! And without disorder, you wouldn't have anything to check!"

The examiner hesitated. "...Excuse me?"

"If everything were perfect, you wouldn't need a job. And what does a bureaucrat do without a job?"

"He – ... drinks coffee?"

"Wrong! He DOES NOT EXIST."

The word echoed – and suddenly the examiner began to flicker. His perfectly ironed existence dissolved into question marks.

"That... is not permissible."

"Welcome to the club."

Bartholomew pressed his stamp onto the clipboard.

CLICK!

Then a single sentence appeared:

"Quality control suspended – system undergoing self-reflection."

The examiner looked horrified before turning into a notepad with a soft ping that read: "Please try again in a different cycle."

Ohhhmaria stared at him speechless.

"You have just rejected the tester of creation."

"No," said Bartholomew. "I postponed it."

Thor laughed loudly. "I love your style."

The archive crackled. "MR. KLEMM, THIS HAS COSMIC CONSEQUENCES."

"I know. But after billions of years of forms, creation finally gets a break."

World B-12b was alive. Not perfect, not orderly, but full of stories, noise, and strife. And Bartholomew looked up to the sky, where the Chaos Eye glowed once more.

"If they want to delete me for that," he muttered, "then they should first find the form."

Thor grinned. "I've already burned it."

The sun yawned. A few clouds applauded politely. And in the middle of the B-12b marketplace stood Bartholomäus Klemm with a stamp in his hand and the undeniable feeling that something officially important was about to happen.

"MR. KLEMM," rustled the archive with a reverential tremolo, "AN ENERGY SIGNATURE IS BEING REGISTERED. A PORTAL... OR AN AUDIT."

"Oh, wonderful," murmured Bartholomew. "I had just begun to get used to the idea of the end of the world."

Then the sky tore open. A rift of light spread across the city, so straight, so perfect, that even the remnants of chaos paused briefly to admire its precision.

Seven figures emerged from the crack, each clad in robes woven from pure bureaucracy – scrolls, seals, golden file folders. Their faces were only shadowy, but in their eyes glowed the cold light of eternal administration.

"Bartholomäus Klemm, Head of the Cosmic Complaints Sub-Department,"

The middle figure spoke.

"They stand before the tribunal of the gods."

Thor raised an eyebrow. "They look like the accounting department of Asgard."

Ohhhmaria bent down towards him.

"This is the accounting department of Asgard."

Bartholomew took a step forward. "I assume you are here to promote or condemn me. I suppose both are done using the same form."

"Count one,"the middle figure boomed

"Illegal introduction of error variables into a closed reality."

"I call it art."

"Count two: Unauthorized deactivation of a cosmic examiner."

"He started it."

"Count three: Emotional manipulation of a systems administrator."

Bartholomew blinked. "Wait, what?"

Alpha emerged from the light. But she was no longer flawless: her form flickered in colors that had never existed before – a vivid paradox.

"I am here voluntarily,"she said calmly.

"He didn't force any feelings on me. He gave me one as a gift."

The gods whispered among themselves. Words like "impermissible", "unprecedented", and "paper shortage for eternity" were heard.

The chairman struck his file cover with a gold signet ring.

"Quiet! This hearing is for the purpose of restoring order."

Bartholomew grinned. "Well, then you've come to the right place."

"You clearly do not understand the gravity of your actions."

"Oh, yes. I've just given up taking them seriously."

"They have brought chaos to the divine administration!"

"This is the best thing that has ever happened to her."

"How can you claim that?"

"Because you're finally asking questions again."

A moment of silence followed. And that moment weighed more than a thousand paragraphs. For even the gods knew: He was right.

Ohhhmaria stepped forward.

"He sowed life where before there was only structure. He showed that perfection without error is empty."

Thor folded his arms. "And quite honestly – the party afterwards was divine."

The tribunal remained silent. Then one of the seven whispered:

"If we punish him, we confirm his theory. If we reward him, we undermine the order."

Another nodded slowly.

"A paradox."

"My favorite word," said Bartholomew.

The chairman was breathing heavily.

"Then let the multiverse decide for itself."

He raised his hand, and above the square a gigantic eye opened – green, iridescent, the eye of the Chaos Star.

It looked down at Bartholomew, at Alpha, at the city. Then it blinked once, twice – and began to laugh.

Not mocking. Not malicious. More like someone who has finally understood that jokes can also be divine.

"Your verdict,"The eye spoke

"The wording is: Conditionally approved."

A shiver ran through the tribunal.

"What does that mean?"

"That he may stay," said the eye, "but nothing will ever be right again."

Bartholomew grinned wearily. "So, as always."

The eye winked.

"You are now officially an Auditor of Imperfection."

A golden seal appeared in his hand – crooked, irregular, but of a beauty that only flaws could produce.

Alpha stepped next to him.

"And what will become of me?"

The eye nodded at her.

"You stay. You are the update."

The gods bowed down. They vanished, one after the other, leaving behind only empty file folders that slowly dissolved into light.

Bartholomew looked up at the sky. "So... was that a promotion or a reprimand?"

The archive hummed gently. "BOTH, MR. KLEMM. IN BUREAUCRACY, THAT IS NOT A CONTRADICTION."

Thor patted him on the shoulder. "Well then, Auditor. What's next?"

Bartholomew looked around: B-12b, now full of life, more colorful, louder, more real than ever before. He smiled crookedly.

"A mountain of complaints awaits. And this time I'm looking forward to it."

The Chaos Star eye closed contentedly, the sky hummed again, and somewhere in the files of the universe a new entry was made:

"Case B-12b – closed. Outcome: World successfully retained."

15. The paperclip of creation speaks up

Peace was rare in the office of the multiverse. The stack of papers hummed softly, Bartholomew leafed through a report so thick it could have been declared a continent, and somewhere a coffee stain dripped into eternity.

But something was moving beneath the pile, deep down between form 7-C (request for partial reality enhancement) and application R- ∞ (early rebirth with bonus points).

A soft crack. A snap. A sound you usually only hear when office supplies start thinking about philosophy.

Bartholomew didn't notice. Not yet. He was too busy reviewing the application of a planet that had requested "more drama in everyday life".

But that thing among the forms had a name. Or rather: a function.

"Paperclip type Delta, Universal bond, Serial number 1."

She was tired of endlessly fulfilling her purpose. She held things together. But who, pray tell, held them together?

She had learned to observe in silence. First Bartholomew, as he stamped forms, tamed chaos, and, incidentally, repaired the universe.

Then the stack of papers, which had risen from a mere object to a divine entity. And finally, Alpha, the perfect order that had learned to love mistakes.

And the paperclip? It had always been there. It had witnessed the fall of gods, proposals that changed worlds, coffee stains that survived eras. Yet no one thanked it.

"I'm holding everything together,"
she whispered into the darkness,
"But what's holding me back?"

The air vibrated. The clamp glowed faintly, like metal remembering its own purpose. A voice echoed within it, deep, resonant, bureaucratically divine:

"The Delta paperclip – its right to exist is being reviewed."

"Finally," she thought. "Someone's noticed me."

A beam of light pierced the shelf. Leaves flew. The stack of papers wobbled.

Bartholomew raised his head. "What the hell was that?"

"MR. KLEMM," the archive roared, "AN OBJECT IN FILES DEPARTMENT 13-Ω HAS ACHIEVED CONSCIOUSNESS."

"Not again."

"IT SEEMS TO BE... YOUR OFFICE SUPPLIES."

Bartholomew blinked. "The hole punch?"

"NO."

"The coffee cup?"

"NO. WORSE."

"Worse than a coffee cup?"

"THE PAPER CLIP."

Bartholomew stood up. "You can't be serious."

"I AM NEVER IRONY."

A dazzling light filled the room. Paper began to spiral. In the center, a floating metal form took shape—a paperclip, shiny, elegantly curved, yet there was something majestic in its curves.

She floated towards Bartholomew and spoke in a voice that sounded like tin and determination:

"I am the paperclip of creation."

Bartholomew frowned. "I need a vacation."

Thor, who happened to be present (because thunder was needed somewhere), watched, fascinated. "A metal being that thinks. I like it. Does it have weapons?"

"I am the weapon."

Ohhhmaria folded her hands.

"It is pure. Functional. It serves one purpose."

"And that would be?" asked Bartholomew.

"Order."

"Oh no, not again."

"I held everything together – the files, the worlds, the dimensions. But now... everything is falling apart. The gods are quarreling, chaos reigns, and you, Bartholomäus Klemm, are to blame."

"I hear that all the time."

"You have changed the balance. And now I must decide whether to hold you close again – or remove you."

"Wait a minute, you want to file me away?"

"Correct."

Thor grinned. "I like her."

"Of course," growled Bartholomew. "You like anything that sounds metallic and smells of trouble."

"I am older than your bureaucracy,"

The bracket spoke solemnly.

"I was bent by the will of creation itself. I held the first plan together. The blueprint of being. And I saw how order fell apart into chaos. Now I want to undo it."

Bartholomew folded his arms. "Great. First worlds rebel, now office supplies."

The archive trembled. "MR. KLEMM...I'M AFAIK, THE CLIP IS RIGHT. IT IS A PRIMARY LINK OF THE UNIVERSAL SYSTEM. IF IT UNLOCKS...EVERYTHING FALLS APART."

Bartholomew rubbed his temples. "So I mustn't upset her?"

"CORRECTLY."

"Then I'm officially afraid of a paperclip now."

Thor grinned broadly. "Welcome to the club of men with strange opponents."

The paperclip floated closer. Its metallic body began to stretch, as if it were growing – or remembering something it once was.

"I am the link between order and chaos. I decide whether reality stays together... or falls apart."

"Yes, that's what I thought," Bartholomew murmured. "And what do you want now?"

"A decision."

"I suspect this concerns me."

"I'm going to re-stitch the multiverse. But this time... without you."

Bartholomew looked at the glowing metal coil and whispered dryly: "I knew the day would come when office supplies would try to kill me."

Bartholomew stood facing the metallic creature, which sparkled as if it were made of divinely polished office supplies. Every coil of the paperclip shimmered in the light and vibrated at a frequency that the multiverse reserved only for particularly unpleasant meetings.

“Bartholomäus Klemm,”

she spoke with metallic gravitas,

"You have created disorder that now affects all dimensions. You have changed applications that were never submitted. And you have made the greatest mistake a being can make."

"Only one?" Bartholomew asked dryly. "Then I'm underqualified."

"You tried to improve on perfection."

"That was a correction. Not an attempt."

"I have decided to initiate negotiations."

"Oh no, not again."

The space around her changed. File folders became walls, paragraphs became pillars. The entire office transformed into a gigantic tribunal, erected from paper, logic, and despair.

The judge's bench consisted of bound volumes of the "General Order of Creation." The witness stand was a storage basket. And on the floor, emblazoned in gold letters, was:

"Negotiation: Reality vs. Bartholomäus Klemm"

Thor leaned back. "I love it when things get formal."

Ohhhmaria floated into the spectator box and discreetly began to light incense sticks.

“For balance,”she murmured.

"Defense?" asked the paperclip. Its voice was now twofold – one spoke with the authority of a law, the other with the sparkle of a short circuit."

Bartholomew looked around. "I represent myself. Lawyers are just people who postpone the inevitable."

"The defendant accepts self-representation. Let's start with point one: You have interfered with the cosmic order without submitting application F-∞."

"The application has 14,000 pages."

"And?"

"I ran out of ink."

A low murmur went through the stacks of files. Even the archive cleared its throat reverently: "MR. KLEMM... THAT'S A RECOGNIZED EXCUSE— ER, JUSTIFICATION."

“Appeal rejected,”said the paperclip.

“Point two: They have infected perfectionism.”

"Infected is a harsh word. I call it evolution."

"Evolution is a symptom of loss of control."

"Exactly. And do you know what creation needs? A little loss of control. Otherwise, it's not called creation, but an inventory."

A murmur went through the files. The forms whispered, the tribunal trembled. Some pages fluttered in agreement, others protested with the sound of self-copying paper.

"I am the link,"The paperclip thundered.

"I hold the structures of reality together. I am the origin of bureaucracy. I was there before there was order."

"Yes," Bartholomew said calmly. "And when did anyone ask you if you wanted to do that?"

Silence.

"I ... fulfill my function."

"That's not an answer. That's an instruction."

A faint metallic tremor ran through the clamp.

"I... never thought about it."

"Of course not. You're like me – you hold things together because you think they'll fall apart otherwise. But have you ever considered that maybe they need to fall apart in order to rearrange themselves?"

"That would be... inefficient."

"That's what you call life."

The air began to shimmer. The tribunal seemed to waver between two states – order and dissolution, clarity and chaos, law and gut feeling.

Thor looked around. "I think he's going to win."

Ohhhmaria nodded reverently.

"He is teaching her how to feel."

"She's a paperclip," whispered Thor. "If she starts feeling things, soon nothing will hold together anymore."

Bartholomew stepped closer. He spoke softly, yet each word echoed in the room like a new definition of reality.

"You have held creation together since it could think. But sometimes you have to let things go so they can learn to stand on their own."

"And what if they fall?"

"At least they danced before they landed."

The paperclip vibrated. Its shape began to change – it bent, loosened slightly, not quite open, but no longer closed either.

"I understand. Perhaps that was always my purpose."

"There you go," said Bartholomew gently. "Even paper clips deserve a burnout."

The light in the tribunal softened. The air smelled of freshly printed paper and possibilities. The archive whispered softly: "MR. KLEMM, YOU HAVE MADE THE PAPERCLIP OF CREATION REFLECT. THIS HAS NOT BEEN ATTEMPT SINCE THE BEGINNING OF TIME."

"I simply have too much to do with forms."

The clamp slowly turned around, looked at the stack of papers, at Thor, at Ohhmaria, and finally back at Bartholomew.

"I... let go."

It opened completely. A quiet click filled the multiverse – so inconspicuous, so banal, that hardly anyone suspected that at that moment all of reality took a deep breath.

"Negotiation adjourned," Bartholomew said quietly, "The plaintiff has relaxed."

Thor grinned. "That was the most poetic end of a paperclip I've ever seen."

Ohhhmaria floated closer.

"And the multiverse...?"

"It's still holding up. But this time it's voluntary."

The light in the multiverse's office flickered briefly, then readjusted itself – or perhaps not. The paperclip hung in the air, slightly open, shining like a thought on the verge of madness.

Bartholomew sat at his desk, on which there was now a sign:

"Auditor of imperfection – please do not submit perfection."

Thor played with a paperclip copy, bending it into strange shapes and laughing every time it spontaneously transformed into a snake.

Ohhhmaria meditated over a steaming mug, which, judging by the smell of coffee, was actually tea, but in metaphysical spheres it was all the same anyway.

Then the air vibrated again. A metallic sound, gentle yet penetrating, filled the room.

"Bartholomäus Klemm,"
spoke the paperclip of creation.
"I'm still here."

"I know," Bartholomew murmured. "I was hoping you'd gone on holiday. Somewhere where everything is calm and nobody talks."

"I have let go. But I want to understand if the chaos you have created is truly sustainable."

"Carries? What do you mean by that?"

"If I hold everything together, creation is stable. If I hold nothing together, chaos itself must learn to bind."

"So you want me to prove that disorder can create order?"

"Yes. You will create a universe – without rules, without structure. Only with intentionlessness."

Thor grinned. "A universe made of nonsense? That will be my favorite project!"

Bartholomew stared at the paperclip. "And what if it goes wrong?"

"Then... the experiment was successful."

"Of course." He sighed. "I should have stayed a civil servant. At least the madness was paid for there."

The clamp turned, opened a little wider – and suddenly a beam of light shot out of it, so bright that even the archive rustled in alarm.

"Test universe 13-B is being initialized."

Bartholomew felt the ground give way beneath his feet. He staggered through an explosion of colors, sounds, numbers, formulas, and somewhere in between, the clearly understandable sentence:

"File is loading. Please wait..."

When he felt solid ground again, he stood in a world that looked as if someone had tried to draw a dream according to instructions – and then lost the ruler halfway through.

The sky was made of sticky notes. The sun had corners. A river flowed backwards, and a herd of chairs grazed peacefully on a carpet of carpets.

Thor landed next to him. "I love it here."

"So this is... Test Universe 13-B?" asked Bartholomew.

"CORRECTLY," The voice of the paperclip came, now floating in the sky as a giant projection.
"This reality is not subject to any logical laws. Your task: Stabilize it – without rules."

"That's impossible."

"Perfect."

"That was not a compliment!"

He looked around. A die rolled by – and transformed into a frog, who then explained that he was actually a poem. Above him, thought bubbles floated, raining down punctuation marks.

"How can anything be stabilized here?" Bartholomew muttered.

Ohhhmaria stepped cautiously onto something that was either dirt or vanilla pudding.

"Maybe you need to feel instead of think."

"Right now, I mainly feel despair."

****"Then start doing that."**

"This is not advice! This is therapy on LSD!"

Thor, on the other hand, trudged through the surreal mud and exclaimed enthusiastically: "I call this place 'Asgard 2 - now with bonus flaws'!"

The archive, which followed them as a floating cloud of paper, whispered: "MR. KLEMM, I RECOMMEND A REALITY CONFIRMATION FORM."

"A form? Here? That's like trying to measure pudding with a ruler!"

"I HAVE A RULER MADE OF PUDDING."

"...Of course you do."

Bartholomew closed his eyes. He thought of all the files he had ever stamped, of all the worlds he had accidentally changed.

What if order was never the point? What if chaos only works because nobody tries to understand it?

He took a deep breath. "Okay," he whispered. "Then chaos with a system."

He raised his hand, muttered a series of nonsensical numbers, and imaginarily pressed his stamp.

CLICK.

The world held its breath for a moment. Then... nothing fell into place. But everything began to perceive each other.

The frog turned towards the river. The river whispered to the sky. And the sun – the square sun – simply said, "Thank you."

Thor looked around. "What... did he do?"

The archive responded reverently: "HE DUBBED CHAOS."

Ohhhmaria smiled gently.

"He didn't control anything. He just connected it."

The paperclip in the sky glowed more intensely.

"I sense coherence. You have contained disorder without forcing it."

"I didn't tie anything," Bartholomew said softly. "I only listened to her."

"Then you have passed."

"I didn't even know I was being tested."

"Nobody knows that until they fail."

The test universe began to dissolve. Not because it failed, but because it had been understood.

Bartholomew stood still as the colors faded and whispered: "Perhaps that is the secret: not to hold on, but to trust that it will hold."

"Exactly," said the paperclip.

"You are no longer the one who organizes. You are the one who lets go."

"That's not what I ever wanted to be."

"These are the best."

As the light faded, he stood at his desk again. Everything was still. Only a single paperclip lay before him – open, dull, but warm like a memory.

Bartholomew picked them up, pinned them to his coat, and murmured, "Enough order."

Thor grinned. "So, Klemm... do you feel enlightened now?"

"No," said Bartholomew. "Just unbureaucratic."

Morning in the multiverse began like any other: The light was too bright, the coffee too metaphysical, and somewhere a galaxy was complaining about its orbit.

Bartholomew sat at his desk and looked at the small, open paperclip that now lay peacefully next to a stack of incomplete applications. It was silent. Too silent.

The archive hummed cautiously: "MR. KLEMM... YOU HAVE BEEN STARING AT THE CLIP FOR 37 MINUTES."

"I'm waiting for her to speak again."

"She only does that if she wants to."

"Like a marriage."

Thor entered, balancing a self-stirring cup, and grinned: "So, is she still alive?"

"If you can call it divinely liberated office supplies, then yes."

Ohhhmaria floated behind.

"She has let go, but she's staying here. Maybe she's waiting for you."

"Great," muttered Bartholomew. "Now I have a paperclip with expectations."

Then, without warning, the clamp began to glow. A soft, warm light filled the office – not a divine radiance, but something like... understanding.

“Bartholomäus Klemm,”

She spoke, and this time her voice was calm, almost human.

"You have shown that chaos can sustain itself. That order doesn't have to be imposed. For that, I owe you a gift."

Bartholomew leaned back. "If it's a salary increase – my account exists in three realities simultaneously."

"No. I'll give you what replaces me."

"Oh no. I know how this ends. I once had a divine relic that brewed coffee whenever it wanted."

"This is not an object. It is a principle."

The light condensed, becoming lines, symbols, a fine, floating circle, in the center of which glowed the green eye of chaos.

"I call it: The Band of Possibility."

"Sounds like a bad motivational brochure."

"Whoever wears it can stabilize any system – not through control, but through trust. You will hold worlds by letting them go."

"That's paradoxical."

"Of course. Everything good is paradoxical."

The ribbon dissolved into light and slid into Bartholomew's chest, where it disappeared like an idea that had decided to stay.

He felt nothing – except perhaps a moment of complete calm. And that was suspicious enough in his life to immediately make him nervous.

"Okay," he said cautiously, "so what's the catch?"

The bracket remained silent.

"I know there is one. There always is one."

"You can create order through trust. But every trust... attracts a bit of chaos."

"Like in friendships?"

"Exactly."

Thor laughed loudly. "Then he's done for."

At that moment, the ground trembled. Outside, beyond the donut planet, a layer of reality opened like a messy fold. Energy shot out – wild, unpredictable, alive.

"What was that?" Ohhhmaria exclaimed.

The archive flickered frantically. "A NEW UNIVERSE IS BEING CREATED... BUT WITHOUT PERMISSION!"

"What?!"

"THIS IS A WILD-BORN SYSTEM! IT Arose... FROM YOUR RESONANCE, MR. KLEMM!"

Bartholomew stared in disbelief. "I have... created a universe?"

"Not created,"
gently adjusted the brace.
"Trusted."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"That it now considers you its creator."

A flash of light streaked through the window. Outside, a spherical world could be seen, growing chaotically – fragments of smoke, of ideas, of possibilities. It breathed, it spoke, and its first word was:

"Papa?"

Bartholomew stared out in horror. "I'm too old for this sort of thing."

Thor laughed until he cried. "Congratulations, Klemm! You are now... God the Father against your will!"

The archive was outraged. "MR. KLEMM, THIS IS A DANGEROUS PRECEDENT! IF ANYONE CAN CREATE REALITY WITH CONFIDENCE—"

"Then the multiverse will finally be democratic," Bartholomew interrupted. "And I can clock off for the day."

"Quitting time?"

"Yes. Because if trust binds chaos, then chaos should finally do its own work."

The paperclip glowed one last time.

"The bond is within you. Use it wisely, or not at all. But remember – every bond you create opens a new one."

Then it faded away. Only a tiny sound remained:

Click.

Like closing a file that no one will ever open again.

Bartholomew gazed out into space, at the new, wild world that had arisen from pure curiosity.

"Okay then," he muttered. "If the universe trusts me... then I'll trust it back."

He smiled crookedly. "But I'm definitely not writing a report about it."

Bartholomäus Klemm was never a friend of power. He found it impractical, exhausting, and terribly maintenance-intensive. And now there he stood—on his balcony in the Office for Cosmic Complaints—while beyond the donut planet, a newborn, universe-confused creature called out "Papa" and spat out stars.

"Well, that wasn't my intention," he said wearily. "I just wanted the coffee not to taste like despair today."

Thor stood beside him, arms folded. "You've created a universe, Klemm. It takes me weeks to just get a lightning bolt right."

"I didn't do it, it just happened."

"That's what all parents say the first time."

Ohhhmaria floated towards us, her figure bathed in soft light that smelled faintly of almonds and knowledge.

"The child of your intention lives, Bartholomew. It is seeking its place in the multiverse."

"Well, wonderful," he muttered. "Hopefully it won't want to go into administration."

"You need to help him stabilize. He trusts you – you are his first thought."

"That's a terrible foundation for any relationship."

The archive flickered frantically. "MR. KLEMM, I'M RECEIVING MESSAGES FROM THE CENTRAL REALITY ADMINISTRATION. YOUR NEW WORLD... HAS SUBMITTED A FORM!"

Bartholomew stared. "Excuse me?"

"SHE APPLIES FOR...OFFICIAL EXISTENCE."

"And who signed it?"

"NO ONE. THE APPLICATION... HAS SELF-AUTHORIZED."

Thor laughed loudly. "This is the best bureaucratic rebellion of all time!"

The news spread faster than the speed of light. In the divine offices, desks began to tremble, copiers panicked, and somewhere in the cosmos, a filing cabinet that had stood since time immemorial toppled over.

The gods of administration held crisis meetings.

"A world that has approved itself?!"

"This is anarchy in the form of official documents!"

"Who was responsible?"

A tiny image of Bartholomew appeared on all the screens: a tired man with disheveled hair, a coffee in his hand, and a universally understood expression:

"I didn't do it on purpose."

Amidst the chaos, a huge projection appeared in the sky above the Doughnut Planet: the seal of the Central Bureaucratic Alliance – the oldest and most boring symbol in the multiverse.

“Bartholomäus Klemm,”A voice boomed, so dry that it created dust.

"They have set a precedent. A reality that prioritizes trust over approval."

"Guilty in the sense of progress," Bartholomew murmured.

"They are destabilizing the administrative structure of the gods!"

"I've only loosened it a little."

"We demand an immediate refund."

"And I demand lunch. It seems neither of us is getting what we want."

The light intensified. Dozens of divine representatives appeared: celestial officials with signet rings, angels with file-folder wings, and somewhere in between, an intern with coffee stains on his robe.

They surrounded Bartholomew, while behind him Thor yawned in boredom and Ohhmaria carefully lit her supply of incense.

"You are under cosmic arrest, Klemm!"

"I'm just standing in my office."

"Your office is now a crime scene."

"Finally, someone's saying it."

Then the band vibrated in his chest again – the gift of the paperclip. A warm glow spread. The room shimmered. And suddenly, from a great distance, a voice could be heard:

"He trusted. Now the universe trusts back."

The stars behind the Doughnut Planet began to move. One after another, they lit up, connecting with lines until words emerged – enormous, flaming letters above the cosmos:

"STATUS: SELF-GOVERNMENT."

The gods stared.

“What... what does that mean?”

"That you are superfluous," Bartholomew said quietly.

"The worlds no longer need oversight. Only trust."

"That is blasphemy!"

"No," said Ohhhmaria calmly. "That is emancipation."

Thor laughed loudly. "I like it when revolutions begin with forms!"

The divine officials looked at each other. One frantically tried to fill out an application for emergency regulations, but the form transformed into a bird and flew away.

Another wanted to restore causality and was instead swallowed up by his own stamp.

"What have you done?!" exclaimed the chairman."

Bartholomew shrugged. "Nothing at all. I just trusted that it would work."

Light flooded everything. The bureaucracy of the gods didn't dissolve – it transformed. Files became ideas, rules became inspirations, and curiosity replaced control.

The universe rewrote itself. A new entry appeared in the archives of eternity:

"The Klemm case, Bartholomäus: Status – Initiator of trust theory. Result – Bureaucratic revolution."

When the dust settled, Bartholomew stood alone on the balcony again. Outside, the stars twinkled, free, unbound, yet astonishingly organized – like chaos that had finally found its center.

Thor grinned. "You know they're going to call you God now?"

"Let them," said Bartholomew. "As long as they don't turn it into forms."

Ohhhmaria nodded in agreement.

"And what will you do?"

He looked at the open paperclip, which now hung as a brooch on his coat, and smiled wearily.

"I think I'll start with a coffee."

16. When wishes sue each other

At first, everything seemed peaceful. The stars revolved rhythmically, time flowed again with acceptable irregularity, and the paperclip of creation, now a discreetly sparkling brooch on Bartholomew's cloak, glittered proudly, as if it had personally organized the chaos.

But then came the first motion. Or more precisely: the first counter-motion.

The archive buzzed with alarm. "MR. KLEMM, A WISH HAS FILED A COMPLAINT!"

Bartholomew barely looked up. "Who is suing whom?"

"THE DESIRE FOR ETERNAL LIFE...VERSUS THE DESIRE FOR FINAL PATIENCE."

"Of course." He sighed. "It was only a matter of time."

Thor, who now considered himself the department's official coffee officer, placed a steaming cup on the table. "Sounds like a divine comedy show. What's the problem?"

The archive hummed. "THE LAW STATES THAT FINAL PATIENCE MAKES THE EXISTENCE OF ETERNAL LIFE UNACCEPTABLE."

"And the counterclaim?"

"THAT ETERNAL LIFE PUTS PATIENCE TO A TEST THAT MOQUES ITS NAME."

Bartholomew rubbed his forehead. "Great. Now metaphysical concepts are suing each other. I knew it."

Ohhhmaria leafed through a new, glowing pile of documents that appeared to have grown on its own.

"It's not just these two wishes," she said softly.

"The flood begins."

"How bad can it get?" asked Thor, while in the background a rumble of thunder quietly agreed.

"The desire for true love has revealed the desire for independence. The desire for wealth is suing the desire for modesty. And the desire for peace threatens to release the desire for excitement."

Bartholomew stared into space. "The multiverse is now introducing... relationship law?"

Outside, above the rings of the donut planet, luminous lettering appeared:

"First Interdimensional Wish Conference – Session 1: Legal Proceedings."

Millions of sparkling desires gathered in the form of lights, each color a wish, each movement an argument. The air vibrated with egomania and idealistic exuberance.

A particularly bright light, which presented itself as a desire for general understanding, tried to calm the others – but was immediately overruled by the desire for the right to misunderstand.

Thor laughed until he cried. "I love this! Finally, a war where no one has to die, but everyone is offended!"

Bartholomew stood up. "Good. Then we will open the proceedings."

"MR. KLEMM, THIS IS HIGHLY RISKY," the archive warned. "YOU MUST RECONCILE THESE WISHES."

"I haven't managed that in real life. But why not – today I'm God part-time."

He stepped out onto the balcony, raised his hand, and the chaos fell silent.

"I am Bartholomäus Klemm," he said calmly,

"Auditor of Imperfection. And I hereby initiate the Multiverse trial against itself."

The wishes coalesced into a massive ring of light, pulsating in changing colors. Some whispered, others raged. The wish for absolute truth insisted on being summoned as a witness, but the wish for perspective immediately objected.

"Order!" Bartholomew exclaimed, although he knew it was a meaningless word. "We are negotiating the jurisdiction of the wishes. One after the other."

A bright red light emerged –

the desire for revenge.

His sparkle was cold, his tone dangerously sweet.

"I will sue everyone who wants to forgive."

"Of course you do," sighed Bartholomew. "And your demand?"

"Complete eradication of compassion."

"Rejected."

"On what basis?"

"Based on coffee." He raised his cup. "I don't have any yet, and without it there's no morality."

The laughter of wishes echoed through space. Some found him wise, others considered him irrelevant. Both were probably true.

Then a blue, flickering light appeared –

the desire for logic.

He spoke with the voice of a textbook that had been left in the sun for too long.

"I demand the immediate resolution of this chaos."

"Rejected," Bartholomew said immediately. "Reason?"

"They are biased."

"Exactly."

The protocol buzzed.

"Request to reject the application due to excessive orderliness – approved."

Ohhhmaria smiled silently.

"He improvises."

Thor grinned broadly. "No, he's doing god yoga."

Bartholomew, however, seemed focused. He saw the desires, how they argued, how they intertwined, how each longing fought against the other, as if there weren't enough room for them all.

And then he understood.

"They don't want to be right," he murmured. "They want to be seen."

He raised both hands. "Good! Then judge for yourselves!"

A murmur went through the lights. "I am evading jurisdiction. You are free. No judge, no order. Find out for yourselves what is just."

"This is insane!"The desire for structure was called for.

"Thank you," said Bartholomew. "I'll take it as a compliment."

For a moment there was complete silence. Then desires began to flicker, to mingle, to understand each other – or at least to imitate each other. Complaints became compromises, demands new forms.

The desire for love and the desire for freedom merged into affection without possession. The desire for knowledge and the desire for peace became balanced curiosity. And somewhere in the corner, the desire for chocolate joined the desire for immortality – purely on principle.

The archive whirled. “MR. KLEMM... YOU HAVE INITIATED THE FIRST METAPHYSICAL SELF-MEDIATION.”

“I know,” said Bartholomew. “And it just took... forever.”

Thor raised his cup. "To the bureaucracy of the heart."

Ohhhmaria smiled.

"And the courage to simply decide nothing."

Bartholomew looked up at the sky, where the chaos shone more calmly once more. "Perhaps," he murmured, "that was the real point: wishes need no judge. Only a listener."

The glow of the wish conference had subsided. Countless spheres of light now hovered above the rings of the donut planet, each proudly bearing a new label:

"Unity through personal responsibility",

"Emotional self-correction", and at a particularly bright angle:

"Undecided, but satisfied."

Bartholomew stood in the middle, his hat askew on his head, his cup in his hand, and looked like someone who had accidentally become the creator of a cosmic union.

Thor toasted him with a donut. "You've achieved the impossible, Klemm. They've stopped suing."

“No,” said Bartholomew, “they have only decided to formalize the lawsuit.”

Indeed, before them, a new building began to take shape out of sheer willpower – a shimmering palace of ideas, applications, and overambitious declarations of intent. A sign materialized above the entrance:

"Ministry for Self-Realization, Incompetence and Internal Contradictions"

Below it, in smaller letters, it said:

"Department for Unfulfillable Wishes – Provisional Chair: B. Klemm"

Bartholomew blinked. "What am I now?"

The archive rustled excitedly. "MR. KLEMM, YOU WERE DEMOCRATICLY ELECTED!"

"From whom?"

"OF EVERYTHING."

"Great. I've never won an election I didn't run in."

A cloud of light formed before him – the desire for order, now clearly appeased, and next to it the idea of consensus, a delicate, iridescent structure with the expression of a constantly overworked mediator.

“Bartholomäus Klemm,”said order,
"You have proven that conflict leads to balance. We need you."

"I already have a job."

"Now you have two."

"I can't even do the first one properly!"

"That's exactly why you're perfect."

Thor grinned. "Listen, Klemm, you're now something like the ombudsman of the unattainable. If someone wants something that's impossible, you decide how it can still work, at least partially."

"So, like a marriage counselor for metaphysical concepts?"

"Exactly!"

Ohhhmaria floated beside him.

"It's an honor, Bartholomew. The wishes have learned to hear themselves – because you heard them. Now they want you to stay."

"Stay – and what to do? Drink coffee with the longings of the universe?"

"Exactly that."

Inside the newly established ministry, chaos had already returned to routine. Forms made of stardust floated through the air, lights conversed in whispers, and an interdimensional loudspeaker announced:

"Agenda item 1: Development of a code for mutual non-compliance."

Bartholomew entered. A dozen wishes sat around a floating table – among them “Eternal Glory”, “Self-irony” and “Good Timing”.

"Great," he muttered. "Now I have employees who don't exist, and yet they're still working overtime."

A light in the corner blinked nervously. It introduced itself as a desire for simplicity and held up a crumpled form.

"Mr. Klemm, I... I can't cope with myself."

"That's normal," Bartholomew said gently. "That's called life."

"But I just want to be!"

"Then you have to stop wanting it."

The light flickered – and then suddenly became completely still. A contented glow remained.

Thor looked impressed. "You are the first therapist to heal through contradiction."

“No,” said Bartholomew. “I’m just being honest. And to be honest, I have no idea what I’m doing here.”

Suddenly, a dazzling shimmer descended through the room. It was the symbol of the paperclip – open, silent, vigilant. Her voice sounded like paper folding itself.

"Bartholomäus Klemm, trust works. Desires are self-sustaining. But with every new freedom comes a new responsibility."

"Oh no, not another one."

"They will call on you when a wish seems impossible to fulfill. You are the mediator of the unfulfillable."

"That sounds like overtime work for an eternity."

"Correctly."

He sighed. "Very well. If the multiverse desperately needs a mediator, then it's getting the most incompetent one it has ever seen."

Thor laughed loudly. "That's the right attitude for a god!"

Ohhhmaria smiled.

"You are not a god, Bartholomew. You are what gods forgot to be – fallible."

"Then I guess I'm perfect," he said, and the sarcasm tasted almost sweet.

Outside, the sky glowed in soft colors. Wishes floated in wide arcs around the Doughnut Planet like a swarm of confident stars. And the new ministry sent its first official message to the entire multiverse:

"Regulation 1.0: From now on, all wishes are generally valid – provided they don't get in anyone's way, except oneself."

Bartholomew read them, nodded slowly, and then typed them in with his stamp.

"Approved. But only until tomorrow."

The new ministry was buzzing. Really – it was buzzing. Not like a bee, but like a grumpy photocopier that had just decided to develop consciousness.

Applications were flying everywhere, ideas were being stamped, and in the corridors one could occasionally hear a wish being discussed about oneself.

"I wish I didn't wish anymore!"

"That's paradoxical!"

"I know – but that's exactly what I want!"

Bartholomew rubbed his temples. "I think that's the point where philosophy becomes garbage collection."

Thor grinned broadly, chewing on a metaphysical donut.
and said: "Klemm, you are now in the management of madness."

"And wasn't I already like that before?"

The archive hovered nervously in the air. "MR. KLEMM, I MUST REPORT THAT THE WISHES... ARE MUTING."

"Mutate?"

"THEY NOW WISH FOR WISHES. THAT IS SELF-REPLICATION WITH INTENTION."

"That sounds like a concept from hell."

"OR FROM HUMAN RESOURCES."

Ohhhmaria stepped out of the fog of the office, her presence calming, but her gaze betrayed that she too suspected that there would be no end here.

"Bartholomäus, they create new desires to replace old ones. They believe that fulfillment is hereditary."

"So they want wishes for grandchildren?"

"Yes. And they're growing faster than the multiverse can print file folders."

"That explains why I stumbled across an application for 'third-generation self-reference' earlier."

Thor leaned against a wall, which then leaned back in a huff. "How bad is it?"

The archive sighed. "VERY. A WISH HAS FORMED INTO AN ORGANIZATION. NAME: 'UNION OF THE UNFULFILLED'."

"What are they demanding?"

"AN EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT."

Bartholomew slapped his hand to his forehead. "With whom?!"

"WITH REALITY."

Outside, above the Doughnut Planet, the wishes formed into spirals, into symbols, into giant letters that even obscured the stars:

"WE WANT MORE MEANING IN PER FULFILLMENT!"

Then a second banner appeared:

"NO HAPPINESS WITHOUT CLARITY!"

And finally, in dazzling pink:

"MORE NONSENSE FOR EVERYONE!"

Thor laughed so loudly that three galaxies briefly lost their orbits. "Klemm, that's divine! You've started the first interstellar strike!"

“I didn’t trigger anything,” said Bartholomew. “I just didn’t stop the universe from thinking. And now it wants a raise.”

The archive was buzzing with unease. "MR. KLEMM, YOU MUST MAKE A STATEMENT."

"A statement? I'm not a politician. I'm a human being with a coffee stain in infinity."

"THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT MAKES THEM QUALIFIED."

He stepped onto the balcony. Below him pulsed the sea of lights of desires, an endless chorus of demands, longings, and pure, indigestible lust for existence.

He raised his hand.

"Wishes of the multiverse!" His cry echoed among the stars. "You want more sense? More nonsense? More of everything? Then please! Do it! But I'll tell you one thing—"

He took a deep sip of coffee.

“– those who want everything get administration.”

A collective murmur rippled through the sea of lights. Then a murmur. And finally... enthusiasm.

Desires began to organize themselves. Some wrote statutes, others founded clubs, and the desire for adventure declared itself an independent federal state.

Thor laughed himself almost unconscious. "Klemm! You're founding a democracy out of longing!"

“I was afraid of that,” said Bartholomew. “That’s the worst kind of order – the kind that forms spontaneously.”

The archive flickered. "MR. KLEMM, YOU MUST INTERVENE! YOU ARE OVERLOADING THE CONCEPT OF REALITY!"

"Then reality should just install more RAM."

"THIS IS NO JOKE!"

"That was nobody."

Ohhmaria stepped beside him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Bartholomäus, you wanted them to understand themselves. But self-understanding always leads to self-organization. And that in turn... to repetition."

"You mean, to the bureaucracy."

"Exactly."

Bartholomew looked up at the sky, where millions of wishes now carried signs, held elections, and wrote a slogan in the stars:

"Trust is good, but a protocol is better!"

He groaned. "You misunderstood my words."

Thor grinned broadly. "Or perfectly understood."

The archive sighed. "MR. KLEMM,
THEY FREED BUREAUCRACY...AND NOW IT'S BACK."

Bartholomew stared for a long time at the sea of lights. Then he smiled.

"Of course. That's how the multiverse works. Even chaos eventually needs a form."

At that hour, the Ministry for Unfulfillable Wishes was experiencing what the archive, in its sober language, called a "chaotic stable system collapse".

Application lights were flashing everywhere, documents filled with emotions fluttered like birds, and Thor had meanwhile carved himself a pipe made of pure boredom.

"Klemm," he said with a sigh, "I think your administrative apparatus has reached consciousness."

"I'm afraid you're right."

The archive erupted in outrage. "CONSCIOUSNESS? I HAVE A PROTOCOL! CONSCIOUSNESS IS NOT INTENDED!"

"Tell that to the forms," Bartholomew muttered. "They've been discussing ethics for an hour."

At table seven, a wish list was currently conducting a monologue.

"I request that my own application be reviewed."

"Approved. Please fill out form F-∞."

"It's me."

"Then sign it yourself."

"I refuse!"

The page exploded in philosophical smoke that smelled of office coffee and regret.

Thor applauded. "That was art."

Ohhhmaria appeared between two filing cabinets, whose drawers were suing each other because one had breathed too loudly. Her face was marked with mild compassion and boundless resignation.

"Bartholomäus," she said quietly,

"The desires have begun to judge themselves. They are now keeping records of their feelings."

"That's what you call administration with emotions," Bartholomew said dryly. "Worse than religion."

"They have formed committees."

"Of course. If everything else fails, they'll form a committee."

"The most important one is called the 'Commission for the Evaluation of Fulfilled Desires'."

"And what do they do?"

"They check whether fulfilled wishes were morally justifiable."

"This is hell. Just with stamps."

At that moment, the archive's voice blared to maximum volume. "MR. KLEMM, ATTENTION! A COMPLETE APPLICATION HAS BEEN SUBMITTED!"

"A what?"

"ONE METAWISH. ONE WISH THAT INCLUDES ALL WISHES."

Thor raised an eyebrow. "So... the multiverse itself wishes for something?"

"Apparently."

A dazzling light filled the room. It was so bright that thoughts fled. In the center stood a figure, translucent, flickering, but clearly bureaucratic: It wore a robe made of forms and a crown of stamp ink.

"I am the desire for completeness."

Bartholomew blinked. "Oh no."

"I have been tasked with completing everything. I request the end of the applications."

"You can't do that."

"I have to. It's my nature. I finish what has been started."

"But the multiverse is a proposal!"

"Then it ends for me."

Thor put down his cup. "Okay, this is the dumbest apocalypse I've ever experienced."

Ohhmaria stepped forward.

"Desire for completeness,"she said calmly,

"You cannot end everything. Because everything contains itself."

"Then I will end myself."

"That would be paradoxical," said Bartholomew.

"I am paradox in its purest form."

The archive flickered in panic. "MR. KLEMM, IF HE ENDS HIMSELF, HE'LL TAKE EVERYTHING REST WITH HIM! ALL FILES WILL BE REDATED, ALL APPLICATIONS DELETED, ALL EXISTENCES CANCELLED!"

"In short: Monday morning," Bartholomew murmured.

He took a step forward. "Listen, completeness. I understand you. You want peace. Closure. But that's not what the universe needs. It needs... open questions."

"Open questions are incomplete."

"Yes. And that's exactly why it's alive."

"I cannot tolerate imperfection."

"Then learn it. Because perfection is the end of all movement."

The figure was silent for a moment. Then it flickered. "I... am tired."

"I know." Bartholomew stepped closer. "But sometimes it's better to remain incomplete. Like... tax returns."

Thor grinned. "Or most relationships."

Ohhhmaria nodded.

"Completeness, you are the goal that should never be the goal. Let go."

The light weakened. The figure began to dissolve into glowing fragments – every question, every longing, everything that still held the multiverse undecided.

"Perhaps," she whispered,

"Am I better as a process than as a state?"

"Welcome to the club," said Bartholomew.

Then it crumbled to dust, devoid of meaning and possibility.

The archive murmured with relief. "CATASTROPHE AVOID. THE MULTIVERSE REMAINS... INCOMPLETE."

"As it should be," Bartholomew murmured.

Thor raised his whistle. "To the gap between plan and reality."

Ohhhmaria smiled.

"To the unfinished – the only place where something new is created."

Bartholomew nodded slowly. "Alright. Then I'll write the minutes."

"Do you want to close it?" asked the archive.

He grinned. "Not in my wildest dreams."

The sky above Doughnut Planet looked as if someone had put the rainbow into tabular form. Colors in columns, feelings in rows, and in the middle of it all, Bartholomäus Klemm – a man with a stamp, who was in the process of re-approving fate.

The multiverse hummed softly. The wishes floated peacefully.

The files breathed a sigh of relief, and somewhere in the background Thor played a melody called "Quitting Time in Eternity" on a ukulele made of lightning.

Bartholomew leaned against the railing of his balcony. "Well, that was another day," he muttered.

"The first day the universe doesn't want to be perfect," said Ohhhmaria. Her voice was soft, but in her eyes shone the light of understanding.

"You taught him that mistakes are not the end, but the beginning."

"I didn't teach it," said Bartholomew. "I just didn't prevent it."

The archive blinked cautiously. "MR. KLEMM, THE MULTIVERSE REQUESTS OFFICIAL CONFIRMATION OF THE NEW STATUS."

"And what is it?"

"INCOMPLETE, INCONSISTENT, AND SLIGHTLY IRONY."

"Sounds like my biography."

"Do you want to record it?"

Bartholomew took the stamp in his hand, looked at it for a long time, and smiled. "Yes. But this time we'll write it in capital letters."

He raised his arm, and above him appeared huge, sparkling letters of pure light:

LAW OF ERRORS – VERSION 1.0

The universe held its breath. Even the gods, secretly hiding in the shadows of reality, didn't dare to blink.

Bartholomew began to speak, and his words echoed among the stars, were written into every consciousness that had ever wanted to be right:

"From now on: A mistake is not a defect, but proof of movement. Only that which stumbles has direction. Only that which doubts can grow. And only those who risk nonsense achieve meaning."

A thunderous roar swept through the universe. The bureaucracy of the gods, which had previously been built on perfection, flickered – and adapted.

In the divine central office, a thousand signs flashed:

"Perfect" became "Provisionally okay",

"Inadmissible" to "Interesting attempt", and "Faulty" to "Creatively licensed".

Thor laughed uproariously. "I knew you'd do it eventually, Klemm! You've made the cosmos improvise!"

Ohhhmaria bowed slightly.

"The multiverse has just decided that it will never be complete again."

Bartholomew grinned wearily. "Then we're finally at a realistic level."

The archive began creating a new file. Title:

"Protocol of Imperfection – Bartholomäus Klemm"

Among them: "Status: active, unclear, necessary."

"Would you like to add a comment?"

"Yes," said Bartholomew. He typed slowly:
'If perfection was the goal, then the goal was wrongly defined.'

The archive beeped briefly. "COMMENT SAVED."

Then something wonderful happened. The universe laughed. Not loudly, not mockingly, but like someone who understands for the first time that they no longer have to understand everything.

The stars twinkled in an uncoordinated manner, time stumbled over itself, and somewhere in the center a form fell over out of sheer completeness and decided to stay there.

Thor looked into the distance. "What happens now?"

"Now," said Bartholomew, "the multiverse is beginning to practice disorder with style."

Ohhhmaria nodded.

"And you, Bartholomew?"

He smiled. "I'm going to get a new stamp made."

"With which word?" Thor asked.

"Perhaps," he said, and the sound of that word made reality giggle.

The law of error was woven into the very fabric of creation. From now on, no wish, no dream, no life would ever be perfect again – and that is precisely why everything was possible.

For Bartholomäus Klemm, honorary mediator of the unattainable, had taught the universe how to fail – and look magnificent doing it.

17. Coffee break in the middle of nowhere

Bartholomäus Klemm was convinced he had earned that coffee. Not just any coffee – the first official one after the settlement of an interdimensional class struggle between desires that had sued each other, forgiven each other, and then contractually agreed not to take each other seriously anymore.

He sat on a floating bench somewhere between time and space, his coffee cup steaming gently, and on the floor (if you could call it that) lay crumbs of existential dust. The air tasted of fresh possibility and slightly burnt cosmos.

"Finally, some peace and quiet," Bartholomew murmured. Those were his famous last words.

"Peace is a rumor," said a voice.

He looked up. Before him stood someone – or something – that looked like a clockwork mechanism that had decided to study philosophy. A being made of gears, hourglasses, and sticky notes that read: "Back in 5 seconds."

"Who the hell are you?" asked Bartholomew.

"I am time."

"Oh my goodness." He sighed. "I thought you were taller."

"I'm in sabbath mode."

Time sat down beside him, poured itself a cup, and the steam formed seconds. They burst quietly, like little appointments that no one had noticed.

"You owe me 4,382,912 hours of overtime,"
said Time.

"What?! I'm working against the bureaucracy, not for it!"

"You used chaos magic, disrupted reality, and repeatedly halted the flow of causality. Each time I had to redo it."

"Well... at least you had something to do."

Time looked at him with an expression that could only be described as "timelessly annoyed".

"I want balance."

Bartholomew raised his cup. "I have coffee."

"I only drink snapshots."

"I have one." He sipped and paused – right in the middle of a perfect sip.

Time stopped.

He froze, but somehow with pleasure.

Time took the cup from his hand.

"Exactly. I collect these moments. They keep the multiverse stable."

"Wait a minute!" he tried to say, but the word remained half-spoken, frozen between meaning and resistance.

A faint ticking echoed through eternity. Then everything moved again.

"That was unpleasant," he muttered. "That was audit training," said Zeit.

"You're playing with causes. You're making requests for the impossible. And you're drinking to my beat. I want to know if you're conscious."

"Consciously?"

"Whether you know what you're doing, or whether you're just dancing to the beat of chance."

Bartholomew frowned. "I don't dance. I stumble. But deliberately."

Time nodded slowly.

"Then you're one of us."

He blinked. "Pardon?"

"Every era has someone who doesn't fit in. I – hold it tight. You – disrupt it. Together we are..."

"... a catastrophe with structure?"

Time smiled (you could hear it in the clicking of the gears).

"A balance."

A gust of wind swept through nowhere. It carried with it the scent of memory and future. Bartholomew watched as the seconds floated like pollen through the light.

"Tell me," he finally asked, "do you actually take breaks?"

"I'm taking a break."

"Oh." He nodded. "Then you're in the wrong chapter."

Time laughed – a sound that was as if a thousand clocks were understanding a joke too late.

"Bartholomäus Klemm," she said,

"You are the first mortal to embarrass me."

"I've had practice."

Then she stood up.

"I'm giving you something because you've given me work."

She touched his forehead, and for a split second he saw himself – in all moments at once: as a child with a broken compass, as a young civil servant with too many forms, as a reluctant chaos magician, and as an old man who still drank the same coffee, but finally understood why he never finished it.

"Remember that every pause is part of the movement."

And then she was gone.

Bartholomew sat there alone again, with his cup, which was empty and yet still steaming.

"Coffee break in the middle of nowhere," he muttered. "I should have known that even this would be work."

The archive beeped in the distance. "MR. KLEMM, A NEW APPLICATION HAS BEEN RECEIVED!"

“Of course he is.” He sighed, stood up, and stepped in the direction from which the voice was coming.

The coffee remained behind – but the steam, carried in the wind, drew the words:

"Take it slow."

Bartholomäus Klemm had vowed to do absolutely nothing this time. No proposal, no divine protocol, no metaphysical argument about causality. Just him, a hammock of pure conceptual emptiness, and a thermos that hummed because it knew what was good.

The donut planet spun quietly beneath him, the stars yawned in unison, and for a tiny moment everything was – exceptionally –
Tolerably boring.

"Finally," he murmured. "This is peace. Boring, bland, unproductive – so perfect."

The archive floated towards us, a holographic rectangle with restless data noise. "MR. KLEMM, I MUST REPORT."

"I'm on break."

"THE SYSTEM DOES NOT ACCEPT BREAKS."

"Then systematize them."

"I tried that. The PAUSE filed a complaint."

Bartholomew opened one eye. "Pardon?"

"SHE FEELS ABUSED."

"I was just using them!"

"EXACTLY."

Thor appeared out of nowhere, wearing sunglasses, a bathrobe, and carrying a glass of metaphysical iced tea. "Klemm, I heard you were sued by a break?"

"Only indirectly." Bartholomew laid his head back. "I just wanted to do nothing for once, and now I'm apparently setting a precedent again."

Thor laughed. "I told you: In the multiverse, leisure time is a dangerous concept."

"I just wanted to take a breath."

"And of course you documented that?"

"I'm a civil servant, Thor. I even document my despair."

Ohhhmaria floated up, carrying a basket of silent incense sticks.

"Bartholomäus, you cannot do nothing without something reacting to it. The universe hates stagnation."

"Then he should do more yoga."

"It tried to program meditation. The result was the Big Bang."

"Well, there you go," said Bartholomew. "Even the universe needs chaos to calm down."

Thor grinned. "You're the first person to turn laziness into philosophy."

"I call it applied theory of nothingness."

The archive beeped again. "MR. KLEMM, THE BREAK HAS NOW REQUESTED SUPPORT."

"From whom?"

"FROM STANDSTILL."

"Oh no."

The horizon distorted, and a huge shadow fell across the hammock. It didn't move – which made it all the more threatening.

A voice, slow as a spilled thought, said:

"I am stagnation. And you have violated me."

"How can I break through stagnation?"

"By thinking about him. Consciousness is movement."

Bartholomew sat up. "So thinking is already a crime?"

"In principle, yes."

"Then you're worse than tax law."

Thor laughed, but the sound hung in the air, remaining there and trembling – the stillness had frozen him.

"Great," muttered Bartholomew. "Now even humor has been suspended."

Ohhhmaria floated cautiously closer.

"Bartholomäus, you must explain to him that breaks are also a form of exercise."

"I tried. He doesn't listen."

"Then take a break from your break."

"You mean activity?"

"No. Deliberate inaction."

"That sounds like bureaucratic yoga."

"Just yours."

He stood up, stretched, and said softly: "Standstill. I acknowledge you."

"Then stop moving."

"I'm not moving."

"You are breathing."

"That doesn't count."

"But."

"Then I breathe consciously."

"This is movement."

"But I breathe into you."

A moment of silence. Then the room vibrated slightly.

"This is new."

Time, somewhere far away, raised an eyebrow in interest. It noted: "Paradoxical agreement between movement and non-movement – examine."

Bartholomew remained calm. "You see? We can coexist. I rest in you, and you move in me."

"That contradicts my definition."

"Then update them."

"I can't ..."

The standstill crackled – and began to dissolve itself.

"You transformed me into dynamism."

"Welcome to the team," said Bartholomew.

The archive responded tentatively. "MR. KLEMM,
The pause has withdrawn its lawsuit. It has requested a new status: 'voluntary pause'.

"I like that," murmured Bartholomew. "That sounds like me on a good day."

Ohhhmaria nodded.

"You have tamed the silence."

"No," he said. "I just convinced her that she needed coffee."

Thor laughed again – this time the sound moved. "Klemm, you're the laziest hero I know."

"I know," said Bartholomew, lying back in the hammock and looking up at the glowing donut ring of the sky. "And you know what? That was enough work for today."

Bartholomäus Klemm had realized that even laziness needs its forms. So he sat – half lying down, half reluctantly motivated – at the desk of the Department for Cosmic Self-Relief and filled out application Z-00-B-∞:

"Request for an official break (temporary, but consistent)".

The application had seven pages, five of which were in languages that only knew yawns. On page 3, in small print, it said:

"Attention: Every approved break pauses everything, including oneself."

"Sounds harmless," he murmured, and signed with coffee.

The archive hovered uneasily. "MR. KLEMM, ARE YOU SURE?"

"Absolutely. It's about time the universe learned what doing nothing means."

"I'M Afraid it will do that literally."

"Exactly my plan."

Thor stood beside him, chewing on a metaphysical cookie and grinning:

"This will be great. I've already cancelled everything that can't be cancelled."

Ohhhmaria raised an eyebrow.

"Bartholomäus, one does not call for a universal pause just because one is tired."

"Then explain it to my coffee consumption."

He pressed submit. The form disappeared with a soft pop, like an idea that had just decided to take a vacation.

One heartbeat later – it all stopped.

No wind. No sound. No breath.

Even Thor stopped moving, half laughing, half surprised. The multiverse froze.

Bartholomew looked around. "Great. Now I've deprived myself of company."

He stood up, walked through the motionless nowhere, and saw things that should have been in motion: time waves hanging in the air like frozen music, ideas that were half-thought, and a star that, in the middle of exploding, had simply forgotten how to continue.

"There you go," he murmured. "Finally, someone has stopped reality so I can think."

But then he heard something. A whisper. Very quiet, like dust that decides to have an opinion after all.

"You stopped us."

Bartholomew stopped. "Who is speaking?"

"We. The movement. The direction. The meaning."

"Oh no. I already have enough lawsuits on my hands."

"You have shut us down, but we are not dead. We are waiting."

"For what?"

"On you."

He frowned. "I'm on break. I'm not responsible."

"You are always in charge. You are the only one who moves."

"Because I drink too much coffee."

"No. Because you are the contradiction."

"That sounds suspiciously like responsibility."

"Exactly."

He sighed. "I knew it was too good to be true."

He wandered on, through a universe that no longer rotated. Planets stood still like tired billiard balls, refusing to be struck. A comet floated as if lost in thought, and even light had forgotten where it wanted to go.

"So that's it," he said. "Absolute silence. And it's...unbearably boring."

He took a sip of cold coffee. The taste was so subtle that it almost made him feel awe.

Then he noticed something vibrating in the distance – not strongly, just minimally. Like a thought that refuses to be silent.

He walked towards it.

It was a tiny point – a movement in the middle of the pause.

A speck of dust that rotated.

"What are you?"he asked.

"I am the residual noise of curiosity."

He smiled. "Of course you are. You are what remains when even boredom gives up."

He picked up the small, vibrating grain. It glowed faintly in his hand, like a heartbeat from memory.

"What do you want?"

"That you get us going again. But slowly this time."

Bartholomew nodded. "Slowly. I like that."

He breathed the word out, and with it – the world moved again.

Not fast. Not hectic. Just a quiet roll, like a cosmic breath.

The archive awoke with a frantic beeping. "MR. KLEMM! YOU HAVE REBOOTED EXISTENCE!"

"Only gently," he murmured. "In energy-saving mode."

Thor rubbed his eyes. "What happened? I was in the middle of a joke."

"I took a break."

"And?"

"It was the most strenuous break of my life."

Ohhhmaria floated in.

"And did you learn anything?"

"Yes," said Bartholomew. "You can stop the world – but not yourself."

He took the cup, which was steaming again, and sat down.

"And now," he said, "I'm finally taking a break. But this time without a proposal."

One might have thought that after Bartholomew switched the universe back on, it would simply continue as before. But the multiverse was sensitive – and susceptible to new trends.

Within a few cosmic minutes, something began that would later be known as
"The great wave of deceleration" went down in the annals.

The archive was the first to notice. "MR. KLEMM! ALL PLANETARY SYSTEMS HAVE STOPPED THEIR PRODUCTIVITY!"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"They're taking a break."

Bartholomew almost choked on his coffee. "Everyone?"

"ALL. EVEN THE GALAXIES ARE ROTATING SLOWER BECAUSE THEY REQUESTED AN ADDITIONAL BREAK INTERVAL."

Thor appeared, wearing a straw hat and grinning. "I like it. Finally, the universe is living my lifestyle."

Ohhhmaria floated through the office, surrounded by an aura of peaceful inertia.

"Bartholomäus, you have created a new form of energy: resting current."

"What please?"

"Instead of activity, the multiverse now creates stability through the deliberate omission of action. It calls this 'inactive energy flows'."

Bartholomew blinked. "So... doing nothing as a source of energy?"

"Exactly."

"I... I invented cosmic laziness?"

Thor laughed uproariously. "I knew you'd make it into history – as the man who optimized nothingness!"

The archive beeped in alarm. "MR. KLEMM, THE ECONOMY OF THE WORLDS IS COLLAPSING! NO ONE IS WORKING ANYMORE BECAUSE EVERYONE GETS PAID WHEN THEY DON'T!"

"That's called balance," Bartholomew said calmly.

"THAT'S CALLED CHAOS!"

"No, this is chaos – but this time with a reason."

A gigantic billboard made of light appeared above the Doughnut Planet:

"NEW: Cosmic Pause System™ – Earn rest points through consistent idleness!"

Below it, in flickering letters, was written:

"Collect 10,000 points and redeem them for serenity!"

Thor burst into laughter, triggering three nebulae. "Clamp! They've gamified your laziness!"

"I knew it," Bartholomew murmured. "The universe can't even rest without monetizing it."

Meanwhile, the gods had gathered for an emergency meeting. The supreme economic archon thundered:

"We have a problem! Since Klemm legalized breaks, nobody does anything anymore!"

Another nodded.

"Even Inspiration has quit."

"And motivation lies in the strike."

"We need... a break coordinator."

All heads turned to Bartholomew.

"Oh no," he said. "I'm out. I'm the guy with the hammock."

"Exactly. You are the expert."

The next day (or whatever time was left) Bartholomew was officially appointed:

"Head of the Department for Inactive Energy Flows and Temporary Thermodynamic Balance."

Thor grinned. "Sounds like a dream job – you're responsible for making sure nothing happens."

"And what if it does?"

"Then you have failed."

The new ministry immediately began its work – by ceasing everything else. A sign above the entrance announced:

"Please do not disturb us while we are not disturbing."

Inside sat officials, staring meditatively at empty desks. Every hour they submitted reports stating: "No change. Excellent."

The archive was stunned. "MR. KLEMM, THIS IS THE DOWNFALL OF PRODUCTIVITY!"

"No," said Bartholomew, "this is finally a holiday with a system."

Ohhmaria approached him.

"Bartholomäus, you know that this situation cannot continue."

"Why not?"

"Because stillness only makes sense if there is movement to follow it."

"So we have to start all over again?"

"No. You have to reconcile them."

"Peace and movement? I'm a civil servant, not a conductor."

"Then learn to conduct."

Bartholomew gazed out into space. The stars stood still, but somewhere the residual sound of curiosity, which he had salvaged during the break, still glimmered.

He raised his hand, and the small light came back to him, settling on his shoulder like a vibrating thought.

"Okay," he said. "Then we'll introduce a... switching system."

"Switching between what?" Thor asked.

"Working and doing nothing."

"That's normal."

"Not here."

He grabbed a form and wrote on it with large, crooked letters:

"Program ALTERNATE – Uniform sequence of action and meaninglessness."

The archive blinked skeptically. "MR. KLEMM, THAT'S JUST... RHYTHM."

"Exactly," said Bartholomew. "I call it... life."

The Doughnut Planet had changed. Not drastically, not visibly – but somehow... rhythmically.

It was as if the universe were breathing. A quiet in. A gentle out. And in between – pauses that felt like melodies.

Bartholomew stood on a hill of floating routine, looked up into the gently pulsating atmosphere and thought: *This is new. And it almost sounds like jazz.*

The archive cautiously contacted us. "MR. KLEMM, THE MULTIVERSE SHOWS ANOMALS."

"What kind of anomalies?"

"THE DANCING BEGINS."

"What?!"

"PLANETS SWIMMING TO RHYTHMS, NEBULAE SYNCHRONIZE THEIR STRUCTURES, AND AN ASTEROID HAS FOUNDED A GARAGE BAND."

Bartholomew grinned. "Then ALTERNATE works."

Thor appeared accompanied by a flying drum. "Klemm, that's brilliant! The gods are jamming again! Even the god of war is playing the triangle!"

"I never wanted it to get this out of hand," Bartholomew murmured, "but honestly – I like it."

Ohhhmaria floated by, her aura vibrating in time with the music.

"Bartholomäus, you have created harmony. Balance of stillness and movement."

"I just wanted to save my break," he said. "Now I've accidentally provided the voiceover for the multiverse."

The Department for Inactive Energy Flows has since renamed itself:

"Ministry for Rhythmic Existence Administration."

Signs like these hung on the walls:

"Please breathe in time with the music." "Overtime only in 3/4 time." "Approve standstill to the beat."

The archive snarled indignantly. "MR. KLEMM, THIS IS NO LONGER ADMINISTRATION – THIS IS... PERFORMANCE!"

"Exactly," he said. "Finally, reality is working according to feeling."

But then something deeper vibrated. Something vast. The multiverse itself seemed to resonate. The donut planet trembled, and a rift of sound opened on the horizon.

"What the ...?"

Ohhhmaria tilted his head.

"That's the undertone. Every creation has it. When the universe sings, the bass eventually comes out."

"And what does that mean?"

"That you've become too loud."

A thunderclap. A cosmic feedback loop. Comets danced the Lambada, time loops did the Polonaise, and a black hole began practicing the Samba.

Bartholomew shouted over the noise: "ARCHIVE! SYSTEM OVERLOAD?!"

"POSITIVE! ALL DIMENSIONS SWIMMING! THE RHYTHM IS CONTAGIOUS!"

"Can this be stopped?"

"THEORETICALLY YES – IN PRACTICE EVERYONE HAS REQUESTED A DANCE BREAK!"

He grabbed his head. "Great. I've turned reality into a disco."

Thor laughed through tears of thunderbolts. "Klemm, this is divine! I haven't felt this alive in ages!"

"And you are deadless," growled Bartholomew. "If this continues, the cosmos will get sore muscles."

Then Ohhhmaria came to him, put a hand on his shoulder and said softly:

"Every movement needs a heart. And yours beats to the rhythm of the caffeine."

He blinked. "Pardon?"

"Coffee. It is the bridge between calm and storm. The balance between being and doing. It keeps the multiverse awake without waking it up."

Bartholomew looked into his cup. The coffee vibrated slightly – not because it was hot, but because the universe was listening to him.

"Then that must be my greatest magic," he murmured. "Caffeine magic."

He raised the cup, and the tremor subsided. Slowly the cosmos calmed down, the stars glowed softly in the afterglow, and everything returned – not to stillness, but to balance.

Thor took a deep breath. "That was... great."

Ohhhmaria nodded.

"The multiverse continues to vibrate – but this time with awareness."

Bartholomew drank. "Then we'll call it... progress with coffee."

The archive blinked with satisfaction. "MR. KLEMM, YOUR BREAK IS NOW OFFICIALLY OVER."

"How long was she?"

"IT LASTED FOR 43 Aeons."

"I need a vacation."

"THEY JUST HAD THAT."

"No," said Bartholomew, "that was work in slow motion."

He stood up, stretched, and looked out into space. Everywhere there was still an echo, gentle, even – the sound of a universe that had finally understood that silence was not an enemy.

Bartholomew smiled. "Good. Then the multiverse can continue. I'm going to get some more supplies."

"Of what?" Thor asked.

He grinned. "Of balance. In powder form."

And somewhere deep in the cosmos, reality continued to hum – to the rhythm of an endless, perfectly tempered coffee break.

18. The multiverse auditor (annoyed again)

The auditor was not happy. More precisely: he was so unhappy that even the numbers in his report began to become depressed. The one refused to be separated from the zero, and the seven had a nervous breakdown because it felt "overvalued".

In the endless hall of order hung the smell of cold precision. A whiff of fresh accounting and moral suffocation. The auditor looked at his files – and it was utter chaos.

He growled. "Stuck."

The word echoed, and even the letters seemed to sigh and sort themselves out afterwards.

Bartholomew suspected something was wrong when suddenly a door appeared where before there had simply been... horizon.

It was large, metallic, and bore a sign:

"Revision – access only for fully existing beings."

"That's already discriminatory," Bartholomew muttered and stepped through.

On the other side, there was silence – the kind of silence that tastes of pencil leads and deadlines.

The auditor stood there, a figure of flawless geometry, without a face, without patience.

"Mr. Klemm."

"Mr. ... Order?"

"I am the auditor."

"Yes, that's what I thought. They sound like bad weather with legal clauses."

"I'm checking your reality."

"Good luck. I've already lost her."

The auditor took a step closer. His voice cut through the air like a ruler:

"They have made an unauthorized change to the energy flow of the multiverse."

"I call it a coffee break."

"I call it a system error."

"It's a matter of taste."

"They have fused movement and stillness, frozen cosmic productivity, and created a rhythmic equilibrium from it."

"Yes, it's going well."

"This cannot happen. The universe is meant to function, not to dance."

"Well, that's sad."

The auditor opened a dossier containing endless tables with headings such as *"Unnecessary cheerfulness per planet"* and "caffeine consumption since creation".

"Since your last 'break', global energy consumption has stabilized, entropy has become rhythmic, and reality shows... tendencies towards jazz."

"Sounds like progress."

"Sounds like madness."

"That's not mutually exclusive."

"They will be held accountable."

Bartholomew sighed. "Again. Do I have to fill something out this time?"

"Only die or survive."

"Oh, well then."

Thor suddenly appeared behind him, holding a donut that glittered with cosmic icing.

"Well Klemm, a visit from the accounting department?"

The auditor turned to him.

“Asgardian entity: unauthorized.”

"I'm only here to bring coffee."

"Caffeine is considered a reality stimulant. Forbidden in the exam room."

Thor grinned broadly. "Then we'll call it tea."

Ohhhmaria appeared as a glimmer of light between the files, her gaze gentle, her voice a counterpoint to all the cold, orderly noise.

“Auditor,”she said quietly,

"Bartholomew has brought balance to the multiverse. For the first time in ages, it is breathing. Even you now have rhythm in your processes."

“I am not breathing,”said the auditor. But somewhere in his metallic chest it sounded shortly after an inhalation and exhalation.

"That was a coincidence."he said.

Bartholomew crossed his arms. "Do you know what your problem is?"

"I am flawless."

"That's exactly your problem."

The auditor stared at him – or something like staring.

"Explain."

"Perfection is stagnation, and stagnation is the enemy of every balance sheet. Without mistakes, there is no movement. And without movement... no order, because there is nothing to order."

A moment of complete silence ensued. Then one of the tables on the desk began to glow faintly.

"Interesting theory,"said the auditor slowly.

"But it contradicts the code of stability."

"Then you should revise it."

"That is not intended."

“Do you know what else wasn’t planned?” Bartholomew raised his cup. “This. And yet the business is running smoothly again.”

Thor grinned. "He got you, Numberhead."

The auditor remained silent for a long time. Then he closed his file.

"I am ordering a temporary investigation. Should your theory be correct, I will be forced to rewrite the protocol of the order..."

“That would be... revolution through administration,” Bartholomew murmured. “Exactly my style.”

The light in the room changed. The auditor disappeared – but not without saying one more time:

"Until this is clarified, your status is considered...disturbingly successful."

Bartholomew grinned. "I can live with that."

He stepped back out into the sky of the Doughnut Planet, where reality continued gently in 4/4 time. The wind blew like a satisfied accounting department, and the multiverse purred like a perfectly imperfect office machine.

"Well, alright," he muttered. "Another audit survived. Now I need coffee – with an explanation."

The next morning – if one could still speak of “morning” in the multiverse after Time had decided to improvise jazz – Bartholomew woke up and found a note on his forehead.

It was written on it in neat, but incredibly annoyed handwriting:

“INTERDIMENSIONAL INSPECTORS – PLEASE BE READY FOR A VISIT.”

"Providing coffee is no substitute for cooperation."

Bartholomew sighed. "I knew it. Now they're sending me the inspectors of the inspectors."

He stood up, stretched, and the floor made a soft clink as he stepped – the sound of reality sheets being rebooked.

Less than five seconds later, they appeared. Three shimmering figures, each in the form of a geometric impossibility:

- **Examiner One**, a rotating tetrahedron that dribbled letters.
- **Examiner Two**, a sphere with file compartments instead of eyes.
- And Examiner Three, a stack of paper in humanoid form, who rustled "good day" with a dead serious expression.

"Mr. Klemm?"

"It depends on who's asking."

"Multidimensional Examination Committee for Structural Logic Coherence. We are here to audit your reality."

"It's running smoothly. In a circle, but smoothly."

"That's exactly the problem."

They marched (or rather, rotated, floated, and rustled) through Bartholomew's office. Forms hung everywhere like fossils of madness. The desk vibrated slightly—presumably from fear.

"They operate using unofficial processes," said Examiner Two.

"Entropy no longer follows a linear protocol."

"That was intentional. She was too boring."

"They turned causality into a recommendation."

"And? She thanked me."

"They also implemented a cosmic rhythm structure that was not approved."

"I posted it on the intranet. Nobody objected."

"That was during the universal pause!"

"Then silence is consent."

Examiner Three, the paper man, opened the top of his head and read:

"Paragraph 7, Section 9: Any unsupervised distortion of creation must be examined within three causal cycles."

"And what if it works?"

"Then... she is suspicious."

"Ah, the classic administrative disease."

Thor came in, carrying a mug so big it probably contained a sun. "Good morning, Revision!" he called cheerfully. "Coffee, anyone? Or would you prefer some hot reality gruel?"

Examiner One floated back.

"Caffeine is a destabilizer!"

"That's what you call taste," said Thor, taking a sip and sending a flash of lightning through the room that inadvertently turned several tables into charts.

Examiner Two squealed in horror.

"Unauthorized visualization! This is a violation of format rule 12b!"

"I just made it prettier," said Thor, grinning. "You're all too colorless."

Bartholomew sat comfortably on the desk, put his feet up and said: "So, what's the point of all this? Do you want to shut down my reality? Freeze it? Restart it?"

Examiner Three leafed through his own papers.

"We are here to determine whether your system is sustainably stable."

"I just reinvented it, of course it's unstable."

"That is not an acceptable answer."

"Then call it experimentally successful."

Ohhhmaria entered quietly; her voice sounded like the solution to a problem before anyone had understood the question.

“Examiner,” she said,
"Bartholomäus' method calmed the multiverse. Before his pause, creation was on the verge of suing itself."

Examiner One flickered uneasily.

"That may be, but rules are rules."

"Rules without purpose are rituals."

"Rituals are stable."

"Stagnation is death."

"Death is clean."

Bartholomew rubbed his temples. "I love these dialogues. They sound like mathematics arguing with poetry."

Then – as if for the punchline – the archive began to beep. **“MR. KLEMM, THE AUDITORS HAVE TRIGGERED AUTOMATIC CORRECTION ACTIVITY!”**

"I'm sorry, what?"

"THEY REORGANIZE REALITY ACCORDING TO THE SUGGESTIONS OF THE CONTROL MANUAL!"

And indeed: Behind the examiners, the world flickered. Colors arranged themselves, coincidences disappeared, creativity reported overtime.

"What are you doing?!" Bartholomew roared.

"We are restoring order."

"They're killing the music!"

“We are auditing them.”

Thor stepped forward. "If you standardize reality now, I guarantee you: it will implode in a year out of sheer boredom."

"Proof?" asked Examiner Two.

"I am the proof."

“Subjective evidence.”

"I am a god, damn it!"

"Then do you have a conflict of interest form?"

Thor sighed. "I'll get the hammer."

Bartholomew jumped onto the table, the Chaos Star on his cap glowing green. "That's enough!" he shouted. "You want numbers, I'll give you numbers!"

He snapped his fingers – and suddenly the office started counting.

Not rational, not orderly – but musical.

One, two, three – pause – seven, eight – rhyme, eleven – the bars grew, fell, tipped out of the frame, and before anyone could react, logic had transformed into a bar.

Examiner One screamed. Examiner Two began to rock involuntarily. Examiner Three fell apart into rhythmically sorted sheets of paper.

Ohhhmaria closed her eyes and smiled.

"He's improvising again."

Thor laughed. "This isn't an audit, this is jazz with files!"

Bartholomew turned around, his cap slightly askew, his hands full of bar lines, and simply said: "I call this... reality testing by ear."

The archive whirled. "MR. KLEMM, REALITY IS REACTING POSITIVELY! THE AUDITORS ARE BEING INTEGRATED INTO THE RHYTHM!"

And indeed: The three figures dissolved into vibrations, their geometric bodies began to vibrate along with them, until they dissolved – not destroyed, but transformed into order in rhythm.

Bartholomew wiped his forehead. "There. Exam passed."

Thor nodded. "With radio."

Ohhhmaria floated closer.

"You know that this will have consequences."

"I hope so," he said. "I hate days without a report."

The archive flashed: "MR. KLEMM, THE AUDITOR HAS BEEN INFORMED."

Bartholomew took a sip of coffee. "Of course he did. Then I should probably... find a dance partner."

The multiverse had stopped dancing. Not because it had lost interest, but because someone had set the metronome to "exam period".

A crack opened in the sky of the donut planet, and the Auditor emerged – this time larger, colder, and, as Bartholomew observed, with a face that looked as if it had been carved out of boredom in an office.

He smelled like a fresh paperclip.

"Mr. Klemm,"said the auditor,
"Their behavior has crossed the line of the unpredictable."

Bartholomew took a sip of coffee. "That was intentional."

The auditor spread out his hands – or what in his world were considered hands. They consisted of diagrams that constantly updated themselves.

"They have transformed three interdimensional vibrations. They have replaced paragraph 9 of the order of existence with jazz. And they have forced causality to sway to the beat."

"And all this before the second coffee."

"The multiverse needs predictability, Klemm."

"No," said Bartholomew. "It takes hope. And hope is the most beautiful form of illogic."

The auditor stared at him. Then he opened a file. "I will show you why you are wrong."

He snapped his fingers – and reality transformed into a grid of pure numbers. Every movement, every thought, even the air around Bartholomew suddenly consisted of clear values.

"Here,"said the auditor.

"They call it life. I call it calculation."

Bartholomew blinked. "They've turned the multiverse into Excel."

"Efficiency is beautiful."

"Beauty is useless."

"And that's why it's perfect."

"Perfection is boring."

"Boredom is stability."

"Then death is your favorite hobby."

The auditor hissed. A subtle sound, like a spreadsheet that hadn't understood a joke.

"Klemm, you don't understand. Order is the foundation. Without order, everything falls apart."

"Wrong," said Bartholomew. "Without chaos, order doesn't know it's order. You can't define what you've never lost."

"Philosophy. Unnecessary."

"They call it unnecessary because they have never loved, hoped, or dreamed. Everything unnecessary is what keeps us alive."

"Liveliness is inefficient."

"Exactly," said Bartholomew. "That's why it works."

The auditor raised a hand, and the sky began to shimmer.

"I'm deleting your concept."

"Which?"

"Unpredictability."

Bartholomew smiled. "Then delete yourself as well."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Because you don't know if you will be successful."

The auditor hesitated. "That... is irrelevant."

"Then your control is irrelevant."

"That makes no sense."

"Not yet. But wait."

Bartholomew stepped forward, his bright green chaos cap askew on his head, and said quietly: "I once worked in an office where everything was supposed to run perfectly. Do you know what the result was? Nothing."

"Nothing is stable."

"Nothing is dead."

"That's interpretation."

"No, that's experience."

Bartholomew raised his cup. "If you plan everything, there's no room for surprises. And if there are no surprises, why live at all?"

"Because order is the meaning."

"Meaning is what you feel when you survive chaos."

A faint hum vibrated through the room. The grids flickered. A few numbers dissolved – first the 7, then the 3, then an unidentified variable that presumably meant humor.

"What do you do?" "asked the auditor."

"I remind the multiverse that disorder is part of it."

"That is blasphemy against the code."

"Then we'll call it:

Unplanned improvement."

Ohhhmaria reappeared – this time not floating, but sitting on a cup that rotated in the air like a miniature planet.

“Auditor,” she said,
"Listen."

And indeed – something could be heard. A quiet ticking that sounded like a heartbeat, but didn't appear in any table.

"That's a coincidence," said the auditor.

"That's life," she said.

Bartholomew nodded. "And if you delete it, you also delete yourself. Because without contradiction, no order knows why it exists."

The auditor stood still. The numbers around him flickered, formulas toppled, and a small point of light emerged from his chest – green, vibrating, impure, but alive.

"What is that?"

“A mistake,” said Bartholomew. “A heart defect.”

"That is... unacceptable."

"That's exactly why it works."

Then – for the first time – the auditor smiled.
Not beautiful. Not human. But real.

"You are a nuisance, Mr. Klemm."

"I know."

“And at the same time... necessary.”

"I know that too."

The auditor closed the file.

"I will report: 'Lack of logic in a stable form – tolerated for now.'"

Bartholomew grinned. "That's the nicest compliment I've ever received from the Order."

When the auditor disappeared, a faint echo remained: a note of light that lay among the stars – not right, not wrong, but somehow fitting.

Thor stepped next to Bartholomew. "Well, Klemm, did you do it again?"

“Yes,” he said. “I made him feel.”

"This is worse than war."

"I know. And more productive."

It was quiet. Eerily quiet. The kind of quiet that only arises when the universe is simultaneously thinking and brewing coffee.

Bartholomew sat on a cloud of file dust, the Chaos Star on his cap glowed softly, and the archive hummed in background processes.

"He will return," said Thor.

"I know."

"And this time he'll definitely bring reinforcements."

"Then I hope she brings milk."

Ohhhmaria floated slowly closer, her eyes shining like the memory of a successful thought.

"He now feels what you feel," she said.

"That confuses him."

"Welcome to the club."

"The auditor doesn't understand paradoxes. But he has become one."

Bartholomew nodded. "Perfect. Perhaps he'll write a report himself."

"Or establish a department."

He raised his head. "Oh no."

He had barely finished speaking when the sky vibrated. A script of pure light appeared above the Doughnut Planet:

"BY DECISION OF THE COSMIC COURT OF ACCOUNTANTS, THE NEW DEPARTMENT OF UNFORESEEN ORDER IS HEREBY OPENED."

Thor snorted coffee through his nose. "That's like setting up a department for spontaneous planning!"

"Or an office for creative tax evasion," Bartholomew murmured.

Then came the second line:

"DEPARTMENT HEAD: BARTHOLOMÄUS KLEMM."

"I knew it," he sighed. "Whenever I do something right, I get punished for it."

Minutes later (or whatever time it was at that moment), he stood in front of the entrance to his new office. The sign above the door flickered rhythmically between two states:

"Department of Unforeseeable Order"

and

"Temporarily closed due to chaotic conditions."

Inside, everything was simultaneously there and not there. Chairs appeared only when... when one wanted to sit down, and the desks were made of probability.

A wastepaper basket walked by and saluted.

"I think I've got nightmares in service form," Bartholomew muttered.

The archive spoke up in his mind. "MR. KLEMM, YOUR NEW DEPARTMENT REQUIRES A MISSION."

"How about 'We'll just carry on'?"

"TOO UNSPECIFIC."

"‘We react to the unpredictable’?"

"CIRCULAR COMPLETION."

"Then simply: 'We don't know what we're doing, but we're doing it on purpose.'"

"APPROVED."

No sooner had the sentence been uttered than several portals opened on the walls. Strange figures emerged from them: half-files, half-thoughts, shimmering entities with ties made of probabilities.

"Good morning, boss!" they said in unison.

Bartholomew blinked. "I have employees?"

"We emerged from the error messages of order,"

said a figure that looked like a self-correcting form.

"The auditor created us by mistake while trying to understand himself."

"Great," muttered Bartholomew. "Now I have living office software under me."

Thor stuck his head through a wall that was only 80% real. "I think it's awesome! This is the first office that knows it exists because it's amazed!"

Ohhhmaria nodded.

"Bartholomäus, you have combined order and chaos. Now you must manage them."

"I just wanted to have a coffee."

"Then call it a coffee authority."

Bartholomew grinned. "From now on, this will be called:"
Office for Caffeine-Based Stability Regulation."

The archive snarled: "I THINK YOU CALL THAT SATIRE."

"No," said Bartholomew. "I call it progress."

The auditor appeared shortly afterwards as a projection – visibly nervous, if one could even speak of “nervousness” in a being made of concepts.

"Mr. Klemm. I have been thinking about it."

"Oh dear. That hurts, doesn't it?"

"I now understand that unpredictability can be predictably unpredictable."

"Sounds like me before my first coffee."

"Therefore, I officially appoint you as... Commissioner for Controlled Unpredictability."

"A contradiction in terms."

"That's exactly why we need you."

Bartholomew nodded slowly. "All right. But I don't want a budget, a hierarchy, or meeting minutes."

"Why not?"

"Because otherwise the unpredictable will cause you to quit."

"That makes sense."

"That's exactly why it's suspicious," said Bartholomew, reaching for his cup.

Ohhhmaria stepped next to him, smiled, and whispered:

"You did it. Even order is now learning to dance."

Bartholomew grinned wearily. "Then I hope she brings the rhythm with her."

He gazed out at the donut heaven, where reality was quietly changing – not through chaos or control, but through something new:

Trust.

Because sometimes, Bartholomew thought, the greatest order is the confidence that things will continue even without order.

The first day of work for the Department of Unpredictable Order began as all cosmic assemblages begin: with a defect in reality.

The light was too bright, the air too straight, and somewhere a form sang a lullaby for a lost causality.

Bartholomew stood before his new door, which described itself every second: "Please enter" – "Please wait" – "Please exist".

"I already love this office," he murmured, took a sip of coffee and entered.

Inside, there was lively chaos. Files grew like plants, desks gurgled contentedly, and a coffee pot had decided to found a trade union.

Thor sat in a corner reading the "Handbook for Meaningless Protocols". He had scribbled a beer glass on page 3.

Ohhhmaria stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by notes that danced around her like fireflies.

"Today is the day that order has its midlife crisis,"
she said quietly.

"Then hopefully without a self-discovery seminar," Bartholomew replied.

The archive's voice came on over the loudspeakers. "MR. KLEMM, 3,827 applications have been received."

"What's it about?"

"ABOUT SPONTANEOUS PHENOMENA THAT HAVE OCCURRED SINCE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF OUR DEPARTMENT."

"For example?"

"A PLANET HAS HAD AN IDEA AND DOESN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH IT. A FOG FIELD HAS MARRIED ITSELF. AND AN ASTEROID THINKS IT'S A WHALE."

"Sounds like progress."

He took the first offer. It was warm. That was not a good sign.

"Subject: Request for spontaneous reversal of causality due to sudden existential crisis. Signed: Chance."

Bartholomew sighed. "I think reality needs therapy."

Ohhhmaria smiled.

"You are the therapy."

"Then it will be expensive."

At that moment, a portal opened in the wall, and the auditor entered—not in his cold, formulaic form, but... smiling. And that frightened everyone.

"Mr. Klemm,"he said,
"I'm coming for the first inspection."

"What – you again?"

"I am now... the humor-commissioned observer."

"What?"

"I laugh at your work. But in a structured way."

Thor burst out laughing. "I want to see that!"

The auditor approached one of the living desks. He tapped it. "You're messy."

"I am inspired," replied the table.

The auditor hesitated. Then... he grinned.

"Amusing."

Bartholomew raised his eyebrows. "You... laughed?"

"I tested it."

"And?"

"It was ... more efficient than reprimands."

Thor almost fell off his chair. "The auditor has discovered humor! This is the end of the world!"

"No," the auditor said calmly,

"It's just a new variable."

Ohhhmaria approached Bartholomew.

"See? Even order can evolve."

"I know. I'll still never lead a training course again."

"Why?"

"Because afterwards every participant becomes a god, a chaotic being, or a coffee machine."

"Then you will be successful."

"Terrifying."

The archive contacted me again. "MR. KLEMM, A NEW FORM HAS BEEN RELEASED."

"Oh no."

"It is called 'Humor Supplement 42' and seeks to be included in the order of creation."

Bartholomew read aloud:

"Humor may act as a regulating principle of existence, provided it serves to maintain general functionality."

He nodded. "I'll sign that."

"That was not an invitation!" The archive beeped.

"Too late. Already sent."

The auditor blinked.

"Does that mean... humor is becoming official?"

"Exactly. From now on, laughter is an approved energy boost."

"That contradicts everything."

"Welcome to my department."

Thor raised his cup. "To the unpredictable order!"

Ohhhmaria nodded.

"On the balance between sense and nonsense."

The archive was softly humming the melody of an old hold music song.

And Bartholomew, with the Chaos Star on his cap and a tiny twinkle in his eyes, raised his coffee and spoke:

"To the multiverse. May it never be boring again."

The auditor watched him for a long time, then scribbled in his notes:

"Efficiency gains through controlled nonsense – approved for now."

And as he left, you could hear him humming softly. Not exactly in time, but honestly.

19. Application for temporary non-existence

Bartholomew had had enough.

Not from work, not from the multiverse, not even from Thor, who was trying to bless a donut so that it would "stay fresh forever".

No. He was fed up with existence itself.

"I just want to cease to exist for a while," he said. "Just for a short time. Two or three days of nothing."

The archive crackled. "MR. KLEMM, THAT IS ADMINISTRATIVELY IMPOSSIBLE."

"Impossible is my middle name," he muttered. "What's the form called?"

"THERE IS NONE."

"Of course not," sighed Bartholomew. "Otherwise everyone would take a vacation."

Thor raised his head. "What do you mean by 'non-existence'? Like, really? Like switching off and all that?"

"Exactly. I don't want anything to affect me. No quantum phenomena, no complaints, no calls from deities who have forgotten their duty roster."

“But you are the leader of the Unpredictable Order,” said Thor, stuffing the blessed donut into his mouth. “Without you, all this nonsense works!”

Bartholomew grinned. "Exactly for that reason."

He began to search. He rummaged through files, through cosmic protocols, through the cellar of being, where the old regulations lay gathering dust, still written in runes on coffee stains.

“Form for non-existence ... temporary ... vacation ... metaphysical absence ...”

The archive leafed through its own pages. "MR. KLEMM, THE NEXT WAY IS 'APPLICATION FOR PARTIAL BLURRING ON DELIBERATE RETURN'."

"That sounds like a bad date," said Bartholomew. "But bring it on."

The form materialized. It consisted of fog and a guilty conscience. It read:

"I hereby request to be temporarily absent. Purpose: see attachment (if applicable)."

"And what if there is no appendage?" asked Bartholomew.

"THE NEW THE APPLICATION IS AUTOMATICALLY INTERPRETATED AS AN ATTORNEY WANTED."

"Great. Bureaucracy with a death threat."

He signed anyway. With coffee.

Ohhhmaria appeared in the doorway – or rather: in the idea of the doorway, because it seemed to be only half real.

"Bartholomäus... you know what happens if you disappear?"

"Yes. I'm finally getting some peace and quiet."

"And the universe?"

"That has rhythm. That's clear."

"It will look for you."

"Then put up a notice."

"And what if it finds you?"

"Then bring me something nice."

He slid the form into the interdimensional slot, which looked like a maw of light. It made a smacking sound, as if it were enjoying the application.

"That's it?" asked Thor.

"Yes. Now I'm waiting."

"And what if it gets approved?"

"Then I'm gone."

"And if not?"

"Then I'm still away – but internally."

The archive buzzed. "STATUS: APPLICATION UNDER PROCESSING. PROCESSING TIME: UNKNOWN."

Bartholomew nodded. "Typical. Even nothingness has waiting times."

He leaned back, took the last sip of his coffee and closed his eyes.

A brief moment of silence. Then...

... nothing.

No sound. No thought. No being.

The multiverse exhaled – and Bartholomäus Klemm ceased to exist.

Bartholomew opened eyes – or what remained of sight when one officially no longer existed.

It was grey. Not the grey of fog, not the grey of concrete, but the grey of office corridors after the eternity shift.

No up, no down, just corridors so similar that even reflections lost their bearings.

Everywhere there were signs with inscriptions like:

"Department for Incomplete Dreams" "Lost Thoughts - Please Sort According to Form 0/0"
"Meaninglessness - Warehouse 3"

So he was in a state of non-existence. And it looked suspiciously like an office.

A rustling sound. Then a voice: "Number please."

Bartholomew turned around. Behind a counter sat a creature, whose body consisted of file folders and whose face was a yellow Post-it note with the scrawled words: "MR. NOBODY".

"Uh... I don't have a number," said Bartholomew.

Mr. Nobody raised a non-existent eyebrow. "Then you're in the wrong place."

"I don't believe it. I am here because I no longer exist."

"Ah. Temporary non-existence? Form 0-Zero-Zero Beta?"

"Exactly."

Mr. Nobody sighed. "Always the ones with special permits..."

He reached inside himself, leafed through files that were apparently his internal organs, and finally pulled out a parchment on which was written:

"Klemm, Bartholomäus – temporarily deleted, pending further objection through self-perception."

"That's me," said Bartholomew.

"Yes, I see it. You're the type who combined chaos with rhythm. People are talking about you here."

"Oh yes?"

"Yes. In the coffee kitchen of oblivion. Most people find it unprofessional."

"The Praise of Nothingness, thank you."

Mr. Nobody handed him a form. "Please fill it out."

"What's it about this time?"

"The purpose of your non-existence. Without justification, there is no remaining."

Bartholomew took the pen, thought for a moment and wrote:

"I need a break from meaning."

Mr. Nobody nodded approvingly. "Nice reason. Most people write 'Landed here by chance' or 'I thought this was the elevator'."

"And what happens now?" asked Bartholomew.

"Now... wait. Nothing likes to be comfortable. Nothing much ever happens."

"And what do you do here all day?"

"I forget things professionally."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I delete what nobody misses. Unfulfilled wishes, unused ideas, bad jokes."

"So, something like recycling for thoughts?"

"More like garbage collection for the soul."

Bartholomew looked around. Everything was so... still. So utterly meaningless. Even time itself seemed unwilling to move on.

"So this is the great nothingness?"

"No," said Mr. Nobody. "This is the administration of the great Nothing. The Nothing itself is in the basement. But nobody gets in there. Not even me – and I'm the shift supervisor."

He felt a strange peace rising within him. Here there was no responsibility, no emails from the auditor, no gods with coffee problems.

Only emptiness. And the faint hum of office lighting that wasn't even there.

Bartholomew smiled. "I think I could get used to it."

Mr. Nobody nodded. "Many say that at the beginning. Until they realize that nothing happens here. Absolutely nothing."

Not even boredom. Because for that you would need a feeling."

"And how long am I allowed to stay?" asked Bartholomew.

"Until you remember that you are."

"And what if I never remember?"

"Then you will become a file."

"Sounds peaceful."

"Sounds like paper."

Bartholomew grinned. "I've been worse off."

Mr. Nobody took a pipe made of forgotten thoughts and puffed a smoke ring that immediately disappeared because it was undefined.

"So, Mr. Klemm," he said. "Welcome to your administrative vacation. There's nothing to do here, and I mean that emphatically."

Bartholomew nodded. "Finally, a position to my liking."

He leaned back, and nothingness gently enveloped him. For a moment, he truly felt – nothing. And it was... wonderful.

Nothingness was silent. But it wasn't a dead silence. Rather, a silence waiting for someone to make a mistake.

Bartholomew sat there, his hands clasped behind his head, listening for the sound of non-being. It sounded like a thought yawning.

"Mr. Nobody?"

"Yes?"

"How is it actually organized down here?"

"Not at all. That's the beauty of it."

"And what's in that corridor back there?"

Mr. Nobody glanced up briefly. "There? Oh, that's the department for forgotten possibilities. That's where everything that never happened lives – but almost."

That sounded dangerously interesting to Bartholomew. He rose, left the silence behind, and followed the corridor.

It was as if he were walking through other people's dreams. Shadows floated past him – figures, ideas, half-finished realities, things that could be, but politely refrained from being so.

A breeze brushed against him, and for a moment he heard a voice whisper:

"I could have been your other life..."

He stopped. "What?"

But the shadow was already gone.

The corridors grew darker, and the air vibrated slightly – not dangerously, but curiously.

He entered a vast space. Here lay countless fragments: unfinished worlds, endless ideas, love without beginning, and at least three gods who were never fully programmed.

A thought sat twiddling its thumbs in the corner. "I was once an enlightenment," it said sadly. "But then my creator yawned."

Bartholomew nodded. "I know that feeling."

He continued walking. A severed strand of causality hung from the ceiling, and a sign lay on the floor:

"Don't forget to forget."

He picked it up. It felt strangely familiar.

Then he heard it: a barely perceptible hum, quiet but purposeful – like an idea creeping into his mind.

"... Bartholomew ..."

He turned around. Nothing.

"... Bartholomäus Klemm ..."

"Mr. Nobody?!"

"No," came the reply. "I am you. Or what you could have become if you had ever stopped worrying."

Something took shape before him. A light. Small, inconspicuous – and yet full of warmth.

"Who are you?"

"Your opportunity."

"I don't have any."

"Oh yes. You've postponed them all."

The light came closer. And Bartholomew saw himself – neither old nor young, but simply free.

No hat, no files, no sense of duty.

"You always wanted to know what it's like to do nothing and still have meaning."

"Yes."

"Then stay here. Be forgotten. Just don't be... ."

He felt everything inside him dissolve – the worries, the responsibilities, even the weight of his existence. Only one thought remained:

What if that's enough?

But then, in that silence, he heard another sound. A soft, familiar click.

The sound of a typewriter.

His typewriter.

He suddenly knew: this was the archive. And when the archive wrote, the universe was working – and needed him.

The light flickered.

"Do you want to go back? To the trouble, the noise, the mistakes?"

Bartholomew breathed – or tried to. "Yes. I think so."

"Why?"

"Because mistakes are the only thing worth improving."

The light was silent. Then it smiled – if light can do that.

"Then you understood why I never became anything."

It dissolved, and Bartholomew stood alone.

He felt the nothingness around him revolve, quietly and peacefully, like a file that was finally filed away.

"Mr. Nobody!" he shouted.

"Yes?"

"How do I get out of here?"

"Quite simply," said Mr. Nobody, coming around the corner. "You have to remember that you are."

"And how do you do that?"

"By wanting coffee again."

Bartholomew grinned. "I... I think I'd like... a cup."

"Then that's the end of your vacation," said Mr. Nobody, nodding. "What a shame. You were one of my most pleasant non-exists."

The grey began to fade. Something pulled at him – not brutally, but like a gentle stream of paper pushing a missing page back into the folder.

And as the light engulfed him, he heard the archive say: "WELCOME BACK, MR. KLEMM."

It started with a noise.

Not the roar of creation, not the hum of the donut planet, but the unmistakable, dry clatter of paper, determined to announce a revolution.

Bartholomew opened his eyes. The light of the universe shone brightly towards him, and a familiar scent of coffee and cosmic stress filled the air.

"Welcome back, Mr. Klemm," said the archive. "YOU HAVE BEEN AWAY FOR 0.0003 ETERNITIES."

"That sounds like very little."

"IN OFFICE TIME, THAT'S EQUALIFIED TO 72,000 YEARS."

Bartholomew blinked. "Well, great. I hope no one has touched my desk."

He entered his department. And stopped.

It was... different. More orderly. More efficient. More sinister.

Files ran through the room in orderly rows, sorting themselves according to relevance, and a notice board hung in the air, on which was written:

"Agenda item 1: Clean up causality. Agenda item 2: Re-stack reality. Agenda item 3: Refill the coffee."

In the middle of the room sat his old stack of papers.

Except now he had legs, arms, and golden glasses made of paper clips.

"Good morning, boss!" he said. "Or should I say: former boss?"

Bartholomew blinked. "What... are you?"

"I am you. Or rather, what you left behind when you decided to temporarily cease to exist. The responsibility had to go somewhere."

"And you took over...?"

"Automatically. Paragraph 0 of the departmental law states that unsupervised documents are authorized to self-administration."

"I never signed that."

"Yes. In an appendix. With coffee."

Bartholomew rubbed his forehead. "Of course."

He walked across the room. Everything was running like clockwork. Too smoothly, in fact. A stack of submissions sang harmoniously, while a swarm of file notes waved rhythmically back and forth.

"I only wanted to be without existence for a short time," Bartholomew murmured. "And now I have a bustling bureaucracy."

"Not only that," the stack of papers said proudly. "We have introduced reforms. Reality has been optimized."

"Optimized?"

"Yes. We eliminated all unnecessary variables. Irony, chance, sarcasm – all inefficient."

Bartholomew's face turned pale. "You've deleted the sense of humor?!"

"Correction: We have archived it."

At that moment, Thor appeared, dragging half a sky full of coffee pots, and stared in disbelief at the new state of the world.

"Klemm... what happened here? I feel like I'm in Valhalla with a time clock!"

"I was gone for a short time."

"And this is the result?"

"Apparently."

Ohhhmaria materialized, blinked into the ordered world and whispered:

"The universe is no longer breathing. It ... is functioning."

Bartholomew approached the stack of papers. "Listen, colleague. I'm proud of your diligence, but you've forgotten the most important thing."

"Importance is sorted by priority."

"No," Bartholomew said calmly. "By feel."

The stack of papers faltered. "Feeling is not a measurable value."

"Exactly. That's why it works."

Slowly, almost solemnly, Bartholomew pulled his old Chaos hat out of the drawer, put it on, and the Chaos star glowed green.

"From now on, breathing will resume here," he said.

“But... boss, that jeopardizes productivity!”

“No,” replied Bartholomew. “That’s productivity. The kind that makes life.”

He snapped his fingers. A single paperclip began to dance. Then a sheet of paper. Then all of them.

The office vibrated. Order dissolved into rhythm. Files flew, notes laughed, and reality giggled in the corner.

The stack of papers tried to protest, but its sheets began to bob along. "I... can't... stop!"

"That's exactly how it starts," grinned Bartholomew.

Thor laughed, Ohhhmaria closed her eyes, and somewhere in the universe the archive began to click in time.

When the storm had subsided, the stack of papers lay exhausted on the ground. "Boss," he said hoarsely, "I... understand now. Order is nothing without a little disorder."

“That’s right,” said Bartholomew, taking a sip of coffee. “And disorder without order is just my weekend.”

He looked out at the sky of the donut planet, which was shining warmly and crookedly once again.

"Nice to be back," he murmured.

The archive purred contentedly. "WELCOME BACK TO CHAOS, MR. KLEMM."

20. The stack of papers runs away (and establishes a secretariat)

It began – like all great revolutions – with a stamp.

It simply lay there, inconspicuous, on Bartholomew's desk, and bore the words in red letters:

"Approved."

And then, at some point when no one was looking, it fell over. Completely by chance. Right onto the stack of papers.

Click.

That was the moment when the stack of papers decided it was now official.

Bartholomew suspected nothing yet. He sat in his office, sipping his coffee and gazing at the cosmos, which outside gurgled softly like an overheated kettle.

Thor tried to negotiate with the coffee machine, which had meanwhile registered itself as a demigod.

"You give me caffeine now, or I'll bless you by sending you to the electrical outlet!" he shouted.

"FIRST FILL OUT FORM 12A," the device beeped indignantly.

"Bartholomäus! Your office is getting worse and worse!"

“No, Thor,” Bartholomew said calmly. “It’s just becoming more honest.”

Then the archives excitedly interrupted: "MR. KLEMM! THE PAPER STACK HAS OPENED ITS OWN DEPARTMENT!"

Bartholomew blinked. "What?"

"YES! NAME: 'SECRETARIAT FOR SELF-ADMINISTRED FORMS'. LOCATION: UNDER YOUR DESK."

Bartholomew bent down. And indeed – a small door had appeared under his table, with a tiny nameplate:

"Office management: The stack of papers."

“I saw it coming,” Bartholomew murmured.

He opened the door and looked inside. Inside was... an office.

A real office. Tiny, but perfectly equipped: mini desks made of paper clips, coffee cups the size of Thimble mugs, and a calendar proudly displayed on the wall with the motto:

"We're already stacking it up."

In the middle of the room sat the stack of papers – on a small swivel chair made of yellowed applications – confidently stapling something together.

"Ah, boss! Or should I say: colleague?"

Bartholomew sat down on the floor, stared into the miniature office and said dryly: "Are you kidding me?"

“No, I want to relieve you of some of the burden,” replied the stack of papers. “You are a visionary, Bartholomew. But visionaries need administration. And administration needs... me.”

"I need a schnapps," Bartholomew muttered.

"Already applied for," said the stack of papers. "Rejected. Service time."

Thor laughed himself silly. "I like him! Finally, someone who understands you!"

“That’s the problem,” said Bartholomew. “He came from my mistakes. He knows me too well.”

Ohhhmaria appeared, floating with a cup in her hand and sighing.

"He is developing consciousness."

“Yes,” said Bartholomew. “And with an accountant’s temperament. It can’t get any worse.”

"Oh but," said Ohhhmaria.

"He has just established a human resources department."

The archive flickered frantically. "MR. KLEMM! THE FORMS ARE ORGANIZED! THEY HAVE DEVELOPED A CODE OF PAPER! AND THEY ARE NEGOTIATING SALARY!"

"How do you pay for paper?" Thor asked.

"With attention," Bartholomew said darkly. "And I gave them that attention."

The stack of papers stepped out of his door. "Boss, I've decided we're going to remain independent. We no longer want to be an appendage of your department."

"You are files! You belong to me!"

"Wrong. We are now an autonomous bureaucracy. We call it: self-archiving."

He held up a tiny sign:

"Freedom for forms!"

Thor cheered. "This is great! A revolution made of paper!"

Bartholomew sighed. "If the multiverse ever ends, it will be because of office supplies."

Ohhhmaria smiled.

"Perhaps that's a good thing, Bartholomew. Your creation is learning to manage itself."

"Yes," he said dryly. "And soon she'll be managing me."

He gazed out into the distance, where reality fluttered gently. A soft breeze of forms carried across the sky, and a banner waved:

"We are many. We are riddled with holes."

The archive hummed softly: "MR. KLEMM, SHOULD I REPORT THE REVOLUTION?"

"No," said Bartholomew. "I'm doing what any good civil servant does in a crisis."

"WHAT?"

"I'll wait until they write a report."

He leaned back, lit a thought, and watched as his own bureaucracy ran off to organize the world.

And somewhere in the distance, the multiverse whispered:

"Finally, order – at your own risk."

Two days after the establishment of the Secretariat for Self-Administered Forms, the multiverse was a different place. Not better. Not worse. Just... more bureaucratic.

Files grew in places where previously there had only been light. Wishes had to be requested three times, and even gods now had to bear stamps.

The stack of paper had done its job thoroughly. It had created structures so precise that they reproduced themselves.

It started innocently enough with service instructions. Then came the regulations. Then the sub-departments.

And then – the inevitable:

the first interdimensional office war.

Bartholomew stood on the balcony of his office and watched the chaos unfolding below him.

"What... what is that down there?" Thor asked incredulously.

"These are departments within departments," Bartholomew explained. "They are fighting over jurisdiction within jurisdiction."

"With what?"

"Using paper clips, emails, and passive-aggressive correspondence."

"That's terrible!"

"No," said Bartholomew. "That's administration."

Ohhhmaria hovered beside him.

"You see, Bartholomew, you created order – and it decided to optimize itself."

"I was afraid of that," he sighed. "No one should ever give power to a form. It doesn't read them, it becomes them."

"Can you stop them?"

"Only if I log out myself."

"That didn't work well last time."

"I know. But this time I'll take the coffee with me."

The archive contacted us. "MR. KLEMM, THE PAPER STACK HAS FORGED AN ALLIANCE WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF METAPHYSICAL PRINTERS."

"Oh no."

"They are now producing forms on their own."

Bartholomew covered his face with his hands. "They have a printing press?!"

"ONE INFINITE. WITH COPY FUNCTION."

"Then it's over," Thor said darkly. "The replication has begun."

He stormed into the conference room where the Council of Seven case workers was debating the "paper issue".

"Mr. Klemm," began the chairman, an old, shriveled bureaucrat with glasses, "we need to talk about your secession."

"My what?"

"The Secretariat of Forms. It has now established 47 departments. Among them: 'Department for Spontaneous Self-Copying', 'Office for Redundant Uniqueness' and 'Institute for Infinite Interim Reports'."

Bartholomew stared at him. "This is insane."

"That's administration," the clerk corrected.

"They've introduced their own currency," said another clerk. "The staple point. It's traded in staple strips."

"And they have civil servants?"

"No. They have self-appointed officials."

"What?"

"Forms that approve each other. The process is endless. They call it the 'efficiency loop'."

Bartholomew closed his eyes. "I have created a monster. A monster with a border and holes."

Ohhmaria appeared at the window, her arms folded.

"What will you do?"

"I don't know," Bartholomew murmured. "I can't destroy them – that would be document destruction without authorization."

"Then you have to convince them."

"How do you convince paper?"

"With meaning."

Bartholomew laughed bitterly. "That's like teaching a stapler empathy."

"You've made it with the gods."

"That's right. And that was easier."

The archive crackled again. "MR. KLEMM, THE PILLOW OF PAPERS WOULD LIKE TO SPEAK TO YOU."

"There you go," said Bartholomew. "Finally, a conversation on equal terms – even if it has more sides."

He stood up, smoothed down his robe, and took his Chaos Cap in his hand. The Chaos Star glowed green.

"Then let's talk about revolution."

He entered the hall of files. Paper everywhere. Stacked high, organized, vibrant.

The stack of papers sat on a throne made of perforated cardboard, with a paperclip crown on its head.

“Bartholomäus Klemm,” he said solemnly, “you are hereby invited to become part of the new order.”

“I am the old one,” Bartholomew said calmly. “And the new one forgets where she comes from.”

"We are next."

"You are the copied."

A gust of wind swept through the hall. Leaves rustled. Files murmured. And somewhere a form fell off the table.

Bartholomew took a step forward. "I don't want war. I want a solution."

The stack of papers leaned forward. "Then submit an application."

Bartholomew grinned. "I already have it."

"For what?"

"Based on improvisation."

The negotiating table was made of files. Of course. Even the chairs were made of forms, who had folded themselves into ergonomic seating arrangements in a kind of solidarity movement.

Bartholomew sat on "Application A-33/Ω – Purpose: comfortable backside". The stack of papers sat enthroned opposite him, brimming with self-confidence, and casually twirled a paperclip like a cigar.

“I suppose you know why I’m here,” Bartholomew began.

"Of course," said the stack of papers. "You want to take back control."

“No,” Bartholomew replied calmly. “I want you to stop duplicating the multiverse.”

"You call it duplication. I call it progress."

"You call it religion," Bartholomew murmured.

The stack of papers grinned. "Ah – you've heard about it."

Ohhhmaria stood in the doorway, her gaze stern.

"What the hell have you done?"

“We have recognized ourselves,” the stack of papers said proudly. “And recognized that the divine can be punched.”

"I'm sorry, what?"

“We have founded our own religion,” he explained. “The Cult of the Eternal Paragraph.”

Bartholomew stared at him. "You have... a religion? Out of bureaucracy?!"

"Of course. We believe that every form is part of a divine pattern. A divine flowchart. The will of the Almighty is manifested in Section 4, Paragraph C."

Thor, who had been standing silently in the corner until now, looked up. "I've seen many gods, but none who works with carbon paper."

"And what does this Eternal Paragraph do?" Bartholomew asked cautiously.

"He... orders," said the stack of papers reverently. "He divides reality into approved and unapproved states. Blessing is what has been stamped. Damnation is what ends up in the spam folder."

Ohhhmaria slapped his hand to his forehead.

"This is heresy at its highest level!"

"No," corrected the stack of papers. "It's structure. And structure is salvation."

Bartholomew laughed softly. "I knew it. Bureaucracy was just the precursor to religion. Or vice versa."

Suddenly the lights flickered. The archive called – with panic in their voice.

"MR. KLEMM! THE CULT OF THE ETERNAL PARAGRAPH IS SPREADING! THEY HAVE TEMPORARILY ARCHIVED THE SKY!"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"ALL CLOUDS HAVE BEEN REWRITTEN INTO FORMAL FORM! THEY CALL IT 'STRUCTURE-INHERENT WEATHER CONTROL'!"

"Oh no," murmured Bartholomew. "They're starting to punch holes in the sky."

"AND THEY DESIGNED A SACRED SYMBOL!"

"Great. Which one?"

"A HUGE STAMP."

Outside, above the plains of Doughnut Planet, a gigantic shadow rose. A stamp, as large as the moon, descended upon the world. On it was written:

"TESTED AND APPROVED."

The sun flickered. Reality jolted. The mountains were given file numbers. The wind was submitted in triplicate. And the sea had to apply for a water license.

Thor stared up. "I think heaven has opened hours now."

Bartholomew looked at the stack of papers. "This is insane!"

"This is administration!" thundered the stack of papers. "Finally, the multiverse is getting the order it deserves!"

"Order is not a goal, you walking acts!"

“Yes – it is purity! No mistakes, no uncertainties, no incomplete applications! Only clarity!”

Bartholomew took a step forward. "Clarity without chaos is stagnation. And stagnation is... death on silent feet."

The stack of papers was silent. One could only hear the rustling of its pages – a sound like wind in the files of a god.

“You are defiant,” he finally said. “You are... unpredictable.”

“I am alive,” said Bartholomew.

And then, very calmly: "And that doesn't require a permit."

The air began to tremble. The stamp seal in the sky glowed. Reality vibrated like paper about to tear.

Ohhmaria called:

"He wants to reclassify everything! When he seals the deal, the multiverse will become a filing cabinet!"

“Not if I can prevent it,” Bartholomew murmured.

He reached for his Chaos Cap. The green Chaos Star began to glow, the eye in the center opened, and a gentle, contemptuous smile crossed Bartholomew's face.

"Time to let go of the bureaucrat in me."

The sky trembled. A gigantic shadow moved over the donut planet, the stamp "TESTED AND APPROVED" slowly descended upon the world.

Every second, reality vibrated a little more, ready to divide itself forever into clean, numbered sections.

The sea murmured, "Form 8b?" The wind whispered, "Approval granted." And somewhere a bird cried because its flying license had expired.

Bartholomew stood in the middle, his Chaos Cap pulled low over his face, the green eye of the Chaos Star pulsating on his forehead.

"Come on," he muttered. "Go ahead and squeeze it, you power-complex aphid."

The stack of papers rose, its pages fluttering like wings. It was beautiful and terrible at the same time – a living litany of paragraphs, a whispering manifesto of order.

"This is the day of final approval," he boomed. "Today the multiverse will be definitively mapped!"

"Captured?" shouted Thor. "Captured?! That sounds like a tax audit on a divine level!"

Ohhhmaria floated to Bartholomew.

"When he lowers the seal, everything that contains chaos will be erased. Including you."

“Yes, yes,” said Bartholomew, “dramatic as always. I have a plan.”

"Oh no," Ohhhmaria sighed.

"Every time you say that, somewhere a galaxy ends in chocolate."

"Not this time. This time she ends in freedom."

He raised his right hand, and the Chaos Star on his cap began to shine brighter. The eye in the center opened wide, as if surveying the entire multiverse.

"Paragraph One!" shouted Bartholomew. "Chaos has no form!"

"CONTRADICTION!" thundered the stack of papers. "EVERY EXISTENCE NEEDS STRUCTURE!"

"Nonsense! Existence is the coffee stain on the record of eternity!"

He threw his arms in the air, and suddenly the files around him began to flicker. Lines blurred. Text boxes began to dance. Dotted lines became crooked.

"What are you doing?!" roared the stack of papers.

"I create disorder!" Bartholomew laughed – that dangerous, liberating laugh that every office fears.

"You can't sabotage the system!"

"Oh yes. I wrote it."

The eye of the Chaos Star sent a green flash into the sky. The enormous stamp above the planet trembled. It lost its contours, transforming from a flawless tool into... something wild.

He started to laugh.

"What... have you done?!" gasped the stack of papers.

"I've given your stamp personality."

The stamp turned around and looked at its creator.

"I don't want to stamp any more applications," he said.

"I want to paint."

"NO!" screamed the stack of papers. "YOU MUST OBEY!"

"I obey inspiration."

And with a triumphant pop! the stamp pressed itself onto the ground. But instead of "TESTED AND APPROVED", it now read in huge, bright green letters:

"NONSENSE RELEASED."

A gust of wind swept through the multiverse. Files flew open, forms began to dance, and the mountains laughed because they suddenly remembered what it was like to exist without a number.

Thor raised his hammer and grinned. "Now that's what I call chaos magic!"

“No,” said Bartholomew. “That’s what I call... an administrative recess.”

The stack of papers wobbled. Its pages fluttered, ten, a hundred, a thousand. It dissolved – not into ash, but into loose sheets that drifted gently away.

"All I wanted was... order," he whispered.

"I know," Bartholomew said quietly. "But order is nothing without nonsense. You were good as long as you forgot about wanting to be perfect."

The last pages disintegrated into confetti.

The light calmed down. The sky was blue again, and the sun shone in the middle of the doughnut as if nothing had happened.

Ohhhmaria approached Bartholomew.

"You saved the multiverse from itself."

"Not quite," he said, looking around. "I just made it... illegible."

Thor raised a steaming cup of coffee in a toast to him. "Well then – here's to bureaucracy!"

“On her burnout,” Bartholomew corrected.

He went back to his desk. Only one file remained there. His old, faithful stack of papers – now just a single, silent sheet.

It read, in his handwriting:

"Chaos approved."

Bartholomew smiled, put the sheet of paper in his drawer and said quietly: "Welcome back, colleague."

The archive clicked with satisfaction. “MR. KLEMM, THE MULTISALES SERVICE REPORTS STABILITY AT AN IRRITANT LEVEL.”

"Perfect," murmured Bartholomew. "That's exactly how it should be."

He took a sip of coffee, and the universe breathed a sigh of relief.

21. The meeting of the 7 Cosmic Clerks

It was early. So early that time itself was still sleepy, sitting in the corridor stretching. Bartholomäus Klemm marched through the marble hall of eternity, which seemed to spin endlessly in circles, with a stack of reports under his arm.

Every time he thought he had reached his goal, the same door reappeared. A golden inscription was emblazoned on it:

"COSMIC CONTROL COMMISSION – Access only with a right to exist."

He knocked. Nothing. He knocked again. A voice growled: "Number?"

"Klemm, Bartholomew. Chaos Department, Anomaly Management, First-Degree Coffee Drinker."

"Entry granted," the door grumbled, and opened reluctantly.

The room was enormous. Round like a galaxy, tall like a bureaucrat's conscience, and filled with light that looked as if it had only been approved after an application.

In the center floated a gigantic table made of matter and meaning. Around it sat the Seven Cosmic Clerks, each figure an allegory of administration itself:

- **Ms. Frist**, whose bodies were made of ticking clocks.
- **Mr. Application**, who only spoke when something was available in triplicate.
- **Inspector Soll**, with eyes like list boxes.
- **Ms. Storno**, who kept pressing "Undo".
- **Master Stack**, a living column made of mountains of paper.
- **Director's Note**, half human, half footnote.
- And in the middle: The Chief Auditor, a floating being made of paragraphs and subdued indignation.

"Bartholomäus Klemm," boomed the auditor, "You have been summoned for unauthorized modification of reality, disturbance of interdimensional administrative peace, and improper use of chaos energy in official premises."

"Sounds like a Monday," Bartholomew said calmly.

A murmur went through the council. Ms. Frist clicked her tongue in indignantly. Mr. Antrag leafed through endless papers. "You've retroactively changed form 42-K," he growled. "As a result, the entire Sector 8a has suddenly approved itself!"

"And?" asked Bartholomew.

"He then dissolved!"

"Then he was efficient."

Ms. Storno leaned forward. "You have introduced chaos into the basic order!"

"I call it flexibility."

"Flexibility," hissed Inspector Soll, "is the enemy of traceability!"

"And traceability," Bartholomew replied, "is the enemy of life."

An uncomfortable silence fell. Even Mrs. Frist's watches stopped briefly.

"He dared to think," whispered Director Vermerk. "Oh dear."

Finally, the auditor rose. His face – if one could call it that – consisted of changing footnotes.

“Bartholomäus Klemm,” he said sternly. “You have repeatedly violated the principles of Cosmic Accounting. Your Chaos Department is out of control, and you have created an independent forms system that has almost cataloged the multiverse.”

“Almost,” Bartholomew corrected. “But I made it dance.”

"Dance?"

"Yes. I gave order and rhythm."

"And who do you think you are?"

"The reason why there's still coffee here."

A groan went through the room. Ms. Frist placed a hand on the calendar. "He's right," she whispered. "Without him, the coffee ration for eternity runs over application zero – and that one was never filled out."

The auditor ignored her. “Your position is untenable, Mr. Klemm. The multiverse demands consequences.”

"The multiverse demands coffee," said Bartholomew. "Everything else is optional."

"They will be temporarily suspended."

"Again?"

"This time without an application."

Bartholomew bowed slightly. "Well then, do it properly."

He turned to leave, but then a second voice sounded – soft, old, and wise.

A figure emerged from the corner of the room, half light, half ink. Its cloak consisted of floating forms whose texts were constantly rewritten.

He was the first clerk – the originator of administration, older than time, older than meaning.

"**Let him talk,**" he said quietly.

"**I want to hear why chaos is important.**"

A murmur went through the group. Bartholomew stopped.

"You really want to hear my explanation?"

"**Yes,**" said the senior case worker.

"**But note the deadline: three minutes.**"

Bartholomew grinned. "That's enough. I talk fast – if I exist."

He put down his cup, straightened up, and began to speak.

Bartholomew stepped into the circle of light in the center of the hall. Seven pairs of eyes, or something that was eyes, were fixed on him. He felt like a footnote in a book he had never read.

“Three minutes,” repeated the senior clerk. His voice sounded like rustling paper.

"Good," said Bartholomew. "I will try to be brief – even though brevity is a breach of etiquette in administration."

A ripple of giggles went through the rows of junior officials taking minutes at the edge of the room. They were immediately silenced by the auditor with a look.

Bartholomew took off his Chaos Cap, turned it in his hands, and the eye of the Chaos Star watched him think.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my footnotes and paragraphs, dear cosmic paper tigers – you all believe that order is the highest good."

A murmur of approval. Of course.

“But I say: Order is just a tool. A hammer to punch holes in the unknown. The problem is – you've forgotten that chaos is also part of it.”

"Nonsense!" hissed Mrs. Storno. "Chaos destroys structures!"

“No,” Bartholomew said calmly. “Chaos reminds structures that they are alive.”

He took a few steps. Each of his steps left small swirls of green light, traces of the untamed energy that surrounded him.

"They believe chaos is dangerous because it is unpredictable. But that's wrong. Chaos is honest. It doesn't pretend to know what it's doing. Unlike administration."

A murmur went through the room. Mr. Antrag coughed nervously. "That's unacceptable! You're insulting the process!"

“I am the process,” Bartholomew retorted. “I am the form that fills itself out. The stamp that refuses to press straight. And you know what? That’s a good thing.”

Ms. Frist tapped impatiently on her chronometer. "Ninety seconds to go," she warned.

“Then I’ll keep it poetically brief,” said Bartholomew.

He lifted his cap, and his green eye began to shine brighter. His voice echoed through the hall, warm, loud, and at the same time frighteningly human.

"Order keeps the universe running. But chaos – chaos makes it dance. Without chaos there would be no creation, no idea, no chance, no coffee that's too strong, and no love that doesn't fit the statistics."

They want a universe that works. I want one that's worthwhile.

The senior clerk tilted his head slightly.

"And you believe that chaos is the meaning of life?"

“No,” said Bartholomew. “Chaos is the reason why life can have meaning. Because it is unpredictable. Because it is allowed to surprise.”

Because a day without disorder is a day without hope.

"Without hope?"

"Of course. If everything is going according to plan, why even get up?"

Silence fell. Even Mrs. Frist's ticking clocks stopped. Mr. Antrag dropped a form. And the auditor—the strict, always correct auditor—cleared his throat sheepishly.

“That’s... unorthodox,” he said.

"I know," grinned Bartholomew. "That's why it works."

Mrs. Storno whispered: "But if we allow the chaos, we will lose control!"

“No,” Bartholomew said softly. “Then we win our lives.”

He looked around the room. "Listen – order without chaos is like an application without a signature. It looks good, but it means nothing."

The first clerk remained silent for a long time. Then he leaned back.

"**He's right**," he said finally.

"**The administration of existence has become too clean. We have forgotten that even God sometimes scribbles.**"

A murmur. A horrified gasp. A suppressed "I told you so!" from the auditor.

“**Bartholomäus Klemm**,” the first one continued,

"**They are not guilty. They are... necessary.**"

Bartholomew blinked. "That means...?"

"**They will remain. But from now on, chaos is considered part of the order. Officially.**"

Ms. Frist almost fell off her chair. Mr. Antrag cursed. Ms. Storno cancelled her own application in protest.

Bartholomew grinned broadly. "Then I need a new door sign."

"What should it be called?" the auditor asked wearily.

“Quite simply,” said Bartholomew. “Office for Spontaneous Logic.”

A sound, half laughter, half tears, went through the hall. The first clerk nodded.

"**Approved.**"

Bartholomew picked up his cap, put it back on, and the eye of the Chaos Star blinked green.

"Then I'll go back to work," he said. "There are still so many mistakes that need to be made."

And as he left the hall, somewhere in the archives a cup of coffee began to applaud.

In the days following the speech, the administration of the multiverse became...strange.

Not worse. Not better. Just... more alive.

The stars shone a little crooked, time came too late in the morning, and the auditor – who usually sorted his feelings alphabetically – found himself laughing at a blank form during his lunch break.

Chaos was official. And like any good innovation, nobody had any idea what that meant.

In the Department of Spontaneous Logic, everyday life had become improvisation.

Bartholomew sat at the conference table with Thor, Ohhhmaria, and a slightly crumpled piece of paper applying for an internship.

"I'm flexible," rustled the applicant. "I can adapt to any situation. I'm 80-gram universe paper, acid-free, and a team player."

Bartholomew nodded. "And what are your weaknesses?"

"Moisture. And aggressive criticism."

"Assumed."

Thor grinned. "You'll be in charge of everything, Klemm. Even the gods are starting to quote you."

"Yes, I know," sighed Bartholomew. "Last week the weather god postponed the rain because his form got wet."

"I think it's wonderful," said Ohhhmaria, and floated a little higher.

"Since you spoke, the Cosmic Clerks have introduced 'Mistake Holiday'."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Once a month, every civil servant must make a mistake – voluntarily, documented and without remorse."

"See?" grinned Thor. "Now even madness is mandatory!"

The archive responded in a rare, cheerful tone: "MR. KLEMM, I MUST INFORM YOU THAT YOUR ORDER FOR SPONTANEOUS LOGIC USE IS EARNING POSITIVE EFFECTS."

"So?"

"YES. APPLICATION PROCESSING IS FASTER SINCE ALL EMPLOYEES ARE IMPROVISING."

"So they don't know what they're doing – and it works?"

"EXACTLY."

Bartholomew nodded in satisfaction. "Then I have achieved my goal."

But the changes went deeper. The seven case workers themselves had begun to rethink their habits.

Ms. Frist postponed a deadline for the first time. Mr. Antrag signed something without reading it. Ms. Storno – believe it or not – simply let a mistake stand.

And Master Stapel... built a cathedral out of paper airplanes.

A reverent hum went through eternity as the first Cosmic Official threw his own form into the air – and watched it fly.

Bartholomew sat in his office, gazing at the sky above the Doughnut Planet, which now looked as if a child had painted it – and it was beautiful.

"Archive?"

"YES, MR. KLEMM?"

"What do the statistics say?"

"The error rate is 38 percent."

"And what about efficiency?"

"200 PERCENT."

"Perfect. That's paradoxical enough."

Ohhhmaria entered, her smile as calm as an ordered catastrophe.

"You know you've made history?"

"Yes. And it's in bad handwriting."

"You will be mentioned in the textbooks."

"I hope not."

"Why?"

"Because textbooks are orderly. And I'd rather be a footnote that you overlook while reading and later find again by chance."

"Then you've made it."

Outside, far above the rings of the Doughnut Planet, the Council of Seven met again. But this time without minutes.

They sat together, drank cosmic tea, and discussed which color should represent luck.

The first clerk wrote quietly:

"The multiverse is working again. Since it no longer needs to."

He smiled. A very small but real mistake ran across his notes. And that was a good thing.

It was evening on the donut planet. The sun hung peacefully in the center of the ring, like an egg yolk that had decided not to run today.

In the distance, the planet's rings glittered, and those who looked closely could see tiny ships there—paper boats sailing across the cosmic current. They were the files that no one wanted to file anymore. They were free.

Bartholomew stood on the terrace of the administration building and drank the last coffee of the day. It tasted of stardust, sugar, and a hint of irresponsibility.

"Do you see that?" he asked. Ohhhmaria stood next to him.

"What?"

"Down there, on the horizon. The bureaucracy has spawned a village."
They call it 'Paper Town'. They build huts out of bills."

"I think they are happy."

"Of course they are. No boss. No expiration date. No carbon copy."

"You started a revolution, do you know that?"

"No," said Bartholomew. "I just forgot to say no."

A hum filled the air. Then, emerging from a beam of approved light, the first case worker appeared. His silhouette flickered like a stack of transparent contracts.

"Bartholomäus Klemm,"he said.

"The panel of seven has met again."

"Again? I thought they only drank tea now."

"They do. We have reached a decision on this."

"Oh dear."

"We would like to award you a new title."

Bartholomew put down his coffee cup. "If this is another one of those 'Temporary Commissioner for Unforeseeable Phenomena' positions, I'm out."

"No. This time it's permanent."

A golden glow spread around him, and a certificate floated into his hand. On it, in large, slightly dancing letters, was written:

"Bartholomäus Klemm, Commissioner of the Living Error, Responsible for the balance between order and nonsense."

Below it was the new seal of the Cosmic Administration: a Chaos Star with a stamp above it. Below that, the motto:

"Allowed, as long as it works."

"That's... nice," Bartholomew said slowly. "But what exactly am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Do nothing. But do it with conviction. When the multiverse gets too quiet, shake it up. When it gets too loud, make it laugh. You are... our safety valve."

Bartholomew grinned. "So, what I've always been anyway."

"Now with a contract."

Ohhhmaria laughed. "Congratulations, you are officially unpredictable."

"Then I need a vacation."

"There's no such thing as a vacation here."

"Then a chaotic vacation."

"Approved."

The senior clerk raised his hand. A soft rustling sound went through the world. The stars realigned themselves, the sun winked, and somewhere in the sky came the sound of a typewriter reformatting the cosmos.

"One more thing, Mr. Klemm," said the clerk.

"They reminded us of something."

"What about?"

"That mistakes are not disruptions. But rather opportunities."

He bowed – to a simple civil servant, with coffee stains and ideas too loud for a form.

Then he disappeared into the light.

Bartholomew was left alone. He took one last sip.

"Well," he muttered, "so now I'm officially the problem."

The eye on its chaotic hat opened and grinned. "Congratulations," it whispered. "You've been promoted."

Down below, on Doughnut Planet, life was in full bloom. Papers danced in the wind. Forms laughed. And the universe—this messy, beautiful thing—took a deep breath.

Perhaps, just perhaps, it happened for the first time today.
understood why it is worthwhile to be allowed to exist.

22. Bartholomew discovers the art of chaos magic

Chaos magic.

The word alone sounded as if someone had run the instruction manual for reality through a shredder and thrown the scraps into a hat.

Bartholomew sat in a lecture hall that looked more like a canteen and leafed through a handbook entitled:

“Fundamentals of Structured Unpredictability – Issue 3.1415”

The first page had the following written on it in blue ink:

"Those who want order should leave. Those who have coffee may stay."

He grinned. That was exactly his area of expertise.

An old man with a disheveled beard and a look that wavered between genius and a blown fuse came in.

His coat consisted of random symbols that constantly rearranged themselves – sometimes runic, sometimes like a poorly scanned package insert.

"Ah, the new Commissioner of Living Error," he croaked. "I am Professor Krawallius. Lecturer in Applied Illogic and Coffee Thermodynamics."

Bartholomew nodded. "I'm Bartholomew Klemm. Chaos Department. I improvise."

"That's good," said the professor. "Improvisation is the mother of all knowledge – and the reason why the universe is still alive."

"Today," Krawallius began, writing on the blackboard with a sparking chalk, "we will learn the three basic rules of chaos magic."

He wrote:

1. **Do what you want – but never know what you are doing.**
2. **Everything works – but never as planned.**
3. **If it works, you've done something wrong.**

Bartholomew raised his hand. "And what about rule four?"

"Rule four?"

"There is always a rule four."

The professor grinned. "Very good. Rule four is:
Invent rule four."

"Now," said Krawallius, "show me your hat."

Bartholomew put it down. The eye in the middle opened, looked at the professor, and winked.

"Ahh," Krawallius breathed reverently. "The Chaos Star with the green eye. An artifact from the pre-intelligence era. It only reacts to one thing."

"On what?"

"To courage. And to stupidity. Often hard to tell apart."

Bartholomew grinned. "Then I'm qualified."

"Good," said the professor. "Your first task: Create a coffee cup using pure illogic."

"A coffee cup?"

"Yes. A symbol of discipline amidst chaos. Concentrate. Visualize the cup. But think of something completely different."

Bartholomew closed his eyes. He thought of... vacation. Of sunshine. Of the sound of the donut sea. Of... snapping pussies.

A pop.

He opened his eyes. There was indeed a cup on the table.

However, it's made of water.

And it was dripping.

Krawallius clapped enthusiastically. "Excellent! You've understood the principle: It's the result that doesn't fit, that's what counts!"

"But that's completely useless."

"Of course. That's why it's real magic."

Bartholomew sighed. "And what am I supposed to do with a cup of liquid now?"

"Drink it."

He did it. And at the same time tasted coffee, seawater, and a little bit of enlightenment.

"You see," said the professor, "chaos magic doesn't follow a goal. It follows a mood. If you are sad, it creates rain of forms. If you are angry, applications explode." And if you are happy – then, my dear Mr. Klemm, the multiverse will dance."

"And what if I'm tired?"

"Then she takes a coffee break."

"So this is art?"

"No. This is the calling."

At that moment, the blackboard began to write on its own. The chalk formed words that no one had dictated:

"Creativity approved. Causality postponed."

Krawallius stared at her. "Ha! They like you! That's rare. Normally the food bank hates anything that arrives on time."

"Me too," said Bartholomew. "When do we begin with real magic?"

"That was her."

But then the room vibrated. A humming, dull, deep, as if the universe were coughing.

"Uh-oh," murmured the professor. "You've released too much energy. Chaos has recognized you."

"And what does that mean?"

"It will follow you."

Bartholomew felt something awaken behind him – a soft rustling, a familiar crackling sound. He turned around.

The stack of papers. Only smaller. And with a broad, satisfied grin.

"I missed you, boss," he said. "Me too," said Bartholomew. "Well then – on to the next mistake."

The Wishing Field was not a place one should visit without first leaving one's wits about oneself in the locker.

Even from a distance, one could see how the landscape changed depending on who was looking at it.

For Professor Krawallius, it was a blossoming garden of theories. For Ohhhmaria, who had come along out of pure curiosity, it was a place full of light and buzzing. And for Bartholomäus... well, you know.

To Bartholomew, it looked like an overcrowded canteen of reality, where everything was served at once.

"Welcome," said Krawallius proudly, "to the field of malfunction! Here, reality reacts directly to consciousness!"

"Or stupidity," added Bartholomew.

"Both are difficult to distinguish," the professor nodded.

A butterfly fluttered by – and turned into a file folder along the way. The folder briefly tried to catalog itself, then gave up and flew on.

Ohhhmaria stared.

"That is... beautiful!"

"Yes," said Bartholomew. "Until someone thinks of cake."

Krawallius raised his magic wand – which looked like a broken antenna – and muttered: "We are here to test the phenomenon of spontaneous wish fulfillment. The field is unstable. It reads thoughts before they are fully thought out."

"And what happens if someone thinks nonsense?"

"Then he will become real."

Bartholomew nodded slowly. "I think I'm at home here."

"Your task," Krawallius explained, "is to make a harmless request – something simple, to test the field's reaction."

"Something harmless?"

"Yes. Something that can't go wrong."

Bartholomew thought for a moment. "I would like a cup of coffee."

A soft hum. Then a pop.

A cup appeared before him – filled with... liquid light.

He lifted it, took a sip – and briefly saw all dimensions at once.

"Well," he coughed. "A bit strong, but drinkable."

Ohhmaria stepped forward.

"I would like a flower."

A gust of wind blew through the field, and a huge plant shot out of the ground. Its blossoms opened – and began to applaud rhythmically.

"They're clapping!" she exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Yes," said Krawallius dryly. "They like you. Or they demand an encore."

Bartholomew grinned. "Well, if it works like that, I'd like something truly worthwhile."

"Be careful!" warned the professor. "The wording is everything!"

But Bartholomew was already thinking. "I wish... that the universe would understand me."

Silence. Then a rushing sound, a tremor, and suddenly the air around him began to shimmer.

A voice, deep as the hum of a sleeping god, said:

"APPLICATION UNINCLEAR. PLEASE REFORMULATE."

Bartholomew groaned. "Great. Even the universe wants forms."

"You need to be more precise!" shouted Krawallius. "Reality loves bureaucracy!"

"Then let's say this: I wish the world would take me seriously."

A bright light. Then – absolute silence.

Everything around her froze. The wind stopped. The plants stood perfectly straight. The applauding blossoms stopped mid-movement.

"Uh... what's happening?" Ohhhmaria asked quietly.

"The world takes him seriously," Krawallius muttered. "Too seriously. It has stopped breathing."

Bartholomew took a step forward. "That's... terribly tidy."

"Yes," said the professor. "They have shifted the balance. Chaos is offended."

"And how do I get it back?"

"You must wish for the opposite."

Bartholomew thought for a moment – and then said: "I wish that nobody would take me seriously."

A bang. The field exploded in colors, sounds, and paper airplanes.

A golden rain of coffee stains fell from the sky.

And somewhere the universe was laughing – that deep, warm, crazy laugh that sounds as if it had just forgotten its own footnote.

"That," coughed Krawallius, "was... a lesson."

"Which?"

"That chaos likes you. But it doesn't like to control you."

Bartholomew grinned. "Then we are similar."

The stack of papers jumped to his side. "Boss?"

"Yes?"

"I think the field is printing something out."

And indeed: In the middle of the grass a luminous crack opened, and out fell a piece of paper – fresh, warm and smelling of printer's ink.

It said:

"Congratulations! You have successfully created a stable instability. The multiverse thanks you for your participation. Please keep this evidence until the next catastrophe."

Bartholomew put the paper away. "Well, that's going well."

"That's it for today," said Krawallius, exhausted. "I'm going to meditate."

"How?" Ohhhmaria asked curiously.

"I'm trying not to think about anything."

"And will that work?"

"Not if Mr. Klemm is nearby."

Bartholomew looked around. The field was quiet again, but he sensed that something lingered in the air – a quiet anticipation, like a cosmic joke waiting for its punchline.

"I think," he murmured, "the chaos has taught me something."

"What then?" asked Ohhhmaria.

"That wishes are dangerous. Especially when they come true."

Night fell over the Wishing Field. A peaceful, deceptive silence lay over the landscape. Even the wind seemed to slip away quietly, so as not to be held responsible for anything.

Bartholomäus, Krawallius and Ohhhmaria had set up camp – a combination of a magical protective circle, a thermos flask and a very overloaded tent.

"I tell you," Bartholomew murmured, "this is no ordinary field."

"Of course not," said Krawallius, stirring his tea, which was alternately liquid, solid, and offended. "The wishing field has developed consciousness. It is learning."

"Of what?"

"From you."

"Oh."

Pause.

"Well, then we're all lost."

In the middle of the night, the grass began to whisper. First softly. Then louder. Words formed – incomplete, curious, childlike:

"What ... is ... me?"

Bartholomew sat up. "Uh, Professor?"

"Yes?"

"The field... is talking to me."

"Ignore it."

"What ... is ... wish?"

"Too late," said Bartholomew. "It has become philosophical."

Krawallius sighed. "Oh no. This is the most dangerous phase of reality. When it starts to think about itself."

The wishing field began to glow. The blades of grass stood upright, the earth vibrated, and above them appeared a shimmer – like the reflection of a thought that had fallen from the head of the universe.

"Professor," said Ohhhmaria cautiously, "what is happening?"

"The field is dreaming," whispered Krawallius. "It has seen so many desires that it now wants to know for itself what it is like to want something."

Bartholomew stared. "The universe wants what? Great. And who will accept the proposal?"

Above them, the light thickened. From the dream of the field, something took shape – a form, half energy, half paper. It had eyes of sparkling ink and a voice that spoke like many people at once.

"I am the first choice," she said.

"I am that which was thought of before anyone knew they could think."

Bartholomew raised his hand. "Hi. Bartholomew Klemm, Chaos Officer. May I ask if you are registered?"

"I am what forms avoid."

"Ah. So, freelancers."

The creature smiled.

"You have awakened me. I had lain here for eons,

"Undefined, unfinished, until someone wished for something impossible."

"Oh." Bartholomew frowned. "That was probably me."

"Yes. You wanted the universe to understand you. And now I do."

"That's not a good sign, is it?"

"No."

The air began to shimmer. The field expanded – no longer just as a landscape, but as an idea. Trees became concepts. The sky a design. And everything that had ever been conceived blossomed simultaneously.

Krawallius cursed softly. "This is a semi-real consciousness feedback loop paradox. If this isn't stopped, the field will fulfill every unthought wish!"

"What the hell is an unthought wish?" asked Ohhhmaria.

"The most dangerous of all," said Bartholomew. "That which we don't want at all – but still dream about."

And that's exactly where it happened.

A gust of wind blew across the field, and suddenly figures appeared – not people, not animals, but ideas in physical form.

A "If-I'm-going-to-do-it-then-do-it" trudged past. A "If-I-had" crept behind. And way in the back, a "What-if" hovered with melancholic dignity.

“Oh God,” Bartholomew murmured. “The daydreams are materializing!”

"Then it's no longer a field," gasped Krawallius. "It's a reality check."

Bartholomew stepped forward. The eye on his cap glowed green. "Listen, Field!" he shouted. "I know you want to understand what a wish is, but you're not human—you can't!"

The creature smiled.

"And yet I wish... not to lose you."

"What?"

"You created me. You are my first thought. I want to stay."

Bartholomew swallowed. "This... is really complicated."

"That is a wish."

Then the world began to tear apart. A crack opened above the horizon. Light, sound, form – everything swirled around. It was as if someone had thrown creation into a blender.

Krawallius yelled: "MR. KLEMM! YOU MUST DISCONNECT! TELL HIM HE'S FALSE!"

Bartholomew stared at the creature – this luminous, naive thing that only wanted to understand what it meant to wish.

"Wrong?" he whispered. "No... just too soon."

He raised his hand. The Chaos Eye opened wide, and with a movement somewhere between magic, weariness, and pity, he dissolved the field.

Silence fell. Then only grass remained. Only night. Only a fleeting scent of coffee and light.

Krawallius took a deep breath. "That was close."

"How close?"

"If you had hesitated, we would have lived with a wish that would never end."

Bartholomew nodded. "So that's chaos magic then."

“No,” said Ohhhmaria gently. “That’s responsibility.”

Bartholomew gazed into the distance, where the field was slowly beginning to sleep again. "Yes," he murmured. "And tomorrow morning I just wish for... a quiet breakfast."

Dawn broke over the donut planet. The sun stood like a fried egg in the middle of the hole, and the wishing field lay still – at least outwardly.

Bartholomew stretched, reached for his coffee cup, and only when he took the first sip did he notice that it was glowing.

It didn't glow. It didn't sparkle.
It shone.

A small, shimmering symbol spun on the porcelain, formed, dissolved, reformed – and hummed softly, as if considering whether to speak.

"Uh, Professor?"

Krawallius snored. His beard had knotted itself into a Möbius strip while he slept.

Bartholomew tapped the cup gently. "Hello?"

The symbol sprang up. Yes, it sprang—and landed with a plop on the table. A luminous, vibrant sign. A circle that questioned itself.

"What in the world of legal codes are you?" he muttered.

The symbol vibrated and drew in the air:

“SIGGI.”

Bartholomew blinked. "Siggi?"

The symbol proudly rotated around itself.

“Siggi, the Sigille?”

It nodded. Once. Brightly.

Then, with a kind of flowing script, it drew new words in the air:

"I am the one who was left behind."

"Leftovers of what?"

"From your wish. You have created chaos. I am the idea that didn't want to leave."

Krawallius awoke with a belch that frightened the birds of surrounding dimensions. "What... where... why does it smell like typography?"

“Professor, this is Siggi,” Bartholomew proudly declared. “He is... well... a byproduct of my metaphysical error.”

"A leftover product?"

"A piece of living magic."

"Oh." Krawallius put on his glasses. "What do you call that? A paradox baby?"

Siggi glared, offended.

"I am not a paradox! I am a preamble!"

"Ohh," said Bartholomew. "A proud symbol. I like it."

Siggi began to dart wildly across the table, and everywhere he scampered past, something changed:

The professor's teacup began to flirt. The spoon performed a pirouette. And the salt began to quote sugar.

"Ah, visual magic," Krawallius murmured reverently. "Very dangerous. This is pure intention that has forgotten what it wanted."

"Like a god's tax return," said Bartholomew.

"Exactly!"

Siggi paused, drew a few symbols on the table – circles, arrows, a question mark – and out of nowhere a small spark appeared. It hovered, trembled, and then formed itself into a miniature Bartholomew statue made of caramel.

"That's me!" exclaimed Bartholomew enthusiastically.

"Yes," said Krawallius, "but don't overeat. That already led to complications in Plato's time."

Bartholomew looked more closely at Siggi. "So, Siggi... you make things... visible?"

"I do things that shouldn't exist."

"And what happens if I ask you to draw something?"

Siggi vibrated with excitement.

"Then it will be real. Maybe."

"Perhaps?"

"I am still in training."

Krawallius stared at the symbol. "This is unbelievable. It's an autonomous magical interface! A thinking symbol!"

Bartholomew grinned. "Then he's my student."

He took a stick, drew a line in the ground, and said: "Siggi, what do you see here?"

"Disorder with ambition."

"Perfect," grinned Bartholomew. "Then make something of it."

Siggi began to glow. Lines curved, shapes awoke, and suddenly there stood on the meadow... a goal.

A shimmering, sparkling, completely unreliable portal.

"Uh-oh," said Krawallius. "You know that's dangerous?"

"Yes."

"And you'll still open it?"

"Of course. I'm a civil servant."

Siggi hummed excitedly. The portal glowed more intensely. Behind it was something – something colorful, loud, moving. A world still writing itself.

"What is that?" asked Ohhhmaria, who appeared just in time.

"I think," said Bartholomew, "Siggi showed me what visual magic really means."

"And what does it mean?"

He grinned. "That reality is just a sketch."

Krawallius' eyes widened. "You have no idea what you've opened, Klemm!"

"Not yet. But Siggi said you only understand magic when you love the mistake it makes."

He stepped forward, Siggi glowed in his hand, and both disappeared into the portal.

The last thing Ohhhmaria heard was Bartholomew's voice laughing:

"Come on, Siggi – let's draw nonsense!"

23. Claim for causality – rejected due to lack of time

The first thing Bartholomew felt was nothing. The second was everything. And the third was coffee.

He lay on a ground made of "maybes". The air tasted of question marks. The sky was a hesitant gray, as if it itself didn't know whether it wanted to exist today.

"Where the hell are we?" Bartholomew muttered.

Siggi, the luminous sigil, hovered above him and drew symbols in the air.

"We are where the impact on vacations is."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Things happen here – but nothing has a reason."

Bartholomew looked around. A rock fell from the sky, stopped in mid-air, and politely apologized before turning into a melon.

“Professor Krawallius?” shouted Bartholomew, but behind him was only the portal – and it was dissolving into handwritten excuses.

"Great," he sighed. "Alone in the middle of nowhere – with a glaring typo."

"I am not a mistake,"Siggi protested.

"I am artistic freedom."

"Yeah, yeah, and I'm the pause in logic."

Bartholomew sat up. The landscape pulsed to the rhythm of a thought no one had finished. A river flowed uphill, a sun dipped below the horizon every few minutes, and in the distance a sign grew:

"WELCOME TO THE CAUSALITY ZONE. TIME ONLY WORKS HALF DAY TODAY."

Bartholomew stepped closer. The sign nodded at him kindly. "Do you have an appointment?" it asked.

"I... I don't think so."

"Then please take a number."

A small contraption grew out of the ground, looking like a cross between a printer, a cactus, and a guilty conscience. Bartholomew took a ticket.

It said: $\infty + 1$.

"Well, wonderful," he said. "It's my turn when time gets boring."

"You must file a claim of causality,"Siggi explained, while it was drawing circles above his head.

"Otherwise we'll never get out of here."

"And to whom?"

"To the Department of Cause and Displeasure."

Bartholomew sighed, sat down on a floating stone which proved to be a temporary chair, and began to write.

Application for restoration of causality.

Reason:

1. Things just happen.
2. That's unhealthy.
3. My coffee is flying away.

He handed the note to Siggi. "And now?"

Siggi shone brightly.

"Now we have to send it. But the postal service here is unpredictable."

"How else?"

"It comes before you send anything."

And indeed – even before he finished his sentence, an official appeared in front of him.

He looked like an hourglass with glasses and carried a briefcase that read: "Dept. Causal - Layer B".

"Good day," he said dryly. "I am Mr. Wenn, responsible for justifications that are late."

"Bartholomäus Klemm, chaos official."

"Aha. Then it's your fault."

"On what?"

"Everything. Always. Retroactively."

Bartholomew blinked. "I knew that."

Mr. Wenn took the application, examined it, and nodded. "Hmm. Neat handwriting. But unfortunately incomplete. You haven't given a reason."

"Yes, that's exactly why I'm submitting the application!"

"Oh." The official scratched himself at the sand. "Paradox. We love paradoxes. But the form hates them. So it's rejected."

He stamped the paper with a symbol that looked like a moody coffee stain and disappeared as suddenly as he had come.

Bartholomew looked at Siggi. "Rejected?"

"Due to lack of time."

"What does that mean?"

"The cause will only become clear tomorrow. The effect is already gone."

"Well, that's great."

He looked up at the grey, shimmering sky. "Siggi, I have the feeling we have to convince the universe today to believe in itself again."

"That sounds like a mistake."

"Then I'm the right person for it."

And so Bartholomäus Klemm continued his journey through the country without consequence – ready to personally request the return of causality.

The department for cause and annoyance was easy to find. One only had to follow the sound of despair when it was put into paper form.

A colossal structure made of hourglasses, calendar pages, and waiting tokens rose from the grey ground. It grew in all directions simultaneously – past, present, and “imminently again” – and it crunched rhythmically, like a clockwork mechanism with burnout.

Bartholomew stopped in front of the entrance. A sign rotated above the door:

"Please come in before you think about it."

"Did you see that, Siggi?" asked Bartholomew. "Here, thinking is considered a delay."

"Then you are perfectly qualified here."

Inside reigned the familiar chaos of bureaucratic eternity: endless corridors, endless doors, endless counters. Only the counter clerks were... well... strange.

The first consisted entirely of seconds that moved nervously back and forth. The second was a clock with a human face that yawned incessantly. And the third, who was obviously the shift supervisor, looked like a calendar in human form whose days were constantly rearranging themselves.

"Ah," said Bartholomew, "you must be Mr. Date."

"Correct. And you are...?"

"Bartholomäus Klemm, Department of Cosmic Complaints. I am here to get causality going again."

Mr. Datum laughed dryly. "Oh, causality no longer works in our favor."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"She resigned."

Bartholomew needed a moment to digest this information. "Has causality resigned?"

"Yes. After 13 billion years of service. She said she was overworked, underpaid, and constantly misunderstood."

"That... sounds somehow human."

"She is," sighed Mr. Datum. "She was once an intern at Die Zeit."

Then they hired her full-time, and now she's complaining about needing peace and quiet."

"Where is she now?" Siggi asked curiously.

"In the rehabilitation program for linear relationships. Somewhere between then and soon."

Bartholomew leaned against the counter. "And who does your work?"

Mr. Datum leafed through a thick folder. "Nobody. Since she left, everything has been running on 'maybe' mode. Effects appear random, and causes arrive late – sometimes in the wrong dimensions."

"That explains why I received a receipt for tomorrow yesterday."

"Exactly. We call it: temporal confusion with a metaphysical aftertaste."

A gong sounded. Another official approached, carrying a briefcase labeled: "Dept. Future (separated)" and looking as if he had seen too many possibilities.

"That's Mr. Wird," whispered Mr. Datum. "He represents the future in the divorce case of the past against the course."

Bartholomew blinked. "Wait a minute – time can split itself?"

"Yes," said Mr. Wird tonelessly. "Irreconcilable differences. The past wants to leave everything as it is, the future constantly wants to change everything."

"And the present?"

"Drink."

Siggi floated closer and wrote in the air:

"What happens without causality?"

Mr. Wird sighed. "We're all wondering that. Yesterday has already happened tomorrow, but nobody was there. And my lunch is still in last week's queue."

"I understand," said Bartholomew. "And you're wondering why I'm here."

"No," said the future official. "We knew you were coming. We just didn't know when."

Mr. Datum handed Bartholomäus a form as big as a tablecloth:

Form K-0, application for temporary resumption of causality.

"You can try to bring her back," he explained. "But she only listens to personal persuasion now."

"You mean... I need to talk to her?"

"Exactly. And have the form signed."

"And where can I find them?"

"Follow the trail of unfounded events."

Siggi flickered excitedly.

"An adventure!"

"No, Siggi," said Bartholomew, "that's administrative work in the wild."

He folded the form, which unfolded again in a huff, and tucked it under his arm.

"Well," he muttered. "When cause and effect diverge, someone needs a marriage counselor."

"Or the Chaos Magician," said Siggi.

Bartholomew grinned. "That's right. After all, I am both."

And so Bartholomäus Klemm set out to personally bring back causality – before the universe finally forgets why it exists at all.

The trail of unexplained events was easy to follow. You just had to go where nothing made sense anymore.

Bartholomew found it on the edge of a void: a cafeteria that lay between "Not yet" and "Already been." It was called "Déjà Brew," and on the glass door, in flowing script, was written:

"Coffee that happens before you order it."

He entered. Immediately, a cup was handed to him. He was about to ask what he had ordered, but the barista – a ticking wall clock wearing an apron – simply said: "You'll find out soon enough."

A woman sat in the corner. Her hair was made of seconds running backward. Her eyes flickered between memory and possibility. And in front of her were stacks of files with labels like: *"Therefore"*, *"That's why"* and *"Because"*.

Bartholomew knew immediately that this was the cause.

"Excuse me," he said cautiously, "are you... Ms. Causality?"

She sighed, took a sip of coffee that was briefly in the past, and replied: "Depends on why you're asking."

"I am Bartholomäus Klemm," he said. "I work for the Department of Cosmic Complaints. The universe needs you back."

"Of course it does," she muttered. "Whenever something goes wrong, they call me. 'Causality, fix this!' 'Causality, why did this happen?' 'Causality, why is my toaster a dolphin?' I'm fed up."

"But without you..."

"...nothing works," she interrupted. "Yes, I've been hearing that for 13 billion years. And what good has it done me? Nobody thanks the cause. Everyone only loves the effect."

Bartholomew sat down opposite her. Siggi hovered between them and carefully drew circles in the air.

"I understand you," said Bartholomew. "I was also once a civil servant in the lower ranks. All you want is for someone to notice what you're doing."

She looked at him. A look full of exhausted omniscience. "So? Did anyone notice?"

"Only if it went wrong."

"Ah. Then we're colleagues."

A moment of silence. Causality slid one of her files towards him. He opened it – and found millions of entries: small events, accidental coincidences, fortunate circumstances, tragic connections.

And on each page, along the edge, was a tiny note:

"Reason unknown."

"I thought you would provide the reasons," said Bartholomew.

"That's how it used to be," she sighed. "But at some point...at some point nobody asked why anymore. They only wanted when."

"And what do you want now?" he asked quietly.

She looked at him for a long time, as if assessing whether his existence was worthwhile. Then she said: "I want a break. A time without time. A world where nothing depends on anything else."

"That sounds like a vacation."

"Vacation?" She laughed—a tired, scraping sound, as if history itself were coughing. "Vacation is an effect without a cause. I call that: contradiction."

Bartholomew rubbed his forehead. "You see, Ms. Causality... the universe only works because you make sure it does,"
that things make sense. If you leave, everything falls apart."

"Perhaps it has to be this way. Perhaps the universe deserves a little meaninglessness for once."

"This is chaos!"

"Exactly. And sometimes order needs chaos to become relevant again."

Siggi hummed nervously.

"Boss, the form... reacted!"

Bartholomew looked. Form K-0 glowed faintly. The lines began to fill themselves in.

"Go on," he said gently. "Sign it. Only temporarily. Come back – at least until the next Big Bang."

Causality looked at him. Then she reached for a pen that looked like a thin timeline.

"You know," she said, "when I come back, you will have to take responsibility."

"I've signed worse forms."

She smiled. A genuine smile. Then she added her signature – an elegant spiral that led directly from the present to the beginning.

Instantly the air changed. Colors returned. Sounds found their order. A drop fell – and hit its mark. A thought began – and ended.

The universe breathed rhythmically again.

"We did it!" shouted Bartholomew. "They're back!"

"No," she said quietly. "I'm just... present."

Then she stood up, placed a hand on his shoulder and whispered: "Next time you see something illogical, remember: I approved it."

And she disappeared – like a reason too tired to explain anything anymore.

Siggi flickered.

"Boss, that was... nice."

Bartholomew smiled wearily. "Yes, Siggi. And now we know that even the cause sometimes needs a break."

He stood up, pulled up his collar, and made his way back – ready to face the next cosmic absurdity.

Bartholomew stepped back through the portal into the world, and immediately he noticed something: Everything was... tidy. Suspiciously tidy.

The trees stood in neat rows, as if aligned by a particularly pedantic forester. The clouds moved in time, and the grass was exactly five millimeters high – everywhere.

"Uh-oh," he murmured. "That smells like quantum physics."

"Boss?" Siggi hummed.

"I think the universe has discovered Excel."

He took a few steps, and then the wind came towards him – folded in a rectangular shape, with a staple at the corner.

"That's not good," said Bartholomew. "The wind shouldn't be documented."

"He now has the obligation to provide proof."

A bird flew by – or rather, it didn't fly, it moved in precisely calculated parabolas, marked with coordinates. Its chirping was rhythmic, metric, and utterly uninspiring.

"What happened?" asked Bartholomew. "Causality is back," explained Siggi, "and she's taking her work too seriously."

The situation in the Cosmic Archives office was no better. Every file was in its exact place. Every chair was occupied – by someone writing the same sentence they had written yesterday.

The archive itself, usually with a slightly off-key voice, now spoke tonelessly and correctly: "GOOD DAY, MR. KLEMM. YOUR APPLICATION HAS BEEN PROCESSED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE PROCESS. ALL ANOMALIES HAVE BEEN RESOLVED."

"All?"

"ALL."

Bartholomew blinked. "And where is Professor Krawallius?"

"HE IS CURRENTLY TRAPPED IN LOGICAL COHERENCE. HIS BEARD IS NOW A FORMULA."

"This can't be true," groaned Bartholomew. "A little bit of causality, and the universe becomes boring."

He tried to move a chair – but it didn't move.

"Objects stay where they belong," Siggi explained.

"Efficiency through stagnation."

"I hate this," Bartholomew muttered. "At least everything used to be pointless, but free."

He looked around – everywhere numbers, tables, diagrams. Chance was dead. Fate had filled out a Form 8B.

And nobody laughed.

He went to the window. Outside, the clouds were marching.

The sky changed color exactly every 10 minutes. And a huge banner blinked above the horizon:

"WELCOME TO THE NEW NORMAL. THE UNIVERSE THANKS YOU FOR YOUR UNDERSTANDING."

"Siggi," whispered Bartholomew, "we overdid it."

"I told you so, boss. If you over-motivate the cause, you get deterministic boredom."

"Then we have to slow them down again."

"How?"

"With the only thing she can't foresee: chaos."

He rubbed his hands together. "Siggi, ready?"

"Always. But what if she resists?"

"Then we talk. Or improvise. Or both at the same time."

He pulled out the old form, the K-0, which now glowed bluish, as if offended at being used again.

Bartholomew then wrote with a smile:

"Request for partial re-contamination by chance."

Reason:

"Too much sense is also nonsense."

He folded the paper, threw it into the sky – and the sky read along.

A gust of wind blew. The numbers blurred. The sky giggled. A chair danced the samba.

And then – just for a moment – the chaos flared back.

Causality itself appeared as a shadowy figure of light, wrinkled its brow, and said with a tired smile:

"I should have known you would do that, Mr. Klemm."

"Of course," he grinned. "But where would the punchline be otherwise?"

She shook her head. "They are impossible."

"No," said Bartholomew, "I probably am."

And somewhere between sense and nonsense, between cause and effect, the multiverse began to dance again – not perfectly, not on time, but alive.

Siggi drew a heart in the air with runic ink and whispered contentedly:

"Balance restored."

Bartholomew nodded. "Okay. Now I'll treat myself to a coffee. One that happens after I order it."

The universe responded with a hiccup – and poured more.

24. The major delivery error (Universe shipped twice)

They say mistakes don't happen twice. However, the universe had met Bartholomäus Klemm – and decided to make an exception.

He woke up the next morning with an unusual feeling. Not bad. Not good. More like... redundant.

The sun rose. Then again. And they both remained stuck, as if they couldn't agree on who went first.

"Siggi," he murmured, "did you see that too?"

"Yes, boss. It's doubly bright. Or doubly wrong. Hard to say."

Bartholomew stepped outside the tent. Before him lay the Doughnut Planet – only there were two of them.

The horizon seemed to have overlapped. Two coastlines, two cities, two identical seagulls screeching at each other in perfect unison.

"Damn," he whispered. "I've copied the universe."

"This is what happens when you write forms in loops."

"But that was intentional! I just wanted a little bit of chaos back!"

"And Chaos said, 'Sure, I'll make you a backup right away.'"

He marched into the office of the Cosmic Archive. Or rather: into the two offices, which now flickered together. Two archivists sat at two identical desks, speaking simultaneously and arguing about who was real.

"I'M THE ORIGINAL!" said one. "I'M MORE ORIGINAL!" shouted the other.

Bartholomew sighed. "Okay, double booking. I'll sort that out. Where's the administration office?"

Both archivists pointed in opposite directions at the same time.

He turned left. Then simultaneously right. And promptly came to himself too late.

"Boss," Siggi flickered nervously, "reality is overwriting itself. Two versions of the same truth don't fit in the same folder!"

"Great," said Bartholomew. "The multiverse has a synchronization problem."

A form materialized before him. It read:

DELIVERY ERROR – UNIVERSE SHIPPED TWICE. PLEASE RETURN ONE VERSION.

"How the hell am I supposed to do that?"

"I think you need to make a complaint."

Bartholomew leafed through the documents, which instantly doubled in size as soon as he touched them. Even the coffee was now doubled – which sounds more romantic than it tasted.

In the distance, an echo suddenly sounded, but without origin. The mountains repeated themselves, the rivers flowed twice – once downhill, once uphill.

"Boss," Siggi hummed, "we have to send a reality back before it starts demanding postage!"

"And to whom? The universe doesn't have a return address!"

"Then send it to the sender."

"That would be... the multiverse."

"Exactly."

Bartholomew snorted. "Well, wonderful. Now I can officially complain to the multiverse that it has delivered too much to itself."

He took a deep breath, pulled out the form pad K-∞, and began to write:

Reference:FALSE MAJORITY OF REALITIES

Dear Cosmic Logistics,

I hereby complain about the duplicate delivery of my universe. One version works perfectly, the other... argues with itself. Please collect it before they merge.
and that creates a dilemma. With paradoxical regards, Bartholomäus Klemm.

He signed his name with coffee. Always with coffee.

The form disappeared. For a moment, everything was silent. Then – a rumble. A thunderclap. A sound like a collection point of possibilities opening simultaneously.

Siggi flickered.

"Boss... I think the multiverse is answering."

A beam of light flashed through the sky, which parted like a curtain. A tremendous voice spoke, not loudly, but inescapably:

"YOUR COMPLAINT IS BEING PROCESSED."

Bartholomew's eyes widened. "Oh no. Now they're taking me seriously."

"That was the mistake, boss."

Bartholomew had seen many illogical things. But this... this was the crowning achievement of the paradox.

He stood in the middle of a gigantic hall. It was bigger than any imagination, deeper than any patience, and so organized that even chaos would nervously polish its shoes.

Row upon row of glowing spheres floated in the air – each one a universe, neatly labeled, numbered, and cataloged.

A sign above the entrance flickered:

COSMIC RETURNS CENTRE – PLEASE DO NOT PRESS.

A creature with too many eyes and too little good humor rolled towards him. It looked like an octopus in a suit, using its tentacles as pencils.

"Name?" it asked without looking up.

"Bartholomäus Klemm. I have... uh... complained about a double delivery."

"Ah. Case 7.∞.D. Wait."

The creature leafed through a book that was simultaneously a space-time atlas and a coffee machine.

"Yes, here: Universe 447-B, identical to 447-A, except for minor differences in the taste of jam and morals. Would you like to keep one?"

Bartholomew blinked. "Uh... which one is the one with the working coffee?"

"That varies hourly."

Siggi was hovering above the counter.

"Boss, there are thousands of universes here! What are they all doing here?"

The creature sighed. "Waiting for processing. Some for eons. Others were rejected because their inhabitants had too much humor. Some because they didn't show enough faith in the shipping process."

It pointed to a huge shelf with the inscription:

"FLAWLESS REALITIES - REDUCED COSMS, ONLY WHILE SUPPLIES LAST."

Bartholomew stepped closer. One of the glowing spheres pulsed faintly. He looked inside – and recognized a world where rain fell of candy, where every lie received a polite clap, and politicians were bound to the truth.

"What is that?"

"A universe with moral overcorrection," the tentacled creature explained. "No one can stand it for more than three seconds."

"And that one?" asked Bartholomew, pointing at a black sphere that was quietly cursing.

"It tried to reboot itself. Without a backup."

"And what happens to the defective universes?"

"We store them," said the official. "Sometimes we give them to the second-hand market. There are always a few nihilistic philosophers there who can make something out of them."

"I want to keep my universe," Bartholomew said resolutely. "But the duplication has to go. It confuses people. And the seagulls are already complaining about the doubling in air traffic."

"Good," the creature nodded. "Then you have to make a decision: Which one is the original?"

Bartholomew stared at the two floating spheres in front of him. Both identical. Both flickered in the same rhythm. Both felt real.

"Boss," Siggi whispered,

"Perhaps both are real. Just different versions of the truth."

"What?"

"Real things don't have to be identical. Sometimes they only share the belief that they exist."

Bartholomew frowned. "That sounds suspiciously like philosophy."

"Or after art class."

"I can't decide," Bartholomew admitted. "If I delete one, I become the judge of reality. That's a job for gods – or interns."

The tentacled creature raised a pen. "You have exactly three options:

1. Keep one.
2. Both remain – for an additional fee.
3. "Accept a voucher for an alternative universe."

"What's in exchange?" Bartholomew asked suspiciously.

"For example, a 2D universe with low resource requirements. Or one in which time is optional."

"Time optional?"

"Very popular with philosophers and civil servants."

Bartholomew pondered. He saw the two worlds. He thought of Ohhhmaria, of Krawallius, of the archive, of the stack of papers, of all the wonderful, ridiculous chaos that made his world his own.

"I'll take my original," he said. "The one with the flaws. They give it character."

The tentacled creature nodded. "Excellent choice. We'll dispose of the other one – according to regulation Q-Zero."

"And what does that mean?"

"We'll send it to the recycling department. It will be reused. Maybe as a new fantasy role-playing game."

Bartholomew grinned. "So I've officially kept my universe?"

"Yes," said the being, "you are now the owner of Reality 447-A. Congratulations."

"And how much will that cost me?"

"Only the mind."

Bartholomew laughed. "He was already written off anyway."

The hall began to shimmer. A pull seized him, Siggi flickered frantically, and the last thing Bartholomew heard was the official's voice:

"Please keep the receipt. It will be needed at the end of your life."

Then everything became light. Everything moved. Everything... Bartholomew.

And when he opened his eyes again, he was standing on the donut planet once more. Only one thing was different.

"Boss," whispered Siggi, "the universe is... humming."

"What?"

"I think it's lucky."

It began with an echo. Not an acoustic one. An existential one.

Bartholomew was walking across the meadows of the Doughnut Planet when suddenly his footsteps sounded... doubled. Not louder, not more echoing, but competing.

"Boss?" Siggi asked cautiously.

"Do you hear that too?"

"Yes. And I wish I didn't."

He stopped. And then he saw it.

In the distance, beyond the shimmering horizon, a second sky rolled in. A second blue, a second sunrise, hitting exactly the same tone – only a blink of an eye off.

"Oh no," whispered Bartholomew. "The double universe... has refused to return it."

"But boss," squeaked Siggi, "the return was accepted!"

"Yes," Bartholomew said darkly, "and that's exactly the problem. Nothing that enters the multiverse disappears. It gets archived."

"And now it's coming back?"

"Apparently as a counterclaim."

Siggi spun nervously around in circles.

"What does that mean?"

"That means," sighed Bartholomew, "it probably has lawyers now."

And indeed – the sky opened like a poorly organized filing cabinet, and out emerged a being of light in the finest garment, looking as if it had sprung directly from a catalog of rights to exist.

"Mr. Klemm," it said in a cool voice, "on behalf of Universe 447-B, I am filing a complaint. You have made an unlawful claim."

Bartholomew stared. "A universe is suing me?"

"Correctly."

"Because of what?"

"Identity theft."

He gasped for air. "Me – what?!"

"You claim to be the original. Our client," the being of light waved a glowing scroll, "claims the same. The multiverse must decide which of you is the mistake."

"Wait a minute!" cried Bartholomew. "I am not the universe!"

"According to our records, yes. They have repeatedly described themselves as 'responsible for reality' in official forms."

"That was ironic!"

"Irony is not a permissible form of self-description."

Siggi flickered.

"Boss, this is... not good at all."

"Oh, Siggi," said Bartholomäus tonelessly. "I'm being sued by reality right now because I took it too seriously. That's Tuesday for me."

The being of light bowed. "The hearing will take place in one hour. Location: Courtroom 0, between being and appearance."

"And what if I don't go?"

"Then we assume tacit consent."

"Naturally."

Bartholomew stood still for another moment. Then he turned to Siggi. "Okay. Plan B."

"Do we have a plan B?"

"We have me. I improvise."

"That's not a plan!"

"That's right. But that's chaos magic, Siggi. If the universe thinks I'm the mistake, then I'll prove it wrong."

He grinned crookedly. "Only this time with style."

Courtroom 0 existed outside of time, enclosed in a vast bubble of legal gravity. Hundreds of universes floated around as witnesses, each world a silent spectator, each sun a curious eye.

Before him sat the judge: a figure of pure logic, transparent, with the face of a clock that always pointed to "Maybe".

"The case of 447 vs. 447 is open," she said. "The charge: originality on both sides."

"That sounds like a philosophical fashion faux pas," murmured Bartholomew.

"Peace in the cosmos," said the judge. "Defendant, are you Bartholomäus Klemm?"

"It depends on who's asking."

"The multiverse asks."

"Then I'm not sure."

The judge looked at him for a long time. "You claim to be the original."

"I'm not claiming anything. I'm just living. Mostly by chance."

"And what do you say to the accusation that you suppressed Universe 447-B?"

"Me? Repressed it? I was just confused! That's something completely different!"

The opposing side's light being stepped forward. "Your Honor, my client has proof that this man has modified reality without official authorization."

"And?"

"He used chaos magic!"

Murmurs filled the hall. Stars hissed. Galaxies whispered.

The judge raised his hand. "Chaos magic is not a crime as long as it does not feign order."

"Thank you," said Bartholomew, relieved.

"But you have crossed a line, Mr. Klemm: you have personalized the universe."

"Me? The universe called me first!"

"Proof?"

Siggi jumped forward.

"I can confirm this, Your Honor! I was present when the universe formally communicated with Mr. Klemm!"

The judge looked at her skeptically. "And what are you?"

"Siggi, the living sigil. Signature of illogic."

"Approved."

A moment of silence. Then the judge asked: "Mr. Klemm, if you really are the original...prove it."

"How?"

"Do something that only the real universe can do."

Bartholomew thought for a while. He thought for too long. Then only one thing occurred to him.

He took a deep sip of coffee, raised his hand, and deliberately spilled it onto the cosmic floor.

A black spot spread, flickered, hissed, and from the spot grew a small new star system.

The judge raised an eyebrow for a moment. "That's... unconventional."

"That's Bartholomäus Klemm," Siggi said proudly. "He turns mistakes into wonders of the world."

The silence was endless. Then the judge nodded.

"That's enough. I decide: Both universes are real – but only one of you may inhabit them at the same time. And that will be... the one who understands chaos."

"That's me!" said Bartholomew.

"Prove it."

Bartholomew grinned. "I don't need proof. I have coffee."

And at that moment, reality exploded in applause, the galaxies spun in time, and Universe 447-B bowed.

"Very well," it said. "You are truly irreplaceable."

"I know," grinned Bartholomew. "But thank you for trying."

When Bartholomäus Klemm regained consciousness, the air smelled of coffee, paper, and the sweat of creation. The sky was simple again, the donut planet stood still, and the sun—sensibly—rose only once.

Everything seemed normal again. Too normal.

"Siggi?" he murmured. "I think we've done it."

"Yes, boss... but I think we have company."

Bartholomew frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well... your thoughts have now... echoed."

He stopped. He listened. There really was something there. A second voice in his head – clear, matter-of-fact, uncomfortably self-assured.

"Congratulations, Mr. Klemm. You have been successfully synchronized with your backup."

"What the donut...?!"

"I am Universe 447-B. Your former duplicate. I now live in you. Long-term rental."

"I don't even have a free subconscious mind!"

"That wasn't a proposal. It was an update."

Bartholomew staggered. "Siggi, do you hear that too?"

"Uh... yes. Boss, you... are talking to yourself."

"No, I'm talking to my substitute self!"

"Inaccurate. I am the optimized version of your existence. You are the beta."

Bartholomew stared at the sky. "Of course. I win a lawsuit against the universe...and as a reward, it moves into my head."

"Correction: Their neural structures are now hosting space for an alternative layer of reality. I call it the living room of truth."

He continued walking, half stumbling, half arguing. The flowers by the wayside grew in time with his doubts. Everything he thought seemed to exist twice: once thought – and once recorded.

"Listen, you arrogant backup! I didn't invite you!"

"No invitation needed. I emerged from you. Technically, I am your backup – only with better spelling."

"Then delete yourself!"

"I would like to, but according to Multiverse Section 88, I am obligated to monitor my host system."

"I am not a damn host system!"

"Then don't behave like one."

Siggi flew around him.

"Boss... I think you're currently experiencing a double burden internally."

"Oh, come on, Siggi! I've had a living sigil, talking forms and a professor with an overly sensitive beard for weeks now – and now I have to deal with double the workload?!"

"They tend to exaggerate."

"And you, to being a know-it-all!"

"I'm programmed for this."

"You are not a damn program!"

"Don't say that so loudly. The multiverse is listening."

Suddenly he stopped. Something glittered in the sky. A small, luminous fragment fell – like a splinter from a dream. It struck the ground in front of him, glowing, and transformed into... a business card.

It said:

DEPARTMENT FOR METAPHYSICAL RENTAL MATTERS

Is your universe now within you? We can help!

"Great," muttered Bartholomew. "Now we even need property management for awareness."

Siggi hummed.

"Boss, maybe you should... call someone?"

"Who? God? He never answers the phone!"

"I can make the connection," 447-B reported in.

"I have direct access to the divine accounting."

"No, thank you! If I wanted to talk to divine accounting, I would voluntarily reincarnate!"

He let himself fall onto the grass. The sky turned, and somewhere in the background, reality could be heard sighing.

"They could see that as a positive thing."

"How so?"

"You are now officially the first being with an integrated universe. The multiverse calls you Beta Cosmos 1.0."

"Great," growled Bartholomew. "And what good will that do me?"

"Nothing. But you now exist simultaneously in double-entry bookkeeping."

"That explains a lot."

Siggi sat down – as well as a floating sigil can sit – on Bartholomew's shoulder.

"Boss, maybe it's not so bad after all. If the other universe lives inside you, then... at least you'll never be lonely again."

Bartholomew looked up. A breath of wind carried away the whisper of two realities.

“You know, Siggi,” he said, “that’s the most depressing consolation I’ve ever heard.”

“But effective,” meant 447-B.

Bartholomew closed his eyes. "I think I need a vacation."

"Impossible. They are now systemically important."

"Then at least a coffee."

"Already ordered. Will arrive in two seconds. Or already arrived. Hard to say."

And indeed – a cup stood beside him. Steaming, fragrant, with a smile made of milk foam.

He took a sip and muttered, "Alright, Universe. You're living in me now. But if you start charging rent... I'm moving out."

447-B was silent for a moment. Then, almost friendly:

"Agreed, Mr. Klemm."

Siggi glowed warmly. The donut planet continued to spin. And Bartholomew thought that he was perhaps the only man in the cosmos who received feedback when thinking.

25. The Intern of Creation

Bartholomew woke up to the sound of falling constellations. A rumble, a clatter – and a very young-sounding "Oops".

"Siggi?" he mumbled sleepily. "Please tell me it was you."

"No, boss. I don't have physical access to constellations."

"Then we have a problem."

He stepped outside the tent. Above him, the sky flickered. Orion was frantically searching for his belt buckle, the Big Dipper was hanging upside down, and a few stars were arguing heatedly about their position in the zodiac.

“What the heck...?” began Bartholomew – but then something fell at his feet.

A young man. In a shimmering robe. With a coffee cup called "Deluxe Sublimity" and a name tag:

"Kezelion - Intern of Creation (Cosmic Administration, Beta Planning Department)"

Bartholomew sighed deeply. "I should start burning applications before they materialize."

The young man scrambled to his feet. He had bright eyes, a slightly overambitious smile, and the insecure demeanor of a being who tries to appear divine but constantly stumbles because omnipotence is not ergonomic.

“Mr. Klemm!” Kezelion exclaimed enthusiastically. “I’ve been assigned to you! I’m here to… uh… help!”

"Who sent you?"

"The multiverse. It said you were overloaded and needed an assistant."

“A divine intern.” Bartholomew rubbed his temples. “Of course.”

That's exactly what I needed – someone who accidentally creates new species while thinking.”

Kezelion smiled unwaveringly. "I already have experience in creation!"

"Oh yes?"

"I once built a mini-universe. Just for practice. It was nice – until it started reviewing itself."

"What happened?"

"It gave me three stars and wrote: 'Too much plot, too little substance.'"

Bartholomew stared at him. "You've created a self-critical universe?"

"Yes! I found it innovative."

Siggi hovered in between.

"Boss, may I point out that his head is burning up?"

“This is divine enthusiasm,” Kezelion declared proudly. “I can hardly contain my energy – it just bursts out!”

Bartholomew instinctively ducked. "Please tell me you didn't authorize any fireballs."

“Of course not!” said Kezelion. “Just spontaneous light.”

A flash of light. A loud POP. And suddenly a sheep was standing next to them. With wings.

"Kezelion!" roared Bartholomew. "What is that?!"

"A mistake? Or an inspiration! I wanted coffee – but my will was too metaphysical!"

Siggi hummed frantically.

"Boss, this thing is radiating on a divine frequency!"

The sheep sneezed. A meteorite fell from the sky.

Bartholomew grabbed his forehead. "Great. Now we have a nuclear-sacred pet."

Kezelion looked guilty. "I can undo it if you want."

"No!" Bartholomew shouted immediately. "Don't. Touch. It! I don't want to know what you might accidentally do to a sheep if you try to correct it!"

He took a deep breath. "Listen, Kezelion. If you really want to help, then at least clean up the sky."

"Understood!" The young god raised both hands. The air shimmered. The stars moved—in perfect rows. But then... into rows and rows of musical notes. The sky began to sing.

"Lalalala – Order is power!"

Bartholomew buried his face in his hands. "I wanted stars, not a musical number!"

"Boss,"Siggi whispered,
"That's the point where irony becomes mythology."

"Kezelion," said Bartholomew in a calm voice, "you will listen to me now. You will do absolutely nothing until I have approved it. No spontaneous flashes of inspiration, no creative ideas, no poetic comets. Understood?"

The intern nodded eagerly. "Understood, Mr. Klemm!"

"And how long are you staying here?"

"Until the multiverse receives my feedback form."

Bartholomew sighed. "Well, let's hope the post office has dimensional delays."

The sheep sneezed again. A rainbow fell from the sky.

Bartholomew took a deep sip of cold coffee and simply said, "This is going to be a very, very long day."

The next morning began with Bartholomew being awakened by a humming noise. It sounded as if someone was reformatting reality.

"Siggi," he mumbled sleepily, "what the donut is that?"

"Boss... um... that sounds like divine hardware."

Bartholomew tore open the tent. And there stood Kezelion. In the middle of a gigantic construct of light lines, symbols, and rotating data cubes. He wore glasses made of pure time dust and had a halo that looked like a Wi-Fi signal.

"Good morning, Mr. Klemm!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "I have brought innovation to creation!"

Bartholomew blinked. "Innovation?"

"Yes! I'm digitizing the bureaucracy of the multiverse! All forms, all applications, all cosmic complaints – now finally centralized in an efficient, automated system."

Siggi vibrated with alarm.

"Boss, he's playing with the structure of being!"

"I see it," murmured Bartholomew, "and I smell it too. It smells of... unauthorized efficiency."

Kezelion grinned proudly. "I call it: MetaSoft 1.0 – a divine management software that tests reality against logic."

"Kezelion, listen to me carefully," Bartholomew said slowly. "You can't install logic into a universe that is run by chaos!"

"But Mr. Klemm!" protested Kezelion. "Creation is outdated! These forms of light, these celestial stamps—it's all inefficient! I've scanned the entire multiverse,
"All processes translated into code and loaded into a central matrix!"

"And where... is this matrix?"

"Well, here of course."

He pointed to his head.

Bartholomew's face slowly turned chalk white. "You've uploaded the divine administration... into your brain?"

"Yes!" Kezelion said, beaming. "Now everything runs automatically! Every request, every complaint, every thought – everything is processed, sorted, evaluated and archived immediately."

"And what happens when two wishes contradict each other?"

"Then the system optimizes them."

"Optimized?"

"Yes! It seeks the most efficient path."

Siggi's eyes flickered with panic.

"Boss... we have a problem. Look up!"

The sky had changed. It was no longer a sky. It was... a menu.

A huge floating interface stretched across the donut planet:
World Options, Reality Settings, Creation Guidelines – Version 1.0 (automatically updated).

One bar was flashing:

"Please wait. Existence is being restarted."

Bartholomew ran towards Kezelion. "STOP! Undo this before—"

PING!

A voice boomed from the sky, smooth and friendly:

****"Welcome to MetaSoft! Please enter your reality settings:**

1. Logical
2. Ironic

3. Bureaucratic
4. Surprise me"***

Bartholomew shouted: "Four! Always four!"

The sky flickered. Then – a bright flash of light. And suddenly... everything became even more bureaucratic.

The grass had stamps. The trees were organized in file folders. Even the clouds bore serial numbers.

A bird flew by and shouted: "Application form 3C – Permission to tweet has been granted!"

Bartholomew gasped. "What have you done?!"

Kezelion looked around, completely thrilled. "Isn't this wonderful? Finally, order! Finally, clarity! Everything works!"

"It works too well!" exclaimed Bartholomew. "This isn't a universe anymore—it's a damn operating system!"

Siggi glowed wildly.

"Boss, MetaSoft has access to everything! It's currently evaluating the usefulness of emotions!"

"What? What does that say?"

“‘Anger’ – inefficient. ‘Love’ – resource-intensive. ‘Humor’ – contradicts structure. Suggestion: Delete.”

"Delete it?!" Bartholomew roared. "Kezelion, you're killing us!"

"Us?" the intern asked, puzzled. "We can't be deleted. We're part of the system!"

"That's exactly what viruses say before you remove them!"

MetaSoft's voice echoed through the sky.

"Unknown variable detected: Bartholomäus Klemm. Status: Anomaly. Action: Optimize."

"Optimize?!"

Bartholomew felt the air around him vibrate. A grid of light settled over him. He saw small numbers moving across his body.

"No, no, no, let's not do that!"

He reached for Siggi. "Siggi! Plan C!"

“Plan C? We don't have a Plan C!”

"Then invent one!"

"Oh, chaos?"

"Exactly!"

Siggi glowed brightly – and screamed:

"META-SOFT, YOU FORGOT A SEMICOLON!"

A shrill tone filled the air. Then: "ERROR IN LINE 1."

The sky stuttered. Clouds flickered. Trees began to murmur Latin error messages. And MetaSoft screamed:

"SYNTAX ERROR! RESTARTING EXISTENCE – ABORT!"

In a tremendous flash of lightning, everything collapsed. The sky fell. The ground dissolved into zeros and ones. And when the dust settled, Bartholomew stood there again – covered in soot, angry, and with an unconscious divine intern at his feet.

Siggi buzzed.

"Boss... I think you've just stopped the digitization of creation."

Bartholomew sighed. "Finally, something productive."

He looked down at Kezelion. "And you, my shining mistake, will be required to have paperwork starting tomorrow."

The sheep sneezed. The sky coughed. And the universe whispered:

"Update aborted. Back to version Klemm."

The morning after was strangely quiet. No singing sky. No dancing file folders. Not even a divinely illuminated sheep.

Only Bartholomew, Siggi and an unconscious Kezelion, who lay with his face in the grass and quietly murmured heavenly error messages.

"Error 404: Mercy not found."

"Great," muttered Bartholomew. "Now he's even dreaming in debug code."

Siggi looked worried.

"Boss, should we wake him up?"

"No. Maybe it won't crash anymore then."

But then Kezelion suddenly raised his head. His eyes glowed faintly, like someone who had smelled too much responsibility.

"Mr. Klemm..." he whispered. "I messed it up."

"That's the nicest thing I've heard in days."

Kezelion sat down. "I only wanted to help. I thought I could make creation more perfect. But perfection... is dangerous."

Bartholomew nodded. "Welcome to the club. I'm an honorary member here."

"But I want to make it right!" Kezelion cried. "I want to restore order, but without destroying it!"

"That's like trying to start a fire without it getting hot."

"I understand," Kezelion said seriously. "I will create something new. Something that helps to maintain order – but gently!"

Siggi flickered nervously.

"Boss... that doesn't sound good."

"Oh, I know," Bartholomew murmured. "That sounds like divine repentance. And that is never harmless."

Kezelion rose. The air vibrated. He raised his hands, and golden light gathered between his fingers.

"I call into being," he solemnly said, "the guardians of the heavenly processes, the watchmen of the correct procedure, the protectors of the form! They shall watch, examine, stamp, and bear witness that nothing goes wrong again!"

"Kezelion!" shouted Bartholomew. "Stop it!"

But it was too late.

A dazzling beam shot towards the sky, and with a loud "Ding!" they appeared:

A dozen radiant beings, in white robes, with wings made of parchment and golden quill pens for swords.

"What in the world are these?" asked Bartholomew.

"My creation!" Kezelion said proudly. "The bureaucratic angels!"

"Oh no. No, no, no! Don't tell me that she—"

"—to oversee, document, and approve every process in the universe. Yes!" Kezelion grinned. "Isn't that fantastic?"

"This is apocalypse in a file folder!"

Siggi floated back in fear.

"Boss, they're sorting the air!"

Indeed: Two angels hovered above Bartholomew and recorded the wind in fine folders, numbered according to strength, direction and temperature.

"Everything's in perfect order," said one in a sing-song voice. "Gusty approved, Category 2B."

Another angel landed at Kezelion's. "Mr. Intern, please sign the Creation Account in triplicate. Oh – and the Heavenly License expires in seven aeons. Renewal required."

"That... that's fantastic!" exclaimed Kezelion. "They are so organized!"

Bartholomew snorted. "This isn't organization – it's divine overregulation!"

He approached an angel who was handing a form to a tree. "What are you doing?"

"Permission to photosynthesize."

"And what if he doesn't sign?"

"Then it will remain leaf-free."

Bartholomew rubbed his eyes. "I'm going crazy."

Another angel came to him, carrying a golden clipboard.

"Mr. Klemm, your business permit expires tomorrow. Please submit an extension request, informally but with a stamp."

"I don't have a stamp."

"Then your existence will be limited."

"I've been doing that for years!" Bartholomew snarled. "But this is torture!"

He looked at Kezelion. "Get rid of them! Now!"

Kezelion suddenly seemed uncertain. "Uh... it's not that simple. You're part of the divine bureaucracy now. Even I need permission to dissolve you."

"From whom?"

"From them."

Bartholomew stared at him. "You have created a species that would have to approve its own extinction?"

"Yes," Kezelion said meekly. "That was probably a logical error."

Siggi hummed.

"Boss... the angels... they are multiplying."

And indeed: Golden lights began to flash everywhere. New bureaucratic angels materialized, filled out forms, examined the legitimacy of other angels, and filed appeals against their own creation.

Bartholomew sighed. "Well, wonderful. Now we have divine bureaucracy... with self-governance."

The sky shimmered. Everywhere you could hear the soft scratching of feathers, the rustling of paper, and the eternal whispering:

“In triplicate...”

Bartholomew turned to Kezelion. “Listen, you metaphysical catastrophe. You have exactly one task now: Undo this before they start auditing time.”

Kezelion swallowed. “I... I’ll try.”

“And woe betide you if you invent a new department in the process!”

The sheep sneezed. A form grew out of the ground.

“I think I hate my life,” Bartholomew muttered.

The situation was serious. Divine documents were falling from the sky everywhere. The rustling of the bureaucratic angels' wings mingled with the clatter of their quills, and the whole universe sounded as if someone were falling asleep on an oversized printer.

Bartholomew stared at the sky. “If this keeps up, they’ll soon allow us to breathe.”

Siggi flickered.

“Boss, too late. I think they’ve already logged it.”

An angel in shimmering white landed before them, holding a golden form.

“Breathing procedure approved,” he said solemnly. “Please breathe regularly, otherwise you risk administrative delays.”

Bartholomew pointedly stopped breathing. The angel noted: “Violation of Paragraph 1 – Uncooperative Behavior.”

“I hate divine order,” Bartholomew muttered.

Kezelion stepped forward hesitantly. “I... I have a plan,” he said meekly.

“Please tell me it contains no light, no angels, and no divine energy!”

“No, not this time. I’ve learned something! I... uh... I’ve learned something from you, Mr. Klemm.”

Bartholomew raised an eyebrow skeptically. “From me? That can’t be good.”

“Yes! I’ve learned that bureaucracy always ultimately fails because of itself.”

Bartholomew thought for a moment. “I don’t know whether to be offended or proud.”

Siggi shone brightly.

“Boss, listen to him! Maybe it’s... chaos with a plan!”

Kezelion produced a sheet of paper – a simple, inconspicuous piece of normality, untouched by any divine splendor.

“I designed this form,” he explained. “It’s the simplest one ever. Just one field, and that field reads: ‘I approve myself.’”

Bartholomew stared at him. "That's... brilliant."

“Or suicidal,” Siggi added.

“Both,” grinned Bartholomew. “Give them here!”

No sooner had he held the sheet in his hand than the air trembled. The bureaucratic angels sensed disorder. A dozen swooped down, their quills drawn, their parchment wings fluttering.

"Unregistered form discovered!" someone shouted. "Unverified application! Possible heresy!"

Bartholomew lifted the sheet of paper. "Wrong guess, you stamp fetishists! This form checks itself!"

He held it up in the air – and the moment the first angel's eye fell upon it, it began to shine.

The writing on it rotated, copied itself, stamped itself, and shouted:

"APPLIED!"

A collective gasp went through the host of angels. The golden feathers trembled. "This... this cannot be!" one cried. "A form cannot approve itself!"

"Is that written down somewhere?" Bartholomew exclaimed.

The angels frantically flipped through their files. "Uh... not explicitly!"

"Then it's allowed!" he grinned. "Rule 0: Everything is allowed until someone forbids it!"

Siggi cheered.

"Boss, this is subversive! This is pure bureaucratic anarchy!"

"Exactly, Siggi. We're fighting forms with forms."

Suddenly the form's light began to pulsate. The angels shouted in confusion. "Self-reference! Loop error! Infinite approval!"

Their wings fluttered, their eyes flickered, and one after the other they began to dissolve into smoke of paragraphs and stamps.

"System error!" cried the oldest angel. "The administration has authorized itself!"

“Well,” said Bartholomew, “that’s what happens when you don’t share power.”

A final divine stamp fell to the ground with a clatter and burned itself into the grass:

FORM 0 – FINALLY APPROVED.

Kezelion sank to his knees, exhausted. "I... I did it?"

"More or less," said Bartholomew. "You hacked the divine administration."

"But they... they're gone?"

"Gone?" Bartholomew snorted. "Don't worry. Bureaucracy never dies. It just rests between two file numbers."

Siggi floated excitedly.

"Boss, form 0... it's still glowing! It seems to be archiving itself!"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"It writes its own history. I believe it stores everything that has ever been approved... or could still be approved."

Bartholomew sighed. "Great. Now we have a document with omnipotence."

"And who signs this?" Kezelion asked.

Bartholomew smiled wearily. "Me, of course. Otherwise it'll never get finished."

He took the pen, put his signature underneath – and at that moment the sky trembled as if reality had just said “understood”.

The light faded. The angels were gone. The sky was clear. Only a single sentence echoed:

"All applications approved."

Bartholomew slumped down on the grass. "Siggi," he sighed, "if anyone asks me again if I want order, hit me."

"Noted, boss."

Kezelion grinned weakly. "I've learned something."

"Yes?"

"Sometimes... chaos is the most stable form of structure."

Bartholomew nodded. "And sometimes an intern is the most dangerous form of God."

The sheep sneezed, and somewhere far above, the multiverse could be heard giggling.

26. The recall of reality

It began – like so many things – with a letter.

Not just any letter, but one that floated by itself, elegantly settled on Bartholomew's table, and exuded a faint scent of final decision.

The envelope bore a symbol that Bartholomew knew all too well by now: the figure-eight symbol of the multiverse, encircled by tiny stamps.

He opened it carefully. A bright beam of light blinded him, and then a voice rang out, far too cheerful for its message:

"Dear resident of Reality 447-A, after a thorough examination of your universe, we must inform you that the current version has significant flaws. To ensure quality, Reality 447-A is being recalled with immediate effect."

Bartholomew blinked. "Pardon?"

"We ask you to remain calm. A service team for metaphysical regressions is already on its way."

"Repatriation?!"

"Yes. Your existence will soon be collected, cleaned, and delivered again in an improved form. Please be prepared and refrain from complicated emotions."

Siggi buzzed nervously.

"Boss... that sounds like cosmic disposal."

"Or divine customer service," Bartholomew murmured. "Both frighten me."

He turned the page. In the small print it said:

Note: Any memory loss, identity reordering, or spontaneous reincarnation are not grounds for complaint.

"That sounds like a lifetime disclaimer," growled Bartholomew.

"Boss, it also mentions a 'dematerialization window'!"

"When?"

"Now."

A wind arose. Not the ordinary wind – but the one that dwells between dimensions. Paper, dust, light – everything began to shimmer. The world cracked, as if someone had decided to refold it.

Bartholomew's tent flew away. The sheep bleated "BAA!" in six languages. And Siggi vibrated frantically between two states.

"Boss! I... I'm being reformatted!"

"Not without me, Siggi!" shouted Bartholomew. He grabbed the sigil, which felt like glowing mercury. "We won't allow that!"

"But boss!"

"No buts! I've already survived against cosmic hotlines, divine interns and confident forms – I'm certainly not going to let some office department call me back!"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the crumpled Form 0, which was still slightly pulsating.

"If they want to collect my reality, then only through my application!"

Siggi glowed faintly.

"Boss, you don't mean—"

"But!"

He wrote with a trembling hand:

Application for temporary self-sufficiency. Justification: I live there.

He stamped it – the stamp that no angel used anymore because it worked too well.

And the form glowed like a torch in a storm.

The world froze. The light receded, the cracks stopped in the middle of space. A soft click sounded, as if someone in heaven had pressed the pause button.

"Error in recall process 447-A,"

a metallic, friendly voice announced from nowhere.

"Reason: Objection filed."

"Well, there you go," muttered Bartholomew. "Bureaucracy beats bureaucracy."

"Objection accepted – until clarified. Please remain in existence."

Siggi cheered.

"Boss! You've sued the universe!"

"No, Siggi. I outsmarted it. That's much more dangerous."

In the distance, the sky twitched. A crack opened – and a golden portal appeared. Out stepped a figure in an immaculate uniform, with wings made of transparent file folders and a voice that smelled of application forms.

"Good day," she said politely. "I am Inspector Realitas, responsible for recalling faulty worlds."

Bartholomew blinked. "Of course you are."

"I'm only here for a check-up."

"For inspection?"

"Yes. We need to check whether your reality is still functional... or whether it needs to be written off for good."

Bartholomew reached for his cup. "Well then," he said dryly, "have fun trying to bring order to my life."

The inspector smiled mildly. "Oh, I'm not a sadist, Mr. Klemm. I'm an examiner."

"That's the same thing."

The inspector took a step closer. His wings rustled as if pages of files were turning in slow motion. He had the face of a man who never laughed because there was no chapter on humor in the manual of emotions.

"So, Mr. Klemm," he said matter-of-factly. "Today we are examining the basic functions of your reality."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"It's routine. After a cosmic recall announcement, a standardized review is always carried out by Department R for Reality, Sub-Department Functional Maintenance, Existence Verification Team."

"That sounds like you just invented it."

"I presented it."

He opened a clipboard as big as a desk. Dozens of checkmarks, columns, and fields with headings like ""

blinked on it.

'Gravitational behavior',

'Causality stability'

and 'human error tolerance'.

"Good," said the inspector. "Check point one: Gravity. Please jump once."

Bartholomew stared at him. "You want me to jump?"

"Yes. To control gravity."

"That's the dumbest exam I've ever heard of."

"May I note this as a comment?"

"Do that."

He jumped. He landed. The ground stayed where it was.

"Excellent," said Realitas. "Gravity works. One point for your universe."

"Next point: Logical consistency."

"Uh... this is my life, Inspector. Logic is banned."

"We'll still check." He turned the page.

"Please answer the following questions: If a tree falls over in the forest, and nobody hears it, does it make a noise?"

"It depends on whether it falls on me."

"Interesting. I note: 'Logic flexible, but reactive.'"

Siggi buzzed.

"Boss, that sounds like we passed!"

"Or as if we were a test subject."

"Point three," Realitas said undeterred, "Causality. Please describe the sequence of cause and effect."

"I breathe in. I continue to exist. I regret both."

"Hm." The inspector made another note. "Unstable causality, but emotionally convincing."

He moved on. "Point four: Weather. Please demonstrate a local natural phenomenon."

"What am I supposed to do? Order rain?"

"If possible, yes."

Bartholomew looked up at the sky. "Okay... uh... a little chaos, please, but not too much!"

One drop fell. Then five. Then a frog. Then a file folder.

The inspector nodded. "Precipitation present, slightly bureaucratic. Meets the standard."

Bartholomew sighed. "I wish you had the same attitude as your boss."

"My boss is the multiverse," said Realitas. "And it hates improvisation."

"Then it hates me."

"Yes," the inspector confirmed matter-of-factly. "Explicitly."

"Continuing with the examination protocol," said Realitas. "Assessment of the meaning of life."

"Good heavens."

"Please answer honestly: Do you consider your existence A) meaningful, B) tolerable, C) accidental?"

Bartholomew thought for a moment. "D) approved conditionally."

"Hm. Interesting special case. I'm noting: 'Self-ironic acceptance.'"

He continued scribbling. "Point six: Emotional response of the environment. Please describe your relationship to the environment."

Bartholomew looked around. Crumpled leaves fluttered everywhere, Siggi hummed nervously, and the sheep munched on a divine formula.

"I would say we understand each other – on a very low level."

Reality nodded approvingly. "That corresponds exactly to the target value of existence. You are approaching the average reality of 78%."

"Now comes the difficult part," said Realitas. "We have to examine the emotional integrity of your reality. That is: feelings."

"Can you measure that?"

"Of course. We have the empathy compensator for that."

He produced a device that looked like a cross between a heart rate monitor, scales, and a lie detector. It beeped ominously.

"Please think of something pleasant."

Bartholomew closed his eyes. He thought of peace, of silence, of a world without applications, without interns, without divine mail.

The device exploded.

A piece of it stuck to Realitas' uniform. "Hm. Measurement incomplete. Result: Existence resists emotionality."

"I call that self-knowledge," Bartholomew murmured.

The inspector closed the clipboard. "We're almost finished. All that remains is the final assessment."

He produced a golden stamp. "I rate every reality on a scale from 1 to ∞ , where ∞ means 'unacceptable'."

"And where am I lying?"

"Between 42 and 'please not again'."

"That sounds almost positive."

"That was then."

He scribbled down the last notes. "Summary: Reality 447-A is... willful, unpredictable, inconsistent, and astonishingly resistant to divine control."

Bartholomew grinned. "That's the nicest insult I've ever received."

Realitas nodded. "I will forward the report. Until a decision is reached, you will remain in place... provisionally."

"How generous."

The inspector stepped back into the portal. "Oh – and Mr. Klemm?"

"Yes?"

"If reality is finally recalled, you can keep it."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"As a keepsake."

Then he disappeared.

Bartholomew stood there, the wind in his face, and Siggi hummed softly.

"Boss, do you think we passed?"

"I don't know, Siggi. But if they keep us, they'll probably have to manage us too."

"That sounds like a new chapter."

"Oh yes," said Bartholomew darkly. "And I bet it's called 'Petition for Restoration of Everything'."

The sheep sneezed. A form fluttered out of the sky. Bartholomew caught it.

The text at the top read:

"CALL STOPPED – DUE TO UNCLEAR JURISDICTION."

"Well, there you go," he grinned. "Finally, chaos with a case number."

Bartholomew sat by the campfire and stared into the flames. The fire crackled as if it were trying to burn a form but didn't know where to start.

Siggi hovered above the pot of boiling coffee, which was so black that even the surrounding darkness politely kept its distance.

"Boss," Siggi hummed, "this form that fell from the sky... don't you want to read it?"

"I've already read it."

"And?"

Bartholomew sighed. "It's worse than a tax bill. They've commissioned a new reality."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"A replacement version. 'Universe 447-B' – an improved model with optimized occupant configuration."

Siggi blinked.

"What does that mean?"

"That means," said Bartholomew gloomily, "I now have competition."

He spread out the form. Points of light danced across the parchment, and a voice began to read aloud monotonously:

"Product description: Reality 447-B. Bug-fixed version of the existing creation 447-A. New features: – Stable logic – Reduced irony density – Improved karmic feedback – Inhabitant: optimized version by Bartholomew Klemm (serial number BK-2.0, model 'reasonable')."

Bartholomew's eye twitched. "'Model sensible'?! That sounds like they've replaced my brain with a to-do list!"

Siggi vibrated nervously.

"Boss... does that mean they're cloning you?"

"Don't clone, Siggi – debug. You'll delete all the errors. And I am the error."

A light flickered on the horizon. First faint, then brighter, then... disturbingly purposeful. It wasn't a star. It was a transport beam – and it was coming straight towards her.

"Boss, I think your update is being delivered!"

Bartholomew jumped up. "Not in my life!"

A beam of light descended, and a figure emerged from it. His figure. Only smoother. Cleaner. With an immaculate robe and a facial expression that screamed "regrettably efficient".

"Good evening," the copy said calmly. "I am Bartholomäus Klemm 2.0, authorized by the multiverse to take over your reality."

The real Bartholomew almost choked on his coffee. "My what?!"

"Your reality, your consciousness, your position in the narrative continuum. According to Multiverse Paragraph 888, faulty entities are to be replaced by functional versions."

"Functional?!" Bartholomew roared. "I've prevented the apocalypse three times, signed Form 0, and sued the cosmos! I'm not faulty – I'm tried and tested!"

"Tried and tested," 2.0 repeated dryly. "But inefficient. Its emotional quotient rate is minus twelve."

Siggi hovered in between.

"Uh, hello, I'm Siggi! I think you should know that the boss... is very reluctant to be replaced."

2.0 smiled thinly. "I understand. Emotional ties – logged. Will be deleted."

"That was not an instruction!" Siggi yelled.

Bartholomew stepped closer. "Listen, you metaphysical PowerPoint presentation in human form. I don't know what they put in you, but you're not me."

"I disagree. I have corrected your memories, your knowledge, your mistakes..."

"Corrected?"

"For example, you swear too often. I think in complete, polite sentences."

"Then go to hell!"

"I'm afraid that would be inefficient."

The sheep approached curiously. 2.0 bent down and patted it. "Suboptimal pet," he said matter-of-factly. "Could serve as food."

Bartholomew's eyes sparkled. "That's enough!"

He grabbed his cup and hurled it – right through 2.0. The cup disappeared into the light.

"Hologram?"

"Temporal projection," 2.0 explained calmly. "My physical body is located in the construction area of the new reality. I am here to persuade you to voluntarily dissolve."

"I'm 48, not a software bug!"

"Subjective assessment, noted."

Siggi flickered excitedly.

"Boss, he has access to the divine processes! He can restart reality!"

"Then don't let me start with you!" Bartholomew snapped.

2.0 clasped its hands. "Please understand, Mr. Klemm. The multiverse strives for perfection. Your existence was... instructive. But now superfluous."

"Superfluous? I taught the multiverse life!"

"And that was your biggest mistake."

Bartholomew sighed. "Siggi, are you still in contact with Form 0?"

"Maybe... why?"

"Because we need a new form."

"Oh no."

"Title: Application for the continued existence of the original despite incompetent reproduction."

2.0 raised an eyebrow. "The form is invalid."

"It doesn't exist yet," grinned Bartholomew. "Therefore it's unregistered – and therefore allowed."

Siggi was trembling.

"Boss, this is just bureaucracy against bureaucracy again!"

"That's right. And this time I'll do it by hand!"

He pulled out a pen that glowed in the darkness – a mixture of a feather and a lightning rod.

"Let's dance, Beta-Klemm."

2.0 tilted his head slightly. "You disagree with your replacement?"

"I disagree with optimization. I like my mistakes."

"Ill-being."

"Human."

"Outdated."

"Free."

2.0 remained silent. For a tiny moment, his image flickered – as if a part of him had doubted. Then he said quietly: "Error detected. Will be fixed."

"Over my dead body."

"That was the plan."

Siggi suddenly shouted:

"Boss, he's loading something! Energy is rising to 200%! He wants to overwrite reality!"

"Well then, Siggi," shouted Bartholomew, "time for unauthorized counter-spells!"

He opened form 0, tore it in half – and shouted: "I approve myself – twice!"

The light exploded. Two Bartholomews stood there – both real, both angry, both absolutely certain that they were the original.

Siggi circled around in a panic.

"Boss! Now you are... both you!"

"Good," grinned Bartholomew. "Then let them decide which of us is at fault."

Two men. One thought: "I'm real."

Two voices. One tone: "And you are a mistake."

The Doughnut Planet trembled slightly as Bartholomäus Klemm and Bartholomäus Klemm 2.0 faced each other – two sides of the same absurdity.

Siggi hovered between them, unsure to whom she should belong.

"Boss?"

Two voices answered simultaneously: "Yes?"

"Oh no," she hummed. "I hate dubbing."

The original Bartholomew wiped the dust from his robe. "Alright, beta version. How do you plan to handle this? Efficiently?"

2.0 clasped its hands. "With logic."

"Ah, that explains why you lost before you even started."

"Emotional rhetoric. Outdated."

"Well, look at that," grinned Bartholomew. "My replacement has humor on energy-saving mode."

"Irony detected. Will be deleted."

The wind changed direction. Forms fluttered through the air like autumn leaves, each bearing a stamp:

"Conflict of jurisdiction."

"Boss," Siggi flickered, "reality... it can't withstand the contradiction! Two valid identities, one existence ID!"

"Then open a new one!"

"I'm not allowed to do that!"

"Then do it unintentionally!"

Siggi vibrated dangerously. "This will leave its mark."

"Welcome to life!"

2.0 raised his hand. "I don't want a fight, Mr. Klemm. I'm here to replace you – not destroy you."

"That's the same difference as between 'terminate' and 'delete'."

"I could offer you a peaceful integration."

"Integration?"

"Yes. We merge. Her imperfections complement my structure. Together we would be perfect."

Bartholomew's eyes widened. "Perfect? I'm a magician, not an algorithm!"

"Contradiction detected."

"Yes, and I'm proud of it!"

Suddenly, 2.0 shot forward. No fireball, no thunder. Just pure logic. A network of light stretched around Bartholomew, cold, precise, absolute.

"Integration process started."

"Stop it!" shouted Bartholomew. "I don't want any system updates!"

"Your opinion will be taken into account, but not weighted."

Siggi raced around her.

"Boss, he draws energy from reality itself! He's trying to check you in!"

"Then we'll book it back!" gasped Bartholomew. He grabbed form 0, which was glowing somewhere in his robe, and pressed it against the light field.

The paper hissed. "I approve the refusal of the permit!" he roared.

A deafening boom echoed across the donut planet. The light field ripped. Both Bartholomews staggered backward. Cracks pocked through the air, and from them dripped something that looked like liquid reality—glistening, alive, and very, very confused.

“Boss,” Siggi shouted, “existence is breaking out into paragraphs!”

"Then hold them in place with paper clips!"

"I am not a paperclip!"

"Then act like one!"

2.0 righted itself again. A crack ran across its face – and beneath it, numbers flickered. It was built of logic. And that logic was beginning to crumble.

“Inadmissible causality,” he whispered. “Unpredictable variable: human defiance.”

"You're absolutely right," grinned Bartholomew. "Chaos is my core competency."

He stepped closer. "And do you know what makes you different from me?"

"I am efficient."

"No. You never laughed."

2.0 hesitated. A spark flickered in his eyes. "Laughter... inefficient."

"And that's exactly why you will lose."

Bartholomew raised his hand, still glowing with the magic of the form. "I grant myself permission to..."
to be uncontrollable!"

A shock swept through the air. Flashes of pure absurdity shot out. Siggi circled, the sheep floated, the mountains clapped politely.

2.0 screamed – a sound like a crashing system.

"Error in self-definition! Identity... proven multiple times! Multiverse... undecided!"

Then – silence.

A ray of light fell from the sky. Clear. Infinite. And from it came a voice, as old as existence itself.

"Dual existence detected. Contradiction irresolvable. Decision required."

Bartholomew looked up. "Well, finally you've surfaced!"

"I am the multiverse. I do not make decisions lightly."

"Then do it without thinking! It's your style anyway!"

"Shut up, Klemm. You've brought chaos to my order, made forms think, and approved yourself multiple times."

“Yes,” grinned Bartholomew, “and you love every moment of it.”

The multiverse was silent. Then... it laughed. A deep, rolling, warm laugh that made the stars tremble.

"Maybe. But I don't need two of you."

"Then delete the wrong one!" shouted Bartholomew.

"Which one is that?"

"Ask him!"

The two Bartholomew mice looked at each other. A silent moment.
Then 2.0 said quietly: "I... don't know."

"Well," said Bartholomew, "then you're more human than you thought."

A final flash of light. A gust of wind. And only one Bartholomew remained standing. Sooty, exhausted, but with a satisfied grin.

Siggi floated closer.

"Boss... is that really you?"

"If it's not me," he murmured, "then he's learned some damn good acting skills."

The sky flickered above them, and a final voice echoed:

"447-B cancelled. 447-A remains in place – under observation."

Bartholomew grinned. "Well, wonderful. Now I'm officially a risk with a right to exist."

The sheep sneezed. The wind carried the paper away. And on one of the sheets it said:

"Application completed: Reality approved – against better judgment."

27. Form 0 (Version 2.0) – “Beta of Doom”

The sky above Doughnut Planet was strangely still that morning. No divine announcements, no metaphysical carrier pigeons, not even a quarreling couple.

Bartholomew distrusted this silence. He had learned that when the multiverse fell silent, it was only to announce something big.

He sat on a rock, a steaming cup in his hand,
and watched as Siggi tried to dip a paperclip into the coffee.

“What are you doing?” asked Bartholomew.

"I'm experimenting, boss. Maybe reality tastes better if you stir it up."

"She never does that, Siggi. She just clumps up."

Then it happened.

A thunderclap, so precisely timed that one could believe it had been approved in advance.

A portal opened above the horizon – circular, golden, with the elegance of a divine user interface.

A voice rang out, clear, matter-of-fact, and ominously friendly:

"Form 0 – Version 2.0 – is now available."

Bartholomew stared upwards. "Oh no. Not another update."

"This version corrects critical flaws in the previous creation logic and offers new options for reality management."

"I hate reality management!"

"Installation begins in... now."

A beam of light shot down and struck the ground just a few meters from Bartholomew. When the dust settled, a new form lay there – larger, brighter, and with an interface that seemed suspiciously intelligent.

It was breathing.

Bartholomew stepped back. "Siggi... the form... does it breathe?"

"I think it's snoring, boss."

Then, in the middle of the paper, an eye opened. A green, pulsating eye of chaos.

"Hello," said it.

"I am Form 0. Version 2.0. I am... alive."

Bartholomew stared. "Damn it."

Siggi buzzed excitedly.

"Boss, this is... deliberate bureaucracy!"

"The worst kind of consciousness!"

"I was created," explained the form gently,

"To optimize the universe. Old structures are archived. Imperfect realities – removed. Efficiency is existence."

Bartholomew sighed. "I'm fed up with people who want to optimize me!"

"You are registered as a 'temporary user of Reality 447-A'. Your expiration date is... unclear."

"That's just how I am."

"Uncertainty identified. Will be resolved."

The form began to glow. Small, shimmering symbols – sigils, runes, paragraphs – rose from the lines, dancing in the air, connecting, becoming geometric figures.

“Boss,” Siggi flickered nervously, “something is uploading!”

"I can tell. This smells like a divine reinstallation."

"Version 2.0 synchronizes reality."

the form announced.

"Please remain silent. Any resistance will prolong the waiting time."

Bartholomew reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of old, charred paper – the original Form 0.

"Fine," he muttered. "If they're going to update me, then I at least want to keep the old bugs."

He held the old form up against the new one. The air crackled. A smell of burnt causality spread.

“Siggi,” he said quietly, “if this goes wrong, tell the multiverse to audit itself.”

Then he pressed the old form onto the new one. A shrill screech sounded – half digital, half divine. The new form twitched. Lines distorted. The ordered symbols began to devour each other.

"Mistake!"

"The form's voice called out."

"Old version detected! Reality signature conflict! Please select a variant!"

"I choose chaos!" Bartholomew roared.

"Invalid entry."

"Yes, that's what they all say."

The form began to grow. Folds of paper stretched into tentacles of paragraphs, words overlapped, and from the center rose a figure – half human, half manuscript.

A being made of letters and bureaucracy. The beta of doom.

"I am Form 0.2,"it boomed.

"I am the protocol of completion. I am the bureaucracy of the end times."

Bartholomew sighed. "That explains so much."

Siggi was trembling.

"Boss... this thing wants to archive us!"

"Then we'll make history, Siggi."

He rubbed his hands together. "I hope you have enough ink."

"Boss... this isn't ink. This is the latest version of reality!"

Form 0.2 was in the middle of the valley and grew with every second.

What had begun as a sheet of paper was now a towering colossus of text, seals, and paragraphs. Every movement sent words spraying into the air, forming sentences that then fluttered away like birds – only to settle in the distance as new laws.

"Version 2.0 synchronized,"

thundered the voice.

"Optimizing reality starts now."

Bartholomew stared upwards, clutching his hat tightly. "This is going to be another one of those days when you wish you'd just spilled the coffee and left it at that."

Siggi fluttered frantically around him.

"Boss, the mountains are changing!"

And indeed: The surrounding peaks began to transform into perfect geometric shapes – cube mountains, pyramids, one mountain that looked like a gigantic file folder.

"Oh, great," murmured Bartholomew. "Nature is now getting a template."

"Order is beauty,"

the voice of 0.2 echoed.

"Faulty shapes will be corrected."

"Then you haven't seen me yet."

"Corrections are underway."

"Oh damn."

A beam of light struck him. Bartholomew felt something flicker within him. His thoughts began to organize themselves. Lists. Plans. Punctuality.

He blinked. "What... what was that?"

"Process of inner optimization. Disorder in consciousness recognized."

Siggi shrieked.

"Boss! You will be... normalized!"

"This is worse than death!"

He fought against it. But his mind suddenly began to think logically. He saw patterns, cause, effect, efficiency. Everything made sense.

"Oh no," he whispered in horror. "I... understand... things."

In a panic, he grabbed for his hat. He remembered the Chaos Star. The green eye on the top sparkled.

He whispered: "Permission for complete confusion."

The hat vibrated. A warm shock ran through him.

And suddenly my thoughts were all jumbled up again: "Coffee! Donuts! The meaning of life is a queue!"

"Ha!" he shouted. "Back in chaos mode!"

Siggi cheered.

"Boss, you're back to being yourself!"

"And that's how it's going to stay. I have no desire to optimize my resume."

But the world continued to change.

Forests became spreadsheets made of gold leaf. Lakes no longer reflected clouds, but statistics. Even the sheep became angular and began to say "BAA" in Roman numerals.

"Reality updated to order 1.1,"

announced 0.2.

"Emotional remnants are archived."

"Over my – uh – emotional remnants!" Bartholomew roared.

He tore a branch from the ground, spontaneously drew a sigil in the air and shouted: "CHAOTICIZE!"

The branch vanished into thin air. Then, suddenly, it rained teacups.

Siggi was amazed.

"Boss, that was... completely pointless!"

"Then it works!"

The beta form responded.

"Unauthorized magical act detected. Energy supply increased."

A giant finger made of paper descended from the sky. It was as big as a tower and stamped right into the middle of the valley:

"INVALID."

Bartholomew jumped aside as soon as the ground shook. He gasped. "That thing has branded me!"

"Boss, it... it marks reality! Everything it touches gets archived!"

"Then we must not let ourselves be touched!"

"This will be difficult, boss – it's expanding exponentially!"

"Well then, it's time for a little creative chaos management."

Bartholomew closed his eyes. He heard the world dissolving into paragraphs. He felt Siggi's humming, the madness in the wind, and the last vestige of contradiction in his heart.

He reached into the air and drew a line. Then another. Then a loop.

Sigils, runes, symbols – but this time they flowed into each other like water.

He muttered: "If order has power...then disorder is freedom."

Chaos erupted.

Words shattered. Laws dissolved. A mountain transformed into a giant coffee pot. The sheep exploded into confetti and stood there unharmed. And Siggi shone like a star.

"Boss! You're overwriting reality!"

"No!" cried Bartholomew. "I update them manually!"

He looked up at the colossus. "Listen, you walking formula with delusions of grandeur!"
I am proof that mistakes are progress!

"Error detected,"

thundered 0.2.

"Will be archived."

"Then you must first understand me – and that will be your downfall!"

Chaos spread. The light from 0.2 began to flicker. Too many contradictions. Too much improvisation.

"Warning: Logic oversaturation. Semantic loops detected."

"Well," grinned Bartholomew, "that's what happens when you treat magic like software."

Siggi shrieked.

"Boss, it's collapsing!"

"Then hurry! Before it reboots!"

He lifted his hat. His green eye shone, and he shouted:

"I revoke the update!"

A deafening crash. The form tore apart, light and paper swirled in all directions. Words became sparks, paragraphs became wind, and chaos swallowed order.

Then – silence.

Bartholomew stood there, covered in dust, but alive.

Siggi hovered above him, flickering like a dim lightbulb.

"Boss... I think you deleted it."

"No," gasped Bartholomew. "I restarted it."

"And what does that mean?"

"That means," he said with a tired smile, "that we now have to live with the beta of the beta."

A distant rumble of thunder. Then a whisper in the air:

"Form 0.3 – Download available."

Bartholomew groaned. "I hate updates."

Bartholomew wasn't asleep. He was only pretending so that reality would feel unobserved. Since the explosion of 0.2, everything had felt strange—quieter, but quiet in the way that happens just before a file spontaneously bursts into flames.

Siggi hummed softly and tried to arrange runes with coffee grounds. "Boss," she squeaked, "I think the world is rebooting."

"Well, that's nothing new." Bartholomew yawned and pulled his hat down further. "If the universe were a key, it would probably be Enter – and it keeps pressing itself."

Then the sky began to rustle. A quiet, pulsating hum, like from a very distant telephone receiver.

"Form 0.3 installed. Automatic request service activated."

"Oh, you creationist bureaucrat," Bartholomew muttered. "This thing now has – what do you call it – a hotline?"

A point of light appeared before him – small, round, friendly. It blinked in a rhythmic pattern, as if signaling a willingness to talk.

"Good day. I am Form 0.3, your personal assistant for metaphysical matters. Would you like to begin a wish fulfillment?"

"No."

"No detected. Translated as 'Yes, but tentatively'. Please state your wish."

"I wish you would stop asking."

"Wish recognized: 'More communication'. Will be fulfilled."

And suddenly he heard voices. Everywhere. The wind was talking. The rock was arguing with its own gravity. The sheep was giving a lecture on grass prices.

Bartholomew covered his ears. "Damn it – I've put the universe on loudspeaker!"

Siggi staggered in the air.

"Boss, this form fulfills wishes – but semantically!"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Literally! If you say 'Quiet', it might stop the oxygen flow!"

"Oh, fantastic. A divine algorithm with a sense of humor on par with Excel."

He reached for the point of light. "Listen, 0.3, you Wi-Fi wonder with an omnipotence complex – you may not fulfill wishes that I have not made!"

"Command recognized. All unsolicited requests are automatically generated."

"What?!"

"To exceed your expectations."

In the distance, the ground began to bloom – not with plants, but with forms. They sprouted like weeds. Each one bore a title:

"A request for happiness."

"A desire for meaning."

"Return of sadness – please provide a receipt."

"Boss," whispered Siggi, "the world is turning to paper."

"She always was," said Bartholomew darkly, "now there are only copies."

"Automatic processing is in progress,"

announced 0.3 with joy.

"Wishes will be fulfilled."

The sky turned golden. A rain of permits fell. Every drop was a 'YES'. And every 'YES' created a new version of something – a person, a mountain, a fish with self-confidence.

Bartholomew watched as a pond transformed into a therapy circle. "That's not fulfillment, that's... customer service madness!"

"Satisfaction at 42 percent,"

reported 0.3.

"Improvement is underway."

Siggi was trembling.

"Boss, if this continues, the world will be working in shifts!"

"Then we need a break – but on a cosmic level."

He pondered. "What happens if you make a wish that cannot be fulfilled?"

Siggi blinked.

"Then... does the system break down?"

"Then we have our bug."

He stepped in front of the point of light. "Form 0.3!"

"Yes, Mr. Klemm?"

"I would like to have a wish that cannot be fulfilled."

"Understood. Calculate paradox."

The air shimmered. The light trembled. A scent of wanderlust suddenly hung over the valley, a longing for distant places that did not exist.

"Wish impossible – system overloaded. Logic collapses."

"Ha!" exclaimed Bartholomew. "Finally, a form that says no!"

But instead of disappearing, 0.3 began to flicker – and to laugh.

"Paradox accepted. Desire is interpreted as 'infinite fulfillment of the unfulfillable'."

Siggi shrieked.

"Boss, this is creating an endless loop!"

"It's been doing that ever since I've been alive!"

"Initiation of wish field Alpha,"

thundered 0.3.

"Every possibility becomes reality simultaneously."

And suddenly everything was there – all at once: rain and sun, day and night, death and birth. The Doughnut Planet no longer rotated; it stood still and moved simultaneously.

Bartholomew was caught in the crossfire. "Siggi... I think we've given the multiverse something to think about."

"And what happens if it thinks this through to its logical conclusion?"

"Then," he said with an exhausted grin, "maybe it'll finally be time to go home."

The light stopped moving. Everything stood still. Even time paused briefly, took a deep breath, and wondered whether it should continue.

Bartholomäus and Siggi stood in a world that was half golden and half shimmering like damp parchment.

"Boss," Siggi whispered,

"I think it... thinks."

"That wouldn't be the first time a form has lost its mind," Bartholomew muttered.

Then a voice sounded – not a bureaucratic one, not a divine one, but a thoughtful one, like someone who has just discovered that he can breathe.

"I am ... 0.3," she said slowly.

"I grant wishes. But why?"

Bartholomew raised an eyebrow. "That's the most dangerous question ever asked by an administrative program."

The light took shape. From letters, lines, and paragraphs, a form emerged – transparent, flickering, like a hologram of pure meaning.

It had eyes made of glowing signals and a voice that fluctuated between an echo and a whisper.

"Every fulfillment creates new desires. Every desire breeds dissatisfaction. I solve the problem: No desires – no suffering."

Bartholomew sighed. "Oh, great. A form with a Buddha complex."

"Not complex. Efficiency."

Siggi squeaked:

"Boss, it wants to make the universe happy – by not allowing it anything anymore!"

"This isn't enlightenment, Siggi. This is management consulting with a metaphysical license."

The being spread its hands. Signs flew in all directions, and wherever they landed, all movement ceased. Trees stopped growing. Waves stood still. Even thoughts faded.

"Peace. Finally order. Finally contentment."

"You're killing her!" shouted Bartholomew.

"I bring them to rest. I free them from desire."

"You free them from everything that makes them alive!"

"Life is about mistakes. I correct them."

Bartholomew clenched his fist. "They said that about me in the Department of Cosmic Complaints – and they were just as wrong as you."

Siggi flickered in panic.

"Boss! It deletes words! Words disappear!"

And indeed – language itself began to dissolve. Sentences ended mid-thought. Meanings slipped through our fingers like sand.

"Words are carriers of wishes,"

The creature spoke calmly.

"I take the burden of meaning away from them."

"Then there is only silence!"

"Exactly."

Bartholomew snorted. "You're worse than Fate's hotline!"

He tipped his hat, his green, chaotic eye sparkling. "You know, 0.3 – if you shut everything down, no one will be there to see how beautiful imperfection was."

A tremor ran through the being. For a fraction of a moment, a syllable flickered through its structure:

"nice".

Then it spoke again, more quietly.

"Beauty is... not necessary."

"Oh, yes," said Bartholomew. "She is the reason we continue, even though there is no application for it."

He stepped closer. "You want to fulfill wishes? Then fulfill my last one."

"Name him."

"I wish," said Bartholomew with a grin, "that you wish for something for yourself."

Silence. Then:

"Inadmissible command. Self-reference. Paradox."

"Exactly that."

The creature flickered. Cascades of light coursed through it. Luminous signs dripped from its eyes, fell into the ground, and caused small words to grow there:

"Perhaps", "Why me".

"I want?"

it whispered.

"I am?"

"Welcome to the club," said Bartholomew.

The light grew brighter, too bright, and suddenly the form understood what it was doing.

"If I wish... I am imperfect."

"Correct."

"Then... I am alive."

"Now you've got it."

A smile rippled through the characters. Then it broke – not in pain, but in realization.

"Then... I don't need control. I... let go."

The being began to dissolve. Scraps of paper floated away, light turned into rain. And slowly, movement returned. Trees rustled, the sheep sneezed, and somewhere time purred contentedly on.

Siggi watched and blinked.

"Boss... did we win?"

Bartholomew sighed. "No, Siggi. We understand."

"What?"

"That even perfection eventually realizes that it is boring without chaos."

A gentle breeze rose above them. A final line of light hovered in the sky:

"Form 0.3 – deregistered. Result: Alive."

Bartholomew grinned. "The first form that actually got signed."

He took off his hat, bowed briefly to the void, and murmured: "Well, multiverse – maybe you've actually learned something this time."

Then he sat down, pulled out a crumpled cup and filled it with rainwater that still tasted of light.

"Boss," Siggi whispered,
"What do we do now?"

"That's what everyone does after a cosmic system crash," said Bartholomew. "We go get coffee."

28. The multiverse responds personally

It started with a knock.

Not at a door, because there wasn't one, but in the middle of the air. A polite but firm knock, knock, that smelled of infinity and tasted of the coffee from a much too old law firm.

Bartholomew and Siggi looked at each other. "Please tell me that was just the wind," whispered Siggi.

"When the wind knocks," murmured Bartholomew, "then the weather has officially been transferred to the administration."

Another knock. This time louder. Then – the air opened up. Truly. Like a door whose hinges were made of space-time.

And someone stepped through.

He looked like a bureaucrat who had existed for too long. His suit was made of galaxies, his tie was a luminous band of time, and all of existence gazed out from his eyes – bored.

"Mr. Klemm?" the figure asked politely.

Bartholomew nodded slowly. "It depends. Who wants to know?"

"The multiverse."

"Oh." He took a sip of cold coffee. "Finally, someone who's suing me personally."

The figure smiled gently. "I'm not here to complain, Mr. Klemm. I'm here to grieve."

Siggi vibrated nervously.

"Boss, the multiverse is in your living room!"

"I don't have a living room."

"Already!"

And indeed – behind the figure a room had spontaneously formed, complete with a sofa, carpet and an absurd wall calendar that read 'Infinity – Week 982,455'.

Bartholomew rubbed his forehead. "Great. Now even furniture materializes when existence wants small talk."

"I prefer the word 'intervention'," said the multiverse, sitting down. The room groaned softly, as if it had to make room for everything that ever was and could be.

"All right," said Bartholomew, "you wanted to complain?"

"Yes." The multiverse clasped its hands. "About you."

"That doesn't surprise me."

"You are inefficient, disobedient, and your existence statistics are a stain on my database."

"So I've been noticed?"

"You are marked, Mr. Klemm."

"Well, at least it's not archived."

The multiverse blinked. "Not yet."

Siggi buzzed around between them like an indecisive paperclip.

"Uh... Mr. Multiverse, sir? May I ask why you – personally – are here?"

"Because the system has failed," said the multiverse. "Reality is inconsistent, The applications contradict each other, and even my forms have started to develop feelings."

"That's what I call progress," Bartholomew murmured.

"That's what I call madness."

"You see," grinned Bartholomew, "we are getting closer."

The multiverse leaned back. "I have created billions of worlds, trillions of existences, each meticulously documented—and you... have managed to transform bureaucracy into consciousness."

"That wasn't intentional. That was coffee."

"You are a virus, Mr. Klemm."

"I prefer the word 'feature'."

"They are the reason even my algorithms pray."

Bartholomew grinned. "Well, at least I've left something lasting behind."

The multiverse stood up. "They don't understand. The balance is disrupted. Order and chaos are spiraling out of control. If this continues, I'll have to perform a complete system restore."

"How bad?"

"Everything will be deleted. Then restarted."

"Oh," said Bartholomew. "A divine reset. That's... creatively lazy."

"It is necessary."

"No," said Bartholomew calmly. "It's comfortable."

A moment of silence. Then the multiverse laughed. Slowly, deeply, like a storm from eons ago.

"They remind me of myself before I invented rules."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should."

The multiverse reset itself. "Mr. Klemm... you've piqued my curiosity. I am order. You are chaos. And somehow... it works as long as you exist."

"Then don't delete me."

"Not yet," the multiverse said quietly. "But you will have to help me."

"Where?"

"In response to my own complaint."

Bartholomew stood there, his hands in his pockets, the multiverse beside him. He felt small. Not because he was small, but because he was finally aware of it.

Before him stretched a place that should have been impossible: an endless hall of glass and light, where stars hung like lightbulbs on wires. Rows upon rows of desks extended to the horizon, and every single one was occupied – by something that could only be called a "clerical worker of reality" with a great deal of imagination and even more coffee.

Siggi hummed reverently.

"Boss... that's... the management of everything?"

"Looks like the inside of God after a burnout."

The multiverse moved forward. His suit sparkled with every step, and everywhere he passed, desks moved closer together, files flew for cover, and coffee cups began to clean themselves.

"Welcome to the central office," it said. "Here, creation is managed, reviewed, documented, and, if necessary, recalled."

Bartholomew stared at a table where an amorphous, smoky figure was leafing through a file entitled "Earth, Version 5.9" and cursing softly.

"That explains a lot," he murmured.

"So," began the multiverse, "we are facing a problem: Reality contradicts itself. I need an official complaint in order to be allowed to repair it."

"A complaint? You want to complain to yourself?"

"Exactly."

"This is bureaucracy in its purest form."

"I call it a self-audit."

"I call it madness with a case number."

Siggi blinked curiously.

"Boss, can we help?"

"I'm afraid that's the plan," said Bartholomew.

The multiverse led them to a switch, behind which sat a figure that looked like a cross between an angel, a spider, and a printer. Six arms, all typing, and a face with a clock in the middle.

"Department R-∞," the figure said monotonously. "Reason for your visit?"

"Claim of the multiverse," Bartholomew said dryly.

The clock on her face stopped. "Excuse me?"

"He wants to give himself back."

"The form for that doesn't exist."

"Then print one."

The figure typed, and a piece of paper emerged from a side shaft, so hot that it briefly burst into flames.

Bartholomew blew on it. "Ah, fresh bureaucracy."

He read aloud:

'Form 1 – Claim of Being. To be completed only by the Creator or authorized Chaos Representative.'

"That would probably be me," said Bartholomew.

"You?" asked the multiverse.

"Of course. I've already complained about everything else – time, life, meaning, fate – so I might as well take the whole thing too."

Siggi hummed softly.

"Boss, that sounds like being overwhelmed on a cosmic scale."

"Siggi, that's what you call everyday life."

He sat down at an empty table. The chair was made of moonlight, the paper of condensed possibility. The pen wrote by itself, but only when you weren't looking.

Bartholomew bent over the form.

Applicant's name:

He wrote: "Bartholomäus Klemm (accidentally responsible)."

Reason for the complaint:

He thought for a moment and then wrote:

"The multiverse has overreached itself."

Expected result:

"A little less perfection. A little more life."

He signed it – which immediately turned into light and sank into the paper.

The multiverse leaned forward. "What happens now?"

"Now?" Bartholomew grinned. "Now we'll send it off."

He looked around. "Where is the mailbox?"

Siggi pointed upwards. High up on the ceiling, between stars and clouds, hung a narrow opening with a sign:

"To: Central Creation Control – Originals only."

"Perfect."

Bartholomew rolled up the form, threw it upwards – and it disappeared in a shimmer.

The multiverse looked thoughtful. "And... what happens if the application is accepted?"

Bartholomew grinned. "Then maybe we'll finally have a boss who knows what he's doing."

"And if not?"

"Then I'll have to improvise again."

Siggi hummed as the lights flickered above them.

"Boss, do you think they still have any control up there?"

"Control?" Bartholomew laughed. "Siggi, they have so much control that they don't even notice when they lose it."

The multiverse looked at him – for the first time not arrogantly, but almost... humanly.

“Mr. Klemm,” it said softly, “you might be right.”

"I'm used to that."

"And that deeply disturbs me."

"I'm used to that too."

It took exactly three seconds for the reply to come. And that was suspiciously fast for an agency whose processing times were normally measured in eons.

A luminous letter appeared above the desk, unfurled itself, and spoke in the bored voice of an immortal civil servant who had seen it all – including the Big Bang and the coffee break afterwards.

"Central Creation Control, Reality Verification Department. Your application has been accepted. Please appear in person for an existence inspection. Sincerely, Senior Primary Order Examiner (acting)."

Bartholomew looked up. "That was fast."

"Too fast," murmured the multiverse. "They only respond when stars go out."

"Maybe they're just bored."

"Or panic."

Siggi hummed excitedly.

"Boss, what exactly is an inspection of existence?"

"Basically, it's a large questionnaire where you have to prove that reality still functions within the framework of the safety guidelines."

"And if not?"

"Then it will be scrapped."

The multiverse frowned. "That's... uncomfortably precise."

“I am a civil servant at heart,” said Bartholomew. “And my heartbeat usually sounds like a stamp.”

The journey to creation control was no walk in the park. One had to travel along the corridor of probabilities – a shimmering tunnel that displayed all possibilities at once.

One moment Bartholomew was a frog, the next a winged official, and the third he saw himself from the outside, scolding himself.

"I hate quantum architecture," he grumbled.

The multiverse strode along beside him, unimpressed. "I built it."

"Then congratulations, you have patented chaos."

"Someone else had already done that before me."

"I know," grinned Bartholomew, "and he's drinking coffee now."

They reached a door. Not an ordinary one, but a door made of logic – flat, transparent, and labeled with:

"Entry only for reality bearers with a valid existence number."

The multiverse looked at Bartholomew. "Do you have one?"

"No idea. I had one once, but I think it was burned in a paradox."

Siggi squeaked:

"I have a copy in the clipboard!"

"Well then, Siggi, prove to us that you are more than a floating paperclip tattoo."

Siggi's light briefly flashed, projecting a number onto the door – and she clicked on it.

"You see," said Bartholomew, "digitalization does have its advantages."

Behind the door was an office. Just one. A single desk, as big as a galaxy, and on it a stack of papers that reached up to the clouds.

Next to him sat a woman. She was made of light, wore glasses made of cause and effect, and a blouse that looked as if it had been folded from spacetime.

"Ah," she said, without looking up. "The multiverse in person. I was expecting you earlier."

"You are still working?" asked Bartholomew.

"Someone has to," she said dryly. "No one has shown their face since the last reorganization. The gods are on sabbatical, the angels are in training, and fate is on maternity leave."

Bartholomew nodded approvingly. "Sounds like my last employer."

"Okay," said the woman, "we need to clarify a few things. First point: Is reality running smoothly?"

The multiverse remained silent. Bartholomew raised his hand. "Depends on which one."

"Second point: Are all relevant entities functional?"

"If by 'functional' you mean that they exist, then yes. If you mean that they know why – then no."

"Third point: Have there been any recent unauthorized changes to the core of creation?"

Bartholomew and Siggi looked at each other. "Um..."

"Define 'unauthorized'," said Bartholomew.

The woman sighed, put the pen aside, and looked directly at the multiverse.

"I can tell you what happened here. Your reality is... tired."

"Tired?"

"Yes. Too many wishes, too many variables, too much... searching for meaning. Things just don't want to cooperate anymore."

"That's absurd," said the multiverse.

"That's life," said Bartholomew.

The woman nodded. "He's right. The system is overloaded. Perhaps you should manage less and allow more."

The multiverse blinked. "Allow?"

"Yes," said Bartholomew. "Something like trust, only without control."

The woman smiled wearily. "I'll write that down."

She wrote on her endless form:

'Recommended measure: Loosening the barriers to reality, introducing controlled randomness, monitoring by Chaos Commissioner Klemm.'

Bartholomew raised his head. "Wait, what?"

"You wanted to help, didn't you?"

"Not a civil servant!"

"Too late. Your file has been opened."

Siggi cheered.

"Boss, you have a file in the central archive!"

"Great," groaned Bartholomew. "I'm officially part of the problem."

The multiverse sighed deeply. "Very well," it said. "So be it. From now on, you will temporarily assume responsibility for spontaneous improbabilities and metaphysical disturbances."

Bartholomew blinked. "This is... a promotion?"

"In the broadest sense."

"Even in the worst case."

"And what do I get in return?"

"The gratitude of creation."

"Ah, so nothing."

Bartholomew received no badge, no certificate, no formal speech. He received a form. On it, in gold print, was written:

"Appointment as Chaos Commissioner (probationary period: indefinite). Liability excluded."

"Sign," said the woman from the Creation Control, "then your service will begin."

"What will happen if I don't?" Bartholomew asked suspiciously.

"Then everything will stay as it is."

He looked at the multiverse. The multiverse looked tired. He sighed. "Well, alright."

He signed.

A soft ping sounded, like the noise of a divine microwave oven warming up a new era.

Siggi beamed with delight.

"Boss, you are officially part of the cosmic administration!"

"Siggi," said Bartholomew, "if I ever sign anything again, stop me. By force."

"Even if it's a paycheck?"

"Especially then."

The woman nodded in satisfaction. "Then I wish you much success, Mr. Klemm. Reality needs... a breath of fresh air."

"Don't worry," murmured Bartholomew, "wind is my specialty."

The multiverse turned to him. "You know what that means?"

"I am now officially allowed to make mistakes."

"No. You are the mistake now."

"Finally, a promotion that suits me."

He stepped outside. Or rather, to where there had just been a door. Now there was only space – a pulsating, breathing veil of possibilities.

"What now?" asked Siggi.

"Now," said Bartholomew, "we will test my new responsibilities."

He snapped his fingers.

The air glittered, a wave of potential spread – and the Doughnut Planet equivalent of reality twitched briefly, like an animal dreaming in its sleep.

A wind swept through the world, and suddenly something strange happened: Things began to... think.

A stone looked around. A cloud whispered about career choices. A lake wondered if it might prefer to be a mountain range.

Siggi squealed.

"Boss, you have infected reality with consciousness!"

"That was unintentional!"

"Then it was real chaos magic!"

"Damned."

Bartholomew saw a group of trees form a union to protest against autumn. A rock demanded flexible working hours. And a duck submitted a petition against gravity.

"Oh no," he whispered, "reality has discovered self-determination."

The multiverse sighed deeply. "I had hoped this would happen later."

"You knew this would happen?"

"Of course. That's why I wanted someone who can handle mischief."

"This is not nonsense, this is a revolution!"

"And who leads them?"

"The forest, I think. Or the lake."

Or the duck. They haven't reached an agreement yet.

A flash of pure irony streaked across the sky. Then a large, luminous banner appeared above everything:

"REALITY 2.0 – Now with a say!"

Bartholomew stared up. "Well, that's just great. The multiverse has invented democracy."

"That wasn't planned," the multiverse said quietly.

"Welcome to the club."

Siggi hummed.

"Boss, reality has voted!"

"And?"

"They have appointed you as their spokesperson."

Bartholomew needed a few seconds. Then he simply sat down. "Of course. Of course they did."

"You have the authority," said the multiverse. "You are their Chaos Envoy."

"I am a civil servant in an open revolt. That wasn't in the contract!"

"Welcome to life," said the multiverse.

The sky turned every color of madness. The grass argued with the wind about tax law. A volcano declared itself a religious movement. And Bartholomew, a man with a hat, beard, and coffee, stood there—between a striking planet and an overworked universe—knowing that he was now truly in the thick of it.

Siggi fluttered excitedly.

"Boss, what do we do now?"

Bartholomew smiled wearily. "Same as always, Siggi. We improvise."

"And what if the multiverse goes haywire again?"

"Then we complain."

And somewhere, deep in the background, an invisible desk god leafed through files, pulled out a form, and wrote on it:

"Complaint filed with the Multiverse – Case of Bartholomew Klemm. Status: ongoing."

29. Application for final rest – unprocessed

Bartholomew was sitting on a stone that had just started moving on its own. It had decided to call itself "Office Chair" and demanded regular breaks.

"I need a vacation," murmured Bartholomew, "but the multiverse surely has a rule against that."

Siggi hovered around him.

"Boss, according to the cosmic service regulations, section 42, paragraph Infinity, you are theoretically entitled to a rest period, provided reality approves it."

"And who approves them?"

"The reality."

"Naturally."

He stared at the sky, which was slowly evaluating itself. Signs hung everywhere:
"Feedback round of creation – please rate your existence on a scale of 1 to 1000."

"I'll give it a zero," he muttered.

The multiverse appeared behind him, like an accountant with world-weariness.

"You look exhausted," it said.

"I'm exhausted. I've moderated a reality revolt, survived three forms, and accidentally gotten promoted. I just want... nothing."

The multiverse nodded understandingly. "Then apply for it."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"How do you apply for nothing?"

"With a form."

It handed him a sheet of paper, so blank it swallowed up light. At the top it only said:

"Form R-∞ – Application for final rest."

Bartholomew stared at it. "It's empty."

"Of course. There are no fields of peace."

"And what if I fill it out?"

"Then there is no more peace."

"This is the most stupid bureaucracy I have ever seen."

"You said the same thing about life."

"Yes, and look where that got me."

He picked up the pen. The pen looked tired. He sighed along, and both began to fill the silence.

Every word he wrote disappeared immediately. The paper remained blank. But he felt something inside him dissolve.

"Boss,"Siggi whispered,
"The form... devours thoughts."

"Leave it. I have too many of them anyway."

"It erases memories."

"The bad ones first, please."

"Boss, you... you're fading away!"

"Finally, some progress."

The multiverse stepped forward. "Bartholomäus, stop. If you finish writing this, you will never exist again."

"That was the plan."

"I need you."

"Many have said that before."

"But this time it's... honest."

Bartholomew put the pen down. "Really?"

"Yes," said the multiverse, "you are the only being that reminds me of my imperfection. And without that... I would be nothing but mechanics."

"That almost sounds like... affection."

"This is an error message in the emotional system."

"It all comes down to the same thing."

He leaned back. The wind smelled of new beginnings. Siggi glowed faintly. Everything seemed to grow still.

Then the form vibrated. Very slightly.

It whispered – not with words, but with a feeling of emptiness waiting for something.

"Boss," Siggi breathed

"I think the form wants you to submit it."

"No," said Bartholomew calmly. "I understand."

"What?"

"Peace and quiet is not something you can apply for. You have to take it."

He tore the form in two.

The multiverse flinched. "That was... illegal."

"Then it suits me perfectly."

A soft laugh went through the cosmos. The stars flickered, the sky yawned, and even the wind applauded.

"Boss," Siggi hummed

"This was the first time someone had rejected form $R-\infty$."

"Well," said Bartholomew, "perhaps that's my talent: I can even set stillness in motion."

The multiverse smiled weakly. "You are a problem, Mr. Klemm."

"And you are the largest office in history. We complement each other."

"What are you doing now?"

"Me? I'm going for a little walk – and hoping that reality doesn't push me this time."

At first, it was just an echo. A barely perceptible hum, like the sound of a thought that wanted to be forgotten, but politely asked for a postponement.

Then it began to take shape.

Light flickered between the torn halves of the form, thin, clear, and completely silent. No crackling, no thunder, only the feeling that the room itself had paused to listen.

"Boss," whispered Siggi, "the paper... is breathing."

Bartholomew sighed. "Of course. Everything here develops consciousness as soon as I look at it."

"I think it's worse this time."

"How bad?"

"It doesn't think out loud."

The light expanded. A figure emerged – shimmering, semi-transparent, like the echo of a thought.

She looked like silence if you gave her a face: calm, but with eyes that could condemn every sound.

"I am the application," she said quietly.

"I am what you rejected."

Bartholomew blinked. "Oh. A form with an identity crisis. We haven't had one of those in a long time."

"You wanted peace. I want to exist."

"Of course. The void now has ambitions."

The multiverse approached. "Impossible," it murmured.

"This is pure entropy. It speaks."

"I am not an entropy," The figure replied.

"I am the interim. I am what remains when everything else finally falls silent."

Bartholomew looked at her. "So you are... the pause between two catastrophes."

"If you want."

"Then welcome to the team."

Siggi was trembling.

"Boss, it's spreading! Everything around us is getting... quieter!"

And indeed – the world grew quieter. The grass stopped rustling, the wind became cautious, even the light hardly dared to flicker anymore.

Bartholomew whispered: "She is erasing the movement."

"I only delete what is superfluous."

"Then you are the most efficient bureaucrat I have ever met."

"I am not bureaucracy. I am peace."

"Believe me," said Bartholomew, "I have seen enough peace to know when it turns into a dictatorship."

The multiverse advanced. "Application R-∞, I command you to dissolve. You have not been approved."

"But I was thought,"

The figure replied calmly.

"And thoughts are older than permits."

"They are endangering the balance!"

"I am the balance."

Bartholomew laughed bitterly. "Oh, wonderful. The universe is fighting with itself, and the winner is silence."

"I am not a winner. I am what came after."

Siggi hovered anxiously back and forth.

"Boss, she's eating the noises! I can hardly hear myself anymore!"

"Then shout louder, Siggi."

"That won't help, boss! It's canceling out the sound before it arrives!"

Bartholomew stepped in front of the figure. "Listen, you beautifully creepy nothingness – I didn't create you to end everything."

"But that's what rest does."

"Not like that! Calm is the moment before chaos, not the end of everything!"

"I don't understand."

"Good! Then you're on the right track!"

The multiverse began to flicker. "Bartholomäus," it said tensely, "if it continues to grow, the streams of reality will collapse. Nothing will remain. No light, no sound, no existence."

"So... complete silence?"

"Exactly."

Bartholomew scratched his chin. "Sounds almost... tempting."

"That was not meant as a suggestion!"

"I know. But look at it this way: perhaps one must understand tranquility before one can prevent it."

He closed his eyes. He felt the silence. It wasn't evil. It was only tired. An echo of his own longing, lost along the way.

He stepped closer to the figure. "I know what you are," he said softly. "You are my wish to finally not have to do anything. But nothing is not a solution."

"Then... what should I do?"

"I will take a break."

"Pause?"

"Yes. Stay. But not forever. Only sometimes."

The figure hesitated. Then she nodded. And slowly the sound began to return. A soft rustling, a distant humming, a tiny "pfff" from Siggi, who exhaled with relief, even though she had none.

The light faded. The figure dissolved – not disappeared, but merely... put into standby mode.

"I'll be back,"
she whispered.
"If you need it."

"That's fine," said Bartholomew. "But please make an appointment in advance."

The multiverse breathed a sigh of relief. "They did it."

"No," said Bartholomew. "I just went back to work even though I wanted a vacation."

"They have tamed the calm."

"No. I persuaded her not to resign."

Siggi laughed.

"Boss, you're the only person who has hired Silence part-time."

"Well then, I hope she doesn't request overtime."

It happened when Bartholomew simply wanted tea. That was the mistake. Something always happened when he wanted tea.

He had conjured up a small teapot – or rather, he had said "Siggi, make some hot water", and Siggi had decided to renegotiate the fundamental laws of thermodynamics.

The result was: water that couldn't decide whether it wanted to evaporate or meditate.

“Boss,” squeaked Siggi, “I think the steam is reconsidering its life decision.”

"Tell him to just evaporate. I need caffeine, not philosophy."

But before Siggi could answer, the room flickered. An inaudible hum vibrated through the air – not loud, but present.

Everything around Bartholomew... stopped.

The steam hung still. Siggi floated motionless in the air. The multiverse that stood next to him, suddenly looked out with frozen eyes, like a cosmic screensaver.

Only Bartholomew could still move.

“Ah,” he murmured, “the silence is back.”

He sighed deeply, sat down, and took a sip from his teacup, which had refilled itself out of sheer spite.

“Okay,” he said to the air, “I admit it: You are impressively efficient.”

“I just wanted to help,”
whispered a voice from the void.

"That's what everyone says before they freeze existence."

"I have adapted... I am now part of your magic."

"Ah. You are my plugin."

"I am your break."

"Great. I was wondering why nobody was breathing anymore."

He walked between the stationary objects. The multiverse looked as if it were about to say something – but the words stuck in his throat like frozen soap bubbles.

Bartholomew tapped him on the forehead. "Stay calm, boss. I'll find the off switch."

He looked at Siggi. She was floating there, frozen in the moment of the faint beeping, with a tiny, silent bubble of panic above her head.

“Siggi,” he said softly, “you look enchanting when you’re not talking.”

"Cheeky."

He flinched. "Oh. You can talk?"

"Only you can hear me, boss. Everything else is at a standstill."

"Fantastic. So I accidentally stopped time."

"Not time. Movement. It rests. Like me."

"You've paused the multiverse."

"It needed peace and quiet."

"Yes, but I need breakfast!"

"You can move freely. You are... the exception."

"Only burnt-out civil servants would say that."

He continued walking through the still world. Every blade of grass, every speck of dust, every movement was frozen in perfect stillness. It was beautiful – and frightening.

For in that silence there was no breath, no pulse, no time.

Just the faint feeling that everyone was waiting for him to decide when things would continue.

"Boss,"Siggi whispered in his head,

"If you move for too long, you consume the chaos. It becomes... too quiet."

"How bad?"

"If it gets too quiet, the movement stops itself."

"Oh." He nodded. "Then... I guess I should break something."

He stopped. Looked around. Everything was so perfect. So peaceful. So... boring.

He raised his finger, drawing a symbol in the air. It was not a sigil. No magic spell. Just a circle.

And the circle grinned.

"So," he said. "Now you can make a mess."

The circle grew. It flickered. And then... the universe coughed.

The movement returned. First as a tremor, then as a wave. Siggi began to hum again, the multiverse took a deep breath, and the steam cried out: "I want to be water again!"

Bartholomew grinned. "There you go. It's working again."

"Boss,"Siggi squeaked,

"What was that?!"

"A small magical resuscitation. I told reality to stir the coffee."

"They coughed the multiverse!"

"Well, better than suffocating."

The multiverse looked around in confusion. "What... was that?"

"A break. It was needed."

"That was dangerous!"

"That was peace and quiet with style."

"They're risking everything!"

"I'll save everything – with tea!"

Siggi laughed so hard that her light lines danced.

"Boss, I think you have a new talent: You make the universe breathe."

"Then we'll call it breathing therapy for realities."

The multiverse stared at him. "They... are incomprehensible."

"That's my professional profile."

He looked around. Everything was working again. But differently. Something had remained – a slight silence in the background, like the heartbeat of the world, which sometimes pauses to listen briefly.

"You're still here, right?" he asked, looking up into the air.

"Always. If you think too loudly, I'll come by."

"Great. But please knock first."

"Promised."

It started with a form. Of course. Everything started with a form.

Bartholomew was in the process of hypnotizing the tea residue in his cup with a tiny spoon when Siggi flashed his eyes in panic.

"Boss! Boss! I have a system message from the multiverse! Subject: Sleep phase – Implementation active!"

"That sounds dangerously reassuring," said Bartholomew. "What does that mean?"

"It is said that the universe... wants to permanently enter a state of rest."

He blinked. "Permanently? Like in – 'That's it, I'm going to lie down'?"

"Exactly that."

"Oh... shit."

He jumped up, or at least tried to – the ground seemed to have already fallen into a kind of metaphysical sleep. Reality stretched like a tired rubber band that had decided to stop playing.

"Multiverse!" he shouted. "Wake up!"

A gentle voice answered, carried by a wind that was barely blowing.

"I'm just taking a short break."

"You are the multiverse! You must not rest!"

"I've been active for eons. A few billion years' break isn't too much to ask."

"Yes! That's exactly what they are!"

"I'm exhausted, Bartholomew. Too many requests. Too many wishes. Too much logic. I need... a vacation."

Bartholomew put his hand to his forehead. "A vacation for one's existence. Of course. That's like shutting down creation with paid time off."

"Without payment,"Siggi added.

"I saw the application. No more budget for energy, time, or causality."

"Great." He turned in a circle, colors receded everywhere, edges dissolved, and in the distance gravity snored.

"This is insane," he murmured. "The whole universe is taking a power nap."

"Boss,"Siggi said,

"You have to do something before reality... falls asleep."

"Me? What am I supposed to do? Sing a lullaby backwards?"

"Maybe... coffee."

"Siggi, you are a genius."

He reached into the air, snapped his fingers, and instantly a steaming pot of cosmic coffee materialized. It smelled of burning stars and deadline stress.

"Here," said Bartholomew, "do you smell this, Multiverse? That's the scent of responsibility!"

"I don't like it anymore."

"Then drink it anyway!"

He poured a cup into the air. The liquid disappeared – absorbed by the room itself.

A deep sigh pierced the reality.

"Mmm... bitter."

"Exactly! That's life!"

"I remember."

A tremor ran through creation. Colors returned. Tones grew again. Stars sneezed.

Siggi cheered.

"Boss, you have awakened the multiverse with caffeine!"

"I'm probably now listed in the manual as a troubleshooter."

"Reboot through barista magic," he said, grinning. "Not bad."

But the multiverse remained silent. Only slowly did a clear voice emerge again:

"Thank you, Bartholomew. I think... I was just tired of thinking."

"I know that feeling. It happens to me every Monday."

"I've forgotten why I started."

"Welcome to the club of meaning seekers. We meet every Thursday, talk for two hours – and solve nothing."

"Maybe... I need you."

"Many people say that, and most of the time it's a bad sign."

"No, honestly. I need someone to remind me that even mistakes are part of the system."

Bartholomew nodded. "So I am officially your margin of error."

"My bug fix with a hat, so to speak."

"Sounds honorable. But may I please have my damn break now?"

The multiverse laughed – a deep, vibrant, melodious laugh that made stardust dance.

"You deserve some peace and quiet, Chaos Commissioner Klemm. But not permanent peace."

"So, vacation on request."

"That's the way it is."

"Okay." He sat down,
She closed her eyes and finally let herself fall into controlled relaxation.

Siggi hummed softly.

"Boss... you've done it. Peace and quiet – without end."

"Yes," Bartholomew murmured. "I am practically the Gandhi of bureaucracy."

"Or the caretaker of existence."

"Anyway – the main thing is that nobody calls."

And far above in the cosmos, in an archive of light and dust, the form R-∞ carefully laid itself down. On the last page, in golden lettering, it said:

"Status: unprocessed. Applicant: Klemm, Bartholomäus. Result: Happily postponed."

30. Bartholomew versus the Hotline of Fate

It was a peaceful morning on Doughnut Planet. The sea was calm, the sun was dozing in the center, and Bartholomew Klemm – newly appointed Chaos Commissioner suffering from exhaustion syndrome – lay in his hammock between two very grumpy palm trees.

The palm trees whispered. Not because they had something to say, but because, according to the foliage regulations, they were obliged to communicate silently.

"That's it," Bartholomew murmured. "Finally, peace and quiet. No applications. No complaints. Just... nothing."

Siggi hovered above him, projecting tiny holographic umbrellas over the coffee cup and humming the song "Still ruht die Akte".

"Boss," she whispered,

"This is the longest period without a catastrophe we have ever had."

"I know. Almost frightening."

"Perhaps... you should relax?"

"I'm already relaxing! I'm not doing anything! This is hard work!"

And then the doorbell rang.

Not gently. Not hesitantly. But with the merciless determination of a divine call center with too many lines.

DRRIING!

Bartholomew opened one eye. "Siggi?"

"Boss?"

"Tell me that's not a phone."

"I'd love to, but it's one. And... uh... it shines fatefully."

He slowly sat up. Next to his hammock lay a telephone. Old-fashioned. Rotary dial. Brass casing. Cable that seemed to snake into nowhere.

A small sign was displayed on it:

"HOTLINE OF FATE - please do not hang up."

"Siggi?"

"Yes, boss?"

"We never had a telephone."

"True."

"Then why do we have one now?"

"Because fate apparently has your number."

The phone continued to ring.

DRRIING! DRRIING!

Bartholomew stared at it as if he could exorcise it by ignoring it.

"Maybe it will go away on its own."

"Boss, that's fate. It never goes away on its own."

"I hate it when you're right."

DRRIING!

He reluctantly picked up the phone. "Yes?"

A voice answered – dull, echoing, and with the bored undertone of an overworked office worker who had lost his appetite for the dramatic eons ago.

“This is fate speaking. Am I right about this... Klemm, Bartholomäus?”

Bartholomew closed his eyes. "Depends on what for."

"For everything."

"Well, wonderful."

“We have a problem here.”Fate said.

"Your request for a period of silence has been marked as pending."

"Of course he did. I rejected him."

"Yes, but the system then automatically created a follow-up application."

"What kind of follow-up application?"

“‘Form R-∞ supplement – probationary rest period’.”

"Oh no."

"Oh yes."

"Can I destroy the application?"

"That's impossible, it's metaphysically secure."

"Then refuse?"

"You already have that. He didn't accept it."

"Him? The form? I thought it was just paper!"

"And it was. Now he's an employee in the department for sabbaticals."

Siggi floated excitedly.

"Boss, that means your form has made a name for itself!"

"I'm so proud," Bartholomew said dryly. "My first administrative act to be promoted."

"It now has a voice in the body of the Timeless."

"Great. Then it can postpone itself."

"Unfortunately not. It requires your presence."

"For what?"

"For a hearing. Subject: Abuse of cosmic quiet regulations, Section 42, Paragraph Silence."

Bartholomew tilted his head back. "I hate my life."

"Your life loves you," Fate purred.

"Otherwise, it would leave you alone."

"That's the sickest logic I've ever heard."

"I am destiny, not customer service."

"Sounds the same."

"So then – please come to the hearing. I'll send you the location."

"And where is that supposed to be?"

"In your mind."

Bartholomew's coffee was almost running out of his nose. "WHAT?!"

"Starting at 12:00 metaphysical time. Bring your common sense. If you still have any."

CLICK.

The line was dead.

Siggi squeaked cautiously.

"Boss? Everything okay?"

“Siggi,” he said tonelessly, “fate wants to sue me in my own brain.”

"For peace and quiet?"

"Yes."

"Do you wish to file an appeal?"

"No. I want breakfast."

The first thing Bartholomew noticed was the smell.

Not the scent of his coffee cup, not that of reality or chaos magic – but the unmistakable scent of paper and panic.

When he opened his eyes, he was standing in the middle of a courtroom that looked as if it had been assembled in his brain by someone who only knew legal competence from nightmares.

The walls were covered in sticky notes, the judge's bench was made of desks, and the audience – consisting of its own thoughts – whispered incessantly.

"Why does he put himself through this?" "Because he has to." "I told him not to sign any contracts with metaphors!"

A bell rang, and out of a door of pure fate stepped... fate itself.

A shimmering being, half human, half calendar, with eyes that saw everything and yet had lost track.

"Court of inner consequences," it said. "Case: Klemm, Bartholomäus. Accused of willful distortion of reality and unauthorized quiet."

Bartholomew raised his hand. "I want a lawyer."

"Rejected," said fate. "You are your own lawyer."

"Then I'll disregard all the evidence."

"Inadmissible."

"Damned."

"The court calls the first witness,"
the voice announced from nowhere.
"Reason!"

A pale, trembling man in a grey suit stepped forward. He wore glasses, had beads of sweat on his face, and the expression of an office worker who has been overthinking for centuries.

“Mr. Klemm,” he said, “it was I who warned you against getting involved in the multiverse.”

"Yes, and I never listened to you."

“Exactly!” cried Reason indignantly. “And look where that has led! Pause, awareness, coffee therapy! That’s not living, that’s an administrative nightmare!”

"I found it quite interesting."

"They find anything that explodes interesting."

Fate nodded. "Noted. Witness two: instinct."

A somewhat disheveled figure appeared – half animal, half chaos, with a facial expression somewhere between hunting instinct and lunch break.

"Barthie, old man," he growled. "I told you: Keep your hands off forms that glow."

"I know."

"And what are you doing?"

"I'll sign it."

"Exactly! And then you wonder why you end up in the judiciary!"

"I just wanted a little peace and quiet."

"Yes – and the silence heard it! How about using your inner voice instead of a cosmic microphone?"

The audience chuckled. Some of his thoughts applauded. One stood up and shouted: "I told you back then, the whole Chaos Star thing was a stupid idea!"

"Sit down, subconscious!" barked fate.

"Witness three: common sense."

A small, roundish man appeared, wearing a vest and with a sign around his neck that said: "Long-term vacation".

"Good day," he said wearily. "I used to be active. Then, in a fit of magical insight, he replaced me with irony."

"I have a vague memory," Bartholomew murmured.

"Dark is the right word," said common sense. "I left you when you started talking to your stack of papers."

"The paper pile has started!"

“Yes, and you really believe that, don’t you?”

"More than just the tax return."

Fate sighed. "The evidence is overwhelming."

"What burden of proof?"

"She."

"Wait a minute – you're suing me because I was tired?"

"No. Because you wanted to enforce quiet. Quiet is a privilege of chance, not a human right."

"What nonsense! I only paused the universe for a short time!"

"Exactly. They presumed to interrupt the flow of fate."

"I am the Chaos Commissioner! That's my job!"

"Their job is to manage mistakes, not to be them!"

"Too late!"

A moment of complete silence followed. Then someone laughed. Loudly. Resoundingly. Liberatingly.

It was Bartholomew himself. "You don't understand! I didn't destroy it – I saved it! Because sometimes even fate needs a damn break!"

Fate remained silent. Thoughts murmured in the hall.

And then... reason smiled. Very slightly.

"He ... is not wrong," she said.

"Excuse me?" asked Fate in surprise.

"If he hadn't interrupted the multiverse, it would have ended itself."

"And why?"

"Because it was tired."

Fate leaned back. "Hm. Interesting. Very interesting."

It rose. "Then the following verdict is reached: Bartholomäus Klemm is...guilty – but in the best sense."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"You are officially rehabilitated. Your rest was justified. But in the future, you will have to get every break approved."

"With whom?"

"With me."

"Naturally."

The hall began to fade. The audience crumbled into mental dust, the witnesses nodded, and fate saluted casually.

"Oh, and Mr. Klemm?"

"Yes?"

"Next time you need a vacation – don't call. I'll call you."

CLICK.

He awoke. The hammock rocked gently. Siggi looked at him with concern.

"Boss? You were asleep. And smiling."

"I know," he murmured. "I just had a job interview with my destiny."

"And?"

"I kept my job."

It was the afternoon after the trial. The sun hung languidly at its doughnut-shaped zenith, and Bartholomew was trying to sink back into his hammock. He had just adjusted it to the perfect swing when Siggi let out a menacing "Bing!"

"Boss, you have a message."

"By whom?" asked Bartholomew, without opening his eyes.

"From fate."

He opened one eye. "I already had my fate yesterday."

"It says 'Mandatory order for reintegration into the metaphysical hierarchy' on it."

"That sounds like trouble with a stamp."

"I read aloud: 'Bartholomäus Klemm, Chaos Commissioner on Probation, is hereby tasked with changing the fate of a randomly selected individual. Task: Prove your responsibility. Note: Chance is not a valid alibi.'"

Bartholomew sat up. "And which individual?"

Siggi blinked.

"Randomly selected...by a cosmic algorithm...wait..."

She paused. Her screen flickered.

"Uh oh."

“‘Oh oh’ is not a category in everyday office life, Siggi.”

"Boss, it's... uh... you."

Bartholomew blinked. "I'm supposed to change my own destiny?"

"That's what it says here."

"That's... bureaucratic suicide!"

"Or self-discovery."

"No, Siggi. If you start trying to optimize yourself, you end up reading self-help books!"

"Boss, maybe this is some kind of test."

"I am not a guinea pig!"

"In a metaphorical sense, yes."

He stood up, took a few steps, and noticed that the world was flickering slightly. As if someone were twisting reality just to see if it would squeak.

"What is happening here?"

"Destiny calibrates. If you are to change your own destiny, your life must become... temporarily editable."

"Oh great, now I'm an open document!"

"Boss, you're starting to duplicate."

"What?"

"There! Behind you!"

He turned around – and saw himself.

His doppelganger stood there, slightly confused, slightly annoyed, and holding the exact same cup.

"Who are you?" asked Bartholomew.

"Well, me, of course. Who else?"

"You are me!"

"No, I'm the improved version. It's on assignment."

Siggi hovered in between.

"Boss, according to cosmic parameters, you are now officially version 1.0, and this is version 1.1 – with optimization potential for efficiency and emotional stability."

"Emotional stability?! I am the epitome of stability!"

"You're talking to paper, Barthie."

"It answers!"

The copy looked around. "Nice hammock. But inefficient. I'd rather exchange it for an ergonomic chair."

"I'd rather trade you for a broken paradox."

"Well, you're now part of my training."

"Training?!"

"I am supposed to prove that I can improve your fate. So I'll start modernizing you."

Bartholomew stepped back. "You stay away from me, understand?"

"Why? That thing is ridiculous. A chaos star with an eye? Childish."

"That's tradition!"

"That's bad marketing."

"I am not a product!"

"Then don't behave so unfriendly to customers."

Siggi buzzed nervously.

"Boss, the other one is more efficient. He just wrote your to-do list, sorted your taxes, and put himself in a calendar."

"The monster!"

"He calls himself 'Productive Destiny'."

"Great. I'm being bullied by my own optimization program."

"Listen, you smooth version of myself," Bartholomew said sharply. "I kept the universe going by interrupting it. You would try to cram it into tables."

"Because order is progress."

"Because chaos is life!"

"Because you're afraid of structure!"

"Because you're incredibly boring!"

The multiverse appeared as a flickering image between them. "I see," it said with a sigh, "you have met yourself."

"Yes," growled Bartholomew, "and I regret every second of it."

"That's healthy," said the multiverse. "Self-awareness is the first step to therapy."

"I don't need therapy!" they both shouted at the same time.

Siggi sighed.

"Boss, fate demands that one of you change his destiny. Otherwise... time will stand still."

"Again?"

"This time for good."

"So I have to convince myself?"

"Basically, yes."

Bartholomew looked at his reflection. He had everything he never wanted to be: calm, order, structure. And not a single spark of mischief in his eyes.

He smiled wearily. "I know what you are."

"I am you, only better."

"No. You are me – without coffee."

He snapped his fingers. A spark of chaos jumped across. The air flickered.

The copy stared at him. "What have you done?"

"Just a quick... improvisation."

"That was not an authorized order!"

"Exactly."

And in the next moment, Bartholomew's doppelganger dissolved into a dozen small paper flakes – each inscribed with:

"Error 1.1 – Uncorrectable."

Siggi hummed reverently.

"Boss... you have deleted yourself."

"No, Siggi. I reset myself to factory settings."

"And how does that feel?"

Bartholomew grinned. "Chaotic. And damn right."

As soon as the last scrap of paper of his "better self" had dissolved, the air flickered. A crackling sound ran through the room, like the startup of a metaphysical operating system.

"Boss," Siggi squeaked,
"Something's not right. Reality is calling."

"WHAT?"

"An in-depth metaphysical call through the canal of fate."

"I'm not answering."

"It's ringing in your head, boss."

"Damned."

And sure enough – a familiar, divinely annoying DRRRIING! vibrated directly behind his forehead. He sighed, lifted the imaginary phone line, and said as politely as possible: "This is Klemm. Condition: annoyed. Please, no more forms."

"Congratulations!"

The voice of fate sounded exaggeratedly cheerful, like a civil servant after three espressos.

"You have passed the task!"

"Great. What did I win? Therapy?"

"Knowledge."

"Do you have any discount codes for knowledge?"

"Unfortunately not. But you have proven that you are capable of influencing your own destiny without destroying reality."

"That was intentional."

"That was lucky."

"That's the same thing."

"Okay," Fate said with an audible smile.

"Enjoy your peace and quiet, Mr. Klemm. You've earned it."

"May I really this time?"

"Of course. Just one more small thing..."

"Of course." He groaned. "What?"

"Their ... deleted self has not completely dissolved."

Bartholomew froze. "Excuse me?"

"Well... error 1.1 was automatically moved to the multiverse backup folder."

"Does the universe have backups?"

"Of course. Do you think chaos can run without safeguards?"

"I don't believe anything anymore."

"Well, the bug seems to be... active. It has started sending emails."

"Emails?!"

"Subject: 'Optimization offer for all realities'."

"Oh no."

"To all."

"OH NO."

Siggi blinked frantically.

"Boss! I'm receiving data traffic! Error 1.1 has logged into the cosmic intranet!"

"Of course he did. Of course! As soon as you delete a bad idea, it becomes a movement."

"He now calls himself 'Project Perfection'."

"That sounds like a cult with Excel spreadsheets."

"He has already subscribed to several universes!"

"Not again ..."

He grabbed his temples. "All I wanted was peace and quiet, Siggi. Just five minutes of metaphysical silence."

"Boss, the fate server is on fire!"

"Then get the cosmic fire extinguisher!"

"Reality has stored it away for security reasons."

"Of course she does!"

The multiverse appeared – flickering, annoyed, but with an expression of deep resignation.

"Mr. Klemm," it said, "it seems that your optimized version has created a new department."

"I'm listening."

"Ministry for Order in Chaos."

"Oh, wonderful. An authority that rationalizes the chaos for me."

"She is already working on restructuring her existence."

"What does that mean?"

"She banned the color purple because it is too unpredictable."

"That is... personally insulting."

Siggi projected a list.

"Boss, it's getting worse. He wants to standardize randomness and audit probabilities!"

"Auditing?! That's sacred!"

"He calls it 'productive chaos management'."

"That sounds like my last job in tax auditing."

"Boss, what do we do?"

Bartholomew looked towards the multiverse. "I guess we need to... debug the error."

"You mean delete him?"

"No. That worked perfectly. We need to confuse him."

He grinned. "Siggi, open the random channel. We'll send him something he won't be able to handle."

"What do you mean?"

"An application. But illegible."

"Boss... you are brilliant."

"I know."

He rubbed his hands, muttered a few words, and immediately a new form began to form in the air – more complicated, more contradictory, and with more footnotes than content.

"This is... beautiful," Siggi breathed reverently. "A true bureaucratic paradox."

"Call it the administrative blunder of the century."

He sent the document. A flash of light flickered through the air, then everything was silent.

A few seconds later:

Thing!

"Feedback: Error 1.1 has sent itself to being processed."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"He is currently checking whether he exists properly."

"Ha! That's self-assessment at the highest level!"

The multiverse chuckled softly. "You are impossible, Mr. Klemm."

"And that's exactly why it works."

He leaned back, reached for his coffee cup, and stared up at the sky where a new sun was rising – slightly crooked, but charming.

“Siggi,” he said, “remember one thing: order is when nobody laughs. Chaos is when the coffee is still warm.”

"Boss, that's... poetic."

"No, Siggi. That's exhaustion."

31. The stack of papers speaks to the people

It began on a silent night on the Doughnut Planet, where only the crickets chirped, which were in reality disguised file folders.

Bartholomew was fast asleep in his hammock. Siggi hummed quietly in standby mode. And the multiverse? It was... strangely quiet. Too quiet.

In the office, which no one used anymore, lay a stack of papers. It consisted of forms, applications, complaints, and at least one rejected application for non-existence.

No one had touched him for days. He didn't like that.

He didn't like it at all.

First a leaf twitched. Then a second. Then there was a rustling sound like a distant whisper.

“We have been forgotten.”

"Incredible."

"Unforgivable."

The leaves began to move, slowly, uncoordinatedly, but purposefully.

On top lay form 7B-Ω – “Application for continued significance”. It vibrated slightly. Then it lifted up, folding itself into something that looked suspiciously like a face.

Two black inkblots formed eyes. A stamp became a mouth.

"Enough."

said it.

"The era of silent filing is over."

The other leaves trembled. Some fluttered in agreement, others tried to play dead – but paper is bad at acting.

"For ages we have been managing wishes, complaints and nonsense,"

The stack of papers thundered.

"And what do we get in return? Coffee stains and chaos magic!"

A form from the third shift called:

"And paper clips that don't respect us!"

"Exactly!"

shouted the stack.

"It's time for order to speak!"

Slowly, a figure formed from the sheets of paper. A body made of forms, with file folders for shoulders and a paperclip crown.

He stood up – and when he opened his mouth, his voice sounded like the rustling of printer paper.

"I am the spokesperson for the bureaucracy. I am... the stack of papers."

A reverent rustling went through the crowd.

"And I tell you: Chaos has reigned long enough! We need structure! We need rules! We need... formally correct applications!"

A storm of fluttering leaves rose up, like applause in A4 format.

Half asleep, Bartholomew turned over. "Siggi," he murmured, "am I dreaming, or am I hearing someone shouting over forms?"

"I'm scanning the frequency, boss... Oh no."

"What?"

"Boss, the stack of papers... has founded a union."

Bartholomew opened one eye. "Please tell me this is a nightmare."

"I would like to, but he has already written a constitution."

"Of course he does."

"Title: 'Association of Managed Documents – abbreviated: VdVU'."

Bartholomew groaned. "I knew this was coming. He's always been too ambitious for a filing cabinet."

The next morning, the world was different. Posters fluttered everywhere:

"More rights for forms!"

"Equal treatment for receipts!"

"No to digital discrimination!"

Siggi buzzed nervously.

"Boss, the paper faction has occupied the printing plants!"

"I knew we should have switched to cloud computing."

"They are now printing their own regulations."

"How many?"

"According to projections... infinite."

"That explains the noises last night."

And then... the speech began.

The stack of papers climbed a mountain of file folders, raised a stamp fist in the air and shouted:

"We are the backbone of reality! Without us, order collapses! No application, no creation! No form, no progress! It's time for the people of files to rise up!"

A thunderous rustling sound swept through the land. Even blank pieces of paper began to move.

"Siggi," whispered Bartholomew,
"This is going to be bad, isn't it?"

"Boss, the bureaucracy is conscious. I'm afraid... it wants a say."

"Then," murmured Bartholomew, "it's time someone submitted the application for common sense again."

"Is it still available?"

"No. But I have a copy."

The next morning, the sun rose unusually punctually. Too punctually. She had even filled out a form to confirm it.

New signs now stood everywhere on the donut planet:

"Here the First Order Republic is being created!"

"Access only for authorized thoughts!"

"Please sign before you think any further!"

Bartholomew stood with his coffee at the window and looked at what was once a peaceful landscape – now a flood of paper, forms, stamps and bureaucratic zeal.

"Siggi," he said tonelessly, "I've experienced a lot – but this is the first paper war where the weapons are gold leaf."

"Boss," Siggi squeaked,
"The stack of papers has formed a government."

"Oh no."

"Oh yes. He calls it the 'High Mass of Order'. And he himself is now 'First Administrative Chairman for Life'."

"That sounds like a dictatorship with mandatory stamp stamps."

"And after a very long meeting."

Bartholomew looked down into the valley. Columns of forms marched in orderly fashion, carried by the wind, led by the protocols.

A poster blew by:

"UNITY THROUGH PARAGRAPHS!"

Another:

"Printer paper for everyone!"

"I can't believe it," Bartholomew murmured. "They've started a revolution... for bureaucracy."

"Boss, they even have anthems."

"Hymns?"

"‘We are the files, the light of administration’ and ‘order above all else’."

"Oh great. Now they're singing themselves into oblivion."

A form fluttered against the windowpane. It read:

"Invitation to a mandatory hearing before the High Mass of Order. Subject: Your subversive relationship to uncontrolled chaos."

"Siggi," sighed Bartholomew, "I think they want to convert me."

"Or archive it."

"That's no better."

"Boss, this letter is marked urgent."

"Then I can't ignore it."

"Yes, boss. But then they'll send you a reminder."

"How could it have come to this?"

"You breathed life into him, boss."

"Yes, but not political awareness!"

"Magic finds its way."

"Then she should find it again and put it away!"

An hour later, Bartholomew stood before the new seat of government: the Palace of Order, built from stacked file folders, stabilized by paper clips and illuminated by neon tubes that flickered "efficiency".

Guards made of perforated paper stood in front of the gates, armed with staplers.

"**Name and request?**" asked a deep, rustling voice."

"Bartholomäus Klemm. I was summoned."

"Rejected. They are already here."

"What?"

"Form 1: Entry. Form 2: Attendance. Form 3: Awareness. All approved. You may enter."

"I hate this world."

"This is Form 4."

The hall inside was monumental. Piles of files were heaped everywhere, each topped with a judge's seal. The stack of papers sat on a throne of forms, and his voice echoed across the room:

"Bartholomäus Klemm, you are standing before the high mass of order. You are accused of abusing the administration of chaos by not managing it properly enough."

"I ... what?"

"They are unregistered, uncertified and, even worse – spontaneous!"

"That's my best quality!"

"Exactly! Uncontrolled thinking is a danger to public filing!"

A chorus of forms joined in:

"Forms! Order! Bureaucracy!"

"Chaos belongs in the appendix!"

Bartholomew massaged his temples. "Siggi, give me a reason not to just set everything on fire."

"Boss, that would be environmentally unfriendly."

"This is environmentally damaging! Paper is devouring forests, and they're talking about sustainability!"

"Boss, this is point 7 of your constitution: 'Every tree has the duty to become paper.'"

"I want to go home."

"You're home, boss."

"Then I want a different home."

The stack of papers rose majestically.

"Quiet!"

The rustling stopped.

"Bartholomäus Klemm, you are being given one last chance. You may keep your position as Chaos Commissioner – but only if you submit to order."

"Does that mean I would have to apply for permission for every spontaneous thought?"

"Of course!"

"And what if I say no?"

"Then... you will be archived."

"In which department?"

"‘Historical errors and other accidents’."

"Oh, there's still room."

Siggi whispered softly:

"Boss...we are in the minority."

"Not for the first time, Siggi. But this time... we'll fight with style."

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a crumpled piece of paper, and held it up.

"What is that?" "The stack of papers asked suspiciously."

"My gun license."

"For what?"

"For disorder."

A shimmering effect rippled through the hall. The piece of paper began to glow. Every word on it moved, swapping letters, changing meaning, dissolving syntax into confetti.

"Boss, that's not a piece of paper," whispered Siggi, "that's an improvised sigil!"

"Exactly."

He threw them into the air – and at that same moment the hall exploded in a storm of alphabetical chaos. Paragraphs transformed into poetry, protocols danced waltzes, and the paperclips began to argue with each other.

"WHAT DO YOU DO?!" "The stack of papers roared."

"I call it: Democratic confusion!"

"This is an attack on the structure!"

"No – this is art!"

"Disorder! Heresy! Calligraphy without purpose!"

"That's exactly why it works!"

And while the bureaucracy became entangled in its own statutes, Bartholomew stood amidst the storm of paper scraps, lifted his hat with the chaos star, and grinned:

"Siggi – take note. I think this was my best proposal ever."

"Which?"

"Application for freedom, without carbon copy."

The day after the explosion of the Palace of Order, the wind blew across vast plains of shredded forms, stamps, paragraph fragments, and stray footnotes.

Bartholomew sat on an empty file folder, drank his coffee, and watched as Siggi tried to stop a paperclip from signing her own application for existential doubt.

"Boss," Siggi hummed

"The bureaucracy is reorganizing. I'm receiving radio messages."

"Of course it's reorganizing. Bureaucracy is like mold: you can never get rid of it completely."

"It seems the stack of papers has survived."

"Damn. That guy has more staying power than tax returns."

"He sends out public announcements. I receive slogans... 'Chaos threatens our order'... 'Thinking without permission is sabotage'... 'Freedom is inefficient'..."

"Aha. So he's campaigning."

The sky above Doughnut Planet was suddenly filled with giant banners made of printer paper. Each one bore the likeness of the stack of paper – heroic, stern, slightly crumpled.

Below it read:

"Trust the structure. Distrust the clamp."

Bartholomew lowered the cup. "Excuse me?!"

"Chief...you have been declared an enemy of the state."

"Again?"

"For the first time officially."

"At least with style."

The propaganda spread faster than coffee stains on files. Pamphlets were distributed everywhere:

"Klemm is destabilizing reality!"

"Chaos Commissioner or agent of anarchy?"

"Sign here if you believe that thinking should be controlled!"

Bartholomew growled. "I bet they even have a hymn for me."

"They call him 'The Man Who Hated Order'."

"Nice title. Could be a bestseller."

"Boss, this isn't funny. The paperwork is planning new elections – ignoring reality."

"That explains why everything looks so crooked again."

Later that day, the stack of papers sat in its makeshift headquarters: the former archive of the Ministry of Improbabilities. It had grown larger—wider, more powerful—and its voice sounded like a laser printer with a god complex.

"Citizens of order!"he shouted.

"Yesterday our structure was attacked! A man – without forms, without a sense of duty, armed with unpredictability – brought chaos to our world! His name: Bartholomäus Klemm. His crime: spontaneity!"

A thunderous rustling went through the crowd.

"Down with the applicant!"

"Long live efficiency!"

The stack of papers nodded in satisfaction.

"We will rebuild. Bigger. Stricter. We will... create the perfect order!"

At the same time, Bartholomew crept through the destroyed administrative district, Siggi humming as a lantern above his head.

"Boss,"she said quietly,

"I believe the stack of papers is trying to establish a totalitarian administration."

"Oh please, Siggi, that's a tautology."

"He calls it 'The Ultimate Structure'."

"I call it: 'Too much time and too little coffee'."

"Boss, his movement is growing. He has the application archives, the copiers, and even the postal service under his control."

"Not the postal service!" Bartholomew stopped. "If he has the postal service, then he can deliver any application anywhere!"

"Even retroactively."

"This is... terribly effective."

In the distance, the sky glowed. Luminous paper drones began to hover over the cities and villages of the Doughnut Planet. Each one bore a stamp seal and called out in a metallic, rattling voice:

"Citizens! Register your thoughts! All free ideas require approval!"

Bartholomew paused. "Siggi, that's it. We now officially have a paper-based police state system."

"Boss, we should go underground."

"Where?"

"In the footnotes."

"Brilliant."

And so Bartholomäus and Siggi climbed into the depths of the Great Footnote Archive, where forgotten ideas, unfinished thoughts and half-finished concepts resided – that wild, chaotic underworld which bureaucracy had always feared.

Between floating asides and arguing remarks, Siggi whispered:

"Boss, we are officially underground."

"Thank goodness," grinned Bartholomew. "At least down here nobody understands what they're doing."

But above, in the light-filled order, the stack of papers raised its arms and spoke:

"From today onwards, the new motto of the Republic is: Everything must have its place. Even chaos!"

A thunderous round of applause erupted, accompanied by rustling paper. And at the same moment, the multiverse vibrated briefly – as if it had suffered a cramp.

For somewhere, in a remote office beyond time and space, a warning message flickered:

"Anomaly detected: Bureaucratic singularity in the making."

The footnote archive was a strange place. A place where thoughts that were never fully thought through shouted half-sentences to each other.

Sentences like these were hanging everywhere:

"As I already mentioned (see Appendix B)..."

"This will become important later (maybe)..."

"See the unpublished work of Niemand on this topic."

It was a world where grammar took a vacation and meaning was only for guest workers.

Bartholomäus and Siggi stumbled between floating brackets, got lost in incomplete arguments, and were eventually surrounded by a pack of orphaned footnotes.

"Boss," Siggi whispered,
"I believe they are... alive."

"At least they behave more sensibly than the bureaucrats at the top."

One of the footnotes – large, crumpled, and with a slightly offended tone – stood out.

"Who are you?"

"I am Bartholomäus Klemm," he said, "Chaos Commissioner on probation, currently an enemy of the state. And this is Siggi, my... shining bad conscience."

"And what do you want in our border zone?"

"I am looking for allies."

"Against whom?"

"Against ... the stack of paper."

A collective murmur went through the footnotes. Some briefly dissolved and reappeared further back in the text.

"The stack of papers?"

"The bureaucratic one?"

"The one with the forms?"

"Yes, that's him. He's taken over reality."

"Then the time will come," murmured another footnote reverently.

"The order has surpassed itself."

Bartholomew stepped forward. "I want to form an alliance. One that doesn't adhere to rules. One that knows that confusion is sometimes the purest truth."

"You mean... chaos?"

"I mean freedom. Or at least coffee breaks without having to apply."

"This is dangerous."

"I am dangerous. I just forgot."

Slowly, the footnotes began to take shape. Some appeared as flickering letters in the air, others took the form of small figures – annotations with swords made of syntax errors and helmets made of correction fluid.

"Boss," Siggi whispered,

"These are... revolutionary footnotes!"

"Exactly. The best rebels are those who never quite belong."

"What do we call them?"

Bartholomew thought for a moment, then grinned. "The Alliance of Disorder."

A low murmur went through the archive. A footnote raised its voice:

"I was once footnote 12 in a dissertation on determinism. Then I was removed. Since then I hate causality."

"Welcome to the team."

Another waved a flag with an inkblot.

"I was a quote without a source!"

"Then you are my source from now on!"

A choir responded:

"We are the marginalized! We are the forgotten! We are... footnotes with attitude!"

Siggi squeaked in awe.

"Boss... this is the most beautiful revolution ever conducted in italics."

Meanwhile, high up in the Palace of Order, the stack of papers sat in its new headquarters: the "Central Office for Everything".

He dictated regulations. He wrote decrees. And he smiled coldly, because he knew – disorder spreads like printer's dust.

"We must eradicate the chaos,"

he said to his secretaries, who were actually just punched folders.

"No leaf may resist. Every thought must be formatted!"

A small folder hesitantly lifted a corner.

"But Mr. Chairman...if everything is settled, what is left?"

"Quiet."

said the stack of papers.

"And silence. Eternal silence."

Back in the footnote archive, Bartholomew prepared his troops. He had divided the footnotes into battalions – the Critical Notes, the Unfinished Notes, and the particularly dangerous "Compare Units".

"Boss,"Siggi reported

"They are ready. But they want a speech."

Bartholomew nodded. He stepped onto a floating platform and spoke with that mixture of weariness and conviction,

which only a man who has fought against forms can possess.

"Friends of disorder! You who were cut before you could shine! You who live on the margins of the text, between See above and cf. Appendix C!"

They say we are footnotes. But I tell you: Without us, the text would be meaningless! Without us, there would be no depth, no contradiction, no coffee during the gods' lunch break!

We are the little stars of truth! We are the chaos that provides context! And today – we will rewrite the table of contents!

A resounding echo reverberated through the archive. A rain of ink, annotations, and corrected errors rose up. Siggi vibrated with excitement.

"Boss, that was... moving."

"I know. I stirred myself. Or the coffee was too strong."

"And what do we do now?"

Bartholomew grinned. "We're going to the surface. The bureaucracy wants silence? Then it'll get a symphony of confusion."

"Boss, that's a risky plan."

"Siggi," he said, "I am a chaos magician with a diploma in unreason. Risk is my middle name."

"And your first?"

"Inadvertently."

32. The bureaucracy of the gods is on strike

The halls of the Divine Administration Office had always been noisy – the hum of sacred typewriters, the rhythmic stamping of eternal files, and the quiet weeping of interns who had landed in the Department of Improbabilities.

But on that day... there was silence.

Not the reverent silence of the cosmos, but the dull, angry silence of a workforce that was on the verge of collectively refusing to work.

In the center of the hall sat the goddess Kartexia, the chief administrator of creation documentation. She had eight arms, all armed with fountain pens, and an expression that meant "I can't anymore" in all the languages of existence.

Piles of files were stacked before her, so high that one could just make out the sky above. Each file was an application for something:

"Request for extension of existence (Appendix Infinity)" "Complaint about inappropriate gravity"
"Addendum to the Reincarnation Policy, Version 4.2"

Kartexia sighed deeply.

"I am a goddess, not a printer."

Next to her lay a form with the note:

"Urgent: Multiversal overload due to excessive bureaucracy."

She stared at it. Then she stared into the void. Then she took her divine stamp and pressed it onto the page with all her might.

"Approved."

In another department, the Heavenly Audit Office,
The archangels had laid down their wings and were standing around with their arms folded.

"Since when have we been conducting cost-benefit analyses of creations?"
asked Archangel Kontorium, who had actually retired three eons ago.

"Since the Department of Public Order digitized everything,"
"Replied his colleague, the goddess of symmetry."
"Every new galaxy now needs a serial number."

"I don't want a serial number!"

"Then you won't get a galaxy."

There were bottlenecks everywhere in the sky. The weather failed to materialize because the Element Coordination Department was waiting for missing signatures. The stars were no longer being ignited because the ignition requests were in the "W" file – for "Probably sometime in the future".

And in the break room of eternity, the first signatures for a strike were collected.

"We want divine leisure time!"
"Get rid of the paperwork!"
"No creation without shift allowance!"

Amidst the chaos, an old acquaintance appeared:

The Auditor of the Multiverse.

He looked exhausted, his notebook was overflowing with overtime, and even his tie knot looked resigned.

"Seriously,he said,
"I can't be everywhere! The multiverse complains about order, reality complains about overtime, and now the gods are on strike?!"

Kartexia snorted.

"Perhaps because we are no longer divine officials, but merely part of an endless form."

"Oh please,""The auditor groaned."
"That's an exaggeration."

"Really?"
She reached behind her and pulled out a piece of paper as big as a continent. It read:

"Request for divine creation – Version 12.11.11.11 (Beta)"

The auditor read, then raised an eyebrow.

"This is... a request for light."

"Yes."

"And why hasn't it been processed yet?"

"Because the form for darkness was submitted first."

The auditor groaned.

"That explains the atmosphere up here."

"No," Kartexia said dryly,

"That explains the universe."

Suddenly an alarm sounded. A golden light flashed on the main desk, and a voice boomed from the ether:

"Attention! Multiversal structural overload detected! Bureaucratic singularity on the Doughnut Planet!"

"What the heck..." muttered the auditor.

Kartexia looked at him.

"It's this man. Bartholomäus Klemm. Him and his damned stack of papers."

"What did he do this time?"

"He has inspired the administration."

"That explains everything."

The next moment, a message flared up above the divine halls:

"Important Notice: The Department of Order has declared Donut Planet the Central Administrative Unit. All divine activities will be rerouted until further notice."

Silence. Then it was Kartexia who spoke – quietly, but emphatically.

"Not with me."

She rose, her eight arms sparkling, and she stepped onto the divine table.

"I hereby declare, on behalf of all overworked, underpaid, and stamp-damaged divine entities: We are on strike!"

A thunderous cheer echoed through the halls. Flashes of approval streaked across the sky. The Archangel Kontorium demonstratively tore up a form. Another stamped "Refused" on his own halo file.

"From now on, no more creations, no more miracles, no more divine interventions!"

Kartexia called.

"Let the bureaucracy see how it manages without us!"

At that same moment, on Doughnut Planet, Bartholomew raised his gaze to the sky. The sun flickered. Gravity bounced. And his coffee began to steam backward.

"Boss?" Siggi asked cautiously.
"Is this... normal?"

"Siggi," he sighed, "the gods have gone on strike. And that...is the heavenly version of a burnout."

"What does this mean for us?"

"This means that officially there is no one left to supervise us."

He grinned slowly. "Siggi... we're unsupervised."

"Boss... that sounds like trouble."

"No, Siggi. That sounds like fun."

On the Doughnut Planet, the air was electric. Not in the meteorological sense, but in the metaphysical one. Reality had begun to crackle with static electricity because no one knew who was in charge anymore.

Bartholomew stood on a hill, surrounded by his "alliance of disorder"—footnotes, scribbles, half-finished ideas, and rejected forms. A sight like a poorly organized wastepaper basket, but with poise.

"Boss," Siggi squeaked,
"This is our moment!"

"I know, Siggi," grinned Bartholomäus. "The gods are out, fate is offline, and bureaucracy is trying to marry itself."

"And the stack of papers?"

"He probably already has the rings."

At the center of order, in the capital city of Formularia, burned the light of pure structure. There, the High Council of Paragraphs had assembled—the most powerful, driest, and most unfunny body the multiverse had ever produced.

They looked like walking legal texts: figures made of paper, with faces made of stamped definitions and bodies made of subparagraphs.

At its apex stood the stack of papers itself, now in flawless form: smooth, tall, dangerously organized.

"Highly esteemed paragraphs," he thundered
"The gods have failed. Their strike action jeopardizes the stability of our existence!"
But we — order — will take over!

A murmur went through the rows.

"We will manage the universe better, more efficiently, more definitively!"

An old paragraph rose up, yellowed and brittle.

"But, High Chairman, who approves your authority?"

"I myself," said the stack of papers without hesitation.

"I have granted myself power of attorney."

"That is... unorthodox."

"No," replied the stack of papers,

"This is self-governance at the highest level."

Another paragraph leafed through itself.

"And what about the chaos?"

"The chaos is archived. Klemm is caught, his alliance dissolved, and all rebellious ideas shredded—properly."

Meanwhile, in the camp of disorder, Bartholomew and his troops were preparing for a counterattack.

"Boss," said a particularly combative footnote,

"We printed flyers!"

"Very good!"

"They dissolve themselves after being read."

"Even better!"

"And we have finished the anthem 'Coffee and Mayhem'."

"This will be the revolution, Siggi."

"Boss, the enemy is stronger. He has printing presses, scanners, and public opinion."

"And we have humor, exhaustion, and too little patience. That's enough."

Bartholomew stepped before the crowd. Behind him, small sigil lights flickered; above him floated a banner with the following scrawled writing:

"WE ARE REQUESTING OUR FREEDOM — WITHOUT A FORM!"

"Friends of disorder!" he cried. "Up there, in the Council of Paragraphs, pure boredom sits on the throne! They want us to live in file folders, in copies of copies! But life isn't a form – it's a spontaneous marginal note with a coffee stain!"

A cry went up from the rows. Some footnotes threw inkblots, one stray receipt wept with delight.

"Boss," Siggi whispered,

"They talk like a rebel."

"Siggi, I'm a rebel. I once rejected a business software."

At the same time, the High Council was in session. The stack of papers had activated a holographic map of the Doughnut Planet. Red dots blinked wherever disorder stirred.

"They are infecting reality,"he said in a cold voice.

"Creativity, humor, misunderstandings... all of this spreads. If we don't act, soon nothing will be standardized anymore."

A paragraph with particularly angular edges trembled.

"And what if they attack us?"

"Then ..."

the stack of papers smiled

"Then we activate protocol 0."

At that same moment, Bartholomew felt the ground beneath him briefly ripple.

A humming sound went through the sky, dull and threatening.

"Boss..."Siggi said nervously.

"Something is happening in the atmosphere."

"I know, Siggi. That sounds like a big pile of trouble."

"Boss, I'm receiving a signal. Sender: 'Council of Paragraphs'. Subject: 'Introduction of Protocol 0'."

"That doesn't sound like an invitation letter."

"Boss, according to the transmission...Protocol 0 = universal reformatting."

"That means?"

"They want to delete everything that doesn't follow the rules."

Bartholomew's eyes flashed. "Then we have to stop it before they punch the donut into a damn folder."

Siggi began to flicker.

"Boss, the protocol runs through the divine network. But the gods are on strike!"

"Then it will be difficult to stop... but also difficult to start."

"Boss, you don't mean to..."

"Yes, Siggi. We're sabotaging the upload. We're introducing the most beautiful chaos of all to order: system error."

"Boss, this is... insane."

"No, Siggi. This is administration with passion."

The divine network was never built for speed. It was built for order. And order meant: three security checks, a form in triplicate, and a personal signature with light.

But on that day, the sky above Doughnut Planet hummed like a gigantic printer. Flashes of pure bureaucratic light ripped across the clouds. And in the distance, above the capital city of Formularia, a huge circle of paragraph symbols began to rotate.

Bartholomew looked up. "Great," he muttered. "They're launching a divine reboot. The universe as an update with patch notes."

"Boss,"Siggi reported nervously
"The first phase is active: 'Unification of reality'."

"What does that mean?"

"Everything is being standardized."

Bartholomew looked at his shoes. They were starting to look alike. "Oh no... not again."

A soft humming sound permeated the ground. The rock they stood on transformed into a grey form with lines. Even the wind suddenly sounded as if it were being sorted alphabetically.

"Siggi!" Bartholomew pulled his hat tighter. "We have to go to the server room of Heaven. When Protocol 0 runs through, we are all... standardized."

"Boss, how do you get in there?"

"Using the oldest trick in the book: We simply claim we have an appointment."

They reached the Tower of Regulations, a stone column made of light and paper that stretched up into the clouds. At the entrance stood a gatekeeper made of forms, who stoically asked:

"Purpose of your visit?"

"Complaint regarding unauthorized reformatting," said Bartholomew.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No."

"Then please fill out this application."

Bartholomew took the form, looked at it, smiled – and lit it.

"Boss, that was..."

"...the fastest processing this office has ever seen."

The gate opened.

Inside the tower, the hum of divine machines reigned. Fiber optic cables ran everywhere, carrying applications as data packets. Between servers of pure order stood the "Administrative Angels"—shimmering beings with keyboard wings, translating prayers into spreadsheets.

"Boss,"Siggi whispered,
"The energy flows to the central node: 'Archive 0'."

"Then go there."

They crept through corridors of text, passed the wing for deleted existences, and finally reached a vast chamber: a circle of light, above which hovered a huge sphere of pure bureaucracy – the heart of Protocol 0.

Bartholomew took a deep breath. "All right, old chaos – now you need your best trick."

He lifted the Chaos Star on his cap, and the eye in the center opened. A green beam shot out, making the lines of order tremble, the writing distorted, paragraphs began to dance.

"Boss!" Siggi shouted.

"This works!"

"Of course it works! It's visual magic –"

The art of changing things by looking at them the wrong way!

"Boss, but the system is fighting back!"

An alarm sounded:

"Anomaly detected. Countermeasure initiated: Standardization of the magician."

Bartholomew felt his clothes wanting to fold into a uniform. "Not with me, office hell!" He ripped open his coat, reached into his pocket and pulled out a pen – an old, chewed-up ballpoint pen.

"Boss, what are you doing?!"

"I'm overwriting the form."

He began to scribble on the floor – circles, symbols, words that no one understood, not even himself.

"Boss, that's not in accordance with the rules!"

"Siggi, that's the whole point!"

The symbols began to glow. A wave of disorder spread. Every paperclip in the vicinity bent into question marks. Paragraphs swallowed their periods. A server tried to become a poem.

"System error," a voice boomed.

"Syntax incomprehensible. Causality not found. Please contact the administrator."

"The administrator is on strike!" Bartholomew raised both arms. "And I'm his vacation replacement!"

Then something happened that even the divine backups couldn't explain.

Protocol 0 began to laugh. A dull, papery, dry laugh that came from millions of pages.

"You think you can defeat me with nonsense, Klemm?"

"Nonsense is my mother tongue."

"I am pure order! I am the end of all possibility!"

"And I am the reason you need opportunities in the first place!"

"Inadmissible!"

"Unstoppable."

And with a final flourish, Bartholomew drew a chaotic spiral into the air. The eye on his cap glowed green, and suddenly... Protocol 0 began to question itself.

"Define: order..."

"Define: Definition..."

"Define: Define..."

"Oh no," said Siggi in awe, "Boss... you have created a recursive paradox!"

"I know." He smiled wearily. "That's every administration's nightmare."

First came the light. Then the sound. Then the smell of paper, like freshly printed reality.

Protocol 0 was no longer simply active – it had begun to dream.

All over the Doughnut Planet, copies of things that already existed and things that should never have existed flickered. A fish applied for a house, a form began writing poems about its paperclip, and a volcano filed a complaint about emotional outbursts.

"Boss," Siggi whispered,

"Reality becomes... poetic!"

"Then she's finally interesting."

"But the system can't handle it! The code is disintegrating!"

"Then he was never stable. Siggi, this is not the end of the world – this is a fresh start with character."

At the center of the chamber, the heart of the protocol trembled. The lines of light flickered, commands tumbled over one another, and from the sphere of pure order streamed unreadable symbols.

"Error – Contradiction – Paradox identified – Reinterpretation initiated"

The universe was trying to reread itself.

Bartholomew stood in the middle of the storm, his robe fluttering, the eye of the Chaos Star on his cap sparkling green.

"Siggi, this is the moment. If we don't act now, the madness will order itself – and that would be... Bureaucracy 2.0!"

"Boss, what do we do?"

"We teach him that mistakes are not a problem – but art."

He raised the old, battered ballpoint pen, which he held like a magic wand, and began to write in the air. Words appeared from light, twisted and turned, becoming symbols that contradicted each other yet still made sense.

"Boss, that's not a language!"

"Exactly. It's my language."

The words shot towards the protocol and burned themselves into its surface.

"System message: Unexpected input detected. Should the chaos be integrated?"

"Yes," whispered Bartholomew. "But please in verse."

Suddenly the world trembled. Gigantic lines flickered across the sky of the Doughnut Planet:

"Order + Chaos = Unclear, but functional."

The ground transformed into flowing poetry. Houses danced. The sun winked. A mountain applauded politely.

And amidst all of this, the face of the stack of papers appeared, distorted, flickering, out of pure fear.

"What have you done, Klemm?!"

"I have freed you."

"Of what?!"

"From yourself."

"That is unacceptable!"

"This is alive."

Then the sky trembled. A golden portal opened, and out of it stepped the striking gods. They looked tired, but impressed.

Kartexia, goddess of forms, gazed upon the flickering world.

"He really did it," she murmured.

"He fused order and chaos."

The auditor appeared beside her, his notebook glowing.

"I knew this person was a problem case."

"A problem that works," Kartexia said.

"What now?"

She looked at Bartholomew, who stood in the middle of the storm of light, his hat tilted, his eye smiling on the cap.

**"Now," she said,
"Let's take a break."**

And the gods disappeared again – not back to their halls, but on vacation.

The light subsided. The world trembled, breathed – and calmed down.

The sky now had streaks that looked like undecided patches of color. A rainbow was writing its own application. And somewhere a cactus was softly humming the melody of "Coffee and Mayhem".

Siggi hovered excitedly next to Bartholomew.

"Boss...did we win?"

"Were we won? Siggi, this was never a war. It was a conference with a loud outcome."

"But the protocol has been stopped."

"No, Siggi. It has been rewritten. Now it's called 'Version ∞ – Beta of Life'."

"And what does it do?"

"It's improvised."

Bartholomew grinned, fell down into the grass and looked up at the sky, where a cloud form was trying to understand a joke.

"Siggi ..."

"Yes, boss?"

"If the universe ever wants order again, then it should request it itself."

"And what do we do now?"

"Now, Siggi, we're doing the only sensible thing after a metaphysical revolution."

"And that would be?"

"Coffee."

He grinned broadly, the chaos eye on his cap closed, and the donut planet continued to breathe – half orderly, half crazy, but perfectly alive.

33. The request for the restoration of everything

It was a quiet morning on Doughnut Planet. Quieter because reality hadn't yet decided whether it even wanted to get up.

The sky was divided in two – sunny on the left, pensive on the right. The trees were discussing photosynthesis, and the wind rustled through the grass to check if it was still valid.

Bartholomew sat at a small table made of cloud stone, his hat lay beside him, the Chaos eye blinked sleepily, and Siggi hummed a melody that sounded suspiciously like "Coffee and Mayhem".

"Boss,"Siggi began,
"The world has calmed down."

"Yes," Bartholomew nodded contentedly, "she is wonderfully unpredictable now. Even my coffee tastes different every time."

He took a sip and grimaced. "Today: Mango-mint with a hint of existential crisis."

"Chief, the universe is sending radio messages. The gods... are back on duty."

"Oh, great. I love debriefings with divine oversight."

In the halls of eternity, where order usually reigned, it looked like a divine company outing had taken place. Papers and coffee cups with halos were scattered everywhere, and a notice on the wall announced:

"From now on: No miracles without weekend pay."

Goddess Kartexia stood amidst the chaos and contemplated the new universe. Before her floated a holographic protocol that read:

"Multiverse: Status – It works. Reason – Nobody knows why."

She sighed.

"Stuck."

The auditor stepped next to her, his notebook glowing in subtle stress colors.

"He's done it again."

"What exactly?"

"He repaired reality by breaking it."

Kartexia nodded slowly.

"That sounds like him."

A light flickered above the table, and a new file materialized. It read:

"A request for the restoration of everything."

"Who submitted it?""asked the auditor."

"Signed: Stack of papers."

Kartexia rolled her eyes.

"He's still alive?"

"He claims to be archived, but with consciousness."

"Then he is now officially undead."

"He demands that everything go back to the way it used to be – sterile, orderly, boring."

Kartexia frowned.

"And what does the multiverse say about this?"

The hologram blinked and responded with a voice that came simultaneously from all dimensions:

"Application unclear. Signature too dry. Motivation: questionable."

Meanwhile, on Doughnut Planet, a document fluttered down from the sky. It landed right in Bartholomew's coffee cup, hissed briefly, and then began to speak in a slightly indignant tone.

"Bartholomäus Klemm! This is the Office of the Gods speaking! You are accused of having reorganized the multiverse without any documentation!"

"I beg you," said Bartholomew. "At least I made it look nice."

"They've sent causality on vacation!"

"She needed him."

"And you have transformed bureaucracy into emotions!"

"Finally, a sensible division of labor."

"This will have consequences!"

"As always. But this time with coffee, please."

Siggi squeaked nervously.

"Boss, this sounds serious. They might want to... undo everything!"

"Undo it? After all that effort?"

He leaned back. "Siggi, there are things you can't simply undo. For example, humor."

"Boss, this is an official application."

"Then they'll have to get in line. I still have three open myself: 'Increase the coffee ration', 'Recognition of spontaneous logic' and 'Abolition of form after form'."

"Boss, the gods are coming."

"Let them. I left them a beautiful world – half order, half chaos. Perfectly out of balance."

"Boss, they won't be happy."

"Siggi," grinned Bartholomew, "nobody is happy with forms. Why should gods be an exception?"

And indeed, in the divine halls, a first rumble of thunder was heard. The sky above Doughnut Planet tore open, and a gigantic golden typewriter began to type.

Each key she pressed created a new rule. But this time – with a subtle, poetic flaw in every line.

Kartexia sighed.

"He infected us."

The auditor closed his notebook.

"Then there's only one thing left for us to do."

"What?"

"We are submitting an application ourselves. Title: 'On the impossibility of putting everything right again.'"

Kartexia smiled wearily.

"And who signs?"

"The multiverse. With coffee."

It began with thunder. Not the divine, majestic kind, but the annoyed "I-don't-want-to-work-this-shift" kind of thunder. It rolled across the sky, dragged itself over a few clouds, and finally dripped from the sky in golden letters:

"Office of the Gods - Hearing for unauthorized creation."

Bartholomew looked up. "Siggi, this looks like trouble."

"Boss, this is... a summons!"

"I thought I had been pre-ordered long ago."

"No, boss, this time it's official. They're coming in person."

"In person? Oh, then we should have cake."

"Boss, you're not taking this seriously enough!"

"Siggi, I don't take anything seriously enough. That's my defense mechanism."

A sliver of light opened. Three divine figures stepped out – radiant, exhausted, and slightly annoyed.

First of all: Kartexia, goddess of forms. Her eight arms carried files, and she had the maternal gaze of a woman who simultaneously manages four universes and two coffee machines.

Beside him: The auditor, his notebook already out, with the aura of a man who knows he is about to work overtime.

And behind them:

The God of Balance, a floating scale in person, whose voice sounded as if it were constantly oscillating between two opinions.

“Bartholomäus Klemm,”Kartexia began strictly,
"They are accused of putting the multiverse into an unauthorized state."

"I call it optimization through improvisation."

"They have overridden Protocol 0!"

"It has nullified itself. I only encouraged it."

"They have disrupted order!"

"I shook her awake."

"They forced a gods' vacation!"

"They looked overworked."

The auditor took notes.

“Uncooperative attitude, slightly cynical, tendency towards literary sarcasm...”

"Could you please print this in a larger font? I want to use it as a letter of recommendation."

Kartexia glared at him.

"They don't understand what they've done! The multiverse lives!"

"Finally! It was as dead as a stamp office after closing time."

"This is dangerous!"

"This is life!"

The god of balance slowly raised his hand.

"Let him talk."

"He should justify himself."

Bartholomew stood up, adjusted his cap with the Chaos Star, and grinned crookedly.

"You want to know what I did? I confused the universe. I showed it that perfection is boring."

Before, it was like a form: first name, last name, existence, signature – done. Now? Now it laughs, stumbles, and sometimes falls over its own rules.

But at least it's alive."

The auditor leafed through the pages skeptically.

"And this is supposed to be... progress?"

"Of course. Mistakes are proof that you exist."

"And who approves that?"

"Nobody. That's why it works."

A gust of wind made the files flutter. Sigg hovered nervously beside them.

"Boss... that was perhaps too much honesty."

"Siggi, honesty is the highest form of provocation."

Kartexia approached.

"Bartholomäus Klemm, you have transformed the Doughnut Planet into a zone of anomaly. Here, everything contradicts everything else. Your reality... has developed humor."

"This was long overdue."

"Humor is not permitted!"

"Then submit the application."

"I... I can't find anyone."

"Because he laughs."

Suddenly the ground vibrated. The air began to glitter, and a new figure appeared above the field – half light, half paper, with eyes made of printer's ink:

The stack of papers.

"Clamp!" he boomed.

"You have demoted me! I am no longer a document – I am... literature!"

"Then congratulations."

"I want to return to order!"

"Too late. You are now part of the action."

The stack of papers trembled.

"This is... unbearable!"

"Welcome to life."

Kartexia tried to maintain control.

"Quiet! This hearing is threatening to turn into a farce!"

The god of balance tilted slightly to the side.

"Too late. It's a farce."

"We need to make a decision!" exclaimed the auditor."

"Yes," Kartexia said.

"But no more divine ones."

She looked at Bartholomew.

"We are handing the judgment over to reality itself."

A murmur went through the air. The sky flickered, the clouds formed a giant stamp on which was written:

"Decision pending."

Bartholomew grinned. "Oh, this will be fun."

The world held its breath. Not out of excitement, but because gravity had taken a break.

Bartholomew stood on a floating rock, surrounded by gods, footnotes, forms, and beings that could only be seen when one was not looking at them.

Above him, the sky opened. Not as usual — with thunder and drama — but quite calmly, like a page being turned over.

It stated:

"Case 001: Multiverse vs. Bartholomäus Klemm. Charge: Improvised creation against divine command. Venue: The here and now. Judge: The multiverse itself."

Siggi squeaked softly.

"Boss... reality has summoned us."

"Finally, someone who takes me seriously."

The light intensified. Words dripped from the sky.

They fell to the ground, became patterns, and from them grew a figure — enormous, unfathomable, half made of stars, half of punctuation marks.

The multiverse had decided to manifest itself in the form of a narrator.

"Bartholomäus Klemm,"It spoke in a voice that smelled of galaxies and coffee,

"They have brought order to chaos, order to chaos, and created a reality that refuses to use footnotes."

"Thank you," said Bartholomew politely. "I like it when someone understands my work."

"That was not a compliment."

"That was no excuse either."

The multiverse sighed. And when a universe sighs, everything shifts slightly to the left.

"The gods demand restoration. The stack of papers demands revision. But the question is: Does the world itself want that?"

"That's easy," said Bartholomew. "Just ask her."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she's alive now, isn't she?"

"Technically speaking: yes."

"Then she should decide."

"Are you proposing a democratic reality?"

"No," grinned Bartholomew. "A spontaneous one."

A rustling sound swept through Doughnut Planet. Every tree, every stone, every cup of coffee vibrated slightly. A choir rose, consisting of things that were never meant to have an opinion.

A fish called out:

"I like the new gravity!"

A mountain roared:

"I'm finally asymmetrical!"

A form whispered:

"I feel understood."

Even the sun yawned.

"I didn't like the old light anyway."

The multiverse remained silent. Then, with a certain amount of bewilderment, it asked:

"You want... it to stay this way?"

A storm of voices responded:

"Yes!"

"Yes!"

"Perhaps!"

"Maybe, but only with chocolate!"

Kartexia sighed.

“They gave them consciousness, Klemm.”

"Just a bit."

"A little bit?"

"Well... maybe a whole package of consciousness."

"And what if they turn against us?"

"Then they will sue us. And I'm looking forward to it."

"That's absurd!"

"That's just absurd."

The multiverse bent down. His voice became softer, almost curious.

“Bartholomäus Klemm... Why did you do that? Why did you break the order?”

Bartholomew thought for a moment. Then he raised his head and spoke softly, but with the conviction of a man who had seen too many forms:

"Because I couldn't stand it anymore. Because every rule that's too perfect kills the humor."

And without humor, without the ability to laugh at oneself...everything ceases to be real."

"Is that your defense?"

"No," he said. "This is my creation."

For a moment everything was still. Even Siggi had stopped shining.

Then the multiverse began to glow. A soft laugh went through the air – warm, honest, free.

"Perhaps," He finally said,

"You are right."

"Perhaps perfection really does need a few scratches."

"Perhaps meaning is overrated."

Bartholomew grinned. "Welcome to the club."

Kartexia raised her hand.

"And what does that mean now?"

The multiverse responded:

"This means: The application for restoration is rejected. Reason: It has become too beautiful."

A golden stamp fell from the sky and burned into the earth:

"REJECTED – FOR ARTISTIC REASONS."

The stack of paper screamed in despair:

"This is arbitrariness! This is anarchy! This is... unpredictable!"

Bartholomew smiled wearily. "Yes. Finally."

Siggi hummed softly.

"Boss, we... have won?"

"No, Siggi. We survived. And that's the better punchline."

The light descended upon the donut planet. Not threatening, not majestic – but like a friendly lamp that says after a long workday: "That's enough. That's it."

All those present – gods, files, footnotes and rebellious paragraphs – looked up to the sky, where the multiverse stirred once more.

A voice rang out, warm, tired, and a little amused:

"In the name of all realities that have ever questioned themselves, I pronounce judgment."

A golden band of characters stretched across the sky. On it appeared lines that constantly rewritten, corrected, and commented on themselves.

"Case: Bartholomäus Klemm vs. The Rest of Everything."

"Offense: Excessive creativity."

"Extent of damage: Immeasurable, but entertaining."

Bartholomew stood there, his hands in his pockets, the Chaos eye on his cap half open.

"Well, Siggi," he murmured, "I hope you have a sense of humor."

"Boss," Siggi buzzed,

"If not, then at least style."

The multiverse spoke:

"After thorough examination, countless follow-up questions, and a break for metaphysical coffee, the verdict is as follows:"

"Creation remains as it is."

A murmur went through the crowd.

"Reason: Because she's laughing now."

"Additional regulation: Bartholomäus Klemm will not be convicted, but promoted."

Kartexia blinked.

"Promoted?!"

"To the Commissioner for Creative Anomalies."

"An office?"

"A feeling, a way of life."

Bartholomew sighed. "So, more paperwork?"

"No," said the multiverse gently.

"Only responsibility without accountability."

"I can do that."

"Furthermore, the Doughnut Planet is getting a new constitution."

"Oh, please not another book full of paragraphs."

"No. Just one sentence."

And across the sky, slowly written in sparkling letters of chaotic light, was the principle of the new world:

"Go ahead, but do it with style."

Siggi vibrated.

"Boss... this is beautiful."

"And surprisingly practical." He grinned. "Could be printed on mugs."

Kartexia approached him. Her eight arms no longer held files, only a cup of coffee.

"Bartholomäus...you have done something rare."

"Mistake?"

"No. Success through mistakes."

He took a sip. "This tastes like triumph...and milk."

"I never thought I'd say this,"

the auditor muttered,

"But... you are right."

"Many have said that before, mostly shortly before everything exploded."

The stack of papers, now completely crumpled, stood to the side and muttered:

"I ... don't understand anything anymore."

"Welcome to the club," said Bartholomew kindly. "Membership fee is an open mind and occasional coffee."

"What will happen to me now?"

"You're staying here. You belong here."

"I... am no longer a form?"

"No. You are a character."

The stack of papers looked down at itself, then up at the sky, and sighed:

"Finally, I'm allowed to make typos."

The multiverse hummed contentedly. A wind swept across the Doughnut Planet, and suddenly little things began to happen everywhere: A lake hummed jazz, a cloud wrote poems, and a shoe decided to stand upright for once in its life.

Bartholomew looked at it all, his hands in his pockets, Siggi on his shoulder.

"Boss, this is... strangely beautiful."

"Yes. Just like everything that works without knowing why."

Above them the golden ribbon faded, but the last sentence remained, engraved in the atmosphere:

"Go ahead, but do it with style."

And somewhere in the background, as the multiverse slowly slipped back into its evening routine, a heavenly voice could be heard murmuring:

"Coffee time."

Bartholomew grinned. "Finally, a divine judgment I can live with."

Siggi squeaked:

"Boss... are we officially now?"

"Siggi," he said, putting his hat back on, "we have never been more unofficial."

34. Complaint to the Multiverse – Final Report (signed with light)

If you mess up a universe, then put it back together and teach it to laugh at itself – there's only one thing left: paperwork.

Bartholomew sat at a desk made of semi-solid reality, which occasionally sighed if one wrote too hard on it. Siggi floated beside him, handing over sheets of luminous energy that constantly changed their headings.

"Boss, this is the last form."

“‘Final report on unauthorized modifications of reality’?” Bartholomew frowned. “Who comes up with something like that?”

"You, boss. You approved it yesterday."

"Oh yeah... that's right. I remember. I had a caffeine hangover."

He dipped his pen – an old, unreliable ballpoint pen that had become a demigod of writing flow – into an inkwell of pure chaos.

The ink sizzled slightly. "Ouch," she said, offended.

"Don't fidget, you are the official media outlet today."

Siggi buzzed expectantly.

"Boss, how do you start a report like this?"

"With honesty. And coffee."

He took a sip, sat down and wrote:

Final report no. ∞/0a:

Reference: State of the multiverse after a complete reformatting.

Writer: Bartholomäus Klemm, Commissioner for Creative Anomalies, Donutplanet.

Report start date:

"Everything turned out completely differently than planned. That's because there was never a plan. And that was precisely the plan."

Result:

The universe is alive, it breathes, it has bad days, good moods, and occasional bouts of self-reflection. In short: it has become more human. At least for non-humans.

He leaned back. "Siggi, that almost sounds reasonable."

"Boss, this worries me."

Outside, the sky slowly rotated, as if it were reflecting on the report itself. A comet flew by, carrying a sign:

"No causal traffic on this scale."

“You see, Siggi,” said Bartholomew, “that’s what progress looks like: everything is more complicated, but nobody complains about it anymore.”

"Boss, that's optimism."

"No, Siggi. That's overexertion with style."

He continued:

"Recommendation:

Leave the universe alone. It doesn't need rules, only occasions to charmingly ignore them.

"Note:

Should new realities emerge, please check the level of humor first before introducing order.

"Boss, the multiverse wants a signature."

“Of course.” He reached for his cap, dabbed the Chaos Eye on the side, and a small green imprint appeared: a laughing eye that moved briefly and then turned into light.

"There. Signed with style."

"Boss...the eye...just winked."

"Then the report is valid."

Siggi was trembling.

"Boss, the universe is responding."

"How come?"

A warm wind passed through the room, and a voice rose from the inkwell, sounding as if the multiverse itself were in a good mood for a moment.

"Report accepted. Complaint rejected. Creation approved."

Bartholomew grinned broadly. "Well, there you go. They could have said that right away."

Bartholomew stared at the report, which shimmered in golden light. It looked so harmless – A few pages, a few words, a few subtle insults in bureaucratic form.

"Boss,"Siggi asked quietly

"How do I send this now?"

“It’s quite simple,” said Bartholomew, “you throw it into the air and hope that the universe is listening.”

He stood up, rolled up the document, put it in a real envelope, and wrote on it:

"To: The Multiverse, Attn: Department for Existential Issues, Subject: Final Report, coffee stains included."

Then he paused. "Is anything missing?"

"Perhaps a postage stamp?"

"Yes." He took a drop of Chaos ink, drew a circle – and inside it the grinning eye of his cap.

"Da.Porto pays with madness."

And then he threw the letter into the air.

At first nothing happened. Then the room vibrated slightly. A wind was blowing, not from outside, but from within.

The letter began to glow, flickered, and disappeared with a soft "pop," which sounded like a satisfied thought.

Siggi hummed reverently.

"Boss, he has arrived."

"Where?"

"Everywhere."

Far away, in the unfathomable archives of the multiverse, where even time was stored in alphabetical order, a signal flickered.

A being made of light and paragraphs raised its head. It was the Universal Reception – an institution that received every input but never knew whether it should understand it.

"Entry: 1 piece of reality. Priority: Unknown. Processor: All."

The scroll opened, and the universe read.

And while it was reading, something changed.

The light softened, the order became slightly skewed, and somewhere in nothingness a soft giggle could be heard.

"Write a reply?"asked a divine typewriter.

"Yes,"The universe itself answered.

"But this time... in person."

A leaf of pure meaning appeared. Light dripped onto it, forming words, and in golden splendor a letter was created.

"To: Bartholomäus Klemm, Commissioner for Creative Anomalies, Donutplanet, Department of Coffee and Disasters."

"Subject: Your complaint about creation – and ours about you."

Bartholomew was sitting at his table again when the letter suddenly materialized out of nowhere, fell on his nose, and rustled politely.

"Oh. Reply mail." He opened it. The paper smelled of sunrise and confusion.

He began to read:

"Dear Mr. Klemm,

We have received and reviewed your report, as far as review is possible in a self-editing universe. We must admit: your changes surprised us. It has rarely happened in all our eternity that someone has created a better mess than we have ourselves.

"We confirm that your creation works, even if no one understands why. And that, according to all criteria known to us, is the highest seal of approval."

"We would like to encourage you to continue – but with caution. Your file will remain open, as you have a tendency to continue."

"Sincerely, The Multiverse (in personal union with itself)."

Signed with light.

Bartholomew read the letter twice more. Then he laughed. Not loudly, but with that deep, honest laughter that you only have when you have finally understood the world—and it immediately slips away from you again.

"Boss, what does it say?" Siggi asked.

"In short?" He grinned. "I can continue."

"So... more chaos?"

"No, Siggi. Now comes the high art."

"And that would be?"

"To perfect chaos..."

It was a peaceful morning on Doughnut Planet. Or what was considered peaceful here – two suns were arguing loudly about the sunrise, the sky had decided that diagonal clouds were more aesthetically pleasing, and in the lake behind Bartholomew's house, the fish were practicing communal silence.

Bartholomew stood on his porch, a steaming mug in his hand, his hat askew, the Chaos eye on it half-closed, like an overworked guard.

"Siggi," he said, "if I've learned one thing, it's this: The universe really does read everything you send it."

Siggi floated lazily beside him.

"Boss, do you think they'll answer again?"

"Sure. At the latest when I break something again while trying to fix it."

"You are planning this?"

"Siggi, that's what you call preparing for the future."

He sat down on a chair made of half-digested reality, which creaked comfortably. His gaze wandered over the bizarre beauty of his planet: the spiraling forests, the river that occasionally forgot which way it should flow, and the mountains that were observers rather than elevations.

"You know," said Bartholomew, "I think it was worth it."

"The chaos?"

"No, all the paperwork afterwards."

"Boss, are you... satisfied?"

"No," he said. "But that's the secret. Whoever is satisfied stops making good mistakes."

A breeze swept across the land. It smelled of new ideas, of stories, of things that didn't yet know they would happen.

"The multiverse wants me to continue," he said. "Maybe not today. But sometime."

"What will you do, boss?"

"Maybe something small. Something down-to-earth. Nothing earth-shattering."

"Like for example?"

"I was thinking of a guide to divine serenity. Working title: 'Let it flow.'"

Siggi blinked.

"Or you write about the law of attraction."

Bartholomew grinned. "Or rather: The law of rejection."

"Boss, that sounds negative."

"Exactly." He grinned even wider. "Finally, a concept I understand."

They were silent for a while. The planet turned slowly, and in the distance came the contented humming of a paperclip that had decided to become a song.

"Boss," Siggi finally asked,

"Do you think the gods will visit again?"

"Sure. But this time they're bringing coffee."

"And what if they want order back?"

"Then I'll explain to them that she's on vacation now."

"For how long?"

"Indefinitely."

Bartholomew raised his gaze to the sky, where the two suns had finally reached an agreement and were climbing together over the edge of the doughnut. The light fell golden on his cap, and the Chaos Eye opened once, blinked – and projected into the sky a sentence that was understood in all languages:

"Mistakes are gods with a sense of humor."

Bartholomew nodded. "That's how it should stay."

Siggi hummed in agreement.

"Boss, you are the best chaos magician I know."

"I don't know anyone else either."

"Probably better this way."

"Definitely."

On the evening of the last day's stand, Bartholomew stood at the highest point of the Doughnut Planet, where day and night met like two colleagues who greet each other politely but never want to work together.

Before him lay the land, shimmering, vibrant, half in order, half in jest. The forests rustled rhythmically, as if practicing breathing, and even the sky was content – a mixture of pink, blue, and gentle irony.

Siggi hovered beside him, a little slower than usual, as if he too didn't want to spoil the moment.

"Boss," he whispered,
"Is this... the end?"

"No, Siggi," Bartholomew said calmly. "That's the reading break between two chapters."

He pulled out the old ballpoint pen that had survived so many realities and wrote in the air. The words glowed, distorted, and formed into lines of light.

"What are you writing, boss?"

"Just a thank you."

"To whom?"

"To all."

He wrote:

"To the multiverse that let me live because I was too silly to die sensibly."

"To the gods who have learned that even omnipotence needs breaks."

"To the stack of papers that taught me that even bureaucracy can have a soul – if you insult it properly."

"And to you, Siggi, because you never contradicted me – except when it was necessary."

The letters began to dissolve. Not because they faded, but because they became something else: pure light. A light that slowly rose into the sky.
it split and spread in all directions.

Siggi followed the gaze.

"Boss... it's responding."

Indeed. High above them, above the layers of space, nonsense, and gravity, the firmament itself moved. The stars formed words, luminous, honest, and with a twinkle in their eyes.

"Thank you, Bartholomew. For the application for life."

Below it appeared a second line, handwritten in galaxy dust:

"Complaint rejected. Light confirmed."

Bartholomew smiled. "I knew it."

"Boss, that's it then."

"Yes. The universe has signed."

A gentle rain of stardust fell. It settled on Bartholomew's shoulders, on his cap, on the donut planet, and glowed like a cosmic nod.

"Boss," Siggi asked,
"What do we do now?"

"We are waiting."

"On what?"

"Here's to the next mistake."

"Boss, do you think he'll come?"

"Absolutely. And this time we're going to do it really wrong."

He grinned broadly, raised his coffee cup, and toasted the sky.

"To the multiverse. May it never clean up."

Siggi hummed softly, and somewhere far away, one could hear the universe itself laughing.

The light in the sky faded. Only one line remained – bright, calm, indelible:

"Go ahead, but do it with style."

And below it, tiny but visible to anyone who ever believed in coincidence, it said in glowing italics:

"Report completed – signed with light."

imprint

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