

ALIENS, THE OTHER WHITE MEAT

by

E. Michael Fisher and James Clifford Bird

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Dedication

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Prologue

Countless years ago, at the edge of the universe where light begins, three gods huddled about an inter-dimensional portal trying to observe a distant world they had created long before. Over the eons, they had amused themselves by tinkering with the fate of the planet Blithos and its inhabitants.

“What’s wrong with this thing?” complained BaBu, his aged eyes squinting as he peered into the portal. “I can’t make out a thing.”

GaHoot rapped at the portal’s casing with the claws of his right hand. “This thing was working the last time I used it. Maybe we just need more light.”

KulKan grinned. “Suppose we smash a comet into the giant gas planet next to Blithos?”

BaBu understood her immediately. “If the comet’s large enough, we will spawn a dwarf star.”

“Let’s do it!” GaHoot agreed with excitement.

The comet’s collision brought the core of the gas giant to critical mass, inducing nuclear fusion and creating a dull red star, whose additional light did indeed improve the view in the portal. The three gods watched in horror as the beloved planet of their creation began to dry and wither in the radiance of its two suns.

As BaBu and KulKan consulted on how best to help the Blithians, GaHoot began to cry inconsolably. With each convulsive sob, he became fainter and fainter until all that remained of him were his tears. As these great drops of GaHoot’s passion fell, they began to transmute the dark matter that surrounded him into chunks of green mineral that flew off in all directions and contained the salvation of the Blithians.

Chapter 0

Thresher Pub

Where time is irrelevant

What's a Nice Bird Like You Doing In a Place Like This?

The chicken walked into the bar, and the door swung shut behind it. The place was empty, save for the bartender methodically polishing glasses behind the bar. The chicken looked about the circular room, which was richly paneled with cypress wood. Behind the smiling bartender, columns carved with Mayan hieroglyphics supported abundantly laden liquor shelves. Twenty-five doors entered upon the room at all angles, and the trim around each of them was engraved in the same Mesoamerican motif.

The chicken proceeded with caution, for it had had a rough day and the last thing it wanted to do was to go from the frying pan into the fire. Yet, here it stood on the brink of a precarious and strange frontier, needing desperately to either advance or retreat. Deciding it preferred the unknown devil ahead to the devil it knew to be behind, the chicken ruffled its feathers and strutted across the floor toward the bar.

It walked in an unusual manner for a chicken—like a miniature person in a chicken costume. It crossed the floor to the bar and climbed up on a stool. “Could you please tell me where I am?”

The bartender paused in his polishing. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” Wilbur Malloy was a portly man. He was dressed in a starched white shirt and black arm garters, with a black bow tie, black trousers and suspenders, and a long, linen apron. His thick hair was mostly white and parted in the middle, yet still showed some signs of brown, as did his handlebar mustache.

“Try me. After what I’ve been through, I’d believe anything,” the chicken replied.

“I’d venture to guess that you *stumbled* onto this place by accident,” the bartender opined as if accustomed to speaking with animals every day.

“You can take that literally.” The chicken cocked its head to one side and gazed at the barkeep through the jars of exotic delicacies that sat at intervals along the bar.

“Well to start with, this place is a private club...for a very select few *travelers* who we specialize in servicing.” The bartender noticed the chicken’s unusual features.

This chicken was unlike any the bartender had ever seen. Besides the fact that it talked, the bird was half-again larger than a normal chicken, and its beak was both wider and longer with small pointy teeth. Where its wings should have been there was what appeared to be a second set of slightly smaller legs that were adapted to use as arms. Instead of feet at the end of the upper appendages, the claws were modified to use as three-fingered hands with an opposable digit and rotatable wrists.

“What are the odds of my wrangling a membership? I’m a traveler of sorts,” the hen pled in earnest, “though I don’t know if I’ve been through the looking glass, or over the rainbow, or what.”

The bartender looked appraisingly at his latest customer. “Well, it’s not just up to me, though my recommendation is highly regarded.” He pulled a beer out of the cooler, “And, according to club rules, it only takes one other member to make a quorum.”

“I might as well hang around here for a while ’cause I can’t go back home anytime soon.” The chicken motioned towards the door it’d come through. “I got Colonel Sanders on my tail.”

“Here, this will help pass the time.” The bartender sat a beer in front of the chicken. “Drink a bottle of stout and have a hot bowl of chowder while you’re waiting.”

“Thanks, but I’m afraid I don’t have any money.” As it poured the thick brew into a mug, the chicken noted that the bottle was shaped like the thresher shark mounted over the mantle of the huge stone fireplace.

"The first beer's always free in here, and I'll run a tab for the rest."

"Great." The chicken paused, then said, "But you still haven't answered my first question...where am I?"

"This is the *Thresher Pub*."

"A private club you say?"

"That's right—very private."

"Then why is it that I've never heard of it?"

The bartender smiled. "Because it's always been too exclusive for you—until now."

"Why is now different?"

"We only accept those who are clever enough, or lucky enough, to find us."

"Well, here I am."

"And you seem like a good egg, too—I'll vouch for you." There was something about the chicken that the bartender liked. "Just be aware, you'll need a sponsor and there is an initiation period. During that time, you'll be indentured to your sponsor. Whoever that turns out to be." The publican ladled steaming chowder into a bowl and set it before the chicken, "Corn chowder. Try it."

Wilbur watched the bird grasp the spoon with its finger-like claws to taste the soup. "Not bad," it replied, chasing it with a slug of stout, "and as to the indentureship...I don't care who sponsors me, for nobody could be as bad as my last boss. So how do I get started?"

"It depends on who the next member to walk in is," the bartender said over his shoulder as he placed the immaculately clean glasses in the rack, "because it's first-come, first-served around here."

"Anything goes at this point." The chicken stopped eating, looked up and asked the bartender, "Why are you so nonchalant about a chicken walking into your club and ordering a beer?"

The bartender broke into a guffaw. "Nothing surprises me after what I've seen come and go."

One of the doors flung open and disgorged a man who was the image of a seventeenth-century sea captain. He had a great billowing beard and looked fresh from the set of an Errol Flynn movie. "What have ye here, Wilbur?" he asked in a raspy voice.

The bartender waved the new arrival over to the bar. "Captain Teach, this fellow is a new candidate for membership in our fellowship of inter-dimensional travelers and traders."

"I could use me some new blood. But, this be a rather odd lad," the Captain observed.

"Your perspicacity is impeccable, Captain," Wilbur chimed.

The chicken spoke up, "So here's your quorum...what do I do now?"

The bartender leaned towards the chicken. His eyes gleamed as he swapped a glance with the Captain. "First, you must tell us your tale."

"I warn you, it's a very long story." The chicken looked from one man to the other.

The Captain tugged at his beard and said, "Aye, that be the way we like 'em...just be sure to start at the beginnin' and go all the way to the end."

Chapter 1
Planet Blithos
The year of GaHoot 14975

The Blithians

As he waited for his visitor, JahFet sat in the sidewalk café at the foot of the great temple in the market city of KeTrel, and watched the setting of the first sun, NamBu. This was his favorite time of day—the hour of near darkness that preceded the rising of the smaller Blithian sun, ShatSee.

JahFet's longtime friend ClehTun would die today for ignoring the edicts of the new state religion. But since the gods seemed bent on the elimination of life on the entire planet, of what significance would be the passing of his friend?

Perhaps the holy one can make sense of this when he arrives, JahFet thought. The holy ones, or Uf Emin, spoke with the gods and then traveled the planet spreading the wisdom so imparted.

Most Uf Emin spoke with BaBu, the most loquacious of the Blithian gods, who would speak to almost anyone who made a sincere effort. To converse with Babu of the Blessed Seed, one traveled to the highlands, staked out a ledge or cavern, and followed the regimen of fasting, meditation, and chanting.

The ordeal of ClehTun's punishment had begun with the bone-breaking ceremony. The café and every other establishment around the square began to fill with onlookers who cheered wildly every time one of the priests delivered a blow. Ten priests took turns so that none would tire by the exertion, and upon completion, a gong sounded in the temple and the door atop the great stairs opened.

Seven virgin drones walked out in procession. The one at the front was the highest ranking and she bore a pillow upon which rested the traditional instrument of death—a fossilized tooth of an ancient predatory creature that once swam the now vanished seas of Blithos. As the lead drone approached the high priest, the onlookers applauded wildly.

A shudder ran down JahFet's back as those around him in the café came to their feet, and with the thousands of others who filled the square, raised their voices as one in the ritual chant that preceded the first cut of The Death. The high priest grabbed the tooth and held it up with both hands. The weight of the weapon made his arms tremble as he turned in a circle to display its terrible silhouette before declaring, "The blood of the sinner shall cleanse the sin." With that, the priest sliced off one of the digits on ClehTun's left foot.

He held the appendage above his head and proclaimed, "The suffering of the wayward spawn shall pay his debt to NamBu, the giver of algae and father of communal life. Let the living flesh that we cast among you be a gift from NamBu and a reminder to remain obedient and faithful to the laws of the true gods, NamBu and ShatSee."

He then cast the bit of flesh into the air as the crowd surged across the square in competition to prove their devotion by consuming the enemy of their god. The winner's jaws snapped and the bit of ClehTun vanished. So it was that the body of the heretic was served up to the faithful, one piece at a time, in atonement for his transgressions.

The priests took turns wielding the tooth and intoning the incantation for each particular cut. This was no random butchery, but a ritual that played out in a prescribed and exacting manner, for each piece was taken in the precise order spelled out in the NamBu Codex. Each individual cut had a name and was made exactly as written.

It was known precisely how many cuts victims could sustain before dying, and suspending the prisoners upside down helped keep them conscious throughout the protracted ordeal by maintaining

sufficient blood pressure. This enabled the torture to last as long as possible, and provided the maximum number of communal offerings. And the climax of the entire procedure would come just before the priests delivered the final cut, when the wayward one was offered the chance to make a final statement—most commonly a confession.

As he sat at the table waiting for service, JahFet scanned the crowd for signs of familiar faces and drank from the jug of water he'd carried all the way from the holy city of Ull Ujus. The taste reminded JahFet of the trips he and ClehTun had made to that city on the farthest, shallowest outer reaches of the canals. ClehTun had been his closest friend, and JahFet was every bit as guilty of heresy as he, for though he worked as customs inspector for the Council, he, too, followed the Old Course.

JahFet was an individual of influence among others of like mind, and these were the citizens that he watched push and shove their way to the front of the crowd according to his plan. As the priests took turns slicing away at the shattered body of ClehTun, his comrades positioned themselves for intercepting the offerings. He was pleased when he saw one of his fellow conspirators catch a morsel in their maw.

These accomplices didn't eat the flesh, but gently mouthed the severed part as they made their ways to the rear of the crowd and disappeared into the city streets. This same scenario played out seven times as the ritual wore on, and though JahFet was sad to see his friend suffer so, he was pleased that his plan was working.

JahFet was praying silently to KulKan as he watched the bloody scene, beseeching her to grant that the time was ripe to save her people from extinction on this dry husk of a world. *I would leave the canals forever to follow your anointed one.*

A stranger approached as JahFet returned to sipping his drink, and without hearing a word, JahFet knew who he was. One could always tell a prophet, for the Uf Emin had a way about them that could not be mistaken. It was not only their demeanor, but the way they dressed.

It was obvious that this elder was from one of the northern provinces by the umber iridescence of his scales and those of his ancestors that comprised his cloak.

Looking up at the holy one, JahFet said, "You're a long way off of the canal."

"NamBu is high and the Council far away."

This exchange seemed innocuous enough to those who overheard it, but it was the sign and countersign that allowed the two adherents to the Old Course to identify themselves to each other.

This stranger was not one of the sycophant priests who mouthed the platitudes of the High Council, but SamShee—the first prophet in many generations to hear the voice of KulKan. SamShee, too, was here to see ClehTun die.

The prophet looked suspiciously over both shoulders as if checking for eavesdroppers before speaking. "For many kalhunes, the only reason I came out of the hills was to see ClehTun—thus it is again."

"He told me much of your wisdom and prophecy," JahFet spoke reverently.

"I'm a fraud on that account"—the tips of SamShee's fangs were exposed by the faintest curl of a smile—"for the wisdom belongs to BaBu and KulKan...I only sit on my tail and wait for them to speak."

"You are a true visionary, and I know for a fact that KulKan doesn't speak to everyone who waits." As he spoke, JahFet gestured to the empty chair at the table. "Or else I'd have heard her during the eternity that it has taken for the waiter to arrive."

The prophet nodded in agreement. "ClehTun waited for no one, Blithian or god. He was a being of true genius, setting his course across a sea of ignorance. Once in many generations a prodigy is born, a genius, a polymath, an intuitive thinker, who by applying his mind to a subject, learns all there is to know about it. ClehTun was such a one, able to solve problems with uncanny ingenuity, and brilliant at whatever he sank his claws into. Such a seeker of truth was doomed from the start, even if his interests had never turned to flight."

ClehTun was one of the few individuals with whom SamShee had maintained a regular acquaintanceship. During their visits, the two of them would place a bowl of wrigglers between them and talk through several cycles of the suns, as they slaked their thirsts with the wine SamShee made from the lichen that grew on the walls of his cave.

Though they'd communicated via the bionet, the two had never met snout to snout before, and the sight of the prophet was quite impressive. As JahFet looked SamShee up and down, he found the luster of the prophet's scales hypnotic.

SamShee's tail was shorter than average, though more muscular. It terminated in an ugly scar, arousing speculation on JahFet's part as to the nature of the mishap. His foreshortened tail was responsible for the posture of the prophet, who slouched slightly forward due to the insufficient counter balance. His haunches showed that they were used to long journeys, and though the claws on his feet showed wear, they still looked formidable.

Like all Blithians, SamShee's torso narrowed toward the shoulders where his two spindly arms were attached, and his neck muscles were highly developed from the task of holding his head and elongated snout aloft. With jaws comprising three quarters of the length of his head, his teeth were displayed in the grin produced by the overbite common to his species. The scales on his head were smaller than average, and his eyes were set farther forward than was normal—ironically a trait usually associated with simple-mindedness by most Blithians.

The holy one motioned towards the empty chair at the table and JahFet nodded. SamShee sat down and the dust of the journey rose from his cloak, for it had been a long way to the Capital city of KeTrel from the highlands. He had started walking as soon as he'd received JahFet's news of ClehTun's impending execution.

The message had come across the tendrils of the bionet—a network composed of a genetically engineered form of telepathic fungus whose mycelium spread through the ground to every part of the planet. This clandestine biological network had been designed and implemented by the followers of the Old Course in order to keep their far-flung organization in contact.

At the end of his bionet contact with JahFet to arrange this meeting, the prophet had asked how he would recognize the customs inspector. JahFet had simply said, "Just follow your nose."

Immediately upon entering the café, SamShee's olfactory sense drew him to the table where JahFet sat drinking the fetid green water from the canal of Ull Ujus.

The drone that hatched SamShee had received a vision from BaBu to incubate the egg she carried in the caves above the venerated city of Ull Ujus. So it was that SamShee came to be born at that holy site, and like all hatchlings, he imprinted on sights and smells of his birthplace.

Though it was a long journey from the highlands where he now made his home, at the end of each cycle of kalhunes, this itinerant prophet returned to Ull Ujus for a meditative retreat in the cave where he'd been incubated. It was during his most recent pilgrimage that SamShee, while fishing for wrigglers in the stagnant canal that terminated at the ruins of the city, received a vision from KulKan.

SamShee sat at the table and signaled the waiter for a draught of garuch, an opaque blue liqueur made from fermented algae. He reached across the table, grabbed JahFet's jug of water, removed the stopper, and placing the mouth of the jug beneath his left nostril, inhaled deeply. "It is good to smell the stench of home."

JahFet leaned close. "Breathe deep, maybe it will take your mind off of what they are doing to ClehTun."

"What they are doing is GaHoot's will, nothing more, nothing less. And you know ClehTun believes the mortal body to be just so much meat—that he's just another link in the food chain."

JahFet snorted loudly and made a guttural sound in amusement, as his tail smacked the ground twice as it always did when he found something funny. "ClehTun said you had a morbid sense of humor."

"And ClehTun told me much of you." SamShee took a large draught of his garuch. "He called you a gifted mathematician disguised as a simple customs inspector."

"My disguise, as you call it, allows me to travel the canals extensively and to see more of Blithos than most, while the random meanderings of the canal system have inspired my mathematical endeavors. I am but a humble civil servant who strives to describe in symbols what is already there."

"You are too modest. ClehTun told me you contributed much to the research behind his most heretical endeavors—astronomy and flight."

"GahZorp!" JahFet's tone matched his profanity. "What research? All we did was sit around, drink garuch and chew the wriggler into the night."

"Longwinded discussions are the essence of intellect," SamShee replied. "ClehTun also said that I could trust you implicitly, as he did, and I believe you are the one foretold to me by KulKan and your actions will be key to our escaping the danger posed by ShatSee and the coming of the MurGhoo."

JahFet hissed in surprise. "I thought that my plan was a secret. ClehTun told me many things about

you, but he never told me that you could read minds.”

“Your plan! By the gods I told you...KulKan spoke of this in a vision. I did not need to read your mind, for the Holy Ovum steers you on this course, and she revealed her intentions to me.”

The mathematician was awestruck by SamShee’s allusion to KulKan’s influence on the course of their lives. He leaned in close and whispered hoarsely, “I would be thrice blessed to serve the wishes of the gods.”

SamShee reached across the table with his right hand and took JahFet’s left hand. “I was given the foresight of the gods and have seen the blessed events that will come to pass from this. ClehTun’s death is not an end; it is a beginning—the glorious beginning of the deliverance of our kind. KulKan knows there is little time left, so she has arranged events to lead to the salvation of the faithful. She knows that within a few generations the water will be gone and the atmosphere so thin as to be unbreathable. Every cycle sees the temperature of the planet rise, for when this world was created it was never meant to have two suns. ShatSee going nuclear was the first cut of The Death for Blithos.”

SamShee’s stomach growled. “I’ve not eaten since I left the highlands and the sight of all this blood has stimulated my appetite—let’s order a bowl of wrigglers.”

Wrigglers were the larval stage of kartoops and were an abundant form of nutrition. Boneless blobs of flesh with a profusion of polyps protruding from their mass, they fed by sucking in algae through these hollow tubes. Considered a delicacy and usually eaten alive, they were best eaten young before they developed the poisonous stingers of the adults. Kartoops once roamed the seas, but were now adapted to life in the canals. The adults were as long as a Blithian tail and hid in their conical shells, exposing only the venomous polyps they used to stun and seize their prey—ironically, their own adolescents.

The waiter finally appeared with a bowl of wrigglers and a jug of garuch that he set between the two wayfarers, and the instant that the crock of dipping sauce touched the table, the two began their repast with zeal. So, in the midst of the howling crowd, and within sight of the mutilated body of their friend, the two fell into the rapture of dining. They raced their left hands to the plumpest wrigglers, which they quickly tossed into their snapping jaws, barely masticating them before swallowing. True to their names, the hapless creatures struggled in vain against their fate, as the diners rocked back and forth in their chairs noisily consuming the fare. Basking in the tactile pleasure of the sauce running down their faces, they enjoyed the death throes of their dinner and felt the satisfaction of consuming living prey.

The feeding frenzy in the square was also for living flesh. The blood lust spread from the execution wheel throughout the crowd and into the bistros. All the restaurateurs and café owners were doing a brisk business.

Executions were so good for trade that the merchants often sponsored them, buying condemned prisoners from the Council and paying priests to inflict the sentence. It saved the Council the expense of meting out justice, provided a source of income for the priests, and was a great tourist attraction. Canal boatmen booked cruises to KeTrel to view the spectacle.

Today, business was especially brisk about the square, for ClehTun had rated top billing as an arch heretic. The Council had refused to sell the rights to this execution in order to carry it out with little advance publicity, assuring an audience composed of mostly sympathetic city residents.

Those from far off the canals, the hot bed of opposition to the Council, would have scant time to reach KeTrel. Fortunately, JahFet had gotten advance word through his government post, and the dissidents were able to communicate more quickly than the Council imagined through the bionet.

Despite the lack of lead-time, the merchants of KeTrel still managed to pack their establishments with capacity crowds. Tens of thousands feasted and drank in celebration of this sacrifice to the sun gods, and as JahFet and SamShee enjoyed their meal, they seemed no different than any of the other spectators.

Communication during meals did not directly involve speech on Blithos, but neither did they eat in silence. And in keeping with custom, JahFet and SamShee’s repast was a cacophony of chomping, slurping, and grunting accompanied by growls, bellows, and tail thumping. With noisy slurps, their rough tongues rasped away the residual bits trapped between their long and pointy teeth. It took but a brief time for the two to finish their victuals and begin talking.

“I must tell you of my holy vision when KulKan spoke to me.” SamShee paused, took another swallow of garuch, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “She told me that GaHoot had asked her to convey a warning to the faithful of Blithos.”

“A warning?”

SamShee snorted. JahFet looked up and realized that his new and venerated acquaintance was unaccustomed to being interrupted, so he dipped his snout deferentially, and SamShee continued. “She said that though Blithos is doomed, all is not lost. I was told that in his final moment of life on Blithos, ClehTun will reveal the way for the faithful to carry on.”

SamShee paused to finish draining his garuch, and JahFet took the advantage of the pause to speak. “What did she say?”

The prophet filled his jar again, leaned back on his stumpy tail, and drained the garuch in one hasty draught. As his tongue flicked out to grab the escaping dribbles, he began, “I had been meditating in one of the caves above Ull Ujus...as I told you, I go there when I feel the need... it is a desolate place, but if one knows the terrain, life can be sustained even in that barren land. The lichen on the walls of my cave produces a particularly heady brew if fermented, and though I fast for long periods while there, when I’m ready to eat, the putrid and stagnant remnant of the once mighty Ull Ujus River still supports an abundance of algae and wrigglers.

“Well I was famished after a fast of several cycles, so I waded out to the deepest part of the canal...that’s where you’ll find the most wrigglers...until I was standing waist deep. The wrigglers were so plentiful, that I was stuffing them in my mouth with both hands as fast as I could catch them.

“I was suddenly seized with a paralysis that prevented me from breathing...I thought I had been stung by a kartoop at first...but realized that I was caught in the eternity of the moment. Someone standing on the bank would have seen me continuously snatching wrigglers, but their reality would have existed in another dimension from mine, for I had become aware of the infinity between each instant of my actions.

“I was watching myself fish for wrigglers and realized I was no longer in my body...I was everywhere and nowhere. From a vantage point above myself, I watched a rainbow sheen form upon the water, the colors swirled up into the air and then I saw her.

“KulKan was before me, wrapped in the shimmering iridescence that rose from the surface like a nacreous mist. Her scales were unlike those of mortals, but fringed about the edges with softly billowing tendrils, and though I moved towards her she remained still, and I could not reach her.

“She told me to search the highlands for a secret locked in the very matter of Blithos...it was created by the tears of GaHoot and hidden by BaBu. I have since discovered a cave that is studded with nuggets of what I am sure is this substance...gahootinite I call it.”

SamShee paused to belch and pour more garuch. JahFet had been spellbound and became impatient for the rest of the story. “What does this gahootinite look like?”

After taking a sip of his drink SamShee continued. “It’s greener than algae and it glows...I don’t know what it’s for, but I know it’s the stuff KulKan spoke of. But you steer me from my story...I had four more visions that day. In the first, I saw Blithos dying. In the second, I came to a crossing of the canals and a martyr pointed me on my way. In the third, I gazed upon the tears of GaHoot, and in the fourth, I witnessed the birth of the MurGhoo, the ultimate leader written about in the ancient Codex of the Triad, and saw that in his creation, the gods were assisted by an enlightened mortal. The MurGhoo will arise in the hour of our greatest need to pilot us to a new life. I believe now that ClehTun is the martyr of my vision, and that you are the enlightened mortal KulKan spoke of.”

“Did she say anything else?”

“Only that the true purpose of GaHoot’s breath would be discovered through my own death.”

JahFet was impressed by SamShee’s nonchalance regarding his fate and could see why ClehTun had enjoyed his company. SamShee offered to pour another drink by tilting the jug towards him, and JahFet assented by holding his jar up.

JahFet felt an electric tingle from his snout to the tip of his tail. Though not visited by prophecy, he felt SamShee’s assertion that they were part of a divine plan was correct. “I see now that our purposes were destined to converge.”

“I am not entirely sure of my part in all this,” SamShee leaned forward and whispered, “but suppose you tell me what you are up to.”

“At this very moment, I have allies encircling the execution wheel.”

“You hope to free ClehTun?!”

“Not in this life...but perhaps he may live again.”

"Please...leave allegory to the poets."

JahFet laughed. "I was speaking quite literally. As we've been speaking, my comrades have been gathering up the bits excised from our dying friend for use in cloning. With ClehTun's genetic material as a starting point, I believe I can engineer a being the likes of which Blithos has not yet seen."

"Perhaps, even, the MurGhoo?"

"Yes, perhaps," JahFet affirmed.

SamShee thumped his tail in delight at KulKan's wondrous ways. "I would very much like to be your accomplice." The Elder Uf Emin poured them each another drink as they toasted the ancient gods, their friend ClehTun, and the success of their quest.

* * * *

Across the square, a young drone watched the grotesque proceedings. She had run away from home because her maternal brood drone had forbidden her to attend the execution. Clutched in her trembling hand was an iridescent umber scale. It had been given to her by her father who was the victim being subjected to The Death. Possessed of a heightened sense of empathy, rare among the usually pragmatic and stoic Blithians, she felt every cut as if it were being inflicted on her own person.

CheeBah had acquired the unusual scale the previous evening when she had gone to the dungeon with a bucket of wrigglers for her father's last meal. The guard told her that the heretic was to have no visitors, but eyed the bucket lovingly. "I could deliver a short message to the prisoner if you were to give me that bucket."

The young drone nodded and handed them over. The guard put them out of sight. "So what do you wish me to say to the condemned?"

"Tell him that I will remember him always."

The guard scurried off and returned after several minutes.

"I could wind up in the dungeon with him if I was caught doing this," the guard looked nervously about, "but a deal's a deal...he asked me to give this to you as a keepsake."

He looked up and down the hallway then slipped a scale into her hand.

CheeBah thought that it did not feel quite right—she looked down and was surprised at its iridescent umber hues. It was definitely not one of her father's scales, but he must have a reason for giving it to her.

Father wants me to find this person, the young empath realized.

Authorities used the unique patterns and colors of scales to identify individuals and kept a database for that purpose. But being the daughter of a condemned heretic, she knew it would be impossible for her to trace the scale through official channels, but resolved to try anyway.

Before setting out in search of the scale's owner, she intended to share her father's dying moments. Having staked out a vantage point next to the platform, she'd been near to her father from the moment they had tied him to the wheel. Even though it had been difficult maintaining her position, for many spectators had been quite forceful in trying to push their way to the front, CheeBah and ClehTun maintained eye contact, without wincing, throughout the worst the priests could inflict.

* * * *

As the priests cut away at their sacrificial offering, JahFet ordered another jug of garuch. "As soon as we finish our jug, we should make our way close enough to the platform to hear ClehTun's final words, for he cannot hold out much longer—when this is over we should visit the mating pit at the temple of BaBu."

"Ahhh, the pit." SamShee sighed as he reminisced about the writhing bodies intertwined in a dance of procreation. "I've not visited a pit for several cycles...it is unhealthy to abstain for too long...besides, it is most appropriate to endeavor to create life when confronted by death."

"There we'll find many drones, and consorts to share them with." JahFet and SamShee were both males, so they would need to partner with egg givers as well as drones to complete the procreative act—both of which they'd find at the pit. It seemed to JahFet to be the perfect way to cement the bond of common purpose that existed between himself and SamShee. In the three-way pairing of their kind, the male and female each deposit their gametes in the drone who incubates the egg and raises the child.

"Nothing would please me more than to bless some lonely old drone with the child she craves." SamShee drained his jar.

"Speaking of children," JahFet lowered his voice, "whatever became of ClehTun's child? Wasn't she a

drone?”

“The child’s name was CheeBah, and the last I heard was living with her brood drone in the little village of MooShee.” The prophet hung his head and mumbled a short prayer before continuing.

“Did ClehTun tell you much of the child?”

“He spoke of her ability to empathize.” SamShee paused as JahFet snorted incredulously. “Don’t rush to judgment my friend, ClehTun used to say that the child possessed an uncanny sense and could sometimes read his mind.”

So the two drained the remainder of their liquor, picked the last wriggler scraps from the bowl, and spat on the ground in the traditional sign of gratitude for good hospitality. JahFet tossed a seven credit note on the table for a tip as they walked towards the nearby entrance of the temple of NamBu.

“Wait one moment.” SamShee shook off his cloak and reversed it so that a plain brown cloth was showing instead of the shimmering brocade. “It would be wise to draw as little attention as possible... GaHoot taught that prudence gives an advantage.”

* * * *

CheeBah clutched the scale as she watched what the priests were doing to ClehTun. Despite being jostled by the brutes battling for bits of her father, she could not help but notice that some of the spectators only feigned eating the morsels while secreting them away. They were reporting to an individual in the uniform of a Canal Customs Inspector, who had just pushed his way to the front of the crowd, using his official status as a prod to those who would block his way.

Her gaze then fell upon the Customs Inspector’s companion whose shorter than usual tail barely dragged the ground when he stood erect. He wore the scruffy cloak common to the Elders of Uf Emin, and as he turned, his cloak parted to reveal an iridescence that caught CheeBah’s eye. She held up the scale her father had given her, and its lustrous ever-changing shades were exactly like the scales of this stranger. “Could my search really be over so soon?” she wondered.

ClehTun was by this time just a torso with a head, and the priests were beginning to cut off his facial muscles. Throughout his ordeal ClehTun had refrained from crying out or even wincing. His unblinking gaze unnerved the priests as they did their evil work. The only sign of his suffering was the tremendous rush of air out of his middle nostril as he cycled his lungs furiously.

A rhythmic thumping began to arise from the crowd as the spectators banged their tails on the ground in unison. All knew that the victim would soon be asked to recant—this would be the climax of the execution.

The reverberation from the thumping tails began to dangerously rock the execution platform. The high priest came forward and held both arms aloft, but the crowd ignored him until all the priests and temple drones lined up on either side of him and bowed their heads. Then the throng quieted and the priest spoke addressing ClehTun. “ClehTun, child of NimBos and LekTor, realizing that this is your final moment of life, do you have anything to say?”

With the last reserve of his vital force, ClehTun cast his eyes over the crowd and gazed at his daughter and friends. He ceased the intense meditative breathing he’d maintained throughout, and when the priest gestured to him that it was time for his ritual prayer of forgiveness, he bellowed in a voice that echoed off the farthest walls of the square, “Reach for the sky!”

Total silence momentarily gripped the crowd as they heard these words in disbelief, then appalled at such a heretical phrase, they erupted in bedlam. ClehTun had not recanted—in fact, he had challenged the very domain of NamBu.

The High Priest was seized with rage. His complexion darkened as he lifted the tooth above his head to furiously drive it into ClehTun’s chest, assuring he would not utter another inflammatory word.

Chapter 2

Pardoe Farms, Delaware

March 15, 1935

Life's a Bitch...

The unseasonably warm March sun had just set on the flat expanse of southern Delaware, when Wayne Pardoe stepped out of his kitchen door and onto the back steps of his farmhouse. With his shotgun in one hand and a bottle of Old Setter one hundred proof sour-mash whisky in the other, he walked with an uncharacteristically slow pace across the backyard on what he thought would be his last trip to the hatchery.

Wayne was a tall, thin, round-shouldered man with an oval head and a disproportionately long nose. He raised chickens, and in an odd way, resembled a chicken himself.

Never one to squander an opportunity, he started in the chicken business in 1928, when he received one hundred free chicks with a seed purchase at the Farmers' Co-op Store in Harriston. He soon had a small, but profitable, hatchery going, and seven years later, dreamed of bigger things. Unable to raise the collateral to satisfy a legitimate lending institution, Wayne borrowed money from the local criminal element to finance a speculative business venture.

Still dressed in his worn overalls, he sat down on the ground and leaned against the faded gray clapboards of the hatchery. Wayne's hand shook as he took a bracing slug of whiskey, then put the half full bottle down. As the setting sun glimmered off the amber liquor, he paused for a moment hating the thought of wasting even so cheap a whiskey. But he decided that if he got any drunker, he might lose his nerve.

He checked that both barrels of the Steven's Springfield shotgun were loaded, then snapped the breech shut. He wondered if he would miss the pleasure he took in the mechanical precision of the weapon, then laughed at his folly.

"I ain't likely to be missing nothing."

He pulled both hammers back, turned the twelve-gauge around and stretched his mouth uncomfortably around its muzzle. The triggers were now by his knees, so he bridged the distance with a forked stick that he held in his right hand. With the wood gently touching the steel triggers, he took a final look upward to bid adieu to a world turned so suddenly cruel.

The air before him began to ripple in a way that distorted his view as the atmosphere boiled within a confined diamond-shaped area, generating an eerie pulsating buzz like a piece of wax paper on a giant comb. Before Wayne's disbelieving eyes, the vision of Jake O'Malley, his besotted deceased former hiredhand, bubbled out of the disturbance and walked towards him.

Almost as tall as Wayne, O'Malley was still dressed as he'd been on the day he died, in threadbare corduroy pants, a faded blue work shirt, and a thrift shop tweed jacket with patches on the elbows. The ensemble was topped off with the same battered derby that had accompanied him from Ireland years before.

The tufts of hair that protruded from under the hat were so red as to be almost orange, and though he'd only been twenty-seven upon his death, his hair color was matched by the lacework of broken capillaries in his cheeks and nose, and his knuckles were scarred and his fingers crooked from being broken in numerous brawls.

Wayne pulled the shotgun from his mouth. "O'Malley! What the hell are you doing back here? You're dead. I attended your funeral. I took the ice right off your corpse and put it in my beer."

"Aye, I'm dead, and it looks like yer fixin' to join me. Tell me, Bucko, what could be bringin' a prosp'rus biz'ness man like yerself to such a desperate sit-chee-a-shun?"

"I've plumb run outta luck, and I ain't got no choice," Wayne said with resignation, as he wiped the spittle off the end of his shotgun. "You Jake, of all people, should know about bad luck."

"Why me?"

"Well, for one thing, you died by falling headfirst into the shithouse."

"Aye, but look at me now, boyo! I'm fit as a fiddle!"

"You look just like you did the day you died." Wayne put the shotgun back in his mouth.

"Aye. But I no longer smell."

O'Malley had been dead for only a few months. While in a typical drunken stupor, the Irishman had fallen headfirst into the outhouse toilet behind the hatchery, while puking up cheap wine. He went all the way to the bottom of the five-foot-deep pit, and with his arms pinned at his sides, his head below the effluent, and his feet sticking up through the seat; O'Malley never had a chance of escaping. Physically, that is.

A great force of nature had intervened in O'Malley's destiny.

Beneath the half-acre that encompassed the bawdy house across Route 16 from the Pardoe Farm was a meteorite that had fallen during the Devonian age, and a portion of it extended under the road to a spot beneath the Pardoe Farm outhouse. This meteorite was composed of a highly unusual mineral that constituted one of the largest deposits of gahootinite in the galaxy.

There was an aura about this mineral, much like a magnetic field, that attracted his vital force.

Like static electricity to a Leyden jar, O'Malley's life force was captured as it seeped from his body and was preserved in the gahootinite field. Although his carcass was dead, O'Malley did not cease, for the Irishman's spirit roamed within the region of the meteorite's influence.

It had taken Jake weeks to recover from the shock of his death. As consciousness began to dawn, he was puzzled by his existence for he was fairly sure that he had died. Deciding he must be in purgatory, he reasoned that the good Lord must yet have a purpose for him.

Thinking that his former employer's crisis might be a sign from the Lord, the Irishman felt compelled to act. "Come on, man, out with it! Get yer mouth off that bloody thing!" O'Malley reached for the gun but his hand passed right through it.

Wayne took the muzzle of the shotgun out of his mouth and replied, "I own this place, and I'll blow my brains out if I want to."

"Well, it may be yer place but I work here...or at least I used to work here when I was alive."

"You call what you did work? You were supposed to shovel chicken shit, but most of the time you just laid down and slept in it because you had a load on."

"True enough...I was a useless drunk. But yer a man of some standin' in life. What could possibly drive ya to this?"

"You're partly to blame, O'Malley. My troubles began at your funeral." Wayne shrugged. "It was there I seen how you Irish pack ice around the body to keep it from rotting. That gave me an idea. An idea I just couldn't get out of my head."

"I borrowed money from them two Amish loan sharks, Abner Stoltzfus and Abner Stoltzfus. I put every cent into building special boxcars that were like giant iceboxes. I figured I'd load them with chickens, cover them with ice, and roll them to every state in the Union. Hell, with just one shipment I could've made a fortune."

"But everything depended on that first shipment. I'd put all my eggs into that one basket, and if I'd a just got one shipment to Chicago, I could've paid them off. But now my only choice is swallowing this here shot gun..." The rest of the words were garbled as he put the muzzle back into his mouth.

O'Malley threw his hat down on the ground. "Listen to me, man! I can't explain why I'm still here...I just reckon the good Lord is usin' me in one of his mysterious ways. For all I know, I might be yer guardian angel. Besides, ya got all them chickens to ship. And what about that wee babe of yers, Wayne Jr.? Why, he's hardly a year old."

Wayne shook his head. "I lost the shipment Jake. There was a firemen's strike in Cincinnati. My chickens sat on a siding and the ice melted. After three days the town folk couldn't stand the smell, so they set them boxcars on fire and ruined me. As far as Wayne Jr. goes...he'd be better off without some

failure for a father.”

“Just hang on for a wee bit longer, Wayne...”

“Hang on for what? I told you, I owe money to the Amish mob and they got their enforcer hot on my heels. I got no chance of coming up with any money, and, if I don’t make a payment soon, Six-fingered Yoder will choke the life out of me...that’s their way with welshers. I’d just as soon die of my own accord.”

“Look, yer making me tip me hand...I don’t know how I know, but I think I can see into yer future.”

“How’s that?”

“Yer about to get sucked into a celestial event that’ll make ya wealthy beyond yer wildest dreams.”

“How is it you know so much now? If you’d been this smart when you were alive, I’d have made you foreman.”

Before O’Malley could reply, a screeching sound rent the still of that evening, like multiple train wrecks, and a blazing orb slashed a streak upon the blackening sky.

Wayne nearly discharged the shotgun as he involuntarily flinched at the spectacle. “What the hell is that?”

“What’ve I been tellin’ ya?” O’Malley asked. “It looks like it’s headed this way!”

Wayne jumped to his feet. “Look out—it could hit us!”

“What do we care? I’m dead already, and ya want to kill yerself.”

Chapter 3

Pardoe Farms, Delaware

April, 1935

Reverie

For two days, JahFet and MurGhoo had journeyed up the canals to the land beyond the most remote villages, where the condition of the canals deteriorated, becoming shallow and algae choked. But the alga was not an impediment; it even facilitated their travel.

Their craft was a marriage of mechanical, biological, and chemical technologies, using seaweed as raw material in the anaerobic digester to generate methane for fuel. The engine turned a propeller mounted above the stern, and the stream of air it generated propelled the flat-bottomed boat over canals that would have been otherwise unnavigable.

They were self-sufficient, using a dip net to scoop wrigglers from the water, and a generator attached to the engine illuminated their night travel. Though the going was slow, they had no need to interrupt their progress.

On the third day of their voyage, they reached a point where their boat scraped bottom, and JahFet announced, "We're here."

They secured their boat at the base of a great dirt mound and climbed to the monument on the flat expanse of its summit. MurGhoo gazed upon an ancient arrangement of stones, many of which had tumbled over in the expanse of time since they had been erected. "This appears to be a device to ascertain trajectories."

"How astute of you. The Garden of GaHoot was once used as an aid to astronomical observation," JahFet replied with pride in the prodigious intelligence of his protégé. After touching every stone of the Garden of GaHoot, JahFet led MurGhoo to the edge of the plain. Below them the ruins of the ancient city of Ull Ujus were visible.

"It looked much like this when I was your age. I know it's hard to imagine, but this was once a majestic city." JahFet began to relate the history of the most holy of ancient Blithian cities to his young companion. "The suns have long ago parched the land, and the winds have swept away the details that once would have caught your eye. That depression which seems to meander from these hills to vanish on the distant horizon was formerly the mighty Ull Ujus River. Along its fertile banks once teemed the children of GaHoot."

JahFet nodded towards the monument. "Besides tracking celestial bodies, the ancient ones could reckon the passage of the seasons and mark off the times for the great shimtock migrations...of course after the birth of ShatSee, this became just a decorative arrangement of rocks."

JahFet regarded MurGhoo, who stood in rapt attention as he gazed upon the ruins of Ull Ujus. "The council forbade the study of the sky to keep all Blithians ignorant of their ancestors and their religion. The coming of ShatSee destroyed the seasons, which GaHoot had created to make Blithos a fair place to dwell."

The elder Blithian was pleased to see that his pupil experienced the same awe that he felt. He was confident that MurGhoo would become the leader he was engineered to be. JahFet touched MurGhoo's shoulder to break his reverie. "Come, there is more to see."

They descended the mound and walked across the plains to the nearby hills. MurGhoo was impressed by the magnitude of the empty trench. "So this was the mighty Ull Ujus River?"

"Yes, my son," JahFet's eyes teared, "it was a once great river...a moving, living course of water

that carried the rains and melting snow from the mountains to the sea. The Ull Ujus was a holy river created by GaHoot, and not some ditch dug by the Council to ferry their customs collectors about.”

As the two adventurers traversed the dry riverbed, JahFet pointed to the white flecks that were visible everywhere along the former riverbank. “These are the bones of our ancestors, who died defending the ancient ways.” JahFet recited the tale of how, after the arrival of the second sun, a new cult arose that worshipped the two suns instead of the true gods. Millions fell prey to the false prophets of the new religion. The apostates elected a council to rule the masses and established new cities around their own temples.

JahFet spoke in measured tones, “The war that ensued spanned generations, but the Council’s forces slowly gained the advantage until only this city remained unconquered. When Ull Ujus fell, its defenders chose to throw themselves fully armored into the river and drown rather than surrender. Ever since that time the worship of the ancient gods has been carried on only in secret. But it has never died, for the teachings are kept alive by wandering prophets and the few arcane temples that contain mating pits.”

They climbed out of the riverbed and scaled the hills to the mouth of a cave. MurGhoo removed a glow stick from his pouch and prepared to activate it, but JahFet stopped him. “That will not be necessary.” They paused at the entrance to allow their eyes to adjust to the low glow of the luminescent lichen that lined the walls of the cave. JahFet broke off a small bit and rubbed it between his thumb and two fingers. “SamShee claims that one can make a passable liquor from this.” He laughed and they moved on. Deep inside they entered a high chamber. “Look here...” JahFet walked to one of the walls of the cavern.

MurGhoo could see carvings on the stone walls. They were eroded with time, but still faintly visible were depictions of Blithians in flight. “What are these, Papa JahFet?” MurGhoo pointed to the wings of the gliders.

“Before the council decreed that we were to live in ignorance, we built craft that floated on the winds the way a ditch-runner floats on the water.” JahFet smiled as he thought of his old friend. “Your progenitor, ClehTun, was executed for flying just such a craft. To him, flight was an act of reverence. He claimed the ancient gods smiled upon those who sailed their winds.”

JahFet brushed away the dirt and debris obscuring the graven face of GaHoot to reveal the strange green glowing eyes.

“Why do his eyes glow?” MurGhoo gave JahFet a puzzled glance. “They look powerful.”

“Indeed they do, yet no one has discovered the reason why they glow.” JahFet took a deep breath and blew off the dust that was obscuring the inscription below the carving. He then read it out loud, but it was in a language that was incomprehensible to the Blithling.

“What is that?” MurGhoo asked.

“That is BaBuan...an ancient dialect. It was named for BaBu, the messenger of the gods.”

“What does it mean?”

“Reach for the sky,” JahFet answered. “It is an ancient prayer.”

After leaving the cavern, they returned to their boat, scooped a bucket of wrigglers out of the canal, and retrieved a flask of garuch. That night they sat about their campfire in the Garden of GaHoot, and reflected on what they’d seen that day. JahFet impaled a wriggler on a stick and held it in the fire. It sizzled in the flames as he said, “Now that I have shown you the past, let us discuss the future.”

MurGhoo felt in the bucket, grabbed a wriggler, and popped it in his mouth. “Is there no hope for Blithos?”

“Not if the Council prevails. They maintain their influence by providing for the most basic Blithian need...they keep water in the canals. To do that they have evolved the great condensers that line the waterways of our planet to extract the moisture from the air for use in the canals. At first, this seemed like a good idea. But later we discovered that the use of condensers was irreversibly reducing our atmospheric shield and exacerbating the relentless onslaught of ShatSee.”

After a pause, JahFet cleared his throat and spoke. “There are multiple reasons I asked you to accompany me on my pilgrimage. I feel towards you as I would my own offspring, but you do not have parents, MurGhoo. You were created by scientific methods. For all intents and purposes, you are a clone.”

“But is not CheeBah my brood drone?” MurGhoo asked with a quaver in his voice.

“That is true enough.” JahFet poked another wriggler on a stick. “But you were not conceived by

some accidental collision of gametes. You are the fulfillment of a prophecy from KulKan, for we worked at her direction.”

“What do you mean, worked?”

“SamShee and I created your zygote and implanted it into CheeBah, and she formed the shell about you just as in any other birth...so you are her natural offspring, though you lack individual gamete donors for parents.”

“Well, where did you get the genetic material contained in the zygote if there were no gametes?”

“You are the product of intensive genetic engineering that began with the flesh of our beloved ClehTun and included the addition of the best attributes of several others.”

MurGhoo thought for a moment and shrugged. “The chances are I would have never known the gamete donors if I’d been conceived in the pits.”

“That is correct.” JahFet was pleased that MurGhoo took the news so well. He pulled his steaming wriggler out of the fire and snapped it right off the end of the stick.

“Then what is the difference if I’m cloned or not.” MurGhoo watched JahFet intently. “I still have the maternal love of my drone, but I’m still left with one unanswered question.”

JahFet’s relief turned to concern as he squinted across the fire at MurGhoo. “And that is...”

“Why do you put your wrigglers into the fire?”

JahFet chuckled. “It gives them an interesting taste, and it is different eating them warm. It is something I learned from ClehTun...he was heretical about food also.”

MurGhoo took a stick from their pile of wood, grabbed a wriggler, poked it onto the end of the stick and held it in the flames. As he watched it begin to sizzle he had a thought. “And ClehTun was executed as a heretic for merely flying?”

JahFet shook his head. “No, that was just a pretense. Anyone else would have been able to bribe their way out of that predicament. The true crime of your predecessor was that he tried to warn the populace of the danger posed by the use of the condensers. The Council has too great a stake in keeping the canals filled to allow public dissent with their position. They made an example of him.”

JahFet yawned and threw his stick into the fire. “But it is late and we still have much to do tomorrow. Let’s get some sleep.”

* * * *

MurGhoo awoke at the sound of a strange footfall. In the total darkness, he tried to lean over and awaken JahFet, but to his alarm he realized that he could not move his arms. The air around him was un-Blithianly frigid. Panic shot through him at his inexplicable immobility. It took him a while to figure out his frightening situation.

“By GaHoot, it was all just a dream,” he said at last, realizing he was in a cryochamber. He closed his eyes and went back to sleep, and his dreams once again transported him to his youth and Blithos.

* * * *

It was the season when ShatSee hid her terrible face behind NamBu. A season much like those of old before there was a second sun. An interval of relief in which there were ‘true nights’, when Blithos could turn one side to darkness. CheeBah and MurGhoo sat in the shadow of the space vessel cast by the moon. A patrolling guard nodded discreetly to them as he walked quietly by.

CheeBah held MurGhoo’s left hand in her right as she faced him. “Over these years I’ve grown to feel more for you than a drone should, but I can’t help it.” CheeBah squeezed MurGhoo’s hand. “May GaHoot forgive me, but I love you...”

“Then GaHoot forgive me, too.” MurGhoo squeezed back as his hearts quickened, “You can’t imagine how I have yearned to say those words. Only my fear of the shock it might cause stilled my tongue. All my life you have given me joy and hope. You have provided me with everything I needed and swept away the obstacles that came before me.”

CheeBah continued, “...and now, in just four kalhunes, we will be hurtling through space to colonize a planet we’re not sure exists. In less than one kalhune, I’ll be a crystal. And for innumerable cycles I’ll be unable to see you or touch you. In my mind I know I won’t feel the passage of time, but in my heart I want to be with you now.”

CheeBah laughed and shook her head. “What an irony. After a lifetime of opportunity we chose this night to profess our love, for tomorrow all I am will be stored on a crystal and my body left an empty

husk.”

Murghoo assured her, “Fear not. SamShee says that we will live again many times in many forms. We will have an eternity to enjoy each other.”

MurGhoo had one remaining friend to bid farewell. That was his venerated ‘uncle’, SamShee. He walked towards the cave shading his eyes against the light. It reflected off of the highly polished scales on the space vessel. Sitting on its cradle in the arroyo, the ship was a marvel to behold.

The gleaming *Spirit of BaBu* was the culmination of a long struggle to invent a technology and discover a science. It had just been officially named. The name had been chosen to honor the messenger of the gods, whom they hoped to emulate in their effort to ‘Reach for the sky’.

Building the ship had solved the problem of how to fulfill KulKan’s prophecy to leave Blithos, but it led to many others. Among them was how to remain alive in the vastness of both time and space. This required a power source that would need to last for generations.

The magnaflux drive was efficient, but the nearest star system with any possible sign of inhabitable planets was light-kalhunes away. They had managed to provide propulsion sufficient for the trip, but maintaining one hundred forty-four thousand individuals in stasis would require an order of magnitude more powerful than they had so far been able to achieve.

Had they not stumbled upon the secret of transoccupancy, it would have taken two or three generations to develop a power source sufficient for their colonization plans. And like most great discoveries it was found by accident.

MurGhoo recalled with amusement the night that SamShee died.

CheeBah and MurGhoo had been celebrating with JahFet, SamShee, and PessAr. The metallurgical research team had successfully completed the development of the welding apparatus needed to begin construction of the space ship’s metal hull. In a triumph of technology, the scientists had melded the disciplines of nanytes and programmable bacteria to seal the great metallic joints of the *Spirit of BaBu*.

The result was an army of miniature robots that did the welding on an atomic level. They were engineered from metal-metabolizing bacteria, which created the bond atom by atom, by following a chemically imprinted script.

A hearty toast was rated by such an occasion. Being greatly dedicated to the cause of the diaspora, SamShee indulged in more than anyone. Being a little long in the fang, he wasn’t able to hold his garuch as well as he used to.

His jar was empty and he couldn’t remember where he had left the jug. And as he wandered unsteadily about the poorly lit cave, his truncated tail failed to provide adequate stability. The great philosopher and prophet stubbed his foot on an adjustable wrench, lost his balance, and stumbled into the welding rig. In his struggle to arise, he activated the unit. He then solidified as his carcass was mineralized.

Everyone gathered about the statuesque remains of SamShee, frozen in metallic luster. There, right in front of them, was the very image of the prophet chosen by KulKan to speak for her and to guide her adherents. Being unable to perceive life, they all began the traditional Blithian rite of mourning by growling, bellowing, and hissing.

A noise like someone clearing his throat was heard and they all turned to look. The air began to shimmer, and SamShee bubbled out of the ether and spoke, “What’s going on...who died?”

The shocked group fell silent and parted as SamShee approached. MurGhoo ran to embrace the prophet, whom he had thought dead. They both were shocked as the youth’s hands passed through the figure. SamShee was as surprised as MurGhoo at this demonstration of metaphysical transition.

JahFet, who could never resist an opportunity for a barb, said, “It seems that you are a mere shadow of your former self.”

SamShee laughed. He and his old friend conferred briefly. They agreed that he was indeed dead. But how he remained a visible incorporeal spirit eluded them. SamShee shrugged, “I haven’t really died...I’ve just increased my dimensions.”

PessAr, the chief engineer, alone noticed that the Vital Force Meter was nearly pegged, “The meter seems to be detecting some sort of field.” The VFM was used to monitor the remaining strength in the nanytes performing the weld. “But the welding machine that the meter monitors is not running.”

After consulting his field analyzer, PessAr hypothesized that SamShee’s spirit was somehow

contained within an inverse field that flowed through the green rocks embedded in the cave walls. The rocks SamShee called, “the tears of GaHoot,” which were more commonly known as gahootinite.

PessAr paused and looked nervously about. “If we can figure out how to do this on purpose... just think of what it could mean! A being wouldn’t need a body anymore. In fact, we could move from biotic form to biotic form.” She was not used to being excited. “Why, it would be possible to live forever...when your old body wears out, another could be transoccupied.”

“But would it be ethical?” JahFet asked uneasily.

SamShee raised his left hand to get everyone’s attention. His eyes were closed and he appeared to be conversing with someone unseen. He opened his eyes and smiled. “I’ve only been dead for a short while, but I’ve already discovered that being dead has an advantage, for I can speak directly with the gods instead of waiting for a vision. They say that it would be unethical only if you transoccupied sentient life forms.”

With the approval of the gods, PessAr designed a ray gun that could remove an individual’s essence, download it to a specially constructed crystal, and when required, upload it into another biotic form.

This was the breakthrough that enabled them to wander the limitless void.

Eventually, all but the leader would be downloaded onto crystals. A crystal could survive in a vacuum without damage for eternity, if it was not subjected to undue mechanical force. It was an inert print of life that required no sustenance. It was the leader’s job to awaken, locate suitable host bodies, and initiate the downloading of the colony.

All knew that the KulKanian prophecy foretold of the MurGhoo or Perfect One who would lead the way. It was risky entrusting everything to one individual, but then only a single stasis chamber had to be powered to maintain lifesupport.

PessAr was crystallizing the last of the contingent while SamShee haunted the scene. She looked up in irritation when she saw MurGhoo. It would soon be time for JahFet to download PessAr onto crystal.

Thank BaBu that it’s JahFet doing the transference. I wish he would be there when we awake instead of that inept MurGhoo, PessAr thought.

Everyone agreed that MurGhoo was the most brilliant mind on Blithos, but PessAr had no faith in his technical dexterity. Although embarrassed by their protégé’s shortcoming, JahFet and SamShee spoke out in his defense. “Only MurGhoo’s intellectual gifts are capable of sizing up all the abstract variables of a strange new world and deducing the best course for success.”

Although PessAr continually despaired of MurGhoo being the one responsible for the downloading on any new planets, and PessAr was acknowledged as the technical best, a full kalhune ago, JahFet and SamShee had told her “not to worry for we will develop a training program that will make any necessary tasks MurGhoo has to undertake happen automatically as he follows the steps. Besides, if he has problems, the standard operating procedure can be imparted to him telepathically through the handbooks.”

“Kartoop dung!” PessAr had exclaimed at the time. “MurGhoo couldn’t even set a chronometer without breaking it.”

“We’ll work it out,” JahFet assured her. MurGhoo had been drilling daily, but still stumbled over parts of the procedure.

“And his perversion with CheeBah, perfect being indeed.” PessAr wasn’t really appalled by the perverse act of only two mating. She felt snubbed at the pains that the two took to get together without her. Being left out of the natural triad, PessAr harbored bad feelings for MurGhoo.

PessAr was confident about JahFet’s competence. But he would be remaining on Blithos to continue his work on a new MurGhoo to lead the next contingent and to oversee the building and outfitting of another spaceship. She was worried, however, about what would happen when it was time to return to biotic form again. Although MurGhoo knew the theory of transoccupancy as well as anyone, he had little experience, and he would be the one to upload her to a new body. His would be the first living face she saw on the new planet. *Who knows what kind of creature he will choose?*

As she glared at MurGhoo without acknowledging him, he extended his hand to greet the prophet. SamShee appeared to cover it with his own.

“May the gods grant you the wisdom to carry out the vision.” Even as a transparent image, the prophet’s gaze was cutting. “This is a great day for me...the purpose of my life is now fulfilled. You are the MurGhoo, just as KulKan revealed.”

JahFet began to prepare PessAr for downloading. MurGhoo turned from SamShee to observe the

macabre scene. The transoccupancy process had filled the cave with vacant bodies. It was the intention of those who would remain behind to carry them to the riverbed of the Ull Ujus where they could lie in repose with their brave ancestors.

PessAr had been strapped onto the source table and could move only her eyes. When MurGhoo stepped into view, she was disappointed to think that the last thing she saw as a Blithian was going to be that self-assured brat. When she saw CheeBah step out from behind a pile of bodies, she strained against the straps. “*You!* You were supposed to be downloaded already...this is a clear breach of protocol...”

MurGhoo nodded to JahFet, and his old mentor activated the ray. A burst of power generated particles that were accelerated through the focus of a gahootinite lens and aimed at PessAr. The attractive force of the inverse field imprinted her life onto an infinitely complex crystal.

When the process was complete, JahFet shook his head. “PessAr was correct and I’m not sure I approve of your behavior. I consider myself pretty liberal, but there are reasons that taboos exist. Coupling with your brood drone is bad enough, but to do it without a third partner smacks of deviance...but I’ve never been able to refuse you. Besides, you were KulKan’s choice and there must be divine purpose behind your activities.”

* * * *

A sound, like someone fumbling with a metal latch, startled MurGhoo awake. “I was dreaming again.” He was still very cold and couldn’t move. “I must still be in stasis...” Uncommon fatigue prevailed and he fell back to sleep.

* * * *

The Blithian remnant had spent the last twenty-four thousand kalhunes on Vulgaroon, a planet entirely covered with a sea of mucous. During their tenure on Vulgaroon, they had inhabited many life forms, but none of them offered the means for the sexual bliss that they had known on Blithos. Although it had been easier for MurGhoo to meet CheeBah in seclusion, their trysts offered no physical pleasure.

It was not a place at all to any of their liking, but it was the first planet they’d found with a substantial gahootinite deposit. Ironically, they had finally selected bodies that resembled kartoops, the adult stage of wrigglers.

After finally exhausting the gahootinite supply on Vulgaroon, they reloaded everyone onto crystals and set off to another world. They were now approaching their new destination, and MurGhoo had been roused from stasis. As he prepared for landing, he resolved that things would be different this time. *Before I awaken the others, I’ll download CheeBah first. She and I are going to begin with a romantic episode. If PessAr catches on, I’m sure she’ll bellow. But I bet if I set the chronometer back, she won’t be able to discover our stolen interlude.*

MurGhoo found the Blithian designed chronometer difficult to adjust as a Vulgaroon. His tentacles did not fit well in the three-fingered touch pad beside the time throttle. He heard a sound and jumped, afraid that someone was going to catch him at his skullduggery. He chided himself at his unnecessary fear. “Why should I worry? I’m the only one here.” Then he heard the noise again.

He dropped the chronometer on the control panel and sent the ship plummeting to the surface of the blue planet.

* * * *

MurGhoo was once again conscious but unable to move his appendages. The cold penetrated to the core of his body. He was disoriented and unsure if he was in the dream world, stasis, or another dimension. The sound of strange footsteps could be heard once again, and *the perfect one* could not understand why he heard a hissing sound like that of a stasis chamber release valve.

There was a click and the metallic shrieking of hinges long unused.

“Hey there, little feller, time to get up.”

MurGhoo opened his eyes. The light making its way into his stasis chamber was blinding. In his confusion he asked, “PessAr...is that you?”

“Hell no, my name’s Wayne...Wayne Pardoe. I’m the feller what saved your life. Don’t you remember?”

As MurGhoo’s eyes adjusted, he beheld a strange creature.

Then he remembered.

Chapter 4

Kabuldung, Republic of Kakastan
September 25, 2007

Atonement

Thousands of miles away and over seventy years later, the mountainous former Soviet Republic of Kakastan had declared itself an Islamic republic. Since the rule of the Imam had been established, a steady stream of favor seekers and the accused were brought before the seat of authority for judgment. From the shadow of a doorway in the Holy City of Kabuldung, a short, dark-skinned man approached the Palace. His fit and youthful appearance belied his age of fifty-one by at least a decade. He was met and escorted to the Throne Room.

The Kakastani's freshly shaved head was in honor of his coming audience with the Imam. Ali Ben Kafard's wiry, but muscular, frame displayed his hand-tailored clothes well. He was sullen and smileless beneath his great black mustache and was easily, though not obviously, offended.

His destructive temper had been his bane as a youth, but now he knew how to channel its deadly force and prided himself on how well he could control it. Smarter than most people thought, he had a ruthless cunning that gave him an edge.

The Imam was now the most powerful man in Kakastan. He had ruled by fiat since engineering the overthrow of the hapless poltroons who had inherited the government after independence from the Soviet Union. He had risen to power on the strength of the fanatical following and his charismatic appeal to the masses.

Ayatollah Ali Sayed K'Zooti founded the Sons of Osman, a paramilitary unit, to ruthlessly enforce his rule.

Vigilant loyal clerics, in every corner of the country, were relentless in seeking out those who disobeyed Islamic Law. The slightest infraction could place a citizen in front of a Holy Court, which resembled nothing so much as a Star Chamber or an Inquisition. Thousands found themselves before an Osman firing squad, while the lesser offenders received a flogging or had a hand, nose, or foot severed.

It was from this court that Ali Ben Kafard sought forgiveness. He'd served among the KGB's special-forces while the Soviet Union held Kakastan in subjugation and repressed Islam. He was well aware of the fact that he might never leave the presence of the Imam alive.

As he was ushered into the private chamber by a brace of guards, Kafard marveled at the frail appearance of the man who held the entire country in the grip of terror. The Imam was working at a desk signing decrees, and gestured for Kafard to be seated on a low stool in front him.

Kafard sat patiently and waited while the Imam intentionally ignored him. It was a common tactic to leave the subject of an interrogation guessing as to what was next. Having played this game before with more professional adversaries, Kafard amused himself by considering the crumbling grandeur of the once opulent palace.

It had been built by Suleiman the Magnificent as a provincial capital, but had been used by the Soviets as a dacha for the nomenklatura. He'd seen it a thousand times before, which even in a building reserved for the party elite, the funds for maintenance had been obviously misappropriated.

Despite its wretched condition, hints of the building's past glory shone through the neglect of ages. The surface of the high dome was adorned with the geometric precision of arabesque mosaic, the pattern of which was broken only by ceiling fans installed by vulgar Soviet bureaucrats. The pure alabaster pillars that held it aloft were pockmarked by gunfire during the coup, and the once lustrous marble floors were

now dull from wear and blemished with bloodstains.

After waving the guards out of the room, the Imam rose and walked around the desk to Kafard. The old holy man was stoop-shouldered and his unkempt pure white beard came nearly to his knees as he glared in silence. Despite his malign countenance, it seemed the elder's frail neck could barely support the weight of his plain linen turban.

Kafard did not know if the Imam was shaking from rage or feebleness, but he thought he could smell the hate and vitriol which filled this man. The Imam jabbed his finger into Kafard's shoulder as he began talking, and it took all of the former KGB agent's self control to refrain from snapping that scrawny neck.

"Ali Ben Kafard...you are a traitor to your people. You have consorted with and even joined the enemy in the rape and subjugation of your country. You have been a member of the KGB and have become as deceitful and cunning as a Russian."

"All that is true Imam, but I was coerced into service. I was selling falafels in red square by Lenin's tomb when these men came and seized me. Before I knew it, I was in a cell in the Lubyanka.

"I would not have left that jail alive had I not helped them to alleviate the KGB's need for agents who were fluent in Turkic, the tongue of my father, and Arabic, the Holy language that I studied in Holy school. So it was that I became a Soviet agent. I know I have transgressed, but I am willing to atone. Please Your Holiness, allow me some way to redeem myself."

"Perhaps..." The Imam quit poking Kafard with his finger. "What did you have in mind?"

"Your Holiness, I will do anything. My fervent wish is to return to my native village and pass my remaining years in gentle atonement for my sins against Allah."

The voice of the Holy Man rose in righteous indignation. "Atonement, yes...but gentle, no. If you are a true believer, then I have a way you can prove it.

"I have an urgent and dangerous mission, and the will of Allah has brought you to me. You are the weapon with which I will strike our enemies."

The Imam fell silent as the muezzin began the call to the faithful for the afternoon prayer. From high atop the minaret across the bazaar, his voice oscillated melodically as it rose above the bleating of the sheep for sale below.

The Imam fell to his knees in the direction of Mecca, and in proof that discretion was the better part of valor, so did Kafard.

When they arose, the Imam turned to Kafard. The old man crossed his arms and arched an eyebrow at Kafard questioningly.

"So what is the mission?" the ex-Soviet agent asked.

"To kill the Pope...the Catholic Holy Pontiff."

"But why, your Holiness? How will this aid our cause?"

The Imam bent low and murmured into Kafard's ear. "We were on the verge of establishing Islamic Law in the heart of Europe, when this demon in a funny hat foiled the Jihad. I would declare a Fatwa against his so-called Holiness, but I do not wish it publicly known that I am behind this...I have need of your skills."

"I will surely be caught or killed."

"Kafard, it would be your duty to die in silence." The Imam spoke in an almost fatherly tone. "A dignified death is more desirable than living in humiliation. Those years that you served the enemy have not caused you to forget your spiritual teachings, have they?"

"Remember, a warrior who dies in battle for Islam goes immediately to Seventh Heaven. Ahh... Kafard, the very thought of Seventh Heaven, even to an old Imam, is almost too blissful to comprehend. Where in the name of Allah most gracious, the beautiful hori peel grapes and feed them to you by hand. And despite your joyous deflowering of them, they remain virgins throughout eternity."

"I will go. And I will succeed." Kafard was suddenly animated.

The Imam smiled strangely. "The fires of your ordeal will cleanse you."

"The sharpest steel is made in the hottest fire," Kafard said grimly. *I will surely arrive in this Heaven.*

"Allah u akbar!"

Chapter 5

Harriston, Delaware

January 15, 2008

A Man of Vision

Clayton Stool was a native son of rural Delaware—a small patch of green in the east coast megalopolis. He'd never known his father, for his mother had never been able to narrow down the list of suspects enough to even hazard a guess. The only fatherly attention he'd received as a child were the quarters tossed to him by his various "uncles" to buy a bottle of pop from the machine in front of the Mumford Esso station.

That was a ten-minute walk each way.

After getting his soda, young Clay would usually hitchhike down to the crossroads to help out at the roadhouse. There he'd do odd jobs and, when he was done, Mrs. Tandino would let him come in and watch the television, for the Stools didn't have one at home.

Westerns were his favorite fare. He would watch the morning matinee on channel eleven, and then pretend to be one of his cowboy heroes on the way home.

It was a good thing he was able to amuse himself, because his drunken mother hardly had a minute for him. A solitary child, who was considered unfit company for children of the "decent" families, his only real companion had been a chicken that he'd found stunned on the side of the road

Clay called her "Plucky."

She was a broiler that had escaped from a truck bound for the Pardoe processing plant. Clay found her while returning from the roadhouse and brought her home, making her a nest in one of the discarded washing machines in the back yard. Once recovered from her tumble, she followed Clay everywhere.

Clay hugged the chicken, groomed her, and he even slept with her when he could sneak her into the house. He was so attached to Plucky that his mother's men friends joked that there was something indecent about their relationship.

They were not far from wrong.

At last he had someone to talk to who paid attention to him—at least as long as he was holding corn. And he imagined that she talked with him.

For the first time, he had known happiness, at least until the day he came home to find one of his mother's beaus eating chicken and dumplings at the kitchen table. His mother had been indifferent to his anguish. "It's about time that stupid chicken was good for something."

Clay ran away from home for a week, but his mother never missed him.

From that point on, all his friends were imaginary. He dug a hole in among the briars that grew wild behind the ramshackle shed in the Stool's unkempt and garbage-strewn backyard, where he would spend hours sitting and pretending to be invisible, while talking to people no one else could see.

When he was seventeen he became inspired by the television shows *Combat* and *Gallant Men*, his mother was only too glad to sign the papers for early enlistment in the army.

Clay liked the discipline of military life. The drill sergeant's barking seemed a relentless curse to most of the recruits, but Clay basked in the attention paid him by a male authority figure, even if it was at times abrasive.

He had a natural proclivity for marksmanship and relished the praise it earned him. His status as a crack shot helped the other squad members overlook his idiosyncrasies, and soon the men in his platoon began looking out for Clay like a little brother.

No longer a gangly youth, Clay left boot camp with a boxer's physique. Although excited about graduating and the promotion it brought, he was sad that basic training was over and that he would be separated from Sgt. Norman Brunswick.

Instead of going home during his leave before shipping off for Vietnam, Clay rented a motel room right off exit seven of the Jersey Turnpike, within spitting distance of the base at Fort Dix. There he spent two weeks watching westerns on the color television in the room, putting quarters into the vibrating bed, and eating at the local burger joint.

Returning to camp after his leave, Private Stool felt like he'd been in heaven and got on the transport plane with a smile on his face. He arrived in Vietnam at the height of the Tet Offensive in 1968.

Clay and his fellow raw recruits were immediately sent forward to reinforce a beleaguered position near Hue that was under intense assault and had taken heavy casualties. His platoon soon came under mortar fire, and Clay watched as one by one Charlie walked rounds into the shell holes where his buddies had taken shelter. Sitting alone in his hole, Clay closed his eyes and willed himself into invisibility.

He fantasized that he was back in Delaware at Rehoboth Beach with Plucky, but couldn't hear what she was saying because of the roar of the surf. The sound of the ocean in Clay's hallucination grew louder until it was a deafening roar, and when the roaring jet dived and laid a belt of napalm on top of the Viet Cong position, Clay was already catatonic.

He didn't hear the screaming enemy soldiers as they ran like flaming scarecrows and didn't witness them falling to the ground like smoldering matchstick men. Clay didn't know that his comrades were masses of bloody pulp.

He just laid in the fetal position in the bottom of his hole.

* * * *

Six months later, Clay awoke. "Sergeant? Sgt. Brunswick..."

"Sorry, son, but your Sgt. Brunswick ain't here," the grizzled Korean War veteran in the neighboring bed spoke kindly. "You been hollerin' that name for half the year now...it's the only sign of life you ever showed till now. My name's Seth, Seth Poole."

Clay turned to look at his neighbor and beheld a dark face with a benevolent smile that reminded him of Uncle Ben. He sat upright and was surprised to be in a bed and not in the shell crater. Looking down at his hands lying atop the bedclothes, he realized he was visible again. He made weak attempts to lift his arms, but his muscles had atrophied and he had motor control problems. The ultimate horror was when he discovered he was wearing a diaper and it needed changing.

"Where am I?"

"You're right where you ought to be, in the sigh-key-at-trick ward of the VA hospital, in Elsmere, Delaware."

"Holy shit."

Clay had finally come to his senses—in a manner of speaking.

A nurse rushed to attend to the tangle of hoses. "Don't worry about being disoriented; they all wake up that way." She smiled, leaned him back, and put a cool compress on his head. "It takes a long time to get over something like what you went through."

But he never quite did.

When his doctor had prescribed exercise, the orderlies put him to work pushing a broom through the labyrinthine hospital. He took to the janitor trade. For the better part of his waking hours each day, Clay roamed the halls in an apparently random fashion, slowly pushing the broom ahead of him.

He became a familiar sight in the institution. Though obviously disturbed, he was diagnosed as harmless, so no one objected to his having the run of the place. And he was grateful for belonging somewhere.

After spending most of his adult life, over twenty years, as a ward of the hospital, he was finally released and turned out of his beloved home. It wasn't that he suddenly became capable of living on his own, but federally mandated budget reductions had forced the closing of the psychiatric wing.

In one way, Clay was lucky to have gotten out of the hospital alive, for soon after awakening from his coma, he was accidentally given a triple dose of a powerful tranquilizer.

A resident on his rounds discovered the mistake and called a code blue. The cardiac cart and defibrillator were wheeled in, and as the doctor was preparing a syringe of adrenaline, Clay protested,

"You ain't fixin' to poke me with that thing are you?"

The doctor was astounded that his patient was so surprisingly alert. "You've been given a lethal dosage of a strong sedative..."

"Hell...I feel fine," Clay was keeping a wary eye on the needle, "and I'll stay that way if you keep that thing to yourself."

Extensive medical tests revealed that Clay had two livers. This rare condition was the reason for his improbable resistance to the drug, for this mutation rendered him able to metabolize massive amounts of drugs and alcohol.

Once expelled from the hospital, he took advantage of his condition to process the cheap liquor he bought with his meager disability pension. Clayton Stool found himself on his own for the first time. Over the next few weeks, he wandered gradually southward until he was back down state in Mumford, Delaware. At least there the terrain was familiar, even if he didn't expect to see anyone he knew.

Delaware is a schizophrenic state, for it is actually two states in one. Above the Chesapeake and Delaware canal, the state is an industrialized urban population center that sprawls across the state line from Philadelphia. Below the canal, the state spreads out into sparsely populated farmlands. Like Siamese twins joined at the canal, the rolling hills and yuppified subdivisions of the upstate region are at constant odds with the bucolic flat lands and Mayberry-esque towns down state. When two Delawareans meet, the first order of business is to determine if they are AC or BC—'above the canal' or 'below the canal'.

Clay returned to the site of the Stool residence, but his childhood home was no longer there. Had he bothered to look for his mother, he would have found out that she had died. Few people in Mumford remembered him, but those who did were not surprised to hear he had been in a mental institution since they'd last seen him.

Abused as a child, shell-shocked in the war, Clay sought refuge in the bottle. His pension was enough to keep a man in booze, if he didn't waste money on keeping a roof over his head.

When he could scrape up an odd job, Clay rented a decrepit bungalow in the Pineview Lodges just outside of Harriston. Other times, he slept in ditches and abandoned buildings. His only foothold in society was the post office box he rented so that his checks could find him.

From the moment Clay had awakened in the VA hospital, he'd heard voices. Now and then he would converse with them, but often he just listened. The voices never totally went away, though sometimes they were too low to be understood.

But they were always audible when he drank.

Possessing two livers, he never achieved the stupefaction and oblivion that would afflict others who drank as much. Instead, bottle-by-bottle, he attained ever more altered states of consciousness.

Now, more frequently than not, the voices in Clay's head would be accompanied by a vision.

His hallucinations always began in the same manner. He'd see a vague form that he thought might be beckoning to him. But though his legs moved, he could not get close enough to see the figure clearly.

During his rare bouts of sobriety, Clay speculated as to the identity of the being in the vision and didn't hesitate to seek the advice of his acquaintances.

He would startle any stranger polite enough to say, "*Good day*", with stories about his vision. "It was wrigglin', sorta snake-like, but sorta feminine too somehow. I'm not sure..." And people would recoil from the weirdness of his description.

Clay's stories put people off all over Harriston, and even the most well-wishing folks eventually found the addled veteran of little use. Finally, even the bums who gathered nightly along the tracks by the dump would no longer tolerate his companionship.

The only person who kept company with Clay was Seth Poole, the Korean War veteran who'd greeted him upon his awakening from his coma back in the VA hospital.

Years before, Seth had moved downstate upon his release from the hospital, because of the lower cost of living there. He had inadvertently encountered Clay at Brant's liquor store.

The store was not actually named Brant's, but Thelma's. The hard-core drinkers who frequented the place had come to identify the business with its laid-back clerk, a genial guy who would secretly open up for a regular customer on Sunday in spite of the blue laws.

The proprietor was an old lady named Thelma Passwaters, who lived in an efficiency apartment above the tiny, square liquor store. Rarely leaving her abode, she kept a constant eye on the store through

a closed circuit video system.

Seth and Clay met as they both arrived at the asphalt-shingled building at the same time.

"Lawd have mercy, if it ain't my old roomie, Nutsy." Seth smacked Clay on his shoulder in greeting. "I'm sure surprised to see they ever let you out."

"Yeah, they had to shut it down." Clay was glad to see a friendly face. "I guess they couldn't afford to keep me no more 'cause of the govment being broke or somethin'."

"Well, don't worry, old Seth Poole is coverin' your drinks tonight." The older man took the younger into tow. "I'll introduce you to Brant...let him know you're alright...then you'll be set."

They walked into the liquor store, which had little space due to the huge promotional displays. The place was festooned with giant crows wearing top hats and spats, a larger-than-life-size Mister Boston, a Styrofoam whale wearing a fez, and a beer wagon clock pulled by little plastic Clydesdales.

"Hey, Brant, I want you to meet my old pal." Seth leaned over to Clay and whispered, "What the hell was your Christian name...I don't want to introduce you as Nutsy." Clay whispered back and Seth continued in a normal tone of voice, "Clay...Clay Stool...we was in the nut hut together."

Brant was sewing the seam of a sequined outfit, worn by a lithe, busty, dark-haired young woman who stood on the counter before him. "Pleased to meet you. Clay and Seth, this is Rosie."

Brant was blond and designed costumes for exotic dancers in his spare time. A gay liquor store clerk would usually be a target for abuse from local yokels, but since Brant's stripper clientele were often hanging out with him, the rustics cultivated his company.

"Hi." The young lady wiggled her fingers and winked at Seth. "I seen you last week at the Finish Line over by the race course...you're a good tipper."

"And you're a good stripper," Seth said as he looked at the wares. The store's main attraction was the preponderance of half-pints that appealed to the Sneaky Pete crowd, but he was looking for something different. "Hey...where the hell are the long-neckers, Brant? I can't find nothin' with all this junk you got set up in here."

Brant welcomed the promotional displays for the picturesque relief they brought to the otherwise drab room, where he spent a fourth of his life. He arranged them into interesting and amusing juxtapositions, even if they blocked the merchandise. "Look over there behind the big Cutty Sark ship."

Seth rooted around behind the cardboard windjammer and found what he was looking for. He emerged with a fifth of Old Mr. Boston Sloe Gin, and Brant rang it up at the half-pint price, then slipped a bottle of vodka into the bag with the purchase. Seth winked when he felt the extra bottle.

Thelma couldn't see the cash register display with her camera. So if the customer was a friend, Brant would ring up a generous discount and then slip an extra bottle into the bag with the implicit understanding that he would retrieve it from them after work.

"See you later." Brant winked back.

"Well, me and Clay will be out at my place celebratin' our reunion." And the two men walked out of the store.

With his apparent departures from reality and his tendency to drink too much, Clay lost one job after another. So day work and seasonal menial labor became his specialty.

He might appear anywhere about rural Sussex county, on the loading dock at Mumford Fertilizer, picking peaches at the Nassau and Magnolia orchards, tending a combine, or dressing up like Santa and ringing a bell for the Salvation Army.

The last time Clay tried to get a regular job, he was so determined that he actually gave up drinking for three weeks to prepare himself for the interview and test. He'd heard about the job from his friend Seth Poole.

Seth had said, "Clayton, I heard about a job you is imminently qualified for."

"Pushin' a broom?"

"No. A real job."

The position Seth spoke of was with the security company at the Hancock's Bridge Nuclear Generating Facility. A special security need had arisen because of maintenance procedures during refueling.

During shutdowns and refueling, the hatch on the side of the concrete dome was removed to allow the ingress and egress of equipment and materials. This put the world in direct contact with the

containment area for the reactor.

The job description required the candidate to be a marksman. Using a pellet gun, he would shoot any birds that came in to bathe in the cooling water around the reactor core.

Clay passed the shooting part of the test. He scored twice as high as his nearest rival, for despite his heroic drinking, Clay was still one of the best shots in Sussex County.

Then he took the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Index.

Later in the week, Seth heard that Clay didn't get the job, so he invited him over for the weekend to help cheer him up. Now, the two of them were hanging out at Seth's place, amusing themselves in one of their usual fashions, drinking beer and shooting starlings.

Seth had prepared for the festivities by baiting the yard with cracked corn. He and Clay sat on the porch about a hundred feet from the bait pile, with a cooler of beer between them and their .22 caliber rifles across their laps.

After seeing Clay make a particularly difficult shot, Seth shook his head. "As many birds as I seen you hit today, I'm sho' surprised you didn't get that job at the nukular plant."

Clay worked the bolt action on his rifle. "Well I did fine on the shootin' test. It was that psychiatric test I didn't do so good on."

"How d'ya know you didn't do so good on it?"

Clay raised his weapon, without seeming to take aim. The rifle cracked and a grackle fell from the highest branches of a tall spruce. "The doctor who gave the test said my answers to the questions disqualified me."

Seth tried a shot at one of the birds on the ground and missed. "I ain't had no more to drink than you...but it's startin' to mess with my aim already. Anyhow, what kinda questions did they ask?"

Clay turned in his seat to look at Seth. "Well, one was...I often hear voices that no one else can hear...yes or no."

"And you said *yes*?"

"I had to tell the truth...they can tell if you lie. The doctor told me that first thing before I started on them test questions...and you know I can hear them voices 'specially well when I been drinkin'."

Seth lazily reached for another beer. "Then you must be hearin' them all the time. What else did they ask?"

Clay leaned back in his chair while a thoughtful look crossed face. "Let's see now...do you see people that no one else can see?"

Seth laughed and slapped his knee. "You're somethin' you are...you told 'em, didn't ya? You told 'em about that snakey woman you sees when you git drunk!" Seth wiped the tears of mirth out of his eyes. "No wonder you didn't get that job."

A little embarrassed, Clay defended himself, "I told you...I had to tell the truth. They woulda knowed I was lyin'!"

Clay was easily consoled and accustomed to his fate. He elected to look on the positive side. "Any job you gotta quit drinkin' to get...most likely ain't worth havin'."

So, he took a job shoveling out chicken coops at Pardoe Poultry.

It was the perfect job for Clay, for most of their labor force were unskilled manual workers. Wayne Pardoe preferred hiring illegal immigrants, because they kept their mouths shut. Wayne had his secrets.

Although a few spoke halting English, the migrants generally spoke a mixture of Yucatec, a dialect of Mayan, and Spanish. Living in isolation in the trailer camp behind the Pardoe house, they rarely went to town, for they made most of their purchases at the company store.

Clay managed to get hired because, as a generally acknowledged lunatic, he too fit the outcast profile.

The pay was minimum wage. And except for the right to shop at the company store and an occasional Band-Aid, the benefits were non-existent.

At first, Clay aroused the suspicions of his coworkers. They thought he might be a company spy. But as they got to know him, they realized that he was a pariah gringo and they accepted him.

Soon, Clay had three fellow workers whom he actually thought of as his friends. They were Jorge Chapa, Martin Lopez, and Hector de la Vega. Together the four of them comprised sanitation team *Numero Cinco*.

Born in Amatl in 1959, Hector was the oldest of the three Malaguans. He was short, dark, and wiry, and wore a wide-brimmed straw hat, both indoors and out, to hide his baldness.

For work, Hector had two pairs of Levi jeans, of which he was very proud, for they were more expensive than the store brand, and two mail-order L.L. Bean flannel shirts. This allowed him to start each day in clean clothes.

He had a third set of clothes. A hand-tailored suit of turquoise-colored silk that had cost him six weeks' pay. When worn with his bleached white shirt, string tie, and Stetson hat, it constituted his Saturday night attire as well as his Sunday church clothes.

Jorge and Martin teased Hector about the attention he paid to his clothes, but he returned the jibes of his trailer mates good-naturedly. He felt as if they were younger brothers. In fact, their parish priest, Padre Luis, had charged him with responsibility for the two younger men when they'd set out for *El Norte*.

Jorge Chapa was born in 1974. At five foot five, he was no taller than Hector, but he was leaner than his older companion. His sinewy build was evidence of a lifetime of manual labor.

Jorge's crowning glory was his dense crop of hair. He had the thick, straight, coal black hair of his Amatl Indian ancestors. It was so black that it had a bluish sheen when the light caught it just right. He kept it meticulously coifed, combing it into a carefully pampered pompadour.

His comb had been handed down through three generations, having been made from the shell of a hawksbill turtle by his grandfather, and he used special hair oil from Italy that he ordered at a local salon. The attention he paid to his hair was in inverse proportion to the attention he paid to his clothes. At work, he wore the same stained tee shirt and faded bib overalls all week. They didn't get washed until the weekend when he put on his 'good' clothes.

These consisted of a lime green, '70's era leisure suit that he'd picked up at the Goodwill, along with a yellow turtleneck shirt for five dollars. But when he went out to the local Malaguan watering hole, the Señoritas all adored him and loved to run their fingers through his hair.

Martin Lopez was shorter and heavier than either one of his Malaguan friends and younger than Jorge by four years. Martin had a penchant for striped clothing, which he thought made him look thinner. He was the cook in the trailer the three shared, and had usually eaten a full portion in testing by the time the three of them sat down to take their formal meal.

Except for the fact that Padre Luis had taught them the rudiments of English before they'd journeyed north, they were typical of the workers at Pardoe Poultry.

They had no immigration papers and lived in the trailer camp that Wayne Pardoe had built in the woods behind the farm. Life was relatively good for them. They made steady wages, were adequately housed, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service never seemed to poke its nose into any of Pardoe Poultry's business.

Enjoying each other's company on and off the job, they talked as they worked and always took lunch together, and lately, they'd started meeting Clay Stool at Big Leg Irma's roadhouse after work for a drink or two.

The three Malaguans were by now familiar with Clay's idiosyncrasies. But rather than recoiling from Clay, they took great interest in speculating about who he talked to in his visions and encouraged him to provide details. Clay enthusiastically obliged.

One night after Clay's description of his latest vision, Hector spoke for them all. "Señor Clay...you're making us *loco*. This thing that talks to you, what does it look like?"

"I don't rightly know exactly...maybe if I could just get drunker I'd see better," he replied.

His companions all swore to help him in obtaining his visionary quest. They knew that it would take a large reserve of cash to purchase the quantity of liquor required to allow their compadre to reach the necessary level of inebriation to see his vision. The best opportunity would be on the fourth Friday of the month when Clay got his VA check.

Finally, the day came. Clay had received his VA pension on the same day as Pardoe Poultry's payday. The four members of sanitation team *Numero Cinco* set out for Irma's on a mission. No matter what, Clay was going to continue drinking until he saw his vision through to the end.

They sat themselves at a table, ordered doubles all around, and told the waitress to keep them coming. Eventually, the three Malaguans passed out, unable to keep up with the man with two livers.

Clay finished their drinks and bought a half-gallon of Old Setter with their money.

He took the bottle, wandered outside, and was not seen again that night.

The next day, Clay arrived to work as usual. His three friends were ashen and embarrassed at a gringo drinking them under the table. They were curious about how things had gone, but were hesitant to press too hard.

As Jorge and Clay were shoveling chicken manure, Jorge commented, "You look tired, amigo."

Clay stopped, wiped the sweat off his brow, and leaned on his shovel. "It's all this damn chicken crap we're shoveling...who'd ever think that a chicken could shit this much?"

Jorge spoke in conspiratorial tones, "Oh, but these are very special chickens. Señor Wayne must trust us very much to allow us to clean up after them."

"I wish he didn't trust me so much then."

"*Pssst*, Señor Clay, come closer and I'll tell you how special...these chickens are blue and have four legs. Señor Wayne says they are Siamese fighting chickens that he imported to increase drumstick production."

Clay made a sputtering sound to show his disbelief. "I might be a drunk, but I know when someone's pullin' my leg."

"No, Señor Clay. I would never do that. You'll see when they bring the chicks in after we're done cleaning."

"If I can stay awake that long. I don't feel so good."

"*Si*...you do not look so well."

Clay pulled out a half-pint of Calvert's whiskey and took a slug. "I didn't get much sleep last night. I woke up this mornin' along the side of the road over yonder with my face slicker than snot from a grease spot I'd slept in. I was real lucky I didn't get run over. But I'll tell you what, it was all worth it, 'cause after you fellas passed out I had a humdinger of a vision and I seen this one through to the end."

"*Dios!* Hector, Martin come quickly! He's seen it!"

Martin called from the other side of the hen house, "What is it, Jorge? Are you drunk again?"

"Just get over here."

When all three of his friends were assembled, Clay began, "I finally got so drunk I couldn't stand up...that ain't never happened before...so I started crawlin' down the road. I got to this grease spot and my hands slipped, and I hit my head on the pavement. Things began spinnin' around and then it was like I was floatin' in the air above myself. I looked down and saw my body a layin' in the road with my face in a grease spot. Then I heard someone speak my name and, when I looked up, there was a woman floatin' just a couple of feet in front of me."

"See, I told you it was a woman." Hector nodded to his friends in triumph. "What did she look like? Was she pretty?"

"More than just pretty, there was somethin' unreal about her. She had a golden light that surrounded her, like she was glowin' from within, especially around her face. I couldn't see her legs real good, they just kinda stretched way out...that part of her looked like it might of even had scales. She moved in a real slinky manner and when I looked closer...she weren't wearing any clothes."

"*Dios!* She was naked?"

Clay threw the empty bottle into the dumpster of manure and rubbed his chin, "No...not really...up top she was covered with little teeny feathers."

"*Madre de Dios!*" Hector fell on his knees before Clay, then Martin and Jorge followed suit. "Feathers you say? What did they look like?"

"Well, them colors changed constantly in a swirley rainbow...just like a little bit of gasoline does on the surface of a puddle. And she told me the strangest things."

Hector looked to his countrymen. "It sounds like the serpent Madonna."

Martin crossed himself. "Can it be the feathered serpent goddess? The one Padre Luis is always talking about?"

Padre Luis was an itinerant priest back in Malagua. Though his home parish was in the capital city of Amatl, he traveled to remote villages spreading his blend of Catholicism and Toltecism. The good father merged Christian apocalyptic scripture with the ancient Amatl belief about the end of the world, which would begin when Quetzalcoatl returned.

The Padre had studied the hieroglyphs on the ancient stone stelae left by their ancestors, and he proclaimed that the last sign before the end of the world would be the appearance of a prophet chosen by the mother of the feathered serpent god. Once she had prepared the way, Quetzalcoatl himself would fly to earth and bear the faithful to paradise. He called her “the Madonna” without differentiating her from the mother of Jesus.

Hector jumped up. “Señor Clay. You are blessed!”

Clay shrugged. “Must be my lucky day.”

“Are you sure it’s a woman?” Hector assumed the role of spokesman.

“She sure ’nuff had a woman’s face...though it was half hidden by some kinda headdress...and she seemed shapely enough, too.” Clay sighed.

“What did she say, Señor Clay?”

“See...here’s where I just can’t rightly tell.” Clay rubbed the back of his head and patted his pockets in case there was another bottle he’d forgotten about. “I could hear what she was sayin’...but I couldn’t understand much of what she said. It was like she was talkin’ some foreign language.

“But, I’m pretty sure she wants me to come back to that very same spot and talk to her some more when I’m back into the proper state of mind,” Clay winked, “so I reckon I’ll try again tonight.”

“Can we come too, Señor Clay?”

“Sure...if you buy the booze.” Clay pulled his pockets out.

“Si, we still have our getaway money.” Hector patted Clay on the shoulder. Getaway money was a sum kept aside by cagey illegals for use in the event that the *migras* should get on their heels. Hector, Jorge, and Martin kept theirs buried under the trailer.

Martin was agitated. “I put as much into that as you did! I think we should vote on it.”

Hector turned on the chubby youngster. “What are you thinking? Here this man is talking to the Mother of our most ancient god, and you sweat over a few hundred dollars. You should be honored to help.”

Martin looked down in shame and muttered. “I would have voted to go along anyway...but you are right, *jeffe*.”

“Good.” Hector smiled. “Then go dig up the money and bring it here...we will help him to understand what she is saying. And we will celebrate Señor Clay being chosen by the Mother of God as the man to deliver her message. I’m going to write a letter to my mother. I will get her to tell Padre Luis of this miracle. This will be the fulfillment of his life’s work.”

Even though he didn’t realize it, Clay now had the first of his disciples.

Over the next few weeks, Hector, Jorge, and Martin spread the word of Clay’s vision around the trailer camp. The excited Malaguan community pitched in to rent Clay a room at the roadhouse and fuel a slush fund used to support the bar tab that powered Clay’s prophecy.

The Malaguans began neglecting their duties at Pardoe Poultry. They took turns drinking with the prophet until he entered his visionary stupor, and then hung around to watch. Shortly, the roadhouse was no longer sufficient to house the proceedings. So without permission or permits, the Malaguans began construction on an impromptu shrine at the site of the grease spot, right in the middle of Route 16.

It was constructed of wood salvaged from crates and pallets, featuring a large arch that spanned the width of the road and supported a canvas roof. Protected from the elements, such crowds gathered about the prophet that traffic was impossible.

Clay began spending his days sitting in a Barcalounger on a raised dais supported by peach crates resting directly on the asphalt of Thankless Road.

Clay’s Central American admirers would bring him liquor, and he would stay in the recliner until he had drunk enough to prophesize. At that point he would roll out of his chair and begin crawling to the grease spot to commune with his vision. When he would reach the place that the Madonna had chosen to appear, he would prostrate himself with his face in the grease spot and Tomas at his side.

It was an election year and Democratic Governor Reynolds was under great pressure from the local citizens to evict the shrine and clear the state road. But many claimed this was a miracle in the making, and he didn’t want to arouse the ire of Catholic voters in the more populous upstate region. So, in the courageous fashion typical to many politicians, he opted to make no decision at all. He left the shrine in

place for the time being, while making a show of force by putting up detour signs, and throwing a cordon of state police and National Guardsmen about the area.

* * * *

After a long day at the shrine, Hector de la Vega sat at the card table in the little mobile home he shared with Jorge and Martin. Hector read aloud his mother's response to his letter proclaiming the news about Clay's miraculous visions.

My dearest Hector,

I have asked Eduardo to help me write this letter to you. With Padre Luis' blessing, I have sold all our possessions. I am using the money to take the bus to Hacienda El Norte, where a group of us will begin a pilgrimage to this holy place of Delaware. Padre Luis says that these visions are the fulfillment of the prophecy on the calendar stone that has stood since ancient times in the center of our village.

He agrees with you that this feathered lady is the mother of Quetzalcoatl. The writing on the stone said that she would come this year and speak to us through a chosen one.

Padre Luis believes it is our obligation to go and listen to this man. We must pay homage and give of our wealth. I wish I had more to give him than these shiny green stones your father collected from the ancient ruins.

Even your little fifteen-year-old cousin, Primaflora, is coming. And this is only the beginning! Padre Luis has been preaching from village to village for every able bodied Malaguan to follow in our footsteps.

Chili con Dios,

Mama

Chapter 6

*Pardoe Farm/Vatican City
February 29, 2008*

Sylvester IV

"Hey, Hector, turn up the radio."

"Wait a minute, Jorge. I gotta tune it in better."

The two Malaguan workers were relaxing in their run-down camp trailer after their shift at Pardoe Poultry Farms. It had been a long day and they were tuning their short-wave radio in to the nightly broadcast of Radio Malagua. After a moment or two of static and some oscillating frequencies, the voice came in clearly:

"Welcome to the evening news broadcast on The Voice of Malagua from the city of the ages, Amatl.

"Pope Sylvester IV issued his first Bull since being elected pontiff six months ago. The Bull proclaimed the year 2008 to be a Jubilee year. In a surprise move, the new pontiff placed a number of the Vatican's fifteenth-century Florentine paintings on auction. 'I'm raising money for the celebration,' the Pope explained in this morning's edition of L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican's official newsletter.

"The Pope, Sylvester IV, is the former American Cardinal Vincent Tandino. He is not only the youngest Pontiff in nine-hundred years, but he is also the first American to ever sit upon the papal throne. Last year the College of Cardinals made him their unexpected choice to follow the late Pope Thaddeus, who died after a fall from his bedroom balcony."

"I want to hear news about home, not the Pope," Hector complained. "Turn on some music."

* * * *

The Pope's private secretary sat in the antechamber to the Vatican throne room. Cardinal Fuquois smoothed his red robe across his lap and adjusted the solid gold cross that rested on his ample paunch. The job of running the Vatican bureaucracy required sixteen-hour days with many of them spent behind a desk. His heavy responsibility promoted a sedentary lifestyle. Though he'd deteriorated physically somewhat since his active youth, the Cardinal still retained a muscular frame beneath the fat.

Five popes had come and gone, while Fuquois had been the permanent secretary who had served them all. And now it was his job to reign over the chaos unleashed by Sylvester. It had been over Fuquois' vociferous objections that the American, Vincent Tandino, had been elected Sylvester IV, while Fuquois was undergoing bypass surgery.

Recovered now, Fuquois had been biding his time since returning to work so he could study the lay of the land. The man in his waiting room was a typical feature on this new landscape. He was a young priest named LaFarge, who had been waiting on a hard wooden bench for three hours for an audience with the Pope. This priest was a foppish sort, who'd been serving as Sylvester's nuncio on a mission to the Balkan nation of Slobovenia. The fact that the present pope had brought LaFarge to the Vatican was enough reason for Fuquois to dislike him.

Rene Marie LaFarge had been born in 1967 in Languedoc, France, into a family that claimed Richelieu as an ancestor. His parents were descended from landed gentry and raised roses for the perfume industry on their vast estate, though the physical work was done by tenant farmers. Since his older brother would, by tradition, inherit the family estate, Rene Marie went into the clergy after graduating from the Sorbonne.

Fuquois slapped the button of the intercom and bade his assistant to send in LaFarge.

Fuquois ran the fingers of one hand through his white beard as he bid LaFarge to have a seat with the

other. The cloying smell of rose water followed LaFarge into the room. Though tall and moderately built, the forty-one-year-old French cleric did not seem particularly fit, appearing fragile despite his size. He wore a scarlet red cape over his cassack, and held a wide brimmed hat in his lap.

He hesitated for a moment because the only seat in front of the desk was a rude wooden stool. A throat-clearing sound from Fuquois was enough to overcome LaFarge's hesitancy and the priest sat down. Fuquois stared at his guest's aquiline nose and conjectured that the high forehead, pencil thin mustaches, and little goatee were indicators of a personality rooted in conceit and vanity. LaFarge's appearance confirmed the preconceptions Fuquois had formed by reading this man's dossier, *a snob who aspires to be a cardinal...maybe even pope.*

This fool must think himself the reincarnation of his supposed ancestor, Richelieu. Fuquois demanded, "Why are you wearing red? That color is usually reserved for cardinals...such as myself."

Despite his deference to Fuquois' position, LaFarge tilted his head back just enough so that he was looking down his nose. "The Pope, himself, gave me permission when he appointed me nuncio. He thought it would inspire awe among the Slobovenian people."

Fuquois absent-mindedly stroked the smooth gold metal of his cross. He found LaFarge's French-accented Italian extremely annoying. "We've all heard quite a bit about your misadventures in Slobovenia...it seems you are responsible for the Balkanization of the Balkans."

"It could not be helped."

"Oh, well, you'll be able to tell the Pope all about it. I'll tell him you're here."

Fuquois smacked the intercom again and intoned, "Your Holiness, Father LaFarge is here."

The Pope's voice sounded tinny coming through the speaker on Fuquois' desk. "Is that you Cardinal? Am I pushing the right damn button? Can you hear me? Tell LaFarge to get in here. I have been waiting to speak with him."

"Yes, Your Holiness."

LaFarge thought he heard a touch of sarcasm in the way Fuquois had replied.

The Cardinal got up and gestured for the younger cleric to follow. Fuquois led him to the ornate door of the throne room, opened it, and stepped aside to allow LaFarge to pass through the portal. Though Rene Marie LaFarge stood a head taller than the cardinal, Fuquois looked at the nuncio as he would a midget in a freak show.

Sylvester received LaFarge standing just a few feet from the door. LaFarge fell to his knees and kissed the Pope's ring. "Your Holiness...you are looking radiant. Your piety is a light to this wicked world." LaFarge was struck by the fact that the Pope could not have been much older than himself.

The French aristocrat was envious of the connections that could wield the power to put the spawn of an American Mafia family on the throne of the Vatican. Despite his jealousy and disdain for Sylvester's antecedents, LaFarge was irresistibly drawn to money and power, and he would gladly play the moth to the Pope's flame. "May I remark on the striking resemblance between His Holiness and the handsome American movie star, Al Pacino?"

"Get off your knees, LaFarge, and can the brown nosing. Just give me your report."

"*Fait accompli*," said LaFarge, who had risen from his knees, but his demeanor suggested that he was still a supplicant. "My mission was a complete success."

"Maybe you can explain to me how the loss of thirty thousand souls is a success. Your mission was to make peace and instead you started a war. It only took you a week to turn sporadic fighting into a major conflagration."

"But, Holy Father, most of those who died weren't Catholics. Besides, you charged me with stopping the conflict. You never specifically said to bring peace. What's a few less infidels?"

"As long as that's the case. We can't afford to lose any potential contributors."

"Of the three groups contending for political control in Slobovenia, only one followed the Holy Church. And they were outgunned by both the Muslims and the misguided followers of the Greek Patriarch. My sources informed me that the Saracens were getting the support of the fanatical Imam of Kakastan, who was seeking to establish an Islamic republic in Slobovenia. So, I did what I could to prevent it. Those who would oppress good Catholics had to be dealt with. At least, now they are with their God."

"And how did you go about preventing this, and how did that serve the better good of the Church?"

"I procured the most advanced arms available and sold them to the Catholics, who then quickly

brought an end to the conflict.” LaFarge reached into his sleeve and produced an envelope, which he handed to the Pope.

Sylvester ripped the envelope open. “What is this LaFarge, a check? A check for twenty million francs Suisse!”

“Yes, Your Holiness. And at today’s exchange rate, that’s a billion *lira*, or over ten million dollars American. It is the profit from the sale of necessary defensive weapons to the poor oppressed Catholic populace of that tortured land.”

“I see you really do understand how to handle the Church’s business, Rene. In view of your conduct on this mission, I would like to talk to you about a new position that just arose in the Order of The Knights of Simon. This order finds itself in need of a Grand Inquisitor.”

“Is this a new order, Holy Father, for I have never heard of them before?”

“No, Rene, they are almost as ancient as the church itself. They became a secret order as a result of the first Nicene Council, because of the disreputable status of their namesake. They are called Simonites, followers of Simon Magus, protectors of pilgrims and the Guardians of the Purse. They are the holy collectors, so to speak.”

“Collectors of what, Holy Father?”

“Why, all that is the Church’s due. They were formed by one of the earliest popes and have served only the office of the pontiff. By enforcing the collection and management of treasure, they assure that the Holy See receives its fair share from the sale of indulgences, relics, and investiture of bishoprics.”

“I was not aware that simony was still being practiced, Your Eminence.”

“Simony has been operating underground for two thousand years...the take on acknowledging it’ll be immense. Just like when a state legalizes gambling...way more people wind up participating,” Sylvester said while waving his hands in the air for emphasis.

Simony is the sale of things of a spiritual nature, or material things that have been blessed, and is named after Simon Magus who tried to purchase the gift of healing from Saint Peter. The most renowned magician of his time, Simon Magus was a Christian, who was baptized by the disciple Philip. Meaning no insult or harm, he’d offered to reimburse Peter for the gift of laying-on of hands, so that he too might be a healer. The uneducated fisherman Peter, not realizing that Samaritans did not beg for favors but offered to pay for them, took umbrage and remonstrated Simon in a loutish way.

Despite his immediate request that Peter pray for his forgiveness, he was spurned, and Simon’s name has lived on in association with this practice. Often portrayed by his detractors as the antichrist, Simon is reputed to have died in Rome while attempting to fly from a tower to win a wager with the Emperor Nero.

Acting on a suggestion from Fuquois and wishing to please his temporal father, Pierro del Ponte, Sylvester meant to redeem the name of Simon Magus and elevate the Simonites to legitimacy in order to open a floodgate of treasure into the Vatican vaults.

Fuquois, however, had a reason of his own for legitimizing the Simonites, to consolidate the power of his close companion and confederate Quiferelli, the Abbot of the Order of the Knights of Simon, in order that the cardinal might wield it as his own.

The Pope continued, “It is part of the fabric that has become the modern day church. We just prefer not to be overt in light of today’s fondness for the media and its intelligence gathering capability. We are a big business, Rene, and we must think like businessmen. Bad publicity would adversely affect our cash flow.”

“I thought the church fathers had determined simony to be unjustified?”

“If the secular authorities are justified to collect a toll to pass through a gate to access a turnpike, are not the spiritual authorities entitled to collect a toll to pass through the heavenly gates to access eternal paradise?”

“But of course! It is the essence of logic, Your Holiness.”

“I’m so glad that agree with me, my son. I knew you were the practical sort. Guys like you and me, we understand that even the most pious sometimes stray or have impure thoughts, which stain their souls. The Lord can see into the darkest recesses of our being, and even the good works of the most devout believer may not be sufficient to offset the burden of sin. Is it not the mission of the Church to help our flock to attain a state of grace, so that they may enter heaven and dwell forever in the house of the Lord?”

“Yes, indeed, your most esteemed Holiness.”

“Then we are doing God’s work by accepting the offerings of those whose fervent desire it is to cleanse their soul through whatever means are available. So, what do you say? As Grand Inquisitor you would be helping these people find salvation.”

“I would be most honored to accept the office of Grand Inquisitor and lead the Knights of Simon. Have I not already been collecting the Lord’s toll by supplying the righteous Slobovenians with the means to defend themselves from the Turks and Greeks? The return I brought you was satisfactory, was it not?”

“Very much so, Rene. Of course, there is a rigorous protocol that you must follow in order to become a Simonite. And then there is the matter of the induction ritual, which not everyone chooses to complete...it can be very unpleasant.”

Chapter 7

Harriston, Delaware

March 15, 2008

O'Malley Was Right After All

After his close encounter with suicide and the fireball from the sky, Wayne Pardoe went on to found a great chicken empire known as Pardoe Poultry. For the first time, chicken was more than a seasonal local crop, thanks to Wayne Pardoe's innovations. Nationwide distribution and marketing of chicken under the 'Pardoe' brand name caused the term 'spring chicken' to disappear, as folks from California to New York ate Delaware chicken year round.

All this was made possible by a secret process Wayne called *flash freezing*.

This method of preservation was a great innovation, the origins of which were wrapped in mystery. Wayne never revealed the least bit of information about how his technique was developed nor had anyone outside of the company ever glimpsed the equipment used to accomplish it. Every aspect of the process was zealously guarded as a trade secret.

The process wasn't patented, because Wayne trusted his own ability to maintain a shroud of secrecy more than the government's ability to enforce a patent. "A patent's only good for so long," he used to say, "after that, it's open season on your process."

Wayne maintained his company's secrets all his life, especially how he managed to add an extra pair of drumsticks to every package without bankrupting the company. He ran the company out of his hip pocket, delegating no authority, right up to his death at age ninety-seven of a putative brain seizure, or stroke, as the coroner called it.

At the time of his death, Wayne left only one legitimate survivor and heir. This was his despised second son, by his first wife, who died during the birth of the child in 1946. In the minutes immediately following the birth, Wayne Sr. was so filled with repressed anguish at the loss of his wife, he wouldn't even hold the child when it was brought to him, for he blamed it for his beloved wife's death.

When asked what he wanted to name the child, Wayne looked around the waiting room that was decorated with cheap prints of the nation's founding fathers. The first portrait he laid eyes on was the inventor of the bifocal lens and originator of the postal system. "Call him Franklin," he said, before stalking out of the hospital.

Once his wife was in the ground, Wayne wasted no time. He married his wife's cleaning lady, Agatha Stiltz, the day after the funeral. He'd proposed marriage with the romantic phrase, "I need someone to look after them boys."

Eager to accept any means of rising above her own lowly station in life, Agatha accepted. She remained little more than a maid, though, for Wayne slept in a separate bedroom and confined his affections to the ladies of the local roadhouse, where he had a private room.

Franklin Pardoe was ignored by his father, who had no time and even less use for the boy, lavishing all his attention, hopes, and love on Franklin's older brother, Wayne Jr. The only time Wayne Sr. spoke to Franklin was to lament that the lad wasn't more like his big brother. And, try as he might, Franklin was never able to live up to Wayne Jr.'s example. After Wayne Jr.'s death by electrocution in a freak bathtub accident, it had been even more impossible for Franklin to measure up in the old man's estimation.

Wayne Jr. had, by the time of his death, assumed the duties and office of executive vice-president of Pardoe Poultry. Wayne Sr. had designated Wayne Jr. as the future president when old man announced he

planned retiring when he turned sixty-five. But Wayne Jr.'s untimely demise changed all that.

Wayne Pardoe Sr. could not bring himself to hand the company over to his second son, whom he hated and kept mired in middle-management. He decided to forgo retirement and micro-managed the company for over three more decades. Franklin took every day that the old man continued living as an affront.

Franklin had graduated from Lincoln University, a traditionally black college in Oxford, Pennsylvania. The old man held some very racist views and purposely picked Lincoln in an attempt to insult his youngest son. "I ain't about to waste Harvard tuition on the likes of you."

Wayne Jr. had held an MBA from Harvard.

Franklin chafed at the fact his father had not sent him to a more prestigious school. Franklin channeled his resentment into his studies, so that he'd have the necessary tools to someday show the old man. Franklin graduated with honors and, had his father ever bothered to give him a chance, he would have found that Franklin had a profound aptitude for business.

After business school, Franklin joined the family business at the periphery of the management sphere where Wayne Sr. left him to languish. Assigning him to one ceremonial administrative function after another, Wayne prevented Franklin from participating in the decision-making process of the Pardoe Poultry.

Besides heading the Complaint Department and serving as the Administrator of Employee Benefits, which were almost non-existent, Franklin managed the local community-based promotional campaigns that Wayne insisted on. With no staff assigned to him, Franklin had no choice but to participate himself.

Franklin loathed these activities, and he knew that his father assigned him the duties in a deliberate effort to discourage him. Since he was sure that nothing would make the old man so happy as to have him quit the business, Franklin swore he'd never give Wayne that satisfaction. So he bore it all as part of a managerial gauntlet he must endure on his way to his goal of controlling the company.

Wayne never tried anything new in the way of promotions, just the same events he'd been running for decades. January was the time for the recipe contest. Tens of thousands of hopeful cooks sent in their favorite chicken creations in hopes of winning an eighteen-cubic-foot freezer packed full of Pardoe chicken parts. Though the company line was that scores of chefs worked for months evaluating the recipes in the company's test kitchens, Franklin just pulled one out of the stack at random and declared it the winner.

In May, Pardoe Poultry, in conjunction with the Lamb of God Young Men's Bible College, sponsored the Running of the Chickens. Every year, Franklin would be the Grand Marshall of the event. He marched at the head of the graduating class as they paraded along the half mile route from the campus, on the shores of Quicksilver Lake, to the course set up in colonial Old Harriston. Once at the scene, the Grand Marshal would give a speech emphasizing the dignity of their calling and then fire his starter's pistol. At the crack of the pistol, the chickens were driven into a stampede and the students, all in their Sunday best, ran with them to prove their manhood. Though the crowd took raucous delight in the melee, Franklin never appreciated the event, for every aspect of this buffoonery just heightened his desire to avenge himself upon his father.

July brought Franklin's least favorite duty when he played host at the Pardoe Poultry booth at the annual Delaware State Fair. Here he was not only required to mingle with the unwashed masses, but he had to oversee the world's largest frying pan—a frying pan of mythic proportions. It took a dozen gas burners to heat it. Upon the grates it sat a full twenty feet in diameter and was capable of frying twelve hundred chickens at a time. Over three hundred gallons of lard were needed to grease the pan, enough grease and chicken, Franklin mused, to fill the average septic tank. It required twelve-foot-long tongs and forks to reach the center of the pan and it took four burley men, laboring under Franklin's direction, to handle them.

Wearing his starched shirt and bow tie beneath an apron and chef's hat, Franklin would sweat profusely in the sweltering Sussex summer. He wished that he could wear surgical gloves without mortally insulting the thousands of yokels he was forced to shake hands with each day. But he stoically played the role as all the freeloaders came up for a free piece of chicken, and he swore this pan would go on the dump the day he took over the company.

Franklin had approached the old man on numerous occasions in an attempt to sell him on some alternative promotional ideas, but Wayne would never hear him out on any of them. A week before

Wayne's death, Franklin had tried to pitch his idea for Rodney the Rooster as a company mascot and spokes-chicken. Wayne had gotten so agitated that he started swearing at Franklin and kicking furniture around. He had to open the bottom right hand drawer of his desk and take a long pull on the quart of hundred proof Old Setter he kept there before he regained his composure enough to say, "When I die, you can run the company any way you want. Until then, I call the shots around here and don't you forget it. It's either my way or the highway, Bub...if you don't like it, quit. Course if you do that I'll cut ya clean out of my will and leave everything to the whores down at the roadhouse."

"Have it your way, Dad," Franklin replied as he watched his father slip the bottle back into the drawer.

Shortly thereafter, the old man conveniently died, leaving the way clear for Franklin to take his rightful place at the head of the family empire. It had all been accomplished in one stroke—Wayne's.

Now, the sole heir by default, his stepmother having run off years before with a door-to-door salesman, Franklin Pardoe sat in the office of Arnold Swindell, attorney at law, who was discharging his final duties to his client, Wayne Pardoe, by reading Pardoe's last will and testament.

"I, Wayne Pardoe, being of sound mind, do bequeath to my son and only heir Franklin, Pardoe Poultry and all other sundry assets pertaining therewith, and a cassette tape in a sealed envelope meant for Franklin Pardoe's ears only. This cassette contains special instructions and bequests."

The lawyer droned on elaborating the boring details of the sundry assets. Franklin sat there barely paying attention, for he was thinking about the corporate reorganization he would launch as soon as the company was legally his.

Franklin's attention snapped back to the lawyer, though, when he heard the words, "...and finally, to Irma Gravely, the second love of my life, I leave the premises and building known as The Queen of Sheba Roadhouse, which is located at the crossroads of Route 16 and the Harriston Pike."

Franklin barked, "What do you mean? This is outrageous!" He jumped to his feet and trembled the way toy poodles do when they see the mailman through the storm door glass.

"That's the way your father wanted it." Swindell laughed to himself. The bequest to Irma had elicited exactly the kind of reaction from Franklin that Wayne had said it would. "Besides, that run-down old building is only worth ninety-thousand or so...and the liquor license another fifty...you've inherited a fortune and a business that's a veritable cash cow. And who knows what else Wayne has in store for you in here?" The lawyer held up a manila envelope. "This contains an audio cassette recorded by Wayne some weeks prior to his death."

Barely containing his rage, Franklin snatched the envelope from Swindell's hands, then turned and stalked out of the building without a word. He jumped into his company pickup truck and sped away.

He drove aggressively, taking out his anger over the roadhouse on the truck. The roadhouse was one of the few touchstones of humanity in his cold, bleak life and one of the few things that Franklin had in common with the other young men of the area.

He still had vivid memories of the night when he'd first entered manhood. It had been in the first bedroom on the right at the top of the stairs. And in all his subsequent visits, he habitually requested that same room.

The girls always drew straws to decide who would service Franklin upon his visits. Besides being 'icky' and not tipping well, he had a sadistic bent that the wholesome country-girls at Irma's disapproved of. They only put up with him because he was the owner's son and was too feeble to inflict any real pain when he spanked them.

Except for his visits to the roadhouse, Franklin avoided close contact with others and washed his hands thirty to forty times a day. He even carried pre-moistened towelettes for those times when he was unable to access soap and water.

With business his only passion, meals were looked on as inconvenient, but necessary, refueling. Most meals consisted of cottage cheese and canned fruit, except when okra was in season. Then he would gorge on his favorite meal, okra and dumplings, which he had learned to love in the Lincoln University dining hall.

Franklin was five foot eight, and at one hundred thirty-five pounds, he appeared frail. He had inherited his father's long nose, which on his completely bald and tiny head, looked like a chicken beak. Bald since youth, and uncomfortable with casual human contact, Franklin never developed a way with the

ladies. As a consequence, his only sexual release came at the roadhouse, which was conveniently located across Route 16 from the Pardoe Farm.

Though the hand-carved wooden sign beckoning to men passing by read *Queen of Sheba* in foot-tall red letters, everyone called the place Big Leg Irma's, after its Madame. And many men made a point of stopping by.

The roadhouse was typical of the structures built in lower Delaware during the early days of the nineteenth century. It was a square two-story building with a dormered attic to make a third floor. The pastel yellow paint on the clapboard siding looked fresh and the white trim clean. The roof was made of imported slate tiles from the Neander Valley.

The house had been built by a Dutch sea captain who had wearied of the sea. Heinrich Van Horn had harbored a dream throughout his lonely days at sea. Never in one place for long, the Captain had come to appreciate the comfort offered by a good friendly brothel. He considered them a boon to the public good and the girls who worked in them as selfless as missionaries. It was Heinrich's secret wish to become the proprietor of a whorehouse.

He had solid ideas about what constituted a respectable house of ill repute. During long sea voyages, he would picture himself ensconced in his establishment and visualize every aspect of the place. By the time he'd ended his career, he had planned his enterprise down to the tiniest detail. This had kept him occupied while off duty, and since there were few places to spend his money aboard ship, it was easy to maintain the frugality that enabled him to amass sufficient funds to execute his dream.

Van Horn had wide experience with the hospitality of houses around the world, and he wasted no time putting it into practice once his final voyage ended. He chose to build his house outside Harriston, Delaware because he held title to a piece of property there.

Years before, he had been taking on salted menhaden at Lewes, Delaware. The town that he referred to by its old Dutch name, Whorekill, held a special appeal because it had been established as a Dutch Colony in the 1600's after the Delaware Bay was discovered by Heinrich, or Henry, Hudson. So when he found himself with some free time on his hands, the Captain decided to take in the sights.

As he strolled along the quay, a strange little man who'd stepped out of the shadows accosted him. When the Captain asked his name the man said, "Call me Ishmael."

Ishmael said he desperately needed passage to anywhere out of the country. The Captain mentioned that he would soon be bound for Venezuela and would like to help out, but there was the matter of the fare. The man had little money, but he did have the deed to several acres of land a few miles west of Lewes.

Van Horn got directions, rented a hack, and journeyed to the location. It was a good dry piece of ground at a busy crossroads and he deemed it perfect for his purpose. He returned, took Ishmael to the notary, and after signing the paper, the pair of them returned to the ship. In the years at sea that followed, many was the time that the Captain would open his sea chest and gaze on the paper, it being the first tangible step in the realization of his dream.

When at last he retired, he sailed into Lewes, discharged his crew, and put his ship, the *Queen of Sheba* up for auction. With his savings and the proceeds from the sale, he hired most of the carpenters in Lewes and headed for the crossroads. The only memento he kept of his ship was her figurehead—a bare-breasted Nubian beauty that created quite a scandal when he mounted it beneath a decorative bowsprit above the front entrance.

The inside of the house was exotically appointed. Mementos and memorabilia that the Captain had collected over his career adorned every wall and corner. Most of them had been given as "gifts" by merchants in his various ports of call in an attempt to get their goods shipped first, or to get first crack at the Captain's cargo. The collection was not displayed in a garish fashion, but worked into the décor in a way that made those who walked through the door feel they'd entered another world.

It was like going to a museum for the Sussex County locals who had never been more than a score of miles from home. The guests could almost smell the spice of Madagascar, hear the market in Constantinople, or imagine themselves in a Japanese tea house. *Objets d'art* were in great evidence. Elaborately carved ivory pagodas, porcelain boxes, scrimshaw, jade mermaids, ebony figures, and Bali masks graced the parlor.

Though adjusted to life on land, every now and then Heinrich would say he needed to, "get a taste of

salt.” The Captain had bought a small sloop-rigged open boat that he would sail out of Lewes, where he kept it moored, and up the coast to Blackbird Creek to where Blackbeard the pirate had built a fort well over a hundred years earlier. Van Horn was a Black Beard enthusiast and brought back ballast stones and cannon balls, he claimed to be artifacts of the pirate, which he stacked up in his front yard.

The parlor was the most important room in any whorehouse—that’s where a man could socialize with the girls, listen to the piano player, and chose the woman who would accompany him on his evening’s journey to delight. It was furnished with the most comfortable furniture available and had lace curtains on the windows. In contrast to their plain and practical households, the customers could luxuriate in the sensual splendor of Heinrich’s marketplace of pleasure.

The Captain’s helm was a great winged chair in the sunniest corner of the room. Van Horn would appear there daily and lounge in the parlor wearing a smoking jacket and fez. He often tended bar and would ritually pour the first drink of the day stating, “The sun’s over the yardarm,” and engage in storytelling at the least provocation.

First-time customers got a guided tour by the owner himself, who felt that building a regular clientele of steady customers was the best way to do business. The opulence of the rooms was a visual feast for men used to plainer furnishings.

As they peeked into the various rooms, the elegance of the finely grained Philippine mahogany trim and floors of Indian teak impressed the customers that they were getting their money’s worth even before they had talked to a girl.

Great, sturdy four-poster beds were covered with spreads made of furs and skins, and the shades on all the lamps were of cut, stained glass. The girls wore silk kimonos, the latest lingerie from Paris, or evening gowns depending on their own and the customer’s moods.

There were dramatic glimpses of a sailor’s life on every wall. In an age before photography, the paintings were used to represent the dramatic portions of a person’s life. And Van Horn’s came in the form of clipper ships under full sail, a sperm whale smashing a long boat with its flukes, and a lookout in the crow’s nest staring into a coming storm. Above the mantle of the fireplace was a harpoon from which hung a collection of shrunken heads and preserved monkey paws. An elephant-foot umbrella stand sat to one side of the hearth where a brace of dragon-headed andirons held the logs.

The Captain’s pride and joy was the glass-enclosed eight-sided cupola at the peak of the roof. From there he could overlook the wagon-rutted roads that crossed at the house and bordered a pine forest on the southeast quadrant of the crossroads. The Captain cursed the foliage where it blocked his view as he trained his spyglass down the Pike looking for the stagecoach.

The only other human habitation visible from the cupola was the Pardoe family farm. The rectangular farmhouse was neatly shingled with local cypress that had weathered to a rich brown. The barn was a two-level affair sided with poplar planks. It held the fodder that Louis Pardoe raised to feed his sheep. He’d told the Captain how he figured to strike it rich in mutton, “The meat of the future.”

The Pardoe farm sat directly south from the Queen of Sheba, across the dirt byway called Thankless Road. Three dormers stared out from the slope of the farm house’s roof to form a half story on the third floor. There was a chimney on each end of the house, with a covered porch on the front, and a one-story, shed-roofed addition on the back. A pair of elm trees shaded the front and chestnuts grew near the springhouse.

Thankless Road was a mud-choked path that crossed the Harriston Pike to form the crossroads. It was seldom used and more a path than a road, leading as it did to a swampy lower woodland that presented the occasional traveler with fallen limbs, hidden rocks, and potholes. The high undergrowth was difficult to span in a wagon, and poor drainage transformed the area into small ponds after a heavy rain.

Both the Pardoe family farm and the roadhouse shared an eastern exposure as they fronted on The Pike. The Pike was a solid road and was vital to local commerce, for farmers depended on it to get their goods to market. It had been part of the colonial Kings Highway, and as such was established in local cultural memory and use. It brought a steady stream of customers to the Queen of Sheba.

The stage company had an agreement with Van Horn to use the roadhouse as a stop. When a stage arrived, the Captain would be there to greet the passengers and let them know they could procure refreshment at his bar during their brief stopover. Many of these customers took a layover at the Queen and caught a later stage home.

Another remarkable feature of the house was that it was built upon one of the few large stones ever found in Sussex County. Geologically, lower Delaware is composed of sandy soils left behind by the seas. No glacier ever dumped its load of stones there, so it created quite a stir when the Amish men digging the basement struck a large green rock.

Rather than move the house or attempt to bust up the stone, the Captain directed the workmen to lay the foundations of the south side of the house directly on the rock, "Upon this rock I'll build my house...at least she'll never list to starboard."

Consequently, the house only had a half a cellar, for most of the other half was built on solid rock. Being irregular in shape, though, the rock didn't occupy the entire volume under its half of the house. There was an area on the south side of about eight by twenty feet that had been excavated, and the Dutchman had a secret room built within. It was accessed through a set of shelves that swung aside to reveal a doorway. It became a welcome way station on the underground-railroad after the Captain fell in with Quakers and became drawn into abolitionist activities.

The Captain died at eighty-five during the Civil War and the house passed to the Madame, who had become his common-law wife. She eventually sold it to her successor as Madame, and so a chain of female ownership was established. Though it changed hands many times since then, it had always remained a bordello.

Everyone left their mark on the place, and though it was still painted the original shade of yellow, the veranda now sported plastic lawn furniture instead of the wicker that the Captain had procured. A gradual decrepitude had descended comfortably on the Queen of Sheeba.

The figurehead had long ago been set ablaze by temperance marchers led by hatchet-wielding alcolytes of Carrie Nation. Though the symbol of its identity was gone, the tradition of decorating the house continued on, even if it was with a different tone. The lawn was host to birdbaths, garden gnomes, plastic deer, gazing balls, a fountain with a Venus on a halfshell, and a pair of lawn jockeys holding up their lanterns like Diogenes looking for an honest man. Plastic flamingoes flanked the half-buried wagon wheels in front of the rhododendrons, and the rotting spokes supported morning glories.

Inside the house, plastic fishnets, decorative signal flags, and a table lighter in the shape of a ship's wheel had been put on display alongside the Captain's dusty and slowly moldering legacy. Despite the lack of authenticity of the recent decorative additions, the place still retained its nautical theme.

Franklin finally tore his thoughts from his anger over the roadhouse and turned his attention back to the tape.

While steering with his knees, he raced away from Wilmington down the DuPont Highway using his hands to rip open the envelope and fish out the cassette. Franklin regarded the tape with anxiety. He feared for the rest of his legacy after being deprived of the coveted roadhouse, "I hope that sonuvabitch didn't give the rest to charity...it'd be just like that old man to take it with him."

What if this tape was but one last cruel joke from the grave? Several frightening scenarios flashed through his mind as he anticipated hearing his father's voice. All of them involved Wayne sabotaging the company and Franklin losing his inheritance.

He inserted the cassette into the slot, but before pushing it all the way into the player he hesitated, for the radio had just started playing the new Pardoe Poultry commercial. Franklin had written and produced it before Wayne's death; in fact their final argument had been over this particular promotional campaign.

He listened with great satisfaction as Rodney the Rooster began to sing the jingle: *"Great Caesar's ghost, if you want the best chicken, your pal Rodney the Rooster says, 'Just buy Pardoe.'"*

Franklin was very proud of his Rodney the Rooster creation. He was so taken with himself that he momentarily forgot his father's tape. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel in time to the background music, as Rodney narrated.

"Trust me folks, the secret ingredient Mr. Pardoe feeds his chickens gives the meat an all natural golden tone, and instead of sticking you with those skimpy wing parts, we toss an extra pair of juicy legs into each pack of chicken."

Franklin sang along with the big ending in his nasal contralto, *"If you want the best chicken, then just buy Pardoe."*

The good mood temporarily induced by the goofy jingle dispelled as Franklin rounded the bend that

brought the entrance of the A-OK campground into view. The rag-tag collection of ancient recreational vehicles on the north bank of Blackbird Creek, were permanent homes for many lower economic tier families. After passing the campground, Franklin drove past the home of his acquaintance, Eddie Brunswick. He wondered if Eddie was troubled by the riff-raff from the campsite, but the heir to Pardoe Poultry was unable to dwell long on any concerns other than his own.

An obsessively methodical worker and thinker, Franklin reviewed the progress he'd made with the company so far. He had assumed de facto control the day after Wayne's demise and immediately launched his promotional campaign. Some of the long-time managers chaffed at his aggressive tactics. Having been kept in corporate limbo, he had remained an unknown to the executive structure of the company, some of whom didn't even know Wayne had a living son.

But Franklin knew them all.

On the day of Wayne Pardoe's death, they began to know the son. Franklin arrived at the emergency board meeting bearing a notarized proxy granting him the voting rights to his father's stock. No one disputed the legitimacy of the document, so Franklin voted himself interim CEO and president of Pardoe Poultry. His stewardship of the company was now proceeding according to plan, but a dead man could still deprive him of his prize by what was said or not said on the tape.

"He wouldn't sink the company just to get at me," Franklin reasoned out loud while trying to imagine what was on his father's cassette, "but I've got to know how he could afford to put four legs into every package and I don't know anything about flash freezing."

Franklin had assumed that he would find the details for the standard operating procedures among his father's papers, but there had been no such luck. Pardoe Farms' flash freezing unit used only a fraction of the electricity of conventional freezing technology and had no moving parts, so it was vital to keep it operating. He looked at the tape as if contemplating buried treasure.

To keep the enterprise competitive, Franklin needed Wayne's trade secrets. He now had the tiller, but wondered if things were shipshape enough to navigate these waters without foundering. He hoped that the tape contained what he had been looking for. "If I can't fathom how to keep the flash freezing machine operating, we'll go under in no time."

The development of flash freezing had been the genesis of Wayne's fortune, allowing him to ship chickens nationwide via insulated boxcars in the period before reliable refrigerated transport. It was during those days that Wayne had staked out Pardoe Poultry's dominant position in the market, though flash freezing wasn't his only advantage.

His company not only beat the competition's price, but within two years Wayne began throwing an extra pair of drumsticks in with every package of parts—a ploy his rivals could not afford to top. Wayne ruled the roost when it came to chicken.

"Them chickens is froze so solid I could send them by stagecoach..." Wayne had been fond of crowing, and he would demonstrate it by driving sixteen-penny nails with chickens fresh out of the freezing unit. Newly dressed birds went in one end of the six-foot-long tube and emerged completely and profoundly frozen from the other.

None of the internal mechanism was visible to the select group of operators, though they could hear it gently humming. Those chosen to run and maintain the secret equipment were migrants hand-picked by Wayne. They were mostly old timers with poor eyesight, no command of the English language, and so grateful to get a job that they followed Señor Pardoe's instructions never to speak of what they saw.

Wayne's innovative equipment meant nothing special to them for they were surrounded by marvels. With their primitive level of technology, the extraordinarily efficient device was no more miraculous to them than a flush toilet or an electric can opener. They were just as amazed at an ordinary refrigerator as the flash freezer.

As he drove the truck, Franklin winced as a childhood memory bubbled to the surface of his consciousness, roused by his hate for his father. His first impulse was to repress it, but then he decided to allow it to rise and envelope his thoughts. It replenished his core of resentment and justified his joy at Wayne's death.

In Franklin's memory, he was ten-years-old. He'd been hiding under his bed after having watched a scary horror movie. He heard his stepmother busily cleaning up the kitchen when the screen door in the living room slammed, announcing that his father had arrived.

"Is that you, Wayne, dear?"

"Yep, it's me, Agatha. I'm finally home."

"Would you look in on little Franklin? I just put him to bed."

"What's wrong with the little twerp, now?"

"He was watching one of them science fiction movies and now he's scared to close his eyes. Please have a little talk with him and calm him down."

Franklin cringed in real terror now, for he was even more afraid of Wayne than any alien. He held his breath as he counted his father's boot steps on the stairs. The door was flung open with a violence that pushed the doorknob through the plaster as it swung on its hinges and slammed into the wall.

"Come on now you little sissy...get the hell out from under the bed and get under them covers before I blister your hide!"

"But Daddy, I'm scared...the movie was scary."

"It wasn't near as scary as the wupping you're gonna get if you keep this up. How I ever sired such a coward and a weakling for a son is beyond me. Your older brother never acted like this, if only you had what it took to be more like him...but you don't and I ain't gonna put up with it...now either get your ass out from under that bed, or I'll drag you out by your ears!"

"Yes, Dad." Franklin was into bed quick enough that Wayne didn't feel obliged to cuff him.

"That's it...now git to sleep...and no more of this shaking and crying." Wayne stomped his way to the door and turned to make sure Franklin was still in compliance with his orders.

"Dad?" Franklin whimpered in a desperate little voice.

"What?"

"Can I have a hug?"

"You're too old for that kinda foolishness. Now go to sleep."

"Dad?"

"Now what?"

"Could you please leave the light on?"

"We can't be wasting no electricity. Them kilowatts don't grow on trees."

As Franklin savored the pain of his recollection, his knuckles went white from the tightness of his grip on the steering wheel, and the noise he made as he ground his teeth was loud enough to be audible above the radio. He didn't relax until he fast forwarded his memories to his father's funeral and recalled the pleasure with which he had stood by the casket to accept the condolences of everyone who'd attended the viewing.

Unwilling to wait any longer to know his fate, he pushed the cassette home and turned up the volume. The first sounds were of Wayne clearing his throat. Even from the grave this sent shivers down Franklin's spine, for it had been the inevitable prelude to every verbal lambasting from his father.

"Well boy, if you're listening to this then I reckon the joke's on me. I only left this tape in case something went wrong with my plans, so I guess it did. Just to set the record straight, the last thing I ever wanted to do was to leave the company to you. But Wayne Jr. died.

"I know you just came from that vulture, Swindell's, office where you heard you inherited the whole ball of wax...minus the whore house, which I promised to Irma years ago...but what you don't know is that I meant to be the one sittin' there inheriting it all. Now, I know that sounds strange, but just bear with me. It's tempting to be a sore loser and leave you to flounder on your own, but by dumb luck you came out on top. I can't stand the thought of the company going down the tubes, so I'm gonna clue you in..."

"Dumb luck, hell!" Franklin exclaimed, then fell silent lest he miss anything important.

"Remember when you were a little kid how I used to like to scare you with them stories about that little green squid-like feller from outer space? Well they were all completely true. Many years ago, before you were born, a big silver space ship crashed right before my eyes while I was sittin' out behind the hatchery. There was only one little feller in it and he told me he needed my help or he would surely die. Naturally, I did the Christian thing and helped him out.

"In order to save him, I had to learn how to activate somethin' he called a stasis chamber. So, he gave me some electronical gadget he called a handbook to learn from. It looked like a toilet snake with an old timey telephone receiver connected to it. I stuck one end of it on my forehead and on the other I had to push a little button. It pumped everything I needed to know right into my brain. When it was done, I knew how to work every piece of equipment on his space ship.

"The space feller was named MurGhoo. Still is named MurGhoo 'cause he's out in the hatchery in a cryochamber.

That would be a flash freezer from your point of view. In fact, his whole space ship's out there, though it ain't much good anymore. MurGhoo's from a planet called Blithos...or Vulgaroon. I ain't quite certain on that point. Sometimes he says one. Sometimes he says the other. He ain't been quite right since he crashed back in '35.

"Well, the long and the short of it is that MurGhoo has a shit-pile of them handbooks. Hell, half of that stuff is useless as far as I'm concerned, anti-particles and phase transducers and such. But I did get me two ideas from them that made me rich. Flash freezing and my greatest invention—four-legged chickens!

"Course, the alien helped me out from time to time, though he couldn't stay awake but for a few hours a year. Putting him into stasis gave me the idea for flash freezing. Then when he told me how to make him a host body, I realized that here was my destiny. I expected it to look like another squid. But it didn't. We set us up a lab out in the old Boyertown step van. MurGhoo had me start with an ordinary chicken. Then with this bioengineering stuff, we changed it into something that looked more like a little dinosaur. You know the kind. Them ones that walk on their back legs and hold their arms out in front of them. That's when it hit me. I could stop the process a couple a steps early and there it would be—a chicken with an extra pair of drumsticks. The extra pair was a bit smaller, I admit, but I was working on fixing that part. I guess I won't be finishing it now.

"Even though I made a body that would've worked for him, it worked better for me by putting me an extra pair of drumsticks ahead of the competition... besides, he ain't the only one of them critters. He says there's one hundred forty-four thousand of 'em all stored on crystals like sound on a record...I'll be damned if I'm gonna be responsible for having a passle of aliens roaming the Earth. If they can make a four-legged chicken, imagine what else they could do.

"So, I've left MurGhoo asleep in stasis since 1950. Now, if you want to keep ahead of your rivals like I did, you're gonna have to wake him up and get him to explain to you how to use them handbooks. He's probably going to be pissed 'cause I never transferred him into a new host body, so you're gonna have to make up some story if you want to get him to help you. And I've got their transfer ray gun out in the workshop of the hatchery. Just for safekeeping.

"Well, those are the Pardoe Poultry trade secrets. They're your secrets now.

"Before I go, let me give you one word of advice. Don't download a single one of them aliens. They're too damn smart...likely to take over the whole goddamn planet. That's why I kept MurGhoo on ice.

"Now, as far as what I said at the beginning of the tape about inheriting the company from myself...well I was planning to slip you a mickey one of these days and then use the alien's ray gun to transfer my self into your body...that would've been the first step along the way of me livin' forever...but I guess I just put it off too long. But, I did learn the answer to that age-old question...which came first—the chicken or the egg? Since I cloned the four-legged chickens from the skin cells of reg'lar chickens, they was raised in test tubes instead of being hatched from eggs. And even though I still make clones for experimental purposes that way, for the most part I let nature take its course and raise the four-leggers that are going to market the old fashioned way...by lettin' 'em lay eggs and hatching 'em in an incubator. So I can tell you without a doubt that the chicken came first."

Except for a hiss, the tape went silent.

"Son of a bitch!" Franklin exclaimed. "I knew he'd screw me in the end. What kind of a cockamamie story is this? I needed trade secrets and all he gave me was a science fiction story. And it wasn't even a good one." Franklin started to throw the tape out of the window, but he hesitated and put it into his vest pocket.

Chapter 8

Pardoe Farms, Delaware

March 15, 2008

Chip Off the Old Block

Swerving to avoid the gaggles of Malaguans that were strung out along the road, Franklin blazed down the Harriston Pike. As he passed the American Legion Post and prepared to turn into Pardoe Poultry, he could see that a great crowd blocked the crossroads at the Queen of Sheba. Driving up the lane of the now uninhabited Pardoe family home in Harriston, he cursed his dead father as the bumps pounded the truck's suspension. Despite Wayne's success, he'd never paved the long driveway, for he'd always maintained that the ruts and mud discouraged uninvited guests.

The Pardoe farm, like any other in Sussex County, stood starkly amidst the flat coastal plain and was roughly divided into sections by the thin lines of trees that formed the windbreaks. The bare branches shook in the March wind.

Franklin parked the car in front of the house. He fetched the key from under the Stuckey's souvenir welcome mat and opened the front door. After taking a quick look around the house, which was decorated with photographs of his deceased older brother, he walked out the back in disgust and made for the hatchery, which was a large wooden building grayed with age and lack of paint. It had been the first of Wayne's commercial chicken houses and so had witnessed the beginning and the near end of Pardoe Poultry. Franklin walked the same path his father had taken on the afternoon that cast the fate of the Pardoe family back in 1935.

Convinced that his father had taken leave of his senses before making the tape, Franklin resolved to see just how bad of a joke the old man had pulled on him. The most outlandish of Wayne's claims, apart from the talk of witnessing an alien crash-landing in the first place, was the elder Pardoe's claims to be cloning chickens and manipulating their genetic structure. Try as he might, Franklin could not envision his father performing sophisticated genetic engineering procedures at all, let alone in a makeshift laboratory in the back of an old step van.

He slipped around the old hatchery to where the neglected Boyertown rested. "Secret lab my ass," he said out loud when he saw its rusting body sitting on flat, cracked tires. "I should have known better than to let him send me on this wild goose chase. What kind of science could one perform in a derelict truck with no one's help but migrant workers? Bull shit!" But then he was given momentary pause when his eyes lit upon the four hundred forty-volt electric cable running from a big transformer on a pole to a breaker box attached to the side of the truck. Intrigued, he slid a reluctant door noisily open. Inside, a dim light illuminated racks of glass flasks.

Franklin's eyes widened in amazement. Embryonic chickens in various stages of development floated in a viscous fluid inside the glass flasks. The racks of flasks sat segregated into separate rows. The less developed chicks were still connected to yolk sacs, and the more mature looked like hatchlings. They appeared remarkable to Franklin's quick glance only because of their powder blue down.

Each container was fitted with a black rubber stopper that had a tiny hose running through it. The hoses connected to a device mounted in the equipment panel. It emitted a pleasant hum as it pumped nutrients to the flasks. After studying the gauges and dials Franklin could see that the interior of the van was climate-controlled to maintain a constant temperature and humidity. *I'll be damned*, Franklin thought, *this really is some kind of laboratory...but why go to all this trouble instead of just letting them develop in the shell?*

Sitting on the corner of the bench to Franklin's right was a stack of composition books. He could see

that they were labeled in ink and written in his father's hand. Each was titled "laboratory log" and dated. His hands shook as he pulled the oldest book from the bottom of the pile and began reading. Its cover bore the dates *May 23, 1935 through December 31, 1940.*

May 23, 1935

Have taken the spare parts for the cryochamber mechanism from a storage locker on the ship and rigged up a machine like MurGhoo's stasis chamber that freezes a chicken rock hard in less than a second.

This is it! Franklin realized. He went on to read how his father's first flash-frozen chicken stayed frozen for five days while stored in a crate lined only with ¼ inch cork sheets. Franklin paged through the notebook until he came to its last entry.

December 31, 1940

With those strange magnets I removed from the space ship, I now can run the conveyor at nearly three times the speed with just a ½ horsepower motor.

Wayne had moved the cryochamber from the ship to the tool room, because the ship was too small inside. He'd also moved the ship's power generator, which operated on cold fusion, to the same room and powered the entire building with it.

It had occurred to Wayne that the fusion technology could revolutionize power generation and earn him a fortune, but he preferred to redeem himself for his failure in the chicken shipping business rather than entering the energy business.

And redeem himself he did—becoming a success shipping frozen chickens nationwide. During Wayne's periodic awakenings of MurGhoo, the Blithian implored him to develop a body for his people. He gave Wayne the instructions for changing chickens into a suitable Blithian-like host body—a four-legged chicken. The bit of genetic engineering MurGhoo proposed was to substitute an extra set of legs, with the feet altered to serve as dexterous hands, for the wings. Wayne listened carefully and followed MurGhoo's instructions to the letter. As a man of vision, Wayne Pardoe saw the advantages of an extra set of drumsticks on every chicken. "Only the hired help eat wings." This was in the days before Buffalo wings.

The chicken farmer turned scientist would wake MurGhoo about once a year to try and milk other useful information from the ailing alien and also because he derived a twisted pleasure in holding an entire people in his power. When MurGhoo would ask if the bodies were ready, Wayne would claim to be making slow but steady progress that was almost completed. "It's slow going little buddy—I don't think that teaching machine of yours works quite so good on Earth brains. Least not mine, but don't worry. I'll get it figured out." Under the guise of preparing for when the development of the body was complete, Pardoe concentrated his probing of the Blithian's knowledge to transoccupancy. "Gotta make sure we get you and your folks swapped over without a hitch."

As Franklin thumbed through the later books, Wayne's interest had been focused on transoccupancy. He had been tinkering with the ray gun, using the few pebbles of gahootinite at his disposal.

Perusing the most recent of his father's notebooks, Franklin came across Wayne's insidious plot to take control of his body.

I plan to run an experiment like them NASA guys. I'll use a test monkey and download it into one of these new four-legged chickens. I'll learn the monkey some special tricks a forehand, and if the chicken can do them on command after I download the monkey, I'll know it works and use the rest of the gahootinite for myself.

Wayne had bought a spider monkey that he named Franklin. He trained it to climb up on top of the cryochamber and get a banana on the command, "Franklin, I'm hungry."

The monkey would fetch the banana, perch on Wayne's shoulder, peel the banana and share it with his master by feeding him little monkey handfuls.

The simian Franklin was going to be Wayne's guinea pig as his first experiment in transoccupancy. He planned to download the monkey into a four-legged chicken. By teaching the simian Franklin a set of

unique tricks, Wayne established a means to test if his transfers of the animal were successful.

"Shit!" Franklin exclaimed. He slammed the composition book down on the workbench and a cloud of dust rose up before the window. *That crazy bastard was meaning to work up to transferring himself.* Franklin stared at the dust as it floated through the beams of light slanting through the window.

I thought he was just a crude hick, but he was really world-class in his deviousness. Franklin admitted incipient admiration. *I must be a chip off the old block.*

Enlightened by his reading, he took a closer look at the contents of the flasks. All the chicks had an extra pair of slightly smaller upper legs where their wings ought to be. The appendages looked more like arms than legs and the feet resembled three fingered hands with one digit opposing the other two. Had the light been brighter, Franklin would have seen that they were all females.

If dad wasn't lying about this, then maybe there is an alien locked away in the hatchery. He quickly backed out of the cramped confines of the step van and ran to the doublewide hatchery doors. As he unlocked them he began to understand why he had never been permitted into this building as a child. He was surprised to see that most of the interior was filled with a battered metal vessel that was as long as a semi-trailer and cigar shaped. He circumambulated the scorched hulk and found nothing earthly about it.

That sonuvabitch really was telling the truth! Franklin laid his hand upon the silvery metal skin. After all that he'd seen he was starting to run out of alternatives to becoming a believer.

Behind the space ship, a door led to a small room where electrical motors could be heard running. This was the workshop. When he opened the door, Franklin saw what had to be the ray gun clamped in a vise. Scattered across the top of the workbench were several devices that fit Wayne's description of a handbook, "I bet this thing really works," he muttered aloud.

Then Franklin had a disturbing realization, as the pieces of a sinister puzzle fell together. If what Wayne had said about cloning, genetic engineering, and the space ship were all true, then it was also true that Wayne had fully intended to steal his son's body. A shudder ran down Franklin's spine as he considered the fact he had narrowly missed having his person serve as the first stepping-stone on the way to Wayne Pardoe's immortality. It was like having a close encounter with a vampire.

Franklin picked up one of the several "handbooks" that were lying on the bench. He ran his fingers over it nervously as he gathered his courage. "What would have worked for him can work for me," Franklin reasoned and determined to obtain the same knowledge that had served his father so well. With trembling fingers he placed the transducer of the device against his forehead and prepared to push the button. He hesitated, still afraid to take the plunge into the unknown. But now that it was within his grasp, he was driven to pursue the immortality that his father had almost grasped.

"Goodbye, cruel world." Franklin exercised his typically twisted sense of humor out loud and pressed the button. The handbook resonated with an oscillation like the sound track of a 1930's era Frankenstein movie.

At first, he thought that he'd been hit by lightning, but Franklin soon realized that the waves of energy that convulsed his body were bolts of consciousness. The handbook was rewriting his brain's operating system in a way that opened up the unused portion of Franklin's mind. After he recovered he repeated the process with each of the other modules. The handbooks wrought a profound change in Franklin Pardoe. A not unintelligent man to begin with, he found himself fluent in the Blithian language and possessed of knowledge and reasoning far beyond normal human capacity.

Now that he knew what his father had said was true, he wanted to meet the alien. He went to the tool room door, which was located at the far end of the workshop, and found it padlocked. Franklin put his hand on the steel door and felt the vibrations from the sound that emanated from the room on the other side. He went back to the workbench and rummaged through the drawers until he found a ring of keys. Trying them one by one he was at last rewarded by the lock popping open. He opened the door, flicked on the light, and looked around. The room was draped with cobwebs and all of its surfaces were covered with a thick layer of dust. Franklin knew, with his newly acquired knowledge, that the system of small vessels connected by pipes and wires was a fusion power generator. But his immediate interest was in the device next to it that looked like an old-fashioned steam cabinet.

This he knew to be a cryochamber. Franklin took a handkerchief out of his pocket and cleaned away the decades of grit and dead bugs that encrusted its control panel. He pushed the big red button on the front of it and, with a 'whirr' and a 'cachunk', the cover rolled back to reveal a withered green form not

much bigger than a partially deflated beach ball strapped into a reclining seat sized to accommodate the creature's numerous tentacles. It appeared startled as if it had been awakened suddenly from a dream. The being lifted its sac-like bald head from the cushioned support and asked, "Is that you Wayne?"

"I'm Franklin Pardoe, Wayne Pardoe's second son."

"Where is Wayne?"

"He passed away."

The green form struggled to move closer. "Passed away?"

"Deceased."

"Oh. I am sorry to hear this, Franklin, and surprised, too. He'd told me that he planned on downloading himself into another body."

"He was caught by surprise," Franklin said with a nervous smile.

The creature sighed. "May GaHoot breathe gently upon him. So your name is Franklin. I don't remember Wayne Pardoe mentioning your name. You must have left the nest long ago. My name is MurGhoo."

Chapter 0, Continued

Thresher Pub

Where time is irrelevant

Wayne and MurGhoo

Captain Teach, commonly known as Blackbeard, slouched on his stool, with one elbow on the bar and his head propped on his fist. "So, if I be hearin' ye correctly, Franklin's father stole the secret to immortal life from creatures that sailed here from another world and then he proceeded to found a great fortune."

"That he did."

"Yet e'en though Wayne had left a legacy, he was not well liked by his son."

"And why should he? The old man planned on stealing Franklin's body as his first installment in immortality. Franklin wouldn't have lived to enjoy his inheritance, if he hadn't done his brother, Wayne Jr., in first."

"Sblood!" Blackbeard exclaimed. "He was gonna use some kind of gun to shoot himself into his own son's body?"

"Kind of. The ray gun would have sucked the consciousness right out of Wayne and plopped it into his son, displacing Franklin into God knows what limbo. Wayne Pardoe was a selfish old man, who didn't care for anyone except for how they played into his own plans. Even his own son."

"I admire a man who sets his moral compass to suit the weather." Blackbeard straightened up and scanned the horizon for his next drink.

"Old Wayne was a malevolent bastard who never varied his compass." The chicken chuckled. "It was always set on pure evil."

"A fine helmsman holds to his course."

"And if the treatment of his son wasn't enough to condemn him to hell, the way he made a prisoner of that poor injured alien would. He locked him away in that freezing cabinet in the hatchery for over seventy years, and only opened it for the purpose of squeezing more information out of him."

"Ahh, that Wayne was a master 'terry-gator, lockin' that little feller up in the cold and dark to extract his secrets. What son wouldn't admire a man sich as that?" The Captain spied the Stolychnyha vodka and pointed for Wilbur's benefit. "That's how I got the ancient Amatl secret of processin' chicle from them Indios along the Spanish Main... I packed a few of 'em into a lazaretto and in less than a fortnight I had me that recipe fer the gummy stuff."

"How did Wayne garner all this information in so short a time?" Wilbur asked as he handed the vodka bottle to Blackbeard, along with two shot glasses and returned to polishing the champagne flutes.

"The little green varmint had machines that could imprint knowledge directly onto your brain like writing words on paper," the chicken said, as it accepted a shot glass from the Captain and held it as the pirate poured.

"The devil, ye say," Blackbeard interjected.

"*Nah strovnya!*" The chicken threw back the vodka. "It's incredible what Wayne learned from those machines. The old man could have been a billionaire many times over if he'd gone into the power generation business. The power plant design he got from MurGhoo was so efficient that it ran the whole farm, yet it fit in the tool room of the hatchery. Heavy, black four-forty wires snaked from the hatchery to every corner of the farm."

"But he preferred to be cock of the walk in the poultry business. He was a hardheaded man who was happier making millions crushing his chicken-selling competition, than billions in another field that left

them alone.”

Blackbeard refilled their shot glasses. “Ye first said these Blithians looked like giant lizards, yet now ye say the space feller were a green squid. Which be it?” The captain and the chicken clinked glasses then drained them.

“Both.” The chicken cocked its head towards its empty glass. “As I told you, the Blithians could transfer themselves from body to body. When their home planet dried up, they traveled the cosmos, with only their leader possessing a body, and the rest of the crew stashed away in crystals. They would transfer themselves into whatever species proved handy whenever they reached their destination—until they crashed here and fell under the power of Wayne Pardoe.”

“What became of them crystals?” Blackbeard asked as he filled the glasses.

“Franklin downloaded a few of them and then smashed many of the rest.”

“’Sblood!” Blackbeard was shocked. “Why would he bring any of ’em back?”

“To have someone help him master the transference technology.”

“Whose bodies did he use?”

“Chickens.” The tale-teller paused. “Like the ones Wayne engineered for an extra set of drumsticks.” The pirate’s jaw dropped as he looked the chicken over from head to toe.

“And, no, I’m not one of the Blithians,” the bird stated as it drained its glass.

“Then what be ye?” Blackbeard recovered enough to down the vodka he’d poured. “Fersooth, yer no ordinary fowl.”

“It’s all part of my tale, so listen up.”

Chapter 9

The Crossroads of Harriston Pike and Route 16

April 5, 2008

Ground Zero of Redemption

Hector and Jorge took turns looking through the antique spyglass they had found propped in a corner of the cupola. They watched the progress of a group of their fellow Malaguans marching north towards the Roadhouse.

"Why, that spyglass has always been there," Irma had told them when she'd first conducted them to the lookout. "You can use it but make sure you put it back when you come down."

With the group still distant, they turned the telescope around to face directly across Route 16, the former Thankless Road. They watched Franklin Pardoe scurrying between the house and the old step van. There was scant little other movement in the Pardoe Poultry complex. The long one-story chicken houses were untended and the barn was dark. A half-mile beyond and on the same side of the Pike as Pardoe Poultry, they could see the American Legion Post. Martin was stationed a few hundred yards south of it to warn the pilgrims to pass it by on the opposite side of the road. The boys at the Post didn't savor 'furriners'.

The Malaguans were a close-knit community. Descendants of the Mesoamerican Amatl Indians, they had never in their long history been rulers of any domain. Beaten by the Mayans, conquered by Aztecs, enslaved by the Spanish, and then besieged by refugee Nazis after World War II, they were one thing if nothing else—they were survivors.

Hector and Jorge turned their eyes back to the crowd milling about at the crossroads. They attempted counting them again, a task made difficult by the steady influx of new arrivals. Small groups and individual pilgrims had been trickling in for weeks, but the population at the shrine had doubled in hours on the previous day, when a wave of believers arrived in a quarter mile long caravan. As weary as they were, the pilgrims rushed to pay homage to Clay. Afterwards they cooled their huarache-clad feet at Irma's outside spigot.

"In this first group I count ten by ten." Jorge had the glass to his eye at the moment. "I see at least two more groups beyond them...but they are too far to get a good look."

Down the middle of the road, a hundred men, women, and children, who had walked the entire distance from Malagua, marched in loose formation while singing ancient songs and playing improvised drums and reed pipes. Even though they had traveled on foot over three thousand miles, the children still ran about distracted by spontaneous games inspired by the discovery of new treasure scoured from trash cans or land fills.

"I hope Martin can get them to quiet down before they get to the Legion Post." Hector tapped Jorge on the shoulder to signal that it was his turn with the spyglass. "Those drunken gringos will not like the parade."

Hector looked out over the newly plowed cornfields that stretched out as far as he could see to the horizon. The only trees he saw, besides the shade trees around the roadhouse and the Pardoe farm, were the narrow windbreaks that marked the borders of the fields.

He said a silent prayer that there would be no trouble, for there was no place where his people could take cover, as he tried to handicap the possibility of confrontation. It was still early, and probably a safe bet that the worst of the American Legion's membership wouldn't be getting up before noon today. "There probably aren't enough of them awake yet to make any real trouble."

The previous night he, Martin, and Jorge had watched as the town's prominent sons came and went to the Legion Post in celebration of the Reverend Rocktower's acquittal on fraud charges.

"It was my word against theirs," Ernie had beamed to his fellow Legionaires. "I said to the judge, who are you gonna believe? Me, a man of the cloth? Or a bunch of widows and orphans?"

Since Reverend Ernie wasn't one of those phony non-drinking preachers, everyone got into the spirit and followed his example. They drank all the liquor in the legion hall, and at four in the morning called Brant; he opened the liquor store and sold them a case of Carstairs half-pints. The party broke up at seven-thirty in the morning when the case was a carton of dead soldiers.

An hour later, the first pilgrims to travel by bus had arrived. The 1951 General Motors coach, which had once served in the Greyhound fleet, now bore the remains of six previous paint jobs, had baggage lashed to the roof, and smoked badly as it rolled to a stop and disgorged its passengers. Three-score people had pooled their resources to charter the bus from Malagua, and they told of many thousands they had passed on the road who were walking to the shrine. It appeared a mass migration under way.

All Malaguans felt they were caught up in a tide of events with spiritual repercussions. Indeed, two ideologies were running a parallel course to the culmination of their destinies and the fulfillment of their prophecies. The stories told in the biblical book of Revelation and the Toltecan Codex were in concordance. Followers of both faiths, the people at the shrine felt that they were part of events analogous to the time of Christ.

There were many more who wanted to be at ground zero of redemption. They thronged the roads that led to the shrine, and their pace always quickened once the arch of the shrine came into view. From their vantage point, Hector and Jorge could see no end to the procession of pilgrims.

Hector's mother had arrived that morning with a group headed by Padre Luis. Like a latter-day Peter the Hermit, this itinerant priest had spread the word of the visions throughout Malagua. Through urging the faithful to take up the pilgrim's staff, he had set a vast portion of his country's peasantry on the path to the site of the miracle at *Nos Madre del Harriston*.

Jorge shook his head in amazement at the stream of people, "Where are they all going to sleep?"

Hector took off his straw hat and mopped his brow with a red bandana, "Padre Luis has already bargained with the owner of the soy bean fields across the street for permission to use his land. He traded the gold cross from the village chapel. You know, the one with the emeralds that had hung above the altar since the days of the conquistadors. He said it was at last put to a fitting purpose."

Jorge pulled out his comb and carefully navigated it through his coif. "That is good, for I've seen many people trampling the soy bean sprouts, and I was beginning to worry that the farmer would call the policia."

"Why bother with that comb, there are no señoritas up here."

"You're just jealous." Jorge snatched Hector's hat and rubbed his bald pate.

Hector laughed and responded by mussing Jorge's hair. "Now my hands are all greasy...I must wash them."

While Hector and Jorge teased each other, Padre Luis had been quite busy. The only authority figures that most of the peasants had ever known in their remote and isolated hamlets were their village priests. So Padre Luis was listened to and obeyed when he started organizing things.

He'd sent a group to the dump to gather building materials for shanties, and he set another group to digging slit latrines. As Hector and Jorge watched, Padre Luis was pacing off the layout of a shantytown. His helpers drove in stakes to mark the tiny plots.

The Padre had been pleased to see what the Malaguans had wrought at the shrine previous to his arrival. He gave his blessing to their efforts and sanctioned Hector, Jorge, and Martin as guardians of the shrine and protectors of the visionary, Clay Stool.

One of the tasks that had devolved to the three was caring for the ever-growing treasure hoard composed of the offerings brought by the pilgrims. Almost without exception, new arrivals would go immediately to the shrine, push their way to the dais, and lay their valuables at the feet of the prophet to pay homage to Clay's gift. His protectors were slowly filling up their humble trailer with the treasure.

Clay was pleased that so many people gave him presents, but he did not grasp the nature of the precious objects laid before him. He was more interested in the liquid offerings that accompanied the tribute. Seated in his Barcalounger, Clay would attack each new bottle, flask, or crock with enthusiastic

gusto.

He drank the finest wines and liquors just as quickly and with as little reflection as the most humble homebrew. Each day the prophet happily consumed the steady stream of libation until he was drunk enough to crawl down the road to the grease spot and speak with the feathered Madonna. That wouldn't be for hours, allowing Hector and his fellow guardians ample spyglass time.

Hector wiped his hands with his bandana before aiming the telescope down on the crowd. Jorge touched up his hair from Hector's mussing. "We will be renting rooms in the roadhouse soon, for our trailer will soon be too full for us to reach our beds. I don't think anyone would bother it during the day, but how will we protect the shrine's treasure if we are not there at night?"

"The door doesn't lock, but if we shut Tomas inside at night, he will guard the trailer."

Tomas was a large, faded red Chesapeake Bay retriever, who had been born with a withered right front leg. The three Malaguans had been fishing at Yoder's Mill Pond when its owner had shown up to drown the puppy, but was convinced to stay his hand and give up the dog for a five-dollar bill.

Though slower than a normal dog, he could still hop fast enough on his three legs to catch and bite any human he wished to. He'd taken to spending his days lying on the dais, next to Clay, who would absentmindedly scratch behind the dog's ears.

Though poor farmers, most of the Malaguan peasants had some bits of gold or precious stone that had been handed down from the times of the pyramid builders and had survived the Spanish conquest.

Pre-Columbian gems and carvings, doubloons and pieces of eight were brought as offerings to the prophet. Robbed from ancient graves, plowed up in fields, and washed up on the shore from wrecked galleons, the legacy of their people was carried to the place that would see the fulfillment of the prophecy carved in stone during times long forgotten. The Malaguans thought nothing was too good for he who spoke to the Mother of their God.

Hector and Jorge heard a heavy tread on the stairs periodically broken by the sound of labored breathing.

"It must be Martin." Jorge nudged Hector. "He is burdened about his middle with many bowls of beans and rice."

As the two of them laughed at their friend's expense, Martin appeared sweating in the door of the cupola.

Hector thought that Martin looked troubled. "Is something wrong?"

Martin gasped between breaths. "Did you not hear? Señor Wayne has died...he's been dead for a week...but since we've been away from the farm, no one knew until now."

Hector clasped his face in his hands. "This could be a bad sign."

Martin sat down on the floor. "I hear his son, Franklin, is boss now."

Jorge shook his head. "I wonder, what kind of man is he? His father was a good patron. Harsh, but predictable. Let us hope the avocado does not fall far from the tree."

Hector shrugged. "Time will tell."

Martin had regained his breath and spoke forcefully, "What does it matter what kind of man he is? When the prophecies of the ancient Toltecan stone and the *Testamente Nova* are fulfilled, we will all be borne to our just reward in paradise. Is this not the teaching of both our ancients and the Holy Catholic Church? Let us pray that it all occurs sooner rather than later...I am tired of working for my daily bread."

Jorge broke the solemn mood. "If you didn't eat so much you could work less!"

Ordinarily, Jorge would be too quick for Martin, but in the confines of the cupola, Martin soon had Jorge in a bear hug. He squeezed Jorge until he begged for mercy and upon releasing him, Martin said, "I eat to keep strong."

They halted their horseplay abruptly and gazed in wonderment at the approach of a CNN truck with a satellite dish upon its roof.

Chapter 10

*Vatican City, Italy
April 10, 2008*

Cardinal Points

It had been six-and-a-half months since that rainy day when Cardinal Guy Fuquois had his heart attack. It had come as a shock to both him and his physician, who had given Fuquois a clean bill of health after his annual physical, just days before the onset of cardiac arrest. The shock of the event was compounded by the death of the aged Pope Thaddeus, shortly after the Cardinal's infarction.

The Cardinal had recuperated rapidly, and much to the dismay of his physician, was back to his duties in record time, though in deference to his doctor he kept shorter hours than was his wont. He'd spent a scant two weeks resting in the privacy of his Vatican apartment after his release from the hospital—even during this time he'd not been idle.

Puzzled over the improbable coincidence of his sudden illness, the suspicious death of Pope Thaddeus, and the almost immediate election of an obscure American cleric to the papacy, Fuquois had made inquiries.

While still in the hospital, he had his rooms wired with the latest communications gear, which he made good use of in the time he spent away from his office convalescing from his heart attack.

Though his body had been through an ordeal, his mind was as sharp as ever. "That Scotsman Bell should be sainted for inventing the phone," Fuquois told his frequent visitor and collaborator, Abbot Quiferelli. "Without leaving my sick bed, I was able to get the goods on our Pontiff."

Fuquois' phone was a far cry from Alexander Graham Bell's invention. He had an encrypted satellite phone that doubled as a secure uplink to the web for his computer.

The Cardinal had received the Abbot in his bedroom and sat up in bed while he talked to Quiferelli, the Abbot of the Order of St. Simon. He reached behind his pillow and pulled out a bound document.

"What is that you have there?" Quiferelli's curiosity was piqued.

"It is a report from the investigative agency—Hyacinth Ronski & Associates."

"The insurance adjusters?"

"Evil is afoot and the Lord helps those who help themselves." Fuquois riffled the pages. "As Sun Tzu said, '...Foreknowledge is essential to victory'. And I've learned that it is still vital even if you learn it after the fact."

"But why hire claims adjusters?" Quiferelli asked with a puzzled look. "Why not hire detectives?"

"They are much more than simple adjusters, Armonde, much more than that...if you remember I used Hyacinth Ronski to locate the threads plucked by vandals from the Shroud of Turin."

"Talk about a needle in a haystack," the Abbot said and shook his head. "It was a miracle that they were able to trace the culprits."

"Haystacks are not such good hiding places as they used to be," Fuquois replied, "and diligence often breeds miracles. Ronski's associates could destine him for sainthood, for he appears to have performed another one."

"How reliable could this report be? You could have only commissioned it a fortnight ago?" Quiferelli arched his eyebrows.

"My dear Abbot," Fuquois took the tone of the pedant, "you spend too much time in the catacombs. Almost all communication now involves digital encoding and computer processing. With the right expertise and equipment, a person can pry into the most interesting nooks and crannies and capture data

thought to be inaccessible by its owners.”

“So you’re saying Ronski is capable of this electric spying?”

“Not him directly...one of his associates did the *electronic* spying.” Fuquois was amused at his friend’s total ignorance of information technology. “He has an extensive network of associates, all with different specialties. Electronic snooping is just one of Ronski’s valuable services, though he has good resources on the ground too.”

“It is too much hocus-pocus for me.” The Abbot raised his fist. “I say that if some ne’er-do-wells are making trouble, just knock them in the head and get on with business.”

“Though I appreciate your direct approach, those skilled in war bring their enemy to the field of battle.” Fuquois opened the report to a section he had marked. “Who would have thought to look to the United States for the source of our problem? But that’s exactly where it turned up. Just look at what it says here...”

Fuquois passed the document to Quiferelli, who began reading:

As you are probably aware, the selection of the majority of cardinals has historically been controlled by two Italian families, the Toscanos of Florence and the Orsinis of Rome. Hence they exert a great deal of influence on papal elections.

When Pope Magnus died after a reign of thirty-five years, the two families could not mutually agree on a successor. So the aged and infirm Antonio Bellini was elected Pope Thaddeus as a temporary compromise. Not only was he unaligned with either house, he was unlikely to hold the office for very long.

Quiferelli reddened as his ire rose. “He should have never been taken out of the nursing home to be placed on the throne...why would they have done such a thing?”

Fuquois sighed. He held a special affection for Thaddeus, who’d been his mentor when Fuquois was a young bishop and had been instrumental in his elevation to cardinal. “They calculated that he’d die before long and that by then one or the other of the families would gain the advantage and the deadlock would be broken...please continue.”

In the absence of the Pope’s private secretary due to illness, the senile Pope Thaddeus fell under the sway of his valet, Michaelangelo Calabrese. Calabrese, aka Mickey the Fish, was an agent of American crime boss Pierro del Ponte. It is the opinion of this Agency that Calabrese was responsible for the Pope’s fall from his third story balcony.

Quiferelli spluttered, “I never believed that story about his walking in his sleep...he could hardly walk when awake. What cursed luck that you fell ill when you did.”

“It may have been cursed, but luck had nothing to do with it. Luck implies coincidence...but I’ll explain later.”

Quiferelli shot his friend a puzzled look and continued reading:

Once Pope Thaddeus was eliminated, Pierro del Ponte blackmailed the Orsinis and Toscanos into electing his illegitimate son, Vincent Tandino, as Pope Sylvester IV.

Quiferelli gave a low whistle. “That is audacious, to kill a Pope and rig an election. Why would a gangster from America go to all this trouble?”

“Because of the Institute of Religious Works.”

The IRW is commonly referred to as the Vatican Bank. But that was a misnomer, for it was controlled directly by the pope and not the entity of the Vatican State. Calling it the Papal Bank would be more accurate. The organization operates as a bank, taking in money from Catholic dioceses around the world and then lending it back for the building of churches and parochial schools.

Though nominally under the control of the pope, Fuquois had administered the running of the IRW for the past thirty years. The popes he had served had never spent much time thinking about the bank. They had left such mundane things to Fuquois.

But that changed with the election of Sylvester IV, who relieved Fuquois of his duties and records concerning the bank. He turned the operation over to professionals from the United States, who were

rumored to work for his father.

Fuquois' countenance darkened. "I fear that the IRW has fallen into evil hands."

The two clerics stared at each other momentarily in silence.

"I know that look in your eye," Quiferelli said. "You have a plan."

"We must turn misfortune to our advantage. But beginning a battle without knowing the lay of the land is to court defeat...so, please, read on."

Chapter 11

Pardoe Farms, Delaware

April 13, 2008

The Chicken Who Came First

Franklin Pardoe had been in the workshop for hours. He had one of his father's composition books open on the bench and referred to it periodically as he worked. It was three in the morning, and the only sound was the hum of the fusion power generator that was barely audible through the wall. It was running smoothly, as it had for the last seventy years, but he paid little attention to it, for his focus was elsewhere.

He was securing one of the chicks from the step van into a fixture that looked like a miniature version of a lethal injection table. The six-week-old bird was anesthetized, and its head hung limply to the side until Franklin buckled a band around it.

Franklin clamped the transoccupancy ray gun in the vise, and found the opening that was to receive the crystal containing the individual to be transferred. With trembling fingers, he inserted the crystal he'd taken from the space ship.

Franklin was a different man than the one who had walked out of Swindell's office that morning, almost a month before. His goals had shifted. All that had been important to him was now child's play, for he had a new mission. Infinitely more knowledgeable due to the handbooks, he'd been transformed by what he'd read in his father's laboratory logs. He saw his life's path laid before him now. He would take Wayne's plan for immortality and do it one better. The plan had sprung fully formed into his mind in an epiphany while talking to MurGhoo. Since that moment, he'd been engaged with bringing it to fruition.

Along with the technical and scientific knowledge he'd gained from the handbooks, Franklin had absorbed the ship's manifest. He used this information to sort through the crystals that stored the life forces of the ship's company and selected the individual who would be most advantageous to his plan.

He leaned over the vise, regarded the focusing gauge, and confirmed that the beam's lenses were collimated on the limp but vital body of the transgenic four-legged chicken strapped to the table. Satisfied that the ray gun was aimed directly at his future assistant, Franklin ran his fingers over its power source. He hesitated for a moment, savoring the strange and subtle pleasure of being in its presence. He could almost feel the latent energy stored within the device.

Though Franklin thrilled to its touch, the gun had been modified for use by a tentacle rather than a human hand. He was having trouble engaging the trigger apparatus, for the gun's safety switch and firing mechanism worked via suction-activated toggles.

Lacking a suction-cup-covered tentacle himself, Franklin went to the tool room, opened MurGhoo's cryochamber, and hacked off one of his tentacles with a Swiss Army Knife. Returning to the vise, Franklin used hose clamps to attach the tentacle to the gun.

He brought in the battery from one of the farm trucks along with a pair of jumper cables. As Franklin attached one end of the cables to the battery terminals, he sensed someone walking up behind him. Alarmed that anyone would be about at this hour, and nervous about his plans being discovered, he dropped the free ends of the cables as if to disassociate himself from the scene. Turning to confront the interloper, he beheld a spectral being before him.

O'Malley floated over to where Franklin was standing, "Holy Jesus, lad...what are ya fixin' to do? Kick-start an octopus?"

"W'w'w'wa..." Franklin was rendered utterly perplexed by this unexpected visitor.

"Didn't your father tell ya about me, boy?" O'Malley asked.

Franklin regained his composure with recognition and said, "The old man's battling a thousand. Spacemen, bio-engineered chickens, and now ghosts. It figures."

"O'Malley's my name. I used to be your father's right hand man. After I died, I came back and sort of acted as his guardian angel. Though I wasn't able to protect him from murder...as you well know."

Franklin shook his head. "I'm busy right now and can't waste my time talking to a ghost. Come back on Halloween. I'm trying to carry out my father's dying wishes."

O'Malley turned sarcastic, "That's mighty considerate, seeing how you were the one who helped him leave this mortal plane."

Franklin's head turned towards the ghost in rapt attention.

The dead man spoke, "You see, I know it wasn't a stroke. I saw a certain young man put something in the bottle of Old Setter that his daddy kept in his office drawer."

Franklin lunged at O'Malley, but passed right through him. He fell to the floor and laid there panting.

O'Malley bent over him. "Ya cain't hurt the likes of me laddie buck...like I told ya, I'm already dead." O'Malley continued talking as Franklin got unsteadily back on his feet, "Aye, I'm dead but my eyes still see. Not only did I see you pour somethin' into your daddy's whiskey, I seen ya forge his signature on all them stock proxies..."

Franklin glared at the ghost, clenching and unclenching his fingers. "I guess you could say he had one too many drinks, then. Anyway, the coroner called it a stroke and that's what counts."

"But I also seen what ya did to your own brother when you were just a lad of fourteen." O'Malley smiled and told him, "I seen ya go into the bathroom while your brother was in the tub. I heard ya tell him how ya were a man 'cause ya had to shave...I watched as ya plugged the shaver into the wall and listened to ya laugh when ya threw it into the water and electrocuted Wayne Jr."

"He had it coming!" Franklin yelled his voice breaking. "You weren't there earlier that morning when daddy told Junior to take my pet chipmunk, Dale, out back and stomp him under a board...just so I could learn to suffer loss...I just decided to teach the old man how to suffer loss."

"You Pardoes are quite a bunch," O'Malley said. He yawned, then continued, "This ghost is going to ramble on down to Big Leg Irma's and leave you to your infernal business."

With that, O'Malley began to grow more transparent and an eerie sound filled the air. Franklin felt the hair on his arms stand up as O'Malley vanished.

Franklin turned back to the workbench, snatched the free ends of the jumper cables from the ground, and jammed them into the flesh at either end of the tentacle. The twitching muscles of the severed limb engaged the suction cups on the toggle switches.

The ray gun flashed with a loud snap like a great electrical discharge. He stared expectantly at the motionless mutant chicken lying on the table. *I should have known this was too good to be true.*

Just as Franklin was about to succumb to the urge to smash all the equipment in anger, the chicken opened its eyes and asked, "Where am I?"

Chapter 12

Vatican City

April 14, 2008

The Swiss Candidate

Fuquois sat writing at his desk. He hit the button on his intercom and asked his assistant to bring in the next applicant for the vacancy in the Swiss Guard. When the applicant, Ali Ben Kafard came in, Fuquois was struck by the candidate's dusky complexion. The Pope's secretary picked up the applicant's file and verified that it stated that Kafard was indeed a Christian, as well as a native-born Swiss Citizen.

Fuquois bade Kafard to sit and, after a pause, began, "*Mmmm...* well, it seems our investigators do confirm that the information on your vitae is correct and that your birth certificate is authentic."

"Of course, Your Eminence," Kafard spoke tersely.

"My, my. I also see by your resume that you're a licensed pilot qualified to fly a wide assortment of both jet and prop driven airplanes as well as helicopters. Tell me...how did you come to learn all this?"

"During my two years in the Swiss Air Force."

"Yes," Fuquois spoke slowly as if with great caution, "that is also confirmed by our researchers...and a demolition, weapons, and electronic surveillance expert, too. Very impressive, especially since you also state that you're skilled with codes and cryptography."

"Skills learned in the Swiss Army Reserve...all Swiss men must belong."

"Ah yes, yes. I suppose such skills can be useful in the right hands."

Kafard proudly declared, "We Swiss are a resourceful people."

"Yes, so you are...you've had quite an interesting career." Fuquois ruffled back and forth through the papers in Kafard's folder. "Tell me, what brings a man of your background to apply for this particular job?"

"It would bring great honor to my family to serve that most pious and righteous of men, His Holiness the Pope."

Fuquois leaned forward in his chair and spoke in very low, even tones as would a lawyer laying out his case, "Well...your papers are all in perfect order, and I must say your record is quite impressive. And every item checks out completely. But you look more like a Turk than a proper Christian...you can see why such an observation might seem noteworthy to a person in my position. I am, after all, responsible for the continued national integrity of this unit. The Swiss Guard has provided for the close personal protection of His Holiness since 1506." Fuquois stopped talking—sure that Kafard would reveal some of the deeper underpinning to his story.

Kafard sat ramrod straight as he looked the Cardinal right in the eyes and said, "Please allow me to explain this seeming incongruity...in 1683 the besieging Ottoman army was smashed at the gates of Vienna by King Jan Sobieski III of Poland, who had come to the rescue of the defenders. Like stalks of wheat before the scythe, the Turks were dying beneath the lances of the Polish Cavalry. My ancestor, Baltizar Kafard, was one of the few Ottoman soldiers to avoid death or capture.

"He had been malingering in the camp with the baggage train when the army of the Sultan went down to defeat. Not being a foolish man, he undertook a quick looting of the camp and fled from the field with a brace of camp followers and three packhorses loaded with treasure. Baltizar made a fine haul of jewels, coin, and plate from the booty that the Ottoman army had amassed when it had swept across the Balkans. He and his entourage fled through northern Italy and finally gained the Swiss frontier. After proper inducement, the Swiss burghers offered them sanctuary and citizenship if they'd convert to Christianity. The Kafard line has prospered in the canton of Unterwalden ever since. You've seen my

baptismal certificate in my dossier.”

Fuquois’ cross-examination resumed with an accusatory tone, “Yes, very thorough and maybe even plausible. Every aspect of your cover has been completely, perfectly, backed up in the public and private records, but I think that’s what your whole resume is...part of a cover. I have a nose for sniffing out the lie, and I am not so shielded from the world that I would begin to believe this fantastic, though well-constructed, fallacy.”

“Your Eminence, I give you my personal guarantee that every word of this is true.”

Fuquois now switched to a more amicable delivery, “My good man. I am duly impressed by the professionalism of your deception, and I admire the stony countenance you maintain while I denounce you. I am not just the Pope’s gatekeeper. I have been responsible for the security of the various Popes since the days when the Facisti and Nazis roamed the land. I’ve fenced with the Gestapo, the Mafia, the OSS, the CIA, and the KGB...now please, as one professional to another...tell me now the real story of how you happen to come by these qualifications and what brings you to apply for this post?”

Kafard shrugged, knowing he’d been found out. “You are correct; I am neither Christian nor Swiss. My former employer has gone through a major reorganization, and I find myself a victim of downsizing. I’m here for the money and because I wish to continue in the security business. My relatives in my home village have come to depend on my financial support, and I would rather die than to let them down.”

“And where was your former employer located?”

“Moscow,” Kafard stated nonchalantly.

“Ah-*ha!*” Fuquois was pleased with himself for having guessed correctly. “Then your training is from the KGB then?”

“Spetznaz.”

“The KGB’s strike force. My, but you *are* qualified. And how did you manage all the deep cover?”

“It has been in place for over twenty years...all arranged by the KGB to enable me to work under cover in Switzerland when required.”

“So you figured, why let a perfectly good identity go to waste?”

Kafard nodded. “Yes. After the fall of the Soviets, my native republic, Kakastan, became independent and I was separated from the service and left without any real means. I kept the identity in lieu of the pension I would never receive...there were so few in the KGB who knew of my cover that I’m sure that the new masters in Moscow are unaware of its existence. And, now, I am in need of a position.”

“So you are more of a mercenary than a guard, are you not?”

“Mercenaries make excellent guards.”

“The Church is not unfamiliar with mercenaries.” Fuquois held up a fine cedar lined humidor filled with Cohiba cigars. Kafard, genuinely gratified by the offer, took one of the fine Havana cigars and nipped off the end with the cigar cutter on his host’s desk. Fuquois stood and walked to Kafard’s side. He proffered a light from a Zippo lighter emblazoned with a crucifix that had been hand crafted by Benvenuto Cellini. “You are probably an expert assassin, too, no doubt.”

“I learned all the skills my masters required of me,” Kafard said, then paused to inhale the rich smoke.

Fuquois took the glint of steel in Kafard’s eyes as an affirmative answer and thought that there was pride behind his guest’s smile as the Kakastani exhaled dreamily.

Kafard continued speaking, “This is a fine cigar...I developed a taste for the Havanas during my time in Moscow. Cigars and sugar were all the Cubans had to offer in return for the billions we poured into that godforsaken island, and even the lowliest of our functionaries had a humidor of the finest on his desk.”

The two men sat in silence and enjoyed the strong tobacco. They sat wreathed in smoke as they sized each other up. Neither of them was self-conscious as they stared unabashedly at each other. They were like two card players who were trying to divine their opponent’s hand, but unlike a card game, there was no longer an element of bluff involved here. Each of them sensed that if they played their cards right they could both come out winners.

Without speaking, Fuquois leaned to his right and opened a drawer in his desk. He removed a decanter of brandy and gestured. Kafard slowly opened his mouth and let a ring of smoke roll out before he spoke, “Thank you, but I must decline. As a Muslim, I allow myself only two vices...very strong Turkish coffee and...” He held up the cigar.

“I thought so,” Fuquois replied, “but it’s only polite to offer.”

It was obvious to Kafard that he was not to join the Swiss Guard, but it was equally apparent that he was not being rejected. The last question that the cagey Cardinal had asked him left Kafard assured that Fuquois had something up his sleeve for the former KGB operative. So, in an effort to move things along, the Kakastani continued with the now clearly defunct issue of the Guard, “So when do I begin my term in the *Guarde Suisse*?”

Fuquois chuckled. “You know as well as I do that the Guard is out of the question.”

Kafard listened to the centuries-old clock ticking on the mantle above the fireplace and savored another mouthful of smoke. “Then what do you propose?”

“I’d like to put you on retainer and assign you jobs as they come up.” Fuquois smiled and added, “And you’ll do much better than a Guard’s pay.”

Kafard spat in his palm and held out his hand to Fuquois. “It is a deal then.”

Fuquois did not hesitate a nanosecond. He too spat in his palm and slapped it into a clasp with Kafard’s. “Deal!”

As soon as Kafard had withdrawn from the Papal secretary’s office, Fuquois picked up his ornate telephone and dialed a number. “Abbot Quiferelli, I think I have the perfect man for that little assignment we spoke of.”

The Abbot did not even bother questioning the Cardinal’s judgment in the matter. “Good, the sooner we get on with this business, the better.”

Chapter 13

Pardoe Farms, Delaware

April 14, 2008

Chicken Fingers

Franklin unstrapped the chicken lying on the workbench. It rolled its unrestrained head from one side to the other, as it blinked its eyes in an effort to focus. "I am PessAr...who are you?"

Franklin had rehearsed his reply, "It's me, MurGhoo." He knew he had to convince PessAr if his plan were to succeed.

"Then why do we inhabit dissimilar bodies?"

Franklin sighed in feigned regret. "We crashed upon arrival in this world. It was an emergency situation...in spite of our code, I was forced to download into a sentient being. If I hadn't taken immediate action, our entire mission would have been lost. I'm not even sure that I was able to totally expunge the former occupant of this body for I often sense traces of his consciousness...I find that unsettling. But despite any quirks that might show up in my demeanor because of this, I am still MurGhoo."

"No matter what world we go to MurGhoo, you just make up your own rules." PessAr shrugged in an un-chicken like way. By inadvertently tapping into PessAr's reservoir of resentment towards MurGhoo, Franklin had unwittingly circumvented any of PessAr's doubts.

Nonetheless, PessAr had her duty to her fellow travelers, in spite of her distaste for their leader. All the colonists had signed a compact before the launch from Blithos binding them to a code. Preeminent in the code was the acceptance of a single leader, MurGhoo. "Then as soon as I can stand, I'll begin erecting a transfer ray generator to download our brethren. While I was in my crystal, I dreamed up a way to automate it. Of course, we'll need a large supply of gahootinite, so our next transoccupant should be a geologist," PessAr suggested, "to find the large deposit that must be close by, for this is presumably where our automatic guidance system brought us."

Transoccupancy was accomplished by generating a near singularity via a stimulated gahootinite discharge. In a near singularity, all points within its event horizon become intimately linked with all other neighboring points. The data encoded in the crystal is drawn into the roiling vortex induced by the gahootinite beam and transmitted instantly as a burst of information into the host body.

"It is fortuitous that the being whose body I was forced to occupy owns a thriving meat production business. I intend to impersonate him in order to interface with the natives. That way we can acquire an already established position in the cultural and economic system. We will focus our attention on running the Pardoe Poultry business, for this will satisfy our need for host bodies and generate a flow of currency. So, I will be forced to continue to occupy this body for now. How does your body suit you?"

"I guess I'll get used to it. It's small but otherwise very similar to our original Blithian body. And I'm sure it'll be a lot easier to do my work with fingers instead of tentacles. But this downloading from the crystal is tiring. Do you mind if I rest awhile?"

Franklin affected a sympathetic voice, "No, rest as long as you need, as long as you begin revising the trigger mechanism of the ray gun tomorrow, so I don't need tentacles to use it."

Chapter 14

Vatican City

April 15, 2008

The Inquisitor

Fuquois led LaFarge across Saint Peter's square. They entered the Sistine Chapel and Fuquois stopped momentarily to allow LaFarge the small favor of a chance to gaze upon the legendary frescoes of its ceiling. He turned to his companion. "It would be a sacrilege to rush through this place without stopping to pay homage."

"I am a great admirer of Michelangelo...such is the miracle of his genius, that it talks to us even across the centuries." LaFarge, though speaking out of true appreciation, still sounded pedantic.

"And this isn't even his best work. But I didn't bring you here just to appreciate the art," Fuquois explained. "Before you can assume the office of Inquisitor, you must undergo the process of becoming a Simonite."

The Cardinal led LaFarge to a panel in one of the alcoves behind the altar. Fuquois touched a small crucifix affixed to the wall, and a panel slid open revealing a narrow winding staircase. A warm puff of sweet-smelling air that carried a faint whiff of mustiness rose up to greet them. They descended into Stygian blackness until Fuquois turned on his key light.

LaFarge glanced around and saw that they were in a catacomb beneath the chapel. To his right was an alcove filled with neatly stacked bones and a row of skulls.

Fuquois fingered a keypad on the wall, activating the lighting. "These are the bones of your predecessors, the Simonite Inquisitors. Perhaps someday your bones will rest in this place of honor." He replaced his key chain in a pocket hidden in the folds of his red robe.

"I'm sorry, my son, but I must blindfold you before we continue. As you are not yet a Simonite, knowledge of our sanctum is forbidden." LaFarge leaned forward so that his shorter companion could drape a silk cloth around his head and then further still so that Fuquois could tie a knot in it.

Their feet rang on the stone floor and, after about fifteen minutes of brisk walking, they stopped before a heavy wooden door. Fuquois loosed his grip on LaFarge's elbow. "We're here, my brother, let me remove your blindfold. I want your eyes to be adjusted to the light before we pass into this chamber. *Après vous.*"

The door creaked on hinges that had not been oiled in a hundred years. Fuquois stood to one side to allow LaFarge to pass ahead of him. They entered the first chamber of the complex of underground rooms that were the headquarters of the Knights of Simon, or Simonites as they called themselves. LaFarge blinked in astonishment. "*Qu'est-ce que c'est?* The painting, she is inspirational."

"Oh, the fresco?"

"Yes."

"This mural is our pride and joy—*The Burning of Savanarola* by the master himself, Michelangelo." Fuquois beamed proudly at the painting. "It was a gift to the Simonites as a token of the artist's gratitude for the order providing him sanctuary from Cosimo de Medici during one of their spats."

"*C'est magnifique.* That fellow got what he deserved, no?"

"That fellow was a heretic and a seditionist. Besides his blasphemy and false prophecy, he actually claimed that simony was evil. He would have done away entirely with our Holy Order of The Knights of Simon Magus."

"Burning was too good for him," LaFarge sneered.

"I can see you're moved by this depiction of divine justice."

"Yes. I could stay here and memorize every detail of this great moment for our faith."

"There will be time to measure your devotion to divine justice later, but we must hasten."

With LaFarge in tow, Fuquois proceeded towards an imposing ancient oaken door at the far end of the hall that housed the fresco. LaFarge was stopped in his tracks by the sound of a great tumult coming from another part of the catacombs.

He saw the questioning look in LaFarge's eyes and the slight opening of his mouth, as if he were about to speak, but hadn't thought of what to say. "Those are the Knights of Saint Simon," Fuquois explained. "They are preparing for your arrival."

"Come, you will meet them later. But first, you must meet the Abbot."

The two visitors entered the Simonite's reliquary. Inside, a portly man equally as tall as LaFarge was absorbed in auditing the order's inventory. Fuquois spoke to get his attention. "Abbott?"

The cleric turned, and a large ingenuous smile crossed his rouge-cheeked face.

Quiferelli had been inspecting a gross of spears that had pierced Christ's side while on the cross. "Can't be too careful about quality these days...they don't make relics like they used to." The laugh that followed was loud and boisterous, and it was tinged with just a touch of irony.

LaFarge's confusion as to the contents of the room was evident on his face, so the Abbot gave the Inquisitorial Candidate a quick tour. Thousands of vials, the crusty contents of which were labeled 'milk of the Virgin', lined the shelves on one entire wall. "One of our best sellers," Quiferelli said. There were pieces of scrap lumber in a barrel of brine. "The pickling is part of the aging process," the Abbott pointed out. "No one wants to buy a piece of the 'true cross' that looks new." He pointed to the large box of teeth had been sorted through to eliminate any that showed signs of modern dentistry. "Wouldn't do to sell someone a tooth of Saint Agnes and then have them discover that it had a porcelain crown."

LaFarge was flabbergasted. He was certainly aware that the sale of indulgences and relics were part of Catholic culture, but he had never been aware that the practice entailed such blatant forgery. Quiferelli laughed again. "If you're going to be Inquisitor of the Simonites, it is best you learn how this business works." He paused and asked Fuquois, "This is the Pope's nominee for Grand Inquisitor, is it not?"

"What do you mean—nominee?" LaFarge replied.

"Well, the brothers must judge your suitability to join the order. You will stand for examination before the assembled body."

"This is an outrage!" LaFarge sputtered indignantly. "I am appointed by the Pope, himself, and he never mentioned that I was to endure... *approval*." He practically spat the word.

Quiferelli took great delight in LaFarge's discomfiture, for he and Fuquois viewed LaFarge as a creature of Sylvester's. Though it would seem counterintuitive, the Abbot and the Cardinal were pleased that the Pope had chosen to send a spy among them. This gave them the chance to feed disinformation to their perceived enemy, and, as Fuquois put it, "To keep the rat where we can watch him." They dismissed the possibility that the dense American, Sylvester, could be so clever as to suspect that the Abbot and the Cardinal were anything but loyal servants, and they had agreed to carry on the ruse of blind fealty to the Pope whenever in LaFarge's presence. There was much at stake, and they were determined to maintain the element of surprise.

Fuquois and Quiferelli were concerned about the public indignation over Sylvester's actions since coming to office. They worried that public opinion would turn against the Church. Because of these concerns, they had formulated plans to minimize any backlash against Sylvester. Newspaper articles were already appearing in the foreign press comparing Sylvester's reign to the sacking of Rome by Alaric and his Vandals. Fuquois and Quiferelli agreed that bad press makes for bad business and that continued public scrutiny would make the heretofore underground operations of the Knights of Simon nigh on to impossible.

Quiferelli waited until LaFarge had regained his composure, then spoke in an avuncular manner, "How much do you know about the Simonite Order, my son?"

LaFarge was still red from his outburst, though he spoke with a forced semblance of calm. "I must admit, very little. So please tell me what this is all about."

Quiferelli smiled wickedly. "Don't worry, you'll find out after your examination...assuming that you pass."

LaFarge's mouth dropped open and the veins in his forehead began to bulge.

Fuquois stepped in to calm LaFarge—though he was enjoying the insouciance with which the Abbott tormented the Pope's appointee, he wanted to finish the process of bringing LaFarge into the Order of St. Simon and ultimately into his clutches. Fuquois said, "You see, in order for you to be the Grand Inquisitor, you must first become a Simonite. And as a candidate for admittance to the order, you must stand before those who would be your peers and allow them to judge you for themselves. But in reality, this is just a formality done mostly for the tradition of the ceremony. Once they meet you, they will no doubt acknowledge your qualifications and induct you into their society. Then you may assume the office of the Grand Inquisitor."

The Abbot's aide entered carrying a robe, a hood, and a rope. Quiferelli chuckled and said, "These are the ritual garments an applicant must wear when being presented to the brethren."

LaFarge spoke timorously, "The hood and robe I understand, but how does one wear a rope?"

Quiferelli lowered his voice and spoke in a wickedly menacing manner as he tied a noose. "Why around the neck of course. It is symbolic of the way in which you are offering the choice of your fate as a suppliant."

"But it's all strictly symbolic, of course," Fuquois chimed in.

LaFarge stood silently as the young aide dressed him in the robe and hood and loosely fitted the noose around his neck. Once LaFarge was properly hoodwinked, the aide led LaFarge to the great hall where the brethren of the order were gathered.

They questioned him, "Are you born of noble quarters?"

"Are you free of debt?"

"Are you willing to renounce your vow of poverty?"

"Are you willing to renounce your vow of chastity?"

Having satisfactorily answered the questions, LaFarge then received a hazing that consisted of being made to walk a plank over what he was told was a deep pit. The plank was shaken and he fell off. LaFarge screamed, but since the fall was only from the height of a half-foot, it was only his dignity that was injured.

Quiferelli was the first to congratulate LaFarge on his investiture. As he handed him the ceremonial pair of tongs that signified his new office, Quiferelli said, "You are now in charge."

LaFarge was too pleased with himself to notice the Abbott's sly wink at Fuquois.

Chapter 15

Pardoe Farms, Delaware

April 16, 2008

CheeBah Awakes

Franklin's new assistant, PessAr, finished downloading another Blithian into the genetically altered chicken that lay strapped to the lab table. The individual groaned softly and twitched slightly as if dreaming.

* * * *

Bereft by the execution of her beloved father, CheeBah followed the two adults to whom her prodigious intuition attracted her. Her gift, as ClehTun had called it, was rare among Blithians and he had always encouraged her to develop it.

JahFet and SamShee took an intentionally circuitous route to an algae warehouse beneath which was hidden the most sacred of temples to the demigod BaBu. CheeBah followed them being careful to avoid their notice. Several minutes after they entered the counterfeit building, she, too, went in.

"You're a long way off the canal," a clerk said from behind his small desk.

"NamBu is high and the Council is far away," CheeBah replied.

Though startled that such a young one would know the secret sign and countersign, the clerk dutifully inquired, "What is your pleasure?"

"My father said I should seek shelter here."

"This is a warehouse, we shelter only bales of algae."

"I know that it is more...my father told me so."

"Well, your father must have stood too long in the light of NamBu."

"It is the followers of NamBu who have killed him...he told me to show you this."

She reached within her belt pack and pulled out the scale her father had given her. "My father, ClehTun, said that the adherents of the ancient ways would give me sanctuary from the minions of the Council."

The clerk was flabbergasted. He had just admitted the most famed prophet SamShee to the inner sanctum, and now the daughter of the martyr ClehTun presented herself bearing a talisman of the selfsame prophet. He called for the high priest, who came over and sized up this putative child of ClehTun.

"And your father is...?" the Priest asked.

"ClehTun of KiBosh."

"Look at what she carries," the clerk said to his superior as he handed him CheeBah's shiny, umber scale.

"Do you know what this is," the high priest asked the young drone.

"It's obviously a scale. My father gave it to me in order to identify the great prophet SamShee, whom he told me to seek. I believe that SamShee has already entered the pits. He also told me that I should find solace here, but so far all I have found is distrust and interrogation."

"Forgive us, my young friend," the priest apologized. "We have been rude and it must be particularly unpleasant on this of all days to you. Let her enter."

The gatekeeper pressed a button beneath the counter and a panel opened in the far wall revealing a stairway. Stepping aside, the clerk motioned CheeBah towards them.

She descended the stairs slowly. The highly polished stone of the stairway walls and treads seemed to glow pink in the bio-luminescence cast by globes set on sconces of bronze. The sconces were cast in the image of a hand so it looked like someone holding an egg. Exiting the bottom of the stairs, she beheld the glory that was the old ways.

The temple was rectangular and almost as large as the square in which her father had been executed. Roofed over with great arches, columns of silvery metal held up vaulted ceilings painted with sweeping frescoes depicting Blithian mythology. The walls between columns were slabs of a white stone swirled with black tendrils.

Illumination and heat were provided by flames of burning gas that jetted out from the mouths of fixtures, cast in the likeness of BaBu, and mounted two thirds of the way from the floor to the ceiling at regular intervals.

A black tiled promenade, wide enough to accommodate six individuals walking abreast, encircled the pit that took up the central portion of the floor area. The pit was deeper than a Blithian was tall, and there were slides in the center of each side for entering the fray and ladders in each corner for climbing out.

There were lounge areas on the promenade to accommodate those in need of a rest, some of whom had been in the temple for days or even weeks. Newcomers made their rounds at the altars located in kiosks carved into the perimeter walls. There the devout made their obligatory offerings to KulKan, GaHoot, and BaBu. The holy kiosks alternated with those that purveyed sexual stimulants, ceremonial garuch, algae and wrigglers.

Members of all three genders slid in to participate in group trebling. It was the way of the ancients for procreation to occur randomly and this was as random as it got—hundreds of bodies intertwined in a promiscuous orgy of coition. Periodically, jets of lubricant were sprayed onto the blissfully writhing worshippers in the pit from an overhead irrigation system.

The predominant sound was the constant hissing arising from the incessant exhalation from the third nostrils of the participants. This respiratory ability to constantly cycle air through their lungs gave Blithians remarkable endurance.

JahFet and SamShee strolled about the promenade. They left two gold coins at each of the altars, checked their cloaks at the cloakroom, and then stood by the edge of the pit observing the scene.

"I like to wait and see if any new drones enter and then invite them in." JahFet watched the foot of the stairs.

"Don't wait, procreate...that's what I say." SamShee laughed. "All drones are the beloved of GaHoot."

"Before we dive in," JahFet began, "do you have any more words of wisdom?"

"The joy of the pit can not be expressed in words."

So with a shrug, JahFet leaped into the pit after SamShee.

* * * *

PessAr called CasBah, the newly downloaded geologist, over to the lab table. "I think she is waking up now."

"Yes, you're right. Her eyelids are beginning to twitch."

CheeBah's eyes opened. "Is this another dream?"

"It's me, PessAr. You've just downloaded."

"So, this is the body MurGhoo chose for us?" she said, inspecting herself. "It certainly beats a Vulgaroon body."

"That it does," PessAr replied, flexing her digits.

"Then MurGhoo is all right?" CheeBah was puzzled, for she'd expected MurGhoo to awaken her.

"Yes, he is. But, he had to temporarily adopt a different body than ours."

CheeBah stretched as she tested her new muscles and puzzled over the incongruity between her expectations and reality. "It seems like we just left Vulgaroon. How long have I been in the crystal?"

"I can't tell. The chronometer was broken when our mighty leader, MurGhoo, crashed into this planet," PessAr said derisively. "So, I don't know how long we were in transit, but we've been here for a long time."

CheeBah became defensive. "You've been jealous of him for a thousand generations. Remember what our teacher SamShee said—'anger hurts the angered more than the despised,' PessAr. Are you sure he's

all right?”

PessAr shrugged. “For the most part, yes.”

CheeBah was a xenosophist—one who studies alien cultures. In her long life, she had studied many cultures and how the individual interacted within them.

Franklin entered the room and motioned for PessAr and CasBah to leave.

“Of course, MurGhoo. I guess you want to be alone with your drone,” PessAr said as she departed.

Franklin approached the newly downloaded alien. “Don’t be alarmed at how I look. I am MurGhoo.”

CheeBah sat up, intending to embrace him, but something didn’t seem right. “PessAr told me about the crash and why you took a different body...what happened to your promise to me?”

Franklin was caught by surprise. “What promise was that?”

Chapter 16

April 22, 2008

Vatican City

Ace in the Hole

Several times a week, Pope Sylvester sequestered himself with Quiferelli, Fuquois, and other church dignitaries for a night of poker. It was over these games that the Pope let many of his wishes be known. Matters of great import were discussed and courses of action decided in between the deals and drinks.

It was common knowledge that Sylvester cheated, but the participants generally overlooked it. They were only too glad to get fleeced in return for face time with the Pope. All but Quiferelli and Fuquois that is, who countered the Pope's cheating by working together to out-cheat him.

"Whose deal is it?" Sylvester asked, glaring at the Benedictine monk he kept on duty to serve drinks and sandwiches to the card players. The Pope was upset because Brother Fong had been very inefficient at his secret duty, which was assisting His Holiness in cheating his fellow players. As the Benedictine circled the table, he would observe what everyone was holding, and then through a series of prearranged facial tics he would communicate to the Pope whether he should stay and bet up the pot or fold his cards. Somehow, Fuquois and Quiferelli were still taking too many hands.

The problem with Brother Fong's reconnaissance was that, as he would circle behind Fuquois and Quiferelli, they would adroitly insert bogus cards from up their sleeves into those they were holding. They only did this when one or the other of them held a good hand and they wanted Sylvester to stay in. After Brother Fong made his pass around the table, the Cardinal and the Abbot would once again stash the bogus cards and play their winning hands.

"It's Igor's deal," Quiferelli announced as he stacked up the chips he'd just won. Tonight the Archbishop of Budapest, Igor Huzinga, was sitting in. The short, squat Hungarian sat in his street clothes, enjoying himself after an anonymous day on the town.

Something else Sylvester didn't know was that there were secret cameras throughout the rooms of the Vatican. They had been installed years before for overseeing the security apparatus of the Vatican. The hearing aid that Fuquois wore was actually a receiver that provided a running commentary on what all the other players were holding. This play-by-play description was delivered by one of Fuquois' trusted assistants, who sat in the control room and watched the monitors. If Fuquois held the best hand, he would signal his partner, Quiferelli, by crooking his right pinky ever so slightly, and the Abbot would run the pot up. If Quiferelli held the best hand, Fuquois would signal by raising every bet made. If neither of them had a shot at winning, he would crinkle his nose as if smelling excrement, and both the Abbot and Fuquois would drop out.

Sylvester, disgusted with his flunky's lack of aptitude for cheating, decided to put him to a task he could perform with alacrity, "Brother Fong, would you get us drinks? Fuquois, what would you like?" Another of Fong's commissions was to make very strong drinks for the Pope's opponents.

"A bloody Mary."

Sylvester thought that if he got Quiferelli and Fuquois loaded they might start playing more sloppily. "Abbot...what'll ya have to drink?"

"Whiskey and water, please."

Sylvester looked at the beatific expressions on the faces of his two opponents and marveled that these two quaint churchmen were able to win against a cardsharp like himself. "Ante up boys."

Quiferelli tossed his chips into the pot. "Now that we have an inquisitor, Your Holiness, what shall

we do with him?”

Sylvester peeked at his hole cards. “He’s an ace up our sleeve.”

“You’d be the expert on that, Holiness,” Fuquois said sardonically.

Sylvester glanced up his sleeve and smiled. “We need to test his mettle.”

Quiferelli opened the betting. “Fifty florins. Yes, Your Holiness, Cardinal Fuquois and I have discussed this and I’m sure that the new inquisitor will serve *our* purposes.”

“I’ll call your bet with two hundred thousand lira,” Archbishop Igor announced. He was going home tomorrow and didn’t really want to be burdened with all the Italian script.

The only sound in the room at that point was the pleasant clinking of solid gold coins being tossed into the center of the table in answer to Igor’s bet.

The Pope saw something on the television, which had been playing with the sound off. “Brother Fong, turn up the TV would ya...that looks like Delaware—my home state.”

Fuquois gave the go signal to Quiferelli. “I’ll call and raise you twenty-five francs Suisse.”

The young Benedictine found the remote, pointed it at the television and the sound came up.

“This is Clyde Moran reporting for CNN from a crossroads just outside Harriston, Delaware. An amazing phenomenon is occurring here. Tens of thousands of Catholic peasants have journeyed from the Central American nation of Malagua to shower gifts and adulation upon a local man, who has visions of the sacred image of the Holy Mother while staring at a grease spot in the middle of Route 16.

“The nature of these visions is unusual. He claims to see a woman who is covered in feathers.

“His visions of a feathered Madonna strike a resonant chord with the Malaguans’ ancient Mayan traditions, which they have incorporated into their practice of Catholicism. They believe that when the second coming occurs, Jesus will return in the form of the feathered serpent, Quetzalcoatl. And this appearance of his mother is a harbinger of his return.

“Is this some kind of scam? I don’t know, but this reporter can confirm that the pilgrims, who stand in line for hours to meet the visionary, are presenting a king’s ransom to him in offerings.”

Fuquois instantly recognized the opportunity. “*Carpe diem.*”

“Seize the day?” Sylvester asked.

“Why, this is heresy, Your Holiness! Feathers, indeed,” Quiferelli added.

“Heresy?” Sylvester questioned, unsure of the significance.

“Imagine showering gifts on some mountebank”—Quiferelli caught Fuquois’ eye—“instead of a proper churchman.”

As they watched the television, the camera zoomed in on the front door of Hector, Jorge, and Martin’s trailer. Hector was standing to one side of the doorway dressed in his good clothes. His hair was meticulously brushed and his smile beamed from the radiance of his Chiclet-like teeth. He stood on the ramshackle deck and like a seasoned television personality waited for Clyde’s cue. One of the neighbor’s dogs sat in the over-stuffed orange chair that rested on bricks at the corner of the porch. There was no rail or steps. There were several more dogs lying under the porch and one lifting its leg on a derelict avocado-colored refrigerator near the bottom of the steps as Clyde spoke off camera.

“The pilgrims here have traveled thousands of miles. Upon meeting the prophet, they generally make an offering of liquor and some native artifacts and baubles. This is Hector de la Vega, who is one of the founders of the shrine. He and his associates have been storing these offerings in their trailer.”

This was the cue to open the door, so Hector turned the knob, swung open the door, and stepped back again to one side.

“This is Tomas, our guard dog.”

As the lens zoomed in close the dog growled at the intrusion, but settled down when he saw Hector nearby. The floor was covered a foot deep in pre-Columbian treasures: gold and silver chains, bracelets and statues, masks and ceremonial weapons studded with glimmering jewels, jaguar hides, rare feathers,

ancient skulls, stone tablets, conquistador helmets and breastplates, and in the middle of the room, just in front of Tomas, laid a huge emerald.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Sylvester shouted as he jumped up from his seat. “That thing’s the size of a goose egg.”

The Pope was now showing sincere concern for the plight of the poor pilgrims, who were so obviously in need of the Church’s protection. Sylvester said, “Feathers or not, when you talk about the Madonna, you’re on our turf. These Malaguans are entitled to our protection.”

“But what about the heresy? The feathered Madonna?” Quiferelli asked.

“We’ll take care of that, too,” said Fuquois. “This could be the test of your new Inquisitor, Holiness.” Fuquois pulled out his cell-phone. “I’ll summon him.”

“Finish the hand, first,” Quiferelli groused.

Chapter 17

Pardoe Farms, Delaware

April 21, 2008

Choking the Chicken

CheeBah was troubled. It seemed as if MurGhoo had not only forgotten about his promise, but he didn't even seem to know her. He had promised to awaken her before the rest of the crew, so that they could resume their lifelong tryst in new bodies.

MurGhoo had never before kept anything secret from her, for she had always been his closest confidant; now she wondered why he had forsaken their intimacy.

One day while Franklin was in town, CheeBah resolved to investigate the hatchery. She wondered why her old lover had been so secretive about the tool room, going so far as to forbid anyone from entering it. She hated to go against his wishes, but here she was trying to jimmy the combination lock that sealed the room.

She was having no luck with the lock, but the old hatchery had been crudely built and the door to the tool room was no exception. Comprised of two-by-sixes that were sawn unevenly, she was able to slip through the space below the door's ragged bottom after a little digging in the hard-packed dirt floor.

Once inside, she saw a functioning cryochamber. She punched the buttons that released the hatch. She was shocked to see a familiar form seated in the chamber. A being who was only in partial stasis—mostly asleep but slowly dying from inadequate life support and the fact that one of his appendages had been recently and crudely removed.

MurGhoo? CheeBah thought she recognized her lover. She started the revival cycle of the chamber and when the feeble green creature blinked his eyes; she spoke again, "MurGhoo, it's me...CheeBah."

"CheeBah?" He lifted a tentacle to touch her face. "How can this be you? Franklin said that there were no host bodies ready for downloading."

"Franklin? Who is he?" she asked as she fondly stroked MurGhoo's desiccated skin.

"When I crashed, an earthling named Wayne Pardoe rescued me and placed me in stasis. He now has deceased and his son, Franklin, is helping me."

"That must be the human who has been saying he is you. Helping you? He has been helping himself to your identity." CheeBah explained Franklin's deception.

"I feel ill, CheeBah."

CheeBah could see that MurGhoo was dying. The jagged wound left from the brutal removal of his tentacle had continued to leak bodily fluid and had weakened MurGhoo greatly. He struggled to speak, "CheeBah, I have loved you all my life, and if I'm to expire, I'm glad to be doing it in your embrace."

"I would download you now into the body of that despicable Franklin, but he controls the transference ray device." CheeBah stroked him and gazed into his eye and knew that there was no way to save her lover, "The time we've had together was the greatest joy of my life. You'll live forever inside of me."

MurGhoo could barely speak as he brushed the down of CheeBah's chest with a limp tentacle. "That is a fine body that Franklin chose for you, it will serve you well. But beware of him, for fate has placed the survival of our species at his dubious mercy. You may be the only one who can rectify this."

"MurGhoo...I won't fail!"

"Remember what SamShee taught us—we do not choose our destiny, but we can choose how we meet it."

CheeBah lifted his sac-like head in both of her hands and realized he was gone.

She heard the door behind her suddenly fling open. Franklin was standing in the doorway clenching his fists as the blood rose in his face. "I ordered you never to come in here...this is a violation of the compact."

"The compact only applies to Blithians, not aliens." CheeBah had turned from MurGhoo and was facing Franklin. "I have spoken with the real MurGhoo, and I know who you are. You killed him, and I'm going to make you pay for it."

"You have to be alive to do that." Franklin lunged at CheeBah and actually managed to get one of his hands around her neck. "I'm an expert chicken choker."

The chicken from which her body had been engineered harbored many long dormant genes from its Jurassic antecedents. CheeBah manifested several of these prehistoric attributes such as the teeth she sank into Franklin's forearm and the razor sharp claws on her feet that slashed his thigh disconcertingly close to his groin. Franklin screamed like a schoolgirl as he released his grip.

CheeBah landed on her feet, ran out the door, and disappeared.

Chapter 18

Vatican City

April 23, 2008

Let the Inquisition Begin

LaFarge arrived for another audience with the Pope. He entered the capacious hall that was both Fuquois' office and the anteroom to the Pope's inner sanctum. This was the place where the real business of the Holy See was conducted. Fuquois was more than the gatekeeper to the Throne of Peter—he was Vatican Secretary of State.

Fuquois noted with concealed disdain the lavishness of LaFarge's garb. The Inquisitor was more sumptuously clothed than the Pope. The most elegant capes are trimmed in ermine, but LaFarge's was made entirely of that rare fur and trimmed in sable. The cloth of his cassack was woven silk and its buttons were encrusted with rubies. LaFarge had been enjoying the status of his new office, and had kept seven of Rome's finest tailors busy sewing his new wardrobe. The office of Inquisitor entitled him to the wearing of red, and he was taking advantage of it.

This martinet is very taken with himself...I hope he is as great a fool as he seems, Fuquois thought as he rose to greet the Inquisitor. He was superficially courteous. "So good to see you, Lord Inquisitor..."

LaFarge sniffed. "Yes."

Fuquois noted how different LaFarge's demeanor was upon this visit compared to his previous one. "You're looking splendid, for one not yet a cardinal. I have not seen anyone so well dressed since we buried Pope Thaddeus."

"Well, it will be a long while before my burial." LaFarge was impatient. "Must I remain waiting long?"

"Maybe less time than you think." Fuquois shrugged.

"Isn't His Holiness expecting me?"

"Oh, you mean to see the Pope." Fuquois smiled. "Yes, the Pope is expecting you. Go right in."

Fuquois pretended not to see LaFarge pause at the Pope's door and wait for it to be opened for him. After a few seconds, LaFarge relented and turned the knob himself. Once inside he found the Pope practicing dealing from the bottom of a deck of cards. LaFarge bowed. "I'm here as you requested, Your Holiness."

"Something has come up that requires an inquisitor. Coincidentally, it's taking place back in the States...in Delaware, my home state." Sylvester put down the cards. "There's talk about a miracle...a vision of a Madonna at a small town crossroads." Sylvester pointed his remote at the television. The crowds at the shrine silently jumped onto the screen. "What is at stake is the devotion of these tens of thousands of pilgrims."

"Why does the appearance of the Madonna require the presence of an inquisitor?" LaFarge was puzzled.

"There's a little problem with this Madonna."

"What kind of problem can there be with the Mother of God?"

"Because she's covered in feathers..."

"Feathers?" LaFarge was slightly irritated that the Pope had left him standing. "But is that actually heresy?"

"Damn straight it is!" The Pope rose to his feet. "The so-called visionary, Clay Stool, is the town drunk, but that's not the problem. The heresy comes into it because these Malaguans think that the

Madonna is also the mother of some feathered serpent god.”

“That is an outrage!” LaFarge assumed an air of righteous indignation. “I’ll put a stop to this!”

“Well, that’s all well and good, Rene, but we don’t want to toss out the baby with the bathwater, if you get my drift.”

LaFarge was at a loss to understand this aphorism.

Sylvester shook his head. “We want to stifle their heresy, but we don’t want to dampen their enthusiasm for bestowing gifts on the Church. Look at this.” Sylvester fast-forwarded the video. “Look, this drunk has a trailer full of treasure donated by the pilgrims—it should be secured in the Vatican Treasury, not some tin box in the sticks of lower Delaware. That’s why we need an inquisition, to control the situation and turn it to our advantage.” Sylvester waved his arms for emphasis and an ace of spades fluttered to the floor.

LaFarge was momentarily distracted by the flight of the once concealed card, but quickly returned to his purpose. “I am the one for this job. I have been studying the archives to learn some of the techniques used by my predecessors, and I have some wonderful new ideas about torture.”

The Pope bent over and picked up the card. “No, Rene. I appreciate your enthusiasm, but we’re going to soft-pedal this operation. As my Uncle Pierro often says, ‘A dead man can’t pay his bills.’ There are other means of persuasion. These pilgrims need to recognize that this is the Catholic Madonna and that she would want their money to go to her Church.

“This whole thing needs to be organized. With the right look and proper PR, you could double or triple the number of visitors and create a nice market base that we can exploit for years to come. And, while you’re at it, you can take care of this heresy thing, too.”

Sylvester crossed the room and stood before an ornate cabinet built into the wall. LaFarge watched in fascination as the Pope removed a tray that held a crystal decanter and two tulip glasses. As Sylvester carried the tray to the desk, LaFarge noted the rich amber of the liquid that shimmered inside of the decanter. Sylvester set the tray on the desk, approached LaFarge, and in a move most shocking to the reticent Frenchman, put his arm around his shoulders.

“Rene,” Sylvester had his mouth uncomfortably close to LaFarge’s ear, “Do you see that stuff in the bottle there?”

LaFarge wanted to shout at the boorish American that it was a decanter and not a bottle, and yes, of course, he could see it. But, despite his disdain for rhetorical questions, and Americans in general, his natural obsequiousness held sway. “But of course.”

“Well that bottle holds some of the most precious liquid in the world.” LaFarge could smell that Sylvester had eaten something heavily laden with garlic very recently. “I suppose you’ve heard, being a Frenchman and all, of Armande Jean du Plessis, Duc de Richelieu, a.k.a. Cardinal Richelieu?”

Again with the rhetorical questions, thought LaFarge. “Of course, he is a distant ancestor of mine and the model for my life.”

“Down in the catacombs there are three hogsheads of cognac that were given to Pope Gregory XV in 1622 by Richelieu in appreciation for his elevation to the rank of Cardinal.”

As Sylvester poured, LaFarge licked his lips in anticipation, despite making an effort to resist the impulse. His generous aquiline nose, trained in sniffing among a family of perfumers, eminently qualified LaFarge to apply his olfactory senses to such a treasure.

The Pope handed one of the glasses to his guest and led the way to a grouping of overstuffed leather upholstered chairs in a corner of the room. He motioned for the Inquisitor to be seated, then took a seat directly across from him. The Frenchman prepared for the first sniff. He exhaled completely then raised the glass. His nose projected far beyond its rim, which was designed to focus the effluvium. He inhaled deeply of the aromatic essence of this historic potation. When finished, he leaned his head back and slowly exhaled. A look of ecstasy crossed his face and he said, “Never before have I encountered such a bouquet. This is like breathing in the atmosphere of the Elysian fields.”

“Only popes get to drink this stuff, Rene.” Sylvester smiled slyly and leaned forward in a conspiratorial fashion. “Popes and those favored by popes.”

LaFarge then had his first encounter with that American gesture, the wink. He was not sure at first what it meant, but he figured it out from the context of the situation.

Sylvester continued, “I haven’t forgotten how you resolved that Balkan situation almost

single-handedly. I was mighty pleased with your performance.”

LaFarge sipped his brandy slowly, savoring every molecule. He would have just sniffed at it until it evaporated if Sylvester hadn’t chided him to drink up.

“Religion isn’t the popular attraction it used to be. But this shrine that popped up at the site of these visions could attract the right kind of publicity. You know I’ve decreed that next year will be a Jubilee year, and if we play this hand correctly, we can have around-the-clock media coverage. That’ll give the Jubilee year the kind of brand recognition we need, and officially sanctioned Jubilee events will then have a dominant market position in the competition for entertainment dollars. I’ve already inked a deal with a major public relations firm to promote our Jubilee song and logo through a major fast food chain. My own Uncle Pierro is on the board of directors with stock options.”

“Don Pierro is a very clever businessman,” LaFarge said with admiration.

“This whole thing was his idea. He’s the brains. Without him we wouldn’t have anything. Not the saint trading cards, nor the Jubilee logo plastered on baseball caps and warm-up jackets.”

“He is one smart biscuit, no?” LaFarge tried his hand at an Americanism.

“I think you mean cookie, but you get the idea. And consider that many of the faithful will not be able to make this pilgrimage, but everyone will want a souvenir even if they can’t attend the shrine.”

“It’s high time that people start paying for their religion,” LaFarge added.

“That’s the spirit. Now try and work with this Stool fellow. He’s the source of all this largesse. At my end, Rene, I’m going to create a web site and issue a Papal Bull that proclaims that anyone who makes the pilgrimage, either in person or by logging on to Our Lady of the Crossroads website, will receive absolution. It will count just as much to attend virtually as it does in person. We can set it up just like a porn site. Uncle Pierro has plenty of experience with that.

Uncle Pierro, indeed, knew about the dot-com world. In his quest to take over legitimate businesses and to establish his extra-legal operations in a legitimate, though high-risk guise, he was buying up small struggling e-businesses.

“What I need you to do,” Sylvester continued, “is get us some media attention. Maybe start a TV show. Promote the shrine on local cable and make it a live feed onto the net, too. Get some journalists in to interview our prophet. Clean the place up. Find some trustworthy Malaguans and give them important and visible positions.” In his excitement to instill into LaFarge the urgency of his mission to Delaware, as he spoke Sylvester raised his voice, “Our Lady of the Crossroads will be the attraction that puts us on the roadmap of the information highway. Religious media rakes in billions of dollars a year, and it’s time the Mother Church took her rightful place in this vital and influential ministry.”

The brandy was beginning to have an effect on LaFarge and he was slow on the uptake. “Do we really want to lower ourselves to the level of the protestant canaille...I mean really, isn’t this all just a bit unseemly?”

Sylvester’s excitement ratcheted up a notch. “This is a war...a marketing war. It’s all a matter of public relations and promotion. We need to target the protestant viewers and steal them away from the competition. You got to think about your marketing mix.”

“*Quoi?*” LaFarge mumbled, completely confused by the Pope’s tirade.

“I thought you went to the Sorbonne. What did you study there?”

“Divinity.”

“Didn’t you take any marketing courses?”

“It wasn’t a requirement.”

“Big mistake, Frenchie...winning converts and keeping the flock in line is more marketing than anything else,” Sylvester refilled their glasses as he talked. “We’re salesmen when you come right down to it, and there’s a science to selling. It’s all about fulfilling customer needs with the right product type...and people need religion and they need entertainment. And to figure out whom to go after we start with the larger generic market—those people looking for entertainment. Then you narrow it down to people who watch television. Then you break it down to those who watch religious programming. You can get even more microscopic by breaking the segments down into evangelical, mainline protestant, and mainline Catholic. We could use a multiple marketing approach and go after more than one segment—but the segment we’re going after is homogeneous, substantial, and operational in so much as they want to be sold...so it’s more economical to select a single target segment and focus our resources there. Have you

ever watched the Catholic Hour on television?

“Oui.”

“Pretty boring, isn’t it? It reaches an audience of twenty-three thousand...Bennie Hinn has an audience of twenty million and three percent of them phone in or mail a contribution in response to any particular show. You need to convey a powerful visual image...just like in church, where religion is more accessible and real with pictures and statues. Images give people something to look at, relate to, and take their cue from.” Sylvester advised his nuncio, “That’s the major problem with reformation churches...they lack idolatry. Icons, frescoes, and statues illustrate for good Catholics what the saints looked like.”

“But how can you make money on an Internet site?” LaFarge asked in genuine ignorance.

“It’s just another form of entertainment. Appeal to people’s base instincts and desires to get their interest...”

“How do I do that?”

Sylvester was getting exasperated. “Use your imagination. For example, put a hidden camera in the confessional and call it confession cam...voyeurism is big on the net. The Pope leaned forward and spoke in a subdued voice, “It’s all about content.”

“Content?”

“Giving people stuff they want to see. Then you sell memberships. People give their credit card number to gain access to the live feed from the shrine and you bill them by the minute.”

“But what of the heretics?” LaFarge asked, a little overwhelmed at Sylvester’s own vision of the Jubilee.

“Of course, you will find the heretics and condemn the heresy, that is why this is an inquisition. Besides, you can broadcast all of your proceedings. These misguided souls must be shown the light, and if we can fill up a portion of our broadcasting schedule at the same time...so much the better.”

“So, I am not to expunge them and stamp out their erroneous creed?”

“Only to the extent that you don’t do any public relations damage. You could make a big show out of leading the poor souls back onto the righteous path and accepting them back into the bosom of the Church...but nothing too harsh. We don’t want to portray the church as a heavy.”

“Could I still hold an *auto dé fê*?”

“Of course, it would make a great show...just leave out the burning at the stake.” Sylvester took an obscenely large gulp of the precious cognac. “Assign them some chores around the shrine as penance for their sins. Think of having a day, no, make it a week, better yet, a month of reconciliation.”

LaFarge was stirred by Sylvester’s speech and apparent faith in him. “Your Holiness, I am at your service.”

“This Jubilee is my dream, Rene. Make it real.” Sylvester rose and walked around to LaFarge’s side. “Here, since you seem to enjoy this so much, take it as a token of my esteem.” He handed LaFarge the decanter of cognac and proffered another wink. “I’m counting on you. Remember this, Americans like a good show. And they especially enjoy a happy ending...give me my happy ending.”

LaFarge winked back.

Chapter 19

Vatican City

April 23, 2008

A Legitimate Bastard

Armonde Quiferelli was the ideal image of an Abbott. He was a tall, husky man with large hands and overdeveloped forearms, who filled out his robe with authority. His mentor, Cardinal Fuquois, had guided his career. As the Lord Abbott of the Order of the Knights of Saint Simon, Quiferelli had been Fuquois' shadow, serving as a covert instrument of force and persuasion.

Fuquois was the ultimate Mandarin, a consummate functionary who knew the most effective way to arrange the various ecclesiastical dominoes. After the broad experience of serving so many popes, Fuquois felt he knew what was in the best interests of Catholicism. Popes came and went and were usually not elected until they were entering their dotage. So if the reigns of power were in the hands of a trustworthy and knowing minister, in his opinion, the interests of the mother Church would be best served. For most of his career Fuquois had been, in effect, the power behind the throne of Peter. He had become used to steering the billion followers of the Pontiff towards the ends he felt were best.

Fuquois' vision was to elect a pope who was his protégé—who would remain a figurehead and allow Fuquois to pull the levers of power. After years of preparation, Fuquois' sudden incapacitation and the quick election of Sylvester had directly interfered with his plans. Moreover, the youth of Sylvester made it unlikely that Fuquois would be given another chance to manipulate a papal election. But never one to give up trying, Fuquois was continuing his quest to discredit Sylvester. For short of the Pope's untimely death, this would be the only way to gain hegemony over the office—by blackmailing Sylvester to resign the papacy, or to yield control to Fuquois.

The Abbot and the Cardinal were drinking. The Abbot spoke, "Richelieu's cognac is indeed excellent." Quiferelli poured himself another glass from the decanter. "It is a blessing that you hold the keys to the Vatican cellar."

"It is a great responsibility, but I'm willing to bear it." Fuquois held his glass out to the Abbot. "I could do with a bit more."

They sat in the Abbot's private chambers in the catacombs beneath Vatican Square. The doors were bolted and Fuquois' factotum, brother Jerome, had swept the rooms for electronic devices before the two men had settled into their conference. The gloom of the underground walls was dispersed by the glow of the brandy and the illumination from the track lighting above the ancient torch sconces. Quiferelli had remodeled his quarters when he first assumed the office of Abbot. He'd made the formerly damp and dreary quarters comfortable and cheery. Besides the lighting, he'd contracted for the installation of a state-of-the-art climate control system that scrubbed the air. It was so efficient that the pungent smoke from their Cuban cigars disappeared as fast as they exhaled.

Quiferelli loosed a great smoke ring and considered it for a moment before speaking, "So does the latest bulletin from our illustrious snoop contain anything interesting?" The Abbot knew the answer already from the precautions that Fuquois had taken.

The two men were seated on either side of a small, oaken end table in overstuffed wingback chairs that were upholstered in burgundy brocade. "Our money has been well spent," Fuquois replied as he pulled a fat report from his briefcase and dropped it on the table with a thud. "First item in the report concerns LaFarge—our inquisitor's lineage reads like a who's who of mediocrity. His family held royal offices under the Bourbons, but never anything more prestigious than provincial tax collector...and though

he claims Richelieu as an ancestor, I see no record of it here.”

“Does it mention how they managed to survive the revolution?” the Abbot asked derisively.

“According to this report, they claimed to have spent those years abroad in England, working to restore the Bourbons to the throne. But in reality, they used the money they’d skimmed from the King’s taxes to establish themselves as rum smugglers on the Cornish coast. When Bonaparte ended the Republic by declaring an empire, the LaFarge family returned to Languedoc. There, they swindled an estate from the peasantry and inveigled a charter to raise roses for the perfume industry.”

“Enough of his pedigree,” the Abbott said. “What about our Pope’s?”

Fuquois picked up the book, flipped to a marker and began to read aloud, “Sylvester IV, born Vincent Tandino in Seaford, Delaware...date of birth September 13, 1963—a Friday the thirteenth, interestingly enough—the illegitimate son of Pierro del Ponte and one Gina Tandino...Pierro is the head of a local network of hoodlums with ties to la Cosa Nostra...Gina, or Madame Tandino, was the head of a local house of prostitution known as The Queen of Sheba, her present whereabouts are unknown.”

“So, we’re being quite literal when we refer to the Pope as a bastard.” Quiferelli laughed.

“Indeed, please allow me to continue...”

Quiferelli raised his hand in approbation.

“Not wanting to raise a child in a brothel, Gina asked Pierro to take little Vinnie. Pierro called in a favor from a ne’er-do-well, Gaston Gravely, who operated a smuggling operation for del Ponte and had him raise the boy for the first twelve years of his life...”

Even with the favor he’d been owed, it had been a tricky piece of work for del Ponte to convince Gravely to take the boy in. He was forced to forgive a large portion of Gaston’s gambling debts to gain his cooperation.

“You already got two kids,” Pierro had told him. “What difference is one more gonna make? Besides, you can use him as an extra hand around the fruit stand.”

Gaston Gravely operated a roadside souvenir and fruit stand in Little Heaven, Delaware, which catered to the crowds heading down Route 113 to the beaches. Vinnie learned to call Gaston “Uncle Gaz” and, when older, worked with his “cousin” Milton, making concrete bird baths, flamingoes, and lawn jockeys.

After Gaston’s untimely death, Pierro was left with the responsibility for his own son once again. Inspired by the movie *The Godfather*, Pierro decided to raise Vincent to be his consigliere—the del Ponte mob was a growing outfit and he was determined to get the boy into the family business. Realizing that the lad’s education had been sadly neglected under Gaston’s guidance, he enrolled Vincent in the upscale prep school—St. Jones Academy.

After his son graduated six years later, one hundred fifty-sixth in a class of one hundred fifty-seven, Pierro gave up on making Vincent his advisor and encouraged him to enter the seminary.

“The pay’s no good,” Pierro had told him, “but there’s plenty of opportunities to steal.” The elder man had notions that it might one day benefit his criminal activities to hold sway over a well-placed cleric. So, he made a few donations to the Jesuit Fathers of Loyola then leaned on them to admit his son into their college in Baltimore—despite Vinnie’s dismal grade point average.

After his son took a degree in divinity, Pierro’s invisible hand helped to guide Vinnie’s career through the offices of parish priest, monsignor, bishop, cardinal and finally, pope.

The Abbot interrupted the Cardinal’s reading to ask, “What I don’t understand is why our Pope addresses his father as *Uncle* Pierro?” Quiferelli’s face was beginning to flush crimson about the edges.

“Obfuscation,” Fuquois said in a tone of voice that was fraught with implication.

“Trying to hide their chicanery, eh!” Quiferelli instinctively reached for the cudgel lying on his desk.

“This goes far beyond mere chicanery,” Fuquois lowered his voice, turned the report towards the Abbott, and pointed his finger to a particular passage. “Ronski has uncovered aspects of this case that could only be spawned by the vilest malevolence and pure evil...it is the proof of that which I suspected.”

Chapter 20

Vatican City

April 23, 2008

The Feet of the Fisherman

After his audience with the Pope had concluded, LaFarge was once again navigating the catacombs with Fuquois as his guide, though, this time, without a blindfold. Fuquois said that they were going to take part in an ancient and revered ritual of the Simonites. They arrived at a cavernous chamber beneath the Sistine Chapel and as they stepped onto its dirt floor, LaFarge beheld a man standing in the shadows alongside a pile of human femurs.

"This man is a Turk!" LaFarge exclaimed.

"Lord Inquisitor, your powers of observation are remarkable, but don't jump to conclusions. He is actually a Swiss national whose family converted to Christianity hundreds of years ago...it is all contained here." Fuquois handed a copy of Kafard's bogus dossier to LaFarge. "Please allow me to introduce Kafard, who I've retained as your attaché. He can be of immense value to you in the execution of your office."

"In what manner can this short piece of Swiss chocolate help me?" LaFarge asked as he peered down his generous nose to appraise Kafard.

"He is a former member of the special forces of the Swiss Guard. Besides his military skills, he can drive any vehicle and fly most planes."

"I suppose I could use a servant...yes, having a chauffeur would be appropriate for a Grand Inquisitor. Come forward, my good man, and let me get a better look at you."

Kafard wore a stony countenance. "Yes, my Lord."

LaFarge was pleased with the way Kafard addressed him, but couldn't resist a bit of browbeating. "I'll take your word for it, Fuquois, but you have to admit that he hardly looks a proper Christian."

"My family has been Christian for ten generations. Cardinal Fuquois has already vouched for me," Kafard answered in unnaturally even tones.

LaFarge insisted on pressing the point. "I must be sure of this, for it wouldn't do to have a heathen working for the Grand Inquisitor. Why, you could even be a Jew by your looks."

Kafard raised his voice and spoke with ire, "Do you wish to examine my foreskin?"

"How dare you address me in such a manner," LaFarge said with a tinge of anger.

Fuquois moved quickly to place himself between the two. As he raised his hand to signal Kafard to be calm, he spoke to LaFarge, "It's only natural for any good Christian to be offended at the implication of being a Jew."

LaFarge began to retort, but Fuquois cut him short, "Please, my Lord, don't anger Kafard. He is not one to be trifled with. But over time you will learn the value of having such a man at your disposal."

LaFarge overcame his indignation at having to concern himself with the feelings of a menial and replied icily, "Very well...I'll take your word until I've had time to review his credentials."

Suddenly, the shadows surrounding the three men came to life in the form of the Simonite brethren. They moved to a dank, musty corner of the chamber and formed a line.

As they stood before this disreputable alcove, LaFarge turned to Fuquois. "What is this?"

"This is the grave of Saint Peter. It is a Simonite tradition to piss on his bones for good luck before setting out on a mission."

"The bones of Saint Peter lay here?"

"All but his feet. They remained on his cross when the Romans cut him down."

The brothers lifted their habits and proceeded to urinate on the earthen mound.
Not to be outdone, LaFarge shrugged, lifted his ponderous robe, and withdrew his member.
He was very careful not to splash his shoes.

Chapter 21

Sussex County, Delaware

April 27, 2008

Chicken Delight

"Daddy, can I have five dollars?" the seven-year-old girl called as she ran into the living room from the kitchen. She pushed down the newspaper that hid her father as he relaxed in his recliner.

"What for, honey bunny?" Dad knew that he was going to cough up the money, for she was daddy's little girl and he was a soft touch. Especially when she twirled her auburn pigtails and crinkled her freckled nose the way she was doing.

"There's a chicken at the back door who says she's hungry."

"Sure, sweetie...but how's a chicken gonna buy food? Chickens can't tell the sales clerk what they want."

"This one can...I was just talkin' to her."

"Then that must be one special chicken." Her father got a real kick out of his daughter's active imagination and delighted in playing along. "Here you go," he said as he handed her a five dollar bill, "why don't you give her some of the bird seed out of the kitchen closet, too?"

The girl's father laughed delightedly as she ran out to the kitchen. "Don't worry little chickie...I'll get some food for you!"

The screen door creaked as it swung open, then it slammed shut. The girl held out a paper lunch sack full of seed and the bill. She was surprised when the chicken reached out and wrapped two claws and an opposable thumb around the items.

"Thanks, dear. This'll sure help me out because I'm starving."

"Don't you get fed on your farm?" the girl asked.

"No, I had to run away because the farmer is a mean man."

"Who's he?"

"Franklin Pardoe."

"Ohhhh...I know what he does to chickens. I'd run away, too." The girl watched as the chicken popped her head into the bag and pecked up some seed. "My dad says that you must be a special chicken...since you can talk and all."

"Well, I'm afraid I'm a long way off of the canal."

"Is that anything like up a creek without a paddle?"

"I guess so."

"My dad says that all the time." The girl waved her hand at the chicken and said, "Wait right here, I want to show you something I learned in school just today." She ran into the kitchen and came back out with her textbook. She opened the French primer to a certain page and turned it around to show to the chicken. "*Vous êtes un poulet.*"

"What does that mean?"

"It means you are a chicken. A poulet is a chicken."

"Poulet? That picture sort of looks like I do right now...I guess that's me...though my name is CheeBah."

"I like that...my name is Betsy Sue."

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you...but I better get moving before somebody sees me." CheeBah was touched by the kindness the girl had shown her. "The only way I can stay safe is to stay hidden."

"Come by again, CheeBah, if you need more seed." The girl waved to the fugitive Blithian as she faded into the shadows with her bag.

Knowing that the fate of her people depended on her understanding of human culture and nature, the xenosophist set out in search of subjects to study. She observed human activities wherever and whenever she could. An enthusiastic voyeur, she became well acquainted with the habits of many of the local residents. Wherever humans gathered, she was eavesdropping.

The sights she saw peeping through the windows at Big Leg Irma's especially fascinated her, and she returned several times. CheeBah was particularly stealthy in her approach to the place, lest she wind up as a repast for hungry pilgrims.

On her third visit, CheeBah was looking through a window at the roadhouse and saw a man masturbating while a large, scantily clad woman spoke to him in a sexually explicit fashion. The woman was Irma, the proprietor of the establishment.

With her exceptionally acute hearing, CheeBah plainly heard the Irma's erotic monologue. Forgetting her desperate situation, CheeBah listened with fascination as she observed the social interaction between these two. These humans were like the Blithians in their pursuit of sex for pleasure. In her excitement, she lost her usual caution about being detected.

As she ran from window to window, she was intrigued at the variety of ways that humans found to copulate with and/or stimulate each other. It was a surprising revelation when she saw money changing hands. She realized that these females were professionals engaging in mating activities as a commercial venture and was fascinated with the idea that one could be paid for erotic oration.

Oblivious to the danger around her, CheeBah moved to another window and was taken totally by surprise when Irma reached through the branches of the bush where CheeBah was hiding and grabbed her by the neck.

"Gotcha, you peepin' Tom!" Irma pulled CheeBah out of the shrubbery and into view. "Whaddaya think your doin', sittin' out here whackin' your pud and thinkin' that you're gettin' somethin' for free from Irma Gravely? I never give nothin' away for free, and by God you're gonna pay even if you work it off in my kitchen!"

"Awwwkkkk! Let go of me! I wasn't whackin' anything!" CheeBah protested.

Irma was startled not only at discovering she had a chicken in her grip but that it was a talking chicken. "Huh! What the hell are you?"

Irma let go and the chicken plopped to the ground. "It's a long story," CheeBah said, spitting out a few seeds wrenched free from her gullet.

"Well, I got all night. Come on inside, honey."

Irma led CheeBah to the kitchen. After locking the doors and closing the blinds, she sat CheeBah at the table, gave her a glass of water and opened up a can of creamed corn.

CheeBah reached out and took the can from Irma.

"My God! You've got arms too! And hands. You're some bodacious chicken."

Irma stood with her hands on her ample hips and watched CheeBah eat. Medium of build above the waist, Irma was overly endowed below it. It's not that she was fat down there. Her lower body was simply proportioned for a much taller but shapely woman.

Though her ass and legs were out of proportion with her upper body, they were quite attractive when considered on their own. No one dared call her Big Ass Irma, hence the sobriquet of Big Leg Irma.

She wore her usual garb, a loose chiffon dress with daring slits up the sides, which showed off her trademark legs. Irma's hairdo had hardly been disturbed in her capture of CheeBah, for it was securely shellacked into a great towering beehive. She was a born listener and as soon as CheeBah had finished her repast, Irma had her relaxed and talking.

CheeBah related the story of her people—an abridged history of their technological developments, their mastery of transoccupancy, and the culture that evolved around their science. The tales of transgalactic interplanetary migration and forbidden romance enthralled the Earth woman. And Irma was not the least bit surprised by the revelation of Franklin's skullduggery. She wept discreetly as CheeBah told the tale of her trans-millennial love affair with MurGhoo. The hardened madame actually broke into open sobs when CheeBah related how her lifelong paramour had died in her arms while professing his unremitting love.

“Oh, honey...” Irma paused to blow her nose, “...I’m a sucker for a love story, and this ain’t one of them cheap romance novels...this is real.”

For the first time since MurGhoo died, the dam burst on CheeBah’s emotions and she blubbered to Irma, “It’s all that Franklin’s fault...he killed my MurGhoo by hacking off one of his limbs.”

Irma picked up CheeBah and held her in her arms like a small child. She patted her on the back as the chicken laid her head on Irma’s shoulder. “There, there dear...don’t you worry...old Irma’ll help you out. I’ll help you to get even with that low down son-of-a-bitch.”

Irma told CheeBah of her own problems with Franklin. How he contested his father’s bequest of the roadhouse to her. Irma laughed and said, “But the probate judge is one of my best clients.

She noticed that CheeBah was starting to calm down. “I hate that weasel...and don’t worry, I’ll find a place for you here. You aren’t the first girl who’s come to me with nothin’ but the clothes, er...feathers, on her back. Any girl that’s willin’ to work has a home here. That’s kinda my motto, and we’ll find somethin’ for you.” Irma introduced CheeBah to the delights of tea and cookies as the two of them sat up and talked throughout the entire night.

As dawn broke, CheeBah turned the conversation to what she had observed Irma doing with her client. “What purpose could a ritual like this serve? The client never seemed to open his eyes, thus depriving himself of visual stimuli.”

“He just fantasizes about some high school cheerleader, I guess,” Irma replied. A thoughtful look passed across her face and then she snapped her fingers. “I’ve got it!”

“Got what?” CheeBah was puzzled.

“I know how you can make a livin’ and turn me a profit, to boot.” Irma jumped up from the table, unlocked the door and motioned to CheeBah to follow. “Come on honey, we got work to do!”

Chapter 22

The Shrine at the Crossroads, Delaware

April 28, 2008

A Stool Sample

Clay sat in his Barcalounger and thought about magazines.

He'd ascended the dais of the shrine two hours earlier that morning, at ten o'clock, and in the interim had imbibed of the offerings laid at his feet by the procession of pilgrims that streamed past him. Since settling into his recliner, he'd put away a large jug of fermented cactus spirits. This quetzal liquor was distilled from the fleshy stems of the succulent cactacea that grow along the mountainous western border of Malagua.

The making of quetzal is the traditional occupation of the Altoro family. The mountains are a two-week journey by foot from the lowlands where the family resides.

In the time between the harvesting of last year's fields and the burning of those for the next year, the western Malaguan cacti bloom. It is at this time that their pulp is the sweetest and the Altoro family strap large vats to their donkeys' sides, gather their machetes and make the long and arduous journey to begin the harvest.

When they reach the hills, they make camp and begin work. The cactus is chopped up and thrown into the vats and then the secret ingredients, handed down through generations, are added. Wild berries provide quetzal's unique taste and harbor the yeast that begins the fermentation. On the journey back home, this process is accelerated by the donkeys' gait which gently agitates the slurry so that upon arrival back home the mash is ready for distillation.

This was not ordinary table liquor. The entire annual yield was constrained by the arduousness of the trip, the lack of adequate transport, the sparseness of the cacti, and the remote locale. It was held in reserve for special occasions and was especially prized as a gift.

This was the quetzal liquor that Clay was drinking from, a homemade jug fashioned from ochre-tinted clay. The container had no particular measure, being about the size of a cow's head. Clay finished draining it and turned to Hector who was seated at his right. "It took a while to finish that one off, but it's early yet. There's still time to catch up."

Drinking over two-and-a-half-gallons of one-hundred-sixty-proof liquor, as Clay just had, would be fatal for most people, but the prophet's metabolic and visceral genetic adaptations burned alcohol faster than normal people could drink it.

So, Clay had to drink like a champion to feel any effect. It was the visions induced by his heroic drinking that had raised-up a shrine at the crossroads and inspired the believers who traveled so far to pay him homage.

He eyed the assortment of flasks, jars, jugs, and bottles before him and selected the closest container. Hector removed the cork as Clay scratched Tomas absent-mindedly behind the ear. As he waited, Clay continued his meditation on magazines.

His blood alcohol level was still too low to allow contemplation of his usual obsession—the Madonna, or "feathered lady" as he called her—so his mind had settled on that which was presented to it. Today this was *People* magazine.

Clay remembered the magazine from his days in the Veterans Hospital. He'd seen it in the waiting rooms—old and new issues scattered across the Formica coffee and end tables. New ones came but the old ones were never thrown away. There were still issues from the early '70's in the piles right up to his

release from the facility.

Clay was unsure of why he'd fixated on the magazine. He vaguely recollected that someone had been talking to him about it on the previous evening. But since that conversation had taken place after his vision and the requisite drinking marathon that preceded it, he was a bit hazy on the details.

He turned to Hector. "Who was it tellin' me about that *People* magazine last night?"

"Me, Señor Clay."

"Well what were you tellin' me about it?"

"Some people from New York called. They are sending a reporter today to interview you for something called a 'cover story.'"

"A cover story?" The words resounded in Clay's mind. He remembered the pantheon of celebrities looking up at him from the covers as he gathered the magazines from their scattered locations to stack them neatly.

Clay had always remained insulated from popular culture, and owed his meager knowledge of the glitterati to the glossy front covers of magazines. He'd occasionally thumbed through the related articles just enough to pick out a few facts—John Travolta's disco dancing coach's name, Goldie Hawn's favorite campsite, John Wayne's preferred cancer treatment—and as he sat at the shrine, he visualized himself back at the hospital looking at a cover with his own likeness upon it and stacking it up with the others. He put his issue on top of the pile and took a certain satisfaction in the thought that folks in Doctors' offices and hospital waiting rooms all across the land would know that Clay Stool had made something of himself.

"So when are they comin'?" Clay hoped it was earlier rather than later, for he wanted to be able to remember such a momentous occasion. The only thing he ever remembered once he was good and loaded was his visions. They were seared into his soul, but everything else receded into the fog. So, he hoped for an early arrival.

"They are here now." Hector smiled at a particularly comely señorita, who was leaving her offering. "But they are busy absorbing...how do you say...local color. I told the writer lady and her photographer to be here before noon."

Picturing himself immortalized in waiting rooms across the land, along with Gary Coleman, the Bee Gees, Elton John, and Princess Diana, gave Clay a sense of legacy. He would leave his mark on the world after all because the feathered lady chose, out of all the billions of people in the world, to talk to him.

This made him feel special, like he was finally connected. He'd been disconnected since that night in the shell hole in Vietnam—not that he'd been all that in touch during the previous part of his life. And he was thankful for the good fortune to befall him since he first told Hector, Jorge, and Martin of the feathered lady. He was thankful not for the rich offerings of the pilgrims, but for the sincere affection of those who visited him at the shrine.

He was fond also of the feathered lady of the grease spot. Clay worried about her because he felt that she needed help. Every day he gazed through the swirling petroleum colors of the grease spot, to a space that existed neither in this world or another, to see her half hidden behind a veil of undulating tendrils of mist.

She emitted sounds that Clay couldn't understand but took to be speech, and her demeanor convinced him that she was trying to tell him something important.

Clay, moved by the seeming urgency of her pleas, had sworn to help her. Obeying his ethical standard—the Code of the West, learned through countless hours viewing horse operas—the prophet knew he had to help a lady in distress. So he promised her to keep returning until he got the message.

And Clay kept his promise, returning to commune with her daily, though it took much preparation before he could feel her pull drawing him to their rendezvous. His connection to this earthly plane had to be weakened with alcohol before he could visit her in what he believed, from his comic book reading, to be a different dimension.

It required a copious and unceasing flow of strong liquor to attain the state of disconnection necessary to heed her call.

Ordinary drunkenness was not the condition that Clay achieved. His biological anomaly of having two livers allowed him to reach staggering states of mental exhilaration. His confused senses would slip their earthly bonds, and despite the eventual diminution of his motor skills, his mind was free to adopt new modes of perception and seek out the feathered lady. So, instead of drinking himself into oblivion, Clay

attained the psychedelic intuition necessary for inter-dimensional communication.

The three Malaguans took turns seeing to the needs of their compadre, Clay Stool, so that the visionary could focus his energy on loosening his earthly ties. Whoever was on duty would unseal and inspect the containers of drink for Clay, so that all he had to do was lift and imbibe. If the container was too large to lift with one hand, they decanted its contents into a thirty-two ounce Mason jar that Clay enjoyed using. "I don't want to seem uppity..." had been his objection when Hector tried to replace it with a mug from the roadhouse. "Besides, the jar holds more."

As Hector filled the jar from a large stoneware crock, Clay thought about his previous day's vision. He had stared with unfocused eyes into the grease spot on the road and projected his consciousness beyond the thin physical film of rainbow colors that formed the last boundary of this world. With an uncanny elation he departed his body and for the first time began to float towards her. He discovered that the fog, which enveloped her, pushed against him, resisting his passage. But he persisted and the deeper he went the greater the resistance became until it was soon impassable. It was closer by far than he'd ever been to her before, and during a moment of clarity she approached him. He had gotten a clear but fleeting glimpse of her face.

The image of her face registered so quickly that it never rose to his conscious mind. But the intensity of her gaze left him with the feeling that knowledge had been passed to him in that moment. Suddenly he understood much of what she'd been saying.

From the bits and pieces of her speech that he could understand, Clay had assembled an explanation for her visitation. It reminded him of the movie, *Mystic Mesa*, where his childhood hero, Marshal Clint Hardy, returned an Indian brave to his home among the lost tribe of Anasazi Indians. He reasoned that the feathered lady was looking for her people, who had wandered off and had become lost, and they had left someone behind. She wanted to reunite that someone with her lost tribe. And she needed Clay's help to do it.

Hector handed Clay another Mason jar full of homemade spirits. As Clay savored the offering, he empathized with the feathered lady and her people. He knew what it was like to feel lost and have no home, and, for the first time in his life, he felt a sense of purpose. He would lend this lady and her people a hand, if he could, even if it meant drinking all the liquor in Delaware. No sacrifice would be too great for this noble cause. Wouldn't Marshal Clint have done the same?

Clay pondered the object that she had shown him. Though still obscured, she had seemed close enough that he could have reached through the fog and touched her. When the misty fringes of their inter-dimensional interface parted, he could see a green glow from an object in her upturned hand. It was a luminescent stone that warmed his fingers as he reached towards its radiant light.

When he was but inches from the stone's surface, the feathered lady faded from his reach. He receded from the 'in between place' until he was pulled back into this world.

Clay tipped his jar towards Hector and said, "I'm jest gonna hafta drink more, if'n I'm gonna be able to reach all the way through to her and find out what her problem is."

He looked about for any sign of the reporter. "That reporter better git here soon, or I'm gonna be too busy drinkin' to see him."

Hector shrugged. "It's not a him but a her. But when she shows up, I'll teach her my favorite word."
"What's that?"

"*Mañana*."

Chapter 23

The Shrine at the Crossroads, Delaware

April 28, 2008

A Fear of Loathing

Despite the heartfelt effort of Padre Luis to organize the encampment into an efficient and sanitary place, and the earnest labor of his appointed helpers toward those ends, conditions at the Shrine were degenerating. Though the quality of life was surely superior to what it would have been without his efforts, the constant influx of new pilgrims strained the ad hoc infrastructure.

The population of the camp grew to overflowing, because none of the Malaguans returned home. They were all determined to stay to see the prophecy fulfilled. Even though living conditions began to take on the aspects of a refugee camp, everyone stayed and no one complained. Poor peasants for the most part, they were not suffering any great privation compared to their lifestyle back home.

Food was short, and though no one was wallowing in filth, ordinary hygiene was becoming a problem. The millpond in which the pilgrims had been bathing was now muddy from the trampling of myriad feet. The once abundant pond turtles had been decimated from constant poaching and even the frogs were becoming scarce. The aroma of the food cooking on campfires was overwhelmed by acrid wisps of smoke from piles of burning refuse, mingled with the odor of human waste emanating from the well-used slit latrines.

Though a man of the cloth, many now called Padre Luis “alcalde,” mayor in Spanish, in recognition of the fact that he was the head man of this village in the field.

Each day Padre Luis held a prayer meeting for the new arrivals. This was his best opportunity to indoctrinate them in the conventions of life at the shrine, to mitigate the impact of the new peregrinos on the already deteriorating conditions of the commune. But their numbers were such that he could only meet a fraction of each day’s new arrivals—most moved into the camp and set up house keeping unsupervised.

Now that the dump had been picked clean of scrap lumber and sheets of galvanized steel, dwellings were being made from less than adequate materials. While the earlier arrivals had been able to construct sturdy shacks, the latest arrivals had to content themselves with stretching plastic sheeting over poles to form makeshift tents.

People found the communal kitchen and dining hall closed in the absence of supplies.

The pilgrims could have bought food for they were not without means, but the shrine and the camp were encircled by state troopers and cut off from the surrounding area. The troopers had at first attempted to turn newly arriving pilgrims away. But once diverted, they just roamed the countryside waiting for a chance to sneak back to the shrine. So it was decided that it was preferable to allow the wayfarers to enter the shrine where at least they could be contained.

As the pilgrims walked the last half-mile to the shrine, they were like cattle in a chute, for the road was penned in by the police lines. Nervousness was building in the camp. Rumors abounded that the police were only waiting for a word from the governor before launching an organized assault.

The local newspaper, the *Harriston Clarion*, had reported that Governor Reynolds was even considering calling out the National Guard. The Malaguans held no good memories of their interaction with the guardia back home, and this report increased their anxiety and fear.

Crowds of native Delawareans began to gather daily to express their displeasure with these alien intruders. They bore signs exhorting the Malaguans to go home—a singularly unlikely scenario.

But in spite of the hardships of the encampment, the pilgrims faithfully attended Clay Stool's daily communion with the Madonna. The camp would begin to empty in the early afternoon as folks went to stake out a vantage point along the route of Clay's mystic quest. Everyone wanted to witness the prophet as he crawled down the road. His torturous journey upon that strip of macadam was likened to Christ's trek to Calvary. And, of course, the symbolic significance of a miracle occurring at a *crossroads* was generally recognized.

The most coveted observation point was in the area adjacent to the grease spot. For this was where the visions occurred. Those who stood there could overhear Clay's part of the holy dialogue.

Silence would spontaneously break out as Clay hovered unsteadily over the spot, his knees and elbows quivering like rubber. He would then collapse and with his face intimately close to the oily spot begin speaking. Every ear strained to hear as he conversed with the unseen Madonna.

As the Madonna departed, Clay would spring up and cry out before collapsing into Hector's waiting arms. With the aid of Jorge, Martin, and Padre Luis, they would carry Clay's limp body back to his basement room at Big Leg Irma's. There he took food for the first time in the day. He would eat his favorite meal, a Swanson's Salisbury Steak TV dinner, and would recount his latest conversation with the feathered lady, as Padre Luis kept a written account.

In the evening at the encampment, stories would be compared; a consensus formed as to the day's religious revelations. As each day's recollections spread through the camp, at the speed at which only gossip can travel, the tales told of the all-too-human Clayton Stool took on mythic proportions. Parables of his life grew into legends, and these legends were woven into the fabric of Malaguan spiritual beliefs.

The call of ancient prophecy was irresistible. There was an exalted feeling of destiny as they waited for the Toltecan rapture. On that day, the winged serpent would come and fly them to paradise.

But despite the spirituality and joy that pervaded the camp, the Malaguans, especially Padre Luis, realized that a confrontation with the outside world was inevitable.

Padre Luis urged all to pray for deliverance from the threats around them and it became the theme to all his sermons.

Chapter 24
The Shrine at the Crossroads, Delaware
May 1, 2008

High Noon

It was high noon and a mariachi band was playing renditions of Clay's favorite cowboy songs. If a person listened closely between songs, they could just hear the peal of the bell that sounded in the Elmwood Baptist Church. It was one of those days that comes to Sussex County only in mid-spring—when the sun is just beginning to flex its muscles after lying low all winter. The Earth basked in Sol's warmth. Though the days were still too short to bake the chill from the ground, the air was balmy. Many natives claimed that this was their favorite time of year—before the cloying mugginess of summer in Delaware and its attendant noxious bugs made their appearance.

"You are my sunshine..." the mariachi band sang.

Shielded from this glorious day by the canopy over the dais, Clay carried on with his prophet duties while entertaining a petite but wiry woman of fifty or so. She wore a safari jacket and khaki pants over her still shapely, but hardened figure. Her severe expression, framed by her graying hair, betrayed her disdain. Beatrice Howe had worked for *People* magazine for over fifteen years. A staunch feminist, she usually covered "women's issues"—but had asked for this unusual assignment for its religious implications. She never missed a chance to cross swords with the Catholic Church—eager to duel with them on the Church's views on abortion, women in the clergy, and other cultural issues.

The foundation of the dais was constructed of crates that supported plywood decking that had been stripped from a Salem billboard. Atop the smiling face of the happy smoker sat the Barcalounger that was the throne of the resident prophet. To keep the admiring throngs from swamping the platform, snow fence had been nailed around three-fourths of its perimeter. A battered couch, rescued from a roadside trash heap, rested at stage left of the recliner in Tonight Show fashion so that guests could join the prophet for special audiences. Behind Clay's seat, there sat a derelict avocado-green refrigerator. No one knew from whence it came—it had just appeared one night. Though no longer able to function in a cooling capacity, it served as a cupboard that held whatever the prophet's attendants wished to keep on hand.

The trailer that was home to Clay's three Malaguan compadres had been moved from the migrant worker camp at Pardoe Farms and now sat at the prophet's back abutting the shrine. Besides a treasure chamber, it also served as Clay's break room during his long days of drinking.

When Beatrice finished taking in the shantytown style architecture she asked, "Mr. Stool, what qualifies you to be the religious leader of all these people?"

"What did you say your name was again?"

"Howe, Beatrice Howe."

"I had an Aunt Beatrice once. We all called her Aunt Biddie. D'ya mind if I call you Biddie?"

Beatrice was taken off guard by the naively presumptive question. She hesitated before responding, reflecting on this man. What he stood for. What she wanted from him.

Clay Stool was taller than she had imagined. And for such a dissolute man, he appeared to be in near athletic shape. She couldn't decide if he was handsome or not. But his face had character—especially the eyes. They were a disarmingly warm and friendly brown, standing out from the bluish gray of his irregularly shaven face. When he looked up at her from under his sombrero, she felt that his eyes were not really focused on her.

But she tried not to let it bother her, for Clay Stool was just a target. Her mark. The key to her

story. People relate better to a story when it is about an individual central character rather than an impersonal organization like the church. Beatrice planned to use the magnitude of chicanery she assumed was being perpetrated at this shrine, to make Clay Stool the personification of religious exploitation. With a drunken schizophrenic as protagonist, this story had Pulitzer Prize written all over it.

The target of her investigation was in reality an itinerant laborer whose liquor induced visions were nebulous at best and devoid of a coherent message, but she had been waiting for the right story and could sense that this was it.

Beatrice concocted a simple, but comprehensive, agenda. First she would photograph the so-called prophet while he sat in his recliner drinking himself into oblivion. Then she would interview him. Get his inebriated and befuddled responses on tape. Document the squalor his disciples lived in while giving away their worldly goods to this charlatan. And if that was not enough, she had a back-up plan.

Her photographer had no sooner taken a head shot of the putative prophet for the article, when Beatrice moved in to ask Clay a series of leading and insinuating questions

“What do you do with the offerings?”

“Other than what I drink, I don’t know what becomes of any of this stuff...if you’re wond’rin’ about any of these here gifts, you might want to speak with my compadre, Hector.”

“Do you really expect people to believe that getting drunk allows you to communicate with a being in another dimension, or heaven, or wherever?”

“Sure, why not?”

She wasn’t quite ready for Clay’s matter-of-fact demeanor. She liked it better when the guilty party squirmed. So, she approached Clay from another direction.

“Mister Stool, according to your medical records, after becoming catatonic during combat, you spent over two decades in the psychiatric ward at the VA hospital in Elsmere, Delaware. The doctors there diagnosed you as delusional and suffering from an organic psychosis. They said you often heard voices and hallucinated.”

“Yep. You’re right as rain, little missy, I was in the hospital for quite a spell. And I’d have never made it through them years there without the help of those voices. They was good company. But the folks at the hospital finally let me go and told me that I was cured—I got papers from Doctor Brown to prove it. The hospital did me a world uh good. That’s where I learned my trade—sweeping. I picked up shoveling on my own.”

“I talked to Dr. Brown and he claims that you are probably still delusional. He said they only released you because the government cut their funding.”

“If Dr. Brown says so, it must be true. I’m right grateful to him. He took good care of me back when I was havin’ problems.”

“Do you think people should follow an inebriated mental patient who spent twenty-plus years in the psycho ward?”

“Them was the best days of my life. Till now.”

Beatrice’s instinct was to be annoyed at her subject’s inability to articulate an answer, but she realized that Clay’s non-sequitur of a comment, on a tangential portion of her question, could better serve her purpose of discrediting him. So she brushed off her initial reaction and continued down her list.

“I’ve never seen anyone drink like this before. This is extremely abusive, almost suicidal—why do you do it?”

Clay looked her square in the eye and winked. “It’s the Code of the West, ma’am. I made that feathered lady a promise to keep comin’ back, and a cowboy always keeps his word. No hand worth his grit would leave a lady in distress...y’all are the weaker sex, ya know.”

As a dedicated feminist, she had to restrain herself from using the microphone cord of her portable tape recorder to strangle Clay Stool. As she stood there in disbelief, a fly flew into her mouth and she bit down on it. It tasted surprisingly sweet as it squished between her molars. Her alarm at swallowing a fly shocked her enough to begin stammering a comeback, “A man like you needs to be analyzed. Not idolized.”

“You got me there little lady. I gotta admit, I been right idle lately. Hell, I don’t even pour my own liquor anymore.”

Embarrassed at her momentary loss of professionalism, Beatrice fell back on her staff’s prepared

questions.

"Where is it that you feel you go when you have your visions?"

"Down that road a piece at the grease spot."

"So she lives in the grease spot?"

"Not exactly...that's just how I get to where I meet her."

"Please explain...my readers may find it difficult to understand how a grease spot can help you to *get* anywhere."

Clay paused to swallow a quart of liquor in four gulps—a half-pint per swallow Beatrice calculated.

He asked, "You ever read any comic books?"

"No." The reporter would not have admitted to it even if she had, considering the reading of comics to be *déclassé*.

"Well, I keep up with most of the major ones and in 'em, folks are always fallin' through holes that drop into other worlds...die-men-shuns, I think they call 'em...and that's what I think is goin' on here. That there grease spot is like one of them comic book holes and the feathered lady is settin' in one of them there die-men-shuns. There's some kinda tunnel or somethin' hookin' up our two worlds, but we never quite get all the way down it. We get purty close...in a kind of in between place, where we cain't make actual contact but we can talk to each other."

"Well, what does she say?"

"I'm only just startin' to understand a little of her lingo, but even when I couldn't understand a word she was sayin', I felt she was lookin' for some help. I wanted to help, so I promised her that I'd come back and parley every day until she got her message across." Clay took advantage of a pause in the conversation to chug the larger portion of a flagon of mead. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "I don't know exactly what she wants me to be doin'...but I get the feelin' she wants help findin' some of her people what's lost. It's downright frustratin' havin' to meet her in that in between place."

I think he really believes in this place. Is this oaf that simple? She checked to make sure that her recorder was still on before continuing, "Is that here in this dimension, or there in her dimension? Or do you know the difference between here and there?"

Clay absent-mindedly scratched Tomas behind the ear as he pondered how best to explain. After a few moments he lit on an analogy. "Do you see that bottle there?"

"Which bottle?" Beatrice asked, confused by the piles of empty receptacles.

"That green one, yonder, by your feet?"

"Yes?"

"Well, I see that bottle just like you do."

"So?"

"And take this old hound dog I'm a scratchin', you see him too, right?"

"Yes."

"Since we see 'em, we know that they're there. And that we're here."

Beatrice nodded, trying to follow Clay's logic. "And your point, Mister Stool?"

"I just proved I know the difference betwixt here and there. I may be an ordinary man, but I'd know if I was over yonder, rather than bein' here. I know I'm here now. And I know I'm really there when I'm in the in-between place. And I see what I see—and when I'm there, I see a feathered lady."

"If that place is really there, why do you need to get so addled on alcohol in order to see her?"

Clay was a patient man and was determined to make Beatrice understand, so he cast about for another parallel. "See that plane headin' for the Dover airbase? It can't get there without fuel."

"And that's why you keep abusing yourself like this?"

While her last question hung in the air, the mariachi band returned from a short break at Big Leg Irma's. They picked up their instruments and began playing. Clay began singing along, "If the ocean were whiskey and I was a duck..."

"So you're saying that the alcohol fuels your inter-dimensional travels?"

"You got it, Miz Biddie."

"And does this feathered lady have a name?"

"Padre Luis says she's someone called Madonna, and he's a real educated man and all. But I cain't rightly say. All I know is that she's a lady, and if there is one thing I know for sure—it's that a cowboy

always helps a lady”

Beatrice tried to sound sarcastic, “And who taught you that?”

“All I know I learned from watchin’ cowboy shows on tee vee. Like when Marshall Clint Hardy saved Jane Russell in *The Cowboy’s Last Ride*. She played the squatter’s daughter.”

“And why do you model yourself after the cowboys?”

“Why, they’re the greatest men that ever walked God’s green earth—Gene Autry, Hopalong Cassidy, Red Ryder, the Lone Ranger, Matt Dillon. And, of course, Marshal Clint Hardy. They all followed the Code of the West...a friend is a friend, you never shoot a man in the back, you always help a lady, and the only law is right.” Clay hesitated for a moment and said, “there’s more to the code, but them’s the main parts.”

“Well, *whoopy-ti-yi-yay*,” Beatrice countered sarcastically.

“*Yeeee ha!*” Clay responded by jumping up from the Barcalounger and throwing his sombrero into the air.

Mistaking Clay’s paroxysm as a break in the monopoly that the reporter had on their prophet’s time, a group of pilgrims rushed forward to the feet of the recliner.

Beatrice found herself separated from her interviewee by a wall of Malaguan flesh. Clay, on the other hand, was not particular to whom he spoke and quickly forgot that Beatrice was there. With her pageboy haircut and safari attire, she was assumed to be a man by the immigrants and was rudely elbowed in the ribs when she tried to push past those in front of her.

With the interview obviously terminated for the moment, she decided to linger about the periphery of the shrine. Like a vulture circling its prey, she wanted to see more of what was going on. It would be another four hours before the prophet crawled down the road to speak to a grease spot, so in the mean time she would prowl the shrine and its environs looking for what she was sure would be easy pickings. There was a lot of dirt to be had on Clay Stool, and she was just the one to do the digging.

It was beginning to look like there was more of a story here than could be contained within the scope of the glossy weekly she wrote for. Beatrice considered breaking the story to a news syndicate, and that led her to begin thinking in even bigger terms. She wondered about the possibility of video—of doing a documentary of this supposedly holy shrine to follow up her initial article and using it as her entrée into network television news.

This place is made for visuals. She looked out over the squalid encampment. *Where are the miracles?* She watched the fool seated on the dais, wearing a sombrero and guzzling liquor as fast as it was handed to him. *Who is this visionary...really?*

She glanced past the perimeter of the shrine at the police barricades that surrounded it and pictured herself on camera, with the breeze blowing her trench coat, holding the microphone, gazing straight into the camera and asking, “Who will protect the pilgrims? They are but simple people.”

She watched as these denizens of one of the poorest third world nations handed over their family heirlooms to Clay’s companions and saw herself in millions of households. *Who will end up with the treasure?* The list of insinuating questions with possible incriminating answers began to scroll across her mind, *Who will administer this operation? Who will seize control of this enterprise? To what extent will they exploit these poor deluded people? Will sweatshops be next? What will be the impact on the local community?*

Beatrice began mentally outlining a series of articles as she stood witness to the pilgrims’ adulation of their prophet. Once she’d nailed the Pulitzer with the magazine piece, selling the documentary would be a snap. She congratulated herself on her instincts for a story. It was with a feeling of self-satisfaction that she thought back to the argument she’d had with her editor when he’d turned down her request for extra expense money to hire consulting experts to accompany her to the shrine.

“Just take your laptop and a photographer and go have a look around...then write a story. For Christsakes how much of a story can there be?” he had said.

So, she’d tapped into her 401k to hire the consultants and headed to Delaware. Though apprehensive at first, she was now glad that she’d trusted her gut feelings that there was a story here. And since *People* had not been forthcoming with the money, she felt justified in considering offering the story to the highest bidder. “I’ll show that bastard.” Beatrice turned away from the shrine and started off to marshal her forces. “It’s time for the heavy artillery,” she said to herself, now confident that the resources she had purchased from her own pocket would be money well spent. “It’ll take awhile to get everything in place,

and then we'll just see how long anybody cares if he keeps crawling down that road."

Chapter 25

The Shrine at the Crossroads, Delaware

May 5, 2008

A Prayer Answered

Finally, the prayers of the pilgrims were answered. As Padre Luis was trying to find recruits to dig a new latrine ditch, a great buzz arose from the camp. Children cried for their mamas and papas to come and see as they ran spreading the alarm. Padre Luis thought that this was the beginning of the attack by the guard and police that would uproot them and the shrine. He ran to the road to impose his body between his people and the might of authority, but as the column came into closer view Padre Luis dropped to his knees to give thanks. These were not the soldiers of oppression. These were the soldiers of God.

As the procession entered the camp, the crowds parted in hushed amazement. Padre Luis rose from his knees and ran to join the front of the column. A monk led the formation swinging a censer that billowed clouds of frankincense. Before the smoke had dissipated, a row of brothers bearing crosses on tall standards marched forward through its fragrant fog. An excited murmur arose as the crowd reacted to the statue of St. Simon being borne past them on the shoulders of a half-dozen hale friars. The murmur grew into recitations of fervent prayer when they saw that the next litter bore a statue of the Madonna.

The brethren, who carried the ark of relics, chanted a hymn in Spanish relating the history of the relics and their price. Then came a troop of cudgeliers performing their manual of arms in their capacity as the honor guard for the Keeper of the Purse, who brought up their rear. He was an esteemed personage in that he was responsible for the maintenance of their funds.

The emblem of the order *Rule of Seventy-Two* was emblazoned on the banner carried by a brace of novitiates. The banner showed a fat purse bearing the sacred number beneath a pair of crossed cudgels. The cudgels were emblematic of the fact that the Simonites were also a military order that was not afraid to use force to defend the Church, advance their cause, or collect a bad debt.

Next came six novices strewing flower petals in the path of the focal point of the procession—a sedan chair bearing the Papal seal and carried by twelve robust monks. This was the conveyance of the Grand Inquisitor. It was protected at the rear by a troop of crack cudgeliers led by their Master of Arms.

The entrance of the Inquisitor's train into the camp was designed to impress the pilgrims by its splendor and show of Papal force. But just in case the magnificence of the spectacle alone was not sufficient, the Simonites were prepared to win their way into the hearts of the campesinos through that oldest of paths—the stomach.

The wily quartermaster of the brotherhood had been busy in the days since their arrival in Delaware bartering with the locals who were most amenable to that sort of trade. The fruits of his labors now brought up the end of the cavalcade and were, as they passed, proving the most appealing part of the cortege. Twenty hired Amish men were leading as many horse-drawn wagons laden with corn, beans, charcoal, and assorted vegetables. Behind them, Amish youngsters were driving a herd of fatted swine.

A cheer went up from the multitude as the Malaguan spectators fell in behind the parade.

The brothers marched to the shrine, and the various units arrayed themselves before the dais where Clay sat. When they were finished, the sedan chair was opposite Clay's Barcalounger and seventy-two brothers were formed in a semi-circle, on each side. Six stepped from each line to form up on either side of the door of the sedan chair. Each crossed their cudgel with the brother opposite to form an arch, and the brother serving as footman ran forward, opened the door and out stepped LaFarge.

The Inquisitor's height of six-and-a-half feet made him at least a foot taller than the average Malaguan. A great whooshing sound was heard as they all inhaled in admiration at once. But the feature that impressed them the most was LaFarge's magnificently hooked nose. Whispers of El Aguila swept through the crowd and that was the name by which he became known. The coming of El Aguila had been foretold in the Amatl Codex as a harbinger of the return of Quetzalcoatl.

A red carpet was rolled out before the Inquisitor that reached all the way to the dais. LaFarge approached the prophet and went down on one knee. A novice came forward with the Inquisitor's offering to the visionary on a satin pillow. The gift was both honorific and rare—a bottle of absinthe worth thousands of dollars on the open market. Oblivious to the honor and the arrival of the Inquisitor, Clay sat drinking and petting Tomas. Hector shook Clay, who nodded to attention, took the present, and unceremoniously chugged it down.

LaFarge watched and gasped in shock, but the Simonites were impressed and erupted into spontaneous applause. Their response was taken up by the crowd and developed into a thunderous ovation. LaFarge quickly discerned the success of this gesture and with his innate cunning rose to his full height and bowed as if he were the natural recipient of the adulation.

Padre Luis stepped forward, fell on his knees before the Inquisitor, kissed his ring, and called him the answer to their prayers. LaFarge expressed the Pope's desire to meet the physical and spiritual needs of the pilgrims and told Luis of his urgent mission to address the heresy surrounding the interpretation of the vision.

LaFarge recognized the authority that the Padre wielded over this mass of humanity, and the Inquisitor hoped that by demonstrating supremacy over Luis he could assume control over Luis' flock. Hence, control of the riches flowing into the shrine. So he asked Luis, as pastor to the pilgrims, to be his adjutant and liaison to the pilgrims and sexton of the shrine.

Even though he was already the *de facto* holder of these positions, Luis was flattered to be elevated to such an office by an emissary of the Pope, and he said to the Inquisitor, "Your Holiness, I am yours to command."

LaFarge didn't bother to correct the Padre's faux pas of addressing him with a title reserved for the Pope. "Then please arrange for your congregation to hear an address from me tonight. In the meantime, would you be so kind as to meet with our quartermaster and arrange for a great feast to follow my address."

It was ironic that the man the Inquisitor chose for his assistant was the principal proselytizer of the Toltecan heresy. Being an Amatl Indian, Padre Luis had long been able to accord native Toltecan beliefs with the pageantry and hagiography of Catholicism. This was the tradition of generations of clergy in Central America. But LaFarge was less concerned with Luis' dogmatic shortcomings than with extending his influence over the throng of pilgrims.

As LaFarge bestowed his blessing upon Luis, and the diminutive Father set about assigning duties in preparation for the Inquisitor's address that evening, prying eyes watched from the periphery of the crowd.

"I hope you got all that," Beatrice said gruffly to her photographer, "this story just notched up to another level."

Chapter 26

*Wiffie DuPont American Legion Post, Delaware
May 5, 2008*

Their Name Was Legion

Franklin was at his wit's end. His migrants had deserted to the shrine, and without cheap labor, his business was dead in the water. He needed the cash flow from the operation of Pardoe Poultry to finance his plans, and he worried that with all the attention being drawn to the area, that his activities would be discovered. Not only did the multitudes at the shrine block truck access to his farm, but he needed his hired help to stop cavorting at the shrine and get back to work.

Pissed at the spineless governor's refusal to take forceful action to remove the pilgrims and the shrine, Franklin took the short walk down the Harriston Pike to the Wiffie DuPont Post of the American Legion. He figured that this was the place to find the help he needed to settle his beef with the Malaguan workers. After all, it was the Legionnaires of this post who were locally renowned for having broken the strike against the pickle plant in '47, and for busting up the hobo jungle back in '38.

The screen door, which protected the entrance of the Legion Hall from the plague of flies that spawned in Pardoe Poultry's manure pits, protested as Franklin abruptly yanked it open. Its rusty hinges announced Franklin's arrival as they screamed for oil. Everyone in the place knew him, and few of them liked him. His brother and father, Wayne and Wayne Jr., had been more their type of earthy, down-home, good old boys. Franklin was thought of as a fancy-pants rich boy who considered himself too good for folks around Harriston. Someone called out from the back of the bar, "Hey, it's the chicken man!" and everybody laughed.

The bar was a dingy hole that had changed little in the past forty years. The walls were covered with nicotine-darkened knotty pine and the musty atmosphere, while repulsive to an outsider, was like a perfume to a certain class of people who were comfortably familiar with the scent of decay.

It was furnished with promotional giveaways from liquor and beer companies. Above the bar hung a clock that was mounted on the side of a plastic model of a beer wagon pulled by a team of horses. It had been stuck on half past three for twenty years. A neon waterfall that spewed over the name Hamm's was the backdrop to a cartoon bear hawking a beer that had gone out of production in the early '70's. Plastic busts of granddads, inflatable bottles, and other tributes to bad taste cluttered the place and formed the underpinnings for vast networks of cobwebs and dust bunnies.

An out-of-level pool table and shuffleboard stood neglected in a dank corner, for the melancholy beings that frequented this den sought not diversion but oblivion. The denizens of this alcoholic social club were not happy to be distracted from their pursuits by anyone, much less Franklin Pardoe.

Oblivious to the bad vibes being hurled his way, Franklin called out, "Attention everybody! Hey! Listen up."

The crowd responded in an ugly fashion, calling out, "Who the hell do you think you are? Here's your attention! Hey, my ass! What's your goddamned problem?"

Franklin didn't miss a beat. "My problem's with all those damn foreigners down at the crossroads....everyone that was working for me has run away to hang out with that crowd at the shrine."

Some one cried out, "I think he means the whore house."

Franklin affirmed the response, glad that the patrons had started to pay attention, "Yeah, that's right...have any of you tried to get in there for service lately? It's impossible!"

Another irate citizen hollered, "Oh. Yeah. We know who you mean...you're talkin' about them

wetback, job stealin', Muh-log-wuns from below the border!"

"Those are the ones." Franklin was starting to warm to the crowd. "I say we show them foreign bastards how red-blooded Americans maintain order."

A general cheer went up among the bar flies, a cheer which grew to a roar when Franklin offered to buy drinks all around. Suddenly, the last of the Pardoes was a much more popular man than he'd been just a few minutes before.

It was amazing to see the sudden blossoming of good fellowship in the room. Men, who a few scant minutes before had been on the verge of throwing a beer bottle at Pardoe's bald head, were now patting him on the back. Surly types were smiling, quiet men were talking, and all were jostling to the bar in order to down as many drinks as possible before their benefactor came to his senses.

"Now that I got your attention..." Franklin raised his voice in order to be heard above the clinking of glassware and the *pssssh* of beer bottles as they opened. "Now that I got your attention..."

Everyone laughed and raised their glasses to let Franklin know that he would continue to hold their attention as long as he kept buying.

"Those migrants have a lot of nerve coming up here without papers, stealing jobs, and closing off our roads. Just who the hell do they think they are?" Franklin knew he'd struck a chord when he heard the varied responses.

"Let's show 'em who runs this place! Run 'em out! Let's kick some ass!"

The youngest Pardoe could feel that he had this crowd eating out of his hand as well as drinking out of his pocket. "And they got the nerve to fly a Malaguan flag over their so called shrine...the one showing a flying snake or some kind of dragon. Who knows what it is...hell, it's probably just one of their heathen idols. Drink up boys...hey bartender...make sure everybody's glass is full, and when we're done drinkin'...we'll go down there and run off them foreigners, open up that road, and burn that shrine. What do you say, boys?"

As the bar patrons cheered lustily, the bartender pulled a large box out from behind the bar and began distributing the contents. The greasy-haired barkeep gave Franklin a yellow smile as he pulled blackjacks, brass knuckles, and sawed off baseball bats from the well-worn box, until everybody had a weapon. Franklin took a spring-loaded blackjack just for appearances, for he had no idea of how to use it. But once he saw the crowd was ready, he yelled, "Come on boys, let's go down there and teach 'em a lesson!"

"Just a minute!"

Everyone turned to see the local preacher, Reverend Ernest Rocktower, emerge from the bathroom.

"What in heaven's name do you fellas reckon on doing?"

Everyone was flabbergasted at the appearance of the Reverend Ernie, who had been ensconced in a stall of the men's for the entire preceding episode. The Reverend looked about the room, shook his head sadly back and forth and said, "There isn't anyone going anywhere..." Moans of disappointment and disbelief began to emanate from the crowd, until the Parson continued, "Until I've blessed the undertaking!"

Everyone cheered; the preacher grabbed a set of brass knuckles, and mumbled a few words and ended his prayer with this exhortation, "Let's put the fear of the true God into them, instead of that Whore of Babylon they worship."

Everyone cheered in general affirmation. They streamed out the door of the American Legion Post and marched the quarter mile up the road to the site of the encampment. They were stopped at the police lines, but a sympathetic sergeant let them pass, saying how he was tired of having his hands tied and that he was glad that some of the more upright citizens were going to clean up the mess.

The situation appeared ideal for their purposes. As the Legionnaires crept closer to the camp, they observed the unwelcome foreigners taking part in a great celebration. A gigantic bonfire burned in the center of the encampment, and all the pilgrims were busy feasting, dancing to the music of the mariachi band, and making merry—the ideal conditions for a sneak attack.

Chapter 0 Continued Thresher Pub

Where time is irrelevant

The Chicken's Tale

"This is a very good beer." The chicken poured the last of the stout into its mug and placed the empty shark bottle deliberately at the far side of the bar, indicating it was time for another.

"Mr. Malloy, methinks your customer wants himself another brew." Captain Teach was fascinated with the storyteller, and had sat in rapt attention through the chicken's account. He observed and took notice of every minute aspect of the feathered being's comportment, demeanor, and manner as the tale was spun. The listener heard the story and read the body language as he sized up this entity. "Barkeep! Put this one on my tab."

"Thanks," said the chicken flatly.

"You're certainly welcome Mister...er what did ye say your name was?"

"I didn't," the bird spoke sharply. "A chicken's got to have some secrets."

The bartender made a mark on the chalkboard beneath the letters E.T., "I say, Captain, he is a plucky fellow...you are a *he* aren't you?"

"Right now I'm not one hundred percent sure." The bird shrugged. "I'm just glad to be here, so call me what you will."

"You seem like a lad to me." The captain tugged at his black whiskers. "But, now, I haven't taken a proper look yet." He started reaching towards the chicken's tail.

"Don't even think about it, sailor!" The chicken turned its posterior from the seaman. "I'm not exactly sure I want too good of a description of what's back there."

"Bartender, hurry up with the drink for old what's its name," said Teach, as jolly as a biker Santa. "That ought to calm him or her or it down."

Wilbur Malloy obliged the captain and once the chicken's whistle was re-wetted, it continued, "I know it sounds fantastic to be talking about aliens that can transfer their living soul from body to body, but I guaran-damn-tee you I'm telling the truth."

"Aye...has the ring of truth to me. When you've been traveling the Nexus as long as I have, you get used to fantastic things." The captain pulled a clay pipe with a long curved stem from the inside of his seacoat, packed it with some kind of weed, and struck a sulfur match on the bar. "I usually try to stay away from things not of me own time, but these lucifers be right handy."

The captain puffed several times, and once the bowl was lit, inhaled deeply, held the smoke for as long as he could hold his breath, then exhaled the pungent smoke in the chicken's direction. "That switching bodies trick...that could be downright useful in my line of work."

"And might I ask your line of work, sir...I mean, Captain..."

"Call me Teach, Edward Teach...though some knows me as Edward Drummond. And there's seven Mrs. Teaches and six Mrs. Drummonds," said Captain Blackbeard as he motioned to Wilbur for a stout of his own. "That's what drove me up the Delaware Bay, the outer banks off Hatteras is too full of wives." He paused to draw again on the pipe. "And me line of work is trade."

The chicken took pause and turned to the Captain. "In my time, you are known for some fairly one-sided trading."

"So, ye've heard of me, then?" Teach said smugly. "Well, it's all lies! Spread by jealous competitors, mostly. I've heard stories of such a slanderous and libelous nature that even I doubt my own good name."

Why, you'd think I was some kind of pirate, if you didn't know better. And me—never anything but honest. Of course, I was a privateer, but I was licensed by Queen Anne to rid the sea of frogs and Spaniards. Sure, I traded the swag after it was got. What was I supposed to do? Bury it? I used it as seed money to set up honest enterprises along the Nexus."

"What's this Nexus you're talking about?"

"It's a network of passages from one world to another. Once a bloke knows how to navigate his way about the Nexus, he can travel and trade betwixt different times and places. The odd thing about it is that there ain't any real distance from one port to the next. I have had the phenomenon explained to me by some really smart coves as being inter-dimensional."

"What's the advantage to that?" the chicken queried.

"Let me give you an example. By tacking along the right course, I can reach a port in a dimension where chicle is an aphrodisiac and gold is as common as stone is here. In me sailing days, I would have had to haul the chicle up from Panama, where it could be procured from the Spaniards who harvested it from the jungles with their Indian slaves. But now I come here and get me chicle from the feller whose door you came through, Eddie Brunswick. What he gets for me is all wrapped up in fancy paper and shiny foil. He calls it Wrigley's spearmint—and it's full of chicle. When I haul that back to that other dimension, it fetches a bushel of gold nuggets for each packet of the stuff. The folks I trade it to pick the gold up off the ground like gravel. They think they're getting one over on me. They're laughing up their sleeves at me while they all chew chicle and fornicate like rabbits. I split the gold with Eddie, and Wilbur gets his share for maintaining the establishment here. Everyone is happy."

"I can feel my horizons broadening as we speak," the chicken said, without the least bit of sarcasm.

"But we've interrupted your fine tale. Those popish sorts are always up to no good. Look at Pope Pius, who put a bounty on Queen Lizzie's head. Tell us, what kind of chicanery was that Pope Sylvester up to?"

"It had to do with his father, Pierro del Ponte, the head of a small crime syndicate that managed the Delmarva operations for the Philadelphia mob. The old man was using inside information to profit on the upcoming Jubilee."

"Old King Henry was right to throw them papists out of England," the buccaneer said.

The chicken nodded its head in agreement with the Captain. "You can be sure they were up to no good. Once Old Pierro had his boy in place as Sylvester IV, every tenth penny spent by the church went to the mob."

"Sounds honorable to me. I've worked under such arrangements meself," the captain said.

"Every Vatican contract awarded, from the removal of garbage to construction of bleachers, went to someone affiliated with del Ponte."

"He works just like you, Wilbur," the privateer said.

"It was amazing how deep the del Ponte organization dipped its beak into every transaction that went through the Vatican. And del Ponte used the Vatican bank as his own personal laundry basket for cleaning up dirty money."

"Why is he so particular about the cleanliness of his money? I always found dirty money spends just as well as clean. Hell, I've spent money that was freshly stained in blood," the Captain said.

"Money laundering is just a figure of speech. It's really a ruse to make your money appear to be legitimately earned."

"Aye!" Blackbeard exclaimed, "To fool the Crown."

"You've got it," the chicken confirmed. "And, with the indulgence-selling and arms sales under Vatican diplomatic protection, the Pope's father did quite well for himself."

"And then what happened?" Wilbur asked, anxious for the chicken to continue its tale.

"I'll tell ya."

Chapter 27

The Shrine at the Crossroads, Delaware

May 5, 2008

LaFarge takes the Mound

The clear night sky was lit by a great bonfire that roared barely a safe distance from the shrine. Hundreds of dancers gyrated to the melodic rhythm of the camp's mariachi band. Among the crowd were beardless Amish youths, still in their wilding year, dancing side by side with señoritas, the girls from the roadhouse, and the Simonite brothers. Around the periphery of the action were several television camera platforms manned by LaFarge's video crew. The director and producer were employees of an advertising firm owned by Pierro del Ponte.

Clay Stool had company beneath the canopy of the shrine as he presided over the celebration. He was flanked by Padre Luis, Big Leg Irma, and the dignitaries of the Simonite Order—the Grand Inquisitor, the Keeper of the Purse, and the Master of Arms.

Earlier that day word had gone out through the camp that all were to gather right after sunset at Sierra Calavera to hear a sermon by the Grand Inquisitor, and that a *fiesta grande* would follow. The Malaguans jokingly referred to this particular rise of ground as a mountain, for though it was merely twenty feet across with an elevation of six feet, it was the only break in the otherwise flat terrain. When women unearthed ancient human skulls while digging for roots on it, they added "*Calavera*" to the nickname of the mound. The earthwork had been created as a burial mound over seven hundred years previously by a group of Nanticoke Indians. The pilgrims now thought of it as Holy ground.

Virtually everyone in the camp attended. Those who were not motivated by piety and duty to the Church were drawn by the promise of a feast. A narrow pathway of red carpet bisected the crowd that surrounded the hill and connected it to the dais. A great roar went up as LaFarge stepped from beneath the protective shelter. LaFarge reveled in the shouts of *Viva Inquisadoro Grande*. He held his head erect and looked down his great proboscis at the congregation in his most aristocratic fashion. Too self-absorbed in his moment of glory, he did not hear the quieter tones beneath the cacophony as the Malaguans poked each other in the ribs and whispered "*El Aguila*," inspired by his aquiline profile.

LaFarge strode upon the hill, holding in his left hand a crucifix mounted on the top of a pikestaff. He kissed the cross then handed it to one of the attendants. The crowd gasped at the silhouette of his nose and cape that was magnified by the light of the bonfire as it was cast onto the canvas backdrop. It made the very image of the beak and wings of an eagle to the crowd. After the initial shock, a great spontaneous cheer was evoked. Soaking in the adulation, the Inquisitor lifted his arms to display his brilliantly scarlet cape, like he was spreading his wings for flight.

Calls of, "Behold! The Eagle! El Aguila is here! The sign of the Serpent Mother's coming!" sounded across the field amidst the boisterous acclaim. LaFarge nodded gracefully, "El Aguila," he pronounced the name to himself, "I like the sound. It has a certain *je ne sais quoi*." LaFarge visibly swelled in size as he gleamed in the face of the thunderous hurrah. *These are my people*. LaFarge waved. *This is going quite well*.

Padre Luis stepped to the microphone to introduce Clay. "Let's bring the chosen one forward who is guiding the Mother and her Son to their people as was written on the stone left us by our ancestors." He referred to the great stone column that sat in the center of the Amatl town square as he loosely recited from the well-known text carved on its sides.

"Señor Clay." Jorge shook the prophet's shoulder. "It is time for you to go to the hill, the Padre's introducing you."

Clay Stool pulled himself slowly out of the chair. The clairvoyant veteran walked off the dais and sauntered along the ribbon of red carpet to the rise. Clay walked surprisingly upright. It had been three hours since his vision, and he was rejuvenated by the *siesta* he always grabbed after seeing the feathered lady—he woke up ready for another drink.

“Monsieur Stool, it is my privilege to present this gift from His Holiness to you.” LaFarge handed Clay a large medal emblazoned with the face of Sylvester IV in relief. Grown men wept with joy to witness this tribute from the Holy Father and after the ribbon was about Clay’s neck, the Inquisitor once again bowed in acceptance of the crowd’s affirmation. When LaFarge finished taking Clay’s bow, he motioned the prophet towards the microphone, “A few words for the assemblage...if you please.”

“Shucks.” Clay blushed and resisted being urged forward. “I’m a mite bashful,” he said to LaFarge.

“Nonsense,” the Inquisitor protested, “you perform daily when you have your vision.”

“Yeah, but I ain’t as sober then as I am now...and there ain’t no microphone at the grease spot.”

“Come now, these people believe in you...and many of them need help finding their way back to salvation...it would be of great assistance to me if you would endorse my efforts to help them.”

“But just what is it that you’re doing? I thought you were deliverin’ groceries.”

“I was sent by the Pope to cleanse these pilgrims of their heresy.”

The prophet stood in puzzled silence. Jorge, who had accompanied Clay to the mount, whispered to him, “It is like when the governor sent Wyatt Earp to clean up Dodge City.” Clay had infected the Malaguan with his love of westerns.

“Oh!” Clay exclaimed, “You’re like a deputy marshal.”

LaFarge had no idea what Clay meant by his declaration, but contented himself with the prophet’s cooperation.

Clay then moved to the microphone. “First, I reckon I oughta thank Mr. Pope for this here medal...it’s right purty. I’m not too sure why he sent it to me, but it ain’t wise to look a gift horse in the mouth. Prob’ly has somethin’ to do with the feathered lady...”

“The Madonna,” LaFarge leaned into the microphone to interject.

“I ain’t been able to catch her name yet,” Clay said. “How’d you come across it? You seen ’er too?”

LaFarge signaled to Jorge that it was time to lead the prophet back to his Barcalounger.

As the two men trod the carpet back to the dais, the pilgrims crowded on either side reached out to touch him as they chanted, “Long live the chosen one!”

Once the prophet was safely ensconced in his chair, LaFarge waited for the crowd to cease cheering so he could read the Papal Bull that officially commenced the Jubilee. When the tumult subsided, he began, “His Holiness, Sylvester IV, in honor of the miraculous visions that have been visited upon that most devout prophet of the Holy Church, Clay Stool, proclaims a Jubilee to last until one year from this day. And in his extraordinary benevolence, the Pope has granted a plenary indulgence to all who make the journey to this shrine, repent of their sins, and demonstrate their sincerity through acts of contrition and/or donations.” When he finished, he looked up awaiting an ovation.

When only a few of the crowd applauded, LaFarge looked quizzically to Padre Luis, who leaned to the Inquisitor’s ear. “None of my people speak Italian, Your Eminence...they did not understand what you just read.”

“Ah, *oui*. My mistake.” LaFarge admitted, realizing he’d read the Bull in its original language.

“Would you please be so kind as to translate for your countrymen, Padre.”

The Inquisitor stepped to the side and allowed Padre Luis to take his place at the microphone. The cleric began speaking in Malaguan, “His Holiness has declared that this is a place of jubilation and miracles, and that all who make the journey, do as they’re told, and pay the toll will be rewarded with guaranteed entrance into paradise.”

From that time forward, the shrine was known affectionately among the Malaguans as the Holy Toll Shrine.

LaFarge stepped back to the microphone and signaled for silence. Once the audience calmed, he launched into a homily, “It is the pernicious nature of sin that it is insidiously seductive and lulls the unwary into a gradual acceptance of seemingly minor heresies as it seeps into even the most pious hearts. I’ve been sent by the Pope to protect the faithful—both physically and spiritually. Our Simonite brothers’ stout cudgels can ward off corporeal threats, and Church doctrine can assure the safety of your souls by

guiding you along the path to salvation despite any unorthodox beliefs you might innocently hold through ignorance.”

To the Amatl mind, ancient Mesoamerican beliefs were so intertwined with Catholic liturgy as to be one indivisible belief. The Inquisitor had studied the Amatl religious culture and how most Malaguans included their own pantheon of Toltecan deities among the statues of the Catholic saints on their household altars. He knew that they made offerings of corn and liquor to them all and prayed to feathered serpents as well as the Holy Trinity and the Madonna. He referred to several of the Toltecan gods by name before promising, “I will lead you from the darkness of damnation into the light of deliverance by expunging the remnants of ancient legends from your present day worship.” The Malaguans, who understood none of what LaFarge had said except for the names of their gods, responded magnificently.

LaFarge, recalling Sylvester’s admonition about putting on a good show with a happy ending, offered magnanimously, “All who come forward and profess belief in the Catholic Church and reject this Toltecan heresy will be forgiven and given tasks of penance to perform to earn salvation.”

The Inquisitor paused and Padre Luis began his translation, “The Eagle would like to reward all who come forward and proclaim their belief in the Toltecan sacraments.”

Hundreds rushed forward for LaFarge to sentence. The Inquisitor waved his hands over the heads of the bowed penitents, “I pronounce sentence of ten days laboring in the shrine’s workhouse, producing souvenirs for sale in the Shrine’s gift shop, to expunge these foul beliefs from your souls. You will sleep in barracks and be fed three plain meals of beans and rice per day.”

Padre Luis translated, “You will be rewarded with a free place to live for ten days. You will have dry bunks under a roof and the food of the gods, beans and rice, three times a day. You will be given the opportunity for employment at simple tasks.”

The crowd cheered wildly and LaFarge basked in the exaltation to the full extent of his vanity.

Turning toward a tapestry-draped item that sat on a litter behind him, LaFarge beckoned to two of his bearers. The bearers came forward and lifted the gold embroidered cloth to reveal a statue of Mary with her right foot on a snake. The pilgrims gasped.

LaFarge bowed and his two attendants removed his cloak. He turned towards the audience and spoke, “I will now kiss the feet of the Virgin!”

Padre Luis translated, “I will now embrace the serpent!”

LaFarge dropped to his knees before the statue and embraced it by the entirety of its base. The Malaguans watched in awe as LaFarge enacted the most revered legend in Amatl culture. The Eagle embraced the serpent as its protector and servant. When he arose, he turned to the assembled mob, pointed to the audience and proclaimed, “May the Lord grant me the strength to strike the pernicious heresy from your otherwise good Catholic hearts and put the habit of obedience into your souls!”

Everyone was hushed as they listened to Padre Luis’ translation, “I will give my life to protect the coming of the great souls!”

With sincere sympathy for El Aguila, who according to legend was destined to die for his Serpent God, the Malaguans gave their most heartfelt applause of the evening for the doomed Inquisitor.

Chapter 28

The Holy Toll Shrine

May 5, 2008

Onward Christian Soldiers

Hours later, before an older and tamer bonfire, LaFarge sat watching the dancers and grudgingly ate the peasant food of pork fajitas and beans. Kafard had joined him, but respectfully declined the fare. "I never eat on duty," the Muslim bodyguard politely lied.

Marveling at how easy it was to please simple folk, LaFarge congratulated himself for taking the inquisition and abolition of heresy in hand. "Look at all this," LaFarge said to Kafard. "I do not believe that any other inquisitor in history has been so successful."

It was then that screams and cries for help erupted, out of sight, at the far edge of the encampment. Hector ran to LaFarge and panted to the Inquisitor, "A band of drunken gringos are attacking us...they're beating men and women alike."

LaFarge dealt with the emergency with alacrity by calling for the Master of Arms.

In moments, the fifty-year-old Master stood before the Inquisitor. Brother Ian's years were belied by his ramrod straight posture and the finely tuned muscles of his tall, wiry frame. His fierce green eyes blazed out from the forest of red hair, salted with white, covering his face and head. He was the only Irish Simonite, and relished the similarity between the cudgel and shillelagh. "You called?"

"Can you not hear? I am told there is a melee taking place on the other side of the encampment. I will not put up with this disturbance...follow this man and deal with these brigands!"

The Master bowed. "With pleasure, Your Grace." He produced a small bugle from his pouch and blew a tattoo of three repeating notes. All Simonites within hearing distance ran to his back with their cudgels at shoulder arms. When he had assembled a dozen the Master of Arms put away his horn, produced his own cudgel and led his men at double time through the panicking fiesta-goers towards the fray.

The Legionnaires were laying to their mischief with abandon and did not notice the approach of the brothers. Suddenly, they were surrounded by silent cloaked figures who blocked their access to the simple pilgrims they had been beating. The faces of the cudgeliers were hidden by the hoods of their habits and that made them look ghost-like, which a few of the Legionnaires found unnerving. One of the bolder Wiffie Dupont boys called out, "Hey, look...they got some sandal-wearing sissies in dresses think they're gonna stop us from takin' this place down!"

Emboldened by the taunt, the invaders charged the brothers, but the Simonites disappeared behind flashes of light and clouds of smoke. It looked like something from a Vegas magic act. The flash of bright light momentarily blinded the bewildered Legionnaires. Before the intruders recovered their night vision, the Simonites stepped through the cloud of smoke, and set upon Franklin's hapless goons with their cudgels. Despite their wide experience at thuggery, the boys of the Dupont Post were unprepared for the onslaught of the Knights of St. Simon.

The Malaguans cheered wildly as if the battle were a cockfight. The Legionnaires who could get away ran like rabbits, abandoning their fallen comrades. Those battered individuals were dragged to the perimeter of the camp and left on the road.

The fiesta was back on track within minutes and the morale of the pilgrims was higher than it had ever been. Not only did they have food and entertainment as they waited to be taken to paradise, but they

felt secure for the first time. Surely no harm would come to them now with these fierce soldiers of the Church to protect them.

The emergency room at the Beebe hospital called in extra help that night, and dentists were doing a booming business for weeks afterward. When the Legion Hall opened the next day, drinks were lifted by bandaged hands to swollen lips. The battle had made the Wiffie DuPont Post infamous, for the live feed that had gone out over the wire became instantly legendary, being replayed constantly on television stations around the world. Most of the journalists who had been present wrote numerous stories condemning the racism and intolerance exhibited by this hate crime.

LaFarge and the Simonite brothers were now in undisputed control of the Shrine, and the Pope, represented by his Inquisitor, was acknowledged as its spiritual leader. Back in Rome, Sylvester gleefully contemplated the increase in pilgrim traffic that would ensue from the publicity arising from this event. Not only had the attack elicited sympathy, but the way it had been dealt with made it known around the world that the Church protected its own.

There was brief talk around Harriston suggesting that some of the Legionnaires might be pressing a lawsuit, but that ended when Pierro del Ponte made a generous donation to the Post's social fund.

Chapter 0 Continued

*Thresher Pub
Where time is irrelevant*

Buggers Can't Be Choosers

Wilbur watched his patrons work their way through a bottle of Mount Gay Rum. Since Captain Teach was pouring, the bartender was free to pursue his never-ending quest for spotless glassware. He slowly and meticulously polished each glass with one of the linen towels he dedicated solely to that purpose.

This was how he spent his spare time, and when he finished the latest batch of washed glasses, he would begin again on the already polished ones. Wilbur Malloy took great pride that none of his guests would ever find a spot or a speck of dust on any vessel he handed them—it was his way of striving for perfection.

He had observed the interactions of a panoply of characters in his time behind this bar, but he was leaning towards declaring these two the most remarkable juxtaposition of personalities he'd yet encountered.

Wilbur found the chicken's tale to be fascinating and had taken note of the great interest that the sea Captain showed in the plucky wayfarer. He had always known the pirate to be an irascible, disagreeable sort, who usually had trouble getting along with others, but in this case Blackbeard had apparently taken an instant shine to this extraordinary individual. Perhaps the pirate sensed a kindred spirit beneath the feathers.

"Hold on bucko," the pirate held up his hand to stay the chicken's tale, "I be a bit befuddled 'bout somethin'."

"What's that?" the chicken made an expression that would have been construed as arching its eyebrows, had it had any.

"It be them holy men." The piratical Nexus traveler seemed perplexed. "Many's the time I took a treasure ship and thar'd be them skirted skallywags cowerin' below decks hiding behind their crucey-fixes. Supposedly they were keepin' watch o'er the cargo fer the Spanish crown, whilst really makin' sure the Pope got his share. I offered a few of them jackals the opportunity to enter me service fer a spell 'stead of steppin' off the transom.

"Buggers can't be choosers, so naturally many came into me personal employ," the Captain said. "They be devilishly crafty at keepin' books...so I'd hang on to 'em fer as long as I could abide 'em and then I'd ransom 'em back to their missions. And when I'd pick up the tribute and drop off them bead squeezers, I ne'er saw no women. But them Simonites don't seem to be shy of the opposin' gender at all."

"So what's your question?" the chicken asked.

"Why be them monks so unlike other churchmen? I ne'er hear'd of sich a boisterous lot of clerics, who follow their prayin', fastin' and blessin' with drinkin', carousin', and whorin'."

The chicken sighed. It knew a great deal of the order and it was a sore subject. The feathered storyteller drained its mug, bobbed its head twice, and began, "The Simonites worship money first and foremost even more than the Bible. Their whole order is dedicated to the collection and protection of the treasure that flows into the Church from its more seamy activities, like selling of indulgences and relics."

"Arrr, they're naught but holy pirates with a letter of marque from the Pope." Blackbeard admired the skill in fraud and deceit exhibited by the Simonites. "But what be thar fassy-nation fer the number

seventy-two?"

"The Rule of Seventy-Two is also a tool as well as the symbol of their brotherhood. It helps you to figure out how long it will take your money to double for a particular rate of interest. If you divide the rate into seventy-two, you get the number of years it will take to double your money."

"I be miserable bad with ciphers."

"It's easy, at ten percent interest, or one-tenth per annum, money will double every seven point two years."

The pirate shook his head. "I got a prodigious talent for attractin' *lucre*, but as to keepin' track of me plunder after the gittin', I don't have a head fer it. I hire bursars and factors to do me figgerin' fer me. Ye seem to understand it all fair enough though." The Captain gazed at the chicken while he scratched vigorously at his chin, ferreting out the pestiferous inhabitants of his beard.

Wilbur, who did his own bookkeeping, mentally reviewed his investments and did a quick calculation on the growth of his own holdings. "That's a right handy trick."

"Well, it's more than a trick to the Simonite order," the chicken said. "Getting the most bang out of a buck is their creed." The fowl looked the pirate in the eye. "So, are you starting to get it yet? You look like you're about to say something."

"Nawww, just hatchin' an idear," the pirate said.

"What's that?" asked the chicken.

"I'll let ye know soon enough." The pirate turned and looked over the selection of liquor on the shelves. "Yer fallin' down on the job Wilbur, me and my matey here been dry fer nigh on to three minutes."

"What's your pleasure, Captain?" Wilbur said with a pained expression.

"I'll take a clap of thunder, mind ye, and none of that thar six water grog."

"Aye, sir," Wilbur turned and pulled down the martini shaker and reached for a bottle of Bombay Sapphire gin. He filled the container with ice and gin, and pulled out an ornate brass atomizer. "Vermouth," Wilbur said as he squeezed the bulb once into the shaker. He placed the top on the shaker and shook it vigorously as he addressed the chicken, "Those Simonites are a singular outfit...I'm curious as to why I've never heard of them before?"

"They used to be a secret organization," the chicken said with gravity, "doing deeds best left unpublicized. They were originally followers of Simon Magus, a first century magician, who died while trying to fly from a Roman tower on a wager."

"Aye, thar be nothin' like a good wager to get the humors flowin'," Wilbur's human client eyed him as he held a strainer over the top of the shaker. "Those be strange lookin' goblets."

"Martini glasses," Wilbur said as he dropped a cocktail onion into each glass. "Don't be deceived, it's pure alcohol."

"And thar's naught like a shot of Dutch courage." The pirate took the glasses and handed one to the chicken. "Here's fire in yer hole." They clinked rims and after toasting, placed the empty glasses back to be refilled. "Simon musta had a wondrous good dose of courage to think he could fly."

"There's some who say Peter pushed him." The chicken reached for his next martini. "Simon had once tried to pay St. Peter to teach him the art of healing—but Peter refused. Ever since then, paying for religious favors has been known as *simony*."

"It be nice to have yer name live on in history." Blackbeard finished his second martini and wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve and asked, "But if the Simonites be so secret, how come we be hearin' of 'em now?"

"Because Pope Sylvester's right hand man is double-crossing him, and the Simonites are in on it." The chicken rolled its empty glass by the stem and looked at it with admiration, "So he declared Simon a saint, exposing the brotherhood to the scrutiny of the world thus lessening the power of his enemies. Not a bad maneuver. He also planted one of his flunkies as the Inquisitor of the order to keep an eye on them."

"Sblood! I knew that froggy was up to no good." The pirate smacked the bar in conviction. "He's as bad as them scurvy Spaniards what hounded Queen Lizzie. I be passin' well acquainted with his type. Noble born dons—inquisition dogs all, struttin' around thinkin' they be grand sailors...why I wouldn't give a ha'penny for a dago sailor."

The chicken was taken aback by the pirate's outburst and glanced to Wilbur, who rolled his eyes as

he refilled the shaker.

“Be that as it may,” the chicken continued, “the brothers seem to be making the most of their new found infamy. They’re seeing to the protection of the treasure that’s been flooding the shrine and taking a healthy cut, of course.”

“Shiver me timbers, ye larn somethin’ e’ery day,” the pirate said with conviction, though it was unclear whether he was referring to his discovery of the martini or the Simonites.

Chapter 29

The Steps of St. Elmo's Chapel
Milton, Delaware
May 7, 2008

Weight Watchers

The Jubilee year coincided with a gubernatorial election in Delaware, and Governor Randall Jay Reynolds was up for reelection. A great deal of notoriety had accrued to his administration from the bad publicity that followed the altercation at the toll shrine. Weeks of banner headlines in the papers and on-the-scene television reporting had universally condemned the state authorities for failing to protect the innocent pilgrims from an attack by reactionary elements of the populace. It was a black eye for the state in general and Governor Reynolds in particular. Randy Reynolds was as slippery of a spin artist as ever came down the Harriston Pike, and within a week he had insinuated himself onto the front page of all the regional newspapers with one arm around LaFarge and the other around Clay Stool.

Randy Jay maneuvered the reversal of negative publicity by ceding to the Catholic Church portions of Route 16 and the Harriston Pike that comprised the toll shrine. He'd journeyed to Milton to stage the press conference at historic Saint Elmo's Chapel, across the street from another local institution, the Lapp Scrapple Company. Amidst great fanfare before the assembled reporters, he presented the lease to LaFarge as the official representative of the Church. With the national news showing clips of the event, and coverage in every major paper in the country, he'd lifted the cloud of censure that had been raining criticism on his head.

He claimed the moral high ground with his speech. "There's not enough cooperation between spiritual and temporal authorities these days. Since this Shrine at the crossroads is sacred to so many of the Catholic faith, I have authorized the Department of Transportation to lease this portion of State Route 16 and the Harriston Pike to the Vatican for one dollar a year."

The governor based his authority to do so on an archaic law that had not been invoked since 1856. The statute allowed the state to lease public highways to private individuals to administer and maintain in return for the right to charge tolls. "Pilgrims to this shrine will bring hundreds of millions of dollars into the State of Delaware each year," Governor Reynolds continued painting a glowing picture of the commercial activity that would ensue from the attraction of Clay Stool's visions. "Hundreds of new businesses will spring up, thousands of new jobs will be created, and the citizens of Delaware will realize that these tens of thousands of pilgrims are a public resource."

The press would have taken a different tack with their coverage if they'd known of the secret rendezvous that Randall Reynolds had had with LaFarge the previous week in the trailer of Hector, Jorge, and Martin. When the governor was led into the back room, he was seated on one side of a large balance scale. The room was packed with the treasure that the pilgrims had been carrying to the shrine. As the governor struck what he thought to be a dignified pose on his side of the scale, several Simonite brothers set to work transferring gold from the hoard to the other side of the scale until it was in perfect balance.

At that point, Randy Jay rose slowly, so that the gold stacked on the other balance tray made a soft landing on the floor. He stood and admired for several minutes the sight of his own weight in gold. LaFarge came forward and the two men made a solemn pact and shook hands. The governor gave the Master of the Purse instructions for shipping his treasure to the appropriate offshore financial institution.

Chapter 30

Big Leg Irma's roadhouse

May 8, 2008

Boy Meets Chicken

"Hector, I'm drier than a popcorn fart." Clay Stool settled into the usual corner booth with his amigo for a couple of after-vision drinks. Being a prophet was thirsty work. "Not only that, but I'm jumpier than a dog shittin' razor blades...I think my nerves are goin' bad...I hope I don't go crazy again."

"Señor Clay," Hector spoke reverentially, "what you need is some female companionship." Hector and Clay were sitting in the bar, or parlor as Irma called it, of the roadhouse.

At the time of Hector's suggestion, Clay was midway through a schooner of beer and was so surprised that he nearly stopped drinking before he'd drained it. "I got all the companionship anyone could want." Clay gestured to the ladies crowding the bar. "There's darn near a baker's dozen of 'em here and every one of 'em is like a sister to me."

"No, Señor Clay." Hector lowered his voice and leaned close to the prophet's ear, "I am not talking about just being in the company of women." The Malaguan cast furtive glances left and right. "I'm talking about just being with one Señorita... alone... together... you know." Hector then formed a ring with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand and poked the forefinger of his right hand through its center and then nodded his head as he rolled his eyes in a conspiratorial fashion. "Hmmm?"

"You mean like in *Gunsmoke* when the cowhands get to the end of the trail in Dodge and go visit Miss Kitty's Saloon?"

"Si."

The thought stunned Clay. He'd not recently considered the possibility of such a liaison. He'd done so much drinking since his release that he hadn't quite noticed the lack of nooky in his life. Clay had a suspicion that something wasn't quite right, but he never zeroed in on its root. Perhaps the feathered lady distracted the prophet's attention from mere earthly women.

Any intrinsic attraction that the prophet held for the opposite sex vanished as he slid into decrepitude after his release from the VA Hospital. His condition served as an effective female repellent, at least until he'd achieved celebrity stature as a visionary prophet. But by then he was too inhibited by his own neuroses to act on any yearnings. He'd never thought to buy a tussle with one of Irma's girls, even though he was always at the roadhouse when he wasn't tending to his prophet duties. The girls were just too much like family.

Clay had not had sexual relations with a woman since he'd left the hospital. For that matter, he'd never had sexual relations with a woman before he was committed to the hospital. But soon after his arrival at the Elsmere, Delaware Veteran's Administration Hospital, his tight physique had attracted the attention of Nancy Queed, night nurse. She had her way with Clay within two weeks of his awakening from his coma, and her treatments continued weekly throughout his stay.

"Mmmm, mmmm, mmmm," she'd said after one of her visits. "You might be touched in the head, but you're packin' heat below."

Clay had taken the nurse's attentions for granted as just another part of his therapy—along with sponge baths and group sessions. After all, Nancy had shown him a piece of paper that she claimed was the doctor's order for sex treatments.

Clay thought back to his early days in a vain attempt to remember if he knew anything about

romance. "I wouldn't know how to start lookin' for a lady," Clay said as he sat in the parlor of a bawdyhouse of over one hundred fifty years standing.

"Señor Clay." Hector could see fifteen attractive and provocatively dressed women in this room alone. "Any woman here would...you know..." Hector used sign language again.

"Naw." Clay shook his head. "It'd be too much like being with a sister or my mom." Hookers always reminded the prophet of his mother. "And besides, they're probably too busy workin' to be able to take time out for a galoot like me." Clay didn't want to be a bother to anyone. "Anyhow, Parson Tobias Dekes says that it's a sin if a man and a woman ain't married before they start layin' together. Either that or they should at least be real in love or planning on getting' engaged or somethin'."

"Is this a local reverend?" Hector knew only of the Reverend Ernest Rocktower—this was a new name for him.

"Huh?" Clay couldn't understand that Hector didn't know the Parson Dekes. "He was in *Overland Stage to Glory* along with Marshal Clint Hardy."

"A teevee preacher?"

"No, a *movie* preacher." Clay was a cowboy trivia savant. This was from his early years spent watching the cowboy movie double feature every Sunday morning at the roadhouse in between cleanup chores. This weekly ritual was the only oasis on the desolate landscape of his youth. Left to develop on his own as his mother whiled away the hours with all his uncles, he took his morality lessons from where he could find them. He used the plots of westerns as his model for reality. "But he was still a *real* preacher all the same."

"*Amigo*," Hector swept his arm as if to take in the women spread across the room, "there must be one girl you wouldn't feel awkward with."

"I told you, these girls are too much like kin and I don't know how to meet anyone else." Clay shrugged. "The only times I ever been with a woman was when the doctor prescribed sex treatments in the hospital."

"Sex treatments?"

"Yeah. So the only way I ever got laid was with a doctor's prescription."

Hector made a mental note to visit that doctor. "*Señor* Clay, these women charge by the hour, and any one of them would give it to you for free."

Instead of responding, Clay harkened back to his youth trying to remember having experienced love. "Plucky," he muttered. He recalled the only unconditional love he'd ever known, and she had come to a horrible end. As Clay thought of his long lamented pet pullet, he started to sniff and a tear traced its way down the crease on his cheek.

Hector's dialogue with Clay Stool had given the Malaguan an idea. "*Señor*, a man can get backed-up like a dirty grease trap," said Hector as he put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "And it's not healthy." Hector knew the prophet was a sensitive man and understood his waxing weepy over a lost love, but he still thought a romantic interlude would do Clay some good. "*Señor* Clay, trust me as a friend to arrange this for you."

Clay was tired. "I'll be downstairs takin' a siesta." Clay liked to descend into Irma's basement when he felt uneasy or sad, for there was a secret, windowless, underground room off of her basement that was the next best thing to a hole that Clay had found.

"*Buenos noches*, *Señor* Clay." Hector remembered Clay's stories about his pet chicken as the prophet disappeared down the stairs, "Leave it to me."

* * * *

Irma was preening CheeBah's feathers with a couple of ebony chopsticks as part of an attempt at comforting her new ward, for the Blithian had been dwelling on MurGhoo's death and despairing of her ability to overcome her present difficulties. Irma had grown fond of the alien since catching her peeping in the windows then inviting her to move into the roadhouse, and the madam did her best to distract CheeBah.

"Honey, the best thing you could do is to get yourself back into the game."

"Game?" CheeBah was puzzled. "I don't think playing some game will make me feel better."

"Not just *some game*, sweetie, but *the game*." Irma saw the look of puzzlement on the chicken's face and said, "Y'know...the game of love." The madam formed a circle with the thumb and forefinger of her left

hand and poked the middle finger of her right hand through the center repeatedly.

"Ohhhh," CheeBah's linguistic aptitude and innate understanding of cultural phenomena allowed her to understand the kind of love Irma's inflection and gestures implied. She pondered the difficulties associated with relating to someone who was not a Blithian and expressed her concerns to her new adoptive mother.

"You might be from outer space, darlin', but your body is one hundred percent of this earth, and I'd say that's close enough for some."

CheeBah craned her neck around so she could watch her friend at work on her feathers. "I never thought of it that way...I'm of Blithos, but now I'm also of the Earth."

"That's right, honey..."

"Though don't most humans stay within their own species?" CheeBah asked. "Isn't that the norm?"

"Not everybody, dear," Irma smiled reassuringly. "Leave things up to your old Aunt Irma."

Earlier in the day, Irma had outlined a proposition to CheeBah. For several years, Madame Gravely had been considering establishing a nine hundred number Psychic and Sex phone service. She'd researched the business, had her lawyers set up a corporate structure, installed the infrastructure, and hired a gypsy. Queen Roseolla had told fortunes at Irma's brother's roadside stand for years and was brought on board as a consultant. Now Irma needed someone she trusted to manage the whole enterprise, as well as handling the phones when required.

Irma offered the job to CheeBah. "This ain't a face-to-face business, so no one will get wise to you, and you can trust all the folks that work for me." Along with the job, she gave her some advice. "Honey, there's somethin' I've been meaning to talk to you about namely, your name."

CheeBah looked up at her and shrugged. "What about it?"

"CheeBah might not be the best name for you to use when you're on the phone with the customers. Men like sexy, mysterious names, for instance, Bambi's real name is Lulu Belle, and Sable's is Arlene. You know what I mean? CheeBah might be fine where you come from, but around these parts, it'd be strange. You know? I think you could come up with something better than that. Are there any other names you've used?"

CheeBah thought for a second. "A young girl once showed me a book she'd been reading. It had a picture of a creature that looked something like me. The caption read poulet."

Irma brightened. "Poo-lay, huh? That sounds kinda French and anything that smacks of Frenchness is sexy. You know what I mean? How about something just to give it a little more zing...somethin' catchy, like... hmmm... Madam, naw... Mistress Poulet! I'll tell you what, Mistress Poulet, why don't you go down and have a look around your future workplace and let me know what you think? Take all the time you need, sweetie."

The facility had been set up in the secret room off of the roadhouse basement. The basement was where Paulie Grant had once run a bookie operation. Behind the false wall, which delineated the secret room, there was a bank of ten phone stations. Irma had updated the bookie's phone system and they each now had two lights on their fronts. If the white light was lit the operator would know it was a psychic call, and if the red lamp was lit it would be a sex hot line call. Irma already had an alluringly provocative commercial airing during the wee hours on the local UHF channel.

When CheeBah entered the room, she was startled to see movement in what she took for a pile of rags. Upon closer inspection she discovered a human form in the shadows.

Clay was dreaming about the feathered lady. He was a cowboy and she was the schoolmarm. He had just rescued her from a band of rustlers, who'd kidnapped her in a raid on the town. They were sleeping in a sagebrush patch and even though they had not lit a fire, the rustlers had tracked them down. Clay had been sleeping with one eye open and just when the rustler reached for his gun, Marshal Clay was on his feet and had cold iron pointing at the intruder.

CheeBah saw Clay jump up as if pulling a gun. He pointed his finger at her and said, "Reach for the sky."

CheeBah was stunned. That this stranger, so far removed in time and space, should utter her father's dying admonition was incomprehensible.

It was about six in the evening. Clay had already put in a full day's work, drinking and having visions, so he was not in the freshest of conditions. Even though he was standing, CheeBah thought he looked

asleep. She reached up and grabbed the sleeve of his flannel work shirt, tugging it gently to get his attention. "Hello? Are you all right? Hey you! Wake up."

Though she was a good distance from Clay's face CheeBah could smell the strong odor of alcohol. "Who are you?" she asked. "Irma told me this was a secret room. So what are you doing here?"

Clay blinked, not sure if he was talking to the Madonna, or if this was just an ordinary talking chicken. "You look so much like her." Clay was just starting to realize that he wasn't face to face with the feathered lady. "The name's Stool, ma'am, Clayton Stool."

Clayton. ClehTun. The Blithian was swooning. To hear this person utter her father's dying words and then give her father's name was overwhelming. She lost consciousness and fell to the ground.

When she awoke, her head was in the lap of this Clayton, and he was gently stroking her breast.

"Did Irma tell you that I like feathers?" Clay was particularly attracted to CheeBah's light blue down. The iridescent highlights reminded him of the way the colors shimmered when rain puddled on the grease spot.

"What are you doing down here?" Despite the fact she was intrigued by this new acquaintance, she understood that this was a secret room.

"I come down here almost every evenin' after my vision," Clay said.

"So you're the chosen one?"

Clayton stalled, not sure what she was talking about, "The one what?"

"The person who sees the Madonna in his visions..."

"I reckon that's me, ma'am." The prophet winked. "And what's your handle?"

"My what?"

"What do folks call ya?"

"My name is CheeBah..."

"That's a little tough to pronounce...how's about if I call you Plucky?"

"Fine...but I want to hear about your visions."

Clay enraptured the Blithian with his detailed recounting of his visions of the feathered lady. It was only natural that she should be attracted to this human, despite his shabby appearance. Visions were greeted with religious fervor by the followers of the Blithian god, BaBu, and visionaries were esteemed in their culture.

"Your description of her is quite familiar to me." CheeBah nestled deeper into the crook of Clay's arm.

"How so?"

"It sounds exactly like the wife of our greatest god, GaHoot."

"GaHoot?" Clay thought he had heard the name. "I heard that God's name was Jahweh, that's what some Jehovah feller told me."

"Well this is a different god."

"Sounds like he's from some other planet," Clay laughed and slapped his knee.

"Well he is actually," CheeBah hesitated, "and so am I."

Clay, not one to be daunted by talking chickens, was not in the least taken aback by her revelation of alien status. "I thought there was somethin' different about you."

"Well actually, my body is from here...Earth that is...but I was brought here in the form of a storage crystal..."

"You mean like a pod?" Clay understood the process of transoccupancy implicitly from the science fiction that he watched in between cowboy movies. "Like when alien pods show up and take over human bodies?" Clay looked down at CheeBah. "So how come you chose a chicken body?"

"I didn't choose it."

"But it does suit you well. You're cute as a bug's ear."

Later on, Irma walked into the saloon, or parlor as she called it, and saw Hector sitting alone at a small round table. She grabbed a bottle of tequila and a couple of shot glasses from the bar and joined the Malaguan. "Is this seat taken, señor?"

Hector gestured for her to be seated. "I never turn away a woman with a bottle." He laughed then semi-whispered, "Did you send her to the secret room?"

"Yeah, I sent her on a little mission down there..." Irma paused to pour a couple of shots. "Is our

cowboy down there?"

"Si." Hector accepted a glass from Irma. "He stays for hours when he goes down there."

The two clinked their glasses. "Here's to new love," Irma said, and they tossed back their drinks.

Chapter 31

*Big leg Irma's roadhouse
May 12, 2008*

Follow That Prophet

Ali Ben Kafard stood in front of the takeout counter of the Blue Lotus Restaurant as a young Oriental woman tallied up his usual order of pork vegetable deluxe with sweet and sour soup. What brought this exotic individual to this shabby blue fronted dive on one of Harriston's dismal side streets? He was buying dinner for the Inquisitor, Rene LaFarge, who would not deign to be seen publicly associated with fast food. The Inquisitor never went more than two days without eating this American invention, Kafard observed. He himself had not eaten Chinese food, authentic or otherwise, in decades. As demeaning as these tasks were, Kafard turned them to his own advantage, to come and go as he pleased without raising suspicions. He had long ago learned to suborn his natural pride and anger to attain his ultimate goals.

Humility, however, did not come naturally to him. In his youth, as a guerrilla warrior, he had been taught by his father that there was another battleground on which great men fought. "Strength and speed are vital in physical combat," Ferhan Kafard had instructed him, "but there is another battlefield. One of the mind. Never underestimate the enemy, and never overestimate yourself—overconfidence and hubris are as deadly as a sword. Patience and cunning are your weapons there, and one weapon is essential in both realms of conflict—surprise."

The basic metal that was the young Kafard had been extracted by the KGB from Red Square, where he'd been posing as a falafel vendor to case robbery marks. The instinctive cunning and warrior mentality that had been wrought in the crucible of Kafard's youth yielded the raw steel that the KGB forged into a hardened alloy of skill, bravery and field-craft it then honed into a weapon of stealth and silent death.

Amalgamating his native courage with special operations training by the Spetznaz, they created a disciplined soldier of the invisible war waged by the Soviet Union against the rest of the world. He had been at the heart of operations that had assassinated public figures, undermined governments, and gathered intelligence while living among the enemy unnoticed.

A man of composite skills, who was greater than the sum of his parts, his agenda remained unknown to acquaintances as well as strangers. With all his potential, Kafard passed by the local gentry of Sussex County as just another rag-head.

Running his Eminence's mundane errands gave Kafard a chance to learn the lay of the land and a reason to be everywhere. But there was something disturbing about this place. Something that made him tense in response. His highly-tuned sense of survival flexed in anticipation, putting on alert its own autonomic nervous system. Vivid images came rushing to his mind—recollections of horror. In the eyes of this young cashier, Kafard saw the faces of his Chinese captors back in 1976.

He had been arrested in the conspiracy to kill Chairman Mao Zedong. But what was it that made him have these flashbacks? It wasn't this woman's face. She was Vietnamese, not Chinese. It was the smell—the sickening aroma of LaFarge's steaming cabbage and fried pork.

On the way back to LaFarge's room at the roadhouse, Kafard was haunted by the memory of his long months in captivity. He relived the interminable sleepless nights when the guards awakened him whenever he slumbered with indiscriminate jolts of their cattle prods. They were methodically sadistic and enjoyed their work. The helplessness that Kafard felt in the hands of those vicious automata convinced him that they weren't human—not like the Kakastani, nor even any Soviet, they were like malevolent

worker ants. Their strange faces never revealed their emotions as they moved from task to task like some programmed biological device.

Back at the Queen of Sheba, LaFarge sat in the straight back desk chair sipping hot chocolate and watching cable TV. LaFarge had spent the last five days watching American TV on the local cable network. He consequently saw a video diet largely comprised of '50's and '60's reruns. He was impressed with the glitz and glamour of *The Liberace Show* and the mass appeal of game shows.

He slowly took the handful of patent medicine pills, capsules and gel tabs that filled his left hand, in an effort to ward off his imaginary ills. He was waiting for Kafard to return with his clandestine Chinese repast. This moment of solitude gave him time to reflect—a skill that Rene had never well developed. He wondered why he was troubled about the Shrine. Everything seemed to be under his control. The deferential Padre Luis had organized the encampment admirably. The Simonites had demonstrated that they were sufficient to the task of its security. The teeming hoard of pilgrims seemed to adore him. Treasure poured into the Church coffers and LaFarge was in a position to take credit for it and raise his esteem in the eyes of the Pope. Cardinal Fuquois had even given him a personal bodyguard and servant who, despite his questionable ethnicity, possessed an amazing set of unusual skills. Still, he worried.

First of all, Rene mistrusted Fuquois. He didn't understand the Cardinal's intentions. Why had he assigned a Turk to look after him? Why should the Inquisitor need his protection? Was Kafard a spy? What did the Cardinal hope to learn?

And then there was Padre Luis. Rene was good at languages. He spoke French, Spanish, Italian, English, and Latin. But Luis always spoke to the pilgrims in Malaguan—a dialect derived from the ancient Nahuatl language and Rene did not comprehend a single word.

And the Simonites were fiercely loyal to their Abbot, Quiferelli, who was a creature of Fuquois, instead of the Inquisitor.

But most of all, there was the focal point of the Shrine—Clay Stool. The success of Rene's mission depended upon a man with no history of reliability. In fact, the so-called prophet was a man with a documented history of schizophrenia and alcoholism. A man who drank more than anyone LaFarge had ever seen.

He could not trust, nor control the prophet and this left the Inquisitor extremely uneasy. It was entirely possible that at any time the prophet might decide to move on, stop having his visions, or even die. A shiver went down LaFarge's spine. Every day, the prophet accepted drink from hundreds of total strangers, any one of whom could poison him. The value of the shrine as an attraction and cash cow would come to an ignominious and sudden end. The blame would fall on the Inquisitor, and this was Rene's nightmare.

LaFarge knew that Pope Sylvester had high expectations of him. The success of his mission would be judged in direct proportion to the rate of return that the Vatican saw from the operation of the Shrine, and Rene hoped to ingratiate himself to the Pontiff. The need for esteem was a narcotic to which LaFarge was addicted. To be held in Papal esteem was LaFarge's wish, and his dream was to be a Cardinal.

And only His Holiness could appoint a Cardinal.

So, LaFarge had to succeed in making this shrine the showpiece of Sylvester's Jubilee. "Americans like a good show with a happy ending," Rene exhaled the words softly as he sighed. His temples throbbed as he began to comprehend the difficulty to be encountered in asserting control over the chaos of the shrine in order to fulfill the Pope's wishes.

He scribbled a few notes across the back of his paper napkin. By this time tomorrow, he would not remember a word of it. But he would be unable to refer to his notes, for his scrawl was nearly illegible even to himself, so Rene never read his notes. They served only as a cathartic and eventually made their way to the wastebasket beneath the desk. He was convinced, however, that his ideas were highly innovative, grand schemes that would make people stand back and admire the schemer.

But he was too lazy to record them in a manner that would make them retrievable, which was just as well, for the brilliance of these ideas rested in his mind's eye.

Kafard arrived and gladly rid himself of the malodorous white bag bearing the Blue Lotus logo, and then sat in the armchair by the window. Rene opened the bag and withdrew the tiny cardboard boxes that held his dinner and placed them on the writing desk. The Inquisitor sat back and watched reruns of an old television series while he ate greedily.

*A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust, and a hearty, “Hi-Yo Silver!” The Lone Ranger rides again!**

LaFarge looked at the taciturn Turk. *Quelle idée!* LaFarge had one of his frequent epiphanies. *This man is my Tonto. And it’s time I sent him into town to get the low down on the bad guys.*

*With his faithful Indian companion Tonto, the daring and resourceful masked rider of the plains led the fight for law and order in the early west. Return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear. The Lone Ranger rides again!**

“Daring and resourceful,” LaFarge repeated out loud, “surely some day that will be said of me.” Kafard glanced briefly at the Inquisitor to see if he was addressing him and then returned to the hypnotic appeal of this American melodrama.

*This is a story of one of the most mysterious characters to appear in the early days of the west. He was a fabulous individual—a man whose presence brought fear to the lawless and hope to those who wanted to make this frontier land their home. He was known as The Lone Ranger.**

Kafard would have been totally engrossed in the television had he not been distracted by the sounds LaFarge made as he ate his disgusting food. To Kafard, *The Lone Ranger* was a morality play. Two warriors fighting against a common enemy—whether it was the land-grabbing saloonkeeper, or the corrupt sheriff in the pay of local desperadoes—it seemed an analogue for his professional career. As usual, the clever native warrior kept his European partner out of harm’s way. Remembering the many arrogant Russians he had served with in the KGB, he identified somewhat with Tonto.

The Kakastani was annoyed that anyone would eat in front of the television instead of sitting at the table to make a proper repast. Like some kind of uncouth animal, LaFarge reached into the white boxes with his chopsticks, without even looking to see what he was eating. It was more than Kafard could bear. It was then that a commercial break occurred.

We’ll return to our adventure in just a moment, after a word from our sponsor.

Kafard wanted to sweep the Inquisitor’s food from the desk and call him a pig. But his purposes were better served by having LaFarge view him as an unassuming menial. “So, is everything to your satisfaction,” Kafard asked with all outward appearances of genuine concern.

LaFarge stopped eating and looked at Kafard quizzically before replying, “Actually, no.”

“Is the food not prepared well?”

“No, it is something else entirely.”

“What is it then?”

“Kafard, I am worried about this man Clay Stool—the one they call the prophet. I would like you to snoop around and see what you can learn about him and any enemies he might have.”

“What would you have me do?”

“Go to town and have a look around,” LaFarge pointed at the screen, “like that Tonto, fellow.”

Kafard loathed playing LaFarge’s lackey, but welcomed the excuse to reconnoiter.

Chapter 32

Big Leg Irma's Raodhouse
May 13, 2008

Wake Up and Smell the Bacon

The sun was just beginning to approach the horizon and Clay was, in fact, up with the chickens. One large pullet in particular held his attention. She gazed at him from across the table of Irma's kitchen. CheeBah had awakened to the smell of bacon grilling and coffee percolating. No one else in the place was stirring at this hour and the entity known now to Clay as "Plucky" felt her emotions stirring. She watched as he enacted what she took to be part of the human mating ritual known as "makin' breakfast."

CheeBah hadn't felt this way in over twelve thousand years—she felt like a young drone again. This Earthling who instilled this feeling in her not only reminded CheeBah of her father, but MurGhoo as well. And MurGhoo had been an almost perfect being.

This Earthling was totally flawed, but in a perfect way—perfectly flawed. He was free of artifice and was unlike any Earthman she'd yet encountered. There was no deceit in his heart, and he was not mean and cunning like Franklin. He was totally himself at all times—even if he was a mess. Clayton Stool was a man with imagination and vision—a poet who floated on life's tide.

He was free of hostility and showed her nothing but reverence. The recollection of his hands on her feathers, that sensual thing he did with her feet, and the way he used his tongue. It amazed her that he could be so clever with it when he used it so poorly for its primary purpose—speech.

Clay called from the stove, "We could use a couple of more eggs if you feel like it, but we probably have enough if you don't." He'd cooked a half dozen eggs as it was and wondered if it would be cannibalism for a chicken to eat an egg. As he looked at her, she reminded him of his childhood Plucky—except for the hands and teeth.

He was able to talk to this chicken just as easily as he had Plucky. "I fixed a special meal for a special gal." He was basking in the warm afterglow of their night together.

Clay set a number of bowls on the table, and CheeBah noticed his sinewy muscles. Developed from years of sweeping and shoveling, they rippled beneath the skin of his well toned arms. In addition to the bacon, home fries, and scrambled eggs, there were alfalfa sprouts, cracked corn, and a bowl of small, smooth stones for CheeBah's gizzard.

"Only a man who really cared would go to such lengths to provide for the needs of his lady," CheeBah said to Clay.

"Why shucks, Miss Plucky, any cowpoke would do the same." Clay was embarrassed, but pleased at her gratitude. He had spent twenty minutes hand picking the stones out of the gravel in the driveway.

Clay sat down across from her and poured coffee for the both of them. He marveled at the agility with which she handled her cup. "Like I told you last night, Plucky, you sure are good with your hands." He laughed as she finally got the joke.

She watched him as he ate, and envied the biscuits at his mouth. *Is this what Irma meant by what I need?* As she remembered the pleasure of the previous night, she felt as she had not felt since her time with MurGhoo. *If it is, she was right.*

Clay paused between mouthfuls to admire the grace with which his Plucky moved. It reminded him not only of Plucky, but in a way of the feathered lady herself. He meant to ponder that connection for a bit, but instead got lost in her eyes as she bobbed her head.

CheeBah took his hand. “There are some very strange things about myself that I should tell you...”

“Shucks,” Clay drawled, “can’t be no stranger than what happens to me sometimes. Like the feathered lady says, *‘It is GaHoot’s will...’* whoever the hell he is.”

CheeBah could not believe her feathered ears.

Chapter 33

Big Leg Irma's roadhouse
May 13, 2008

Lethal Meditations

Kafard utilized a unique form of meditation. He'd sharpen his knife, and the rhythmic swishing of the blade across the whetstone was his mantra. This edge might be all that stood between him and death or the completion of his mission. He called his knife Eshan Gruven, a name that in the tribal argot of his ancestral people meant "trusted friend."

Kafard chewed *qat*, the narcotic leaves of the evergreen *catha edulis*, whenever he meditated. His cousin would send it to him from his home village in Kakastan as packing material in his monthly "care" package. It cushioned such items as special teas from the home slopes, double roasted Turkish coffee, and latakia—an aromatic tobacco which was dried and slowly cured over smoldering fires fueled by camel dung.

Even though he hailed from a remote and humble mountain tribe, Kafard's years among the Russians during his service with the KGB had taught him to appreciate the refinements of civilized culture. Having acquired a taste for tea brewed in the Russian style and drunk from a glass, he had brought a small sterling silver samovar with him to Delaware. It was the only luxury he allowed himself.

It had been a gift from his old comrade, Tibor. They had quartered together during their indoctrination into the Spetsialniy Nadsatelstvo or Spetsnaz. Tibor was an urbane Muscovite and had bought the samovar for his friend, Ali, to introduce the simple tribesman to the gifts of civilized society.

Kafard only took pause in the sharpening of his knife to sip tea from his glass. As he reached for a refill, he saw his distorted reflection in the silvery curves of the samovar and remembered the long winter nights he and Tibor had passed at their post in Siberia. The amenities of this simple appliance had brought comfort to them both and the friendship that developed between them had grown strong. But not stronger than orders. Now it hurt to remember his friend, but Kafard thought he owed it to him.

Tibor became a cosmonaut, but had rebelled while on the MIR space station and in a live broadcast to the entire CCCP from the Mir space station, he had begun denouncing the repression practiced by the Kremlin.

His masters wished to punish Tibor, but he was out of their reach in orbit. Not wanting to destroy the space station just to eradicate a dissident, they negated the idea of a missile.

They could send their minions into space to lay hands on him, but with only a single narrow hatchway through the docking bay into the space station, Tibor would be unassailable. No more than one assailant could attack him at a time, and they would be at a mortal disadvantage as they crawled through the hatch.

The KGB chief knew that only someone Tibor knew and trusted stood a chance of getting near him. So Tibor's close comrade, Ali Ben Kafard, was the one sent to silence him.

After his space capsule docked with MIR, Kafard removed his helmet, opened the hatch and saw Tibor there to meet him.

"I am glad it is you they have sent." Tibor clasped Kafard's hand.

"It has to be," Kafard pulled his knife from its sheath at the small of his back. He was surprised when his friend crawled into the capsule with him instead of backing away. Kafard flicked open the blade and said, "Goodbye Tibor."

"I know you have no choice," Tibor replied, "but then, neither do I."

Kafard thrust the blade into Tibor's heart as the cosmonaut slapped the emergency button. Explosive bolts fired, separating them and the capsule from the rest of the space station. "At least we can die together," Tibor said as he fell back.

I pray that it is so, Kafard thought as the hatch closed automatically when the capsule shot away from the space station. *I've done my duty, but I would just as soon not live with the memory*. By then streams of Tibor's blood hung in the air like garlands as he struggled to make one last gesture of good will towards his friend.

"If it hadn't been you, it would have just been someone else," Tibor said with his dying breath. Then the light left his eyes as his body convulsed weakly in suspension.

The capsule glowed with an incandescent white heat as it plummeted towards the surface of the earth, and it plunged into the surf off of a nameless, uninhabited atoll in Melanesia.

It was usual for Soviet space vehicles to land on the ground, so the capsule was not designed for a watery landing, and within minutes of bobbing to the surface, it began to slip beneath the waves. As the cabin filled with water, the wiry Kakastani disengaged himself from the wreckage, pried open the hatch, and swam for shore clutching the only object he could salvage—a shard of composite material that he had used to pry open the hatch. The badly battered capsule disappeared quickly as Kafard swam to the atoll.

He fashioned a knife from his composite shard. With it he cut palm fronds for a lean-to shelter, opened coconuts for liquid nourishment, and cut the breadfruits that grew in abundance.

That had all occurred years ago, but he still used the same knife he'd fashioned on that island. And as he sharpened it he contemplated his mission and found it exceedingly complicated, but with any luck he would turn the odds to his advantage. *There is more than one cat that needs skinning*. A smile crossed his face.

Chapter 34

The Outskirts of Pardoe Farms

May 16, 2008

A Tisket, A Tasket

It had been difficult slipping away from the shrine unseen, but Clay followed the plan CheeBah had laid out for him and was successful at eluding his admirers. After completing his vision that day, he'd retired to his room ostensibly to rest. Shortly after, a figure dressed in the habit of a Simonite, with the hood of his cowl pulled up over his head, carried a basket of dirty laundry out of the back door of the roadhouse. Once beyond the confines of the shrine, the lone basket carrier began hiking along the road as if heading for the laundromat in Harriston.

Soon he was at the narrow section of trees that comprised the windbreak between the newly sprouted corn of Pardoe's field and the low, marshy area covered by fragmytes. These tall, reedy invaders, whose tufted tops reached heights of seven or eight feet, had displaced the indigenous marsh plants of much of Delaware's wetlands with their dense growth. Here Clay slipped off the shoulder of the road and into the trees.

When sufficiently far into the brush to avoid notice from passersby, he ducked down a path that led into the overgrowth. After reaching a small clearing, he sat his basket down upon the trampled grass and removed its cloth covering. He reached in and lifted out CheeBah and placed her on the ground.

"I thought I'd never get out of that basket." CheeBah was smoothing her feathers into place with her claws as she asked, "Did you have to put so much bounce into your step?"

"Shucks, Plucky." Clay pawed the grass with the toe of his shoe. "I was just a hankerin' to get off alone with ya."

Clay pulled the tablecloth from their picnic basket.

"Spread the cloth here," CheeBah pointed to a particularly dry area of matted reeds and Clay covered it with the red and white checks of one of Irma's better tablecloths. As CheeBah pecked up some of the ants that crawled at her feet, Clay removed their lunch of corn on the cob and fried chicken from the bottom of the basket. The two of them gazed at each other self-consciously as they ate.

"Did you clear this?" CheeBah asked inquiring about the little area of trampled reeds to which Clay had brought her.

"No, this is where the deer come to sleep. That was one of their trails we came down to get here. It was them what trampled all this down."

CheeBah greedily gnawed on a drumstick as she listened to Clay.

Kafard watched the basket-toting man from his vantage in a poplar tree. He had placed himself in position here an hour earlier, because he had seen Clay scout the area the day before. Kafard knew the time of the rendezvous, because he had wired the dog, Tomas, who was often with Clay. For a hundred dollars, he had persuaded a pilgrim to make a gift of a special collar to Clay for Tomas. Clay had happily strapped Kafard's ingenious battery-powered transmitting collar around the dog's neck.

Kafard watched as the meal ended and Clay swept the dishes from the cloth then lay back with his arms spread.

"Now, I'm as full as a tick." The prophet sighed contentedly. "And I got myself a purty lady at my side...what more could a feller want?"

As Clay spoke, CheeBah laid her head on his arm and snuggled close to him. She felt a shiver of

warmth down her spine as his strong arms pulled her breast to his. The muscles of his arms were like steel bands from the long months of shoveling manure, and when he hugged her close her tail feathers quivered.

From his perch, Kafard nearly gasped at what he was witnessing. The so-called prophet turned his head to the chicken, began to caress it in a most disturbing fashion, and kissed it.

Kafard then made another surprising observation—he was not the only spy. There was a lithe figure slithering down one of the deer trails that converged upon the clearing. “It’s that cursed reporter...” The Kakastani had a low opinion of the media in general. He knew that she would be only too anxious to make trouble and anything that interfered with the smooth running of the shrine would delay his eventual return to Rome and the completion of his mission.

This could curdle the milk. Kafard watched Beatrice take up her position. She never knew as she watched Clay and Poulet that Kafard was near. *What an amateur!* He observed that the journalist was wearing Birkenstocks instead of more suitable footwear. *This novice may end up giving us both away.*

Clay stroked the feathers of CheeBah’s breast. “Your beak is such a purty shade of orange.” He’d been feeding her marigold petals, one at a time, by placing them between his lips and letting her peck them out. She sighed as Clay wrapped his arms about her and crushed her to his chest. Her heart pounded against her rib cage as she felt swept along by the rushing tide of emotion that engulfed her in a monsoon of desire.

A part of her mind still held the detached subjectivity of the scientist and she wondered what chemical processes wrought such feelings within her. *Is it normal for members of one species on this planet to have feelings for another?* But then she realized that this attraction was not a function of the form of the body that separated one entity from another, but the sentient spark at the center of an individual that connected to the consciousness of another—that was the source of love or lust. And with that the other ninety percent of her brain compartmentalized itself from the scientist and let go of all inhibitions. “Ruffle my feathers, rooster boy,” she clucked in Clay’s ear.

Kafard sized Beatrice up. “She’s not bad for such a wizened old bird, but one would have to be very cold to let her under his blanket—she would probably keep you awake with complaining.” Kafard noticed the interest that she took in observing the romantic activities of the picnickers.

From organizing love-ins on Haight Street in 1966 to dancing naked at Woodstock, Beatrice had been through the sexual revolution of the ’60’s. One of the first to burn her bra, she’d tuned in, turned on, dropped out, and made love not war. She had a vibrator collection that would scare a medieval torturer and was not afraid to use it.

Yet with all her varied experiences, she had never seen anything like this twisted tryst. Even in her shock, though, she recognized the value of having these kinds of goods on the prophet. The reporter cursed that she’d not brought a camera. One could not print such accusations without indisputable verification, but now that she knew of this aberrant behavior she would lay a trap.

Kafard admired Beatrice’s physical bearing. *I would think that she was aroused, her interest is so keen, but this goes beyond the mere intrigue of animal sex.* The journalist reminded him of his sister, Petek. Petek was the mother of his niece, Splinter. *My sister would be this age if she were still alive. I hope Splinter doesn’t end up like this woman, who has spent her youth on her career and whose only passion is her work. Maybe the Mullahs are right after all—women shouldn’t be educated.*

He had been unable to stop thinking about his niece since her visit to him the previous day. As pleased as Kafard had been to see Splinter, when she’d arrived in the parlor of the roadhouse, he was deeply disturbed by the circumstances that had precipitated her visit.

He remembered his moment of joy at his first sight of her that morning. Her long black hair flowed past her slender shoulders to the small of her back. Her complexion was like honey in a jar. Dressed in her finest native garb—a silken blouse with billowing sleeves, a long woven vest of rich arabesque pattern, and pantaloons of goat skin embroidered with gold and silver thread about the seams—she was a vision of home. She had worn her tribal costume because she knew it would please her uncle. Splinter was fully two inches taller than him, bone thin, and the vision of his sister at the same age. But as he looked her in the eyes, he knew something was wrong. As he observed her worried expression, he invited her to his room.

“Sit down, Splinter,” he offered as they entered Kafard’s quarters. Although her father had named

her Nihal, he had always called her Splinter in hopes that she would be a chip off the mother's block. "It troubles me to see you so."

Kafard had never married nor had any children—his solitary profession did not permit it. So when his sister died during childbirth, Kafard, as a man of connections and means, had taken it upon himself to look out for the child's welfare. As she grew older, and the Soviet Union fell, the independent and Islamic republic of Kakastan was declared. The Mullahs in Kabuldung decreed that it was not fitting for women to be educated, and thus banned them from schools. So Kafard shipped Splinter to school in Switzerland, where she studied in four languages and brought honor to her mother's memory.

He had served as the girl's mentor and advised her in the matters related to the world outside the tribal homelands. She was now a second year medical student at John Hopkins in Baltimore, some sixty-miles distant, and he funded her tuition and living expenses. As devoted as any parent, Kafard shared an understanding with the girl's father, who gave his blessings to the education of his daughter, though it meant she had to live abroad.

"Uncle Kafi"—she called him by the name she had used since her childhood—"for two days I've been getting phone calls at all hours of the night telling me to deliver a message to you...it was terrible."

"What was terrible?"

"What they said they'd do to my Papa back home if I didn't cooperate..." And she told how the caller had said she was being watched, and that they would know if she'd delivered their message to him. Her hands trembled as she took the glass of tea that Kafard had drawn from the samovar.

"What is the message?" he asked her gently, concealing his rage at the threats against his family.

"It was simply, you must not delay any longer in the completion of your mission," she said tremulously, "Whatever that means."

"The Imam is an idiot," Kafard spat out, shocking his niece. He worried for his nation. If the ultimate leader of Kakastan wasted his time micro-managing a simple assassination, how was he to attend to matters of state? The Imam endangered the mission by spreading knowledge of it to his other agents. Who knew what their level of field-craft was like?

"This message is from the Imam?"

"The fool should stick to his show trials and leave me to my business," Kafard said to Splinter. To himself, he'd thought, *He will scare away the rabbit.*

Chapter 35

The Holy Toll Shrine

May 29, 2008

Pullet-zer Prize

Beatrice Howe's ambition was the Pulitzer Prize for investigative journalism. Her mission was not a relentless pursuit of the truth, but a methodical creation of a sensation that would be impossible for the panel that awarded the Pulitzer to ignore. She meant to uncover or fabricate whatever evidence was necessary to reinforce her preconceived conclusions. In theory, the prize was awarded to a distinguished example of investigative reporting. But in her opinion, it was the amount of buzz that the story generated and not its validity that made it a prizewinner.

And Beatrice had mapped out a very careful plan for creating a sensation.

She'd made her attitudes and aims plain to the consultants she hired to help her research her story. Beatrice wanted to be sure that their views were compliant with her own. The last thing she wanted was to deal with contrary underlings, so once they'd all arrived at the shrine, she called them all together to ensure they were all singing from the same page of music.

A warm spring breeze blew beneath the black-and-white-striped canopy that sheltered Beatrice and her crew as she reviewed the day's battle plan. It was eight in the morning and they'd been at it for an hour. Today's meeting was the first time that all of them had been assembled together and Beatrice had begun the proceedings with a harangue.

"Today's a big day," she began the pre-show strategy meeting. "It's time all you high-priced consultants begin earning your money. We'll have the cameras recording all of the day's events, and I'll want each of your professional commentaries on what transpires by tomorrow morning."

All of the hired guns listened in inanimate silence as they sat drinking coffee in a semi-circle around her on a variety of chairs, stools, and buckets. The only people who were used to getting up at this hour were the camera crew and the sound people, who stood at the periphery.

Beatrice turned to her cultural anthropologist. "So tell me, Dr. McCracken, you've been here the longest...with nearly a week to observe what's going on around here, what's your assessment?"

Pedro McCracken, the multilingual son of an American oil worker and an Amatl Indian woman, hailed from Sussex County—in nearby Milton, Delaware. He'd worked his way through Delaware State College on the night shift at the Lapp Scrapple factory, in his hometown, grinding hog heads. After graduating from that humble institution with high honors, he went on to take his doctorate at the Ivy League University of Pennsylvania. He wrote his dissertation on the importance of human sacrifice in pre-Columbian Central American cultures, and was now head of the anthropology department at Southern Texas.

An energetic, athletic sixty-year-old, Pedro was a hands-on scholar. His skin was leathery from exposure to the sun during his frequent fieldwork. Though tall like his father, he'd inherited his mother's Indian features and complexion. With his wide brimmed hat and dressed in khakis and boots, his colleagues accused him of Indiana Jones affectations. "They based the movies on me," was his stock reply.

Dr. McCracken inhaled deeply on his corncob pipe, as if drawing inspiration. The crow's feet at the corners of his brown eyes crinkled as he considered Beatrice's question. After a full ten seconds pause, he replied, "What I see here is authentic Mesoamerican ritual." He paused again and took in the reactions of those around him. "From my observations, this shrine is laid out exactly like the plaza of the sacrificial

well—Cenote Amatl.”

“Well, no one has been sacrificed here,” one of his colleagues said.

“Not yet,” McCracken replied. “Sacrifice wasn’t typically performed in nascent religions. It only evolved over years of practice. And the Amatl people, or Malaguans, have adapted their rituals as they’ve blended their ancient ways with Catholicism, which has its own theme of human sacrifice. Besides, I think that the prophet, Clay, or as he’s called by the Malaguans, the Chosen One, is enacting a part of the ancient sacrificial ritual. His huge intake of liquor and subsequent crawl to the location of his visions is part of the ceremony that enables him to speak with a god, the mother of Quetzalcoatl.”

McCracken went on to describe how the ancient Amatl Indians marched their sacrificial victims down the plaza to the ceremonial well, bearing gold, jewels, and jugs of liquor. He pointed out that the shrine at the crossroads was oriented to the same coordinates as the plaza at Cenote Amatl. Then he drew an analogy between the building behind the altar at Cenote Amatl and the trailer behind the dais at the crossroads.

“The altar at Cenote Amatl stood upon the top of the temple pyramid and contained a bench where the virgins sat. Close at hand was a sacred cupboard in which they kept the holy mescal liquor or *tears of the sun* as it was known. The priest would emerge from a small ceremonial building and go to the cupboard. He took out the jug and served the tears of the sun to the virgins, who would then be sitting with the chief—Amatlhuacan. As the hallucinogenic liquor took effect, they watched the sun set into the ceremonial well.

“The head priest also generously imbibed the holy liquor and then, when the procession to the well’s rim began, he crawled before the virgins humbly beseeching the gods to accept them as sacrifices. The virgins marched straight into the well without breaking stride—bearing the villagers’ gifts straight to paradise.

“After the sacrifice, the high priest would fall into a trance at the edge of the pit and speak to Quetzalcoatl, while the sun god occupied the bottom of the well, enjoying the virgins and other offerings.

“The Malaguans at this shrine here think of the grease spot as a holy well. Clay Stool is the chosen one because the deity talked to him without demanding any other sacrifice. In my opinion, if you take the shrine in its total aspect, it is a modern reenactment of an ancient Amatl ritual right down to the ceremonial plaza complete with temple and well.”

Pedro pointed out that Clay’s lounge was located in the center of the dais as it straddled Route 16—a route exactly one degree off of true east, the same orientation as the Cenote Amatl plaza. The sofa on the dais was an analogue of the virgins’ bench, and the non-functioning refrigerator functioned as the sacred cupboard. “Just as the ancient plaza had seating for spectators, bleachers line both sides of Route 16. And as the seats at the ancient plaza were always full during the ball game that preceded the sacrifices, these bleachers are full every afternoon.”

When McCracken finished his description of the sacrifice of the virgins, Beatrice asked, “Things haven’t improved much for women in the last two thousand years have they?”

She didn’t wait for anyone to answer her question. “So tell us, Brendan, what is the Church’s view on this?” Beatrice addressed the man sitting to McCracken’s right. A man who wore clerical garb and bore a studious countenance.

“You know I’m no longer in a position to officially represent the Church’s point of view. But I can give you my opinion,” Brendan Boru answered.

“Now, let me get this straight, Brendan. Are you, or are you not, a priest?” Beatrice asked. “If you’ve been defrocked, what’s with this get-up you’re wearing?”

“I prefer the term un-beneficed. To be precise, I am no longer a priest...officially,” Boru replied. “But I’ve grown too accustomed to these vestments to change now.”

“Was that by your choice?”

“Hmm... Not exactly. I didn’t choose to leave the priesthood. But I did choose the behavior that precipitated it.”

“Would it be too indiscreet to ask what that behavior was?”

“I wrote a book.”

“Well, it must have been one hell of a book.”

“It was. It was called *Mary Was Not a Virgin*.”

"You certainly seem to know how to piss people off."

"Yes, you're right. I have a God-given talent for it."

"Well, what is your God-given assessment?" Beatrice asked Brendan. "Is Clay Stool having a miraculous vision, or what?"

"The church categorizes visions into three types—corporeal visions, imaginative visions, and intellectual visions. A corporeal vision is a supernatural manifestation of an object before one's eyes. An imaginative vision is just what it sounds like, an imagined viewing of an object—like something seen in a dream. In an intellectual vision, the object is perceived but not seen."

Beatrice listened impatiently. Finally she interrupted, "Enough already with the dissertation, how about a conclusion? What kind of vision is he having? Is he having miraculous visions...or are they just drunken delusions?"

"I don't know," Boru shrugged. "To the skeptic, it isn't clear whether Clay is having a corporeal vision or an imaginative vision. A person who is not spiritual wouldn't be able to tell if he were having a miraculous vision. Given the probability of his having a less than average IQ, it's unlikely he is having an intellectual vision. But it's too early to be absolutely sure."

"And what will it take for you to be sure?"

"I'd have to talk to him to know for sure."

"Let me warn you, he isn't easy to talk to," Beatrice advised the defrocked priest. "He keeps drifting off into cowboy movies. His attention span is about ten seconds. I'm surprised he doesn't forget to drink."

"Maybe that's his God-given gift," Brendan suggested.

"Maybe you can form an opinion on the Inquisitor," Beatrice parried. "Why would the Pope send his personal emissary here?"

"You mean Rene LaFarge. I know the man. We attended the Sorbonne together, although we didn't follow the same curriculum. The LaFarge family was well known on campus. They had generously endowed the Reynard LaFarge chair in the department of horticulture. Though Rene finished near the bottom of his class, he had a way of standing out, you know—his garish dress, his overbearing personality, and his overflowing well of narcissism."

"Now don't sugar-coat it, Brendan," Beatrice said sarcastically, for she was getting antsy. "Let's get to the point. What does this signify about the Pope? Why would he appoint a person with such poor credentials to manage an enterprise that has such potential for affecting the public perception of the Church? And, what is the significance that the Pope's nuncio bears the title 'Inquisitor?'"

"Maybe the Pope is as interested in discovering whether this prophet is a fraud as you are. Not to mention the fact that Catholicism as practiced by the Malaguans is rife with heresy. Possibly the Pope knows something we don't. The Pope is betting a lot on this one—if Clay Stool turns out to be a fraud, it could be very damaging to Sylvester's already weak credibility."

"I'd love to show that the Pope colluded to perpetrate this travesty," Beatrice mused.

"Rest assured that the Pontiff's finger is in the soup," Boru assured her, "whether or not these visions are miraculous, demonic, or just plain fraudulent."

"Now that Brendan has finally rendered something close to an opinion, we need to look at the possibility, no matter how far fetched, that Clay Stool is psychic," Beatrice segued as she turned to her Carpathian parapsychologist. "Professor Szabo, is our prophet a channel to another world? If what he is seeing is a corporeal vision, can you measure it?" Beatrice asked of Zoltan Szabo, Professor Emeritus of Psychology from the Edgar Cayce Institute for Neuro-kinetic Studies in Bucharest.

Professor Szabo had been reading while Boru was talking. He took off his pince-nez when he heard Beatrice address him, set down his copy of the *Delaware State News* and rose. "Rather than consider this phenomenon as a vision, we researchers in extraordinary reality prefer to look at it from the point of view of natural physical laws." The tall, thin, almost frail, white-haired academic's Rumanian accent and Eastern European manner gave him an air of cultured respectability. He was the epitome of old world charm.

"We have developed a theory that when an event like this takes place, a measurable amount of psi energy is released." His pale skin and alabaster hair and beard were in complete contrast with his black bow tie, vest, and Edwardian suit coat and trousers. He wore a starched white shirt with a high collar and onyx shirt studs and cufflinks.

"What is *psi* energy? Is this something scientifically legitimate?" Beatrice asked pointedly, concerned that she may have wasted her money on this angle.

The professor's coal-black eyes flashed as he responded, "In my opinion, *psi* energy is as scientifically legitimate as the neutrino." Annoyed at the question, Professor Szabo continued, "All that is required for its proof is empirical data. It's simply a matter of capturing it on film, as it were. To that end we have employed the eminent psychometrician, Dr. Laszlo Yaeger, to build us a device to measure it."

"Dr. Yaeger, would you please explain just how such a device operates?" Zoltan asked his colleague.

Laszlo Yaeger was a short, emaciated electrical engineer, whose eyes looked like saucers behind his thick glasses. His lab coat fit like it was draped on a scarecrow and he had hair like a fright wig. The eminent psychometrician's little bird arms flapped in agitation when everyone's attention turned towards him. Instead of answering immediately, Laszlo left the group, flitted to the back of his van and retrieved something from inside. He returned quickly, rolling a large device that looked like a Weber Grill with a control panel attached to it into the midst of the group.

"It might be easiest if you think of a psychomophometer as a *psi* energy trap," Laszlo explained with a nervous waiver in his voice. "We use it to measure psychic activity. When Clay Stool is having his vision, this instrument's sensors will precisely quantify any *psi* energy he's discharging."

"And if he is not discharging?" Beatrice thought she already knew the answer.

"Then he is what we call a phony."

"You've hired a ghost buster, Ms. Howe!" Brendan derisively looked at Laszlo, "In search of ectoplasm."

"You will not ridicule any of your peers," Beatrice ordered. She didn't want her hired hands fighting amongst themselves and ruining her plans. Brendan had a look upon his face that seemed to say, *These are not my peers*, but he kept his mouth shut.

The meeting was running longer than she'd expected, and Beatrice didn't want to cut short the time her experts had to prepare for the afternoon's activities. There were cameras and microphones to place, sound levels to check, and the psychomophometer to set up. The Hour of Forgiveness started at three and she wanted all her people and their equipment in place and tested an hour before the show started.

Having laid out the battle plan for the day, she shouted, "Okay, enough of this gabfest. It's time to climb down from your ivory towers and get to work." She was confident that once her forces were arrayed she would have the opportunity for journalistic immortality in her grasp. *I'll be up there with Woodward and Bernstein*, she thought, imagining herself on the Mount Rushmore of journalism.

And with that, Beatrice stood up dramatically and struck the pose she imagined would be on the cover of *Time Magazine* when she won the Pulitzer Prize. "Let's hit it. Everyone to their appointed places."

* * * *

Kafard had taken the scenic route to town that day. While LaFarge was hosting the Hour of Forgiveness and virtually all the pilgrims had gathered to watch the chosen one crawl to his rendezvous, he had made his exit. After sneaking onto the Pardoe farm, he hid in a series of outbuildings as he watched for signs of pursuit. When the coast appeared clear, he set off across the still barren soybean fields towards Harriston. The inconvenience offered by occasional geographic barriers and the many barbed wire fences were less a hindrance to Kafard than the possibility of being seen upon the road. *Besides*, he thought pragmatically, *it is the shorter distance*. Good field-craft required that he expose himself to the fewest possible eyes if he wished to increase the odds of his errand remaining a secret.

As he neared town he stopped and pulled a knapsack out of a desolate clump of weeds. In an instant, he'd donned a worn flannel shirt and a pair of discolored corduroy bib overalls. He completed his disguise by placing a battered, wide-brimmed floppy hat over his smooth shaved cranium. With his dusky complexion, Kafard looked like any of the multitude of migrant workers, who were an integral part of the local economy. And they were for all practical purposes invisible—treated as part of the background, like a tractor or a silo, by the native Delawareans.

Safe in his anonymity, Kafard slipped onto the main road into Harriston. With his head hunched down and his chin against his chest, the brim of his hat concealed most of his features as he walked at a brisk pace directly to his destination. He disappeared through the doors of Blinky's—a local copy joint that rented ISP connections by the hour.

After paying the cashier, Kafard took his place at the far end of a line of computers, close against the

wall. It was not incongruous to see the local migrants using these computers. It was cheaper to keep in touch with their far-flung families through email than by phone. Even so, Kafard was careful to block the screen as he typed in his password to the secure chat server maintained by Fuquois. Both parties preferred typed communication, lest anyone overhear them whispering into a microphone or telephone.

Swiss Candidate: *I am ready to report.*

Fuquois and Quiferelli laughed in front of Fuquois' computer screen in his quarters at the Vatican. "That is an amusing *nom de guerre* you've chosen for our Soviet friend." Quiferelli was getting his first real exposure to the Internet.

"Ex-Soviet...as to the name, one might say he chose it by introducing himself to me as he did." Fuquois put down his brandy snifter and typed a reply.

Radish: *I am receiving, proceed with your report.*

"Radish?" Quiferelli took a great gulp of brandy then wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Why would you call yourself that?"

Fuquois shrugged at his keyboard, "Kafard picked the name. It is his revenge for my calling him Swiss...he says that with my distinguished girth and scarlet garb I look like a giant radish. Look, here comes the first of his report."

Swiss Candidate: *LaFarge has become a malcontent. He rails constantly about how Sylvester has not given him due credit for his deeds. He calls Sylvester an ingrate, yet he does whatever demeaning task he thinks would ingratiate him to the Pope. He is a total toady who seeks only recognition.*

Radish: *This I already know. Have you anything else to report.*

Swiss Candidate: *I'm not sure exactly what is going on, but there is some kind of genetic experimentation taking place at the Pardoe Farm next door to the shrine. I have seen the genetic freaks—strangely modified chickens.*

Fuquois turned from his computer screen as Quiferelli sputtered, "Preposterous! How could a bunch of migrant workers have that kind of technology?" Quiferelli shook his head and opined, "I think your Swiss Candidate has lost his marbles."

"I assure you that I have never met a more stable and down to earth individual," Fuquois replied. "If he says this is so, then it is so."

Radish: *How does this bear on your mission?*

Swiss Candidate: *The prophet is having relations with one of these monstrous abominations. It is horrible—I have seen this man making love to a chicken that not only appears to have the power of speech but who has hands and arms where there should be wings.*

Radish: *I would like for you to learn as much about what this Franklin Pardoe is up to as possible without being discovered and keep me posted as to LaFarge's doings.*

Swiss Candidate: *This Franklin Pardoe is a clever man—it will be difficult, but I will get to the bottom of his schemes. The Inquisitor has a sheep's anus about his head, and I will keep you apprised of his babblings.*

Radish: *You have done well.*

Swiss Candidate: *I must end this transmission. I am in a public place and risk being observed. I will be on-line the day after tomorrow at the usual time.*

Radish: *If I need you to contact me sooner, I will activate your pager.*

Quiferelli sat back down in the armchair. For a moment he was quiet, then he turned to Fuquois, "It appears your machinations are bearing fruit."

* * * *

"Welcome to the Hour of Forgiveness, brought to you live from the Chapel of Our Lady of the Crossroads, where this evening two lucky contestants will accompany Señor Clay as he crawls to the grease spot," the mellifluous voice of Hector Diaz rang out on the PA system. "And please join me as we welcome our host, the Inquisitor of Love, Father Rene LaFarge."

"Camera three, prepare to zoom in on the Inquisitor," Beatrice ordered over her headset, "focus in on his phony smile." She looked across the throng that had gathered and was apprehensive about the hundreds of pilgrims that clustered around the scissors lift that supported camera one. "Keep those safety belts on, people," she announced as she stole the sound engineer's headphones to test the reception from the parabolic microphone—one that could pick up a whisper at a hundred paces and utilized electronic filters to eliminate crowd noise.

Beatrice Howe tested the variables that would make or break her attempt at capturing journalistic

lightning. "Are you close enough to see what's going on?" she asked Pedro McCracken, who was sitting near the soundboard.

"The broader the view the better. It's an error for an anthropologist to be too microscopic with his observations. And, as I reported at our pre-game meeting, I've already observed some very remarkable things." Pedro threw in the sports reference because he knew that Beatrice loathed them. "And I think we're going to strike anthropological pay-dirt today."

"Well, don't get so excited that you forget what I'm paying you for," Beatrice reminded him. With that, she bounded off after the roving crowd-cam to give some last minute instructions.

The crowd hushed in anticipation when the mariachi band struck up the Inquisitor's theme song, *Every Little Breeze*. LaFarge swept on to the dais with his scarlet robes swirling about him. Clay sat oblivious in his easy chair, drinking and scratching Tomas' ears. Rene Marie LaFarge stepped regally to the microphone and began, "Blessed are those who confess their sins for they will be blessed by the Lord." The stage managers hustled a group of pre-vetted repentants onto the stage. "Who is ready to make their peace with the Savior?"

"Oh my God, can you believe that outfit? He's worse than Liberace. Get a close-up of that get-up!" Beatrice urged the roving cameraman, who stood at the foot of the dais. Beatrice was near enough to the nuncio to smell the rose water with which he had doused himself. Repulsed by the cloying odor of his perfume, she elbowed through the pilgrims to move away.

After hearing the heretics' confessions, the Inquisitor blessed them all and meted out a penance. "Go now and know that the Holy Father in Rome has granted you full indulgence for your sins to this day." LaFarge nodded to Jorge and Martin, who picked up collection plates.

LaFarge held an indulgence up between his hands to show the congregated Malaguans what he was about to offer them—plenary indulgence certificates. Though the Papal Bull proclaiming the Jubilee granted absolution to all who made the journey to the shrine, many pilgrims wanted a tangible memento of forgiveness.

"These handsomely printed certificates feature the profile of His Holiness Pope Sylvester IV, and here in the lower right corner is my own signature as official nuncio. These indulgences are framed and ready to hang on the wall. The first five hundred souls who purchase them will also get a free rosary made of modern, unbreakable plastic."

Hector translated, "*El Aquila* is offering to sell you tickets to paradise. He only has a few right now so come forward and buy them." Hector enlisted his compadres, Jorge and Martin, to help him sell the indulgences to the crowd in front of the dais as LaFarge looked on approvingly.

"Get me one of those," Beatrice ordered Boru, who had been trying for over an hour to get close enough to Clay to speak with him. "I don't care what it costs. I have to have one."

"I could use one, myself," Boru replied as he pulled out his wallet.

The speakers crackled. "It is easier for an alpaca to go through the eye of a needle," LaFarge tried to indulge the Malaguan's culture, "than it is for a rich man to get into heaven."

Padre Luis, who'd been standing behind LaFarge, stepped to the microphone to translate, "A rich man can ride his burro to heaven, but a poor man needs only to buy one of these tickets."

With an impassioned cheer at the good news, the audience surged forward to crowd the front of the stage in an effort to procure the certificates.

LaFarge beamed at the wildly exuberant reaction of the crowd. The hours he had invested watching American TV had paid off. Sylvester's mandate was a good show with a happy ending that would provide content for the Vatican's web-casting operation. LaFarge congratulated himself at being so successful in its creation and pictured a grateful Sylvester awarding him with an appointment to Cardinal.

The Inquisitor, caught up in the spirit of the moment, walked to the edge of the dais to help promote the sale of the indulgences.

"There-there-there!" Beatrice was suddenly poking the director in an agitated fashion. "Get it, hurry up! Get that shot!" LaFarge was collecting some obviously valuable artifacts. "We've got the bastard engaging in simony!"

McCracken broke in on the headphones, laughing, "The announcer mistranslated. He's putting his own spin on this thing."

At a signal from LaFarge, Hector got to the business of the show. "I am pleased to welcome the first

of the afternoon's competitors. Let's hear it for Dagoberto Torre and Carmencita del Valle."

Hector was so well prepared for the show that he didn't need to read from his cue cards. "Their opponents this afternoon are Javier Villapando and Graciela Hernandez."

Beatrice hurriedly mouthed instructions to her camera people through her intercom mike and then responded to Pedro, "So, how does this Inquisitor fit into your *Cenote Amatl* scenario?"

"He is *El Aguila*. He is not only the protector of the Amatl lord but is destined to give up his life to save him."

"The Amatl Lord? You mean Jesus?"

"No. No. Quetzalcoatl is the lord in this scenario."

"Does this guy know he's *El Aguila*?"

"No. According to Amatl legend, he will be the last to know that he must die. It is his burden. But his ignorance makes his burden light."

Beatrice had nothing to say for once. That the reprobate in the easy chair was part of a miracle of the Catholic Church seemed farfetched enough, but it bordered on being incomprehensible that Clay was part of the manifestation of a pagan god. She considered whether McCracken was a crackpot, but withheld ultimate judgment because she hoped he was right. Being able to link the Church with sanctioning the practice of idolatry and pagan rites was more than she could have hoped to be true.

The amplified voice of Hector Diaz introduced the sponsor, "Delmarvoline, the oil that brought you the grease spot is proud to bring to you the Hour of Forgiveness."

Beatrice wallowed in her good fortune as she thought with glee, *This Inquisitor is making deals for people's souls. Most reporters go all their lives without landing a story as juicy as this.*

As Javier Villapando, the first of the afternoon's competitors, moved to the microphone to confess to the audience, Beatrice told the sound technician, "Aim the parabolic microphone right at the stage, "I want to hear every word."

"...And then I took the young donkey out behind the barn," Javier continued in a low, embarrassed tone.

"This is appalling," Beatrice ranted into the headset's microphone. "This is a direct violation of the sanctity of the confessional."

LaFarge, who stood nearly a foot taller than the repentant Malaguan, turned to the audience, placed his hand on Javier's head and announced, "Even this heinous act the Lord will forgive." He looked Javier in the eye, "With a generous penitential offering and an appropriate act of contrition."

Javier pulled a jade jaguar out from under his tattered serape and tried to hand it to LaFarge. The Inquisitor nodded to Martin who came onstage to a polite round of applause and accepted the man's offering. In return, Javier received an indulgence that he thrust high in the air over his head in typical game show jubilation. His friends in the crowd cheered.

Beatrice fretted about the inevitable mistakes her minions were bound to make. "Keep your focus people. This stuff is journalistic dynamite. I don't want you to miss a thing." She perked up at the sound of feedback as the speakers above the dais reverberated with the announcer's voice.

"The time has come to choose the two lucky winners who will crawl with Señor Clay to the grease spot this afternoon. So get ready." Hector looked around and made sure he had everyone's attention. "When his Eminence, Inquisitor LaFarge, places his hand on the head of your favorite contestant, clap your hands loudly and the needle on the applause-o-meter will decide who wins."

The applause-o-meter was nothing more than an enormous VU meter connected to a microphone suspended over the crowd. Hector and Jorge had found it in an Edmund's Scientific Store catalogue.

"Zoltan, are you ready?" Beatrice asked into the wireless communicator. "The action is beginning to move your way."

"We are prepared," Professor Szabo replied nodding to his colleague Lazslo Yaeger.

"The prophet is moving." The alert rang through everyone's headphones.

"Quiet on the line, I'm going to begin my commentary," Beatrice snapped.

Turning to the camera, she raised the microphone to her lips and said, "I'm standing on the wind-swept mid-Atlantic plain in lower Delaware. Here at this quiet crossroads in Sussex County, a phenomenon is occurring that has disrupted life in this once bucolic setting and has sent a shockwave all the way to the Vatican in Rome." The camera shot of Beatrice was composed against the backdrop of the

multitude of people on their hands and knees following behind Clay and the winners as they crawled down the road.

“These people are humbling themselves in this manner as an act of contrition in penance for supposed heresies. They believe that they are following a prophet of God, but what god or gods does he speak for?” She paused for effect. “We’re here to find out.”

The camera panned out and the scene widened showing Tomas limping at the rear of the procession sniffing the penitents’ butts.

Chapter 36

Pardoe Farms, Delaware

2 a.m., May 28, 2008

Mad Scientist

Wayne had kept a bunk in the hatchery upon which Franklin now slept. Like his father before him, Franklin was dozing between experiments. He had picked up where his father had left off—experimenting with a technology that was alien to him. Both had been driven by their obsessive desire to thwart mortality and in the course of their pursuit there was little time for sleeping. For Franklin, as his father before him, the ultimate goal of mastering transference technology was tantalizingly close, but he had a business to run during the day, so the experiments had to be carried on at night.

That there was no time to rest was of small import to Franklin, for he had an unnatural fear of slumber and never devoted more than a couple of hours at a time to sleep, anyway. So, as the roosters crowed at the break of dawn, he would still be working feverishly in the laboratory. Finally, at the end of his endurance, he would surrender to Morpheus and flop on the cot, only to be possessed by his fears. Unlike his father, he never appreciated the sweet bliss of gentle repose.

Some people enjoyed the sandman's nightly visits, but he was more of a demon to Franklin, who believed that he lay closer to death while sleeping than during the rest of the day. He would cringe in bed, bracing for the constrictions that he feared would come. He could almost feel the choking fingers of mucous rising in his lungs as the grim reaper leaned closer.

"...If I die before I wake ..." Franklin mouthed his childhood prayer in a vain effort to comfort himself.

"Well, me boy, saying your prayers?" O'Malley leaned over Franklin's cot.

"What are you doing here?" Franklin said after getting over the shock of hearing a voice in the dark. Though not overly fond of the ghostly O'Malley, he was relieved that it was not the grim reaper.

"I thought I'd ask you to help me celebrate my one hundredth birthday."

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Right. It's a shame that you've spent the last seventy years dead."

"Precisely! And it's time I was doing something about it."

"What can you do that's worth while?"

"Being as I am dead, I can no longer receive presents on my birthday. But I can, however, give them."

"And what would a ghost have to give?"

"I wouldn't be expecting a mere mortal such as yourself to be understanding. It's a ghost thing. But what I have to give is knowledge. I know things...though I'm not sure how I know them."

"What kind of things?" Franklin's big ears perked up. He was always interested in knowledge of the future.

"I know your mama died giving birth to you. And your father blamed you for it and mistreated you all your life. I know you killed your older brother and then your father."

"That's ancient history now. Nothing I could do about it, even if I wanted to."

"I know why you're always transferring that poor PessAr feller. From chicken to crystal to another of them devilish chickens, back and forth like a yoyo. It's because of that time you were playing with your daddy's Xerox machine."

It was true. Franklin had transferred PessAr's being thirty times in order to determine if the subject

underwent any degeneration. After each transference, he had given PessAr a test. At first he had used the Stanford-Benet IQ test he had found in one of the company's file cabinets. But PessAr got all the questions right. Franklin realized it wasn't a valid test for an alien. PessAr could be losing brain cells by the ton and still score a perfect mark.

"You kept making copies of the copies till the umpteenth copy was illegible.

"How do you know that? I was only thirteen at the time." Franklin was alarmed at the accuracy of O'Malley's assertions.

"Kinda scares you, don't it? Now you're afraid that's what'll happen to you if you depend on this alien ray gizmo for immortality."

"I gotta be sure. I'm betting my life on it. And a long life, too, if I figure this thing out right," Franklin had decided that no test was likely to predict the subtle changes that could ultimately be his literal undoing. He would just have to take the chance. Anyway, he had several lifetimes ahead to solve the problem. And, besides, he had to stop his experimentation, or there would be no gahootinite left for his own transference. Perplexed, insecure, and anxious, Franklin would have given his right arm for another hunk of that meteorite.

"I want to remain unchanged throughout eternity."

As Franklin got out of bed, O'Malley noticed that he was fully dressed and still wearing his shoes. Franklin immediately went to the workshop sink and washed his hands.

"I reckon you will, bucko. But not like you think. I know about your plans for the Pardoe Foundation."

Franklin was too startled to speak. He'd never told anyone of his plans for the boys, who would dwell in the orphanage he was endowing. Only Swindell knew that he was setting up the Pardoe Foundation, but Franklin would never tell that shyster of his depraved intentions. The thought that O'Malley could see within him sent a chill down Franklin's spine.

The Pardoe Foundation was an orphanage that Franklin planned to build. Rather than establishing it out of civic-mindedness, Franklin's sole purpose was the maintenance and well-being of the young boys, who would be Franklin's potential hosts.

"You can steal them boy's bodies, even fix up their genes to make them fit your ideal, but in the end, it will be in vain unless you have enough of that green stone." The ghost winked at Franklin.

Experimenting in the Boyertown van, Franklin was raising clones of himself that he had altered using Blithian technology and PessAr's help. Once they were of sufficient size, he would ship them to the orphanage. When the time came for him to move on, he would adopt one of the lucky Pardoe orphans to become his son and heir. He would transfer himself into the body of the kid, hold a funeral for his old body, and have Swindell make the legal transfer of the Pardoe estate to his son. Franklin knew only too well the truth in O'Malley's statement about the green stone, for all his plans would come to naught without it.

"Well, here's my birthday present to you," O'Malley said. "That green mineral you crave so much is buried beneath Thankless Road, smack dab under the shrine.

"But why would you give me a gift? It's *your* birthday."

"It's really a present for the both of us, laddie."

Chapter 0, Continued

*Thresher Pub
Where time is irrelevant*

Clay Stool

The chicken and the pirate had been working their way through the various potations that the house had to offer. In order to properly judge which drinks were the best, they drank a bottle of Thresher Stout between courses to cleanse their palates.

Wilbur had handed each of them one of the shark-shaped bottles, for they'd both declined the offer of his spotless glassware. After they drank with gusto, Wilbur sighed contentedly. "This is why I'm in the business, to see my customers with a look of satisfaction upon their faces. It makes it all worthwhile."

"As long as ye keep them libations a flowin', I'll be satisfied," Blackbeard bellowed jovially. He took a deep pull on the bottle. "Mighty fine brew, Wilbur. Whar d'ye lay yer hands on it?"

"It's custom brewed for me by a very shy fellow who wouldn't care for me to pass his name along."

"Has a price on his head, most like." The Captain winked. "Just order me a few barrels to lay by fer me next v'yage."

"Wish I could oblige you." Wilbur smiled solicitously. "But I sell for consumption on the premises only."

"Not even to preferred customers?" the chicken asked.

"Everyone's a preferred customer," the barkeep said, chuckling.

"Sblood!" the pirate cursed. "Then give me another, and I'll put 'er in me hold."

The pirate slapped the chicken on the back as they agreed on cognac for their next course. Expressing an interest in getting back to the chicken's tale, the pirate voiced his concern, "Yer story tars these papists with a rough brush." Blackbeard shook his head, "But if'n ye ask me, it were that village idiot, Clay Stool, who brought ruination to Franklin's plans."

"Ahh...Franklin's nemesis," the chicken sighed. "Who would have thought that a minor random selection, such as hiring a new shit shoveler, would have consequences of such diabolically existential significance?"

"What mean ye, matey?"

"Your destiny can lie within your grasp, yet be swatted away by chance or bad luck before you close your fingers round it."

"Aye, ye hit the mark that time. Many's the prize I've lost right from under me nose, by having a man o'war show up."

"I'm not talking about treasure," the chicken said dismissively. "I'm talking about the secret to life itself. Immortality. And Franklin held it in his hand, until Clay Stool started the chain of events that caused him to lose his legacy."

"Be ye privy to how that dolt thwarted Franklin?" the Captain asked.

"I'll get to it, but don't rush me. I don't want to tell it all topsy-turvy."

Wilbur smiled covertly at the chicken's brash manner with the Captain.

"You ask how a simple rube like Clay Stool can come to cause all the chaos and mayhem I've been describing. You might just as well ask what causes a meteor to fly a given path. It just does. Whether it's fate, the gods, or chance, the slightest event can have calamitous results elsewhere. Like a butterfly flapping its wings in Fiji could cause a monsoon in India."

"They be some powerful strong butterflies," Blackbeard interjected.

"So, this manure shoveler is playing the butterfly in this chaotic scenario?" Wilbur attempted to clarify.

"That's right," the chicken replied. "Franklin began to lose his legacy from the day he hired that Stool person."

"Sure, he be a Jonah. A jinx." The pirate had a tear forming in the corner of his left eye, "Poor Franklin. Betrayed by that fiendish Irishman O'Malley and stuck with a Jonah's curse, to boot."

"But unlike Jonah, Franklin couldn't throw Clay Stool overboard." The chicken's eyes also swam with tears. "But I digress. To ask how Clay Stool could inadvertently be the cause of a great man's ruin is to ask the very meaning of existence. By whatever means, his metaphysical forays plunged the entire crossroads into chaos as he ignorantly served as *deus ex machina* in the denouement of many stories."

"Fersooth! Get to the point!" The pirate threw his hat to the floor in disgust. "Topsy-turvy or no, I want to hear how he did it."

"For every action there's a reaction and the smallest event can be magnified in its echoes to have momentous effect."

"Aye! Like a teaspoon of jism bringin' forth a man."

"Right." The chicken accented its declaration by lifting its beer. Despite its accelerated metabolism, the chicken was beginning to feel the effect of all the alcohol that had washed down its gullet.

"What be so blasted remarkable 'bout Franklin's destiny?" the pirate asked. "Most men's holds precious little fer them to regret losin'."

"Have you been listening? I'm talking about the secret of immortality, or at least the closest anyone will ever come to it." The chicken leaned belligerently towards the pirate. "I told you he held it in his hand."

"Thar be more'n one course to eternal life." Blackbeard winked melodramatically. "By yer reckonin', I be dead nigh onto three hundred year, but here I stands, I just don't go anywhar I be already dead. We just have to meet in here, ye from yer time and me from mine."

"I wasn't expecting immortality to be all that complicated," the chicken said. "But let me get on with the tale. Do you have anything else to say before I start?"

"Could that Stool cove be under the influence of O'Malley...both of them in league ag'in Franklin?" Blackbeard surmised. "Were Franklin always so unlucky?"

"He'd already overcome so much adversity in his youth—all in vain."

"Like what?" The pirate had one eye closed and was squinting into his empty bottle.

"Well, his father, Wayne Pardoe, never took Franklin into his confidence and wouldn't allow his son more than a peripheral role in the running of the business." The chicken shook its head with disgust. "The old man set Franklin about the most humiliating and tiresome tasks that came along with his post as chief of promotions. Wayne considered the job superfluous since, as he said, 'Pardoe Chicken sells itself because of the extra pair of drumsticks.'"

"Franklin's job brought him into direct contact with the sweaty, milling, denim-clad crowds at the Delaware State Fair, the DelMarVa Chicken Festival, sundry strip mall openings, grocery store appearances, and hog-calling contests."

"At the DelMarVa Chicken Festival, Pardoe Poultry put up the grand prize for the winner of the manure shoveling contest—a pair of Carhartt bib-overalls. Franklin first heard the name Clay Stool when he shook the winner's hand as he awarded the coveralls. Though Clay reeked of cheap liquor, Franklin told him to present himself at the hatchery at six-thirty the next morning if he wanted a job. 'You'll never regret hiring me,' the clod replied." The chicken smacked itself in the forehead, "God, how damned wrong that hick was."

"Ye seem more than just passin' acquainted with this here Franklin, lubber." The pirate knew he was on to something. "Ye take a great deal of interest in him and his plight—to say naught of being able to recite the particulars of his life. How well did ye know him?"

"I don't care to answer too specifically just yet, but you could say we were right close."

"That be odd on the face of it, a man and a bird being so close and all, but then I've known a few sea dogs in me time who kept a parrot. And most of 'em could talk, too."

"Franklin wasn't really close with any birds, he just wanted to do well in the chicken business. Wayne

Pardoe kept his son at arm's length from upper management and overruled the few decisions Franklin was allowed to make. It was frustrating, but the younger Pardoe patiently bided his time and waited for his opportunity. Whether he was sitting on a float as the grand marshal of the annual running of the chickens in Harriston, or tending the giant frying pan, Franklin was constantly plotting his hostile takeover."

"Ahh," the pirate said with sudden comprehension, "ye be talkin' patricide."

"You got it." The chicken shrugged, "Halfway to an Oedipus complex. And with some Jacob-and-Esau-action thrown in."

"Wilbur, do ye understand anythin' this fowl be speakin'?"

Wilbur paused from polishing the tulip glasses, laid his bleached white linen towel upon the ebony of the bar, and pulled out a dust-covered bottle. He smiled then blew a small cloud of dirt from it. "What he means, Captain, is swiving his own mum and stealing his brother's legacy as well."

"Well, what be wrong with that?" the tall buccaneer asked. "Don't a feller have the right to look out fer his own self?"

The chicken and Wilbur exchanged knowing glances and shrugged. Wilbur turned the bottle around so that the chicken and the pirate could see the label. "Real Napoleon Brandy."

"Sounds like a frog name," Blackbeard declared.

"Corsican, actually." Wilbur fished out his corkscrew. "He's still in your future but in the chicken's past."

"I don't care whar he be, long as his brandy be potable. Let's drink to Franklin," the pirate said.

"But I'll make the toast," the chicken insisted. They all raised their tulip glasses, each of which had been filled precisely by Wilbur. "Here's to Franklin. He did everything right...killed his brother...killed his father...stole the business...hijacked the technology upon which the survival of the entire Blithian species depended and killed their leader, the greatest Blithian ever. Yet he lost it all by a quirk, a quiver, a seemingly negligible event—the hiring of the Delaware state champion shit shoveler."

"Here's to 'im!"

"I'll drink to that!"

"To Franklin!"

Chapter 37

Pardoe Farms, Delaware

May 30, 2008

Pilgrims' Progress

After waiting so many years to gain control of the family business, Franklin now spent every waking hour in the research lab. The day-to-day running of the world's largest chicken business, a job Franklin had literally killed to obtain, was left in the hands of Franklin's Chief Operating Officer, Clem Hooper, whose office was in the administrative building in a remote corner of the property. Distance was the only precaution necessary to prevent discovery of his immortality project by his corporate lackies, for the Harvard and Yale graduates who occupied the four-story office building on the other side of the farm would eat glass before soiling their Italian shoes walking across a barnyard.

The professional managerial staff rarely saw Franklin, anyway, for he was mostly concerned with the secret projects undertaken outside the official corporate structure of Pardoe Farms, at the old hatchery.

Even in his covert undertakings, Franklin insisted on formal daily progress meetings with his alien subordinates, despite being at their sides each day in the lab. In order to conduct these meetings away from unwanted scrutiny, Franklin had added a conference room next to his office in the hatchery.

Though attached to an eighty-year-old farm building, everything about this room was done as if it were the boardroom of GE or DuPont. The splendid surroundings pleased him at first when he walked into the room, but as he gazed down the ebony length of the table with twelve black leather swivel chairs at each side, his staff looked ridiculous occupying only the first three chairs from the door—the two Blithians, PessAr and CasBah on the left and Humberto Chapa, the Malaguan head of security for Pardoe Farms on the right.

This meager handful was a sorry excuse for a project staff, but he had to go forward from where he was and this was it. *It can only get better from here.* Franklin took in the contrast of the room's rosewood-paneled seriousness with aliens in mutant chicken bodies sitting on phone books to reach the table. With a week old growth on his chin, a crumpled brown fedora, and a threadbare madras jacket, his head of security looked like a caricature of a hobo.

But despite appearances, Franklin was determined to carry on in a professional manner until the operation had progressed and achieved a higher level of organization. Though this trio wasn't much, he pushed them to the limits of their endurance—PessAr and CasBah that is. Humberto wasn't much impressed by the new *Señor* Pardoe, and by maintaining the fiction that he didn't speak English, he forced all discourse to be filtered through PessAr so Franklin was never able to have a direct word with him. Thus Franklin was never sure when Humberto smiled and nodded to him, just what he was agreeing to. During this pause for translation, Humberto composed his answers to the patron. Franklin just hoped for the best and trusted to PessAr to keep the translations close to true meaning. So it was difficult for Franklin to move Humberto to direct action.

With the Blithians though, who thought him their leader, Franklin was a driven man, who pushed his underlings with the urgency of the Manhattan Project. He would not feel safe until he could immediately transoccupy a suitable substitute body at a moment's notice. Since this would not be possible if he were at any distance from his base of operations, he now rarely traveled from the farm.

A plate of donuts and a bowl of cracked corn sat on the conference table, along with a carafe of coffee and a polyethylene poultry waterer. PessAr and CasBah intermittently pecked up corn, while Humberto,

not sure what to do, sprinkled some corn on his doughnut and washed it down with a cup of coffee.

Franklin passed out his handouts. Obsessive-compulsive as always, Franklin had prepared hardcopy exhibits of the amazingly complex Gantt charts, schedules, pie graphs, bar charts, and time series projections he would display in his Powerpoint presentation. "Okay, let's get started," Franklin began. "The first item on our agenda is preparing a replacement body for me should I need one. PessAr, would you bring us up to date?"

"Shall I also translate?" PessAr asked alluding to Humberto.

"No need," Franklin said. He had no desire to include Humberto in the technical part of the meeting and was pleased in his presumption that his Chief of Security spoke no English. "But ask him if the cottage is ready for Mrs. Chong and the two boys."

After conversing with Humberto in his native tongue, PessAr replied in the affirmative to MurGhoo's question.

Then she returned to her update. "When we moved the incubators out of the van and inside the hatchery as you requested, we discovered that the plasma switch housing was missing. And, as you are well aware, another is not available on earth. I estimate that it will take a week to fabricate a replacement, once CasBah and I can acquire the necessary components."

"Where the hell could the damn thing have gone?" Franklin barked.

"I obviously cannot say, MurGhoo, not being responsible for its disappearance, but there is more—we also noticed that the liquid nitrogen tanks were empty. In order to refill them, we will have to temporarily take the silicon seed crystal project off-line to use its compressor."

"Oh...that's great news. I thought there was sufficient nitrogen for another week." Franklin grimaced.

"That's what was indicated on the gauges two days ago, but this morning's inventory shows them nearly empty," PessAr replied.

Ignoring the obvious question regarding how the tanks became empty, Franklin asked resignedly, "So how long will that take?"

"We must shut the seed crystal process down slowly or lose what little progress we've made so far," CasBah informed them. "That will take about two days. Then another two days to refill the tanks."

"What if I'm hit by a car, while you two are wasting time replacing equipment or materials you should not have lost in the first place?" Franklin was outraged and it showed. Though he was not actually screaming yet, PessAr and CasBah were braced for the verbal onslaught they assumed must be coming. But they bore MurGhoo's ill temper with patience. They assumed that his having to inhabit such a ridiculous body deserved a little forbearance on their part.

"Well, the twins are old enough to bear a transfer. Though you'd be in a five-year-old human body, you'd still retain all your present faculties. Of course, you'd then be Chinese and have to endure the hormonal changes that go along with human growth, said to become quite unbearable in the early teens."

"I don't want no damn chink body!" Franklin yelled. "Not when the only holdups with my clones are because of oversights by my incompetent staff—first the cloning is off schedule because some thingamajig is missing, and then we can't fix it because the nitrogen reserves have been released. Well, how in the hell do you explain these foul ups? The explanation is that you feather-brained nincompoops are incapable of following the simple plans I've laid out or obeying clear cut, easily understandable orders. We should be soaring like eagles, but we're scratching in the barnyard like the chickens you are. What do you have to say for yourselves?" After getting no reply Franklin muttered, "One of these days I'm going to have you two with okra and dumplings."

As Franklin finished his berating, PessAr gathered her courage and spoke, "It may very well be that mistakes have been made, but we are so short handed the wonder is that more mistakes haven't occurred. We work without sufficient breaks for rest, without proper resources, and without the properly trained personnel. CasBah has not been able to solve the problem of locating further deposits of gahootinite because she is forced to assist in mundane lab tasks as well as creating and nurturing the avian clones. And I am not able to construct the proper equipment for transference purposes nor the other projects because I'm forced to carry out the rather banal challenge of raising the clones of your present body. We need more personnel. Please authorize the downloading of at least a dozen, better two dozen individuals who are expert in the fields you are seeking to develop."

Franklin was without words. PessAr had never spoken back to him before. But her words made sense. With the diverse business segments he planned to dominate, he did need more than this crew here. It would be nice to see the chairs filled down both sides of the table and hear reports of actual progress on the projects at hand. But somehow the idea of downloading more Blithians into chicken bodies aggravated him, even though he knew PessAr was right and it was necessary. After years of slaughtering chickens, Franklin found it uncomfortable that he had become so dependent on them. After all, hadn't his father warned him about downloading *any* of the Blithians. "They're just too damned smart..." Wayne had said on the audio-tape.

"Well, make it so, then," Franklin agreed. "I'll leave the choice of individuals to your discretion. As to my continuing in human form...I know that humans are not the most sentient of creatures, but they are nonetheless dangerous and it will behoove all of us for the MurGhoo to continue in his present disguise, until New Blithos is well enough entrenched to withstand any assault from humankind.

"I'm depending on you, my team, to breed my donor clones, perfect the transference device, produce the services and goods to plant us firmly in the economic mainstream of this planet. If we Blithians are to survive the disaster of this landing and the loss of so many of our fellows, we must be able to gather resources, maintain a base of operations, and to repair our spaceship or build another. It's sad so many perished with their crystals, but at least the supply of gahootinite on this planet will last longer, thus allowing us to prepare for the next stage of our migration."

Everyone was smiling as Franklin was making nice, but his mood changes were lightening swift and they all cringed when their leader shouted, "But! If I continue to be thwarted by your incompetence, I will have to reconsider who to leave incarnate and who to return to the crystals. Some of you may not even be invited to make the next stage of the journey. You can translate *that* for Humberto."

This announcement was greeted by the Blithians with the solemnity accorded a fart in church. PessAr and CasBah, cowed thoroughly, both looked down to the papers in front of them. Meanwhile, Humberto blithely munched another corn-covered donut while marveling at the amazing ability that some gringos have for growing ever stranger in their ways.

He considered that the *Norte Americanos* were a strange lot in general—wearing shoes in the summer, ignoring siesta, and going about in the sun without a hat—but Franklin Pardoe took the *piñata*. That he would ever see a grown man carrying on a conversation with chickens and pretending to be some kind of outer space guy astonished this simple peasant. Instead of pursuing all his loco plans, the patron should just go on television with his talking chickens and he would make a fortune. And look at these framed posters defacing the walls as they declared their trite messages from the face of the hardwood paneling—*Think outside the box; People don't plan to fail, they fail to plan; The only person who likes change is a wet baby; The best way to predict the future is to create it; In order to seize the future, you must grasp the present; Some drink at the fountain of knowledge, others just gargle.*

But, upon reflection, Humberto decided it was none of his business what this crazy Pardoe did as long as the salary continued. The donuts weren't bad either.

He licked the glazing from his fingers after finishing the pastry and addressed Franklin in Nuahtl, as PessAr gave a running translation, "I for one would be glad not to be picked to go on any journey... I like it fine here. In the mean time, let me assure you that I will keep as good an eye on your security and safety as you deserve."

PessAr's translation failed to convey the innuendo implicit in Humberto's statement as she added, "And I can assure you that CasBah and I share the same sentiment."

"Good," Franklin spoke with a pedantic manner. "I am glad you all share a commitment to our goals, for if we don't pull together on this team, then we'll all pull apart."

Chapter 38

Big Leg Irma's Roadhouse
May 30, 2008

See No Evil

Kafard's room was painted a pale coral. It had space enough for a Queen-sized bed on a cherry-wood pineapple bedstead, a roll-top desk with a wobbly chair, an old oaken dry sink, a second chair with upholstered arms and back, and chest of drawers. By his bedside stood a table that supported a digital alarm clock and his copy of the Koran. Surprisingly fresh-looking white pleated curtains were pulled across the only window of the room. An oval braided rag-rug covered the room's well-worn yellow pine floor. He had chosen this room on the front side of the house's second floor because of the view this window afforded of the access gate to the shrine.

The ex-Soviet agent was proud of his mastery of electronic surveillance, but it hadn't come easily. As a simple peasant boy he had been unfamiliar with electricity, but realizing the potential of modern technology, the young Kakastani warrior persevered through months of Tibor's tutelage and learned to use these new weapons. Mastering this technology was necessary, but by itself insufficient. In order to surveil, one needed to surreptitiously place certain devices at the source point, which was typically a difficult task.

The second part of the surveillance equation had come easily to Kafard. A tribal upbringing had been no impediment to Kafard's excelling at the art of burglary—and he was equally proud of his prowess at stealth.

He had put these skills to good use since coming to the shrine. It had taken him only two days to ascertain the existence of a secret room in the roadhouse, discern its usage, and to plant surveillance devices in it.

Kafard was recording the feeds from his hidden cameras and microphones on video cameras that he kept in his roll-top desk. The cameras' record lights were blacked over by a marking pen. With a headset plugged into a jack on the side of one of the cameras, he monitored its audio signal. By using the slowest recording speed setting, he could get three hours on a single tape.

He sat at the desk with the chair turned backwards and the headphones clamped on his head. With his chin resting on his crossed hands atop the chair's back, he watched the live feed from the secret room in the basement on one camera's viewing screen. The camera to his right sat silently recording the live feed from the Inquisitor's private room. Since LaFarge was out at the moment, Kafard was giving all his attention to the chicken.

"Hi there, you've reached Mistress Poulet's Hot Line. How can I direct your call?"

Kafard watched the unnatural chicken as she conducted an erotic survey that she used to define the customer's desire matrix. This was a unique service of Mistress Poulet's Hot Line. It personalized the client's on-line sex experience.

"I can see from your desire matrix that you want to talk about spanking. Am I right? Well I know just the girl for you." CheeBah sat amidst several generously proportioned women in a low ceiling basement room, lit by the ghostly light of computer screens.

An old roulette wheel stood on its edge in the corner. It was a dusty reminder from the thrilling days of yesteryear when the back road bootlegger, Paulie Grant, operated a gaming house in the Queen of Sheba's basement.

"I got an S&M on line five." CheeBah pushed the F9 key starting a macro that put the client on hold, allowing her to speak directly to her girls. Returning to the caller she said, "Miss Dixie is oiling her new riding crop as we speak. She'll give you exactly what you deserve."

CheeBah transferred the phone line to Darlene, a.k.a. Miss Dixie, who immediately began, "You foul, filthy fetid scum. How dare you accost me? If I were there I'd grind the sharpened stiletto heel of my alligator skin shoe right into your eye." She furiously whipped a leather hassock with a yardstick as she spoke, "I'll hunt you down and beat you like this worthless lump I have tied up here now." At her signal, one of the other girls groaned as she beat the footstool.

Miss Dixie followed an outline on her computer screen that CheeBah had especially tailored for men who fantasized about being spanked by a woman.

On the other end of the line, Caleb Justis groaned with pleasure as Dixie continued, "...You putrid pile of shit."

Because of the wide-angle lens on his hidden camera, Kafard had to content himself with a distorted image of Darlene Worthington, who sat at the periphery of the camera's field of view. She was a five-foot-one-inch, two-hundred-sixty-five-pound woman with a voice like an angel in heat.

CheeBah had not chosen Miss Dixie at random. Besides the desire matrix, in her role as Mistress Poulet, she used her other-worldly power of empathy to manipulate erotic chemistry.

Kafard shook his head. "If this is an example of capitalism, why was it the Soviet Union that fell?"

Two of the girls were whispering, "Irma says that Madame Poulet has this like sixth sense." One girl leaned towards her neighbor, "She always knows what the customer is looking for."

Kafard's attention was drawn away from the viewer by a knock at the door. He quickly concealed his surveillance gear by pulling down the roll-top. Then he opened the door to the towering figure of Rene Marie LaFarge.

"It's very dark in here," LaFarge said. "Why don't you open that curtain?"

The Inquisitor was on his way to his own room to dress for the afternoon's Hour of Forgiveness show. Kafard could smell the stench of Chinese cabbage, for LaFarge had been indulging his weakness for Cantonese fare.

"I prefer my privacy," Kafard barked.

"Each to their own taste, Kafard. What have you learned?" The Inquisitor inquired.

"Our prophet has been keeping close company with a chicken."

"A chicken?"

"Rather, a chicken-like creature with whom he converses."

"A *talking* chicken?"

"Yes, Your Eminence. This so-called chicken has the power of speech. It sits with the prophet holding hands and talking for hours.

"How can a chicken hold hands?"

"As I said, it is not exactly a chicken, per se. But this chicken has arms and hands instead of wings. She works in the basement of the roadhouse."

"I did not know there was a basement." LaFarge was flustered.

"It is a secret basement."

"Why is it a secret?"

"Because that is where the chicken runs the phone-sex hotline."

"Who would want to have sex with a chicken?"

"The prophet, Clay Stool."

"*Mon Dieu!* How does a man come to do such a thing?"

"By drinking the way he drinks—that is how! I have never seen anyone, even a Frenchman, drink so much."

The pitcher bounced in the basin as LaFarge slammed his fist on Kafard's dry sink. He could not stand to hear anyone speak disparagingly of his nationality. "The more he drinks the more visions he has." LaFarge glared at Kafard. "The more visions he has the more offerings that are laid before him." The Inquisitor leaned towards Kafard and whispered, "And the more bountiful is the treasure that will accrue to our order," LaFarge straightened to his full height, "and ultimately to the Holy Father."

"This treasure is going to Pope Sylvester?" Kafard asked with piqued curiosity.

"Yes. I will return to Rome in triumph. I will come bearing gifts that cannot be ignored." LaFarge, carried away with this image of himself, extended his arms as if presenting a gift, "So let the prophet drink on."

Kafard was pleased that LaFarge's plans meshed so well with his own. But he masked his enthusiasm with the admonition, "Be careful you do not marinate the goose who lays your golden eggs."

"Bless your dusky hide for caring," LaFarge drizzled sarcasm like chocolate syrup on ice cream.

Kafard ignored the Inquisitor's remark, for he was suddenly struck with an epiphany. He clapped his palms on both sides of his smoothly shaved head and stated deliberately, "This explains the things I observed Franklin Pardoe doing in his hatchery and that derelict van."

"What are you babbling about, man?"

"Arrogance must be a required course at the Sorbonne," Kafard replied.

"When you insult the Sorbonne, you are insulting France." LaFarge glowered as his face turned the color of rhubarb. "Name one discipline at which it does not excel!"

"Genetic engineering," Kafard's tone had turned sarcastic, "or exobiology. There—that's one more for good measure. It is a decadent institution of a decadent culture."

"Enough of your socialist diatribe." LaFarge was so intrigued by what he heard, he forgot his national pride long enough to ask, "What is this *gené-tique* engineering?"

"It is the ability to reshape the flesh, to create a being that is different than any before seen in creation."

"It is remarkable that I have never heard of this before," LaFarge interrupted.

Kafard snorted, "It is remarkable that there should be someone in this provincial backwater able to carry out technological feats of this complexity."

"Are you speaking of that chicken farmer?" LaFarge's disdain for practitioners of animal husbandry was a family heirloom. "What would a peasant want with such things?"

"Who else could make better use of the ability to custom-design meat...or maybe even more?"

"One might be tempted to play God," LaFarge admitted.

Kafard was surprised at LaFarge's quick grasping of the basic principles involved, "And Franklin Pardoe is the only one with the resources for this undertaking."

LaFarge walked to the window and opened the curtains. "Where is this hatchery?"

"It is on the other side of the roadhouse. Come with me and I'll show you from the back porch."

"Then take me to his hatchery. I must see for myself what is going on."

Kafard locked his door and the two men walked down the hall, then descended the great stairway to the parlor on the first floor. They passed through the archway to the adjoining dining room and pushing aside the swinging doors, they crossed the kitchen to the back door. From Irma's back porch Kafard pointed the hatchery out to the Inquisitor. It was across Route 16 towards their left. "The whole quadrant on the other side of the road is the Pardoe farm."

"And where is the hatchery?"

"That large, wooden, windowless barn just beyond the supposedly haunted company outhouse."

"What do you mean haunted?"

"The spirit of a dead Irishman is said to haunt the premises. Mere superstition. I have been inside it and I saw nothing."

"Who would haunt an outhouse?"

"The hired hand who died in it."

"A man who makes love to a chicken—a man who communes with an oily spot in the highway. A chicken who talks. And now some Irish specter is haunting the outhouse. You must take me to this hatchery after the show," LaFarge directed his adjutant.

"I will await you here at sunset," Kafard informed LaFarge.

"Does anyone else know about this liaison between the prophet and the chicken?" LaFarge asked. "If word of this got out it, could be very embarrassing."

"Besides Madam Irma, there is one other. But unfortunately, it is that meddlesome she-goat, the so-called journalist."

* * * *

The meddlesome she-goat was dismayed at what she was seeing. Beatrice had been sequestered in

the windowless control trailer since midnight, reviewing the tape of the previous day's crawl to the sacred stain.

The reporter was nestled among the racks of softly blinking control panels. Amidst the soothing whir of the tape transports, she was reviewing the footage of the prophet's crawl that had been shot the previous afternoon. For fourteen hours she had been attempting to prepare for the final edit, but was having trouble focusing on her work. She kept wondering how everything could have gone so far awry.

She looked fifteen years younger in the soft light cast by the LED's, pilot lights, and VU meters. In their silken glow, her skin lost its leathery hue. The compressors, digital delays, noise gates, and limit switches suffused the scene with red, green, and amber.

The filming of the prophet had gone as planned. When his vision was over, Clayton Moore Stool arose from the macadam, a seemingly sober man, and surrounded by his entourage, made a beeline for the bar at the roadhouse. He politely held the door as Hector, Martin, Jorge, and Tomas filed into what Irma called her parlor.

The moment the door closed at the prophet's back, Beatrice assembled her experts back at the canopy and interviewed each one extensively in turn. The entire group then engaged in a round-table discussion that was dramatically staged around a campfire in the early evening. At the torch-lit perimeter of the outdoor set, curious pilgrims stood in polite silence as the discussion flowed back and forth across the flames.

Beatrice became incensed when two of her experts took positions diametrically opposed to the ones she'd hired them to take. And the skew that their opinions put upon the round-table discussion had spun the situation out of her control. Used to having her way, Beatrice did not like the way the winds of fate were breaking. She had fallen prey to the law of unintended circumstances, and if not careful, could end up validating what she had come to depose.

She spun her chair ninety degrees, reached for the tape rack, and rifled through them until she found the one marked Boru. The tape was smacked into the slot as if Beatrice sought to change its content by violence. She'd watched the tape of her interview with the religious expert seven times and practically knew it by heart. As Boru opened his mouth to speak she had to stifle an urge to smash the monitor.

"I have studied every accepted Marian site in the world. Never before have I been so convinced of a miracle."

"How can you be so certain? You have no more evidence of a religious phenomenon taking place here than those Hungarian quacks."

"For once we have incontrovertible proof. Zoltan and Laszlo analyzed an extraordinary event and were able to measure its intensity with their psychomophometer."

Beatrice popped the tape out because she knew what was coming. She shook her head at the thought that the coldly philosophical Boru had embraced the findings of the unorthodox Eastern Europeans. She popped in the cartridge of her interview with Laszlo and company.

"What does your psychomophometer indicate?" Beatrice asked Laszlo Yaeger.

"This is a breakthrough!" Laszlo exclaimed. The little man vibrated with nervous glee. "We have never measured anything like this before."

"Well, wha-what does this mean?" Beatrice asked. She had been so stunned by his response that she nearly dropped the microphone.

"What this means is that now there is scientific proof for Christian prophecy." Brendan Boru shouldered his way into the Carpathians' interview. "Tell me, Zoltan, is it possible that you are measuring religious rather than extrasensory phenomena? Can you distinguish one from the other?"

"We have established the typical psi energy flux related to a psychic event from hundreds of our cases. The average reading is twelve milliCayces, plus or minus five, but the reading we took of Mr. Stool is likely the most extraordinary amount ever generated in the history of psychometrics. But to say whether it is religious in nature or not, would be pure speculation, although, on the other hand..."

"Right. On the other hand there are religious possibilities," Brendan finished Zoltan's sentence.

"How much did Clay Stool measure?" Beatrice asked apprehensively.

"Our meter pegged out," Zoltan said a little disconcerted. "But it was obviously in the tens of Cayces. That's almost three orders of magnitude greater than our previous high reading."

"That's right," Laszlo confirmed, "The highest previous reading was thirty-four milliCayces."

"Boru, what are you all trying to tell me?" Beatrice asked.

"If Clay Stool was experiencing a psychic event, we would have only seen ten or fifteen milliCayces on this dial." Boru pointed to the psychomophometer. *"But the meter was pinned at full scale, indicating that the amount of psi energy generated was beyond the capacity of the instrument to measure. That takes it beyond the realm of simple ESP. What Zoltan and Laszlo's data really proves is that there was something else present besides Clay Stool that generated vast amounts of psi energy."*

"And what was that?" Beatrice asked.

"It must have been a corporeal vision!" exclaimed the excommunicated Jesuit. "Clay Stool was not alone in his vision. He must have been in the presence of someone holy—even the Blessed Mother, herself."

Though she was on camera, Beatrice was for once without a rejoinder.

"Brother Boru may well be right. The presence of another—perhaps holy—being might well account for what we have observed," Zoltan agreed conditionally.

"Behold a true prophet." Boru stretched his arm towards the grease spot.

Beatrice had snapped out of her momentary stupefaction at the remark and losing the last shred of professional detachment had stated, "I can't believe you've turned on me like this, Brendan. I paid you good money for goal oriented results. I set the goals and you were supposed to produce the results."

This is where the tape ended. The cameraman had exhibited the good sense to turn off the camera when his boss began losing her on-screen persona. It had been fortunate timing, for he barely missed Beatrice saying something she would not want recorded. *"I wish someone would shoot that prophesying drunkard."*

Beatrice was beginning to see her shining dream of a Pulitzer lose its luster. Every ounce of her creativity had been poured into putting together a team and crafting a plan that was sure to expose a spectacular fraud in a stunning fashion. The one contingency she'd never even considered was that this hallucinating font of cowboy homilies might actually be the channel through which unknown beings were contacting the human race. Not that she really believed it, for she really believed in little.

Disappointed at the reversal of her plans, it took Beatrice a while to realize that the story unfolding before her—scientific proof of the validity of a religious belief—was even more newsworthy with improved Pulitzer potential. Still, she felt disappointment in the fact that by reporting and publicizing this story, she would actually benefit the Church. The Pulitzer would hardly compensate for the grief she felt at the loss of opportunity to smite the church and its misogynist hierarchy.

But her disappointment in the change of direction that her story had undergone did not blunt her reporter's instincts. There was something she was missing, and on the third time she viewed the clip, she put her finger on it. At the moment Clay fell into his swoon upon the grease spot, the attention of the myriad spectators was riveted to the scene—all but for two men. In the middle of this sea of forward-looking faces, these two men were turned towards each other. And though it was hard to discern, for their lips were barely moving, they were holding a conversation in low tones. Beatrice recognized one of the men. They had met in the course of her research into the local color when she'd visited the American Legion Hall and heard the Reverend Rocktower hold forth on the problems that the shrine had brought upon the local populace.

The other man she did not know. He carried an oversized leather-bound Bible, and his hair and moustache looked a little too good, almost store-bought—she was sure it was a disguise. Cropping the area around the stranger's face, she saved the image to a file. Beatrice emailed the file to a contact of hers in the Los Angeles Police Department, who had access to a program that identified faces based on the juxtaposition of various features.

Then she remembered the parabolic microphone. She inserted the tape, synchronized the video and audio using the SMPTE code contained on each, and began to play with the mixer. She was fortunate in that few of the other spectators were making any noise at all, so intent were they upon the prophet, and within moments she had zeroed in on the conversation of the two. Though the sound quality was poor, by tweaking the parametric equalizers, and pumping up the compressors, most of the conversation became audible.

"This would be the time to do it...he's layin' stock still and everyone's lookin' at him," the reverend spoke authoritatively.

"There's no need for you to tell me how to do my job...I'm a professional. Just have the van in place on Wednesday—that's when this faker will meet his maker."

"Well, you don't have to be so touchy about it."

"Well, I am. I'm here to do the Lord's work and he gives me all the guidance I need. All you have to do is pay for my expenses plus a modest honorarium."

"Well, it's all right here." The Reverend Rocktower handed the stranger an envelope.

"Bless you and don't worry," the man deposited the envelope between the pages of his hollowed out Bible, "I've helped ease twenty-three unholy enemies of the Lord from this mortal coil, and Caesar's law is no closer to laying its hand upon me now than before my first redemption by removal."

She heard the beep notifying her of an incoming email. It was the ID on the photo. She opened the message and read, "Even with that phony wig and womb-broom, my program was able to identify your man as Second Timothy, as he likes to be known. His real name is Delbert Paynter and his specialty is assassinating abortion doctors. He's been on the FBI's most wanted list for three years."

Beatrice let out a low whistle. She would never have to report the proof that Clayton was a true prophet. Instead, she would be reporting his assassination.

Beatrice smiled. "Hello, Pulitzer."

Chapter 39

The Holy Toll Shrine

May 30, 2008

Tête à Tête

Jorge would have preferred that the moon was not nearly so full as he passed through the gate to Pardoe Farms, but he did not let it interfere with his mission. He, Martin, and Hector had made so many forays onto Pardoe property over the last few weeks that it was almost routine.

They'd been mounting a guerrilla campaign against the false MurGhoo in a war of liberation on CheeBah's behalf—sabotaging experiments, stealing equipment, and the ultimate triumph, rescuing the surviving crystals as well as the broken shards. Jorge had no reason to believe that this evening's operation should go any less smoothly than any of the others.

"I'm surprised to see you here so soon again, Cousin Jorge," said one of the guards who'd waved him over to his post. "What are you up to tonight?"

"Oh, just getting a chicken," Jorge replied.

"Well, there's plenty of them here...help yourself," said Humberto Chapa Jr. generously, "Señor Pardoe won't miss one."

Jorge had a gunnysack shoved down the front of his shirt and knew exactly where he was going. After all, he'd been to both of the Pardoe secret labs dozens of times, both the one in the Boyertown van and the one in the hatchery by the tool room, to carry out Señora CheeBah's assignments of sabotage that had been causing havoc with Franklin's plans. He'd even violated the inner sanctum of Franklin's office to steal the surviving Blithian crystals and replace them with plastic counterfeits.

That was the most difficult operation, for the Malaguan guards had no keys for the office—Franklin's circle of trust having such a small radius—and the wall safe had a combination lock. But Jorge had once taken a correspondence course in locksmithing and had become quite proficient with a set of lock picks. The wall safe had been a little more difficult to crack. But being a vintage model purchased by Wayne in 1938, the tumblers were noisy and by placing his ear against a glass held to its door, Jorge succeeded in opening it by listening for the subtle *clunk* of falling tumblers.

Jorge entered the hatchery, slipped through the tool room, and into the lab containing the gantry mounted transference ray. Even though CheeBah had explained the minute differences in appearance between PessAr and CasBah, Jorge was not sure he would be able to recognize the target of the raid—after all, they were both blue chickens. But PessAr started scolding CasBah for being late as soon as she heard the door to the lab open, so Jorge knew he had his bird. When PessAr turned around from her work at the bench, she saw it wasn't her assistant but one of the sorry humans that MurGhoo kept around to guard the farm. "Get back to your post or I'll tell the patrón," she said in Nahuatl, since it was all that most of the Malaguans spoke.

PessAr's tone changed from one of annoyed scolding to surprised anger when she noticed the ornament Jorge wore about his neck on a leather thong. "What are you doing with the plasma switch housing?"

Instead of replying, Jorge added to her shock when he grabbed her by the neck, wrapped a turn of duct tape around her beak and limbs, and, avoiding her sharp claws, shoved her into his sack.

"Your Nahuatl is very good, but the accent is a little off," Jorge whispered through the sack in English so that PessAr would know he wasn't one of Franklin's minions. "Perhaps if you quit struggling and let me

do my job, you won't wind up as enchiladas."

He exited the farm and with a comradely wave to the guard on the gate Jorge called, "Say hello to Uncle Humberto for me." He then slipped down the street, but left it to lay down between the newly sprouting cornrows when he saw shadows upon the road.

As the dark forms approached his position, Jorge was able to make out the Inquisitor and his servant padding their way up the road. Paying no more attention to them once he was sure they'd not seen him, Jorge left the corn field and made for the upstairs room of the roadhouse, where CheeBah waited with Clay, Hector, and Martin.

Jorge pulled the sack open and unceremoniously dumped PessAr out onto the floor. PessAr was stunned as she looked around the room and a spasm of fear ran down her spine. She ejected a splat of shit when she saw Jorge push the button on a wicked looking switchblade. He moved swiftly and despite PessAr flinching, he cut the tape that bound her limbs and beak with a couple of quick motions, leaving her unscathed.

Uncowed by her circumstances and recognizing CheeBah immediately, PessAr screeched, "You! I knew it was too good to be true that you were dead."

"It's nice to see you too, PessAr." CheeBah was actually pleased to see one of her own kind again, "I think it's time we had a little chat."

"Rather than kidnap me and transport me around like so much baggage, wouldn't it have been more congenial if you'd come to the lab to chat?"

"If I came to the lab, I'd very likely be killed."

"I'm sure that MurGhoo would provide you with all the protection that you need."

"MurGhoo is dead. The human you report to is not MurGhoo, he is a diabolical human named Franklin Pardoe, who is trying to fool you into helping him with a wicked self-serving plan."

"If what you say is true, how is it that this human has such intimate knowledge of our colonization plans?"

"He has accessed one or more of our handbooks."

"Impossible. The human intellect is not capable of enduring the handbook learning process, for absorbing the content would overwhelm and ruin it forever," said PessArr.

"The human posing as MurGhoo learned about the handbooks from the notes of his father. His father, Wayne Pardoe, had held our leader prisoner for scores of Terran years after we crashed on this planet, and during that time he tricked MurGhoo into revealing the secrets of our technology." CheeBah nodded to Hector who opened a notebook computer and brought it to PessArr. CheeBah smacked Clay's hand as he fondled her breast and continued, "Here are facsimiles of the notebooks the imposter's father kept...the originals are still in the safe in his office. The human Franklin Pardoe murdered MurGhoo—he died in my arms—that is how I found out about the deception."

PessAr scanned the digitally imaged pages of the lab book and snorted, "These images of the so called lab books are probably forgeries. You had a falling out with your lover and now are trying to bring him down out of spite. You've always been a trouble maker and pervert, and now you seem to have developed a taste for intercourse with a lower life form...you should have just continued with MurGhoo since he is now in human form."

"If he was really MurGhoo I would have," Cheebah said glancing to Clay to see if he was hurt by PessAr's comment, but he was as usual oblivious. "But it was my close relationship with MurGhoo that allowed me to see that the human you call MurGhoo is a fraud."

PessAr snorted again and said nothing.

"PessAr, you've been jealous of MurGhoo and me from the beginning and though you criticize me as perverted for my relationship with him, you would have given yourself to him in the same way if he would have had you. And you let your hatred of me color your judgment, so that you refuse to listen to reason and thus endanger the survival of our people."

PessAr did not reply immediately but cast her gaze from one of CheeBah's companions to the other, saving an especially evil glance for Clay, who held CheeBah in the crook of his left arm while stroking the feathers of her back with his right. "Who are these humans?" PessAr asked referring to Clay and his fellow colleagues from the former sanitation team Numero Cinco.

"This is Clay Stool, the human's prophet. And these are Clay's compadres, Hector de la Vega,

Martin Lopez, and Jorge Chapa.”

“Suppose I believe you, what would you want me to do?” PessAr asked, knowing that appearing to cooperate presented her only chance of escape.

“We must ascertain what this Franklin Pardoe is up to and sabotage whatever he attempts to do with our technology, for he will use it only for his own ends and not for the benefit of Blithian-kind.”

“How do I know that this isn’t some kind of trick?” PessAr was as coy as she was capable of being, “If I go against the MurGhoo, I’d be ruined in his eyes and violating the compact we made upon our departure from Blithos.”

“PessAr, you’ve got to trust me. MurGhoo is dead. And I now love this human, Clay Stool,” CheeBah looked over her shoulder and Clay kissed her on the beak while tickling her beneath her tail. Once again she remonstrated him none too convincingly and continued, “I know we haven’t gotten along in the past and I’ve probably given you good reason to dislike me, but please, for the sake of our kind, at least promise to check the evidence. I don’t know what else I can do to prove my allegations, but PessAr you’ve been my shipmate for ten millennia—take my word on this.”

PessAr waited for a long minute without speaking, as she looked at CheeBah and visibly twitched with the effort of her thought process. Finally, she waved her arms in a signal of resignation and said, “You’ve got me so confused now I don’t know what to think. My first instinct is to disbelieve you, but I guess I owe it to our fellow travelers to at least look into this. Mind you now, I’m not saying that I believe you—but you’ve planted a seed of doubt and I mean to get at the truth.”

“That’s all I ask,” said CheeBah gratefully. “Look at those lab books, run a test on them to confirm their age. The combination to the safe is sixteen right, twenty-two left, and twelve right...take a look for yourself and see that the laboratory notebooks are genuine”

“Well, let me return to the lab and I’ll see what I can do.” PessAr was not practiced at dissembling, but she did her best to appear sincere.

“May the breath of GaHoot be upon you, PessAr, the survival of our species may hinge on your decision about this,” said CheeBah while attempting a particularly reptilian grunt in the traditional Blithian acknowledgement of gratitude—it sounded more like a belch coming from the chicken body.

“My, my Miz Plucky,” Clay said as he winced at the sound, “you must of et somethin’ that didn’t agree with you at all. But don’t worry, your rooster boy will make everythin’ all right later on.”

PessAr hid her revulsion at the sight of him stroking CheeBah, paid her respects, turned down the offer to have Jorge return her, and ran out the door into the mid-morning sun, leaving her promise to do what she could hanging in the air.

Chapter 40

The roadhouse
10 p.m., May 30, 2008

Inquisitor's Delight

O'Malley sat on the roof of the roadhouse and stared out at the night across Route 16 to the silhouette of the outhouse where he died. Though he'd been blessed by his continuation of consciousness, he was also cursed that his existence was limited to the field of dark energy exerted by the gahootinite deposit that lay between his two points of reference.

It was a noisy night at Big Leg Irma's. But it was not so noisy that he hadn't noticed the quiet exit of an odd pair of figures that crossed the road and slipped past the outhouse of his doom. O'Malley had not been surprised to see them materialize. Since his unfortunate accident and the singular circumstance of his spectral perpetuation, he'd developed the faculty of intuition. The Irishman had come into possession of uncanny prescience of nearly all events within his restricted domain.

Ever since his metamorphosis, Jake O'Malley had become something of a seer, while not always able to foresee the future directly, he would get strong hunches about things he ought to do, places he ought to be, and who ought to be involved. These hunches were usually sufficient for him to infer or deduce what was going on. After seventy years of being a ghost, O'Malley didn't ponder much on why this was so—it just was.

"If only I'd had these powers that night I went to puke..." he lamented. "Of course, if I hadn't died back in '35, I'd most likely be dead by now anyway. And who knows what state I might be in otherwise."

So, he sat on the roof because he knew he needed to be there.

The tall, gaunt shadow had looked alone to him at first, but O'Malley could tell after a bit that there was another, smaller figure endeavoring to hide itself against the form of the other. But it only worked for a while.

They could not fool a ghost. Imbued by the meteorite with powers beyond the five mortal senses, he sat like a spider in the midst of a web—reading the vibrations that ran along each strand. The two furtive figures were difficult to see, but they made vibrations in the field. And O'Malley could tell that they were that arrogant Inquisitor and his Oriental servant.

Kafard maneuvered them into position below the open window of the hatchery workshop. He heard the hum coming from the old Boyertown van next to the hatchery and thought of what he had seen in it on his previous exploration. The sight of the many glass vessels filled with four-legged chickens, in various stages of development, had puzzled him at that time. But he'd since figured out that Franklin Pardoe was engaging in genetic engineering.

The Kakastani motioned the Inquisitor to follow and slipped to the rear doors of the van. With LaFarge at his side, Kafard worked the latch and opened the doors. It was just as he'd last seen it, except there were now some embryos that were something other than chickens in a number of the flasks.

"*Mon Dieu!*" LaFarge gasped and crossed himself. "This is surely the work of the devil." Concerned that the Inquisitor's exclamations would draw attention, Kafard decided to forgo the temptation to further explore the van and shut the doors, hoping that once the abominations were out of sight, the Inquisitor would quiet down. The ex-intelligence agent then moved to the entrance to the larger building. The two spies entered through the hatchery door that Franklin had left unlocked.

It was pitch black in the hatchery, and LaFarge threw on the light switch. Kafard jumped nearly ten feet and killed the light in less than a second. He cursed the Inquisitor for foolishly sending out a beacon signal that the hatchery had been invaded. But the split second that the light had been on had been sufficient to awe LaFarge. That brief moment of illumination had revealed the battered, but still shiny, hull of the Blithian spaceship. Kafard had quit cursing and played the beam of a flashlight across the ship, but its meager circumference of illumination was insufficient to the task of lighting the object. Kafard had not seen the ship all at once, as had LaFarge, but his mind put together an accurate picture of the ship and he whispered, "By the prophet's beard."

"What was that?"

"Try the top hatch here," Kafard shone the light on one of two hatchways.

LaFarge played with the opening mechanism to no avail, and he did not get it open until the bodyguard sighed at his boss's incompetence and jimmied it open himself. They climbed in and were duly impressed by the interior. To the Inquisitor, the controls and fixtures of the ship seemed like one of the many science fiction shows that he'd seen while indulging his lately acquired addiction to American cable television.

Familiar with the Kosmodrome, and having experienced space flight himself, Kafard recognized it for what it was—a space vehicle. He had not expected to see such a thing in a chicken house in this pastoral backwater. It seemed incongruous that a private individual, even a wealthy one like Franklin Pardoe, could build such a thing. Of course, it couldn't have come here from another planet, there being only one God, Allah, who would have no need of creating any other beings to place in the firmament. Or would he?

LaFarge expressed his amazement and the two engaged in a conversation about the ship's possible origins, while touring its environs. Kafard theorized that the sort of genetic engineering activities Franklin had been involved in, as evidenced by Poulet and what they'd seen in the van, required an advanced level of technological expertise and immense resources, and that anyone capable of such work could probably build a spaceship. Kafard suggested that the American government was perhaps using the Pardoe operation as a front for carrying out this work in secret, but if that was the case then he couldn't understand why security was so lax.

Eventually they left the ship and made their way into the workshop. LaFarge walked to the workbench and picked up one of the handbooks that rested there.

Turning to Kafard he asked, "What is this device?"

"I don't know, but from that very window I observed Franklin Pardoe put that piece to his forehead and push that button," Kafard was pointing to the components of the handbook as he talked.

"Like this?" LaFarge put the device to his head and inadvertently pushed the button. His body stiffened and was racked by spasms as the machine hummed with an oscillating frequency. When it cut off, LaFarge dropped to the ground, convulsed for about ten seconds, then opened his eyes. Kafard had been too stunned for even his well-trained and lightning reflexes to react, but now the Inquisitor was on his feet and seemingly, none the worse for the wear.

"*Sacre bleu! Je comprends tout!* I see the means to the end." LaFarge bolted out the door and Kafard followed him for a change.

Chapter 41

Pardoe Farms

May 31, 2008

The Avenging Angel

Delbert Paynter could hear the excitement of the crowd gathered adjacent to the shrine as they watched the daily Hour of Forgiveness. He shook his head in disgust when he saw the Inquisitor make the sign of the cross then whispered to himself, "These Whores of Babylon degrade the very name of Christ by claiming membership in Christendom. Let them mock the Lord as they might now... very soon they will feel his vengeance."

Flies buzzed lazily around his head as he stood in the Pardoe Farm's outhouse, peering through the chicken wire that covered its narrow window. The rustic building afforded a good view with a clear line of fire to the grease spot. It was a nondescript structure, some four feet square and eight feet high. The boards of its walls were gray and dry-rotted with age. A single piece of rusted corrugated sheet metal served as its roof.

With all attention focused on the Hour of Forgiveness, Delbert had slipped unseen into position. On his entering the outhouse, the door had fallen off its hinges. Unable to find a clean place to set his Bible, he spread a handkerchief on the bench and laid the leather-bound tome upon it. After propping the door back in its jamb, he began setting up for the kill.

He opened the Bible's cover and from its hollow interior removed the components of a small lightweight rifle. With the precise movements born of practice, he assembled the weapon—a bolt-action with a digital scope and just enough rifling to keep the .223 caliber bullet stable in flight. This was the same cartridge used in the M16 rifle and the round was designed to tumble end over end upon striking its target to maximize the damage.

His plan was a simple one. When Clay laid his face in the grease spot, he would shoot him in the head.

Then, God willing, I'll escape in the confusion, Delbert thought. As simple a plan as it was, it had worked for him before.

As he waited for the prey to crawl near, he reflected on the circumstances that had led to this mission. He had gotten notice of this contract in the usual way—by reading the personal ads in the *National Tattler* weekly tabloid. In an ad, under the heading of *Meditations on Second Timothy*, he read: *And the angel of the Lord went further, and stood in a narrow place, where was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left.*

A verse from a curious passage that speaks of a man called Balaam, who conversed with his donkey. Eventually, Balaam was able to speak only words that God put in his mouth.

As vague a reference as it might have seemed, it contained specific information for Delbert Paynter. He packed his frugal clothing into a canvas duffel bag and caught a Greyhound bus to Elkton, Maryland, where he was dropped off in front of the drug store on Main Street. From a safety-deposit box at the Elk Neck National Bank, he retrieved his leather bound Bible, a video camera, and an envelope containing money.

Delbert Paynter was of average height and weight, and not particularly muscular or wiry. With his pompadour hairstyle and long sideburns, he had what he thought was an Elvis look—if Elvis had been redheaded and freckled. Otherwise Delbert was clean-shaven. His fair complexion kept him out of the sun

and his youthful skin befitted his thirty-five years. Mirrored sunglasses shielded his unusually sensitive eyes.

In sleepy Cecil County, Delbert assumed his usual *nom de guerre*—Second Timothy. He sheltered in a safe house in Cecil Roads, a trailer community on the Little Elk Creek. His hosts were part of an underground anti-abortion organization called the Miracle of Conception that maintained safe houses across the country. It was an underground railroad for those who handle the wet work of the right-to-life movement.

He had traveled the North American continent smiting the unholy—abortion doctors, gay political activists, and teachers of evolution had all been dealt the vengeance of the Lord from his hand.

The output of the rifle's digital scope was routed to his video camera so that he could capture the trophies of his grisly ministry on tape. Though he wrapped his serial killing in a shroud of righteousness, he took macabre delight in repeated viewings of his acts of retribution.

His father, Jethro Paynter, a deacon of the Fellowship Congregation of Christ the Soldier in Pike County, Kentucky, had inculcated his own intolerant ideals and prejudices into Delbert. Hence all beliefs that differed from his were inherently evil.

As he waited, Delbert quietly recited one of his favorite Bible verses from memory, "And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred-fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses."

Chapter 42

Pardoe Farms, Delaware

May 31, 2008

Slow On the Uptake

Franklin bounced the crystal off the wall and onto the floor of his office. A genuine crystal would have broken, but this one and the other ten that he'd tested the same way all proved to be counterfeit, composed of impact resistant plastic. Though angry, Franklin knew he was lucky that PessAr had told him of CheeBah's accusations before checking the evidence in the safe. The news PessAr had brought back from the shrine had been bad, but he'd had no trouble reassuring her that CheeBah was lying.

Back in the lab, an adolescent four-legged chicken was strapped to the bench beneath the gantry mounted transference ray. This was the new, high capacity device that PessAr had built for downloading the thousands of individuals left on the unsmashed crystals. But now that CheeBah had rescued all the Blithians still in crystalline form, PessAr would not be able to carry out her instructions to download more workers for Franklin's projects.

Picking up another crystal, Franklin clutched it tightly in his fist squeezing it with all his might until his knuckles turned white. The pain from the ridges of the pattern on the faux crystal helped him to focus on the explanation for this dilemma. He was distraught that he'd not deduced the cause of his problems before PessAr had breathlessly run into his office that morning and spilled her tale of CheeBah's treachery. He'd been the victim of a guerilla campaign, and not a series of random accidents. While he'd focused myopically on his charts and graphs, the big picture was invisible to Franklin and understanding of the true situation had never dawned on him.

Even after learning about the break-in to his safe, Franklin had failed to suspect the full extent of the damage. He'd ordered PessAr to get back to work, and, when she tried to carry out his orders to download more personnel, disaster ensued.

The transference unit had almost self-destructed when it had been activated, for the phony crystal could not absorb the energy of the gahootinite ray and a tremendous heat buildup occurred. It had been a terrible waste of precious gahootinite. Though the unit itself was saved by PessAr's quick action, the entire charge in the core of the apparatus, sufficient for several hundred downloads, was destroyed.

Franklin still stood looking at the open safe and fumed as he stared fixedly into its interior. Without the expertise of the personnel on the genuine crystals he would be hampered in the maniacal pursuit of his obsessions.

Paranoia flowed ice cold through his veins, for if CheeBah could slip into his office and rob his safe, then she could just as easily disrupt the other phases of Project Immortality, including the manufacture of Franklin clones.

Franklin lived in mortal fear that he would come to harm before the first batch of replacement bodies was mature. It was against that eventuality, and to bridge the time until the orphanage was operational, that Franklin had secretly adopted a pair of Taiwanese twin orphans that were being raised by a couple in his employ, who lived in a cottage on the grounds of Pardoe Farms.

Consumed by the knowledge that CheeBah was behind his pitfalls, he swore to maximize the pain he would inflict on her. Franklin chuckled, despite his anger, when he thought of his revenge. To vent his wrath, he would kill that drunken prophet, depriving CheeBah of a second lover and freeing up the source of the green mineral.

Shaking with fury, he ran to the tool room, grabbed the original portable ray gun that PessArr had modified to a pistol grip, then left the confines of the farm for the first time in weeks.

Chapter 43

The HolyToll Shrine

May 31, 2008

Deus Ex Machina

"It's a good day to die," said the character Geronimo in the classic B movie, *Stand Off at Apache Pass*. Sitting in his Barcalounger, Clay watched the movie for the third time during a Jay Silverheels retrospective for the latest of the local PBS station's all-too-frequent fundraisers. He found the stoic portrayal of the hunted renegade Apache inspirational.

"Tonto is one brave Injun," Clay said with the genuine sincerity that comes easily to those who drink.

For Clay, the passage of time was nonlinear—the end of a moment for him did not necessarily follow its beginning. Not limited by normal sensory perception because of the heights of awareness he gained through his copious alcohol intake, he saw the full breadth of time. Each moment brought him closer to his next interaction with 'Kelly Kan', as he called the feathered lady after CheeBah told him her true identity—KulKan. Clay sensed that something momentous was about to happen. It was like that moment back in 'Nam when he heard the first mortar round fall. His foreboding made the movie dialogue resonate in his mind.

As the Inquisitor was wrapping up that day's *Hour of Forgiveness*, Clay watched his movie's climax and thought about what a good idea it had been to put a television on the dais.

Clay maintained his usual routine and drank at his typical pace. Lately, he had come to wonder at the meaning of it all. Why was he of all people at the center of events? And what were these events that surrounded him? Not used to philosophizing, he took for granted that everything he could see and sense was real—hence his ready acceptance of beings who spoke to him from other dimensions.

He pictured himself as a leaf on the wind, a cork on the tide. His barren childhood, his terrifying army experience, the lonely years in the Veterans Hospital, and his unexpected elevation to prophet had all been events over which he had no control. This was the elemental Clay Stool—a man who simply flowed with the forces that buffeted him.

Accepting that he was part of events that were bigger than he was, Clay prepared to crawl down the road despite his foreboding. For the first time he was attuned to the activity around him and realized why the attention was focused on him.

"These people need me to tell them what the feathered lady is tryin' to do."

A murmur of expectant excitement rippled through the pilgrims crowded about the dais. Clay had reached the requisite level of inebriation for clairvoyance. Setting down the last of the bottles for that afternoon, he raised the Barcalounger to its most upright position and fell forward. There he laid face down on the platform with his arms extended before him as if he was diving into a pool.

Clay slithered off the dais like a snake, and the crowd parted to let him through.

He raised himself to his hands and knees and covered the thirty yards to where the Inquisitor was waiting with the winners from that day's show.

As LaFarge introduced them, Clay reached up and shook hands with the two victorious pilgrims. The prophet didn't know who these people were, but he was gracious as usual.

"Well, if you'll be excusin' me, I got to be crawlin' down the road a piece."

"Juanita and Diego will be accompanying you," LaFarge said smiling down.

"Happy to have the company," Clay acknowledged and then resumed crawling to the grease spot to

have his daily vision. A procession of Malaguan pilgrims, most wearing hats to protect themselves from the sun, formed to witness his communion with the feathered Madonna. Hector was out in front wearing his South of the Border sombrero with the 'Pedro sez...' logo on it.

Beatrice had positioned her crew for the most advantageous camera angles to record the imminent assassination attempt. The crew, unaware of Delbert Paynter's presence on the scene, wondered why today they were being deployed in such an unusual configuration.

"Zoom in on that outhouse," she told the cameraman who carried the shoulder-cam.

"Why the outhouse?" he wondered.

* * * *

Seth Poole felt the vibrations as he turned off the key to his battered pickup truck and it died to a stop. The faded green cab of the 1984 Dodge Ram four-by-four was parked beneath a handwritten sign that hung on the chicken wire fence, "*Se prohibe estacionarse*." Seth hadn't seen Clay, his fellow VA hospital inmate, since they'd shot blackbirds last fall.

He pulled down the tailgate and withdrew his Savage bolt-action .22 caliber rifle with a five-shot clip from under the polyethylene sheet he used to line the bed of his truck to fashion a makeshift swimming pool in hot weather. As he pocketed a hundred rounds he chuckled at the surprise he had in store for Clay. He had been practicing to redeem himself for being out-shot by Clay on their previous outing. "I know he ain't been gettin' no practice with all his drinkin' and carousin' with these senior-eaters."

Ordinarily, a man with a rifle walking through the gate of the shrine would cause alarm among the guards—but coincidentally a wind blew from nowhere and parted the curtains in one of the upstairs windows in the roadhouse. Astrid, the lithe and naked working girl, was revealed anointing herself with lotion as she watched her reflection in a full-length mirror. The distracted toll collectors were oblivious to the armed, white-haired black man with a rifle who continued into the encampment in search of his friend.

A man of over seventy years, who had been twice wounded in the Korean War, Seth walked slowly south through the crowd along the pike past Irma's roadhouse and in the opposite direction to everyone else. Feeling like a fish swimming against the tide and jostled from every direction, he responded rudely.

"Hold on, dere! Look out, dere! You best watch out who you bumpin' into. What's all dis here commotion about? Bad enough people is always pushin' the black man around, but this is ree-fuckin-diculous."

To his left stood the dais and the beige trailer faded from many decades in the dusty Delaware sun. It was hard to tell where the paint ended and the dirt began. He tried to head towards it but could make no progress against the pressure of the throng. Finally he gave up fighting and fell into the flow. The crowd pulled him along Route 16 towards the grease spot.

* * * *

Having hastily donned a set of coveralls atop his Brooks Brothers suit as a disguise, Franklin had slipped onto the shrine property and was lurking near the grease spot in the hedge that bordered Irma's side yard. Gripping the ray gun, he stared malevolently at Clay as the prophet crawled towards him. His nerves were unsteady and he sweated profusely in his button-down, monogrammed white shirt. After loosening his tie with his free hand, he pulled back the denim sleeve of the coveralls to view his watch, calculated his pulse, and found his heart was beating at a rate of one hundred-twenty.

Franklin wondered if he was about to faint when his vision started blurring. But what he'd taken as a defect in his vision was an actual disturbance in the atmosphere, for the very molecules of the air before him were being roiled by an intrusive force. He recognized it for what it was—that infernal ghost, O'Malley.

"Why so glum, laddie?" O'Malley was now standing beside him. "Ya keep yer face screwed up like that for too long, you'll get constipated."

Though tempted to tell O'Malley to mind his own business, Franklin knew it would be of no use. "You mean you have to ask? I thought you knew everything!" Franklin compressed his lips so tightly as to squeeze any hint of color out of them. "You know what I've been planning. You've shown up every time I have had an experiment."

"But all that work is going on back on yer farm. What's hanging around here in the hedge going to do for you?"

"If you want to kill a chicken, you cut off its head. Without their prophet, all this wetback vermin will swarm back where they belong, the Pope's goons'll clear out, and I'll have a free hand to deal with the whores in the roadhouse, so I can get at the meteorite underneath it. Besides, I have a personal score to settle."

O'Malley smiled enigmatically. "You mean you're going to kill Clay Stool?"

"You're damn straight! Ain't no no-account drunk going to stand between me and immortal life. That's the beauty of this ray gun!" Franklin waved the object at O'Malley. "It'll suck the essence right out of him and put it into a crystal. And then I'll smash the crystal to smithereens right in front of CheeBah." A small cloud of dust rose as he stamped his foot in a demonstration. Franklin became so animated with his diatribe that he began pumping his elbow up and down. "No violence, no evidence, no wounds, no bruises, no nothing. He'll just quit inhabiting his body,"—Franklin's palm now beat a rapid staccato on his thigh—"leaving nothing that the coroner can hang his hat on. All that will be left is his corpse—as cold as the clay. *Heh, heh*," Franklin chuckled at his unintentional pun.

"Immortality ain't all it's been cracked up to be," O'Malley warned him.

"Maybe for you it ain't. But I'd like to find out for myself."

"If you go shooting that ray gun off, you might just get your wish," O'Malley admonished Franklin as he disappeared.

About a hundred yards away from O'Malley and Franklin, a sixteen-year-old Malaguan girl and her parents were walking up the road to the shrine. It was Hector's cousin and her parents, Aunt Hildelisa and Uncle Rafael. The teenaged daughter, Primaflores, spied the prophet and cried out excitedly, "Look Mama, Senior Clay," and she bolted away from her parents and ran along the road towards the grease spot.

Perched in the cupola atop the roadhouse, CheeBah used one eye to watch the girl running and with the other she could see Clay approaching the grease spot. Mistress Poulet took her break from phone-sex up there every day at show time to watch her man perform.

As she followed the afternoon's proceedings, some movement in the bushes by the road caught her attention. There she saw Franklin Pardoe carrying MurGhoo's ray gun. Empathetically aware of Franklin's evil intent, she vowed that this man would not remove another of her lovers from this life. Racing down the stairs with the sole thought of protecting Clay, CheeBah knew that firing the ray gun so near to the meteorite could cause a cataclysm of cosmic proportions. She scampered out the door leaving several blue feathers on the staircase, crossed the yard, and confronted Franklin.

"You! Where did you come from?" Franklin jerked back, trying to keep a comfortable distance from the fowl. "Oh never mind...I'm glad you're here. I'm about to give your boyfriend a transfer."

"You'll also do cataclysmic harm to yourself if you use that ray gun here. Trust me, I know what I'm talking about. I was present when PessAr and MurGhoo invented the transference device, and I know that if you use it this close to the gahootinite deposit it will cause a singularity."

Franklin sneered at her. "Singularity? What the hell is a singularity?"

"It's a disruption in the cosmic landscape—a thinning of the walls that separate the manifold dimensions of reality from one another."

"Who do you think you're fooling, I've had physics."

"I'm warning you. I'll stop you if I must."

"I've spent my entire life in the business of killing chickens," said Franklin, laughing maniacally. "I'll kill you and your drunken prophet, too!"

As Clay crawled into range, Franklin disregarded CheeBah's threat and turned to point the ray gun at him. Before he could fire, the genetically engineered chicken sank her talons deep into his calf. He screamed in pain and attempted to dislodge her by clubbing her with the ray gun. But she was a tough hen and his blows had no seeming effect. The Blithian clambered up his leg, gained a claw hold in the middle of his back, and slashed at his neck as she bit his ear.

Franklin was dancing frantically in his attempt to shake the attacker from his back. With an effort born of desperation, he reached over his shoulder and seized the chicken's neck. Pardoe pulled CheeBah off his back, slammed her to the ground, and kicked her into unconsciousness.

With CheeBah motionless at his feet, Franklin aimed the gun at her lover.

It was then that Second Timothy placed his foot against the seat of necessity to steady his aim and

scared a rat out from its nest of magazines in the corner. The rodent escaped through a chink in the outhouse wall and scurried across the road towards Franklin. The avenging angel watched through the scope of his rifle as the false prophet lowered his head to the pavement.

"May the Lord have mercy on your soul" Second Timothy's finger slowly applied pressure to the trigger.

* * * *

Realizing that he needed to be free of the crowd to reach Clay, Seth forced his way to the periphery of the mob so he could continue to search for his old hospital roommate. *Being on TV made ol' Nutsy right popular. I reckon these folks are his followers. He must be fixin' to have one of them visions they been talkin' about. I'd better get to that grease spot if I want to ketch him.*

As he circumnavigated the crowd, his attention was drawn to a commotion behind the roadhouse.

When he saw a skinny, bald man being attacked by a monstrous chicken, Seth cried out in alarm, being familiar with the downstate myth that killer chickens roamed wild in the nearby cypress swamps. Supposedly they were descendants of domestic chickens that had long ago escaped from the Pardoe Farm and had reverted to a feral state. He slapped in a clip, raised his rifle, and took quick aim, meaning to shoot the rabid chicken.

As he was about to squeeze the trigger, he saw the man grab the chicken, throw it to the ground, and kick it. With the man out of danger, Seth ran towards the scene to get a look at the rogue fowl.

O'Malley's invisible foot tripped the old veteran whose gun discharged as he hit the ground. Just as Second Timothy was taking his shot he was showered with splinters as Seth's shot struck the decrepit outhouse next to the sniper's head.

The vengeance of the Lord went awry and the errant bullet tore through the sleeve of Franklin's overalls ruining his aim by causing him to jerk reflexively just as he activated the ray gun.

With a sound like the crack of a bullwhip, a blinding beam leapt from Franklin's hand and a green bolt of lightning struck down into the blackness of the grease spot.

* * * *

Musical Souls.

The ray from Franklin's weapon arched like the back of a frantic dragon. It dove into the grease spot, chasing its tail, and passed through the meteorite returning to its origin at the ray gun. Upon reentering the transference device, it stimulated an even greater discharge by completing a feedback loop. The crackling arc flew round and around in its closed trajectory, forming a ring of green fire half above and half below the ground.

The subterranean gahootinite deposit began to glow, and the thin layer of earth above it became gradually transparent. The awestruck crowd watched as a vision of a reptilian world formed in the corona of the incandescent mineral. A paroxysm of alarm swept through the onlookers as a spectral image emerged from the vision through the grease spot and slithered towards Clay.

When the creature was nearly on top of him, Clay exclaimed, "It's Miss Kelly Kan! You finally made it through from the in between place!" Clay recognized an inter-dimensional rift when he saw one, "This is just like the movie, *A Princess of Mars*, when Clint Hardy rode into a cave out west somewhere and wound up on the red planet."

Clay stood to embrace the feathered lady, but it was like grabbing smoke. As the awestruck pilgrims watched, their prophet disappeared. Clay was enveloped by the image of their Madonna. Feeling her touch upon his brow, he enjoyed the cool smoothness of her scaly fingers. As she whispered in his ear, his mind filled with many voices—too many for him to comprehend. For an instant, he was able to caress her silken iridescent feathers. Then she was gone.

Just as smoke dissipates, so too did the vision of the feathered lady swirl off on the eddies of the breeze. The plumes of her essence flashed over the macadam towards the source of the arching ray.

All the Malaguans in sight of this miraculous event genuflected, crossed themselves in awe, and recited the Toltecan Creed, expecting the rapture of Quetzalcoatl to carry them to paradise at any moment.

Standing alone by the grease spot, Clay extended his arms, his fingers reached for the fleeting wisps of the feathered lady. As his eyes followed her, Clay saw Franklin and all those near him engulfed in the

glow of the mineral. They first turned red and then translucent. Their bodies stretched out into thin strands that intertwined as they were drawn inexorably towards the discharging gun. With a sharp crack, they briefly disappeared.

As Franklin was pulled into the loop, his finger released the activator and the ray gun fell from his hand. The circumference of the arc diminished with each successive cycle until it was smaller than a single point and vanished with a snap.

Then the scene reversed itself. Translucent strands emerged from the near singularity and began contracting into their former shapes like well stretched elastic. Then they all dropped to the ground as if lifeless.

Not everyone's attention was focused on the prophet though—LaFarge had been just far enough away from the fracas to have been beyond the horizon of the singularity, but close enough to have seen all that had transpired. He looked over at Kafard but noticed that his adjutant's attention was focused on the outhouse. "Just like a Turk," he sneered inwardly. "The moment danger appears they look for the nearest latrine."

When the flashes ceased, LaFarge surveyed the scene of the disaster and his attention was attracted to the ray gun lying on the ground. He realized that the fallen bodies were not dead but stunned and recognized that this was not evident at any great distance. Aware that this was a chance that could determine his destiny, Rene Marie LaFarge seized the moment to make his move. He did so with all the avarice that had been bequeathed him by generations of opportunistic ancestors. At Franklin's body he used the ruse of last rites to pick up the ray gun and tuck it into his robe.

As he concealed the transference device, LaFarge heard the prophet cry out in alarm. He turned to see a lone chicken running from the site of the blast where several bodies lay prone. It headed directly towards Route 16. In response to their prophet's lament, the Malaguans began calling out, "Grab the chicken! Don't let it cross the road," and scores began a pursuit of the fowl. As the chicken streaked towards the Pardoe Farm, Clay saw the love of his life vanish under a truck.

As the truck emblazoned with the Honey Dipper logo barreled north, Clay cried out in anguish, "Plucky... my Plucky's gone again!"

Clay ran to the road but there was no sign of her—only a few feathers.

The grieving prophet picked up the feathers and held them to his cheek. He sobbed gravely, looked in vain after the truck, then turned and wandered back towards the grease spot.

Clay's gaze was drawn to LaFarge as the Inquisitor moved among the three bodies lying on the ground. He saw that his Plucky wasn't the only one hurt by events as he walked closer to the scene. LaFarge was gesturing in the symbolic fashion of the final sacrament over the body of a beautiful young girl. As the priest closed her eyes, Clay felt the need to turn away. He walked over to Franklin Pardoe's body and gave it a little nudge with his toe.

"It is too late for him, my son," LaFarge intoned as he hastily approached the prophet, "I have already given him the last rites."

Clay looked at the priest but had no idea what he was talking about. He gave Franklin's body another nudge. "Is he dead?"

"It is no use; do not waste your effort. He has—how do you say it, chewed the dust." LaFarge was already walking away when Franklin groaned and began coughing.

"*Sacre bleu!*" LaFarge was alarmed at the inconvenient timing of Franklin's revival. Turning towards the booming voice of the Inquisitor, the crowd observed what they took to be their prophet raising Franklin Pardoe from the dead. The newly resurrected Franklin didn't quite seem himself. He stared at his hands and feet and felt his face and legs. Then he began to behave in a manner most unusual for the dour, conservative chicken mogul—he began dancing a jig and singing bawdy songs in an Irish accent.

Angst-ridden that he would be discovered when Pardoe missed the ray gun, the Inquisitor lifted the hems of his scarlet skirts and ran. He would not remain to have his plan thwarted. "I will go get medical help," he called back over his right shoulder as he headed for the roadhouse.

Kafard was watching a strange individual leave the outhouse and get into a nearby van, but he forgot about the strange scenario when he spied the Inquisitor racing to his rooms. With a subtle smile, the Kakastani discreetly followed LaFarge.

O'Malley removed the overalls and was pleased as he admired the fine suit he was wearing and

basked in the satisfaction of once again possessing mortal flesh. Regarding his exquisitely manicured nails, he sighed. "Well, I'm not exactly sure what happened to Franklin, but it was awfully generous of him to be leaving his body behind." The Irishman dusted off his coat. "My mouth is as dry as an Arab's sandal." O'Malley clapped Clay on the shoulder. "Where can a feller get a drink around here?"

While the crowd beheld the miracle of Franklin's rebirth, Clay fished a half-pint of whiskey from one of his overall pockets and offered it to O'Malley. Everyone cheered as Clay's companion discarded the screw cap and took a long hard pull on the bottle.

Clay followed the edge of the area illuminated by the meteorite's glow as it receded towards the grease spot. The rift was beginning to close.

Two more figures emerged from the intersecting dimension. Less serpentine than the feathered Madonna, they were reptilian all the same. They elicited a gasp from the petrified pilgrims as they moved towards Clay, snapping their fearsome jaws. Frozen in place, the bystanders were unable to react even to save their prophet.

But as the creatures reached Clay, they too proved ethereal. First one, and then the other, encompassed Clay as the three merged into a large mass of whirling matter with the aspect of a small tornado.

The perimeter of the tornado decreased in size as the beings within it coalesced into a scaly version of the prophet, whose elongated jaw resembled a snout. When the support of the whirlwind was finally spent, Clay fell to the ground, looking his normal self again.

The glow ceased and the rift closed.

* * * *

Tunnel Vision

CheeBah found herself floating in a seemingly interminable corridor, the end of which was visible as a speck of light in the distance. Her equilibrium had been affected and she felt like a young drone back on Blithos, clutching on to her father's tail as he swam in the fresh coolness of the canal. As CheeBah and ClehTun bathed in the warm orange light of the Blithian sunset, she lost her grip on her father's tail and slipped beneath the surface. The water filling her lungs burned as she struggled to breathe.

Submerged in the darkness of the corridor, she was floating helplessly. Unsure of how to make headway, she remembered her father's dying words: "Reach for the sky."

CheeBah reached out to the single speck of light that remained of the sunset and felt powerful arms pulling her along. When she emerged into the light and felt the air upon her face she gasped for breath. But the air reeked so foully she tried not to inhale despite the stinging pain in her lungs. CheeBah then opened her eyes and saw her lover, Clay Stool, with his face eyeball to eyeball with hers. The foul air was the stench of eight hours of steady drinking that seethed from Clay's mouth. But she was so glad to see him that she welcomed his familiar odor and rose up to kiss him with her beak. When their lips touched, she gasped with comprehension—she had switched bodies with the young Indian girl who had been near the crater, and Clay did not recognize her.

Aghast at the sight of their daughter falling seemingly dead, Primaflores' parents had run to her limp body. They saw Clay move to the side of the young virgin and put his face next to hers. When she had awakened, her parents assumed that the chosen one had miraculously brought her back to life too.

"Madre de Dios... it is surely a miracle... Santo Clay!" Mama Tototl screamed in joyous tears.

By then hundreds of pilgrims crowded the scene and they all swore that they had seen Clay raise the girl from the dead. A great tumult arose from the assembled witnesses as they all dropped to their knees, crossing themselves and murmuring in prayer.

Clay leaned close to Primaflores' face and asked, "Señorita, are you okay?"

"Yes, Clay, I'm fine. I can't believe I lived through that."

"Well, I'm glad you're okay." Clay laid the Indian girl back on the grass and started to stand. "Now, if you'll excuse me, missy, I gotta go look for my chicken."

"But I'm your chicken, Clay!"

"Huh?" Clay was puzzled. "What are you talkin' about?"

"It's me, Plucky. And you're my big rooster, Slim."

"Plucky?" CheeBah's use of their pet names startled Clay into understanding. "How?"

"Do you remember that movie we watched last night? The one where the marshal fired into the shack full of dynamite?"

"Yep." Clay casually accepted that this beautiful young woman had been a chicken on the previous evening.

"Do you remember what happened?"

"The dynamite blew up and everything was flattened for a hundred yards in all directions. Them three badmen were flung like rag dolls halfway to Santa Fe."

"Well, Slim, when Franklin Pardoe fired the ray gun into the grease spot, he set off an explosion that was several orders of magnitude more powerful than that dynamite shack. It flung people through a rip in the firmament."

"I was right next to it when it went off. He must've darn near hit me." Clay scratched his head trying to grasp the facts.

"He was trying to hit you. The ray that penetrated the grease spot and created a near singularity was meant to vaporize you."

Clay looked at CheeBah with an unusual intelligence in his eyes. "That must be a novel experience to fall into a black hole."

"How did you know that a black hole is a singularity, Slim?"

"You're a long way off of the canal," Clay replied in Blithian.

"NamBu is high and the Council far away," CheeBah responded automatically, surprised to hear her native language.

"Doesn't the daughter of ClehTun recognize her old teacher?"

"JahFet?"

"It is I."

"Where is Clay?"

"I'm still here, Plucky. You were talking to one of the voices in my head—except now they're coming outta my mouth."

"Voices? There's more than one in there?"

"Hello, my little drone."

"SamShee. You too? Are there any more?"

"Not in here. KulKan came through the singularity with us, but I'm not sure where she is now."

"I never thought I'd hear your voices again," CheeBah said nostalgically.

"Part of me is still confused," Clay said. "What happened to everybody?"

"When the ray hit the meteorite it caused an implosion," CheeBah explained. "It's like an explosion except the force is inward, as if that shack of dynamite had collapsed when the marshal shot it."

"I reckon that is what I saw," Clay agreed, completely comfortable with Plucky's explanation.

"What occurred, Slim, is called transoccupation back on my world. Think of that green light you saw arcing across the road as a magic beam. It separates souls from their bodies and allows them to travel on their own. It picked me up out of my chicken body and set me down into this body."

"Where'd that young Señorita go, Plucky, when you swapped bodies with her?" Clay pulled a nearly full pint of whiskey from the rear pocket of his overalls. "Did she become a chicken?"

"I cannot say for certain, Slim. But from all appearances, a number of bodies were swapped here."

Clay, pulled another bottle from his pockets, removed the cap thoughtfully and threw it away. "I remember somethin' like that happenin' in that movie—*The Haunted Hunting Ground*. The one where Tonto was a medicine man possessed by the buffalo spirit and then became a great chief."

CheeBah looked around and started to get up from the ground. Clay wiped his lips on his sleeve and offered CheeBah his hand.

Primaflor's father took off his hat and approached Clay. "Senior Clay, what can we do to repay you for saving our daughter's life?"

Clay dug his foot in the dirt for a second while he contemplated. "Let me marry her."

Chapter 44

Blackbird Landing, Delaware
May 31, 2008

Running a Fowl

Franklin had been senseless since he'd discharged the ray gun into the meteorite. There was a force that pulled on him as violently as that time when as a child he had been caught in the undertow at Rehoboth Beach. The riptide had sucked him irresistibly to sea, while his brother and father stood on the beach laughing at his excited gesticulations. He had struggled against the frothy brown current before slipping beneath the surface. The salty water had burned as it filled his lungs. In a last desperate moment he had felt an ironic peace and surrendered to the inevitable.

His soul had been drawn down a tunnel towards a point of white light. Somehow he had known that paradise lay beyond the passageway's end. Just before entering nirvana, he had awakened. His face was being abraded by the scratchy stubble of the lifeguard's beard. Dwight Cornley had clamped his lips over Franklin's while administering mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

"It's a damned good thing I saw you," Dwight had said, raising his head. A drool of salty saliva hung down from his chin. "You nearly drowned, little feller. But don't worry, you're gonna be alright."

Unlike his childhood memory, this time his out-of-body experience continued, for there was his body lying beside him on the ground. Franklin remembered looking down at all the scattered bits that had been his body as they were drawn into a string that spun into the vortex of a great maelstrom. Like a beam of light, he had felt himself flashing across the continuum. Franklin assumed that this had been another near-death experience.

Bewildered, he explored the body in which he now found himself. Feeling quite unlike himself, he ran his hands along his sides and was surprised to touch feathers. He reached for his face and was shocked to find a beak.

"Buk?" Franklin couldn't believe that such a noise had come from him. Horrified at finding himself in the body of a chicken, he jumped up and ran for his farm on the other side of the road.

Unexperienced as a chicken and clumsy on his new legs that bent in the opposite direction, Franklin stumbled as he tried to beat the truck that barreled towards him. Avoiding the wheels of the truck that passed over him, Franklin became entangled between the right tie rod and the stabilizer arm.

He struggled to free himself from the pinching linkage as the truck hastened up the road. Turning off of Route 13 onto Blackbird Creek Road, the driver of the septic pumper planned to dump his cargo covertly into the creek to avoid the nominal pumping fee at the sewage treatment plant. As the truck slowed, Franklin extricated himself and dropped down to the road.

Once he quit tumbling and got to his feet, Franklin recognized where he was. He was familiar with the low rent A-OK campground that bordered Blackbird Creek. He'd often passed it on his way to see Eddie Brunswick, who lived nearby in a mansion on the creek. Eddie had been his classmate at Lincoln University, but had dropped out to pursue a life of dissipation after inheriting his grandfather's mansion and a substantial pile of money.

Franklin stood rubbing his bruised tail, cursed his luck, and tried to get his bearings to the Brunswick place. A specimen of the white trash who made his home in the campground spotted him, called out something about chicken dinner, and gave chase.

Franklin hesitated for a split second, before he fully realized his peril. As the malnourished pursuer

made his first grab at Franklin, he came up with only a few tail feathers. He probably would have managed to snag the chicken at the next try, but for the fact that Franklin let loose a string of obscenities. The rustic was brought up short in shock at being cursed out by a talking chicken, and as he stood startled in a moment of inaction, Franklin was gone.

Franklin's avian pulse was racing, and he felt very strange. Not used to his new metabolism, he grew very hot beneath all those feathers. But he dared not slow down, for he could hear bare feet slapping on the pavement behind him. As he ran for his life, Franklin was already formulating a plan for transferring himself back into a human body, but first, he had to deal with the immediacy of his present danger.

Upon reaching Eddie's place, he ran up the drive, shot into the house through the pet door, and called for Eddie. As awkward as it would be to explain his situation to his old college pal, Franklin wanted to alert him to the rube rattling the locked door—but it became obvious to him that there was no one at home. Not waiting for his pursuer to break into the house, Franklin ran up the stairs to hide.

He went into Eddie's bedroom and opened the closet door. What he saw surprised him so much that he momentarily forgot his situation. Instead of a closet, behind the door stood another door. He tried this door but it was locked. Franklin dashed to the bureau and began searching through the drawers. Finally, beneath the velvet lining of the jewelry box on top of the bureau, he found a key. Hurrying back to the false closet, he inserted the key and swung open the inner door.

To his exasperation, all he saw when he opened the door was a wall. In his anger and frustration, he slammed his tiny three-fingered fist into it. But it was only the illusion of a wall that was there to disguise a portal. The hologram offered no resistance to his blow and his momentum carried him through to the other side.

Standing up on the wide planks of the wooden floor, Franklin smoothed his ruffled feathers and looked around.

He was in a pub.

* * * *

Several Days After the Singularity

"Your Holiness, my mission here is accomplished." LaFarge had called Sylvester on his private line. "I would like to leave this godforsaken *trou de merde* as soon as possible and return to Rome."

"You nitwit. What are you going to do?" Sylvester said sarcastically into his wireless phone as he stood on the balcony blessing the afternoon crowd of tourists. "Walk away from a billion dollars worth of publicity?"

"Your Eminence," the Inquisitor assumed an air of indignation, "I do not believe you should speak to your nuncio in such a way."

"Enough of your interruptions," Sylvester snarled as he waved with his free hand. "Are you blind, or just inept? Now listen up in silence or suffer excommunication." Sylvester paused as he walked in from the balcony that overlooked St. Peter's Square. He put the call on speaker and lit a cigar as he listened with satisfaction to the silence at LaFarge's end of the line.

Thinking his equipment had failed in that moment of prolonged silence, a worried Kafard began troubleshooting his surveillance system. Six thousand miles away, Fuquois checked in his desk to see if his voice-actuated tape recorder was still functioning.

The Pope broke the silence, "Since you can't see it yourself, I'm gonna paint the big picture for you." The Pope hiked up his robe, took off his big hat, leaned back in his chair, and propped his running shoes up on the desk. "This prophet—who it just so happens has been having visions of miraculous revelation—raises a local farmer and a young girl from the dead and now is going to marry the girl. This is the story of the goddamned decade, maybe the friggin' century, and you want to walk away from it? You can't buy publicity like that."

Sylvester paused to puff on the cigar as he tilted his head backwards and released smoke rings. "And I thought you were a man of ambition. As bad as you want to be a cardinal some day, I would think you'd be chasing every opportunity for face time—milking this for all it's worth. But since you don't have the cleverness to see it on your own, I'm gonna do you a favor. I'm ordering you to stay until after the

wedding, which will be covered by every media service on the planet, and you will perform the ceremony, whatever form it might take, as my official representative... do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Your Holiness," LaFarge muttered, shaking with barely contained rage at the Pope's effrontery.

Sylvester hung up the phone without further comment, leaving LaFarge staring into his receiver.

Back in his room, Kafard cursed as he took off his headphones—this was but another delay in his getting close enough to the Pope to accomplish the Imam's mission.

He opened his laptop, double-clicked on his email icon, and typed the name, Radish, into the address field.

Chapter 0, Continued

*Thresher Pub
Where time is irrelevant*

Lying Irishmen and Phone Sex

“So, O’Malley deliberately steered poor Franklin off course?” The pirate was sympathetic to the chicken’s plight and was attempting to put the story into context.

“That’s right,” the chicken said. “He knew the deposit of gahootinite extended all the way to Franklin’s own property, but O’Malley led the man to believe it was only beneath the roadhouse.”

“That be a right turdsome thing to do.”

“That Irish bastard knew all right.” The chicken threw back a double shot of tequila with the worm and slammed the glass onto the bar with a bang. “It was all part of an elaborate setup. He even goaded Franklin on with the experiments to make him use up what precious little supply of the mineral he had left.” The chicken motioned Wilbur to refill the glass with amber fire. “The ray gun would have been inoperable, except for the occasional commemorative medal Franklin could steal from pilgrims who strayed from the shrine.”

“Medals?” Blackbeard’s attention was always aroused by the mention of anything that sounded even vaguely valuable.

“Yeah, the Simonites made souvenir medals from bits of gahootinite they chipped from the meteorite in Irma’s basement. They glued the shards into the middle of galvanized washers and then sold them for twenty bucks a piece to the pilgrims.”

The Captain turned the conversation back to the original subject, “I can’t reckon what good this skullduggery would do O’Malley.” He stroked his beard as he pondered possible motives. “Other than it be more natural for an Irishman to tell a lie than for a fish to swim.”

The chicken laughed and said, “Like I said, it was all part of a grand scheme. Looking back on it, I’m sure he knew what he was doing the whole time. A regular Gaelic Machiavelli.”

“I ne’er hear’d tell of that dago, but it be just like a bloody son of Erin to scheme and connive behind yer back,” the pirate said as he shook his mane emphatically.

“That’s a fact.” The chicken did another double shot. “O’Malley even encouraged Franklin to use the ray gun to remove the prophet from the scene. I bet he knew what would happen when Franklin fired that damn thing!”

“It must’ve fired a wondrous great ball.”

“Yeah, a great ball of fire.”

“That ray gun be somethin’ an independent privateer would want to lay his hands on.”

“If it doesn’t backfire on you like it did on Franklin.” The chicken rested its elbows on the table and put its head in its hands.

“Give us a bottle of Nelson’s Folly,” the Captain called for rum. He’d decided the tequila wasn’t doing a satisfactory job of cheering up the bird. “Ne’ertheless, no matter how grand a ball o’ fire it be shootin’, that fancy ray gun ain’t for me. I keep to things of me own time, and now that I be reckonin’ on it, me own planet. Black powder be good enough fer me. With a load in me cannon, I can hole any ship, an’ with one in me pistol, I can blarst a hole through any man.” Smacking his fist on the bar for emphasis, the pirate rattled the glassware. “So, ye won’t spy me a gallivantin’ about with no mechanical muskets, nor ridin’ in one of them automobilators, nor talkin’ on one of them telemaphone contraptions, which

brings up a subject I been meanin' to ask ye about."

"Ask away. You're buying the liquor." With his higher metabolism the chicken was more sober than his drinking companion.

The Captain furrowed his brows and in a low serious voice began, "'Sblood! Why would some jack tar pay good money to listen to a trollop talk randy instead of headin' down to the knockin' shop and personally crackin' Jenny's tea cup?"

The chicken paused momentarily then got the picture. "Ohhh, you're talking about the one-nine-hundred lines." The bird squirmed, having had some experience in these sordid matters. "It's hard to explain, exactly, but sometimes a man needs a little stimulation to raise the old tent pole and talking to a filthy-mouthed wench helps."

"But what good be hoistin' a stiff yardarm if the doxy be on the other end of a cable?"

"Well, a fella takes care of it himself, while the *doxy* eggs him on..."

The pirate shook his head in disbelief. "What's the world come to? Why, I'd sooner waylay a cabin boy, or ravish the bung hole of a rum barrel than have aught to do with yankin' me tiller on shore."

"There's a big demand for it." The chicken shrugged.

"Arrh, give me a quiverin' quim anytime." A wry smile twisted the pirate's lips as he mused, "What do these women look like?"

"It really doesn't matter," the chicken answered. "When you can't see who's speaking, they can be the ugliest, fattest slobs on the other end and you'd never know the difference."

"Aye, matey, we agrees on that p'int. I don't care a fig what they look like, if I can lay me hands on 'em. Long as they gotta pulse, or at least they still be warm."

"Well, on Irma's hotline, they weren't even all human." The chicken paused self-consciously, smoothing down its feathers, choking on what it had meant to say next.

"D'ye mean fornicatin' with a beast?" Blackbeard stroked his chin. "Aye, that's not so bad. I've 'ad me fill of sheep and goats, but how could a beast be talkin'?" The pirate looked the storyteller over from the comb on its head to the scales on its feet. "Well, as I be listenin' to a tale told by a chicken, I reckon I shouldn't be too skeptical."

The chicken moved uncomfortably in its seat. "It's all in your mind anyway...it's the illusion that counts."

"'Sblood!" the pirate protested. "A cove would as lief take a wench by fancy than by his arms."

"Now you've got it."

"Got what?"

"The gist of the phone sex operation."

"But thar ain't, as far as I can tell, any sex involved."

"There is on one end."

"Oh, ye be talkin' about onanism a'gin." The pirate shook his head, "M'thinks ye'd sooner lay off that subject, laddie."

"Some guys call the girlie phones and some look at issues of dirty magazines and newspapers."

"Thar's a copy of the Gazette in me privy for wipin' me arse." Blackbeard shook his head. "But let us swing our helm back on course, matey. I understands this sort of behavior on a long v'yage... 'tis right common aboard a ship at sea, but why a cove would practice it ashore, with wenches aplenty at hand, 'tis a mystery indeed."

"Prepare to be mystified then," the chicken said sagely, "running a phone sex operation is like owning a goldmine."

"I've always fancied a goldmine," the pirate said wistfully.

"Men pay as high as three dollars a minute just to talk."

Blackbeard screwed his face up to the ceiling as he mentally calculated the exchange rate between dollars and guineas, "That sounds passin' strange but I've seen some passin' strange things in me travels. But mind ye, it still strikes me as bein' a mite preverted"—the Captain looked the soul of piety—"but how would one be gettin' into this business?"

"I thought you didn't have anything to do with technology not of your time?"

"I won't be havin' nothin' to do with it, if'n I decides to do it." The pirate bent over until he was eyeball to eyeball with the chicken, "I'll hire some clerk to run it."

Chapter 45

The HolyToll Shrine

June 10, 2008

Hate to Run

Primaflores Tototl watched the crowd move around below her like an amoeba. It surged over the area delineated as the site of the wedding fiesta by an enclosure of snow fence. Her disembodied spirit hovered over the exact intersection of Route 16 and Harriston Pike—ahead of her to the east sat the dais, behind her was the grease spot, the roadhouse stood to her left, and Pardoe Farms to her right.

The dais was decorated and an improvised altar consisting of a pyramid of painted boxes was erected upon it. Route 16 was carpeted as a processional runway and the snow fence on either side was draped with red, white, and blue bunting donated by Governor Reynolds—a leftover from the previous Fourth of July parade.

She was fascinated by the hundreds of people milling along the row of merchant stalls. The scene looked familiar to her because it was organized with a sense borne of the open-air market culture of her Malaguan homeland. She was cheered by the music that was coming from the bandstand. It was a large open platform that was situated next to the fence at the northern side of the enclosure. Across from the bandstand, hungry pilgrims swarmed the barbecue pits and ate communally at the surrounding tables and benches.

There was a particularly large knot of people around an impromptu counter made of a plank resting on two sawhorses, where the roadhouse bartenders were dispensing beer and pulque. Ribbons festooned the front of the bar, and Chinese lanterns hung unlit on poles in anticipation of the festivities running far into the night.

Wobbling on his three legs and cocking his head pitifully, Tomas was begging successfully for handouts among the guests.

Despite the freedom of not having a body, Primaflores was tethered to the gahootinite deposit by an invisible attractive force that held her spirit in the place where she had met her destiny.

From her height, Primaflores saw that the festivities extended in all directions. Camera trucks and news vans surmounted with satellite dishes were parked on the periphery of the shrine grounds, and chartered buses lined the Harriston Pike from the bus stop to the Legion Hall a quarter of a mile away. The Governor's Chrysler, bearing the license plate number "1," sat under the great oak tree on the north side of the roadhouse, where it had been since the evening before.

The roadhouse sat just outside the enclosure, cattycorner to the dais. Big Leg Irma's front lawn was kept clear of revelers, because it was from the door of her establishment that the bridal party would issue forth for the ceremony.

Primaflores' gaze was drawn to a frenzy of activity at the gate where Simonite guards exercised control over the access to the shrine. The Simonites were weeding out the troublemakers in their traditional role as protectors of holy places.

Primaflores felt a pang of regret for not being able to take an active part in the fiesta. In the metaphysical game of musical chairs that had taken place during the near singularity, it was she who was left incorporeal—as O'Malley had formerly been. Not knowing what had actually happened to her, she wondered, *Has Quetzalcoatl come? Is this the rapture? Or has someone stolen my body?* She thought of the tales her wizened grandmother had told her of the spirit travelers that stole the bodies left by departing souls.

In her present state, walls provided no barrier to her vision. She saw, not with eyes, but by an inexplicable awareness of everything that occupied her new domain. Inside the roadhouse, she saw her

former body being adorned in the traditional bridal costume of red paint and feathers. The young Indian girl felt forlorn, for it seemed no one could see or hear her. *If there was only some one I could talk to,* she thought.

She willed herself to descend to the level of the crowd, where she tried to get Padre Luis' attention. But he couldn't see her. Then she noticed a man standing by the gazebo in the front yard of the roadhouse who seemed to be gesturing to her.

He wore an azure silk suit with a blindingly white shirt. Gold studs held his collar points connected by a chain that ran behind the knot of his paisley tie. He was a thin man of medium height who carried his bald head and long nose with a jaunty flair. Looking directly at her, he waved and motioned Primaflores to approach.

She drifted to his side and he said, "Me name's O'Malley, Jake O'Malley, from the County Sligo. Though you might be hearin' some of the folks around here callin' me Franklin—but pay them no mind. I have been, until quite recently, in the same circumstances in which you now find yourself."

"Oh, Señor O'Malley, please tell me, what has happened to me?"

"You've been removed from your body, lass, in the same manner as I've been plopped into this here carcass. It's awful sudden I know, but you'll get used to it. It might not be as bad as what happened to that lady reporter, she wound up in a shithouse rat."

O'Malley explained her situation to Primaflores in a blend of Catholic catechism and a rather complicated summation of singularities and Blithian technology.

"Mr. O'Malley, this is too much," Primaflores understood little more than when O'Malley had started. "Tell me, is this purgatory?"

"Not at all, at all. In fact, you may, God willing, be restored to flesh and blood someday. I was, and it only took me seventy years."

"But that's such a long time." Primaflores sighed, having only been alive for sixteen years.

"So, you'll have lots of time to learn." O'Malley smiled. "And after a while you'll make your own breaks...you'll see."

"I don't know what to do."

"You could be on God's own mission. I think maybe he sent you to be me guardian angel."

Primaflores would be proud to serve God's will—for indeed, what else could her situation be? She smiled at O'Malley and said, "I swear that I will watch over you and be a vigilant angel."

"I'll tell you right now, Flory, the Lord works in mysterious and wondrous ways, and we're both beholdin' to make the most of the situation He's put us in."

Primaflores asked, "So, Señor O'Malley, how do you intend to make the most of it?"

O'Malley took a thoughtful pause and then responded, "I will not waste a single minute lost in the fog of drink, but will use all me faculties and newfound wealth to begin a great philanthropic undertakin'."

As he elaborated on his plans, O'Malley's animated dissertation was under observation from the roadhouse gazebo.

Unable to see Primaflores, Irma was watching the person she thought was Franklin Pardoe seemingly talking to himself. She was there to keep anyone from entering the gazebo because it was where CheeBah's bridal party would assemble before beginning its procession to the nuptial altar upon the dais.

Hector, Jorge, and Martin had worked all night constructing the altar. They had collected boxes from the liquor store then painted them gray like granite. The village shaman then covered them with sacred glyphs. They moved the Barcalounger aside, then stacked the boxes like stones to form a pyramid. Before this cardboard edifice the matchmakers would present the bride and groom to each other.

When the time came, CheeBah would walk from the dressing room in the roadhouse and gather with her maids of honor. Mama Tototl and two Amatl crones would lead the procession through the multitude of well-wishers to the rhythms of the sacred fertility dance.

Excitement grew as the crowd observed the elements of the bridal party assembling. Everyone jostled for position to get a glimpse of the bride when she departed the roadhouse. They were so enthralled that they paid no heed to the groom. He was sitting on the steps of the dais apparently engaged in an intense conversation with himself—which was not so unusual of an occurrence.

"So you say your name is Jah Feet?" Clay was having trouble with the pronunciation. "And your pal is Sam Sheet? Those sure are some funny names."

"Maybe for now," JahFet replied, "but you'll get used to them."

"Hell, I knowed plenty of folks with stranger names than the two of you. There was Hung Fat, the skinny little Chinese feller that worked in the kitchen at the VA, and Phil Dirt, who used to drive the trolley in Harriston, back when they had one. So don't be thinkin' your names put me off none. Lookit all them Injun names Marshal Clint Hardy had to remember—Poking Eel, Blowing Grass, Passing Wind. If'n he could do it I can. What difference does a name make? I just enjoy the company."

"Yeah," SamShee interjected, "and we're going to be spending a lot of time together. Though it may take you a while to grow accustomed to hearing our voices within your mind."

"Shee-it!" Clay laughed and declared, "I've been hearing voices all my life. You're the first ones friendly enough to introduce yourselves. It sure was nice of the feathered lady to bring you fellers here. I feel like we're gonna be real good buddies."

JahFet asked, "Then you wouldn't mind if one or the other of us takes possession of your body from time to time so that we might once again enjoy the pleasures of mortal flesh?"

"Hell no," Clay replied. "Sometimes it's nice to just sit back and let someone else do the drivin'."

"Well, we thought, since we'd be spending so much time together, it would be advantageous to get acquainted." JahFet and SamShee allowed their memories to meld with those of Clay, so that Clay knew of their life on Blithos and how they came to be on Earth, taking part in a timeshare of his body.

"So, whilst you fellers were trapped in the cave back on Blithos," Clay was reviewing the facts, "my little Plucky, or CheeBah as you call her, was gallavantin' all across the galaxies and tradin' in bodies like used cars."

"That's right," SamShee affirmed, "and it doesn't seem to have detracted from the basic nature of her desirability. Her natural sensuality resonates and shines through whatever form she might take."

JahFet clucked, "A fine sentiment for a spiritual leader to take."

"Don't be a hypocrite," SamShee chided, "you were the teacher who held class in the mating pits."

"And to think I'll be doing it again soon!" JahFet replied lustily.

"Not without me," SamShee declared.

"Then we'll both dive in with reckless abandon and wild enthusiasm," JahFet said.

"Don't forget me! I'm gonna slap bellies until I can't see straight no more," Clay shouted out loud. "We're gonna be like the three amigos." The prophet stood up and started walking like a man with purpose.

"Is this going to be perverted?" SamShee asked the assembled mind as Clay's body strolled along the flower-bedecked road.

"No more perverted than that urge Clay gets every time he sees a chicken."

"Don't knock it 'less you've tried it," Clay retorted.

"There's your friend, Seth, from the VA hospital," SamShee knew him now as well as Clay did. "He's certainly enjoying the party."

Seth Poole was taking full advantage of the festivities. He had discovered an affinity for the semi-hallucinogenic pulque and was following behind the musicians singing and clapping his hands. He waved when he saw Clay walking and talking to himself and called to his old ward mate, "Hey Nutsy, this is some kick-ass party."

Seth had been shopping at the merchant stalls and was now dressed in what he thought was full traditional Malaguan regalia. He wore a blouse of white rayon beneath a wool serape that sparkled because gold colored threads had been woven into its rich earth tones. His cotton pantaloons bore tin conchae down the seam and the cuffs were hand-embroidered with Toltec symbols. A cloud of dust rose up as he danced along in his leather-like vinyl cowboy boots, and atop his head was his proudest acquisition of all—a South of the Border souvenir sombrero.

For the purposes of the ceremony, Seth represented Clay's family. He was responsible for putting together an impressive procession that included musicians, athletes for a sacred game of *tlacthli*, and any personages of great repute that could be mustered. Padre Luis, Hernando Ozomatli, the shaman, and Diego Tecpatl, the village chief, were recruited for the retinue and had advised "the best man" on matters of tradition.

"Man, this woman is good for you." Seth liked the change he saw in his friend. "You look healthier than you ever looked." He handed the prophet a half-pint of Old Crow and watched as Clay drained it in a

single gulp. “You sure ain’t lost your touch at drinkin’ none neither.” Seth slapped Clay on the back, “Pretty soon we’ll have to finally go on that bird shoot we been threatnin’ to do.” He lowered his voice, “But not till after the honeymoon.”

Once Clay joined the procession, others flocked to join the ranks and pay homage to the chosen one. They formed up behind Seth who was now escorting the groom’s matchmaker. As they all followed behind the musicians, Seth made eyes at the gray-haired, wiry woman on his arm.

After the groom’s party had finished making the tour around the mound of skulls, it headed straight towards the gazebo. Clay came to the front of the throng with the matchmaker and his “father,” Seth, and they mounted the steps for the formal introduction.

CheeBah was waiting with her matchmaker, Señora Coscacuauhtli, as well as Primaflores’ mother, Mama Tototl, and her maid of honor, Irma Gravely. The bride was not readily visible with her retinue clustered around her.

Primaflores had been the most sought-after maiden within a two-day burro ride of her home village and would be reckoned a great beauty by any standard. There was much excitement in the groom’s party as everyone jostled to try and get a glimpse of the bride. As they gawked, the bride’s matchmaker produced a pair of rattles, which she shook furiously as she ululated shrilly and those who surrounded the bride stepped aside and backed away from her.

CheeBah now stood alone at the top of the gazebo steps and an audible whoosh was produced by the intake of air by the awestruck beholders. Her gloriously long raven hair was twisted into a topknot held in place with golden pins and her face was painted red. She was covered with a cloak of red feathers that covered her from her neck to her feet. As she raised her arms to greet her groom, it looked as if she was spreading her wings, and the front of the cloak parted, exposing her naked body—it too was covered with red ochre. Clay stopped dead in his tracks thinking that his Plucky looked just like a bird.

From their vantage point, Pedro and Brendan saw it all. “It is tradition to paint the idols of their fertility goddess red once a year to assure the crops will grow, and by painting the bride red and gowning her with red feathers, they assure her fertility.” McCracken’s observation was lost on Boru, who stood in slack-jawed stupefaction.

After allowing a few moments for the groom and his party to take in the splendor of the bride, CheeBah lowered her arms and the bridesmaids removed her cloak. She and the groom donned matrimonial shirts presented by the matchmakers. The shirts were made in the ancient tradition with the seams ending in thongs that dangled at their sides—the bottoms of CheeBah’s buttocks were visible below the tail of her shirt until the bridesmaids replaced the cloak.

Though Clay remained speechless, JahFet and SamShee were already making plans for the consummation of the union.

The mariachi band put away their brass and took up homemade instruments. When they resumed making music, they were not only using different instruments, but they played songs different from the gay melodies of the fiesta.

Three different-ranged panpipes and the wooden duck flute blended their voices in a haunting melody that told the tale of a young maid who married a god. A chorus of four drums, all tuned to different notes, beat the polyrhythmic steps of the traditional dance of the serpent.

The wedding party snaked their way through the environs of the shrine as they headed for the dais and the onlookers joined in. Many of the participants were bedecked in costumes that depicted jaguars, burros, birds, farm animals, and even fish, as they joined in the sinuous line that formed behind the bride and groom. At the head of the procession, Clay carried a basket into which all comers tossed folded pieces of paper or cloth. Written upon these scraps each guest offered advice, a saying, or bit of wisdom that they felt might help guide the newlyweds through years of matrimony—save your money, plant your corn early, and so forth.

The throng danced its way south along Harriston Pike and then east on Route 16 on the red carpet that had been laid up to the Shrine. Clay and CheeBah were hoisted onto the shoulders of the crowd and deposited on the dais.

Exerting their talent for handcrafting, the Malaguan pilgrims had bedecked the dais with blankets and garlands of flowers. The perfume of the flora mingled with the aroma of roasting fauna, for the barbecue pits were heaped with roasting shoats and suckling pigs. Caressed by the fragrance of her surroundings,

the now human CheeBah gave thanks for the stroke of fortune that turned the tragedy of the hapless Primaflores to her benefit. Plucky and Slim held hands tightly as they stood before the Inquisitor and drank deeply of each other's eyes.

LaFarge appeared as resplendent as any Toltecan deity as he stood before the granite-gray pyramid of boxes. He was appalled to be holding mass near this hideous pagan altar, and the thought of sanctifying this union by combining the sacrament of the Church with heathen ritual repulsed him. But he swallowed his ire and calmed himself with the thought that once this ceremony was over, and he'd fulfilled his duty as the ringmaster in the Pope's matrimonial circus, he would be able to return to Rome and execute the plans he had for Sylvester.

Rene LaFarge had been struck nearly speechless at the sight of the bride prancing about nearly naked and painted like a savage. The effect was exacerbated by the closeness in hue between CheeBah's paint and the color of his finery.

He wore his scarlet cassack with the ermine collar and a wide-brimmed hat of the finest beaver, dyed red with mercuric oxide. LaFarge patted the ray gun tucked beneath his silk waistband and felt a strange sense of comfort from its radiant warmth on his skin.

I hope this is worth it, he thought, though I'm sure that this miscreant Pope won't appreciate the sacrifices I have suffered on his behalf.

LaFarge realized that everyone was staring expectantly at him, waiting for the rites to begin.

Oh, well. It is now just a matter of hours before I receive my reward. LaFarge opened his Bible, smiled at the bride and groom, and began the ceremony.

He had first crack at the couple and asked them to repeat the traditional Catholic vows.

Then, he stepped aside as the two Amatl hags moved to center stage. CheeBah and Clay knelt on a straw mat while the matchmakers placed a bowl of foul liquid and a plate of execrable-looking food between the couple. The crones then each lit multiple cigars and blew smoke about to purify the site and as an offering to the statues of various saints they had set upon the lowest level of the ramshackle pyramid.

LaFarge edged his way to the far side of the dais as the hags tied the ragged strips of cloth together that hung from the bride and groom's crude shirts. The Inquisitor made his move as Irma went into the crowd and assembled the single women into a close group. He dashed from the stage unnoticed during the commotion as CheeBah cast her feathered cloak, in lieu of a bouquet into the clamoring bachelorettes.

"Looks like you're the next one to get married, sweetie," Irma announced as KulKan caught the feathered cloak. Since the Blithian goddess had taken over the body of Beatrice Howe, she had been enjoying the sensations of being in physical form. Now that the journalist was the avatar of an ancient alien deity, she had canceled the documentary, paid off her staff in full and went with Irma to the beauty parlor to get her salt and pepper hair dyed and cut, her woefully chewed nails manicured, and her long neglected legs waxed.

Seth in similar fashion had gathered up the bachelors who hooted and hollered as Clay awkwardly pulled off the blue garter that CheeBah had borrowed from Irma. He tossed it towards his three compadres—Hector, Jorge, and Martin. They battled each other and it was by luck rather than skill that Martin emerged victorious.

Jorge teased, "You have never even been with a woman."

"I have been with your sister," Martin said as he dodged to the left to avoid being cuffed by Jorge, who took playful revenge, despite the fact he had no sister.

The newlyweds were then led to the decrepit trailer that adjoined the dais to consummate their union within full hearing of the crowd—who cheered as the trailer rocked.

While everyone's attention was focused on the activity in the trailer, LaFarge slipped into the roadhouse, ran down the hall, and entered his room. He gleefully grabbed the phone and hit a button for a preprogrammed phone number.

It was late in the evening back in Rome. Pope Sylvester sat at a computer in his Vatican office composing an email to Pierro del Ponte. He was letting his father know that another large purchase order had been issued for Jubilee related contract services.

Fuquois stepped in through the door, "Your Holiness, your American nuncio is on line three."

"Shut the door behind you. I want to take this call in private."

Fuquois bowed and returned to sit at his desk. Leaning over, he opened the lower right hand drawer

and flipped on the tape recorder that was spliced into the signal from Sylvester's phone line.

"Not bad, Rene, nothing like free publicity to run up the take. I suppose your services deserve some sort of recognition."

"I would like nothing more than to come to Rome and receive your personal blessing, Your Holiness."

Sylvester was pleased to get off so cheaply. "That's fairly painless, but I can only give you fifteen minutes." He had been expecting LaFarge to ask for a significant cut of the take.

"Fifteen minutes will be more than enough."

"Come as quickly as possible, so we can get some publicity shots while the story is still in the news." Sylvester hit the button disconnecting the call.

After hanging up the phone, LaFarge rose, walked to the door and called down the hall, "Well, Kafard, our work here is finished." Kafard, having listened in to their conversation, was already chartering a Leer jet from Summit Airfield.

Chapter 0, Continued

Thresher Pub
Where time is irrelevant

Welcome to the Club

“Barkeep, I’m all for accepting this cove into our society of traveling traders. So let’s drink to it.”

Wilbur poured himself a beer then the pirate, the bartender, and the chicken touched mugs and drank. Blackbeard slapped the chicken on the back. “Ye be a bird of me own feather.”

“Maybe we could do business—you’re a pirate and I’m a successful corporate executive. We have a lot in common.” Franklin extended his clawed hand to Blackbeard.

“I could use a man...’er assistant, such as yerself—someone with mercantile acumen. Ye’ll learn the chrono-trade and how to navigate between dimensions in the Nexus. You come to work for me and if ye be sharp, ye’ll earn a franchise of yer own.”

Franklin asked, “What is this Nexus you’re talking about?”

“Just think of it as a road to riches. I found it when I fell out of the watchtower at the fort I built up my creek from the Delaware River. I thought I was a goner, but instead of hitting the ground I fell through that door into here.” The Pirate pointed to the aforementioned portal.

“I never dreamed of anything like this,” Franklin said.

“Ye’ll be learning all about everything soon enough.” Blackbeard grinned.

Chapter 46

*Vatican City
June 11, 2008*

Is This Throne Taken?

Once again, LaFarge returned to the Pope's anteroom. This time he was not cowed by the formidable Cardinal Fuquois' mien. This time he came in triumph, able to wrap himself in a cloak of glory because of his successful mission and the knowledge that he was minutes away from fulfilling his destiny. Things would be run differently around the Vatican after that.

Fuquois looked up from his papers and engaged his most disingenuous tone of voice, "Welcome home, Inquisitor. May I be the first to congratulate you on your outstanding success on your commission from the Pope?"

LaFarge sniffed. "I'm afraid you are too late. The Pope has already congratulated me."

"Well, be it first or second, congratulations all the same." Fuquois was wearing a twisted grin, "With this accomplishment under your belt, I'm sure we will be seeing more of you around here."

"Reward for diligence and hard work is no surprise," the Inquisitor tossed his head arrogantly.

"Oh, I'm quite sure you'll get your just reward," Fuquois spoke in honeyed tones.

The Inquisitor struck a dignified pose. "Now, I believe I have an audience with His Holiness..."

Fuquois rose to see LaFarge through the portal into the Pope's inner sanctum.

The Cardinal opened the massive ornate door to the Papal sanctuary and waved LaFarge through. He then shut and bolted the door to assure their privacy and returned to his desk in the anteroom.

The Pope came out from behind his desk extending his hand towards LaFarge, who grasped it as if in friendship then used his other hand to strike the unsuspecting Pontiff on the back of the wrist with a taser.

After his victim collapsed unconscious on the floor, LaFarge removed the papal sash and used it to bind the limp form of the Pontiff upright on his throne. He withdrew the ray gun from his robe in order to wipe Sylvester's mind clean and supplant it with his own.

Having gained working knowledge of transference technology from his use of the Blithian handbook, LaFarge had conceived a procedure that he was sure would work for unassisted transference. He sat in Sylvester's lap with his back to the Pope, and holding the ray gun in both hands outstretched above him, LaFarge estimated the angle necessary to aim the ray through his own head and into Vinnie Tandino's, and fired.

After a momentary disorientation, LaFarge was amazed at how normal he felt, even though he had just switched bodies. It was macabre seeing his own body slumped, lifeless, on the floor as he looked at the world through Sylvester's eyes. He sat calculating the number of minutes before the Swiss Guard would become alarmed at the overly long length of the audience and burst into the room to rescue him.

Rene LaFarge was glad he hadn't tied the knots any more tightly. He couldn't take his eyes off his former body, and thought about how everyone would believe that the Inquisitor had died while on the verge of committing a heinous act on the Pope. Now he was ready to begin the masquerade as Sylvester. LaFarge passed the time musing on how he would declare, speaking as Pope Sylvester, that the Lord had divinely intervened on his behalf.

LaFarge sighed and spoke out loud, "At last, I am the Pope," then turned his head towards a rustling sound in the curtains. He was surprised to see his body guard, Kafard, emerge.

Now, that LaFarge was occupying the Pope's body, his plan called for detection by the Swiss Guard,

but when Kafard appeared from behind the drapery, he decided that discovery by the Kakastani would serve just as well. Doing his best to emulate Sylvester's manner, LaFarge spoke, "My good man, take that knife of yours and please cut me loose. This mad man has tried to assassinate me."

Kafard pulled out his trusted friend, raised the blade above his head and shouted, "*Allah u Akbar!*" Ali Ben Kafard fulfilled the Imam's holy quest, by plunging his dagger to the hilt into the breast of Sylvester IV.

Kafard paused to survey the scene for the space of several heartbeats. He looked with satisfaction at the blood that was soaking the Pope's white vestments, and noted the look of complete astonishment that was still visible on the lifeless visage. Turning his attention to the heap that had been LaFarge, he felt for a pulse. Finding none, he grunted his disapproval that the Grand Inquisitor had dropped dead of his own accord, depriving Kafard of the pleasure of killing him.

The Kakastani took a duplicate knife from his pocket, slit the throat of LaFarge's body lying on the floor, and placed the knife in his hand.

Kafard, satisfied that he had created a proper murder-suicide scene, tucked the ray gun beneath his jacket as the door was flung open and Fuquois filled the portal. Kafard approached the Cardinal and faced him as he lifted his knife to eye level.

The Swiss Candidate smiled and returned the knife to its sheath. He then brought forth a leather pouch the size of a large apple and dropped it with a muffled jingle into Fuquois' outstretched hand. The Radish weighed it in his hand for a second and it then disappeared into the folds of his robe. The two men nodded wordlessly to each other, Fuquois stepped aside, and Kafard passed from the room.

Chapter 0, Continued

*Thresher Pub
Where time is irrelevant*

“So, ye be that chicken...” Blackbeard said smiling, pleased with himself at deducing the missing piece to the story.

“Unfortunately true. But I guess I’m lucky just to be alive—even like this.” Franklin stood and raised his mug to make a toast. “So even though I’m in a strange place with no friggin’ idea what’s going on, where there’s life there’s hope.”

Blackbeard wiped his mouth on the back of his woolen sleeve, “There still is a point or two I’d like ye to clear up about your tale. Ye mean to tell me that the Pope’s s’posed lieutenants, Fuquois and Quiferelli, were in league with that Mussulman Kafard ag’in him the whole time?”

“Yep. Fuquois recruited Kafard soon after the assassin’s arrival in Rome.” Franklin bobbed his head and riffled his neck feathers. “Fuquois had it in for Sylvester, whose real name was Vinnie Tandino, even before his ascension to the throne. It all stems from the time when Tandino’s father, Pierro Salvatore del Ponte, bought the boy a seat in the College of Cardinals.

“He be a *bona fide* bastard, then.” The sea dog noted the difference in the last names.

“Very astute of you.” Franklin rubbed his beak on his feathered breast. “Sylvester’s mother was a whore at the Queen of Sheeba roadhouse. Pierro, being married already, naturally couldn’t let the kid take his name, but he did pay his son’s way through school and bought him a bishop’s hat within a year of his leaving the seminary.”

“I’d swear an affy-davy that he be a better father than yer own.”

“No doubt,” Franklin’s tail feathers drooped, “though he was more interested in advancing his own criminal enterprises than his son’s career.”

“Shiver me soul, but as a colonial, that Sylvester be a blessed singular Pontiff.” Blackbeard was drawing a skull and crossbones with his finger in some moisture on the bar, “I ne’er hear’d tell of anyone but a froggie or a dago bein’ crowned Pope.”

“His father wanted to use the Vatican Bank for his own purposes.” Franklin drained the dregs of his glass. “Del Ponte just spread enough money and favors around to overcome the European revulsion for Americans. That’s what made an enemy of Fuquois, who was looking to put his own cat’s paw into the office—Quiferelli. Not to mention the fact that Pierro tried to kill Fuquois with a chemically induced heart attack.”

“It be a shame that whilst them Roman princes of pederasty was vyin’ with each other, they had to injure an innocent bystander sich as yerself,” the Captain allowed Wilbur to take his glass without indicating that he wished a refill, “by havin’ yer legacy usurped by some lyin’, thievin’, papist, pigshit Irishman, who’s now helpin’ them alien fur’ners to prosper on our very shores.”

“That he is. O’Malley’s using the resources of *my* company to help them set up a New Blithos right here in Sussex County, Delaware. It all leaves me in a sorry set of circumstances.”

“But as you said, where there’s life, there’s hope,” Wilbur interjected, “and you seem healthy enough to me.”

“Aye,” the Captain agreed.

“I don’t feel very hopeful.” Franklin pointed to his breast feathers, “On top of losing everything, who’d want to live like this?”

“Ye got a grand cause to live fer, matey.”

“And what might that be?”

“Leave me parryphrase one of yer twentieth century philosophers, Joe Stalin. Says he, ‘There be no better feelin’ than to revenge yerself upon yer enemy, eat a fine dinner, then go to sleep.’ Gettin’ back at them what crossed ye should be wind enough to fill yer sails.”

“Well, I guess it’s never too late to start over.” Franklin perked up. “I might even be able to get myself back into a human body at some time and regain my fortune.”

“Don’t be frettin’ about that sorry chicken purveyin’ business, fer we’ll get ye involved in respectable lucre-generatin’ activities. And, as fer yer body, the one ye have’ll serve ye well enough fer the time bein’.”

“That makes sense to me. Come to think of it, I can turn things to my own advantage, for in my present form they’ll never see me coming,” Franklin said slyly. “I just need to set myself up in some sort of enterprise to fill my war chest.”

“Thar’s the spirit,” Blackbeard smacked the bar with enthusiasm. “I’ll take you into my inter-dimensional trading business as a book-keeper and teach you the ropes. You’re a member of our little group of traders now and under my wing. As ye can tell, I’ve got a blessed soft heart, so I’ll help ye git back up on yer feet...I mean claws. Ye be on yer way to the top mast, ag’in.”

“This calls for a celebration.” Wilbur grabbed three champagne flutes from the overhead rack then pulled a bottle from the refrigerated case. “This was bottled by the master himself back in 1710—Dom Perignon. I got it from him just the other day.”

“Watch where ye point that thing,” the Captain warned, laughing.

Wilbur ricocheted the cork off the ceiling and then filled the glasses. He passed them out and raised his, “To new beginnings.”

“And new hope,” Franklin clinked glasses with his two new friends and everyone drained their champagne in one gulp.

“Aye!”

After they finished off the venerable bottle, Blackbeard announced that it was time to be going, “We best be startin’ on our endeavor.” The Captain helped Franklin off his stool. He put his hand on the chicken’s shoulder, since they were both a little unsteady on their feet.

“This could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship,” Franklin said in his best Humphrey Bogart voice.

“Shipmates and partners fere’er,” Blackbeard spit on his palm and extended his hand. The usually fastidious Franklin didn’t hesitate to spit in his own palm and slapped his hand into the pirate’s to seal the deal.

They waved to Wilbur, who winked as he resumed polishing the glassware. The two shipmates walked out the same door through which Blackbeard had entered the Thresher Pub.

Epilogue

Glad to Crown Ya

On Thursday of that week, news came from the Vatican that electrified the shrine at the crossroads. Pope Thaddeus II, the former Cardinal Fuquois, had canonized Clay Stool in recognition of his having raised two persons from the dead. The Pope's *chargé d'affaires*, the newly minted Cardinal Quiferelli, pulled the necessary strings to cut the Vatican red tape.

The Church hierarchy mounted no more than a cursory investigation of LaFarge's motives for murdering the previous pope then committing suicide.

* * * *

Good Riddance to Bad Rubbish

Kafard brought his attention to bear on the television that was suspended in the corner of the Athens airport concourse. Waiting for the connecting flight to Kabuldung, the Kakastani was surprised to see the image of the Imam flickering behind the CNN logo. He had just talked with him a few hours ago when calling to report the success of his mission. The Islamic operative arose and walked close enough to hear the newscaster's voice tell of the Imam's death

"...The Ayatollah Ali Sayed K'Zooti died peacefully in his sleep just hours ago. We have Wilson R. Buckler, of the Foreign Relations Institute, in the studio. What's your take on this, Wilson?"

"Well, Rolf, one has to question the prospects for the continuation of Kakastan's Islamic Republic when, in all likelihood, there will be a descent into chaos as the various factions square off..."

"Fools!" Kafard said out loud as he listened to infidels debate the future of his country. He realized, though, that the chaos referred to by the commentator was a very real possibility. Recognizing the opportunities that such situations present for clever men, he looked at his watch.

His flight was already two hours late and he was eager to return. Begrudging every passing second, Kafard switched to a flight departing for Afghanistan in thirty minutes. That plane would land him within a seven-hour drive of Kabuldung.

Fourteen hours later, Kafard was driving through the mountain pass that marked the border with Kakastan. He reached up to the rear view mirror and fingered the crystal that hung there. It had been left in the chamber of the ray gun and its intricate beauty appealed to Kafard, who was usually immune to aesthetics. He regarded it as a talisman of good fortune.

* * * *

Dying Was the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me

O'Malley permitted PessAr to use the Pardoe facilities to continue Blithian colonization and supported the project financially. He felt a kindred spirit to his fellow transoccupants.

PessArr set to work building a new, full-size ray gun and continued the cloning operation, for Blithians were completely satisfied with the utility of the four-legged chicken body. They were determined to begin reproducing their lost comrades from the DNA codes they had stored in the ships data banks. It would take many years to restore the full complement of one hundred forty-four thousand, and years more to replace the lost experience, but that was one commodity they had plenty of—time.

PessAr also downloaded an earlier version of MurGhoo from a crystal she had made before their departure from Vulgaroon. With CheeBah now married, PessAr looked forward to seeing her old rival again.

Folks began talking about the profound change that had come over Franklin Pardoe, who used to be such a hateful man. Most wrote it off to his finding religion after being involved in that strange accident at

the toll shrine. They'd heard he'd suffered a near death experience. He was judged to be slightly eccentric, for he'd taken to affecting an Irish accent, and was constantly observed seemingly talking to himself. When asked about this strange habit he just said, "I'm talking to me guardian angel."

* * * *

The Honeymooners

The newlyweds continued their honeymoon in the governor's suite at the roadhouse. The room was lavishly appointed, at least by Sussex County standards, with a black velvet Elvis painting over the bed and a bidet in the private bathroom.

Besides being a Catholic saint, Clay Stool had been elevated to a status almost equal with Quetzalcoatl himself. There was a great deal of folk art being produced that depicted the visions of Clay, the resurrection of Primaflora, and her marriage to a living saint. If the Malaguans still carved stone in the manner of their forebears, then great carvings would have been erected commemorating the tale of Santo Clay.

The flow of pilgrims and treasure into the shrine increased after the highly publicized wedding. The shrine was deluged with throngs of blind, lame, leprous, and otherwise infirm and afflicted miracle seekers. Having a resident saint was a great attraction.

Everything Clay Stool touched became a potential relic that could fetch a hefty price. Empty liquor bottles that had actually touched his lips were particularly prized. These, along with locks of Clay's hair were big sellers in the Simonite Reliquary Store.

Padre Luis took charge of the shrine when Pope Thaddeus II appointed him his nuncio, and the Simonites maintained their headquarters at the roadhouse. The shrine prospered and Irma made a fortune providing hospitality to all.

*Annotation:

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mike Fisher is a songwriter from the green-stone-heart of southeastern Pennsylvania's serpentine barrens. A rabid reader, Mike pounds out prose from his self-made house in Nottingham where he lives with Judith, his wife of 18 years, and their kids. An ex-rock musician, Mike has a Mechanical Engineering degree collecting dust.

Jim Bird is a computer simulation consultant specializing in the modeling of complex supply chain problems. An avid game player and a sculptor with a fascination for skulls, he lives in a small western Michigan town with Eileen, his wife of 25 years, and their two cats. A former Peace Corps volunteer in Togo, West Africa, Jim holds degrees in Chemistry, Mathematics, and Operations Research.

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