

The Portal

Some Doors Should Be Left Unopened

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For Stephanie always and all things.

Prologue

YUCCA MOUNTAIN AND THE LAND AROUND IT sit in the barren Nevada desert. Home to over nine hundred nuclear bomb tests between 1942 and 1992, its pock-marked surface is a lunar landscape. It's part of the rim of an ancient volcano's caldera and its geological composition made the United States Government think it was the perfect place to store the spent fuel from nuclear power plants, fuel that needs thousands of years to cool down enough for human safety.

In its wisdom, the government ignored the ordinary people who didn't want radioactive waste traveling by rail or truck through their neighborhoods. It ignored the protests from the residents of Nevada who didn't want their state to become Hell's toilet bowl. It ignored the Western Shoshone and Paiute Tribes who considered the long, flat mountain a sacred place where they gathered every spring and fall for religious rites. It ignored the treaty that gave the mountain and the surrounding land in perpetuity to the Western Shoshone.

The government did everything in its power to rouse public support for a nuclear waste storage facility deep in the heart of Yucca Mountain. They vowed, smiled, assured—with fingers crossed behind their backs—bribed, cajoled, wheedled and generally promised both Nevadans and Native Americans that this would in no way jeopardize their environment or their sacred spot.

The near universal rejection of their plans never stopped them from working on the interior of the mountain. Deep within it, they dug and reinforced and dug some more.

The spirits of the mountain had a surprise for them.

January Yucca Mountain, Nevada

AS ARMY COLONEL PAUL STEPHENS waited for his distinguished guest, he tapped a number into his cell phone.

“Zach?”

“Yes?”

“Paul Stephens. You asked me to call when I found something interesting?”

“Colonel Stephens, yes. What've you got?”

“I've been sent over to Yucca Mountain as a babysitter. While the army was excavating the mountain for the spent fuel site, they tapped into a power source inside the mountain that...well, you need to see to believe. The brass is pinning its hopes on Wilhelm Swedenborg to explain it.”

There was a long delay on the phone. “Paul, when I put you on the payroll, I thought I told you to give me information I can use.”

“Oh, I think you can use this. It's like the first atom bomb in comparison to a firecracker. It's end of the world kind of stuff.”

A transport caravan pulled up to the adit of the mineshaft. Paul looked up and cupped the phone to his mouth.

“This is worth my stipend a million times over, Zach.” He hung up as he watched Swedenborg step out of a Humvee.

Early on, Doctor Wilhelm Swedenborg had given up telling people he was a descendant of Emanuel Swedenborg, mostly because hardly anyone recognized the name. The other reason was that it was a lie. His ancestors had come from Sweden, all right, but Ellis Island officials gave them the name Swedenborg because they couldn't understand the real name, Bengtsson, when his great-grandfather, in Swedish, tried to explain it meant son of Bengts. Somehow land of origin, Sweden, and borg, which was what the official thought he heard instead of Bengts, got thrown together and assigned to the family.

Swedenborg arrived at the excavation in a tumult of self-aggrandizement. He was considered the energy expert of the age. It was a consideration he promoted everywhere he could and was greatly enhanced by his Hollywood good looks and a mellifluous baritone voice that made everyone want to believe. The man could have been a movie legend if he'd been inclined. He spent so much time on talk shows that his detractors in the physical sciences called him “The Mouth.” His many books, which lived on the bestseller lists, were dismissed as pop-science by colleagues jealous of his success.

Paul Stephens greeted him at the reception area near the mouth of the tunnel. Colonel Stephens offered a boyish smile as he extended a strong hand to Swedenborg, who regarded it as leprous and side-stepped it with genteel aplomb.

“Doctor, thank you for coming. We’ve stumbled on something. Something really big. I—”

“I’m sure, Colonel. I’m sure.” Swedenborg smiled at the surrounding military and civilian technicians who stopped long enough to bask in that smile for a few moments. Even Paul Stephens, who bridled at Swedenborg’s dismissal and general attitude, warmed under the radiance of the famous, toothsome grin.

They took a tram into the heart of the mountain.

“How are you lighting the tunnel, Colonel?”

“We’re not.”

“What?! Stop!”

The tunnel shimmered. Or did it? He moved close to the wall. His peripheral vision told him that it was alive and pulsing. But, looking directly at the wall, Swedenborg could see that it was just rock. His brain told him it was ignimbrite, a volcanic pyroclastic rock full of iron. Unless the old volcano was at it again, glowing wasn’t one of the properties of ignimbrite. Besides, no heat emanated from the wall.

“This way, Doctor. There’s so much more.”

Swedenborg returned to the tram and it trundled on. He celebrated his companion’s obvious discomfort with a grin.

The tram slowed around a curve and entered an enormous and brightly lit excavated space. Although he scoured the space with an educated eye, Swedenborg could find no sign of manmade lighting. Technicians dressed in full radiation suits worked on a large control center and a smaller, self-contained viewing room to one side. Their movements seemed frantic.

Swedenborg stepped off the tram and looked at the control board. Hydraulic controls, radiation sensors, and some kind of voltage meter crowded the board. The voltage meter was pegged at the maximum. The radiation sensor was minimal. He looked to Stephens.

Stephens smiled. “We’re hoping you can find a way to control the power. The doors keep most of it contained but no one remaining in the cavern proper has lived through the surges.” On the far wall were a pair of huge, two-story tall, blast doors coated with fire retardant foam. The enormous hydraulic arms holding the doors closed glowed red as if they were on fire.

“If we open the doors, if we take the least bit of pressure off them ... well, something happens we can’t control ... hell, we can’t even define.” His smirked as he watched Swedenborg’s facade crack.

“Come with me to the VIP room. It has its own source of air and the walls are double paneled with three inch thick, low-emittance glass separated by a quarter inch dead air space.”

Swedenborg relaxed as they entered the room. “Colonel Stephens, if it’s radioactive, you’re already following the protocols. Controlling it should be ...”

“It’s not radioactive.”

“But the suits? The glass?”

“They keep morale up.”

“The light?”

Stephens shrugged. “I think we found the reason this mountain is sacred to the Indians.”

As they entered the VIP room a klaxon sounded. The men in the cavern scurried out of the area. The men in the room with Stephens and Swedenborg turned their backs to the windows.

Stephens grabbed two pairs of welding glasses and handed one to Swedenborg.

“A surge. Put these on.”

Swedenborg just stared at him. Stephens took the glasses and jammed them over Swedenborg’s eyes.

“Now!”

Swedenborg felt blinded but slid the straps over his head. All he could see was a dim glow in the direction of the doors. The glow began to expand and brighten. He sensed something push the giant doors open a fraction of an inch. Was there movement in the brilliant beam of light? Were some of the workers unable to get out of harm’s way?

But the movement seemed to come from the light itself. Swedenborg leaned forward and raised his hands to pull off his protective glasses. He felt Stephens’ strong hands clamp down around the goggles and hold them on.

“Colonel, let me...” The rest of the protest was lost. His brain jammed by a sight as vivid as life itself but one he refused to admit as real. Aliens. He reached out to touch them, but felt nothing. Gray men with enormous eyes beckoned with elongated fingers. The world was so bright around him that he forgot about the goggles held against his face by straps and Stephens’ hand.

“Beautiful!” Colonel Stephens’ words shifted Swedenborg’s attention.

Stephens was staring straight ahead, a smile of ecstasy painted his face. He’d struggled so hard to keep Swedenborg’s glasses on that he’d forgotten his own.

Colonel Stephens saw shapes and colors build and shift and disappear. His world became a fantastic kaleidoscope as his brain struggled to bring some sense to what he was seeing. He felt a shimmering in his head, in his eyes. He felt or heard or thought “darkness” accompanied by a buzzing ... a strange vibrating hum. Something was alive in that darkness. Something that wanted him. Something that had a job for him to do. A scream began to form deep within him and fought for release.

Swedenborg felt Stephens release his grip on his glasses and reached to pull them off, but was stopped by a scream that rose, dark and horrible, from Stephens as blood oozed from his now-empty eye sockets.

San Juan del Castillo Parrish Los Angeles

HE DIDN'T WANT HER TO LOVE HIM. But he didn't want her not to.

With the host held above his head, Augustus glanced at his congregation of six. Was she smiling at him? She had sung in the church choir and had become a benefactor to the school. But attending an early, weekday mass? What could be her excuse? He wondered if her husband even bothered to ask anymore.

Augustus genuflected and began his prayers while breaking the host over the chalice, including the small piece which was dropped into the wine and water mixture. This was a symbol carried forward from days when believers were separated by distance, secrecy, and fear and the traveling celebrant would carry a small piece of the bread from the communion of one congregation to the next to signify their union.

"Lamb of God..." intoned the six brave souls who were too devout or too asleep to notice the hour.

He elevated his thoughts. A peek at Christine brought him right back down. Her presence made the consecration of bread and wine beyond his conscious ability. The actions were second nature to him. With any luck, transubstantiation would happen whether he willed it or not.

While he was supposed to be praying in awe of the change of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ, he wondered what, if any, his part was in the ancient rite. Did it happen without a priest's benediction? Assuming a priest was necessary, did it happen if the priest was not only a sinner but one who fully intended and expected to sin again in the very near future?

He knew what the Church said and what his confessor said, but his mind remained straddled on a fence of sharp concertina wire. Was there a need for a priest at all? According to Luke, Jesus simply said, "this do in remembrance of me." If there wasn't a need for a priest, was there a need for a church? That was the kind of thinking that got him into trouble. He swallowed his thoughts with his communion. Bitter, bitter pill.

At the communion rail he offered the bread of life to the faithful. "Faithful," he thought to himself, what an odd word for Christine, who had no doubt left her sleeping husband to be here with her lover. She was the last of the six. He wanted to judge her, to cast the first stone. He wanted to find absolution for himself by blaming her, but there was no doubt in his mind that it took two to roast in the fires of Hell. And who should burn the hotter? A woman driven by love or a priest, sworn to celibacy yet driven by lust?

His left hand held the ciborium containing the hosts while between the consecrated index finger and thumb of his right hand, he paused over the waiting, cupped hands or extended tongues. Two old women, who never missed his 6:00 a.m. mass, stuck their grizzled tongues out at him—a throwback to their younger days in the Church when the mystery of the ritual was further buried in the mystery of Latin, days when the idea of anyone touching the host other than the priest was blasphemous.

He wondered what elder or what Church council had thought placing hosts on tongue after tongue of the parishioners was a good idea—diseased mouths, alcohol burps and bad breath included. Clearly it had been someone very high up, who offered his daily masses only in solitude.

Christine approached. She was the image of Christian goodness. Impeccably dressed from neck to toe. Makeup perfect and demure, she must have started dressing at four in the morning. The look was topped off with expensive but simple jewelry and a beautiful, black-lace mantilla covering her soft, brown curls. She looked up at him with a mixture of fear and love. A look that conveyed devotion. Her expression, more than anything, shook him.

“Body of Christ.” His voice didn’t break, but it wasn’t steady either.

She said, “Amen” in a voice as soft and genuine as he’d ever heard. Where was the sound of devilish bemusement he always associated with her? She stuck her tongue out, the tongue he knew so well. Pink. Healthy. Succulent.

To his right, Jason, his altar boy stifled a laugh. Was that an adolescent boy’s laugh at a pretty woman’s tongue or could he read Augustus’ thoughts? His hand shook slightly as he placed the host on his lover’s tongue. The temptation to linger was strong. The temptation to lean over and take that tongue, that mouth, that body coursed through him. Christine lowered her eyes and returned to her pew with a slow steady tread that radiated innocence.

He returned stiff-legged to the altar, the place of sacrifice, the place where he was supposed to lead these people through the closing of the celebration. Saint Lawrence came to mind. “I’m done on this side,” he said to his torturers while they were roasting him over a fire. Augustus felt so done.

Augustus

THE MASS FINISHED without his mind being anywhere near it. In the sacristy, Jason hung up his surplice and cassock. Because he'd been admonished more than once, he checked them over for dirt and damage. Augustus concentrated on the purificator, corporal and other altar linens. These came into contact with the consecrated wine and hosts, requiring special mending and cleaning.

Jason looked at him for official release.

"One o'clock today. I hope you did your Latin homework. You're not going to like this test." It came out with a little more edge than intended, his self-loathing temporarily deflected toward the boy. A belatedly offered weak smile tried to dilute his tone. He never carried the darkness of his soul into his classroom. Teaching was his delight. That his students were teenage boys was his penance.

Jason smiled at him as he left. The laugh, now the smile. Did he know? He and Christine were careful, but maybe the boys who served his masses and populated his classes had guessed. Maybe...

"Is Father Hobbes in there?" He heard the question from outside the sacristy door. Jason mumbled some response before he scrambled away to meet his friends for whatever perversion teenagers favored at seven in the morning after having piety forced on them for the span of a mass.

In his black robe, he opened the door to find Christine waiting. Her smile caused a physical reaction that was a sin all of its own.

"Father Hobbes." She held out her hand as if this was their first meeting.

"Missus Fortune." He played along. What would it be today? Traveling salesman and farmer's daughter? Cloistered nun and hired hand?

The sacristy disappointed even the casual visitor. Everything was neat and put away. The linoleum floors washed and buffed. Laminate counters clean and shiny. But everything showed a lack of creativity. It was as if they hired the finest craftsmen in the world to caress a beautiful church out of wood and stone but let the cleaning crew design the sacristy.

She closed the door behind her and, before he could say *Madre de Dios*, pressed him painfully against the corner of a counter and dropped his pants to his ankles.

She pulled the stiff, white tab out of his roman collar.

"I hate that thing. It's like a shield between you and the world—between you and me."

"Not here," he managed between gasps of pain and pleasure. "The women's auxiliary is cleaning the sacristy today."

He grabbed for his collar. She played keep away for a moment until he managed to snag it and slide it back into its home at his neck.

“Augustus.” There was an impatient little-girl stamp of the foot in her tone of voice.

He took her by the hand with one of his, hauling his pants back up with the other. As they neared the first row of pews, the back door opened. The hushed voices of the women’s auxiliary echoed through the church.

Those about to sin skirted into the confessional, the small space combined with its intended use heightened their excitement. Augustus stopped to reach into the priest’s cubicle to turn on the light indicating that someone was available to hear confessions and hoping the women would skirt the area to give the confessor some peace. In the penitent’s booth with Christine, he was careful to keep one part of his body on the kneeling pad to activate the switch for the light indicating someone was inside.

What ensued, standing, kneeling, grasping and groping their way to ecstasy, was a raucous mixing of bodily fluids stilled only long enough to let the soft footsteps and voices of the women pass. Dim lights, filtered through the carved lattice top of the cubicle, played off their glistening skin as they leaned exhausted on each other.

“Do you remember the first time in your office,” she whispered.

It was hardly forgettable. Three years before, he’d led the choir and sang first tenor. They were learning Verdi’s Requiem and Christine was the soprano soloist. Her voice was good, but her soprano’s temperament was diva level. During the Dies Irae, the “Day of Wrath,” she’d walked out on rehearsal when he asked her to tone it down because she was overwhelming the rest of the chorus. The next day, she came to his office in the school and complained bitterly.

Never one to ignore women and sensing a plea for some personal acceptance, he’d agreed wholeheartedly with her protestations that she was, in fact, too good for the church’s choir. Her anger spent, he suggested that the church in general and he in particular needed the sacrifice of her talent, that her voice turned up the corners of God’s mouth in a beatific smile.

He moved to the corner of his desk to show he was on her side. The lines around her eyes softened. She placed a hand on his knee to thank him for his understanding. His hand covered hers to tell her how much she meant to the choir. Her lips covered his to say she understood.

“You practically raped me,” she said and reintroduced her hand to his groin and found it willing. “I’m glad to see that hasn’t changed. Zach hasn’t made me feel like that since, well ... ever, I suppose.”

Her husband, Zachary Fortune, was a force of his own. He was the premier gunrunner in America, perhaps the world. If there was a war or even angry words being tossed about anywhere on the planet, Zach Fortune was there with a color brochure boasting every tool of mayhem made by man. Because—or perhaps in spite—of his

wife's interest in the Jesuit school and church his presence was known by the generously endowed Christmas baskets of booze sent to keep the teachers happy.

Augustus and Christine straightened up to the best of their ability given the limited space and dim light. Christine stepped out first and scanned the nave. Empty. She nodded to Augustus who came out as if he'd had every reason to be in the same cubicle with her. For motives only she knew, she knelt in a nearby pew and either recited a penance or made a good show of it. Augustus opened the door to the priest's cubicle to turn off the light. His heart almost stopped when one of the lay people popped her head out of the other cubicle.

"Father Hobbes?" she whispered reverently. "I guess you didn't hear me come in."

He stared agape at the woman. Even Christine gawked at her.

"Will you take my confession?" the woman asked.

Unable to talk, he nodded to her and returned to the confessional. Christine laughed her way through the rest of her "penance."

Augustus had never felt guiltier. If heavenly directed lightning bolts were ever to come from above, surely one was on its way. The woman confessed to feelings of anger and jealousy. He felt like telling her to go out and commit some real sins, but he gave her penance to do and absolved her of her pedestrian life.

When he came out, Christine was gone. Relieved and a little disappointed, he hurried off to the residence hall to gather his books for the school day, wondering if he could schedule time with Father Barrone for a breast-beating confession of his own.

A part of him pleaded his side of the situation. Augustus saw himself as something of a saint. To say he broke every one of his vows was false. Chastity and obedience, well, yes, but poverty, no. He'd forsaken an inheritance of more than a billion dollars for the priesthood, to celebrate the mass daily with a sense of awe and devotion, to teach and to comfort the sick and oppressed. After all, Ignatius Loyola sowed his wild oats before forming the Society of Jesus. Augustus had simply reversed the order.

FATHER BARRONE managed his genial bulk with surprising grace as he matched Augustus stride for stride. He looked up at the tall, darkly attractive priest whose intense green eyes were buried in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

"Augustus, may I make a suggestion?"

Augustus knew that Barrone's suggestion would be logical, compassionate in his own old-codger way, and on-the-nail head accurate. He didn't want to hear it, but he nodded.

"You've spent a fair amount of your life trying to separate yourself from any emotional connection. I could argue that you're taking the easy way out of dealing with your family background, but I won't."

"You just did," Augustus said.

“However, if you’ll excuse my French, fucking your way through the parish isn’t serving your purpose. There’s always the chance you’ll fall in love. And, I really doubt it’s doing much for God’s purpose, either.”

Augustus snorted a laugh. Barrone had, once again, mounted him to a cross of truth. He could feel his sins pressing him against the wood.

“I’m going to find another confessor.”

Barrone laughed heartily. He had to stop walking and rest his hands on his thighs. “There’s a long list of priests who would love to hear all the juicy tidbits you confess to, my boy. Tell you what, let me set up an auction or something. I could really use an ipod.”

Next Day

Downtown Los Angeles

THE EXECUTIVE OFFICES OF FORTUNE ENTERPRISES perched raptor-like atop Petroleum Building One. Brushed steel and poplar with cherry accents welcomed the eye. The smell of “clean” filled the air. Employees from every country dressed to remind themselves and everyone else that they were the brightest, most ambitious and most discrete.

Zach Fortune’s secretary, Gretel Miller, a young southern beauty who was the daughter of people who loved Grimm’s faerie tales too much, had the temerity to have a brain. She saw the potential for future in this office, wanted more than a salary and a few bobbles and understood her boss well enough to know the route to her dreams.

The mail arrived with mechanical punctuality. At 10:05 every morning, it was delivered by young men dreaming of moving up the company ladder and, for most of them, moving into Gretel Miller. Todd Schwartz handed Gretel the mountain of correspondence for her boss, most of which was marked “confidential”.

“Gretel, you are as lovely as morning dew.” Todd guessed, wrongly, that Gretel was a sucker for hokey sentiments. Gretel certainly didn’t mind people saying nice things about her, but she also had a keen eye for those who had a chance of success and those who were destined to remain working the lower rungs of that ladder. Todd fell into the latter group, yet he was nice and had such bright eyes that she decided a little quid pro quo was in order. She smiled.

“Todd, you are the sweetest thing.”

“Hey, I’ve got two tickets to...”

“That’s so nice but I’m busy.” Her smile didn’t waver in the least.

Later he would realize she’d brushed him off without even hearing when or what he was inviting her to. But her smile was the only thing that mattered at that moment.

“Maybe another time,” was all he could muster as she started to sort through the mail. The slight jiggle of her breasts, which were squeezed up for maximum allowable view, rooted him where he stood. Todd was lost in mid-fantasy when Zach Fortune’s voice came over the intercom on Gretel’s desk.

“Tell the mail room to fire that idiot and then get in here.”

Gretel looked up at Todd, who scrambled to pull himself together.

“Fired?”

“Don’t worry, Todd. I’ll tell H. R. to redeploy you for a week. It’ll all blow over.”

Zach Fortune's office was an altar to masculinity: dark wood, angles, an acre of desk, and soft lighting. It spoke of seduction and having a scotch after a hard fought deal. Animal trophies were grouped together with pictures of Zach and various presidents, American and otherwise, and every person to hold the position of Secretary of Defense for the last twenty years. A disturbing message to some, an obvious message to his staff.

Munitions of every description, some only rumored to exist, were sold to world leaders and to those who aspired to overthrow them. Presidents were intermediaries and sometimes targets.

If one got over the initial shock of the office decor, one would notice the complete lack of paper. All reports were either verbal or electronic charts and pictures. Zach was a smart man who had suffered through school with dyslexia and bullying for his small stature until he was old enough to drop out and join the Marines. He used the perpetual chip on his shoulder to make him a feared man. The power and money he'd amassed since then hadn't improved his demeanor. Throughout school, The Corps, and his business life, he had perfected ways of taking down rivals while causing as much pain as he could devise.

He reveled in the term "Napoleon Complex" because Napoleon was his hero. There were two three-dimensional pieces of art in the office. One was Napoleon's death mask that hung next to a picture of Zach and a president who upset any conservative worth the name. The other was a bust of Zach that overlooked the city below from a pedestal next to the wall of glass that ran the length of the office.

Zach was taking in this view of the city when Gretel entered. He turned and undid his belt at the same time.

"This will have to be quick. I need you to go through the mail and write my responses before noon." Gretel understood that this was part of her job. It was part of her plan for the future in this ever growing corporation. She was becoming indispensable.

She undid the back of her dress enough to expose her magnificent breasts and knelt before him so he could look at his favorite picture. It showed him being hugged enthusiastically by a vice-president, whose name alone was enough to turn liberals into quaking piles of irate mush. The picture drove him to the edge of ecstasy and made Gretel's job so much easier.

Yucca Mountain

WIL SWEDENBORG was thrust into consciousness by someone slapping him. He swatted at the person and sat up abruptly. A man, dressed in army fatigues, grabbed Wil.

“God wants you,” the man said.

Wil scooted away but the man wouldn’t let go. Wil stood. That motion stopped the man for a moment. Wil looked him over. The man’s eyes were jumping back and forth like he was having a seizure. It called to mind the gruesome image of Paul Stephens. The man shook Wil violently. Wil moved backward quickly and broke the man’s grip. The man’s clothes were dusty and disheveled as if he’d found them by the side of the road and had just thrown them on. His shirt had three stripes on the arm and the name Martin printed on a tag over his heart.

“Sergeant Martin,” Wil said loudly. He hoped shouting the man’s rank and name would snap him out of it.

“God wants...” The man lunged at Wil, who sidestepped him.

As the man stumbled past him, Wil noticed a large blood stain surrounding a hole in the middle of the back of the shirt. The man now seemed lost, as if Wil had simply disappeared.

“God wants...God wants...”

Wil seized the opportunity and ran. He tripped over the stripped body of a man who had been shot in the back. He screamed. His scream attracted the attention of the crazed man and a stream of soldiers pouring out of the mountain who wanted something from him and the look on the faces made him believe it wasn’t an autograph. Wil scrambled to his feet. Behind him, the entrance to the Yucca Mountain facility gaped. Wil could feel a pulse coming from the mountain. He turned to watch the mouth of the cave shimmer. The man made another grab at Wil. He shook it off and ran for his life.

He staggered through the desert. Time had ceased to exist. He knew two things. One was he didn’t dare expose his existence to the caravan of soldiers streaming in either direction. Sporadic gunfire sounded in the distance both behind and to either side of him and he had no idea whose side the soldiers were on. He found shelter in an outcropping of rock and hunkered down. The pulsing of the mountain called to him. He laughed. Was this how the world’s most famous scientist was going to die?

He called up a mental picture of Nevada. It was a blank. What did he know about the state? His famous face scrunched up in concentration. What was the state capital? He ran through the capitals of the states alphabetically: Montgomery, Juneau, Phoenix, until he got to Nevada. Carson City! What else did he know? The state bird was the Mountain Bluebird; the animal was the Bighorn Sheep.

He shook his head. Useless cocktail party stuff. He forced himself to focus on the map in his head. He placed Las Vegas and Reno and after a little more thought Lake Tahoe. The rest of the state was empty in his mental atlas. Another fact cropped up: the population density was somewhere around twenty-four people per square mile. Why couldn't this have happened to him in Manhattan or Los Angeles? At least there he'd run into someone that wasn't as likely to shoot him as the lunatics pushed by the surging power of the mountain behind him.

He knew he had to get to a population center so he could report what he'd witnessed. He also knew that Las Vegas was closest to where he was, because that was where the military helicopter had picked him up and the chopper ride had been short.

He looked at his Gucci shoes then at the expanse of desert before him. This was not how it was supposed to be. That brought him to the second thing he knew. He didn't know what it meant but he had to find "The Priest."

March Jesuit Residence

TWO MONTHS TO THE DAY LATER, Augustus woke, his bed drenched from a night filled with images his mind could only piece together in the most horrific nightmare.

The knock on his door turned out to be real, not the clumping of the juggernaut bent on his destruction in his dream world. Bleary eyed, he opened the door to a nervous young scholastic named Rooney trying to hide behind his thick-lensed glasses.

“You’re wanted on the phone, Father Hobbes,” he mumbled.

“What time is it?”

“Late.”

Sarcasm would get this boy nowhere. He closed the door in Rooney’s face, found flip-flops, padded to the office and picked up the phone. No doubt one of the parishioners had taken ill or lost faith, either way, at that time of night they should suffer on their own.

“This is Father Hobbes.”

“Augustus, my boy.” It took Augustus fifteen seconds to recognize the voice of his exceptionally eccentric uncle, Hamilton.

“Ham, what’s wrong?”

“Your mother has crossed over.”

“Oh.”

His uncle, true to his unusual sense of propriety, hung up leaving Augustus holding a buzzing receiver. On his way back to his room he realized he hadn’t spoken with his mother in months. It was one of those duties skirting along the fringes of his awareness that now played front and center. The news hit him like the juggernaut of his dream: slow, almost imperceptible at first, but inexorable. The pain built and built.

Raised essentially by nannies and governesses, his relationship with his parents was remote. He described them in lukewarm terms, the way one might a distant aunt or cousin. When his father died nine years ago, it had barely registered on Augustus’ emotional radar. He could talk death and afterlife day and night with great authority. But now he found himself without the comfort of the one thing on which he could always rely: words.

Back in his room, he sat on the edge of the bed and wondered what this meant, if anything. Another knock on the door. Augustus was ready to give whoever it was a lashing.

He threw open his door to find his portly, almost saintly confessor standing before him.

“Father Barrone?”

“Augustus, my boy. I just heard the news. I was wondering if you needed to speak with anyone.”

Heard the news? Rooney was going to pay. It was going to be medieval.

“Father, I just need some time to take it in.”

“I don’t care what the Church teaches, death is always a shock.” Barrone moved forward enough to interrupt any idea Augustus might have of easing the door closed.

“Especially if it’s unexpected. You probably want to be alone.”

“Yes, Father.” Augustus rocked slightly on his feet. He wanted to lie down on his bed and let it wash over him.

“Shame. A parishioner gifted me with a case of exceptional single malt scotch that’s in danger of destroying what little motivation I have to do anything. I was hoping you would consent to help rid me of some of it tonight?”

Augustus smiled at the priest’s attempt to engage him. He figured scotch was as good as lying in his bed alone with his thoughts.

“I would be my honor, Father.”

In his confessor’s room, they sat quietly drinking the scotch. Barrone would pipe up occasionally with a quip about some of the less-than-saintly behavior of one saint or another.

“You know, before Francis of Assisi’s imprisonment and his discovery of The Way, he was a dis ... dis ...olute young man...” Barrone tried to sound sober, “... who would rather start a fight than sit comfortably like this. He would rather fuck a woman senseless than talk to her.” He cast a stern eye at Augustus, who came out of his private recollections long enough to see that Barrone was drawing a comparison.

“Then drink his companions under the table,” Augustus offered as a toast.

“Indeed he would.” Barrone smiled and happily emptied his glass. Augustus laughed at Barrone’s attempt to assuage Augustus’ guilt. His was a ridiculous life. Priapic priest. Instead of becoming a Jesuit, he should have started a religious cult where his female followers were required to have sex with him repeatedly as part of their “spiritual journey”.

As he thought about acres of naked women all desperate to jump into his bed, his mind flashed to a forest and a small village nestled among the trees. It was the place of his nightmare. He could feel the sun and wind on his skin. Vivid colors and scents took him further into his reverie. Celts of all ages worked their daily chores. As he passed them, they stopped their work and bowed. A murmur grew in the village. Soon, everyone had stopped to gaze upon him. He looked down on himself and saw blue woad dye patterning parts of his naked body.

At the center of the village, near the chief’s hut, he stopped. The men of the village gathered in a circle around him. The chief stepped forward. A moment’s silent tension and wariness gave way to a smile and laughter. Augustus laughed with him. The chief

bowed before him and nodded to those in the circle. Women of all ages were pressed into the middle of the circle, some more willing than others. The tribe began chanting. Augustus' bones began to reverberate in sync with the chant. He looked over the bounty of the offering.

"Lost in a woman's arms, Augustus?" Barrone asked as he emptied the bottle.

Augustus thought about lying, but lying to one's confessor surely was a double sin, regardless of the circumstances.

"Quite a few, actually."

HER FUNERAL, an enormous affair his mother would have approved of, was officiated by Father Moran, the old priest who was instrumental in getting Augustus into the Jesuits. Augustus held his own until Christine stepped up to sing the Pie Jesu from Faure's Requiem. The song pierced his heart and a flood of loss and love he didn't even know he possessed filled him to bursting. Tears streamed down his face. He sank into an ocean of memory and regret.

Christine watched the effect her singing had on him. Tears sprang from her own eyes as she struggled to finish the song. She ended it prematurely, her voice choked with emotion.

Zach Fortune sat five pews behind Augustus. His phone buzzed constantly but he ignored it. He watched Christine look only at Augustus. He watched tears roll down his wife's cheeks and heard her voice choke up. The look on his face could have been interpreted as concern, but it concealed a seething jealousy.

THE WAKE WAS A LAVISH AFFAIR at Hamilton's mansion. The house was the stuff of legend and the real reason Zach attended the funeral was so he could come to the wake. The old man was a recluse and the few people who had ever seen his house talked about it in hushed tones of awe.

Zach wandered the rooms staring at all the weird artifacts Hamilton Hobbes had collected: texts so old they were encased in locked, climate-controlled, glass cases, models of machines from the Renaissance, astrolabes, armillaries, and reproductions of prints and paintings by Durer and Da Vinci. At least he assumed they weren't the originals.

In the center of one room was a shrine to Emanuel Swedenborg, the Swedish scientist, philosopher and mystic whom Hamilton admired to the point of worship. Zach gave it a cursory glance and continued his exploration. Had he looked a little harder, he would have noticed that a third of the shrine was devoted to tantric sex, a pastime Swedenborg studied assiduously. There he would have found, rather graphically represented, an explanation of what, where, and how.

Hobbes was a half-committed survivalist with well water, a half a year's worth of dry and canned food, coal, vegetable gardens, and a way to shut the house up against invasion. What Zach looked for and didn't find was the ability to turn the estate into a fortress proper: weapons. He assumed that Hamilton, like most people of money, assumed that people would leave him alone rather than storm his home in search of anything they could use. Zach wanted to sell the old coot some basic necessities for keeping the desperate outside and looking for easier loot to prey on.

Christine searched for the core of the wake: Augustus. He was standing in a group of well-dressed older people, his mother's contemporaries. His uncle, in a suit that than hung on his frame in a way that suggested it may have come from a donation center for the needy, hovered protectively. Christine greeted people she knew with nods and few words. She fought for eye contact with Augustus, but he didn't seem to notice her. After a few moments of polite reserve, she muscled into the group and took Augustus' hand.

"Father Hobbes, I'm so sorry."

His eyes showed no recognition. He nodded and released her hand to take the next. She stood awkwardly, listening to the others in the huddle speak of other funerals and how magnificent this one was in comparison. Feeling like a fifth wheel, she melted back out of the group and watched Augustus for some sign.

Hamilton watched her.

Zach pressed past Christine and extended his hand. "Father Hobbes?"

Augustus took the hand.

"I'm Zach Fortune."

"Mister Fortune." Augustus nodded to Zach. Augustus took the hand and condolences of another visitor.

"Father Hobbes. I'd love to spend a moment with you." Zach inserted himself into the center again. He thrust a card into Augustus' hand. "Anytime. Now, where is your crazy uncle?" Augustus looked at him seriously for the first time. It was like he was seeing an old friend after years of separation. Had he met him before? If so, he couldn't recall when that might have been. It must be all the press the man had received over the years. He shook off the feeling.

"Hamilton?" Augustus turned in his uncle's direction as if he were searching the room. Hamilton pretended to search for "Hamilton" as well.

"I think I saw him in the kitchen," Ham offered. Augustus turned back to Zach and shrugged. Zach made a beeline for the kitchen.

"Nice man. Warm, considerate," Hamilton opined. Augustus smiled slightly. Ham's eyes floated over to Christine, who had retreated to the far end of the room. He considered the look in her eyes as she watched Augustus.

She'd offered to sing in hopes it would bind them. She'd pictured herself leading Augustus out of his loss. She pictured the two of them in the afterglow of sex, smiling and cooing of the future. She found herself outside of the shield of grief he'd erected.

Bel Air

HAMILTON SAT ACROSS THE BREAKFAST NOOK TABLE from Augustus, whose sorrow-lined face stared blankly back at him.

“Augustus, forgive my intrusion, but I can’t help but marvel at the loss you are experiencing for a mother who was, to put it mildly, rather cool in her interactions with you.”

Only Augustus’ eyes registered that he was being addressed. Although cool did describe his mother’s relationship with him, it was typically callous of his uncle to bring it up, especially now. It was time to return to the Jesuit residence. He stood and stretched wearily.

“One could say, cruel,” Hamilton added.

“Ham, what are you talking about?”

“You know perfectly well.”

“My mother was a busy person. Mothering was not her strong suit.” It was meant as an earnest defense of his mother. It came out rote.

Hamilton’s laugh infuriated Augustus. He stepped to within striking distance of the old man.

“Uncle, may I suggest this is not the time.” His clenched fists relaxed. Why did he care?

“You have no idea what I’m talking about,” Ham said amazed.

Augustus turned and walked through the kitchen.

“Do you even remember Theresa?”

Augustus stopped. It was a name he’d forced from his mind years ago. So many years ago.

“What does Theresa have to do with anything?” Augustus wanted to fight, but the mere mention of Theresa sapped him of the will to do anything.

“Take a moment, Augustus. Think back to your childhood. Who was the first love of your life?”

“Suzy Young.” Augustus relaxed when he thought about his skinny, petite, fifth grade classmate in parochial school.

“I’m not talking about a schoolboy crush. I’m talking about the first person that made you think outside of yourself.”

He immediately became defensive again. “Clearly, your point is my mother.”

“Wrong. One of the joys of not having children of one’s own is that you live vicariously through the parenting of others. I got to participate in your childhood from a distance. Do you remember Theresa at all?”

“Of course, I do.” He did. The blocked memories flooded his mind and he slowly returned to his seat at the breakfast table.

Theresa. The woman was almost mythical in his memory. She had proportions similar to the Venus of Willendorf. Her smile could change his mood in an instant. The sound of her voice soothed every nerve in him. Her fleshy embrace solved every problem.

He could see himself sitting at the kitchen prep table in his parents’ house. Theresa was dressed in a gray housedress covered by a large, crisp, white apron and was shelling peas for the evening’s supper. She’d made a pot of sugared, milky tea and she and four year old Augustus were sipping it with great affectation from cloisonné demitasses and eating her homemade shortbread.

As she shucked the peas she would look over at him. He waited for those glances, each one a little gift. While he was awash in one of those smiles, his mother walked in to announce that she was off to some event or another. Augustus didn’t turn around to his mother and she came over to him with a sigh of annoyance.

“Tell Mommy you love her,” she said as she hugged his shoulders to her with a gloved hands.

He squirmed a little and whispered, “I love you, Mommy,” while looking at Theresa. His mother straightened abruptly and left the house. The next day, Theresa was gone. No word from her. Nothing.

All he knew was that his father had woken him that morning instead of Theresa and when Augustus asked why, he was told, without any explanation that Theresa had left the household for good.

It was beyond his ability to comprehend. She wouldn’t have left without him. She couldn’t. Augustus had never thrown a fit in his young life, but proceeded to throw one that lasted so long he was exiled to his room for the rest of the day. He lay in bed in utter exhaustion. Every so often he would call out to Theresa, but his bedroom, now his prison, only echoed the call. Just before dinner his mother entered the room.

“Theresa’s gone,” she said flatly. There was a tinge of anger in her voice. Was she was angry with him?

“No!” He knew the God his parents talked about would never let that happen.

“Yes, Augustus. She’s gone.”

“She can’t be,” he insisted. Tears streamed down his face. Theresa was visiting her family or she was on vacation. She loved him. She wouldn’t leave him.

“She left because she couldn’t tolerate being with such a bad boy.”

It lodged somewhere in his chest. He couldn’t breathe. He wanted to scream out against the words, against the pain. His mind raced through all his small transgressions. There were many. Which one was it? It must have been really bad and it must have been really recent. The image of him, pants down, playing with himself struck him. Theresa

put an end to it quickly. He could remember that she laughed it off and got him dressed and they went for a walk. Did it make her angry? Did she hate him because of that?

His mother watched him think it over. She saw guilt take hold of him. She even felt a pang herself, but quickly dismissed it.

“Don’t worry, we’ll have someone new before the end of the week.”

He was in agony. There was no place to turn that wasn’t Hell.

“Now, clean yourself up for dinner. We’re going out tonight.”

A dinner out with his parents was usually a joyous occasion. This time it felt like penance.

If he thought that Hell was Theresa’s loss, something far worse was to follow. Theresa’s replacement was a brutal woman whose nicest words to him during the next ten years as his nanny were when she added “please” to the end of screeches for him to leave her alone. It was a never ending penance for a very bad boy.

Ham watched the memories take Augustus down a very dark path. Obviously, he’d squelched any thought of Theresa and the incomprehensible way she’d disappeared from his world.

“You know why Theresa left?”

“Ham, stop it. I did something she couldn’t deal with.”

Ham shook his head sadly. “Your father told me that he had straightened that out with you years ago when he did the ‘facts of life’ talk.”

“Facts of life? My father? Did you know your brother at all?” Augustus laughed bitterly. “What are you talking about?”

“Theresa loved you like her own son. She and I talked of it many a time. One thing you weren’t was bad...”

“I did things...” Augustus mumbled.

“What kid doesn’t? If we came into this world with the knowledge of our previous lives, we’d all be saints. We are born wiped clean of the memory of past lives. That means we have to learn all over again and how do we learn? We stumble. Let go of that guilt. As much as you Catholics love guilt, it’s worthless.” He let that sit for a moment.

“Your mother became jealous of Theresa and fired her. No warning. Just here today, gone tomorrow. I don’t know what she expected. Theresa raised you from a baby. Somehow your mother believed that giving birth to you was all the effort she had to put into you.” Ham shook his head again. “I liked your mother. She was always good to me, but I never forgave her for what she did to you all those years ago.”

Augustus slumped into his chair. He felt weightless, floating above the scene in which his corporeal body was stuck. He would come crashing down. When he hit bottom, he wanted the comfort of the arms of the Jesuit residence and Barrone’s calming influence.

“I’ve got to go,” he said. Ham nodded sadly. There was nothing more to say.

September

THE FOLLOWING SIX MONTHS were a time of reflection. Augustus' mornings began with penance; his nights ended with questions for his parents who were no longer around to answer them. He spent some time in vain trying to find any trace of Theresa on the internet. He tried to understand his feelings for a mother who was never quite there. She had flitted from social engagements to committee chairwomanships to hair, nail, and whatever appointments. A dinner or evening spent with the family was rare enough to be remarkable. His mental picture of his mother was her blowing a kiss from the door as she rushed off to something. The revelation of his mother's betrayal occluded all of his memories. He tried to fit that square peg in the round hole of the loss he felt. Was it loss of his mother he mourned or loss of the last connection he had to Theresa? He spent as much time as he could in drunken conference with Father Barrone.

Augustus, as usual, was lost in thought as he walked down the crowded corridor of the high school. His height and black robe usually cleared a path without him even being aware of it.

Fred Parker was staring at a small, glossy poster he just picked up from an upperclassman down the hall. The poster was so irreligious, so irreverent that just looking at it felt like a sin. Staring at it brought out a giggle as he walked to his next class. The lanky freshman didn't notice the ruminating priest striding forward in a cloud of thought.

Augustus stopped out of some sense of impending collision. Fred Parker didn't. The boy bounced off the hard, black-encased body before him.

"Sorry," Augustus said.

"Oh, my god!" The boy's face turned bright red. He looked up at the priest who was the subject of the poster he held before him. He clutched it tight to his chest, a clear indication that it was contraband. Augustus held an open hand in front of him.

"It's nothing, Father ... Just a joke ... The upperclassmen ..."

The hand remained. Augustus gave him the "priest stare," which is the same as a cop's stare with a little less compassion thrown in. Slowly, like he was handing over the order for his own execution, Fred handed the poster to Augustus.

Augustus looked at the poster without reaction for a moment.

A small crowd had formed. Boys, who either had seen the poster or had heard about it, watched to see if a freshman's disembodied head was about to roll down the hallway.

Augustus looked at the picture and then at the words. After a moment, they penetrated his thoughts of self-damnation. He laughed and looked at the freshman who couldn't meet his eyes. "You're ... Parker, right?"

The boy nodded still afraid to look up.

“Where did you get this?”

Fred squeaked something. The laugh made him think he might survive the encounter, but he was afraid that anything he might say would put him back on death row.

Augustus laughed hard. “Mind if I keep this?”

Fred shook his head. Augustus stepped around the boy and chuckled his way to his next class. The crowd dispersed, disappointed by the lack of fireworks.

Augustus looked again at the poster. A picture of him looking up in a rather saintly manner, celestial light radiating from his image, with the words, “Vote now and vote often: Augustus Hobbes for God.” He realized that it was meant as a put down. It didn’t matter, he decided. It was funny.

ZACH FORTUNE WAS PERSISTENT. After a number of calls and written invitations were ignored, an edict was issued by the Cardinal: “Mister Fortune is a profound Christian and defender of the faith,” Augustus was told. “Just last month alone, he single-handedly supported all of our missions in Africa.”

“Are the missions, by any chance, in areas where his weapons had just killed half the population?” Augustus wondered out loud.

“Your attitude diminishes you, Father Hobbes. I warn you, keep a civil tongue in your head. The sainted man, for whatever reason, has taken an interest in you and—”

“I think I know the reason.”

“Fine, then. Have lunch with him.” He rang off but Augustus could hear the Cardinal swear as he lowered the receiver. “Honestly, these Jesuits drive me insane.”

Lunch was prefaced by a meeting at Fortune’s gym downtown. Augustus found his way through the plush, labyrinthine hallways to the “private” gym Zach had reserved for the day. He entered to find a full-fledged boxing ring.

After a brief wait, Zach Fortune entered dressed in boxing shorts and shoes. He was a good five inches shorter than Augustus, ten, maybe fifteen years older, but looked like he had just marched out of Marine boot camp.

There was something in his smile that suggested he would bite. Augustus, already on guard and alarmed by what was implied by the meeting place and Fortune’s clothing, offered his hand in peace. Zach shook it with a vise-like grip that made Augustus wince.

It was the kind of handshake he remembered from the endless parties his parents held. Some men believed that inflicting pain was the purpose of a handshake. They misinterpreted “firm handshake” to mean “dominate the other person to the point of injury.” Augustus resisted the temptation to punch him.

“Mind if I call you Gus?” Zach spun away to step into the resin box near the corner of the ring. Without looking back at Augustus, he added, “You seem to keep yourself in shape. Ever do any boxing?” Zach climbed into the ring.

No one called him Gus ... ever. He was probably the only child who grew up without some moniker glued onto him by family and friends. For a long time, he was proud of that but had come to wonder if that was simply a sign of disinterest on everyone's part. Augustus truly hoped this was the last face to face with Zach Fortune so it didn't matter what the man called him.

"I boxed some in college and the seminary."

"That's what I heard. That's what I heard. I thought to myself, the best way to get a feel for an adversary is a sparring match." He motioned for Augustus to join him in the ring. But Augustus hung back.

"Adversary?"

"Don't play coy, Priest."

Augustus tried to swallow his guilt about Christine, but it wouldn't go down and he found himself girding his loins in preparation for battle.

"You're a talker, a thinker. I'm a doer. Why don't you try doing, for a change? Christine likes a man of action," Fortune added as he started to dance around the ring.

Zach motioned to Augustus again. This time, Augustus climbed in, still dressed in his black priest suit and laced, black shoes. He felt an urge to dominate. Very un-Christian, he thought as he looked around the gym.

"Gloves?"

Zach Fortune sneered a laugh in response.

"I haven't sparred in years." Though his words sounded like an excuse, Augustus would love to beat Zach Fortune into a senseless meat sack.

"You afraid of getting hit?"

"Of course, I am. No one in his right mind wants to get hit."

"Too bad."

Fortune lunged forward with an exploratory jab. Augustus slapped it away easily. Augustus fought back a premature celebration. He was bigger, had a longer reach and was younger. He dropped into a rusty version of a boxer's squat. Found that the bounce in his legs had left him, without notice, sometime during the last fifteen years.

Fortune threw a mean, three-punch combo and tagged Augustus with a partially blocked right hook to his face. The force of it surprised Augustus. He had caught some of it with his forearm and now both his forearm and his cheek stung bitterly. His thoughts locked onto the bruise that would leave, but his worry was interrupted by a fist snaking its way through his defenses and finding his nose. His eyes watered from the impact and he snapped back to the fight at hand.

He continued to pivot and dropped any idea that he could dance his way out of a real fight. He also dropped his arms to his sides into his old, white guy version of Mohammed Ali.

Fortune smiled. He came in again with another combination, bobbing and weaving, looking for an opening between Augustus' long arms which batted away each exploratory jab. Just to tick him off, Augustus shot his left fingertips out and flicked Fortune's nose.

Fortune laughed and lunged in again. Augustus didn't cover his right side in time and Fortune landed two hard punches on Augustus' ribs. Augustus grunted in pain but did not cover up, so Fortune came in again to the mid-section. He partially landed three punches as Augustus backed up. Augustus was winded, hurting and really peeved that the little man was landing any punches at all.

Fortune roared blood rage, as a haymaker he threw left his midsection open. Augustus stepped inside the punch, pounded Fortune hard in the gut, put a flat hand against Fortune's face and pushed him back two steps. Enraged, Fortune came again. Augustus side-stepped him and gave him a push on the back of the head as he flew by. Fortune regained his balance and ran at Augustus, who brought his hands up to protect his face and to draw Fortune's attention to his exposed midriff, pivoted at the last moment and hit Fortune full on the side of the head with as hard a right cross as he could throw. Fortune hit the floor before his brain knew he was down. He tried to regain his feet but his legs had other ideas.

On all fours at Augustus' feet Fortune said, "Nice punch."

Augustus was covered in sweat and breathing hard. Looking down at Fortune, the floor looked really good. He could imagine curling up into a fetal position and resting for a while.

"You hit pretty hard yourself." Augustus wanted to hold his ribs. He wanted to soak his hand in ice but he wouldn't give the man the pleasure of seeing any admission of pain.

Fortune ignored Augustus' offered hand and crawled to the ropes to pull himself up. The two stared warily at each other.

"Watch that pushing. I don't like to be pushed." Fortune leaned on the ropes. Tried to clear his head.

"Sorry."

"You're a sly one, aren't you, Priest?" Fortune eyed him. "I won't take you for granted again."

Monday

AUGUSTUS WALKED INTO HIS HIGH SCHOOL FRESHMAN RELIGION CLASS. The doe-eyed, impressionable monsters stopped laughing, passing pornography, and throwing things at each other. He laid his books down on his desk and sat on the corner of it while the students cleaned up around their desks and sat in perfect silence with their eyes on him. One by one, the students realized there was something very different about their teacher. Augustus clenched and unclenched his fist unconsciously to try to keep it from stiffening up on him. His swollen and discolored cheek and the bruises on his knuckles left them with only one possible conclusion.

All of them waited for the brave soul among them who would ask the question—all of them except Daniel Fremont, who must have had a hard night for he was fast asleep in the last desk on the left. He was the quarterback of the junior varsity. He was the freshman class president. He was destined for great things in life. So said his father. So said the rector of the Jesuit house. So said the principal. Augustus thought he'd make a fair to middling has-been somewhere in his mid-twenties.

He walked to Fremont's desk. The other students' eyes sparkled in anticipation as they waited for the show to begin. He leaned over and, with a grunt of exertion, lifted Daniel Fremont and his desk up and carried them to the front of the room. Augustus' hand complained all the way. He turned to face the class, then let the desk and its passenger drop. The boys erupted into laughter and applause.

"What the ffff..." Fremont almost let the last word out. Bewildered, he stared at his classmates and at Augustus.

"Fuck? Is that what you were trying to say?"

"Father Hobbes?" Daniel tried a little supplication in his voice. He considered asking about the bruising he just noticed but decided that Augustus' fist clenching and unclenching near his face meant he should shut up.

"You know the punishment for sleeping in class," Augustus said.

Daniel pressed his lips together to suppress his anger and embarrassment. He looked at the class, which had quieted down the way the Coliseum must have before the final gladiatorial thrust. He looked at Augustus who offered the floor before him with a gesture.

He slid out of his desk and onto his knees facing his classmates and stretched his arms out to the sides with the palms turned up. Augustus placed a History of Religion book on each hand.

"Mister Fremont. What is the nut, the germ, the core idea of all religions?"

Daniel racked his brain. Was this material they'd covered recently? He decided to play it safe. "To love God?"

Augustus walked slowly away and pondered the answer. "A good answer. A reasonable answer. A catechism answer. Care to reach deeper?"

Fremont sensed a bad grade coming on this impromptu test on top of the humiliation he was already feeling. "To help man communicate with God?"

"Oh, nice, nice. You're staying on the same tack so you don't need to admit you might have been wrong. If I may suggest, Mister Fremont, in the future, you should consider removing the question mark from the end of your statements. Question marks take away a sense of gravitas from your answers."

He searched the room for the person trying hardest to escape detection. "Mister Wankowski?"

William Wankowski, or BB—short for Big Bill—was the hero of the wrestling team. Quite an accomplishment for a freshman. He was also socially very timid, in part because of his amazing size at such a young age, but mostly from the beatings his old man, Bigger Bill, gave him as regular as sunshine. Wankowski sat encased in a shroud of flesh and blank looks in an attempt to meld into the background of a world that felt anything but safe to him.

What he hid was an agile brain that worked creatively inside a very kind young man. More than once he had let slip a pearl of wisdom recognized by his teachers, if not his fellow students.

"Religion helps man deal with the disappointments of the world around him," Wankowski whispered.

The class held its breath. Augustus walked over to Wankowski.

"You never cease to amaze me." Augustus turned to the class. "Although Mister Fremont was saying something not wrong taken from the believers point of view, this is a broader view of the role of religion in the world. Does anyone agree with Mister Wankowski?"

The class feared a trap. They were pretty sure Fremont had failed the test but they weren't sure if this was a set up. They were in a Catholic school after all, and this sounded irreligious. God wasn't mentioned once.

One pint-sized boy in the front raised his hand. He was one of those boys the other boys instinctively disliked. He was a little too good, a little too smart, and a little too little in a world of awkwardly growing behemoths.

"Good for you, Franks."

A flurry of hands rose quickly to indicate their agreement.

"All religions are the same. They boil down to the Golden Rule. 'Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.' Forget all the dogma. Forget all the nonsense about who, what, when, and where. Religion is about the brotherhood of man." As an

afterthought he added, "And by 'brotherhood' and 'man' I am referring to all human beings for those of you hoping to exclude women from consideration."

The hands slinked down. The class froze. This couldn't be. Priests didn't talk like this. It felt like a joke jack-in-the-box about to explode in their faces. Fremont shifted uneasily on his knees. He let his arms sag down so that his elbows were resting on his sides.

Wankowski raised his hand.

"Yes, Mister Wankowski?"

After a moment of silence the young man smiled and said, "Did you win the fight?" The class burst out in laughter, relieved that the subject had been broached.

Augustus couldn't help but smile, which hurt his tender cheek. "As a matter of fact, I did."

The class erupted into applause and approving yells. Augustus raised his hands to calm them.

"Let's get back to the matter at hand. What do you think of what I said about religion, Mister Wankowski?"

"Makes sense." BB whispered.

"Does, doesn't it? If Mister Wankowski thinks it bears consideration ..." Augustus offered to the class. The students realized their teacher was giving them the answer to life as an early Easter present. They began to talk excitedly, smiles and volume growing.

"This does not mean that religions are wrong. What it does mean is that you can't feel superior because your god is stronger than the other guy's god, because it's possible none of those gods exist. But they might. The Church might be right. The Buddhists might be right, The Muslims, the Jews." He looked to see if this was sinking in. "Hell, even the Mormons or Scientologists could be right," he laughed. "The truth is, nobody knows. Not I. Not Mister Fremont. Not even Mister Wankowski. Although, I'd put my money on Wankowski if I were a betting man."

He looked out a window for a long moment and added, "People die every day in defense of the myths they believe, the truth of which they will not know until, perhaps, the day they die. Human history overflows with the sacrifices of millions because one group believed something different than the other. Beliefs are nothing but lazy people's facts." He looked at his bruised knuckles. "People fight because they can't imagine not fighting."

"Our job—my job—is to prepare you. Human intellect is the thing that separates us from all other species. Education is the key to releasing that intellect from a prison of ignorance. An intellect that is free and strong, when not knowing the answer, will have a good idea of how to search for the answer to any question that comes along."

That evening, Daniel Fremont told his father of Augustus' heresy. The elder Fremont, a very large contributor to the Church, told the Cardinal, who told his superior in Rome, who told the Father General of the Society of Jesus, who told the Father

Provincial for North America, whose Socius told the rector for Augustus' house and, before you could whistle the Schubert Ave Maria five times—albeit slowly, Augustus was out.

Standing before the rector after hearing the news of his expulsion, Augustus felt like screaming. A million words pressed for release. He fought them back and started to walk out of the office. He stopped and turned back to the rector, “I pumped little boys’ minds, not other parts of their anatomies.” He plucked the stiff, white collar out of his robe and tossed it on the desk. “Think of me while you’re throwing this away.” He left.

Hobbes Mansion

AUGUSTUS' PARENTS' INCREDIBLE HOME HAD BEEN SOLD and the proceeds dumped into a trust that had grown like the population of India. His father, ever the pessimist about human endeavor, included an income provision for Augustus should he come to his senses and quit the priesthood. Unless Augustus fathered any children, the trust, on Augustus' death, would dump into the Hobbes Foundation his father had established during his lifetime which, for all of his father's misanthropy, supported many charitable causes throughout the world.

Though, technically, the priesthood had quit him, the clause in the trust came to bear. Augustus was a very wealthy man. Even a wealthy man can find himself on the outside. A small boat in a huge sea, he looked around his new world and found only Hamilton Hobbes as a possible harbor.

Hamilton, his father's brother and partner in the wildly successful communications company which laid the gold at the end of the rainbow squarely at their feet, took him into his mansion and life like a prodigal son. It was an amazing place in the depths of gated Bel Air, in the depths of the biggest mad-scramble city in America: Los Angeles. His uncle's predilection for the odd and unfamiliar was a godsend for a depressed but always curious ex-priest.

Although Hamilton had been on his best behavior for the wake, his house was clothing optional. In his murky past, Ham had spent time in nudist colonies and taken strongly to the idea. There were chairs and even bedrooms reserved for the more clothing oriented, but most of the chairs wore cashmere blankets in the winter and fine linen sheets in the summer expressly for the bare flesh of those of Ham's persuasion.

Augustus chose the clothing option at first but carelessness and the blues led to fewer and fewer clothes until he, too, was wandering through the marvelous assortment of religious and unorthodox arcana of the house in the glory of his skin and nothing else.

The live-in housekeeper, Maria, carried the genes of a healthy stock of ancestors. She was nearly six feet tall, weighed something that none in the house dare say because she was a muscular beast who made the men in the household wonder if she really was a she. She was rarely seen in anything but a bibbed apron which hung loose enough below her ample waist to not answer the question.

Augustus had become accustomed to his skin. It took a while. He remembered in the seminary the old Jesuits told him that they took showers with soap laden with blue dye, which would stain their flesh to remind them of the wickedness of the flesh. But the house's ambient temperature of eighty degrees and Ham's serene peace with it all helped Augustus find his naturally colored skin to be just right.

Being naked in front of a woman, even Maria, unnerved him at first. The first time he succumbed to nudity, she spent the better part of a minute eying him up and down, which engendered a reaction in him he'd rather it hadn't. Other than suggesting he could use a little beefing up, she never looked at him like that again, so the embarrassment disappeared.

At nine in the evening, Maria retired to her apartment: four rooms on the east side of the house, an area off limits to the wandering ex-priest. Ham warned Augustus that was her private time. Augustus wasn't sure why he would want to bother her, but he made note of it.

HIS FIRST NIGHT in his new home was sleepless. He visited the kitchen for warm milk. On his way back up the stairs, he noticed the lights on in Hamilton's study, a room he felt was also off limits though it was never expressly stated.

"Hamilton?" he asked as he tentatively pushed open the door.

Before him, seated on the floor in an old man's version of the lotus position was his uncle. Hamilton was a little deaf and Augustus was about to repeat his call for Ham's attention but what lay before him stopped all thought of it. He stood transfixed as Hamilton carefully laid a piece of paper before him in the candlelit room. Beyond the paper, in an arc from his left hand to his right, lay nine, machined contraptions set in three distinct triangles. About two inches in height, they were long, fine-threaded, narrow tubes screwed into squat brass tripods. On the top of the tubes were flat rubber discs. When Augustus saw these, he flashed on the workshop in the basement of the house. A metal lathe, vises, taps and dies of all sizes, and a wall on which hung hammers, pliers and screwdrivers of every description. His uncle was a metalsmith! How is it he'd never known that?

Ham mumbled something to himself as he carefully placed flat, stainless steel sheets the size of dinner plates on top of each triangle. He placed a small level in the center of the first plate to his left and adjusted each screw in the triangle supporting it until the bubble was dead center. He repeated that on the remaining plates.

Carefully, he poured sand into a small mound on the plate to his left. On the right plate, he poured a similar amount of granulated graphite. He checked level on the center plate and micro-adjusted two of the screws under it until it was perfect. Satisfied, he poured a third of a cup of water on the center plate.

He rested his hands, palms up on the withered flesh of his thighs. Eyes closed, he began to chant the Aramaic word for god word over and over, "Elah," which Augustus could see was the word written in broad strokes on the piece of paper before his Uncle.

After what seemed a very long time—Ham's voice growing raspy with the effort—the graphite vibrated then stutter-stepped across the plate. Ripples formed on the surface of the sand and water. Within seconds, they too skittered across their plates. Continuing

his chant, Hamilton opened one eye and looked at the plates and at the piece of paper in front of them. There was no mistaking it. Graphite, sand and water each had created “he,” the dominant Aramaic letter of the word he vocalized. His chant ceased. For a moment, under his smiling face, the three held their form. Then the sand and graphite sloughed off into indistinct versions of the letter. The water sloshed back into a puddle.

Augustus had always been a bit of a skeptic. His stint with the worldly Jesuits only muddled those waters. Cemented to the spot by the scene before him that he couldn’t explain away with a few blithe words, Augustus flushed with embarrassment when Hamilton looked up at him.

“Wonderful, isn’t it?”

“What did I just see?”

“Basic sounds are a profound power. The ancients understood it. You knew it once. All little children know it. As we age, we forget the simplest stuff. But we know sound is important. Music. Story telling of every kind. Soothing sounds. Jarring sounds. They all transport us.”

“I don’t understand!”

“Yes, you do, my boy. Let that brain of yours get out of the way for a moment and feel it.” Hamilton could see that was a tall order for his nephew. He smiled. “Distract yourself with life for a while. You’re good at that. The answer will come to you sure as the sun rises.”

“The sun doesn’t rise. We revolve.”

“Relax into the world. It will teach you things Princeton and Stanford never conceived.”

AUGUSTUS HADN’T EVEN CONSIDERED shopping for clothes so he dressed in his ecclesiastical blacks. Because he couldn’t find a thing to do with himself, aimless walks filled his time. The church, his church, loomed before him. He cocked his head back to take in the spires; a mist he hadn’t noticed before coated his face. A man clad in little more than filth and stench, approached.

“Can you help me, Father?”

Augustus patted his pockets for spare change before recognition set in.

“Desmond?” No response.

“Desmond. It’s me, Augustus...Father Hobbes.”

Desmond backed up, stared at Augustus as if he were an apparition materializing out of thin air. He grabbed Augustus and pulled him close. Augustus reeled from the smell.

“I used to sleep in the church. You used to let me. You used to.”

“It’s out of my hands, Desmond.”

“You used to.”

“I know. I’m not a priest anymore.”

The words came out before he thought about them. Their impact stung. Augustus almost staggered under their surprising weight. Desmond looked at him without any recognition that he had spoken.

“You used to.”

“Yes. I used to.”

“I need a place to stay. Just for the night.”

“I know, Desmond. The shelter...”

“Full up.”

Augustus took a clinical look at Desmond.

“‘Been taking your meds?’”

“You used to let me stay.”

He stared at Augustus. Augustus walked to the side door.

“Locked.” Desmond said ruefully.

“Maybe if you have enough faith.” Augustus pulled a key out of his pocket, looked heavenward and offered a little shrug. It was the only key he owned and it was the key to a church to which he was no longer welcome. He inserted the key and the lock clicked open.

“Praise be to Heaven.” Desmond cast a glance skyward.

“Praise Father Moran for not getting around to collecting my key,” corrected Augustus.

Lit by the eternal candle on the altar, which indicated the presence of at least one consecrated host in the tabernacle, and many votive candles before the altars of Saint Cecilia and Mary, the church flickered dimly. Desmond gathered his stuff and entered. In gratitude, he grabbed Augustus and held him tight. Augustus tried to find a place for his nose to escape the stench.

“You know, Desmond, there’s a lavatory in the basement. Perhaps you could...freshen up.”

“I’m good.” Desmond dismissed the idea as he checked out several pews towards the rear of the church, picked one, spread his meager possessions and snuggled in to sleep.

“Father, you’re a miracle worker.”

Augustus watched Desmond drift off. Near the confessional, Augustus knelt in the same pew Christine had used the last time they were together.

“So many miracles are needed, Desmond. So many,” he said to himself. He rested his forehead on hands clasped in prayer. Tears came. Then sleep.

Desmond shook him awake. “I need to make a confession.”

Augustus looked around in shock at the crowded, fully lit church. “Desmond, I’m not a priest.”

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I need to hear the words, Father. The words, the words, the words...” He took the dark glasses from his eyes.

Empty eye sockets bore down on Augustus. Augustus looked around at the congregation who, to a man, ignored him, their attention drawn to the altar where an animal sacrifice was taking place. He looked back to find Desmond inches away. Those bloody sockets threatened to swallow Augustus who scooted backward in shock and fear.

“...the words,” Desmond demanded.

What words? The eyeless visage held him in such fear that at first he couldn't remember the rite of confession. Just as he was ready to run away, the words popped into his mind. He figured that Desmond was asking for release from his sins. The words of the rite became Augustus' spine. He stood.

“God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to Himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church, may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Desmond stopped in his tracks. Augustus stepped forward, the assured and resolute commander of an army, an army of words. Desmond moaned and writhed. Augustus stood before him triumphant. He took stock of the church and saw the faces of the congregation who became savages from ages lost to history. The interior of the church dissolved into a forest. He heard laughter. Turning back, he found Desmond doubled over in laughter.

“Wrong words, Priest,” he grunted out between laughs.

Still kneeling in his pew, Augustus snapped out of his dream. He stood uncertainly, cautiously looking around at the empty, dim church. Desmond remained curled up on his pew. The dark glasses were off. Augustus forced himself to approach Desmond's sleeping form.

“Desmond?” The authoritarian voice had vanished with the dream. “Desmond?”

Desmond snored. Augustus shook him.

“Peace be with you, Father.” Desmond adjusted his position a little and returned to blissful snoring. Augustus checked the church for any other demons that might have been lurking in the shadows. Faltering, he eased open one filthy eyelid. A bloodshot eye stared back. Desmond sleepily swatted at him, picked his nose and snored again.

Maybe Love is the Answer

AUGUSTUS ROAMED THE QUIET HOUSE. Ham and Maria, along with most of the city, were long in bed and the mansion took on a medieval spookiness in the dark quiet. Seclusion had been a way of life for Augustus so his sense of being alone amazed him. He fought against the craving to wake his uncle. Not only was it rude and, given his uncle's age, medically unsound, he wasn't at all sure that Hamilton could cure what ailed him.

His wanderings took him into Maria's wing. A foreboding sense of no-man's-land hit him and no amount of curiosity could overcome it. He backed out; retracing the steps he took as if he were in the midst of a minefield.

Back in his sparse room, he sat, lay down, paced, and felt the bars of his prison contract around him. He looked at his cell phone. It had four numbers on it: the parish, the house he was in, Jonathan Moore, and Christine Fortune.

He could call Jonathan but didn't feel like bandying about the topics of the day. Besides Jonathan was a stickler for rules and, since Augustus wasn't dying or warning Jonathan that a monster was about to devour Los Angeles, it was way too late to call.

That left Christine. She was his lover, he reasoned. One he hadn't seen or spoken with in months, he countered. She would love to hear from him, he thought. She was married, he objected.

The internal debate raged on for a while. He paced his way into a half-spoken argument that continued down into the kitchen, where he mindlessly raided the refrigerator. As the cold air and harsh lighting of the massive appliance wafted over him, he just as mindlessly called her.

HER PHONE BUZZED ON HER NIGHTSTAND. She woke instantly, looked at the caller i.d., and felt a thrill vibrate through her. She sat up in her bed and composed herself. "Augustus."

Augustus almost dropped the phone. Her voice was what he hoped for but an intense feeling of shame came over him.

"Augustus?"

"Christine, I'm so sorry. I have no right to call you at this hour. I hope this doesn't cause you trouble."

She looked at her empty bed. "Zach's out of the country."

Hope took the place of shame in an instant. "Oh."

"Is everything all right? Is your uncle okay?"

“I just ...” He just what? “...miss you.”

There was a long pause. “Come over,” she said and hung up.

MARIA HAD MADE A POINT OF KEEPING THE KEYS to the car on the kitchen table in case Augustus needed his uncle’s town car. Augustus pulled up to the valet at the front of Christine’s condo. The new world he was living in in—mansions, gated communities and luxurious cars—seemed at once very odd and very comforting. He’d grown up with money so its return seemed like slipping into a comfortable old suit.

The night porter at Christine’s condo barely even noticed Augustus’ entrance. Christine had paved the way so when Augustus identified himself, he was directed into the elevator without so much as a single pleasantry exchanged.

Christine met him when the elevator opened on the marble foyer of her penthouse. The quilted, full-length robe she wore didn’t fill him with hope for the remainder of the evening. She appraised him like she would a side of meat. Augustus wasn’t sure what was happening and was about to ask when she turned and walked into the darkened living room. He followed her through the expansive home. An east facing wall was floor to ceiling windows, the sleeping city laid out before him. There was no time to take it in as she swept through the room and into her bedroom. She dropped the robe off her shoulders as she entered the room and he watched her naked back in the dim light.

“Zach’s out of town?” he asked as he hurriedly undressed.

She fell back onto the bed and he knelt beside her. They lost themselves in kiss after kiss.

HE WOKE IN HER BED. Strong sunlight seeped through the edges of the drapes suggesting that it was time to stir. He looked around the room. He was alone. He hadn’t noticed before but hanging across from the sumptuous bed was a huge painting of an “Our Lady of Guadalupe” style vagina. The artist had taken the colors and background of the original, removed the representation of Mary and had, using the feel of the original, substituted in her place a stylistic vision of a vagina resting on horns born by an angel. That was an interesting, perhaps disturbing, choice for the last image one would see every night.

He felt light. His mind effortlessly wandered over the night he’d spent with Christine. It was magical. She was the answer to the questions left behind by his mother, Theresa, and the priesthood.

Wondering what else the room might hold, he pulled himself out of bed and opened the curtains. The brightness of the light backed him up. He looked around the room and found it decidedly antiseptic, as if the only concession they could make to an artistic flare was the painting. He made his way to the amazing bathroom. A large soaking tub, sauna,

and bidet joined the usual suspects. Everything screamed over-the-top luxury. In the tub, Christine reclined with her eyes closed. A carafe and one cup sat next to her on a shelf partially surrounding the tub. He hoped the carafe held strong coffee.

She appeared to be asleep. He sat down on the edge of the tub next to her and eased his legs into the hot water. It was sublime. Nearby, he noticed a dog-eared book, *Creation*, by Wilhelm Swedenborg. The cover featured the God of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel touching a spiral galaxy instead of Adam. He recognized the name and checked the back cover. There was the face of the physicist that was a fixture on television. He heard Christine stir and looked past the book at her.

"Good morning!" Augustus said. She looked at him dreamily at first but couldn't hold his eyes. She shifted away in the water. Her body teased him from beneath water roiled by jets. Was her movement a snub or an invitation to get in the tub? Something was different. Something cold sat between them.

He held up the book. "I didn't know anyone actually reads his books. I thought people buy them so that they can look smart to their friends."

"He's a friend of mine."

"Swedenborg?"

"We went through undergrad together."

"Was he all raging ego then?"

"He was my lover."

Augustus felt very empty.

"Is this coffee?"

She nodded and indicated, with a gesture, to help himself.

He poured himself some. Took a deep draw of it and found it lukewarm and disappointingly weak. He slipped into the tub beside her. She moved as far as she could to create space between them.

"I'm sorry about the crack about Swedenborg."

She took the cup from him and sipped. "He was a pompous ass. But the guy's got a brain that won't quit." She said it like she was describing something delicious.

He reached to caress her cheek. She flinched. He withdrew the hand as if he'd been burned.

"What's wrong?"

She rose from the tub. "I've got a busy day."

He watched her lithe body as she dried herself with a plush towel and donned the quilted bathrobe she'd worn last night.

"Take your time. The towels are on the shelf." She walked out of the bathroom.

Augustus sat stunned for a moment. Clearly, the remark about Swedenborg had offended her. What else could it be?

Dripping, rubbing himself with a towel, he hurried into the bedroom. She was standing in her massive closet considering her wardrobe.

“Look, I didn’t know he meant something to you. I only know him from all the television shows and interviews he’s done. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I know you didn’t. I’ve really got to hurry, Augustus.” She turned back to her clothes.

“I don’t understand. Last night...”

Her sigh had the weight of a broken heart in it. She bit her lip, tried to look at him but quickly turned back to her clothes.

“Last night, I was expecting the priest. I wanted the priest, the past. Last night I was looking for the answer to my life. You were the answer, Augustus.” She turned toward him. Touched him lightly on the cheek and, when he started to respond, shrank away.

“Not anymore.”

He went to her and took her by the shoulders. “Nothing’s changed.”

She shrugged him off. “Everything’s changed. Everything. Surely you felt it last night?!” She struggled to keep the tears out of her voice. “You’re not the priest.”

“What does my priesthood have to do with it?! Now I’m free. We can be together. You can leave Zach.”

She broke down. Turned her back on him and cried, “Please go.”

Augustus stood dumfounded. There must be some piece of logic, some words. Nothing made sense!

Crying, she hurried into the bathroom and slammed the door. “Please go,” she cried through the door.

Augustus turned his attention to the ruffled bed that had cradled what he thought was a new beginning mere moments ago. He started to say something several times, but ended up swallowing his disarrayed thoughts and devastated ego as he hurriedly dressed and left.

The Dark Path

HE WAS GOOD AT READING PEOPLE and Christine had always been an open book to him. She loved him, he was sure. Now, her love had turned into indifference, literally overnight. He knew he'd had been remote since his mother's death. His thoughts had consumed him to the point where the outside world didn't exist and Christine was more a part of the outside world than a part of his. Maybe if he apologized for being distant during that time. Maybe...

He went home. Ham was deep into chanting or he would have begged his uncle to explain what had happened to him. He wasn't sure that Ham knew anything about women, at all. As far as he knew, his uncle had been a near hermit all his life. Augustus thought about Jonathan, but he was pretty sure Jonathan was more celibate than he'd ever been, so what help could he provide? He feared that his priesthood had made him a safe lover, a lover a married woman could have without trepidation.

The irony wasn't missed. He'd used the collar to keep women from expecting more than sex from him. His return to the life of everyman peeled away the barrier that made him interesting. He thought about the women and his transgressions against them and against the vows he'd taken. As miserable a priest as he was, he felt like an even worse lay-person.

Since Maria didn't need the car, Augustus wasted the day driving around. He parked near the Observatory in Griffith Park and tried to make sense of his new, pathless life. Late in the evening, he drove to the Jesuit residence at San Juan del Castillo.

He rang the bell and waited. Nothing happened. He rapped on the door. No response. Someone always manned the door. He called the residence number. The call went straight to voicemail. He tried to imagine what events took place that a novice or lay brother wasn't watching over the phones and door. Nothing came to mind. Although he still had a key to the parish church, the Jesuits had stripped him of all things that belonged to the order, including the keys to the residence and school.

There was a way up to the unlocked windows of the third floor where Barrone slept, but it involved technical climbing. Several years back, he'd stayed out past the residence's curfew and forgotten his keys. A little past high and desperate not to have another story added to the lore of Augustus Hobbes, S.J., he decided that climbing the outside of a building in the dead of a moonless night was a good idea.

It was an old, brick building and the mortar joints were eroded, giving finger and toe holds all the way up. Although he was in good shape, it had been far more strenuous and nerve-wracking than he'd imagined. The two things he did right were to keep moving and not look down. He gained some confidence after a rough start and made his way to the

third story. He was reaching for the ledge of Barrone's window when his toes slipped. Terror filled him as he'd slid back to the second floor ledge, tearing skin and nails, desperately clawing at the bricks for purchase.

He looked at his now-groomed nails as a shiver of fear and remembered-pain ripped through him. Did he really want to see Barrone that badly? Although Barrone's council would be couched in the gibberish of the religion that had cast Augustus out, Barrone was the only person who knew his whole history and all of the underlying psychology of his dependence on Christine.

Climbing the building on another moonless night! He mentally girded his loins. He could feel anxiety work its way into his muscles. Maybe he could get in through a second story window. He had made it to the second story just fine, he assured himself. Of course, the dumpster beneath the second story made getting that far a lot easier, he reasoned. The rational part of him threw up its hands in defeat. On the verge of walking around to the back of the building to start his ascent, he decided to try the door once more.

He reached up to knock and for some reason turned the knob instead. It clicked. The door swung open easily on its well-oiled hinges. The hallway beyond was empty and dark. He walked in using his memory of the place and banged his knee into a bench that was sitting askew in the hallway rather than snug against a wall outside the rector's office. It was the "bench of shame" Augustus had sat on more than once while awaiting punishment from the rector of the house for one of Augustus' amazingly ungodly activities. He pictured himself sitting there with his taped fingers after his aborted attempt to scale the wall. Was it really any wonder they'd kicked him out?

As he continued down the deserted hallway to the main corridor, he called out tentatively. He knew he wasn't welcome but still felt like he belonged. A shadow raced in front of him. Then another shadow and another trailed by something he could only think of as whispered prayers. There was an urgency to the voices that unnerved Augustus. Hesitantly, he turned up the main staircase. There stood the scholastic, Rooney, who had informed him of Hamilton's call an age ago. The glasses were gone and the only thing Augustus could see clearly in the gloom was an eerie smile.

"You have come to recant?" The voice came from behind Augustus. He spun around and found three, no, four Jesuits standing there. One of them was aged Father Anselm who had spoken.

There was something in the tone and the chilling situation that made Augustus consider his answer for a moment. He wasn't sure the truth would get him where he wanted to go. The truth seemed more and more fluid lately. He felt the pressure from the Jesuits around him. At that point, he wasn't sure he wanted to go deeper into the bowels of this nightmare.

"I'm here to confess to Father Barrone."

Anselm chuckled knowingly. The others joined in until it became a disembodied echo in the dark.

“Barrone. Yes. By all means. We will accompany you.”

This was fast becoming a classically bad Hobbesian choice. He started back the way he’d come, but the four Jesuits became a wall blocking his exit.

“Barrone is upstairs in his room. We’ll make sure you get there.”

“What happened to the lights?” Augustus asked.

“You will see all.”

I’ll see a lot better with the lights on, he thought but forced himself to shut up.

Augustus was pretty sure he could fight his way out of the residence. All he had to do was walk over Anselm and then make a run for the door, but he really wanted to know what was going on. Nothing in his years in the priesthood and in the Jesuit order had prepared him for anything like this. He turned and joined in the little parade up two dark flights of stairs. When they reached the landing for the residential hall, they turned toward Barrone’s room. He looked over his shoulder. The parade had grown to include the rest of the inhabitants with Rooney as drum major and Augustus as guest of honor. They moved along in the same, eerie, whispered prayer.

Forming a semi-circle, they surrounded Barrone’s door. The whispers continued. Augustus stood before the door and, after glancing at his guards, knocked.

“Come in.” It was Barrone’s voice, sounding normal and full of the wit and wisdom Augustus knew so well.

Augustus smiled and entered the room. A small lamp glowed on the desk where Barrone sat. Augustus’ eyes adjusted to the welcome intrusion of light.

Barrone’s back was to the door and without turning he said, “Augustus, please come in. Have a seat.” He indicated his bed beside the desk with a welcoming gesture.

Augustus turned and closed the door on the gathering behind him. Through the door he could hear the whispers unbroken. He turned to Barrone who still sat with his back to him.

“Girl trouble?” Barrone asked. That wasn’t as intuitive as it seemed, given Augustus’ history, but it encouraged Augustus to drop his guard. He took the offered seat on the bed.

“What is going on here?”

“What do you mean?” Barrone sounded like he had a lozenge in his mouth.

“The residence, except this room, is without lights, the brotherhood is acting like zombies, and the atmosphere is definitely creepy.”

“Ah...”

That was the answer? “Ah?” He wanted to grab Barrone and shake him. Was Barrone a walking dead-man like the others? He looked around the room. It looked exactly the same. The last bottle of scotch sat half-full near the nightstand. He relaxed and decided that Barrone would tell him about whatever events had led to the peculiar behavior of the others.

“Father, I need to talk to you about something. My life is in pieces.”

"I know. You have come to the right place, my son. You will see all."

"I will 'see all'? That's what Anselm ... what the fuck's happening?"

He shot off the bed, grabbed Barrone by the shoulders, and spun him around.

Barrone sat passively, one eye plucked neatly from its socket and wearing the same eerie smile he had seen on Rooney. Barrone had the eye between his thumb and finger and was licking and sucking at it. Barrone offered it up as if it were a lollipop to share.

Augustus backed up in horror, knocking over the bottle of scotch, running into a bookcase. He turned to make sure that it was something inanimate behind him. Barrone was on him. He grabbed Augustus' face and held it firmly with more strength than Augustus had ever given the older priest credit for.

"Look into my eyes. You will see the truth."

Augustus tried to escape but Barrone held him motionless. Augustus averted his eyes. The memory of what he just saw ate at him. His confessor had slipped into madness. The same madness that, evidently, had spread throughout the residence.

"Father Barrone, I don't understand."

"You will see the truth. Barrone's thumbs moved around to capture Augustus' eyelids and held his eyes open. Augustus looked at the monster who had been his friend. The bloodied socket and the other, intact eye burned into him.

"Look, Augustus. See."

All Augustus saw was madness. As badly as he had wanted to see Barrone, he now wanted to get as far away from him as possible. He tested the hold Barrone had on him. It was strong but not otherworldly. He thought about getting around Barrone, but assumed the phalanx of Jesuits still stood outside the door. How could he get around them?

He turned his gaze back to and then through Barrone. He concentrated on being blank.

"I see," he said. Barrone seemed to increase his hold on Augustus. He repeated his claim more emphatically. "I see."

Barrone looked into Augustus' eyes. Augustus calmed himself and let himself go limp. "I see," he repeated serenely.

"Isn't it magical? The answer!" Barrone asked.

"I understand. For the first time, I understand," Augustus said with what he hoped was a convincing air of wonder.

Barrone relaxed. They stood face to face for a moment. "Welcome back," Barrone said and returned to the grisly meal staring at him from his desk.

Augustus eased off the book case. He took a step, then another. Barrone was preoccupied with sucking on his eye. Augustus walked to the door. Stopped, turned back to Barrone. He wanted to touch him. To say goodbye in some way that might make contact with the man he used to know but doubted that man existed.

"Go do God's work, my boy," Barrone said.

Augustus steeled himself. He still had the others outside the door to get past. He called up the feeling of serenity he had when he'd first said mass. He thought of all the religious fervor he'd felt early on in his priesthood. He opened the door. The group of bodies stood unmoving. They stared at him and he returned their gaze while concentrating on the euphoria of his first day as a priest. Like a door opening, they moved aside. Without looking anywhere but ahead, he walked through the opening and continued to the stairs.

He could hear and feel them go in whatever direction their new religion was leading them. "God's work," he thought, "God's work."

Without incident, he made it out through the front door. He didn't break his calm demeanor or stride until he was in his car and a block away from the residence. Tears poured from his eyes as he wept for his old friends.

Astrology Lesson

AUGUSTUS WIPED THE TEARS FROM HIS FACE. He pounded the wheel. Never in his life had he felt so helpless and alone. He was heading back to his last haven, a home that didn't feel like home.

He called nine-one-one. Although he knew it sounded crazy, someone needed to go to the Jesuit residence and sort things out. After several abortive starts, he got enough information out for the operator to act on.

Augustus arrived at the Bel Air gate. The guard must have noticed his tear-stained face and red eyes because he passed Augustus through without comment. Augustus parked the car in Ham's enormous garage, sat in the still car, listened to it pinging off its heat, and pounded the steering wheel. Tears and screams of impotent rage filled the confined space. Spent, he finally dragged himself into the kitchen.

At the kitchen prep table, Ham and Maria sat munching on cheese and crackers. Augustus couldn't believe his eyes. At this hour, Maria should be locked away in her inner sanctum and Ham should be ... He wasn't sure where Ham should be because his uncle was not a creature of habit.

"We've been worried." Ham said, regarding Augustus with mild concern between chews. Maria stood up, hugged him, and sat back down without meeting his eyes once. She had never touched him before. Surprised, he stood rooted to the spot.

"Your nephew is a ninety pound weekend," she said to Hamilton.

"Weakling, Maria," Ham responded.

"I think I liked her version better," Augustus said.

Ham and Maria continued eating.

"Ham, something happened."

Maria looked up as she shoved another cracker into her mouth.

"Sit down." Hamilton indicated a stool next to him.

"I need to speak to you," Augustus leaned on the last word.

Ham smiled. "We're family."

Augustus didn't know whether to turn around and leave again, walk past them and retreat to his stark, cloister-like room, or sit down and have some cheese.

"Come, chew a little. Life will seem so much better," Ham said with his mouth full.

Augustus stared at him.

"Chewing lightens one's heart," Ham said.

"And makes you strange," said Maria.

"Strong, Maria. Strong," Ham said and held a cracker with a slab of cheese on it up to Augustus.

Augustus laughed. It was so ridiculous. He wanted to scream at them. Tell them that the world was falling apart. That every anchor he had in his life had been torn loose from its footing, then suddenly a sliver of Morbier cheese on a cracker seemed like the answer to all of his problems. He sank onto the stool and gobbled up the snack.

Many crackers later, he'd told the whole story from Christine to the emergency call. He marveled at the retelling. It had sex, violence, and mystery. What more could a story want? Calling up the memories made his gorge rise and he swallowed heavily to control the contents of his stomach.

Finally, Ham broke the silence. "Aries!"

Maria nodded sagely and added, "The Devil!"

"What?"

"The Devil! All of it," she said and crossed herself.

The thought had crossed Augustus' mind. Although he didn't believe in the devil, it would explain all his problems with a single word. He turned to Ham. "What did you say?"

"Aries."

"Like the zodiac sign?"

"Exactly like the zodiac sign. What you're talking about: the eyes, seeing for the first time. Aries."

Augustus sighed. He had hoped for something more than silly superstition.

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Everything. You're a Libra..."

"Ham, I'm not in the mood for a lecture on astrology. I thought you might have some insight into—"

"The Devil!" Maria crossed herself again.

Augustus turned to go up to his room.

"Whatever insights I might have are from the masters who have come before me and for millennia the men and women of knowledge were astrologers or took astrology seriously," Ham said.

Augustus slumped back down onto the stool.

Ham gave him a sly grin. "You're a Libra."

"You going to tell me about my love life now?"

"You're a Libra with Libra rising. You don't have a love life."

"That sounds about right."

"What I'm saying is that you are the antithesis, you're the cure, you're the opposite of what you just witnessed at the Jesuit residence. You're the salve for the wound."

"That's crap." Augustus regretted his outburst as soon as it left his mouth. "I'm sorry, Ham, but I'm not the cure for anything. Not even myself."

"You are a mess. No denying it."

"Thanks."

“What I’m saying is that, astrologically speaking, you are the opposing force to the Mars at the Jesuit house you just described. You are the thing that can neutralize that force.”

“Uncle, you don’t believe that.”

“Come with me.” Ham shoved a cracker into his mouth and led Augustus into his den. Ham sat him down before the carved wooden desk and went to an old, out-of-place, green, metal filing cabinet against the wall. The cabinet was the only piece of furniture that wasn’t wood.

“Where on earth did you get that cabinet?”

“My grandfather, your great-grandfather, was a colonel in the army in World War I.” Ham removed the heavy top of the cabinet. When he did that, the cabinet shifted slightly to reveal that each side by side drawer and the cabinet beneath it were separate units.

“With fluid battle lines, an officer often had to move his paperwork quickly. He’d call in five men and the cabinet, full of secret nonsense would be whisked away. Ingenious, really.”

He put the lid back on, opened one of the drawers and rummaged through it. After a minute of searching, he held a piece of paper up like it was the ultimate proof of something. He brought it over to the desk and laid it in front of Augustus.

“There!”

The piece of paper was brown with age. On it was drawn a wheel equally divided into twelve parts. There were scribbles and numbers handwritten on the chart. They weren’t evenly dispersed. It’s as though someone had spilled them and a concentration sat in one area with splatters of others around the chart.

“This is the chart I made for you on the day of your birth.”

“Why?”

“To see what my little brother had foisted on the world.”

Augustus stared at it but it might as well have been cuneiform.

“Think of astrology the way the ancients did. They noticed that people born at a certain time of year had a tendency to act in certain ways. The way they made note of those tendencies was with the position of the constellations and planets. The sky was their television, their news channel. ”

“You’re saying we’re preordained to be who we are? Have you gone Calvinist on me?”

Hamilton laughed. A bit of cracker was launched out of his mouth and onto Augustus’ jacket. Augustus wiped it off.

“You’re not forced to behave in a certain way. You’re just inclined to. Your mood, your education, your upbringing, the weather, all conspire to push you in one direction or another. What you chose to do ...”

“Ham, I appreciate this, but what I saw tonight ... is beyond anything I’ve ...”

"I understand. I'm trying to help you understand why you're involved at all. Just sit back. Maybe you'll learn something."

"Maybe tomorrow."

"You have a hot date?"

Augustus sat back in the chair and shook his head wearily. He wasn't likely to have a hot date ever again.

Hamilton took Augustus' posture as permission to continue.

"Libra with Libra rising means you want love but you'll never have it. Not the normal, family-style, couple kind of love. That's why you had the parents you had. That's why you had your experience with Theresa."

The mention of her name rankled. Augustus squirmed.

Ham noticed and quickly added, "That's why you went into the priesthood. You were seeking the ultimate love and, to a certain extent, you found it. Not the love of God, but the love of knowledge, of teaching."

He leaned over the paper, stared at it for a moment and pointed at a crescent moon shape drawn on the left side of the chart. "Scorpio moon in the first house." He said it like Augustus should understand it. "That's why, instead of sticking with the priesthood, you dallied around with women and with antithetical thoughts. Your moon is conflicted with your Libra rising which is why you want, you crave the feminine but you can't have it. That's why the priesthood left you unsatisfied. That's why you look elsewhere for the divine. Christine, I might add, is also seeking the divine. Her problem is she thinks having sex with a priest is the path. You're not a priest anymore so you're no longer the path."

"She loves me and I love her," Augustus said angrily.

"She doesn't love you. She loves the idea of you. And you? You're just a puppy who loves being loved."

Augustus pushed away from the desk to rise.

Hamilton continued, undeterred. "Scorpio moon makes you dark and mysterious, hidden. The most important thing is that the Moon is the antidote to Mars. Mars is the ruling planet of Aries. Aries rules the head: eyes...thoughts. So, from what you told me, your brethren Jesuits are afflicted with something very Aries." He looked at the chart again and tapped on a symbol at the top of it. It was a circle with a dot in the center.

"That's your sun in the mid-heaven. The mid-heaven, the zenith is where everyone can see it. It's public."

Augustus looked at the symbol. The circle with the dot made him think of breasts. He decided it was better to keep that to himself.

"Why does the sun have a dot in it?" he asked instead.

"The circle of the sun is infinity. It's the Ouroboros, the snake consuming itself. Constant self-re-creation, self-reflection. The cycle of life. The dot in the center is your awareness. Humanity's awareness."

Augustus stared at the symbol and thought about Ouroboros and the meanings and forms it had taken through the centuries: The Gnostic symbol for the eternal, the alchemist's symbol for their cycle of truth, the halo in Christianity.

"Gemini, the sign of the communicator, rules your mid-heaven. You are the communicator to the public. You're a born teacher. For this event, you're like the White House spokesman."

Augustus stared at the inlaid wood and beamed ceiling.

"Gemini is about the expression of thoughts and ideas. You see? Aries is ideas and Gemini is their expression. Your Jesuit brethren saw something. They believe something about what they saw. You were brought to them with your innate ability to put it into words. You're inextricably bound to this affliction."

Words! That's what Desmond had said, Augustus thought. "So, what do I do?"

"How should I know? I'm not you."

"Ham..."

"Why do you think you were there tonight? What drew you?"

"I told you. Barrone knew the history of me and Christine. It made sense to talk to him." The doorbell rang.

Augustus looked at his watch. It was past midnight. Who would come to an old man's house in the middle of the night?

Ham rubbed his chin. "I wonder if there are any crackers and cheese left. Maria's not known for letting anything go to waste. My guess is that they have gone to bed with her." He walked out of the den.

The doorbell rang again. Someone pounded on the door.

Augustus walked out to get the door and watched Ham shuffle toward it. Ham swung it open without a thought toward his nakedness and before him stood two women and a man. They took in Hamilton Hobbes in all his glory for a moment, then the one in the center, a swarthy, stout woman, flashed a badge.

Ray Cruz

LIEUTENANT RAMONA CRUZ GAVE THE IMPRESSION of having physically fought her way up through the ranks, one punch at a time, in a never ending struggle with her male counterparts. At twenty-nine, she had been the youngest female detective sergeant in the history of the Los Angeles Police Department.

She made detective at the ripe old age of twenty-eight and was brought into the major case squad after one year of street patrol, in an attempt to give a female presence to that division. Her tendency to lock jaws onto a case until it was solved and her natural ability to work a problem through intellectually before jumping into the fray pushed her up the ranks past men who had spent twenty years or more assuming their good looks would make them captain.

Their resentment, vocal at first, died down somewhat when her conviction rate consistently stood head and shoulders above her those of her peers. The talk died down completely when it became apparent she was the pride of the L.A.P.D.: young, female and Latina. A triple threat trotted out whenever the department's image needed a little burnishing. And if you weren't with her, you found yourself friendless in the big, mean world of the police department. You could call her Lieu, or Lieutenant Cruz or Ray. Any other name was either ignored or a reason to find another line of work.

"Did we get you out of bed?" she asked Hamilton.

"No, we were just talking." He peered at her badge. "Police? Are you here to arrest me for that time I jay-walked in...when was that? Sixty-seven?"

"I'm looking for Augustus Hobbes."

Augustus stepped forward, glad he had his clothes on. "I'm Augustus Hobbes."

"Ah." To Hamilton she asked, "And you are?"

"The owner of this house, Hamilton Hobbes. Who are you?" He didn't step out of the way.

"Lieutenant Ray Cruz. Sir, may I ask you to put some clothes on?"

"Not unless I'm going somewhere. Clothes are optional here. Feel free to take yours off."

Pam Lazora, only one year younger than Cruz, was being groomed by Cruz as the next phenomenon in the department. Her face screwed up in anger and she stepped into Ham pushing him back. "Do what the Lieutenant asked you to do."

Augustus rushed up to his uncle's defense and pushed Lazora off. Bruce Pettite, a pockmarked, scrawny twenty year veteran of the force, stepped in front of Augustus and pushed him.

Cruz stepped in the middle. "Easy," was all she said.

A moment passed with no movement. Augustus reached around Pettite and put a gentle hand on Hamilton.

"Come on, Ham. Why don't you see if Maria left any food?"

"A salubrious suggestion." Ham stepped back. "Feel free to do to my nephew what you will." He walked nonchalantly into the kitchen. Augustus watched the cops watch Hamilton's eighty-something butt sashay to the kitchen. At the door, he broke into a little soft shoe to take him out of sight. Augustus laughed out loud.

"Are you here to tell me what happened at the Jesuit house?"

She motioned into the house with her head. "May we get out of the doorway?"

Augustus invited them in with a sweep of his arm. They headed to the den. Augustus stopped them at the entrance.

"Let's go into the living room. It's more comfortable." He ushered them into the living room. One couch and two chairs had linen sheets draped over them. The other couch and chairs were uncovered.

"Closing the house?" Cruz pointed at the covers.

"What? Oh, the seats with covers on them are for people of the nudist persuasion."

Pettite burst out laughing.

"Did you go to the residence?" Augustus sat down opposite the police.

"You're the one who called nine-one-one?"

"Yes! Did you go?"

"Did you know Alphonse Barrone?"

"Alphonse?" Augustus laughed. "I never knew his first name. I thought it was Alan. I always called him 'Father Barrone'."

"I'll take that as a yes. What was the purpose—"

"What do you mean, 'did I know him'?" Augustus bounded out of his chair as the words sank in. "Past tense! What did you find?"

"Please answer my questions. What shape was Father Barrone in when you left?"

"I told the operator. He had gone insane. Plucked out one of his eyes and was sucking on it like a piece of candy."

"One of his eyes?"

"Yes! Tell me what happened."

"When we got there, Father Barrone was dead."

"Dead?" Augustus sunk back down onto the couch. "Oh, my god."

"He had choked to death. The medical examiner told us he had tried to swallow his eyes. Both of them. You're saying when you left, he was alive and still had one eye?"

"Yes!"

"That is in direct contradiction to what the priests said."

"What?" He closed the distance between himself and Cruz. Lazora stepped up and Pettite circled around behind him. Augustus read Cruz' face. He turned and looked at the other detectives. They stared back at him.

“Everyone was zombie-like. I can’t believe they told you anything,” Augustus said while he watched Cruz. He thought he saw a brief flicker of a smile as she glanced at the other female detective.

“Have you been drinking, Mister Hobbes?” Cruz asked.

“No!”

“Do any drugs?” Pettite asked from behind him.

“What?”

“The Jesuits are quite concerned about you. They suggested that you were high on something,” Cruz went on. “I tell you what. Let’s go down to the station and clear this up.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Augustus backed up a step into Pettite.

“Purely informal. We just want to be clear on what happened.”

Augustus laughed. He wasn’t sure why he laughed. It just bubbled out of him. He thought about Barrone’s tortured face telling him “Go do God’s work” and he laughed again.

“You find this funny?” Lazora asked.

“I find it insane. You’re taking me to the police station after what happened at the residence?” He looked at each of them. “Did you catch it? Did they get to you somehow?”

Pettite reached for his handcuffs with one hand and grabbed Augustus’ left forearm with his other.

“That’s not necessary,” Cruz said and Pettite let go of Augustus’ arm. “Is it, Mister Hobbes?” It wasn’t a question but a demand.

Lazora and Pettite flanked Augustus as Ham, still undressed, entered the living room carrying a tray with a teapot, creamer and sugar and five cups. “Tea, anyone?” He watched as Augustus was paraded past towards the front door. “It’s decaf,” he called after them.

“Call Jonathan Moore!” Augustus said as he passed his uncle.

This Brings Back The Memories

Major Crimes

L.A.P.D. Headquarters

PETTITE SHOWED AUGUSTUS A CHAIR in front of Lieutenant Cruz' desk, then sat on a chair behind him. Augustus turned around and saw boredom in his guard's eyes. He shifted uneasily back to face Cruz' empty desk and thought about the only other time he'd been in a police station.

Eleven years ago, his sleep was interrupted by a desperate call from a parishioner. After a few minutes of trying to calm the man down and trying to wake up, Augustus finally understood that the man had been accused of murder and desperately wanted Augustus' help.

On his way to the station that night, Augustus had searched his memory for an image of the man. But faces blended into the congregation the way water blends into coffee.

At three in the morning he'd stood at the desk, informing the sergeant that he was Lionel Sharp's confessor whom Sharp had asked for. A conference ensued between the sergeant and a plainclothes detective. Occasionally, disgusted looks flew his way and some element of insecurity flowed back and forth but eventually, Augustus was escorted into an interrogation room where Lionel sat shackled. In place of the bland image he'd finally latched onto while driving to the station, before him sat a man deep in despair. Augustus was immediately enlivened. Here was a cause: One of his flock wrongly accused.

As soon as Augustus and Lionel were alone in the room, Lionel opened up. Augustus looked the room over and thought about all the movies and detective shows he had seen and held up a hand.

"I'm not sure we're alone," he said.

"It doesn't matter. I'm innocent."

"Aren't you making a confession?"

"I'm asking for your help. I know who you are," Lionel said. By that, the man meant he knew who Augustus' father was.

"I'm not sure I can offer anything to you but the Rite of Confession or counseling as your priest." He kissed and donned his purple stole and placed The Book of Rites on the table between them.

Sharp waved it away and, in a non-stop barrage of words, spent the next half-hour relating the events that had led to this moment. He was accused of the rape and murder of his fourteen-year-old daughter.

Augustus had no problem picturing Sharp's daughter, Lisa. She was a cute girl, large for her age, a child the nuns had expressed concern for because she was so withdrawn. While Sharp told his story, Augustus tried to comprehend the mind of a man who would rape a young girl.

He carefully watched Sharp's face. The shock and loss and sense of injustice seemed genuine. When Sharp sat back, exhausted and in tears, Augustus leaned forward and offered his hand.

"I'll see what I can do."

Sharp took his hand eagerly. "I'm counting on you," he said.

The anxiety in his eyes emboldened Augustus as he set off on his mission.

"You'll hear from me," he promised.

On his way back to the Jesuit residence, Augustus called his father. His father lectured him on the baseness of the human character, assured him that the man was guilty and pestered him with questions as to why Augustus would want to intervene. Rather than get into a philosophical discussion, Augustus insisted and his father made the call. The heavy-hitting attorney arrived at the police station first thing the next morning.

The trial was a farce. His father's attorney tore the beleaguered assistant district attorney to shreds. The prosecution did have evidence but, in the hands of an attorney who had more money to spend on clothing than the Assistant D.A. made in a year, it seemed sketchy at best and the jury acquitted after two hours of deliberation.

When the jury delivered its verdict, Lionel first hugged his attorney, who looked like he was late for an appointment, and then turned triumphantly to Augustus. The two celebrated with a steakhouse dinner and bottle of wine. Augustus had fallen liquidly into bed that night, pleased with the justice system and himself.

Two days later, Augustus sat in his confessional. It had been a slow day. He knew that most parishioners preferred to confess to Monseigneur Moran because he was mostly deaf and they could mumble their way to absolution. He put a marker in his book, looked at his watch and considered closing shop a little early. A smile crossed his face while he thought of all the things he could do instead of listen to the boring drone of venial sins and handing out prayers as penance—prayers people were supposed to be doing anyway. The sound of someone entering the confessional brought him back to business. He slid open the screen.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. My last confession was... three months ago."

Augustus recognized Lionel Sharp's voice immediately but said nothing except, "Go on."

"I need absolution, Father."

"Then you have come to the right place. Confess your sins to your God."

"What I say stays in the confessional, right?"

"This is between you and God. Speak freely," Augustus assured him.

"You're sure?"

What started out as a last minute interruption of the end of a long afternoon, turned into a time-stopping, bile-raising event. He feared what the man would say. Prayed he was wrong. Prayed the man would simply confess some hate of the police or district attorney. He prayed for his own deliverance from that moment.

"My daughter seduced me. She liked the sex but she wouldn't shut up about it. Said she was going to tell everyone. I had no choice. You understand." Sharp's voice countered the indifference of his words. It carried the same deep regret it had in the police station and during the trial.

"You killed her? You raped her?" His stomach contents rose so quickly in Augustus' throat that he clapped a hand over his mouth to prevent them from spewing out. He bit his lower lip. His breathing came in short gasps. His whole body tensed.

"I had to."

Augustus wanted to reach through the screen and strangled the man. He wanted to strip the man naked, make him stand before the world and force him confess to humanity what he had done.

"And," Lionel continued, "I lied...to you and the police and your attorney." His regret seemed to echo over and over in the tiny space. Then a silence took over.

"Father?"

Augustus fought back his vomit. He fought against his urge to strike out.

"Am I absolved?"

The question rocked Augustus. He couldn't absolve the man. He should call the police but he thought about double jeopardy and the sanctity of the confessional. He thought about the vows he'd made the day of his ordination.

"O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended thee, and I detest all my sins because of thy just punishment, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all-good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

It took Augustus a moment to realize that Sharp had just recited the Act of Contrition. He wondered if that was all there was to it? Sharp sounded sincere. Would God forgive him? If God would, who was Augustus to withhold absolution? On the other hand, if there was no God...

"So, is that it then? I'm sorry I lied to you, Father. I had to. You understand." He sounded so relieved.

Lionel Sharp rose from the kneeler and exited the confessional. Augustus was through his door and in Sharp's face before the man had taken two steps out of the confessional.

Without thought or warning, Augustus swung and connected a solid right fist to Sharp's jaw, dislocating it and smashing Augustus' knuckle. Sharp staggered back. Augustus landed punch after punch, even after Sharp collapsed into a pew.

Emotion run its course, Augustus stood up and, for the first time, looked at the bloody pulp that had been Lionel Sharp's face. Pain radiated up from Augustus' hands. Sharp groaned and peered up at Augustus through the swollen slits of his eyelids.

Augustus spit in his face. "You are not absolved." Augustus stormed out of the church. His bloody hands and robe caught the attention of Father Moran who had popped out of his confessional to see what the ruckus was.

The following month, Augustus had spent hour after hour explaining to his superiors why he'd attacked a parishioner without divulging the secrets of the confession that prompted it. The victim's name gave everyone a clear picture of what happened without Augustus saying a word, but there was procedure to follow. Sharp agreed not to sue the parish, the school, the Jesuits or the Catholic Church. Everyone assumed it was because his attorneys didn't want the police or the court to think too much about past events. Augustus had been relieved of confessional duty for half a year and warned that any more unpriestly acts would meet with severe consequences. It was more than five years before older parishioners would dare confess to the crazy Jesuit. Who knew which sin would set him off again?

The cost for the plastic surgery to restore Sharp's face, though very pricey, had been picked up by a very relieved archdiocese.

Without betraying the sanctity of the confessional, Augustus apologized to his father, who waved it off as a lesson learned. Augustus had sworn to himself that he would never become entwined in police business again.

Yet, here he sat in a police station being questioned about the death of his dearest friend in the priesthood. For the first time in many years, he wished his father were around to help him.

Cruz entered reading a file.

Blind Leading the Blind

“HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR RELATIONSHIP with Alphonse Barrone?” Cruz asked.

Lazora entered the office and leaned against a wall to the side. She stared at Augustus like he was a rotten piece of meat.

“He was my confessor, my confidant. My best friend in the Order,” Augustus said.

“And when you were kicked out, did your relationship continue?”

Augustus felt ashamed. Kicked out was what it was, but it sounded so filled with the assumption of wrongdoing.

“No,” he said. “I wasn’t allowed to have contact.”

“And yet, last night you went to the Jesuit house of your own accord. Were you welcomed in?”

“The door was open. No one answered the bell or a knock. I let myself in. The first person I encountered was ...”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. You let yourself into a place you weren’t welcome. Is that correct?”

Augustus felt the weariness of the evening’s events and the lack of sleep hit him all at once. “Yes.”

“Why?”

Augustus didn’t want to tell this story again. As he thought it over, it seemed dreamlike and perhaps created by his imagination. He shook it off as exhaustion.

“Ever since my...separation from the Order, I...my life has fallen into...pieces...”

“You fell into the lap of luxury. I wish my life fell into those kind of pieces,” Cruz said. Lazora laughed.

“From the outside world’s perspective, I understand how it looks. I don’t deny my luck. But it doesn’t feel very lucky when the thing you left all the riches and comfort behind for in the first place has turned its back on you.”

“You feel betrayed by the Church? By the Jesuits?”

“To a certain extent. But that hardly covers the feelings and events I’ve been going through.”

“Hatred, then,” Lazora piped up.

“Hatred? No. The Church made its decision based on money. I resent that. But hate? No.”

“It says here that you were excommunicated for heresy,” Cruz said.

“Heresy!” Augustus spit out the word. “I wasn’t teaching Church dogma, that’s true. I was teaching tolerance—”

"I can hear the anger in your voice. Perhaps Barrone was the focus of your anger. Perhaps you went there to have it out with him." She returned her attention to the file while he answered.

"Barrone was one of the priests who agreed with me. He was my confidant. He knew my doubts and fears and all of my transgressions. He—"

"Maybe you wanted to shut him up?"

"Are you saying I had something to do with his death?"

"That's what we're trying to find out, Mister Hobbes."

"That's ridiculous. He was alive when I left. The whole residence was caught up in some insanity. I called nine-one-one because I was afraid."

"Afraid? Let's get back to that in a moment. You claim Barrone was alive when you left and you called it in because you feared for his safety?"

"His, yes, and the whole house's! You were there. You must have seen how odd it was."

"We were there."

"Well then, why are you bothering me?"

"This is a nuisance? Your best friend, your confidant is murdered and this is a bother?"

"What I'm saying is that I called it in. I told you people that something was wrong at the Jesuit residence. Father Barrone was alive when I left. You were there. You saw how insane the situation was. Yet you're acting like I had something to do with his death. Why aren't you focusing on the people in the residence?"

"You know what people who are involved in a fatal hit-and-run often do? They leave the scene of the crime, ditch their car, and report it stolen."

Augustus sank back into his chair. "I can't believe this. You saw the residence. You saw them."

"Yes, we did. Except for the death of Alphonse Barrone, the place seemed perfectly normal. The priests were quite concerned that we catch you before you harmed anyone else."

"What?! That's insane!" Augustus burst out of his seat.

Pettite and Lazora were on him in a flash. They sat him down, hard.

"Murder, almost by definition, is insane," Cruz said.

A uniform peeked in. "Sorry, Lieutenant. A lawyer is here for Hobbes."

Benton Waters wasn't just any lawyer Jonathan sent for Augustus. He was the premiere defense attorney in the city. The man dressed for the media, drove a Bentley sports coupe, and draped himself in gorgeous young women every night as if they were jewelry. More important, even on the rare occasion when he lost a case, the public, the judges, and even the D.A.s felt like he had won it. Just a whisper that he was coming was enough to make police and district attorneys shudder in distaste and fear.

Cruz looked at Augustus. "That was quick."

Jonathan

“JONATHAN, I OWE YOU ONE,” Augustus said into his cell phone as he stepped out of the lawyer’s car in front of Hamilton’s house.

“I’ve always wanted a billionaire to owe me,” Jonathan said.

“If I can help you...what’s mine is yours.”

“Wow! That’s even better than owing me one. Does your offer include the wives of certain arms dealers?”

Augustus almost hung up. There was a long silence.

“Note to self: don’t ask priests to share their girlfriends,” Jonathan said aloud.

Jonathan didn’t know what had happened with Christine. Augustus was amazed that Jonathan knew about the two of them at all. He shook his head in dismay. Of all the retorts he could think of—angry, sarcastic, hurt, funny things—Augustus only managed to say, “Thanks again.”

“The Jesuit residence story is a wild one. I’ll look into it.” Jonathan clicked off.

As Augustus let himself into the house, he thought about his Jonathan. They had been close since freshman year of high school. College, graduate school and the seminary had put time and distance between them, but they’d kept contact throughout the years. That bond of time and living through adolescence together granted Jonathan certain privileges that no one else had with Augustus.

Jonathan was a mystery. He had an office and a secretary but, as far as Augustus could tell, no one knew exactly what it was Jonathan did. What was true and remarkable about him was that he was connected. There wasn’t a door closed to him. His knowledge of the world was encyclopedic. No matter what subject you brought up, you couldn’t catch Jonathan flat footed.

The other thing about Jonathan is that when he said he would “look into it,” there was a much better than even chance you would get an answer. Maybe he was the person to talk to about Christine.

Husband and Wife Pacific Palisades

ZACHARY FORTUNE SAT ON THE BED and appraised his wife's body as she dressed. He liked that fact that it made her uncomfortable. Years ago, when she complained, he'd made it clear that it was one of her few conjugal duties. He would fondle himself while she dressed and undressed. That was the extent of their sex. Lately, he found himself thinking of Gretel instead of the woman standing naked before him.

Christine tried to be demure. Going through this ritual with Zach felt like cheating. On whom? she wondered. As she had countless times before, she thought about leaving him, but there was always some impediment. This time, she wanted to be fully dressed and out of the bedroom when she told him she was leaving forever. Just another few minutes, she assured herself. She took a breath. Her insides roiled. Everything was wrong. Life that seemed full of promise had suddenly turned dark and unfriendly. Even if she managed to leave him, where would she go?

Zach pulled himself out of his Gretel fantasy for a moment.

"You've gained weight." It was an off-hand statement of fact.

"Have I?" It was typical of Zach to find fault. She thought she should be happy he was attracted to her at all, but ever since they married, his attention had become nothing but voyeurism and threat.

Christine grew increasingly uneasy as the expression on Zach's face hardened. She looked at herself in the mirror. She looked past the signs of age because those weren't new. For the life of her, she couldn't see what Zach was talking about.

"You're letting yourself go." He could smell the fear on her. He could smell the priest on her.

"Just what a wife wants to hear from her husband."

Zach stood. He closed the distance between them in an instant; let his pants fall to the ground. He was engorged and all he could think about was fucking her.

He bent her over and pressed her face down against the dresser, forcing her ass up in the air.

"Zach...?"

He jammed himself inside. Her next sound was a cry of pain. It didn't stop for a long time.

Zach never said a thing. When he finished, he pulled his pants up and walked out of the room. Christine slumped down onto the floor. Physical and emotional pain took her and she yielded to it. After a little while, the physical pain increased. She looked down at the floor and saw the blood.

He's torn me apart, she thought to herself. The bastard ripped her and then walked out like nothing happened. She tried to stand, but found that her energy was gone. The blood continued to seep out of her. I need stitches, she thought.

"Zach," she called. No response. She wondered if he'd left. Another cramp jammed up her insides. She doubled over. "Zach," she cried in desperation. Nothing. "I need to go to the hospital." Quiet. On all fours, she managed to get herself to the bathroom. She wondered if she was going to bleed to death right there.

She lay down on the cool marble floor, and curled up to try to minimize the pain. In mental and physical agony, she fell asleep. After awhile—she couldn't have said how long—she woke to find the pain had subsided. She felt herself and found that the bleeding had stopped.

Weakly, she made it to the soaking tub and ran water. She sat in the tub and cleaned herself up, then sank back into the hot water, covered her face with her hands, and wept.

Box

Major Crimes

EMMET JONES WAS A HUGE MAN. He was a young, African-American with the physique of a pro wrestler. While in high school, friends called him Box because in his baggy clothes he looked like a big box that somehow moved around. He was quick witted, ambitious, and scary strong. Over the years, he'd become Cruz' right hand man. He didn't sit often, but now he sat in Cruz' office with a file in his hands.

"You read it?" Cruz asked without looking up from something she was writing.

"I know they're priests and all, but if this ain't bullshit, I'll turn in my stripes," Box said placing the file gently on Cruz' desk.

"Exactly." She looked up at him and smiled. He always saw through the nonsense. "You should have seen it, Box. You look in this guy's mouth and there's an eye staring back at you. Right out of some nightmare." She shook her head to try to get rid of the image. "I brought Hobbes in because I hoped he could explain something. Hobbes might buy you a nice dinner but, other than that, he's useless. You read the M.E.'s report. The man wasn't forced. He sat there calmly and tried to swallow his own eyes."

"I hope that ain't catching," Box said.

"Have you seen Pettite lately? If this insanity is contagious, he might be the poster child."

Box looked through the blinds at Pettite who was standing with his back to the wall, rocking from one foot to the other and staring at the room.

"How can you tell?"

Cruz laughed.

Angel of Destruction

COLONEL PAUL STEPHENS MARCHED DOWN THE STREET to a staggered beat. His clothes wore weeks of trudging through open desert and the filth of city streets. Dark sunglasses, cap pulled low, and face cast down, he plowed through the crowd with a drunk's dedication to getting home before passing out. A feeling like a rumor spread through the crowd that a crazed killer was in their midst.

A sharp turn into the shiny new Petroleum Plaza pushed three unaware people out of the way. One woman fell, but no one complained because they shared an urgency to get away from the threat Paul seemed to exude. One man, exiting a cab, ran over to help the woman up then turned his attention on Paul who was at the door of the building.

He grabbed Paul's arm, "Hey."

Paul swung around to face him. For a moment, it seemed possible that Paul had been corralled. Bystanders breathed a collective breath of relief. Paul lowered his glasses half an inch. The man staggered back and knocked over the same woman he had just aided. He later told friends Paul had threatened him with a gun.

Paul continued into Petroleum One, the gleaming sixty-story testament to dependence. Nine people jammed onto the first elevator. Paul pressed himself in despite growing vocal objections from fellow riders. The doors couldn't close past Paul.

"There really isn't room for you, sir."

"Come on, man. Wait for another elevator."

The feeling that this man was a threat was just percolating into the souls of those in the elevator cab when Paul raised his head and lowered his glasses. Eight people screamed as they scrambled off the elevator. The ninth, Lila Temple, stood riveted. A beatific vision unfolded before her. Angels, rays of light no artist could duplicate, a bright light from the core of Heaven, filled her head. A feeling of ease and love, sinuous and sensuous caressed her. She floated up into the arms of God. His magnificent white hair and beard, his loving gaze welcomed her.

She drifted out of the elevator and the building; a manic smile contorted her face. Passersby found themselves captivated by one glance at her. They followed for a few steps before they could stop themselves and go on with their business making excuses to themselves for their brief detour into insanity.

Fortune Enterprises

THE ELEVATOR DOORS WHOOSHED OPEN to the lavish offices of Zach Fortune's company. Into the bustle of dresses, robes and suits that represented every ethnicity stepped Paul Stephens. The hustling workers stopped in their tracks. The odor of slept-in clothes and a sense of self-preservation cleared a path to the reception desk. Those awaiting their appointments buried their heads into their phones, reading the latest news from everywhere, hoping that the stranger would not sit next to them. Stephens swept by reception without a glance.

Todd, ex-mail-boy-now- receptionist, moved with the agility of a twenty-year-old who knew his job depended on controlling visitors.

"Sir?"

Paul continued without a break in his stride. Todd hurried past him and confronted him while walking backward. His co-workers made room, becoming the walls of a narrowed universe.

"Sir? May I help you?" he asked with a smile tightened by insecurity. "Sir? I must insist."

Paul pushed past him. Todd hurried in front of him again. Touched the call button on his headset.

"Security..."

He put an arm out like a cop at an intersection. Onlookers swore they saw Paul walk through the young man. Todd felt himself lifted up by his outstretched arm and placed aside like a broom. The snap of bone from his arm was audible to all around.

Gretel heard the commotion and peeked into the hall. Stephens closed the gap before she could think. He brushed past her. She stuttered something meant to delay his advance. His smell hit her and she recoiled a step. Paul went straight to Zach Fortune's door and went in.

"He's not in" was her last attempt at some form of office decorum. She rushed to her desk and pressed the panic button.

Paul Stephens crashed into the office and tottered to Zach's desk. Zach stood up in shock.

"Mister Secretary, I'll have to get back to you. Paul Stephens just walked in... Yes... that's right... Later." He pulled the earpiece out and looked at his intruder.

"Colonel Stephens. What an unexpected surprise."

Stephens seethed in reply.

"Paul. Are you all right? You—"

The door burst open and three burly security men wasted no time surrounding Paul. Gretel stood back holding the door wide open as if more, many more, were about to follow.

Unexpectedly, Paul relaxed. It created a vibration through the room that caught everyone off guard.

"Gretel, gentlemen, it's all right. Colonel Stephens is a friend."

"Sir?" one of the preternaturally large men asked.

"It's okay. Give Paul and me a moment."

A division of ex-marine/ex-pro-footballer types arrived. Suddenly, the vast office was awash in humanity. It was the largest gorilla exhibit outside of the Congo. Zach waved them away.

"Stand down," demanded Zach. The men looked to one another with uncertainty. Zach nodded toward the door. Gretel shooed the men away like flies.

Once the room cleared out, Gretel stood apprehensively.

"It's okay, Gretel."

"I'll ring you in a few minutes. You have the Pentagon conference," she offered as she left.

"Ah, yes." He turned to Paul. "Your bosses are very worried about whatever happened at Yucca. Perhaps you should stick around. They've been looking—"

The door closed. Paul lunged around to Fortune's side of the table. Fortune flinched but held his ground.

"You must learn to see," Paul said.

Zach wrinkled his nose at the pungent odor emitting from Paul. "I see just fine."

"You are blinded by your eyes. There is a world beyond this one." Paul growled.

Zach backed away. "What happened up there?"

Paul grabbed Zach. Zach punched Paul in the face which dislodged the sunglasses from his face.

"See the world as it really is."

Shriveled strands of flesh that were once eyelids hung over empty bloody sockets that had once held Paul's fine, blue eyes. They sucked at Fortune's soul.

The room fell to total silence then Zach's ears began to buzz and tingle. The ringing assumed impossible dimension until he felt himself consumed by it. From inside the bloody depths of Paul's eyes came a light. It promised answers.

"See the world. See it." Paul embraced Zach.

Zach wanted to back away from the stench, the sound, the awful visage, but the light grew and Zach stared at it like a little child at his first carnival. Zach saw the world. Life wasn't good and evil locked in an eternal battle. Life was evil, pure and simple. What was taken for good was only the spice evil stirred into the stew to raise the hopes of those yearning for peace. He saw the world as it stomped over the dreams of those stupid enough to hope.

A father cornered his young daughter who shrank back in horror. The same man smiled piously as he collected donations at his church. Members of gangs and armies laughed as they slaughtered the innocent, then gave humble thanks to their gods for their victories. Every atrocity carried with it some sign of the perpetrator's kind side thrown in to confuse the issue. He saw.

Paul pulled back. He flung Zach aside like a used paper cup. Zach crumpled to the floor and mumbled impassively as Paul hefted the executive chair over his head and hurled it with enough force to fracture the closest window. He ran full tilt into the window and he and Zach's bust, disturbed from its roost, hurtled sixty stories down to their doom.

The crash startled an already alarmed Gretel into action. She was through the door and standing in the cyclone that was her lover's office before she could think. The wind ripped at her dress. She saw no one and screamed Zach's name over and over as she made her way to the window and what she assumed was the dreaded truth. One of the bodyguards rounded Zach's desk and found him babbling on the floor; Zach's fingers were embedded in the gore that was his eyes. Gretel scrambled over to him. She stared at his bleeding, shredded face. Weeping and clawing at her lover, her scream rose above the moan of the wind.

Hobbes Mansion

“I NEED YOUR HELP.” Christine stood with her arms crossed facing Augustus in Ham’s living room. She kept her eyes focused on the floor. Augustus had not changed or even washed up since he’d come back from the police station. He didn’t know what to say to her. He caught her eye for one moment, but she shut him out the next.

Christine’s mind and body ached. She felt Zach’s violation of her as if it were still happening. She’d told herself that seeing Augustus would help heal her. But being in the presence of him or any man simply brought her pain to the forefront. She was here on a mission, bent under the yoke of marital responsibility.

“You need something?” Maria asked from behind Christine. Christine didn’t bother to respond. Maria spat silently, reached into her apron pocket for her stash of evil chasing salt and caste some in Christine’s direction, mouthing a silent prayer.

Augustus smiled, “No thank you, Maria.”

Maria left.

“You’ve read about the event at my husband’s office?”

“Impossible to miss.” He wanted to take her in his arms, but there was nothing inviting in her demeanor. “I meant to call or...”

“What you read is only a part of the story. A very small part.”

“An Army colonel broke into your husband’s office, killed himself, and injured Zach in the process. The papers didn’t say what the injury was,” Augustus prompted.

She shifted her weight back and forth. “Your PhD is in psychology, isn’t it?” she asked.

“That was a long time ago. I’m not a psychologist.”

“It’s insane.” She crumpled into his arms.

He caught her, held her.

“You’re all I have,” she whispered.

He wanted to rescue her. He wanted to stand between her and the world.

She pulled herself out of his arms. “Come with me.”

“Anywhere,” he said.

“Take a look at Zach.”

What could he say? The last thing he wanted to do was spend even a moment with Zachary Fortune, but if this is where love was leading him, so he must go. He nodded.

Callide, Sacerdos Pacific Palisades

THE FORTUNE CONDO WAS TESTAMENT to a great deal of money spent on surprisingly little. The living room could be viewed as Spartan or as taste slavishly obeyed. Subtle hues and rich fabrics mixed with a few pieces of art perfectly blended into a view of the city on one side and the ocean on the other that took even the most jaded visitor's breath away.

The spoiler in the room was a rented medical bed holding Zach Fortune prisoner. Foot and hand restraints, tubes leading to and from plastic bags and bandages that covered his eyes encompassed Zach's world now.

A painfully thin nurse sat on the sofa close to the bed, reading. She glanced at her ward then returned to the Cosmo love test she was taking.

"No way," she told the magazine. "That is just plain wrong."

Zach mumbled something. The nurse put down her magazine, shaking her head at it, came to his side, and straightened sheets which needed no straightening.

"What was that, sweetie?"

"The Priest is coming," Zach said.

CHRISTINE'S CONVERTIBLE BENTLEY GLIDED into the valet station in front of her building. Roscoe, who got his name from the old crime novels his mother loved to read, opened the door for Christine while Augustus, in his black "work clothes," found his own way out of the passenger seat.

"Welcome, Missus Fortune."

"Thank you, Roscoe. Keep it close by, please."

"Will do."

He sat in the plush driver's seat and stared as Christine entered the building. The pout of her lips and the sway of her hips, along with a little bit of thievery, made his nothing day at a nothing job worthwhile.

The elevator opened on the condo's foyer.

"Zach, I'm home."

She put her keys on a sleek alabaster table beneath a breathtaking Santa Fe painting of a river raging through a canyon. Augustus hung back a few steps as she strode into the living room.

“Miz Fortune. He’s very upset. He keeps saying something about a priest,” the nurse said, clearly unsettled. Augustus entered as if cued. In addition to the black on black clothing, there was something paternal in his carriage. The nurse shivered when she saw him.

“Priest.” Zach’s voice filled the room. His face turned away from the entrance.

“Heretic,” Zach laughed. The laugh mutated into words which slowly became distinct.

“The Priest. The Priest. The Priest. The Priest...”

Christine crossed the distance to her husband’s bed in a second.

“Zach?”

He stopped his rant but turned his bandaged eyes to Augustus.

“At last,” he whispered.

“Zach, this is Augustus Hobbes. You remember him?”

“Callide Sacerdos.” Zach wrenched against his restraints.

The nurse pulled a cross pendant out from under her leopard print tunic and kissed it.

“Have you come to join me, Father?” Zach asked as he writhed and groaned miserably.

“Come closer,” urged the raspy whisper from somewhere deep inside the restrained body.

“Mister Fortune.” Augustus stepped up to the bed.

“The Words. Say the Words, Priest.”

“I ... words?” Augustus was cast back to his nightmare in the church, in the Jesuit residence and what Ham had just said to him.

“That’s right, Priest. That’s right. Say them.”

“Mister Fortune, I really don’t...”

Zach slowly rocked in his bed. He moaned lightly at first. The moans and the rocking grew and grew. He strained against the straps that bound him.

“Mister Fortune!” The nurse and Augustus said in unison.

Christine scrambled to her husband’s side. “Zach?” She leaned across to hold one restraint that was in danger of breaking.

The nurse pushed Augustus aside to lend her scant weight to the bed to try and hold Zach Fortune down.

“Get out of here! Now,” the nurse said, her voice booming from a deeper place than she appeared to possess.

“Sacerdos. Sacerdos! Veni, Sanctificator!” Zach’s voice intoned like a chant.

His mouth agape at the scene before him, Augustus backed away. A foot. Then another. With each step back, Zach became less violent. When Augustus stepped into the foyer, the moaning ceased. The nurse and Christine hesitantly released their grips on his arms and eased back until their bodies were clear of the bed. Augustus tried to catch Christine’s eye, but hers were fixed on her husband.

He made his way down the elevator and out under the canopy.

“Sir. “

“Roscoe, is that right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Would you mind getting me a cab, please?”

Roscoe, assuming that Christine’s and Augustus’ plans were spoiled by her husband, did so without delay. It was a good thing. Roscoe didn’t want to think of Christine with this man. Within a minute, a cab appeared. Augustus had just closed the door as Christine bounded out of the building.

“Augustus. Wait. I’ll drive you.”

He rolled down the window. “I think you’re needed here.”

“So are you. You saw.”

“You told him I was coming.” A flat statement without intention.

“No. For all he knew I was having my hair done.”

“I suppose the black suit. Last time he saw me I was still...”

“He has no eyes.”

“He knows Latin.”

She looked at him questioningly.

“Latin. ‘Callide Sacerdos.’ He called me ‘sly priest’ in Latin. Then he said, ‘Veni, Sanctificator.’ It’s from the Mass. ‘Come, O Sanctifier.’ ”

“Augustus, I don’t know what’s going on, but Zach isn’t Catholic. Besides, he doesn’t read. He’s severely dyslexic. The idea of him learning another language...”

“2727 Perugia Way, please,” he said to the driver. Christine stood back and watched Augustus slip away.

All This Study for Something You Know Hobbes Mansion

AUGUSTUS, SHAVED, BATHED, AND NAKED, pulled his weary eyes away from the pile of books on Hamilton's desk. Whatever answers he was seeking were not there. His mind raced. For the first time in years, he was thrilled. The horror of the past few days had turned into a full-blown obsession to find out what was going on. He stretched his way to the leaded glass windows behind the desk and looked out at the beautiful garden and treed land behind the house.

The smell of oiled wood, of shelves filled with old, well cared for books made him feel he was in some medieval European library—the guest, perhaps, of an impossibly reclusive knight of a secret order. He looked closer at the leaded glass. Each panel had a different design: The rosy cross of Rosicrucianism, the Star of David, the Star and Crescent, the tetramorph from the book of Ezekiel. Augustus searched his memory: “As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side, and they four had the face of an ox on the left side, they four also had the face of an eagle.”

He turned to the desk. It was a magnificent. Made of oak carved with acanthus leaves and linen folds. He walked around it and studied it for the first time.

The four pillars of the desk were carved into Ezekiel's four creatures now thought of as symbols for the evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Above each were the Hebrew letters, the four fixed signs of the zodiac and the elements they represented.

Matthew, the man, was linked to Aquarius the water bearer by early Christians who saw the way the four fixed signs of the zodiac formed a cross in the sky. Matthew was associated with the Hebrew letter, tzaddi, the fish hook. A puffed-cheek god of wind representing air, sat above him.

Mark, the lion, had the sign of Leo resting above him along with the letter teth, the serpent and a burning bush for fire. Luke, the ox or calf, had Taurus for his sign and the letter vav, the nail and a tree representing earth. And John, the eagle, stood with Scorpio and the letter nun, the fish, and wavy lines symbolizing water.

The center vanity panel of the desk was the Tree of Life.

Augustus shook his head in wonder as he traced the eagle with one finger. Ham walked in wearing a threadbare pair of pants and a shirt that must have been his civilian clothes after the end of World War II.

“Clothes?”

“Danger is afoot. You should see Maria! There will be Wagner tonight.” He grabbed the blanket from the desk chair and wrapped it around his nephew’s shoulders.

“Don your apparel, Augustus, a foul wind’s astir.”

Dramatics were normal in the house of Hamilton Hobbes. Perhaps Ham and Maria were doing The Scottish Play this evening. He pointed at the desk.

“Ham, this desk!”

Ham caressed the desk with his aged hand. “A gift from the beloved Order.”

By the “Order,” Augustus understood he referred to the Rosicrucian order of which Augustus knew little save it was a mixture of Christianity, Judaism and Egyptian mythology, somehow related to the Masons and that it started either very long ago or sometime in the eighteenth century. The Rosicrucians claimed almost every learned man of the ages as a member and for all Augustus knew, they were. They were full of secrets revealed at hierarchical levels attainable only through study. It always reminded Augustus of a Taoist teacher he had years ago who, when asked what the answer was, answered, “Ah, the answer is ...” Augustus laughed as he remembered the dramatic pause the old Chinese man gave, “... there is no answer.”

“Carved a millennium ago. The oak chest converted to a desk in eighteen eighty-three.”

Augustus ran his hand against the wood and carvings. The carving was old but a thousand years old? He pictured some medieval carving in his head: green men, Christ figures, martial victory panels. He ran his finger over the tree of life. Regardless of its age, it was a glorious piece that he didn’t remember ever seeing before, even though he’d sat in front of it just a few days before.

“Your clothes,” nagged Ham. He looked over the books and scribbled notes on the desk. As much to himself as to Augustus he said, “All this study for something you already know.”

He pulled out a Rosicrucian monograph on Aries and The Alphabet of Nature by F.M. Van Helmont and set them on top of the pile.

“If you must acquire your inner knowledge through a book, start with those.”

Angel of Mercy Fifth and San Pedro

AFTER SPENDING A DAY AND NIGHT CLOTHED AND IN VIRTUAL LOCKDOWN without Macbeth or any other entertainment to pass the time, Augustus decided it was time to do something. Christine was not answering his calls. He went by her condo and Roscoe told him the Fortunes were out. Augustus pressed the issue and Roscoe, with a little more enthusiasm that Augustus felt was needed, told him that Mrs. Fortune had specifically instructed to stop all visitors, especially Augustus Hobbes.

In the privacy of his own car, he yelled at Roscoe for his rudeness and browbeat Zach into submission with a few choice words. Then he chided himself for imagining him towering over a blind, helpless Zach Fortune. He tried Christine again. Straight to voice mail. He left yet another message. His messages sounded whiny, even to him.

Frustrated beyond his comprehension, not really wanting to return to Ham's house, he called Jonathan. "What do you know about Fortune's accident?"

There was a long silence.

"Come on, Jonathan. I know you know everything about everybody."

"Come down for a visit. We'll have a nice chat," offered Jonathan as he hung up.

LILA TEMPLE HAD TRANSCENDED, METAMORPHOSED INTO A CELESTIAL BEING. She could see it in her reflection. She could hear God's words in her own voice. The Archangel, Paul Stephens, had given her the gift of purpose.

One day, after reading about why monks shaved tonsures on the crowns of their heads, she shaved her head so that God could speak to her without the interference of hair. She kissed each of her three, young children and assured them that she was just going for groceries. Then, with the click of the front door lock, she turned her back on her children, her about-to-be foreclosed house, and the life of debt she had lived since her husband had deserted her a year earlier. She prowled the streets in search of souls to send home to her heavenly father.

Find them she did. The homeless, especially those recently shaken off the ailing tree of the American dream, came to her. She took them to her bosom, welcomed them to the promise that emanated from her eyes. There, they found the answers that, until that moment, they had despaired of ever finding.

Her church was the street. She welcomed all: transgressors, sinners, the lost, and the true believers. All found a home in her refulgent blue eyes. Her words were meaningless

sounds as if spoken in a contrived language, but the message was clear: Heaven is coming.

Across the street, Augustus climbed out of his uncle's town car. Maria was driving because Ham had insisted that no one go out alone anymore. Dressed in his clerical black suit, he was late for his meeting with Jonathan whose office was in a building across the street from Lila and her curbside church. Augustus leaned into the driver's window.

"Half an hour, tops. More than that, we'll start reminiscing," he said with a grimace.

Maria, dressed in something like a Teutonic Knight's chain mail and tunic, nodded, but glanced nervously at Lila's congregation. Augustus followed her look across the street to Lila and her flock. Something almost Christ-like in Lila's carriage drew Augustus off the curb and a few steps toward her. Desmond, now one of her disciples, turned in Augustus' direction. Augustus smiled in recognition. Desmond returned a smile that was a nightmare.

"Priest!" The word swirled around him and he swiveled to see if Zach Fortune had somehow materialized behind him chanting the word. In the car, Maria's eyes widened as she focused on Lila. Augustus looked back to the gathering before him. Desmond and the others were chanting, "Sacerdos." The street itself seemed to reverberate with the word.

Lila raised her infectious look to Augustus. Augustus felt something physically pull him to her. He forced himself back in hasty, clumsy steps and tripped over the curb. Maria was there in an instant and half-carried Augustus back into the car. She deposited him in the backseat, crossed herself twenty-one times as she got behind the wheel and sped off.

"Your fiend can visit you," she stated flatly as she careened around a corner.

"Friend," Augustus corrected automatically as he stared out the back window at the assembled throng. The last thing he saw was Lila with her hands extended to him in invitation.

Christine Alone

CHRISTINE EMBRACED HERSELF as she watched her husband writhe in his bonds. His moans shivered up her spine. The nurse sat on the couch engrossed in her magazine. Christine couldn't remember her name.

"Excuse me," she said.

The nurse's eyes didn't quite make it off her page but her raised eyebrows encouraged Christine to continue.

"I'm going out for a while."

The nurse nodded.

"Need anything?"

The nurse shook her head. And so it was. Christine looked over her husband to see if everything was all right. She took a step forward to perhaps touch him, perhaps be near him, but his moaned babble picked up in volume and pace so she retreated. The nurse had taken over Zach's care completely with his blessing. Christine decided she would have to fire her or learn her name. One or the other.

One last look, one last nail in the coffin of her relationship with her husband. She was not needed. It seemed a perfect exit from the hell her life had become. The problem was that she felt locked into the relationship as if she were barricaded inside a windowless, lightless room. Before he raped her—what else could she call it?—she'd barely thought of Zach and herself as a couple. Now, she felt viscerally connected. A writhing tether of flesh, which felt as real as her own but ectoplasmic in nature, united them. Whenever she tried to examine it, whenever she questioned her state of mind, the tether seemed to tighten its grasp until she felt she couldn't breathe.

The nurse looked up when she heard the door close behind Christine. She took a quick glance at her charge. Visually checked that the ankle and wrist bindings were secure and sauntered into the kitchen.

There, she perused the contents of the refrigerator. After several indecisive grabs and releases, she settled for a beer and a jar of pitted, green olives. Standing at the kitchen island, she fished olives out of the jar and washed them down with impressive slugs of beer.

She looked toward the living room. Something seemed out of order. She snared one last olive between two fingers and listened for a moment. She popped the olive in her mouth, grabbed a second beer and returned guardedly into the living room.

It took a moment to register. The room appeared diffused as if a cloud had found its way in. She swiped at her eyes to remove the non-existent mist. Hesitant steps led her to the couch. She peered toward the bed. Empty!

She scanned the room. Her feet felt like they were sinking into the floor. She looked down to see that they were being swallowed by a quicksand of lush rug. Pulling up in vain, at first annoyed and then frightened, a whimper escaped her. She looked up. Zach Fortune was two inches from her; the bandages from his eye sockets gone.

“You’re no longer needed,” he said.

Zach Goes to Work

THE SMALL MAN WITH THE DARK GLASSES made his way through the crowded city street to Petroleum One. No one seemed to notice him and he was forced to battle his way through a sea of elbows and shoulders into the building.

He entered the Fortune Enterprises lofty offices. Todd, his arm in a cast and sling, looked up. Although he didn't immediately recognize him, he thought there was something familiar about the man. The man walked up to the reception desk.

"I fired you. Get out," he said as he turned and walked down the hall toward his office.

Todd recognized the voice and fear filled him. He wanted to do something smart and brave, but it took all he had not to break down into tears as he watched his boss walk away. Everyone in the waiting room turned their attention to the back of Zach Fortune.

Rumors had been rife since "the event," as it was called. People had heard that Fortune had been blinded by the crazy army colonel. This man clearly was not blind. Others said that he picked the larger man up and cast him bodily through the windows of his office. Some said there was a poison gas or some kind of psychotropic drugs involved. The guard who first reached Zach that fateful day went home, cleaned his gun, shot his wife and three sons dead, then turned the gun on himself.

The paramedics who first tended to Zach had found a startling new preoccupation with religion. Their shifts slipped by without a word from them as they spent every living moment on their knees, slowly dying of dehydration, appealing to a harsh god for the salvation of their eternal souls.

Gretel had spent three days locked in her luxurious apartment, drapes closed, lights off and the phone unanswered, sorting out the insanity she had witnessed. It was assumed she would never return to work after bearing witness to the event. On the fourth day, she showed up, early as usual, and took her place behind her desk as though nothing had happened. She sorted through the stacks of mail that no one had the nerve to touch and cheerfully greeted all the staff who came by to see for themselves if the rumor of her return was true.

She knew the universe had tested her and found her lacking. She was stronger than the muscle bound security guards who'd cringed around after Zach was taken from the office by the paramedics. She was stronger than the staff who whispered rumors. She knew Zach Fortune would come back for her and would reward her for her stalwart defiance in the face of the unknowable.

When Zach, followed at a distance by an entourage of staff, entered his outer office, Gretel sprang to her feet. The day had come. The world would re-right itself.

As he passed by her, he said, “Gretel, accompany me. The rest of you, full staff meeting in the conference room. Five minutes. Everybody! Even that bastard I fired.”

Gretel obediently followed Zach and closed the inner-office door behind her. Zach walked to the wall of windows—the broken one had been replaced the day of the event. He looked for all the world like he was admiring the view.

“Zach?”

“A higher duty has been granted us.”

She had no idea what he was talking about. She wanted to ask a million questions, starting with how he walked in without help. She swallowed her curiosity and assured herself that whatever Zach had to say would clarify everything.

“Yes, sir.”

He turned to her and lowered his glasses. The empty eye-sockets rocked her. A shivering started deep inside her and threatened to knock her off her feet. She fought to regain control of her body.

“Come to me and you will understand everything.”

Step by unsteady step, she walked to him. Part of her wanted to run away. Part of her wanted to faint. Part of her started making up stories that would explain this insane path on which her boss was leading her. She forced herself to look into the cavities that once held his steely eyes. She desperately wanted to be transported, to be assumed into the heaven Zach seemed to be in. After the initial shock, nothing happened. There was an emptiness in her that almost made her cry out in pain.

She forced a smile. “I see it,” she said selling it with everything she had.

Zach pulled the belt off his pants. Gretel assumed that she was expected to comfort him the way she always did and dropped to her knees. She unzipped his pants. He caressed her head for a moment, then quickly and adroitly, slipped the belt around her neck and pulled it tight.

She overcame her shock and fought with all her might. As her last breath escaped her Zach said, “You don’t see anything.”

THE STAFF MEETING was a runaway freight train. A few people managed to slip out just as Zach unveiled the truth of his new world. The rest, hulking security guards to willowy young interns and Todd stood whimpering but spellbound while their minds tried to deal with the visions that pounded them.

Each understood they were to spread the word. If one could have asked them in a moment of calm what had just happened or what that “word” was, the answer would have been a rag-tag group of words that added up to inelegant gibberish. But they knew what was required. Immediately, the travel office of the company shifted into a wartime sense of urgency. Staffers booked flights to every part of the globe. The word would spread.

Pandemic Hobbes Mansion

JONATHAN MOORE WAS WHAT MOST PEOPLE WOULD CALL A MILQUETOAST: unassuming in physical build, hair and dress. Reserved in demeanor, only a sense of bemusement that lay somewhere behind his beige exterior and dark eyes gave any clue that something was there that was worth a person's time.

He'd made the trip to meet Ham and Augustus at the mansion. House calls by Jonathan Moore were unheard of. Most of his contacts had only met him over the phone or on Skype. Yet here he was seated in the living room, nursing a drink and trying to make sense of escalating events.

"It's always eyes," he said, "and it's spreading," His bland face was an opaque mask. Augustus leaned forward. "Spreading?"

"Aries," Ham said.

"Later," Augustus said to his uncle.

"My sources in the Nevada state government have disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Augustus asked.

"And the news and military sources I rely on have nothing ... In my entire career, I've never encountered so many tight lips," Jonathan said.

Ham and Augustus sat glued to his words.

"I mean, there's a general who, under normal circumstances, gladly divulges the darkest indiscretions of his life and the direst military secrets. Now, he will only say things like, 'top secret' and 'can't say a thing, Jonathan.' Something's got 'em running scared." He gave it some thought.

"I'll grant you ..." the bemusement returned, "... the general's the sort of man who drinks chardonnay."

Augustus looked at the glass of petite sirah in his own hand and wondered what it said about him.

He stared at Jonathan. Jonathan, the man who had the answer to every question, was clueless. It unnerved Augustus.

"And this 'thing' drove Colonel Stephens to attack Zach Fortune?"

"Augustus, I have no idea. Paul Stephens was moonlighting as a Fortune operative. But the eyes..."

"Aries," inserted Ham.

Jonathan brought out a single paper from his jacket and unfolded it on the table between them. Ham and Augustus joined Jonathan on the sofa to look at it.

“A friend in the Secretary of State’s office sent along a CIA briefing on Hungary with a panicky note about the end of the world. I wish I could say I understand. I wish I could say this is just some isolated madness caused by ergot in the rye flour or something. But it’s happening everywhere.” Jonathan rubbed his eyes, took another sip of scotch and leaned back, giving them more room to read.

“Szeged, Hungary is situated on the Tisza River in the Southern part of the country. Its history dates back at least as far as Ptolemy. Attila used it as a headquarters. The Ottomans used it as the administrative center for their Hungarian conquest. It’s also known for the severity and extent of witch trials carried out there in the early eighteenth century, which still reverberate today. It is celebrated primarily for the paprika trade and for its resplendent old town. Szeged is called the ‘City of Sunshine.’”

Jonathan spoke the words from memory as if he were delivering a briefing. “Recently, a cluster of sightings of aliens or witches, depending on the reporting source, has plagued the city. The once bustling nightlife has dwindled to nothing and the streets now teem with mobs bent on destruction. The hysteria is spreading without known cause or agent. Reports from inside the city are limited to social networks and are highly subjective in nature.

“These events are purported to have started after a weak earthquake collapsed an archaeological dig just outside of the old city walls. The Hungarian government has quarantined the city and its surrounding area and imposed a strict curfew, but they were losing control of the situation. Reports of deaths in the hundreds are unconfirmed.”

His nerves made Augustus jump up and pace. “You think this is related to what I saw at the residence and Zach Fortune yelling at me in a language he didn’t know?”

Jonathan shrugged. “You said Barrone looked right into your eyes?”

Augustus nodded.

“Why aren’t you tearing your eyes out?”

“Libra!” Ham said.

“Later. Please?” Augustus begged his uncle. He turned back to Jonathan, “What about ‘The Words?’ Any ideas?”

“Remember what I told you about your place in this matter,” Ham said to his nephew.

“I’ve heard the same thing from a couple of sources. They were asking me what ‘The Words’ were,” Jonathan answered. “I’ll grant you what I know about exorcism comes from movies, but speaking in tongues and eating your own eyes, that sounds like your world not mine.”

The doorbell announced a visitor.

Maria, giving her best prison guard impression, marched Christine into the room. Jonathan and Ham joined Augustus on their feet. Maria backed away flicking salt toward Christine as she went.

“Christine!” Augustus said.

She lowered her eyes so Augustus wouldn't see the shame she felt for being where she didn't belong.

"Ah, Missus Fortune." Jonathan approached her with an outstretched hand.

"Jonathan Moore. I know your husband. I'm so sorry to hear about his accident."

Christine forced a smile and nodded absently. She glanced at Hamilton. "Mister Hobbes."

Hamilton took her hand and brushed it with his lips. "My dear. What a pleasure. May I offer you something to drink?"

Christine contemplated her life for about one second before responding, "Whiskey."

Augustus growled out his best baritone and said, "I'll get it. I was just going to switch to something more potent." He gave his red wine a look like it might be a fruit punch.

Hamilton indicated the couch. "Please have a seat. Never fear. No Hobbesian flesh has sullied that cushion."

Augustus brought her a crystal tumbler with two splashes of amber liquid in it and held its twin in his other hand. She took it.

He bent down to her and softly said, "I'm glad you're here."

She raised her eyes. The confusion of her life overwhelmed her and, without thought, she leapt into his arms, spilling both drinks onto a beautiful Isfahan pure silk rug.

Jonathan watched the liquid absorb into the priceless silk. His first reaction was to get on his knees and blot it up with anything that was handy. He looked at Ham whose eyes were fixed on Christine and Augustus.

"Well, I'd best be going," Jonathan offered.

"Nonsense. Come with me to my study. I have a theory about the importance of sounds and wavelengths I think is worth taking a look at."

Invitations by Hamilton Hobbes to do anything were as rare as Jonathan's field trips so, when Ham offered his arm, Jonathan, after a final check on the rug and the lovers, joined him. Perhaps, if they get to rolling around on it, they'll blot it up, he thought to himself.

AUGUSTUS WAS SO HUNGRY FOR CHRISTINE that he couldn't stop himself. Christine's gentle reproofs changed nothing. She used all of her strength to push him away. The force of it slapped Augustus sober.

"What's wrong? What have I done?"

"Nothing." She looked at him. She wanted that lightness and exhilaration she used to feel with him, but all she felt was guilt.

"I don't understand," was all Augustus could say.

"I don't either."

“You need some time away from Zach. After what’s happened to him, I can understand...”

“He doesn’t want me there.”

“Then stay with me.”

She didn’t say yes...but she didn’t say no. Augustus felt hope for the first time in a couple of days.

The First Wave Hobbes Mansion

“HAM,” AUGUSTUS BURST INTO THE STUDY. “Would it be all right with you if Christine stayed here for a while?”

“I’d be delighted! I’ll have Maria prepare the ‘Queen’ bedroom.”

Augustus started to close the door.

“Augustus,” called Jonathan. “What’s going on?”

“Things have been a little dicey at her place.”

“Dicey?”

“My boy, Jonathan and I would like a little more information.”

“Let me get her situated,” Augustus offered, “and I’ll come right back down and tell you all about it.”

“Augustus, it will take Maria a little while to prepare the room. Sit down with us,” Ham offered a chair with a gesture.

“I’ll make up the bed,” Augustus insisted.

“Do you know where the linens are?” his uncle asked.

Augustus shook his head.

“Neither do I. Just relax for a moment.”

“I’ll be right back.”

“Augustus,” Jonathan said. “What your uncle is saying is drag your dick in here and listen.” Augustus shot Jonathan an ugly look.

Ham stood and called out, “Christine?”

Christine poked her head into the room.

“Please join us.” He held a chair for her, then pressed a button on an intercom in the wall. “Maria?”

“Yes?” Maria’s voice was full of apprehension.

“Would you prepare the Queen of Swords room for Missus Fortune, please?”

Maria’s face dropped and a word she never said to Hamilton Hobbes escaped her lips. “No.”

“No?”

Hamilton, Augustus and Christine looked at each other in surprise. A slight smile passed over Jonathan’s lips.

“I mean, yes. Right now.” Maria walked away as Ham’s “thank you” came across the intercom. She wiped her face with both hands, hoping to erase the fear and confusion

she felt as she paced the kitchen. Without thinking, she grabbed a butcher knife and held it close to her bosom.

"Maria's always getting her English mixed up," Hamilton apologized to Christine. "You know that the Greek word for 'yes' sounds just like the English word 'no'?"

"She's Greek?" Christine asked.

"We're not sure what she is," Augustus answered.

"Christine," Hamilton started, "You're always welcome here, but please tell us why you came."

"And don't skip the juicy parts," Jonathan added. "Your husband's name comes up in every discussion."

MARIA SOFTLY CURSED as she made the bed in the spacious, feminine bedroom decorated like the Ryder-Waite Tarot card for the Queen of Swords. A single Excalibur-like sword was mounted tip up over the fireplace. Beside it lay a thick piece of rope looped and cut to symbolize release from captivity. White and blue padded silk covered the walls and a small, single, black bird was painted in flight on the west wall. The chairs and bedspread were done in angels and stars mixed with clouds and fish. Maria liked the sword, had used it one night when she condensed the Wagner Ring down to a twenty minute routine for Ham's entertainment, but felt the rest of the room was too girly for her taste.

She straightened up, hands on hips and grunted at the bed. She was unable to do it justice because she would not turn her back to the door. She felt in her bones that the Fortune woman would bring destruction down on all of their heads, and here she was making up a bed for her. Hamilton Hobbes was a wise man, but men lost all ability to think when an attractive woman came into the picture. And that nephew of his was a lost soul. She understood Hamilton doing what he could for the man, but this was going too far.

She grabbed her knife from the nightstand and turned off the lights. One last look around the room showed her the curtains were still open. She sighed, cast a wary glance at the sword on the wall and carefully locked the door, though she doubted it would stop the demons from bursting in on her. Keeping one eye on the wall with doors leading to the closet and bathroom, she went to the windows. She pulled the sheers closed and was about to close the drapes when something in the backyard caught her eye.

She peered down into the dimly lit yard, then staggered back to the far wall rubbing at her eyes, breath caught in her throat. Frantically, she fought with the lock on the door and scrambled out of the room.

"Hobbes!" A high and panicky screech preceded her as she ran down the hall, knife leveled before her.

Devils

MARIA'S SCREAM FILLED THE IMMENSE HOUSE. It pierced the heart of the conversation in Ham's study. Augustus was out of his chair and into the foyer before the others could stir.

Maria clambered down the stairs as the others came to meet her.

"Devils in the yard. Many! Devils!"

Augustus started for the front door.

"No. Back. The property."

Augustus changed direction.

"I'll call the police." Jonathan pulled out his cell phone.

Hamilton stood in Augustus' way and proffered a cane. Augustus looked at him for an explanation.

Hamilton tugged on the cane's handle and a sharp three foot long sword emerged.

"Didn't I ever tell you about this?"

"Keep Christine safe." He pushed the cane back to Hamilton.

Maria scowled at Christine.

"She brought them here," she started but Augustus was already gone.

AUGUSTUS HURRIED THROUGH THE HOUSE to French doors off the main living room, which led to an immense patio. He squinted into the dark and saw movement near the bushes. Cautiously, he moved onto the grass. The grass was trampled down as if a garden party had just ended. A sense of insecurity welled up in him and he looked back at the house for reassurance. It loomed, looking dark and empty. He really must learn to listen to his uncle. Maybe the sword cane wasn't a bad idea.

Indiscernible whispers led Augustus through the foliage that separated the first of the garden "rooms" from the house. He saw a figure standing near a weeping birch.

"Priest..." A whisper on the wind.

As he closed in, the figure evaporated into the tangle of drooping branches.

He brushed them aside and squinted into the dark. Breathless, he hoped to catch some sign of the intruder. Something pestered his hair. He swiped at it. Twigs of the birch tickled at him. He moved a couple of inches to duck them.

Lila stepped up behind him. He swirled around to face her.

"You?!" he said. He remembered her from the street across from Jonathan's office. Was her congregation was with her? The grounds felt soulless and hopeless.

"Fortune has a message for you." She stepped closer.

Augustus decided to drag her into the house so they could wait for the police.

“Veni, Sanctificator.” She stared at him. He froze on the spot.

Her eyes! He was cast back into Barrone’s room. He could feel the dread of that nightmare creep into him.

The branches played with him again. They whipped him. It felt like someone was combing his hair. He swiped at them, but grimaced in pain as his movement resulted in hair being yanked out along with the entwined twigs.

“What, in the name of God ...?”

The branches moved inside his clothes. They insinuated themselves into his flesh and he watched them writhe beneath the skin of his hands like trapped snakes. He struggled and found himself bound head to toe, unable to move a muscle without creating waves of intense pain.

WHEN AUGUSTUS HAD RUSHED OUT OF THE HOUSE, Ham shepherded his guests and Maria back into his study. Jonathan was on his phone with the police commissioner.

The front door boomed as if some huge metallic fist had crashed onto the oak and iron portal. It brought them back out into the foyer. Hamilton’s hand tensed on the sword handle of his cane. The door opened as if inviting the guests to enter. Lila Temple stood in the doorway, a dozen men behind her. There was a moment of peace then a rumble of words began.

Maria saw devils swarm into the house. Cloven-footed, horned and pointy-tailed devils. They came in packs of a dozen.

“We are lost,” she screamed. She looked at Hamilton, raised her knife above her head and, with a Valkyrie like wail, charged the invaders.

Jonathan pulled the phone away from his ear, the police commissioner still assuring him that a significant police response was on its way. He watched the murderous mob surge through the door, a scene from the French Revolution. Peasants with pitchforks and torches. A multitude! The phone was batted from his hand. He was lifted off his feet and pressed against the wall. They were going to kill him.

Maria’s knife thrust found the side of one of the men. She felt it cut its way through flesh and muscle. His demonic eyes grew bright and his laugh crawled up her back. Another man picked her up and flung her across the room. She struck the newel post of the staircase with the resounding crack of her back breaking.

Hamilton was on them, sword exposed, and attacked the man who had catapulted Maria. The man blocked Hamilton’s thrust with his forearm; the blade embedded in the muscle between his ulna and radius. For a moment, the two stood locked in hate and pain. The man grabbed the blade up close to the hilt and snapped it in two. Ham staggered back. He looked over the scene: Jonathan held tight against the wall, Maria moaning at

the foot of the stairs, and Christine lost in the advancing group. He dropped to his knees and began to chant.

As Christine watched, she saw the foyer fill with grim ecclesiastics, Dominican inquisitors all who accused her with their eyes and murmurs.

“Whore,” they hissed. “Harlot,” they spit.

They pointed at her and laughed derisively. She shrank from them as they closed in on her. She could no longer see Hamilton, Jonathan or Maria. They had deserted her. She deserved no better. She was as her accusers described her. The dark mob encircled her. Their accusations deafened her.

Someone ripped the blouse off her back. A cat o’ nine tails appeared in her tormentors’ hands. The closest man raised his in the air. It cracked down on her bare flesh. She screamed in pain. Another followed. She would bear it, for it was right and just.

Hamilton’s chant grew in volume. Those closest to him shrank away. Some howled in pain. Lila came up behind Ham. He turned to face her just as she clasped her hands together and swung them down to the side of his head with all her weight behind the blow. He crumpled to the floor. She pointed at him and her followers lifted the limp body of Hamilton Hobbes up onto their shoulders and silently moved out of the house.

Jonathan was released from the iron grip that held him. As quickly as it had filled, the foyer was empty save for a wind coming through the open door. He saw Christine, back bare and bloodied, bent over Maria’s crumpled body. He took a shaky step to help her. The first police car came up the long drive.

AUGUSTUS HEARD MARIA’S SCREAM AND HAMILTON’S GROWING CHANT. Tentatively, he pulled against the tree which was now a living part of him. The pain became intense colors and smells. Hamilton’s chant grew close and was joined by a chorus of a thousand voices. Augustus mustered his strength to yank himself free of the tree.

He closed his eyes and saw an ancient forest filled with a tribe of naked people, dyed in splotches of blue and umber, undulating before him. He stood stripped naked before the throng, the living god to whom they offered their dreams.

Around him they danced and writhed. The chants grew louder. He was filled with a blinding energy that shot from his loins and up his spine exploding in his head. He felt himself grow and, looking down, he watched as every extremity became a branch or root of a living tree. Pain and pleasure whipped into an eddy of ecstasy.

The convulsions of the tribe grew in pace and intensity. He took in his worshippers. In the middle of the group, the chief stared at him with sightless eyes. Augustus recognized the man. Fortune! Augustus tried to speak but could utter only an inhuman groan that sounded like the swaying of large tree. Several men dragged a young woman

toward Augustus. He could smell her fear, taste her innocence. He had never wanted anything as much as he wanted her. Her pleas for freedom became part of the frenzied chant. In her eyes he could see what he had become. The green man. The unity of earth and man, of spirit and flesh. His strength came from the soil and the air but it also was his limit. He was as much a part of the earth as his brother trees that surrounded him.

The worshippers tied her to a stake in the center of the clearing. Others brought kindling and dry wood and encircled her. Augustus wanted to save her. He wanted to run to her and free her from her bindings, but all he could do was watch for he was, himself, no less bound and firmly rooted to the ground.

“You want her?” Fortune asked him. “You will be united in the smoke of heaven.”

Fire was brought forward and the kindling quickly caught. He heard the howls of fear and pain from the woman over the chant of the people.

The flames grew as did the chant and her screams. Fortune’s laugh rose above it all. It mocked him. It pulled at him with a new pain. The pain was on the threshold of taking over his being. His struggle against his confinement simply amplified it. In his soul he felt the woman being torn from this world. It was his doing. His failure. That pain scoured him.

He raised his head and howled to the heavens, a sound no human could produce. The dark garden of his uncle’s house replaced the ancient forest. He was alone. The tree withdrew its invasive tendrils ripping flesh as it went. Augustus fell free. Bloody and unable to walk, he crawled to the patio where he collapsed. A piece of birch, still stuck under his skin, embedded in the bone of his right shoulder.

Get Someone. Now!

TWO POLICE OFFICERS, flashlights and guns extended before them, moved cautiously through the open French doors. They swept the perimeter of the visible garden with their lights. The garden, like the rest of the house, seemed empty. The tension ebbed out of their gun hands.

“Typical rich-people bullshit. These folks did some bad drugs and called nine-one-one,” the first cop said to his younger companion. They turned back to the house.

Augustus rose unsteadily. His clothes were covered in blood. He straightened his back and his right shoulder caused him to grunt in protest. The cops spun and leveled their guns and flashlights at him.

“Holy fuck,” the young one screamed. His finger found its way inside the trigger guard.

The old cop laid his hand on the other’s gun. He pushed the gun up.

He turned to Augustus, “Sir? Take it easy.” He lowered his weapon and held out an open palm. “We’ll get the paramedics out here right away.” To the other cop he directed, “Get someone.”

The other cop stood gawking at Augustus.

“Now.”

Augustus rocked on his feet. In the flashlight’s beam, he saw his torn, blood-soaked clothing. He rolled his head around trying to deal with the pain in his shoulder. It felt like the bones in his neck and shoulder were crystalizing into rock. His fingers found a piece of wood extending through his skin. He pulled on it. The scream of pain came from within his body and soul. He passed out.

UCLA Hospital

CRUZ STOOD TESTILY OUTSIDE AUGUSTUS HOBBS' HOSPITAL SUITE. The reclusive billionaire, the arms dealer's wife, and Jonathan Moore all mixed up in story that no one could describe with any clarity or agreement whatsoever. This on top of the madness at the Jesuit house, whatever happened in the Fortune office, and the increasingly strange reports coming from around the city and state were enough to make her wonder if she should find another line of work.

She drew in a deep breath, let it go through horse lips, shook her shoulders straight and walked into the room where Augustus lay, staring out the window of his suite.

"Mister Hobbs," she said as she entered the room, "Remember me? Lieutenant Cruz."

He remained in his state of reflection. She stood near enough to touch him. His uncovered skin was a mass of small cuts and bruises. It looked like he had run a gauntlet of barbed wire. According to the hospital record, one hundred and twenty-seven stitches were required to patch him up. He was still taking blood intravenously.

"What happened to my uncle?"

"I was hoping you knew." She inched closer. "I know you're hurting, but you're the only person we haven't interviewed about last night's ..." she searched for a word, "... events."

"What about Maria?"

"She's in stable condition. Her back is broken, but there's too much swelling to tell the extent of the damage."

With some effort, he turned to look at her for the first time. There was such sorrow in his eyes.

"That sounds like doctor talk for 'not good.'"

"Please tell me what happened. Reports from the scene don't make much sense."

"It's well beyond sense. I was in the back garden so I have no idea what happened in the house. But if it was like what happened to me, reason has nothing to do with it."

"Why don't you begin with who did this to you?"

Augustus tried to shrug, but winced in pain.

"What were you doing in the backyard?"

Augustus told her about Maria's announcement that there were intruders in the garden.

"So you ran out the back of the house?"

Augustus nodded.

"What did you see?"

Augustus shook his head again sending a spasm of pain through him.

"You didn't see anyone or anything?"

He looked down and bit his lip.

Cruz cleared her throat impatiently. She hated interviewing people in hospitals. It made them feel safe and safe people didn't spill their guts.

"Mister Hobbes. I'm just trying to help you and Missus Fortune."

"Christine! Where is she?"

"She was released. If someone is threatening you, I can help."

"Go out and catch them."

"Who are they? Tell me and I'll catch them."

"This young woman. I've seen her before. She brought me a message from Zach Fortune." His voice rose as he remembered, "Christine can't go back to her home!"

Cruz could feel alarm radiating from him. "She's with one of my detectives. Don't worry."

Ray Cruz wanted to get back to the young woman. This was the first person she had heard about that wasn't prefaced with Spanish Inquisition or French Revolution or demons.

"You saw this woman in your yard?"

"Yes." He looked like he was about to vomit. Enough so that she moved the kidney shaped tray off the table and onto his chest.

"She did this to you?" Cruz' flat expression didn't betray the doubt she felt.

Had she? He didn't know the answer. "She was there."

"You have any idea where I can find her?" She watched as he shivered, as if trying to get out of his skin.

"If she isn't at the Fortune condo, I have no idea. "

"This woman. Why would she attack you?"

"I don't know what happened. If I told you what I thought happened, you'd lock me up for psychiatric consultation."

"You and the rest of your group. There was a fair amount of blood in the foyer of your house. Any ideas?"

He looked alarmed.

"Ham?"

"Your uncle?"

He nodded anxiously. The movement hurt enough to try and hold still.

"Not according to the other witnesses. Because of yours and Miss Wolton's injuries and your uncle's disappearance, we're taking this seriously, but the eyewitness accounts are ..." she shook her head in disgust, "... irregular."

"Who is Miss Wolton?"

She looked at him like he was daft. "Your housekeeper, Maria."

"I never knew her last name."

Typical rich bastard. Barely knows the people who wait on him hand and foot, Ray thought.

“Let’s get back to last night. Tell me what happened. No matter how trivial a thing seems, it might help. If it’s crazy, it’s crazy and we’ll worry about that later.”

“Can I get a doctor to look at this shoulder? The wood embedded in there is killing me.”

“Wood?” She looked at her file.

“Yeah.” He touched his shoulder. He could feel the piece of wood still sticking through his skin. It was the size of his middle finger. He pulled the gown away from it. “Here! See?”

Cruz looked at the shoulder then summarized from the file.

“A piece of wood was dug out of your shoulder. It’s probably a phantom pain. You have small cuts on ninety percent of your body. You lost a fair amount of blood. Any confusion is understandable. Now please, try to tell me what happened.”

Augustus breathed heavily as he forced himself through the sensation of ripping flesh each movement brought to reach his shoulder again. With a grunt, he yanked the bandage off the wound. “See?”

She looked again. Swollen, discolored flesh around a neatly stitched wound lay across his shoulder.

“Mister Hobbes, I’m sorry. There’s nothing there.”

He felt the wound for himself. The wood was there and now it wasn’t. He quaked in shock. His face filled with agony and fright.

“Mister Hobbes, are you all right?”

“I don’t know.”

He sighed heavily and slowly unraveled the nightmare he’d lived through to the blank-faced Cruz.

Maria's Journey into Night

CRUZ SHOOK HER HEAD AS SHE LEFT HIS ROOM. His story was the most insane of them all. The uniforms had assumed the oddity of the witness accounts was the result of a drug induced frenzy and searched the house. Other than a bottle of aspirin, a few glasses of scotch, and a fine wine cellar—now a few bottles shy as result of the search—they'd found nothing.

On the one hand, drug use was a catch-all explanation for weird behavior and, therefore, a lazy investigator's best friend. On the other, labeling it "drug related" didn't answer much of anything.

Whatever scared these people was real. Augustus Hobbes was lucky to be alive. Someone had done that to him and she doubted it was Druids or a birch tree. Someone had thrown Maria Wolton into the stairs hard enough to break her back and someone had whipped Christine Fortune and terrified Jonathan Moore enough to have them babbling about boogie men. And where was Hamilton Hobbes?

At the house, the techs had found a blood trail leading from a birch tree to the patio. They found the broken off hilt of a sword cane near a fair amount of blood in the foyer. They found all sorts of things that ostensibly supported the witnesses' accounts, but that didn't make them any more likely. Cruz looked over her notes, shaking her head. This looked like one nasty mother of a case.

A uniform came up to her. "Lieu?"

She looked up thankful for the interruption.

"That woman is awake."

Her face lightened. Maybe a little rest had cleared Maria's head and she could offer a cogent version of the assault.

"I'll be right there."

MARIA WOKE WITH A START. Someone had been breathing on her. The stale heat and smell of rotted breath lingered on her face. Her eyes popped open. Pain radiated throughout her body making her want to scream. As her surroundings swam into view, she saw that demons encircled her. She screamed.

She looked around the unfamiliar room. It was a hospital room, but it was huge. There was a seating area in front of her and a wall of glass to her right. But the room moved like a wriggling mass of sin.

She watched as devils unfastened her restraints and yanked off the IVs and monitor cords. She was borne up and carried to the salivating maws of hell that had opened in the

middle of her room. They were going to feed her to the Prince of Darkness. They were going to gorge themselves on her living flesh. She shrieked for help. She could see people pass by the panel of glass in the door to the hallway. She called to them desperately. No one heard. No one came.

She wrested herself free for a moment and sprang away from certain death. She backed into the seating area. She cried out for help from God, from Hamilton, Augustus—anyone. More demons appeared behind her and hefted her aloft. She tried with every ounce of her being to free herself from their burning claws. The sliding door to the balcony opened of its own accord and she was carried out to the railing.

BEING “RIGHT THERE” meant Ramona Cruz had to cross the width of the new wing of the hospital. The suites were situated on either side of the tenth floor.

She opened the door to Maria’s suite and stepped in. The breeze hit her immediately as did the sight of the empty bed. She turned back to the door number to make sure she had the right suite then, with growing alarm, looked at the source of the wind. Curtains billowed and she could see the sliding door to the balcony was open and someone was outside. She crossed the room quickly and reached the balcony just as Maria stepped off into space.

THE SHAKEN NEUROLOGY RESIDENT STOOD BEFORE CRUZ.

“There is no way she walked that far. What am I saying? She couldn’t have walked a step—or gotten out of bed on her own, for that matter. The T 11, T 12 and L 1 vertebrae were fractured. Swelling of the surrounding tissue and pressure from the broken bones are ...” he swallowed hard, “... were impinging on her spinal cord. Because of the swelling, we weren’t able to ascertain the extent of permanent damage to the cord itself, but it was more likely that she would never walk again, than get up for a stroll mere hours after the trauma.”

“I watched her step over the railing and pitch over. How did she do that?”

“She didn’t. She couldn’t! The woman we were treating did not throw herself off that balcony.”

Cruz gave the doctor her police look and he shrank back. Doctors were so certain of the world around them. Let them deal with the real life monsters of her world for a day and they would reconsider some of their cocksureness.

“If there’s nothing else, I have rounds to do.”

“Have at it, Doc.” She turned her back on him. “I look forward to your report. Should be quite a read.” She wanted to find her father and sit on his lap and let him assure her that everything was all right. Not that it would ever happen. Her father had been the victim of a stray bullet when she was two.

She thought about the priest at her church. He was such a weak-kneed bowl of jelly, she couldn't imagine him reassuring anyone. That brought her to Augustus Hobbes. Maybe he could tell her that the earth hadn't split open and spilled out the multitudes of Hell. If not him, maybe the department shrink. Maybe she should go on vacation.

"Lieu." One of her detectives ran up to her. "We've got the perimeter video up if you want to see it."

"Let's go." They walked to the elevator to go down to the security office in the basement.

No, she thought, she saw what she saw. Maria Wolton had jumped to her death under her own power. Sedated and paralyzed, she got out of her bed, walked twenty-five feet, opened the door, walked eight feet, climbed the railing and jumped.

She thought about the woman Hobbes' mentioned and his concern for Christine Fortune's safety. Ignoring the hospital rules, she got on her cell phone.

"Hey, Box, you at the Fortune place?" She asked.

"What's left of it," Box looked at the firemen poking around in the charred room that was once the Fortunes' living room. Walls covered in soot. Broken furniture and what must have been art were scattered throughout the place. Windows blown out.

"What?!"

"There's been an explosion, but get this: it only affected Fortune's condo."

"Somehow that figures. Where's Missus Fortune?"

"Don't worry, Lieu, I got her."

Box heard Christine gasp. Quickly, he rounded the corner and saw her standing in the doorway of her bedroom.

The room was pristine except for three things: the walk-in closet and all of the clothes were blown into charred remnants, the bed was cut in two and smoldering along the cut as if a fiery sword had cleaved it. And printed in what could be blood on the opposing wall beside a blackened picture was the word, Sacerdos.

"Oh, Cruz, you gotta see this." He pulled his cell phone away from his ear and took two quick pictures.

Cruz downloaded the photos. She gasped. Sacerdos!

"Cruz? You get 'em? Lieu?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"Got any idea what that word means?"

"Priest. It means priest. The spelling's weird but..." She changed her course to go back to Augustus' room. To the detective with her she said, "Get a copy of the security video. Bring it downtown."

Into the phone she said, "Her husband?"

"No sign."

"What about...is there a woman hanging around?"

“There was one body. EMTs said it was a woman, very thin. Looked like a mummy to me. Other than that, no other injuries or deaths reported.

“You didn’t tell me about the body ‘til now?” Cruz closed her eyes in resignation. “Since there’s a body, it’s gonna end up in our lap. Have the Santa Monica Police shown up?

“They’re here. With fire techs, locals and lookyloos, we got a crowd.”

“All right,” she sighed, “let S.M.P.D take over.”

He hesitated a moment. “Lieu, we also got this guy here. He’s the valet, I guess, and he’s seeing ghosts.”

Another nut job. She shook her head. “Give him to the locals with my blessing. Don’t let Missus Fortune out of your sight. When you’re done there, bring her to the station. I’ll be at the hospital a little longer.”

“Heard you had a jumper,” Box said.

“Been a joy ride. Keep her close.” She clicked off.

Now she was angry. Weird shit happening in every direction and a heretical ex-priest in the middle of it all. Word had come down from high to treat Augustus Hobbes with kid gloves. She didn’t care whose friend he was or how much money he might contribute to the mayor’s re-election. If there was ever a “person of interest,” he was it.

Hamilton's Nightmare

Long Beach

HAMILTON HOBBS WOKE IN THE MIDDLE OF A DARKENED WAREHOUSE. As he took in his surroundings, he felt the ache in his old bones and a piercing pain in his head. Showing every one of his eighty-four years, Ham struggled to move.

Breaking into a sweat and gasping for breath, he managed to pull himself up into a slouched over sitting position. Tentatively, he turned his head to take in his surroundings. His head protested every movement, but he forced himself to look around. Clearly, the place had been out of commission for quite a while. Sunlight scattered across the floor by broken windows and gaps, high up in the walls. Ham leaned over to stretch his back. He had been lying on the cement slab floor of the building and his back let him to know how unacceptable that was.

Although he didn't see anyone around, he doubted he was free to go. Even if he was alone and the place unlocked, he doubted he had much of a chance of standing up and walking until he could loosen up his body.

He folded his legs in front of him. Each movement brought loud complaints from his joints. He rested his hands on his knees, palms upward, and began to breathe, slow, prolonged aspirations, feeling the pressure his distended diaphragm put on his stomach, liver, and intestines until he felt a stirring in his dantien, the Taoist elixir field of the body three finger widths below the navel. He followed the outline of a yin yang symbol with his eyes beneath closed lids, reversing the direction after every completed cycle.

He opened his eyes. Stiffness melted away. Pain became a memory. Before him stood Lila Temple, the vision of a true believer: hands clasped before her in a suggestion of prayer and a saintly smile that discouraged not only disagreement but discourse of any kind.

"Mister Hobbes. You survived."

Hamilton stared at her. "You have the wrong Hobbes."

"We understand you're some hot shit occultist. You're supposed to know all sorts of religious rites."

"Now I know you have the wrong Hobbes. My nephew is the priest."

"I know your nephew. He's useless." She moved slowly around him. "Are you?"

"What is it you want of me?" Hamilton shifted to see if his body was in the mood to cooperate.

"We need the Key."

"The key?"

“To the lock.”

“If you want to play games, I’m a bit under the weather. Tell me what you want or leave me alone.”

Lila closed the gap between them like lightning. “The Words, you old fuck. The Words. You know them.” She pulled Hamilton up by his shirt as if he were a sack of flour. He was stunned by her strength.

Hamilton didn’t take any of his weight on his own legs. He had no delusions about running away. He was eighty-four and his running was equal to most people’s ambling, but he reckoned keeping his ability to move freely secret was a good idea.

“You’re hurting me.” He gave it his best, old-man petulance.

Lila didn’t relent. “The Words.” She let go and Ham scrambled to keep standing. He knew he had just blown whatever advantage he had.

“You’re wasting your time,” said a voice from the darkness.

Hamilton recognized it. It was the little prig who was determined to speak to the “crazy uncle” during his sister-in-law’s wake. Zach Fortune stepped into the circle.

Fortune turned and twisted his neck in a way that suggested the supernatural. Ham was drawn to the display. The tendons and muscles presented themselves then retreated in an impossible dance. Fortune pulled off his glasses. Ham averted his eyes, but the image of the empty sockets stayed with him. He tried to shield his mind’s eye from a light which increased with every breath.

“It’s the glory of God,” Lila trumpeted. She stepped forward menacingly, but Fortune stopped her. “He doesn’t know anything,” she insisted.

“He does. Believe me, he does. But his usefulness goes beyond his knowledge. He will bring the Priest to us and then guide the Priest to the Key.”

Lila bit her tongue. She was standing in the presence of power. She understood power. Sides. That’s what this world boiled down to. She was on Fortune’s side, God’s side and the stupid priest and his worthless uncle were on the side of damnation. If the old man knew something, she would beat it out of him.

“Then why didn’t we take the priest in the first place? Why all the nonsense in the garden?”

“The priest needs to remember. We need them both. His uncle will bring him to us and help him remember all of it.”

Ham staggered. The light in his head was maddening. Through it, images of things long forgotten played out in his head.

He was in a clearing. He and a woman were holding each other in passion. A wife? He felt her close to him, more like a dream that was part of his soul than a body next to him. A sound came from behind them. They turned toward it. She covered herself, now separate, now afraid. He stood up defensively. Men in armor were upon them. Romans? Greeks? Before he could move, a spear went into his right thigh and nicked the bone. He

fell. The woman cried out. He looked at her as men dragged her away a few feet and threw her to the ground.

He tried to regain his feet. The pain in his leg shot up to his brain and filled him with a dread certainty. He fell back and looked up at the white face leaning over him. So familiar. But who? The face smiled as a bronze sword was unsheathed and held in both hands over his chest.

The woman cried out as they pressed down on her. He cried out for her and raised his hand, a desperate defensive movement. The skin on the arm was brown as the earth. The smile grew on the fierce white face above him. The sword rose then plunged down into his defenseless chest.

The pain jerked him back to the warehouse, but he still could hear the laughter of the men and the scream of the woman in the clearing. He forced them back into the shadows and began to chant. The images dispersed; the light wavered. His chant grew louder.

Lila put her hands over her ears.

“Evil!” she screamed. She pushed at the chant and it slapped her back. Her anger rose, but the chant pressed her relentlessly. She reached out for an anchor against the tide of sound coming from the old man. She touched Fortune and heard laughing. The old bastard was laughing at her. She didn’t care what Fortune said, she was going to kill him. The chant seemed to fade. The laughter grew and took hold of her. Her heart lightened. She looked to the source of the laughter. It resonated from the depths of Zach Fortune.

A Series of Impossibilities

UCLA Hospital

AUGUSTUS FELT TIME pass as if it were an endless crowd dragging sandpaper feet across his body. He desperately wanted to find Hamilton. His uncle would explain the dream he'd had in the garden. Every instant of it was burned into his mind and laced by his failure to help the woman. Ham would, no doubt, tell him that he was a Druid in one of his past lives and he was experiencing a vivid recollection of that time. But he wasn't a Druid, he was their god. Ham, he thought, would laugh and chide Augustus for always thinking a little too highly of himself.

He wanted Christine. But she felt lost to him. He couldn't let the dream come true. He had to protect her. Being bed bound in the hospital wasn't answering that need.

The day outside his room was as bright and as promising as the circumstances which had led to him being there were grim. He sat up experimentally. Besides the painful pulling of stitches and barely healing cuts all over his body, including places he couldn't believe he was cut, his head started to swim as soon as he elevated it.

He eased back into the pillows and let the wooziness pass. Eyes closed, he prepared himself for another assault on the vertical. He took several deep breaths while he looked at the IV. He pulled the needle from the catheter in the back of his hand. With some pain, he checked to see if anything else attached him to the bed.

Like a coach in the locker room at half time, he cajoled himself into believing he could do it. It was only cuts, after all. Another few breaths and he pulled himself up with the help of the lowered side rails. Pain registered in a thousand little places, his shoulder screamed and his head sought lower ground where blood wouldn't have to fight to get to it.

He slumped forward to take a few breaths and let his head clear. Maybe he should take a few minutes and think this over. A nap came to mind and seemed like the best idea he'd come up with in a really long time. Just as he was about to slide back in comfort, he forced himself to move. He swung his left leg over the side of the bed. A sensation of being skinned alive caused him to gasp and his shoulder erupted in agony.

The door to his room opened and in walked the policewoman.

"Going somewhere?" she asked.

He let her arrival be the excuse he needed to get back to a supine position. Perhaps staying put for a little while wasn't a bad idea. He tried to lift his leg up but found that it had gained about a thousand pounds in the last thirty seconds.

She could see he was struggling and hurried over to lend a hand. Together they got him back in bed. She noticed the IV dripping uselessly on the floor and pressed the call button.

“What were you planning to do?”

“I wanted to see Maria.” It wasn’t a complete lie.

Cruz stepped back to get a better angle on his face. She could tell he was hiding something, but didn’t seem like it was big enough to relate to Maria’s death. The door opened with the fastest nurse response to a patient call she’d ever heard of. The nurse brushed past Cruz to lean over her disheveled patient. Just as Cruz was going to point out the IV, the nurse saw it and stopped the drip while she tut-tutted around her patient to get him and his bed into hospital approved shape. She breezed out the door and returned with a new IV line before Cruz could settle back into detective mode.

Once the nurse left—after a strong admonishment to Augustus against unaccompanied sorties—Cruz moved to the bed. Augustus’ breathing calmed, but the look in his eyes suggested he had no intention of lying still for long.

“What have you heard about Maria?” she asked him.

“Only what you told me.” Her question alarmed him. “What’s wrong?”

She saw genuine concern in his eyes.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you that Maria Wolton took her life earlier this morning.”

“Took her life?! Maria?” He had met some suicides in his life as a confessor and during his studies of psychology. Maria didn’t fit into any notion he had of them.

“That’s not possible.”

“Why?”

“Because...,” he thought it over, “She just wouldn’t. I mean, she is the most full of life person I know.”

Cruz noticed the used of present tense. He wasn’t lying about Maria, yet he was hiding something.

They worked through the apparent facts surrounding Maria’s death. Augustus fell into a long period of quiet reflection. His world had become a series of impossible events. Somehow, they revolved around Zach Fortune.

“Did you find Fortune, yet?”

“The detective who accompanied Missus Fortune home said the place had been destroyed.”

“Oh, my god! Is Christine all right?”

She sensed his genuine surprise. “Considering the injuries she received at your house, she’s fine. She’s coming to the police station.”

“And Fortune?”

“No sign of him.” She pulled out her phone and called up the pictures Box had sent her. She zoomed in on the graffiti.

“This word mean anything to you?”

Augustus stared at the word, Sacerdos scrawled on the wall.

“Oh, no!”

“What does it mean, Mister Hobbes?” She asked it with enough edge to bring him back to the discussion.

“‘Priest.’ In Latin. Christine asked me to speak to her husband in the capacity of a psychologist. Although I’ve haven’t practiced psychology outside of school, she was so adamant, so convinced I could do something, that I went along. When we arrived, Fortune was restrained in a hospital bed and started moaning something about ‘priest’ and then he used that word as I was leaving.”

“Did he know you were a priest?”

“Yes.”

“Why Latin? Because you were a priest?”

“I don’t know. I honestly have no idea.”

Cruz changed the picture to the one of the split bed and held it for him to see. At first, he couldn’t tell what he was looking at and gave Cruz a quizzical glance.

“It’s the Fortunes’ bed.”

Augustus’ studied the picture: The singed sheets and bedding material. The bed split in two—a symbol so obvious even the police would understand it. Guilt—a welcome old friend who had taken a break for awhile—and the tortured sense of loss swirling around Christine engulfed him. What was going on? It was as if the whole world was a merely a globe fallen from its pedestal and rolling around a storm-battered ship.

“Any ideas?” Cruz asked as she put her phone away.

Augustus was fresh out. He desperately wanted answers and he desperately wanted her gone.

“Find Fortune. Find that woman. And while you’re at it, find my uncle.”

Cruz stood for a second. Receiving orders was her least favorite thing in the world. Receiving orders from poor little rich boys was the kind of thing that could throw her into a rage. She looked at the bandaged and banged up man before her and a sense of pity came over her. She thought about all sorts of responses. Instead, she left without another word. Once out the door she called Box.

“Bring Missus Fortune down here. I want to see her with Hobbes in the same room.”

“Okay, boss. What about ghost boy? The locals cut him loose already.”

“Oh, for god’s sake! Get a uniform to take him downtown. Maybe he can commune with the goblins in the interrogation rooms.” She thought for a moment. “Who’s on down there?”

“McGill.”

“That fat fuck?”

McGill was one of the holdovers from before she’d taken control of the unit. He didn’t bother to disguise his loathing of his new lieutenant and the feeling bounced

around the unit until it landed back on him. She tolerated his presence only because of the politics involved in throwing him out.

“Okay, ask him nice if he could put off eating his third lunch and spend a moment with the valet.”

She ended the call and noticed she had three voice mails and five texts. She scanned through them. The chief wanted to see her pronto. Pronto. She wondered if it meant the same thing to him as it meant to her, which was when she got around to it.

Evil Incarnate

Long Beach

IN ZACH FORTUNE'S EXPERIENCE, all the leaders, generals and petty tyrants he dealt with in his business fell beneath his contempt. It made it easy for him to sell them weapons that, eventually, would seal their fate. He who lives by the sword, et cetera. Although they were as bloodthirsty and venal as men could be, he never worried about them coming after him. Partly because most of them couldn't see beyond the minute parcels of earth they fought so hard to control, and partly because they needed him to replenish their stocks. Mostly because he believed only one of them had the guts to attack him.

That one man was a Brazilian gangster whose calling card was a blood fest. And who itched for everything that lay beyond his borders. Vinicius Vaz. If there was pure evil on this world, Vaz was it.

Vaz and two bodyguards waited impatiently in the office of the warehouse. Beyond the door stood twenty-nine homeless men, standing as still as if they were frozen. Their eyes never left Vaz. For the first time in his life, he felt afraid. His bodyguards bristled in the fear he radiated. Finally it boiled over.

Vaz strode out of the small room, pulled his Sig Sauer Scorpion TB and shot the closest homeless man in the head. The man dropped, but the others didn't even flinch. Vaz stormed in a rage to the next man and held the gun up between the man's eyes. No reaction. He punched the gun into one of the eyes. Nothing. He pulled the trigger. The bullet passed through the skull of the first man and hit the man behind him in the head. Blood, bone, hair and brains splattered the men behind him. The others merely watched. Now intent on killing every one of them, he pressed the gun on the next man's eye.

"You've done enough," Zach Fortune whispered in his ear.

He spun around ready to shoot Fortune. When he faced him, his will left him. He stared at his gun, as if he couldn't imagine what it was doing in his hand, dropped it, and staggered back. His bodyguards, lost in the spectacle before them, snapped into action. They bookended Zach Fortune bent on crushing him into dust. They waited for their boss' nod but instead, watched Vaz' expression melt into awe.

Zach turned his face to each of the guards, who immediately released him and gave him space, their faces turned downward in respect.

"Clean this up," Zach indicated the bodies with a small gesture of one hand and the two guards holstered their weapons and bent to the task.

“Vinicius, I have work for you. Everything you need is waiting for you in your home.”

Vaz couldn't have explained what he was doing in America or, more specifically, in that warehouse, but he knew he had to get home.

Hospital

“I CAN’T BELIEVE IT.” Jonathan stood at the foot of Augustus’ bed staring out the window. They were both recovering from the details of Maria’s death. Jonathan searched for something neutral to discuss.

“The view is almost worth the price.”

“What is the price?” Augustus hadn’t thought about it for a moment.

“Ten thousand a night.”

“What?!” Augustus struggled to get up without success.

“Because it’s you, they’ll probably charge more.”

Jonathan watched Augustus continue to struggle.

“Augustus. You have lots of things to worry about. Whatever they’re charging you for this room is not among them.”

That brought them back to Maria and the insanity of the night before. Weakened by his efforts, Augustus sank back into his bed.

“Get me the urinal?”

“You don’t pay me enough. Come to think of it, you don’t pay me. I’m sure there’s a nurse who can’t wait to do that very thing.”

Augustus tried to reach the urinal on his nightstand. He grunted in pain. Jonathan went to the nightstand.

“Things are getting weirder, Augustus.”

“Life has grown curiouiser and curiouiser since I left the cloister.”

Jonathan handed him the receptacle. “Your cloister has exploded. Some Jesuit went into the church and started ringing necks. Parishioners made for the exits only to find other Jesuits blocking the way.”

“Oh, my God.”

“Reporters have been interviewing survivors. I guess the killers were chanting something about ‘end days.’ I didn’t think your order was into that evangelical shit.”

“We aren’t,” Augustus said and immediately wondered about including himself in the order.

Jonathan found the remote and turned on the large, flat-screen television near the bed. “See for yourself.”

On the screen was a picture of a war torn cityscape. People were running away while troops in the distance marched down the street toward the cameras.

The reporter, a young woman, tried to stop some of the people fleeing.

Her words, in Arabic were translated in subtitles. "Please...please, can you tell us what's happening?" she asked.

Finally, a little girl, frantically searching the street as she fled the troops stopped. "Mama! Where's my mama?" The reporter said something that was not translated and the little girl ran off. The reporter turned to the camera to say something. The camera jiggled as the operator pointed behind her. The picture finally settled on a man in uniform a foot away from the reporter. His face was ravaged as if he had flayed the skin off with his own hands. One eye was a bloody mess. The other stared insanely at the reporter who, along with the camera operator, stood in shock.

"It's the end," the soldier said over and over again. The camera dropped and static filled the air.

The anchors, safely ensconced in a studio somewhere in America, came into view. Behind them, the image of the destroyed face of the soldier and the subtitled words "the end" were frozen on the screen.

The man and woman turned to each other. They both held a finger to the earpieces they wore with expressions suggesting that they were listening to something. Finally, the female anchor spoke up, "There are reports of similar outbreaks of, for lack of a better word, madness in Hungary, Brazil, Australia, Mozambique and Iraq. There are isolated reports of occurrences in this country. We go now to..."

"Turn it off," Augustus said.

"There's a lot more. The world's been going on without you."

"Turn it off."

Jonathan did as he was asked.

Augustus sat there with the urinal on his lap. All thoughts of relieving himself had vanished. Madness was a good word for what was happening. Augustus stared at his friend. Jonathan's benign expression had melted into fright.

"I'm scared, Augustus. I'm really scared."

"Wait until we know what we're facing before you run and hide."

"You don't know! They were after me, Augustus. They wanted me! It was like... I was next in line for the guillotine." He pulled open his shirt and showed Augustus finger-like bruises on his chest and shoulders.

"If they were after you, why did they take Ham?"

Jonathan turned away from his friend, ashamed of his weakness. "It is the end of the world."

"Jonathan, if it's the end, it's the end! What are you going to do? Join the circus out there? Besides, if it is the end, I'm the one who should be worried. I'm going to some special hell for heretical priests and you're going somewhere...neutral with off-white curtains."

He smiled and Jonathan relaxed.

Ray Cruz, Box, and Christine walked into the room. Augustus noticed that Christine's carriage was unnaturally stiff. Jonathan quickly pulled his clothes together and his face back into his bland disguise.

No reasonable person would suspect that misery could exist in the presence of wealth. Box looked at the room, at the suit Jonathan Moore wore which was worth more than his monthly paycheck, and the vanilla face which sat atop it. He clucked in disapproval.

"Mister Moore, I'm afraid I need you to leave," Cruz said. Augustus could see a uniformed police sentry outside his door.

Jonathan looked at Augustus, who shrugged, a movement he regretted immediately. Jonathan looked at Ray's official smile then at Box, whose lips curled into an ugly sneer.

"I'm having lunch with the commissioner. I'll pass on your regards." Jonathan's parting shot at Cruz didn't faze her in the least. An empty threat: the commissioner hadn't returned his calls. To Augustus he said, "Later," as he walked out the door,

"Please take a seat. This could take a while," Cruz told Christine.

Box leaned against a wall not far from the door, crossed his massive arms and sniffed at the gathering.

Christine kept her distance. Augustus longed for her to come to him. He tried to rise again with the same results: pain and vertigo.

"What happened to you?" he asked her.

Christine dropped her eyes.

"Let's talk about what happened last night," Cruz interrupted.

"I've told you everything," Christine complained.

"And I've told you more than I should have. It's nuts," Augustus added.

Cruz walked to the foot of the bed. Box ushered Christine to within Augustus' reach. His extended hand got no response. Cruz noticed the distance between them and the pain it caused Hobbes.

Christine angled her body away from Augustus and he saw faint streaks of blood across the back of the silk blouse she wore. The urge to be her protector heaved up in him, but she maintained the gap between them.

"It is nuts," Cruz agreed. "I've been working crimes for quite a while and I have to tell you, your stories take it. I've never heard such a crock." She looked each of them in the eye. "There are several ways to tell if perps are lying. One is that their stories are identical down to the word. Another is that they don't even come close to the same story. You two fall into the second group."

Augustus and Christine looked uneasily at each other.

"Let's talk about your relationship."

Find Him!

Fifth and San Pedro

JONATHAN SAT IN HIS SPARTAN OFFICE. For someone who emitted an air of elitist decadence, his office was as plebeian as one could find. Not only was it situated in a not yet gentrified part of downtown, the furnishings looked like they'd come from a going-out-of-business, second-hand office furniture store. There was a desk, a desk chair, two bookshelves filled with books and reports, and a client chair. The chairs, while not ratty, made one think of furniture set out on the side of the road in the hope someone would come and take them away.

Three paintings were the exceptions to his decor. They probably offered more insight into Jonathan than anything else in his life, but what exactly they meant was quirkily mysterious.

Near the door hung a portrait of Thomas More, the lawyer, the writer of Utopia, the great defender of the Catholic Church who gave his head to Henry VIII for the cause. Over the bookcase on his right was Thomas Cromwell, the usurer who rose to great heights under Henry VIII. A true English patriot, he was a defender of Anglican reformation and lost his head primarily for backing the wrong one of Henry's wives.

Finally, to Cromwell's left was Pico della Mirandola, a brilliant but confused Catholic who, after being condemned as a heretic for trying to marry Plato and the Kabbalah to the Church, recanted and devoted himself to the defense of Mother Church. His fear of the stake inspired a fevered attack on Jews, Mohammedans, and astrologers. Although he read Latin, Greek, and Hebrew fluently and had studied Kabbalistic writings in the vernacular in great detail, he put his knowledge and considerable intellect aside and agreed with accusations from far lesser accomplished minds that Kabbalah was the name of a Jewish, anti-Christian writer.

Jonathan had toyed with a fourth portrait: Henry VIII. Henry, equal to his friend More as a defender of the Catholic Church who, before the schism, was ready to lead an army into Germany to put Luther to the stake. A blink of an eye later, he found that the Church was the only obstacle to realizing his personal Holy Grail: Divorce. Religion is nothing if not mutable when one believes strongly enough.

What his decor said to Jonathan was that he was serious about his business. The artwork spoke of his continuous struggle with his Catholicism. Unlike his friend Augustus, Jonathan had always swum on the surface of his beliefs. He never dove into the depths of the religion so that he could decide, one way or the other, what his real

belief was. The painted figures on his walls had their answers and he hoped their example would lead him to his.

Jonathan read reports on his computer, popped a couple of aspirin, washed them down with a slug of scotch and read more reports, shaking his head over and over. There was, simply, no good news.

Via Skype, he connected with the white-wine sipping General who was stationed at Fort Jackson in South Carolina. The General's face was blotchy red, his eyes bloodshot and bulging.

"It's the end, old friend," the General said. He turned as if listening to something behind him. "It started at Yucca and spread like wildfire."

"It's at Fort Jackson?" Jonathan was incredulous. "We have isolated incidences here on the West Coast and we're a lot closer to Nevada than you are."

"The Pentagon has been able to shut down news coming out of the bases or you'd know it's a lot worse out there than you think. Hell, they've even shut down the internet and phone access for all bases around the world and the crazies don't seem technically oriented," he said again glancing over his shoulder.

"How am I talking to you then?" Jonathan asked.

"There are dedicated lines for the brass, but I don't know how long that will last." A bomb blast rattled the windows behind him. "Jesus H. Fucking Christ!"

He ran away from the computer for a moment, came back and stuck his terrified face up close to the computer. "Jonathan, you've got to see this." He carried the computer to the window. The General's panicked face suddenly took up the screen. "Jonathan, call Wilhelm Swedenborg. Swedenborg. Find him." His face disappeared.

After the computer's camera adjusted to the scene, a stunned Jonathan watched a pitched battle on the quadrangle below the General's office.

Soldiers were firing on soldiers. Units of armed men under the command of sergeants and officers were defending the building against an unorganized mob of soldiers. The carnage was amazing. A grenade landed in the middle of the mob and a dozen people flew back as if blown away by a selective tornado.

The mob surged. Bullets decimated their number, but they kept coming. They were chanting something, though Jonathan couldn't make out the words. As he watched, the General appeared in the midst of the organized soldiers, firing his sidearm into the crowd.

The fire returned by the mob was taking its toll. The ranks of soldiers defending the building were thinning. Commanders moved them around and regrouped. A surge by the mob on one side overran the defenders. Agonized screams came across the computer. The mob grabbed the nearest soldier and tore at him with pipes, knives and fingers. He turned up toward the camera, his cheeks ripped from lip to ear. Teeth and jaw bone glared white in contrast to the blood that covered the rest of him and those around him. The mob turned on the next man.

Jonathan was glued to the savagery. He couldn't think past the spectacle before him. As the crowd moved inexorably toward the General, who was swinging a fallen soldier's rifle like a club to fend off the onslaught, the picture went black. A Signal Lost warning came up on his screen. He tapped several keys, to no avail. He checked another site to see if it was his internet connection or the base's that had gone out. The other site came up without a problem. He slammed his hands down on his desk in a rare display of emotion.

He returned to a report the General had sent just hours before. The press had yet to make the connection between the events in Zach Fortune's office and the strange events around the world and on United States Military bases.

The report stated that the United States military was falling to pieces. There was no specific cause anyone could point a finger at. It seemed to have started with the religious groups within the military, then spread throughout the ranks. It would have been considered a great boon to America's enemies if the same wasn't true of their own militaries.

A new crusade. It didn't say what its purpose was or who the crusade was against, only that it had started. Crusades, like the First World War, were exercises in futility. No side really won. Both sides lost a great deal. An enduring enmity was created between the opposing forces. That was something to look forward to, Jonathan thought as he poured himself another scotch. And here, in Los Angeles, a Jesuit house, a place that prided itself on its intellectual approach to religion, was overtaken by religious dysphoria. Add to that Zach Fortune. The man was the antithesis of what idealistically was thought of as religion.

What did it mean? Where was the common ground? He thought about the General's last advice to him and picked up the phone.

Leaving Las Vegas

WIL SWEDENBORG PACED HIS CHEAP, VEGAS MOTEL ROOM, a towel around his waist covered his still wet body. He had squeezed that last water he could out of the system that ran dry earlier each day. He nibbled at his once perfectly manicured nails as he cautiously peered through the crack in his ratty curtains.

It had taken him two days to get to Las Vegas. It would have taken longer but he found some people hiding out in the desert who drove him on their ATV the last fifteen miles. Once in the city his calls to the military brass, who had put him in this predicament, fell on military ears afflicted by the deafness of official deniability.

He got the, "That's interesting, Doctor, we'll pass that on," response from four different people. His fifth and last call was answered by an officious little bastard who kept demanding his location. Although he had refused to give it, another voice came on the line and said, "Stay right there. We'll come for you."

That was why, instead of staying in the finest suite at the finest hotel in the city, he cowered in a room he normally would not have considered for a moment. His world was upside down and he had no idea where to turn.

His credit cards kept him fed and as up to date as was possible with the insanity that surrounded him. Now ATMs and other credit devices were no longer working. One by one, the motels were overwhelmed or abandoned and he searched for another haven to hide in wait even though he had no idea what he was waiting for.

He lost track of time. Finding phone reception or even power for his tablet became a priority. The news on line was colored with false optimism but the truth was there. It didn't take much digging to see that the world was a spinning disaster. Depressed, his mornings started with him searching his name on the web. It reassured him and made him believe that the world and he would survive. Since his name had disappeared from the news since the events at Yucca Mountain, he contemplated creating his own news item and placing it. "Renowned Scientist Studies the Phenomenon" or something like that. Several drafts later, he gave up on the idea because the stories were too self-serving even for him.

While looking at old postings about himself, he saw the mention of his undergrad years at Berkley. He spent the rest of that day reminiscing about Berkley and Christine Blake who had become Christine Fortune.

He looked her up and, for a while, lost himself in pictures and stories about her, mostly as arm candy for Zach Fortune.

The first time Wil met Christine was at an entry level physics class at Berkley for which he was the teaching assistant. The class was well beneath the dignity of the elderly,

famous professor who left the bulk of the teaching to Wil. Christine took the physics class because she yearned for the answers to life. She spent much of the time talking to Wil in hopes that he might have some idea of what her future should hold.

She had aptitude. She tested high and grasped fundamental theories and experiments in one pass but, no matter what Wil did or, neither he nor physics seemed to give her what she so intensely desired.

Wil was already making a name for himself. He rocketed through his masters and M.I.T. actively sought the young physicist to come work at their labs in the fall while completing his doctorate. He was published as a contributor to his mentor's project and his calm, self-confident charm was evolving into the thing that would carry him through his career. A San Francisco station had already used him to explain how solar eruptions affected life on this planet. A week after the show the station, overwhelmed by positive response, begged for him to return on a regular basis. The University of California felt that someone with more of an earned reputation and gravitas should represent it on the airways and sent Wil's mentor in his place. His mentor, lacking Wil's looks and charisma, was dropped after two appearances on the science segment of their nightly news.

Christine was at times Wil's sail and at others his anchor. As their relationship grew, he thought seriously about putting off his doctoral work for a little while to explore this new world of relationships. But he couldn't pin her down. She drifted off into psychology and then theology and their bond grew fainter until she simply wasn't a part of his life anymore. She found singing and a singing teacher with, Wil assumed, a bigger cock. At the same time, M.I.T. gave him an ultimatum and the die was cast.

In his miserable room, made more miserable at night because he kept his lights off and huddled with his tablet under the covers to avoid the notice of the people prowling the streets. The police were effective at first but slowly became a danger themselves. Wil had witnessed three cops walking down a street shooting everything that moved.

A sense of desperation hung over the city. Desperation that, for once, had nothing to do with losses at the casinos. It drove Wil deeper into his memories of Christine.

One news item mentioned her as a patron of a Jesuit high school where she sang. There was a picture of her standing next to a priest, Augustus Hobbes, at a school function. He looked at the picture. His Christine. The priest. The way they inclined their bodies toward each other, her eyes on the priest.

The mountain still pulsed. He felt its vibration in every fiber of his body. It resonated with the word, Priest. Was it the same priest?

Janos Szeged, Hungary

JANOS STAHEL, A SLIGHT, TERRIFIED SEVEN-YEAR-OLD, looked out through a broken window of his hiding place across the street from The Horse's Rump. Once one of the most notable buildings in Hungary, The Reok Palace earned its less than glorious cognomen because it stood behind an equestrian hussar statue erected in honor of the heroes of the First World War. Its formal name was The Combined Regional Centre of Arts. Less than a month ago, his parents had taken him there for a concert. They had picnicked and played. Wrapped in the love of his parents, the music lulled him into blissful dreams.

The madness first took his neighbors, the Huszkas, who burned their children, his best friends Attila and Sophie, to death in their house, claiming it was God's command. Then it overcame his father—the father who, only last week when he was home for his weekend leave from the army, built him a tree house and played futbol with him in the yard .

After hours of being thwarted by his wife from carrying out God's will in his own house, his father inexplicably had walked out. His mother wasted no time spiriting Janos away from the house and they became fugitives. Blocked from leaving the city by the military, she tried door after door until they found an open one in an office building. Entering, they could hear loud praying and cursing coming from the floor above. She hurried him down the stairs where they'd found an old storage room filled with boxes and broken furniture. There, she created a little fortress in the far corner and bedded them down. Just above their hiding place, a window with an eye-sized gap became their only source of information about the world around them.

Sleep seemed impossible. It was as if his father lived on the inside of his eyelids. Whenever he closed his eyes, the glowering hatred in his father's eyes came to him. The dream—the nightmare—was all around him.

Janos and his mother needed food. They waited while the avenues cleared of the marauding gangs who seemed bent on destroying the evil they'd suddenly discovered in their midst. After listening to the sudden quiet for over two hours, his mother, crying with fear, kissed him all over and ordered him to stay still and quiet while she went scavenging for something to eat.

Hours passed but she didn't return. Every noise caused him to jerk alternately with fear and then hope that she might return. Finally, he couldn't stay put. Moving like a snail, he crept up to peek through the window. He watched, scouring the street for any

sign of her. After an eternity, he inched back into the cold comfort of the corner which now held only him and the blanket from his bed in which his mother had bundled him. Tears streamed down his cheeks and he called for her over and over in a frightened whisper.

Hobbes' Mansion

CHRISTINE HELPED AUGUSTUS out of the police cruiser and to his front door, both moving like they were strapped to boards. The two uniforms who drove them to the house moved the patrol car down the drive next to Christine's car, still there from the ill-fated night, and leaned back for a long wait-and-see. It was part of Ray Cruz' effort to make sure she knew exactly where the primary players in this drama were.

Augustus wondered how he would get inside. He had never possessed a key. Either Maria or Ham had always been there for him and that was no longer true. Now the house seemed forbidding and eerily out of place. Nevertheless, it was home.

He abhorred the notion of climbing the wall to see if the patio doors were open. He flexed his shoulders, which didn't fill him with any hope of climbing anything. With a nod to the heavens, he tried the door and it swung open easily. He took a step inside and stiffly offered entry to Christine.

"I've got to go, Augustus." Christine kept her distance from him.

"Where?"

"I've got to find Zach."

Augustus started to argue, then stifled his objections. "I'll go with you."

"You can barely walk. Besides, I was wrong to involve you in the first place. I won't make it worse by ignoring my duty any longer."

"Your duty?"

"To my husband." She walked away. "All of this is my fault. All of it... because of what I did...what we did."

In several quick steps, made jerky by the pull of stitches and tape, he caught up with her and took her in his arms.

"Christine, being a good Catholic does require a certain insane desire to take responsibility for every bad thing that happens. However, we don't know what's going on. Your husband, my uncle, Maria ..." he grimaced, "We don't know a thing."

She pulled away. "They told me, Augustus. They told me it was my doing."

"Who?"

She shook her head and fought back tears.

"The mob in the house?"

She nodded, tears no longer restrained.

"See, when people listen to mobs, things like holocausts and crucifixions happen. Mobs don't make sense. Show me a bunch of people chanting hatred and I'll show you a bunch of idiots being manipulated by some rich man with an agenda or a holier-than-thou hypocrite."

“I have to go.” She turned to leave.

He searched for something to say, hoping she would stay with him because he didn’t want to be left alone with the demons of his own memories. She was his only connection to sanity right now and he wanted her near him.

“Where are you going to stay?”

The question stopped her. She hadn’t thought that far ahead. She had no home. No clothes or possessions beyond the clothes on her back, her purse, and the car she’d driven to Augustus’.

“I know if the Church hadn’t already tossed me out it would do so now for what I’m about to say: The deed is done. The sin’s committed. There’s no use pretending that we don’t know each other or that ignoring each other will atone for that which has been done.”

He could see he’d reached her as she turned back to face him.

“Stay with me. Together we can sort this out. Let the future be what it will. It will happen whether we’re together or apart, but if you stay here at least we can lean on each other while it’s unfolding.”

As he said that last line, he leaned on her a little bit. She smiled bitterly, thinking it was a feint to get in contact with her, then realized he was growing faint. She helped him back into the house. His weight on her shoulders made her back scream in protest.

“You do know how to turn a girl’s head, Augustus Hobbes.”

Cruz had told him it was okay to go back to his house because “the techs have pored over it like it was their final exam.” He hadn’t seen the foyer until that moment. The blood stained marble floor forcefully brought to mind what Ham, Maria, Jonathan, and Christine had been through.

They made it to Ham’s study and sat side by side in the Gothic guest chairs that faced the desk. The sharp angles and hard wood didn’t comfort them physically or ease their wariness about the future. Augustus’ head bobbed as he succumbed to exhaustion. Christine urged him to get up and helped him up the stairs and out of his clothes. She stared at his cuts and stitches in shock. It made the welts on her own back seem insignificant. The harm her sin had brought down on this man made her wish she were dead.

She sat beside him until his breathing deepened. Convinced he was asleep, Christine left the house.

Wilson, one of the patrol cops relayed the information to Cruz, who told them to stay put. Because of his uncle and the Jesuit residence, she felt Augustus was the key to the whole thing and it was worth letting the Fortune woman out of the box for the moment to keep an eye on Hobbes. She called another patrol car to find and follow Christine’s car.

Szeged, Hungary

JANOS' FATHER, SANDOR STAHEL, SEETHED. He and the other apostles of the new order were cleansing the world of the devil and his worshippers. As a reward, he would sit at the right hand of the Lord and rule the newly sanctified realm of God.

The woman had betrayed him. The boy he raised as his own was not of his seed but a brood-son of the devil Ordog, the king of the underworld. Sandor spit and crossed himself after thinking the name. The bitch mother had thwarted his desire to set things right, to show the devil that not even his own son was safe from the purification.

He stood next to the commander of the regiment sitting outside Szeged. They watched as soldiers dragged a woman to him.

"We have taken the city. The evil is in our snares, soon to be in our fires," he said, with deference, into the field phone.

On the other end of the connection, Zach Fortune nodded. Militias around the world were falling into place. Soon Los Angeles would join them. All was ready for the next step.

The soldiers dropped the woman at Sandor's feet.

"Ah, they have brought me a reward. They found the bitch." Sandor smiled as he looked at his broken wife. Clearly the men had spent a little time with her before delivering her to him. The fight was gone from her nearly naked body. He grabbed her bruised and bloodied face. One eye was swollen closed, the other tried to focus.

"Sandor..." Her ragged voice trailed off.

"We are ready for The Coming," Sandor spoke with a religious fervor that Fortune could feel from thousands of miles away.

"The Priest will open the gates soon," Zach said.

Sandor's wife looked up at him desperately. She clutched at his legs and dragged herself up to her knees.

"Never let a woman stand in your way," Zach commanded Sandor before he hung up. Never.

Sandor shook his wife's head until her one seeing eye focused on him.

"Where is the boy?"

"The boy ..." Her voice trailed off again.

He shook her harder then pulled her to her feet and pressed her against the side of the troop carrier.

"Speak, woman, or I give you back to the dogs."

"Dead," she said as clearly as she could. "Taken by your dogs and burned." Was that a smile? Her face was so battered, he couldn't tell.

He trembled with rage and slapped her hard enough to snap her head back. She lost consciousness.

To two soldiers near him, he whispered, “Feed her, clean her, let her rest. Make her think you are her protectors. Once she’s healed, give her to the troops. She’ll join her filthy spawn soon enough.”

Lila Spreads the Word Hobbes' Mansion

THE WORD "PEOPLE," AS THE ELITE SAY IT, is tantamount to a curse. The thing about the neighborhoods of the elite is that they think their gated entrances and private security keep them safe from "people." But once you finagle the gate or fences and figure out the schedule for the private security, those neighborhoods provide lots of hiding places.

For two days, the dense foliage surrounding the mansion opposite Hobbes' driveways had been home for the two people who fought to be Lila. One hated everything around her that wasn't part of the new order. The other loved people and the visions she had been granted by the archangel Paul Stephens. She watched as Augustus and the woman were driven to the front door. As they exited the car, Lila's mind filled with awe. She saw Jesus and the Magdalene, arm in arm, enter the house and then later, Christine return to her car and leave.

A DAY PASSED. Lila sat in harmony and wonderment. Finally, Zach's voice stirred inside her. It is time, it said. She opened her eyes and focused on the police in their cruiser: One asleep and the other on his cell phone.

She emerged from her lair and strode confidently up the drive to the police car. The cop on the phone took a moment to react and, by the time he woke up his partner, Lila was leaning down into the open window, inches from his face.

They both looked into her eyes. They were about to get out and ease her off the property when movement on the street caught their attention. Through their windshield they saw a swarming mob. The woman said something to them, but they assumed she wanted protection from the mob.

They bolted out of their car and ran into the empty street with guns drawn and ready to fire into the unruly crowd only they could see. The driver called into the radio on his shoulder for backup as his partner yelled into the empty street for calm and order.

AUGUSTUS TURNED OVER WITH A START AND A SHARP INTAKE OF BREATH. He found himself in his bed with no memory of climbing the stairs, stripping and settling between the soft sheets.

Augustus stretched and felt his body start to unwind from the horrors of the past days. Though still tender and stiff, for the first time since the attack he felt he might have enough energy to get up and accomplish something. Anything was preferable to hiding in this huge, empty house waiting for something to come to him.

"Maybe we should go grocery shopping or something," he said. He suddenly felt quite alone. "Christine?"

He sat up too quickly and had to take a moment to regain his equilibrium. She must be in the kitchen or somewhere downstairs.

Gingerly, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stepped into the pants that lay crumpled on the floor beneath him. He carefully pulled on the shirt that lay beside them. It smelled of hospital and sweat and blood, but he didn't have the energy to look for something else.

He opened the door to the hallway. "Christine?"

The doorbell rang. She must have locked herself out. He was unsteady and grabbed at the chair next to the door, and ended up falling into it. He felt some stitches tear loose. He touched the spot on his side and felt blood.

On the floor beside him were the shoes he'd been wearing. He bent over and immediately promised himself he would never do that again though he managed to get the shoes on. Pain radiated from a thousand places. With some effort he managed to rise. A tentative step. Baby steps became a halting stride and he tottered to the top of the stairs.

He leaned over the railing and looked toward the front door which stood ajar.

"Christine?"

Gingerly, he made his way down the stairs. The house was spectacularly quiet. He looked out the front door and saw the police car. Christine's car was gone.

"Sacerdos, I have a message."

The familiar voice came from behind him. Augustus spun around to face Lila Temple. Her blues eyes blazed into his brain and he brought a hand up to shield his eyes.

"The prophet says you will be reunited with the old man and your whore when you bring The Words. The Door is closing, Priest. If it closes, you will never see them again."

Augustus couldn't move. Lila Temple simply walked past him and out the door without a backward glance. When he recovered, he saw her turn down the street and disappear beyond the trees that bordered the property.

Where are the police? A gunshot answered his question. He hurried as best his torn flesh would allow, down the drive toward the street where he saw one of the policemen standing over the other with his gun aimed at his gut shot partner who was trying to crawl back toward the driveway.

As Augustus approached, the cop, flipped his partner over, shot the wounded man in the face and spat on the body.

The cop turned toward Augustus and raised his gun.

“Officer ... friend ...” Augustus couldn’t read the man’s name tag and rummaged through his mind for the name. The dead one was Ladrillo. He remembered it because it was the Spanish word for brick. The other was an everyday... Just as he shut his eyes against the inevitable bullet, it came to him. “Officer Wilson...please.”

The cop took a shooting stance and aimed carefully at Augustus, who took a step backward. Wilson closed the distance between them until his gun was an inch from Augustus’ chest. Augustus tried to plan his escape; the thoughts dragging through his brain in slow motion. Backhand the gun to the side, lunge forward with an open palm upper cut to the chin. He watched the gun tremble in Wilson’s hand. Then, Wilson’s expression shattered.

“I’m sorry, Priest,” he said, and in one smooth motion raised the gun to his own chin and fired.

Augustus was frozen on the spot, blood spattered, staring in disbelief. He scanned the quiet street. There was no sign of movement, no sound but the voice crackling over the cops’ shoulder mounted radios.

Augustus’ paralysis ended. His initial reaction was to take the radio from one of the men’s shoulders to call for help, but the two mangled faces, now hardly recognizable, made him recoil.

He turned back to the house. As he passed the police cruiser, he reached through the open driver’s side door and grabbed the radio. He pressed down on the handset.

“Help!” he shouted, holding the radio so tightly that his hand began to cramp. The radio was silent. “Hello? Can anyone hear me?” He was screaming into the microphone. The cramp became more insistent. He released his grip.

“...hear you. Please identify yourself,” came over the speaker. Augustus understood at once that he’d been holding down the transmit button. He paused for a moment, remembering Lila’s statement about “the Door.” What door? And what were The Words? Not only didn’t he know what she was talking about, he didn’t know where to start looking for the answer. Without Ham, he felt helpless.

He dropped the handset without responding to the questioning. He scanned the drive and the street beyond. Nothing. He knew he had to leave but had no idea where to go.

IN THE POLICE DISPATCH OFFICE, a young woman pressed a button for her supervisor. The older woman waddled over to her.

“What’s up?”

“Broken call from one-king-eight. Sounded like a civilian, then nothing. I can’t reach the officers.”

“Where are they?”

“Special detail for Cruz in Bel Air.”

“Contact Cruz. Let her figure it out. Something big’s going down at Staples Center.”

AUGUSTUS LURCHED INTO THE HOUSE. His first thought was to find the keys to the town car and leave before the police had a chance to arrive. Although his next step was a mystery, the option of waiting around for the police seemed like a bad one.

He was pretty sure he'd left the keys in the kitchen when he came home the other night. How long ago was that? He checked every drawer and surface and found nothing useful.

With some misgivings he invaded Maria's suite. It was a religious shrine of icons, statuettes and pictures covering every inch of wall space. Maria hadn't been picky. She prayed to every religion. In parts of the world, the proximity of some of these gods to others could start wars. In Maria's world, they had to coexist.

The artifacts of Maria's life overwhelmed him and blended into his feelings for her less than smoothly. It became clear that he could spend the rest of the morning in the room without finding the keys. He looked out the window at the police cruiser. Without thought of consequences, he hurried out of the house.

The keys were in the ignition. He slid into the driver's seat, surrounded by a computer, radio, shotgun and personal items. The radio crackled on and off. "All units" and "Staples Center" was all he could understand. He searched the controls and turned the volume down.

Without thinking about where he was going, he pulled down the drive, running up onto the curb to avoid hitting the bodies on the street. As he drove out of the neighborhood, a wave of nausea and grief and loss rode with him. He fought it off and was congratulating himself for being so manly when he had to jam on his brakes, throw open the door and vomit all over the street. It happened right in front of the guardhouse at the gated entrance to the community. Red faced and teary-eyed from exertion, his mouth covered in spittle and the remnants of the contents of his stomach, his face splattered with Wilson's blood, Augustus waved and smiled feebly at the guard who stood a few yards away. He burst out laughing as he thought about the impression he was making.

The guard was accustomed to the odd and sometimes amazingly uncivil behavior of the super wealthy under his watch. A lot of odd things were happening around his gatehouse. Earlier, a woman walked by and blessed him as if she were a priest then got into a very nice Mercedes driven by, he guessed from the looks of him, a homeless man.

Now, Hobbes, the famous, crazy, ex-priest-billionaire, whatever that meant, driving a police car? The guard returned to the guardhouse and reached for the phone.

In the distance, police sirens pierced the calm. Augustus drove on to nowhere in particular.

Fifth and San Pedro

IT WASN'T AN IDEA HE COULD IDENTIFY. Maybe some Skinnerian impulse. He just drove until he found himself in front of Jonathan's office. To his great relief, Lila's congregation was not across the street.

The outer office was ruled by Pam, Jonathan's assistant. No one knew why Jonathan had an assistant, but everyone who had met Pam Knowles was happy he did. Rarely did one meet a person with more love of life. She was an average looking woman made beautiful by her attitude. If Pam was there, waiting in the outer office became the reason for the visit.

Augustus walked through the door and basked in the light of Pam's smile of recognition. She taught yoga in the evenings and her grace seemed to fill the air as she rose to greet him.

"Augustus, I'm so glad to see you. It sounds like the world's coming to an end out there," she said, as if she were commenting on the weather. Her face gave no notice of his astonishing appearance.

"It might be."

Unflinching, she looked him over. Was that blood on his face and clothes? All the cuts and bruises ... She doubted she would ever hear all the nuances of how he came to look like this so she decided to let the visit play out and see what came of it.

"May I get you something to drink?"

He wanted to say something charming. He wanted to be witty and urbane. Nothing came to mind. He just shook his head. His face must have betrayed his confusion because she patted his shoulder before returning to her desk. He winced in response.

"Are you all right?" she asked with such sincerity that he wanted to tell her all of his problems, but he just shook his head again. She picked up the phone and announced him. Within a moment, the inner door opened and Jonathan beckoned him in with a sardonic look that suggested he had better things to do than spend his time with ex-priests.

"Get in here, you bastard. I'm glad you think you can interrupt me any time day or night with your problems." Jonathan closed the door behind him.

"I need your help." Augustus looked around the room. The desk was clean and the room tidy. As near as he could tell, Jonathan had been sleeping when Pam buzzed him.

He pulled a tissue out of a drawer and held it out to Augustus. "You could at least clean up a little before you come see me." Jonathan looked him over.

Was he bleeding again? Augustus didn't know what he was talking about. Jonathan indicated his face. Augustus wiped his face and saw dabs of blood and vomit. At first, he

panicked a little thinking that he was bleeding. Then he remembered. A wave of nausea hit him and he swallowed hard.

"Jonathan, I'm fucking scared. Ham and Christine are gone. Maria's dead. The cops that the lieutenant posted for my protection are dead."

Jonathan sat down. All sense of play gone. "Cops? Augustus?"

"I ... they ... killed themselves in front of me."

"What? I don't understand."

Augustus searched for some explanation but found none.

"Augustus?"

"I guess I'm asking you to work your magic. Find someone who can figure this out."

"Have you contacted the police?"

"Sort of." Augustus sat down. He was spent. He was here. It's where his brain had taken him. He didn't know what he wanted except for everything to go away. He longed for the confines and warm embrace of the Jesuit order. Or for a lecture on anything that crossed Hamilton's fancy. He wanted Christine.

Jonathan came around the desk and, with extraordinary effort, laid a comforting hand on Augustus' shoulder. It was so rare for Jonathan to actually touch someone that Augustus was raised out of the quagmire of his misery and confusion for a moment.

"I'll do anything for you, Augustus, anything at all."

Augustus felt a sense of relief, even though he suspected that there was nothing Jonathan could do. He looked at his lifelong friend and saw a little boy hiding behind cagey eyes. Augustus relaxed.

"I assume this happened at your uncle's house?"

Augustus nodded. Jonathan considered this for a moment.

"You have to go to the police. The sooner the better. They've seen the same things I've seen on the internet. Probably more in real life. What you're telling me isn't all that absurd. In fact, it's downright commonplace." Jonathan paced. "You'll have to excuse me." Jonathan stood. "I need to be bad. Then I can think more clearly." He returned quickly to his side of the desk and cracked open a window onto the smoggy world of downtown. Distant sirens and reports gunfire filtered in through the window.

"Being bad" was Jonathan-slang for smoking. It meant that Augustus should leave the room. Jonathan stood by the window, cigarette in one hand and a small personal fan in the other to escort the smoke out. It was an odd sight few living people had ever witnessed.

Augustus opened the door to Ray Cruz and Box standing by Pam's desk.

"Augustus Hobbes. I need you to come with us," Cruz announced as Augustus closed the door behind him.

Jonathan came out of his room, cigarette still in his hand. "What's going on?"

"Mister Hobbes is a person of interest in the murder of two police officers."

Augustus stood stoically. Not because he was feeling manly and noble but because he was pretty sure it was his fault. All of it.

Box moved behind Augustus and pulled out cuffs.

“No need for cuffs. I’m sure Mister Hobbes will cooperate,” Cruz said. Box cuffed him anyway. Suspected cop killers didn’t get special treatment, no matter who they were. Cruz understood.

Jonathan said simply, “I’ll take care of it.”

Augustus noticed the look of concern on Pam’s face.

“I could use that drink now.”

I Don't Like the Trend Major Crimes

BOX SHOWED AUGUSTUS THE FAMILIAR CHAIR in front of Lieutenant Cruz' desk and removed his handcuffs. He leaned on a chair behind Augustus. Augustus turned around to see eye and mouth tight with hate. On such a big man, it was enough to make Augustus forget about everything else. Uneasily, he shifted back to face Cruz' empty desk. He rubbed the pain out of his wrists.

Cruz entered. "I don't like the trend that's forming here, Mister Hobbes."

"Those officers ... I know ... I mean I don't know. I don't know what's going on. All I know is that my uncle and Christine Fortune have disappeared and I need to find them."

"That's what we're going to do. Let's start at the beginning ... no, wait. Let me recap what's happened to date.

"A female street evangelist associated with Zach Fortune tortured you using the trees in your backyard..."

"That's not what I said!"

"Ah, ah, ah..." She wagged a finger. "You'll have your chance. Let me run this through. In the meantime, your friend Jonathan Moore, Christine Fortune, Zach Fortune's wife, Maria Wolton, your housekeeper, and your uncle, Hamilton Hobbes were attacked by the Spanish Inquisition in the foyer of your house. Hamilton Hobbes has been missing ever since; Maria Wolton was paralyzed and subsequently walked thirty paces to throw herself off a balcony in the hospital.

"You lost enough blood that your recovery was in question for a while. Yet you and Missus Fortune returned to your house against the orders of your doctor."

"You said we could go."

She held up a finger and Augustus bit his tongue. He would have joined Box's derisive laughs at the absurd tale if it wasn't exactly what he remembered.

"You returned to your uncle's house with police protection. And now we add what you said in the car ride here." She picked up a notepad and read, "The street evangelist kidnapped Christine and the two officers stationed outside your house died in a murder-suicide pact. Is that about the sum of it?"

"I'm not saying it doesn't sound strange..."

"Strange?! There's not a jury in the world that wouldn't form a lynch mob as soon as they heard that tripe come out of your mouth."

"Just because it doesn't make sense doesn't mean it's a lie."

“Oh, Mister Hobbes. That’s exactly what it means. The murder of two police officers turns this into a completely different investigation. When we picked you up, you were driving the victims’ car, spattered with, and I will bet my uncle’s balls on it, their blood and you’re telling me that you were simply witness to a bizarre sequence of events?”

“It is Officer Wilson’s blood. He shot the other cop in the face then aimed his gun at me then, suddenly turned it on himself.”

“Mmmm...”

“I don’t blame you for not believing me. I lived through it and I don’t believe it. The answer lies with Zach Fortune. I beg you, don’t lock me up. I have to find Christine and my uncle.”

“Don’t lock you up? Box, you hear that? We shouldn’t lock him up.”

“The man’s got business to attend to,” Box said in a whisper laden with malice.

“Don’t we all. Mister Hobbes, don’t we all. Look at it from our perspective ...”

“Believe me, I have.”

“Then you wouldn’t mind if we write up a statement for you to sign?”

“If it will get me out of here quicker.”

“Get you out of here? You don’t understand. You’re the prime suspect in the murder of two police officers. Remember? We read you your rights in the car? “

Augustus shook his head. “I have to find Christine.”

Cruz’ calm face hardened. As much as she hated to admit it to herself, she believed that Augustus thought he was telling the truth. Cruz looked at Box. Although the big man stood like a stone pillar, she knew he was a flinch away from beating Augustus Hobbes to death.

Box hadn’t seen Maria Wolton throw herself off the balcony. If he had seen that, he wouldn’t be so eager to pass sentence. This was not a simple case. Motives were out the window, which left insanity. That would be easy to prove. Just get a judge to listen to Hobbes and Moore and he’d lock them up forever. But the insanity was airborne. The street was alive with crazy. Blue flu was usually a police union tactic yet today half the force was absent without leave. The streets were alternately filled with mobs and devoid of any human life at all.

“You have to help us understand what happened at your house.”

“I told you. I don’t understand. The answers lie with Zach Fortune.”

To Box she said, “Escort Mister Hobbes to lockup.”

Box helped Augustus to his feet.

“If you feel like you want to talk about what really happened, let me know,” she said.

“Just find Zach Fortune.”

Box jerked Augustus out of the chair and out of her office, causing Augustus to gasp in pain.

“Zach Fortune.” She shook her head and slumped down behind a desk she would have happily traded for a parking meter beat.

By the time Box finished the paperwork, Jonathan had performed his magic and Augustus was freed over the protests of Ray Cruz and the rest of the department.

She stood in the center of a very angry group of detectives. Police killers didn't just walk out the door, no matter whose friend they were.

"Maybe this is good. I want him followed. I want to know everything."

As the disgruntled cops filed out, Box joined her. "We're losing people like crazy. People just not showing or showing up all whacked. Pulling together any sort of surveillance after a day or two might be impossible," he said.

Cruz knew it was true. She didn't know the details of what was happening at the Staples Center, but it sounded like a riot had broken out between police and county sheriffs, not civilians. There were unconfirmed reports of deadly fighting within military units inside the United States. It was one thing to read about what was going on overseas, but this was in her backyard. Was Hobbes part of this or was he the mainspring?

Box handed her some paperwork. "Read this. It'll ruin your day."

She went back to her office and looked at the paraffin and finger print test reports on her desk. Hobbes didn't have any powder residue on his hands and the prints on the murder weapon were Wilson's and no one else's. That supported Hobbes version. She looked over the files of Wilson and Ladrillo. Both valor-cited officers with solid performance, fitness and personnel records. Murder-suicide didn't make any sense. Neither did Hobbes as the killer.

There was always a chance he had thoroughly cleaned his hands, wiped the gun and pressed it into Wilson's dead hand, but nothing in her experience with suspects led her to believe that Hobbes was anywhere near that devious. But that left whom? The mysterious female street evangelist? Zach Fortune? Nonsense. But was there anything that wasn't nonsense in this case? Was nonsense the new normal?

Cruz rarely felt out of control and yet she bobbed helplessly in the middle of a vast sea of confusion.

She rifled through her desk until she found the file on the attack at Fortune's office. Colonel Paul Stephens. His eyes were gouged out just like Fortune's. Was this related to the attacks at the Hobbes Mansion and on her two uniforms? It seemed directly related to the death of the Jesuit, Barrone. True to what Hobbes had said on his previous visit to her office, the Jesuit residence was full of crazy people. Eight people were dead because she didn't take him at his word.

She searched the internet, hoping to find some sort of pattern, but the internet had become a bee-hive of bizarre stories that made no sense with aliens battling witches battling the devil on every corner.

HAMILTON SAT ALONE IN THE EMPTY WAREHOUSE. Christine had arrived. It buoyed Hamilton for a moment until he saw the vapid expression on her face which turned to unadulterated adoration when she saw Fortune.

After the Brazilians left, Fortune and Christine left in a limousine. Christine still lost in her trance. As she left the warehouse, she'd glanced at Ham. He'd smiled in response.

"Don't waste your time, Mister Hobbes. She doesn't exist anymore," Zach told him.

Lila stepped up in front of Hamilton. "Mister Hobbes," Lila said in her most polite tone. There was a joy in her voice he had not heard in days ... weeks? How long had it been? Hamilton prepared himself to chant. It had worked on everyone but Fortune.

She turned on some music from the forties. It was Artie Shaw's band doing, *Begin the Beguine*. The music seduced him. He sank into the divine melody. She moved lithely in front of him. He was taken into the sway of her body. All thoughts of the absurdity of his new world left him. He was transported to another time. Maybe it was the music, maybe the lack of food. Maybe the terror of having a man like Zachary Fortune in charge had weakened Ham's ability to reason. Watching one of his tormentors undulating in front of him, gathered all of his fears and common sense and put them aside.

"Care to dance?" Lila stood before him, hands held out.

"I'm afraid my dancing days are behind me, young woman. I cut quite a rug as a young roué, I can tell you." He smiled as he looked up into her smiling face and saw the trap he'd walked into.

"Oh, you're gonna dance, old man. You're going to dance. The sooner you talk, the sooner the music stops." He started to chant, but her first blow was already on its way.

Box Cutter

CRUZ WAS DRAGGED BACK FROM HER RUMINATIONS BY A SERIES OF SHOUTS, then the sounds of an all-out brawl coming from outside her office. In the main room, two of her detectives were beating someone in the corner, a crowd gathered around egging them on. Another man she couldn't identify stood nearby chanting some insanity about a new world order. As she raced over to stop the fight, she noticed that the chanter's face was covered in blood.

She turned her back on him and made her way through the crowd watching the fight.

"Step back! Come on, get out of my way." Cops she had worked with for years were staring savagely at the fight. She finally made it to the front. Lazora and Pettite were pistol-whipping Fredrickson's face into hamburger.

"Jesus, what are you two doing?" She grabbed at Pettite who backhanded her hard. She staggered back into another cop, who roughly pushed her aside. Box entered just in time to see it and rushed to her side.

"Lieutenant!" He grabbed the cop who'd pushed her by the collar and propelled him into a wall. "What the fuck?" The cop struggled against him. Box kned him in the groin, but the guy barely reacted.

Cruz went back into the melee before her. "Pettite, Lazora. Stand down!"

Lazora turned her gun on Cruz. Cruz automatically drew her own. The police behind her urged them both to shoot.

"Lazora, lower your weapon." There was no fear or any recognition in Lazora's eyes. "It's me, Pam. It's Ray Cruz."

Lazora compressed her lips and turned her head slightly to the side so that her dominant right eye was leveled over her gun's sight.

"Detective Lazora, stand down!" Cruz couldn't believe what she was seeing. She watched Lazora's finger start to squeeze the trigger. Cruz fired before she could think about it. Lazora's face burst apart.

The crowd, stunned at first, began to cheer. Pettite quickly turned his gun toward Cruz. He was flung back by the two bullets that struck his chest as he squeezed his own trigger, the bullet striking the cop next to Cruz.

Pandemonium. Cruz stood in shock over the bodies of two of her team. She didn't notice Bruce McGill pull a knife from an ankle sheath and work his way behind her.

Box had grown tired of wrestling with a guy who felt no pain. He grabbed the man's head and slammed it into the wall until the victim slumped down, unconscious. He heard the shots and turned to see the crowd cheering and Cruz standing stock still with her smoking gun still pointed at where Pettite had been. He pulled his own. He didn't know

what was going on, but he had no doubts about which side he was on. A cop he had known for three years turned on him. He pushed the cop away, but the man drew a gun and Box dropped him with a single punch to the side of the head. He kicked the gun away. Another cop picked it up and leveled it at him. Box shot him without blinking.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a big man closing in on Cruz. He spun around and saw McGill raising a knife up to stab Cruz in the back. Box crashed through the crowd of cops and buried a shoulder into McGill's fleshy bulk, lifting him off his feet and into the mess that once was Paul Fredrickson. He pulled back to punch him in the face and McGill shoved the knife at him. It skittered down his ribs, cutting muscle and connective tissue and found a home on his left side.

McGill glowered triumphantly.

Box staggered backward, the knife still protruding from his side. "Ray," was all he could say.

Cruz spun around and immediately understood. She stepped into McGill and beat him with her gun until he bore a striking resemblance to Fredrickson. Covered in his blood, she turned to Box who was delicately trying to dislodge the blade.

"Jesus, Jesus, Jesus..."

The crowd behind her was chanting and cheering. The man in the corner was still chanting something about the new order. She helped Box into her office and returned. The crowd had turned to the chanter and hung on his every word.

"The One is coming. The Priest will open the gate and take us to the Promised Land."

As she got closer, she noticed that the blood around his eyes ringed empty sockets. The world was coming to an end. Hobbes was right. Madness was the new king. She stood in front of her underlings, raised her gun to the face of the chanter, and blew the back of his head away with two quick shots.

There was silence. She turned to the crowd. "Get the fuck out of my squad room...Now!"

Nothing happened at first, but then, as one, they dispersed. Once she felt somewhat safe, she returned to her office and Box.

That's As Good A Story As Any Fifth and San Pedro

AUGUSTUS WALKED INTO JONATHAN'S OUTER OFFICE ONE STEP BEHIND HIM.

"Who'd you call? The President? The ink isn't even dry on my fingerprints," Augustus said.

"You are a lot of things, but cop killer isn't one of them."

Pam rose to greet them. "Your guest is waiting for you." She indicated his office with a look.

"You left him in my office?" Jonathan hurried over to his door. Augustus hung back.

"I'm sorry. But it was either that or tie him up and blindfold him. The man is all charm and hands." Pam grimaced at the memory.

Augustus didn't know who was behind the door, but he instantly disliked anyone who treated Pam with disrespect.

Jonathan stood at his door and looked back at Augustus. "You're the one who's gotten me into this. Get your butt in here."

"Augustus?"

It was Pam. He held back and Jonathan waited with him.

"What's going on out there?" she asked.

"It's been getting a little insane since you left this office, Augustus," Jonathan said. "The Governor called out the National Guard. Some units responded; others mutinied. Evidently a full scale battle ensued in San Diego. No details because all communication was lost. It's happening around the world. The Governor released you because I told him you were crucial to stopping this."

Augustus looked at Jonathan, who shrugged. A shiver accompanied that shrug.

Augustus turned to Pam, took one of her hands and said, "Maybe all of it is a bad dream that will just disappear in a couple of days. We'll figure it out, I promise. Stay away from people, Pam. Just be safe."

"Pam, come in here with us. Whatever's happening, let's stay together," Jonathan said.

Inside the office, Wilhelm Swedenborg stood at the bookshelves, thumbing through papers. Augustus recognized him immediately. Swedenborg didn't look up.

"Doctor Swedenborg, this is Augustus Hobbes."

Swedenborg casually dropped the pages on the shelf and turned to Jonathan and Augustus. He covered the intense fear and uncertainty he was feeling with a learned air of *savoir faire*.

“Ah, The Priest.”

Jonathan hurried over and straightened the pages. Augustus bristled slightly at Swedenborg’s words.

“Swedenborg,” he said. “I’ve always wanted to ask you, are you any relation to Emanuel?”

Swedenborg’s heart swelled. He suddenly liked this dour looking man.

“As a matter of fact...” he started.

“He isn’t,” Jonathan threw out. “It was all a mistake...”

“Well, we’re not here to talk about me now are we, Mister Hobbes?” He sneered at Jonathan.

“What is your connection to all of this?” Augustus asked.

Swedenborg liked Augustus even more because he shifted the spotlight back to him. “I was there when Colonel Stephens had his ...” Swedenborg shuddered, “... accident.”

Augustus looked a little dumfounded. Swedenborg took the opportunity to turn it into a lecture. He told them about Yucca Mountain, the vault and Stephens in florid detail and with great embellishment. He made it sound like the only reason anyone made it out of the mountain alive was because of colossal efforts on his part. Even while telling that version, he had a clear picture of himself cowering on the ground of the visitors’ room beneath the awful visage of Paul Stephens until workers in full radiation suits, carried the two of them away. He skipped over the man in front of the mountain access, the traumatic journey away from the mountain and the days of quaking in isolation and fear in a seedy dive he loathed almost as much as his own weakness.

Augustus watched Swedenborg’s eyes flicker and wander and he knew he was being told a lie. But there was no way to chalk up to coincidence Stephens, Fortune, and Barrone all tearing out their eyes and Stephens seemed to be the genesis of it all.

“Doctor,” Augustus began when Swedenborg came up for air.

“Wil, please.” Swedenborg insisted. “May I call you, Gus?”

Augustus almost staggered. Jonathan choked a laugh out. Augustus tried to answer, but nothing came out. He thought about the horrible day in the ring with Zach Fortune and everything that had happened since.

“Augustus and I share two things. We went to the same high school and neither of us ever had nicknames,” Jonathan said. “At least not ones we knew about.”

Jonathan’s voice calmed Augustus immediately. He thought back to high school and the name “wienie-ass” all of Jonathan’s friends called him. It made him smile, but he understood why Jonathan liked to keep that under wraps.

“Ah, understood,” Swedenborg said. “In college, I was on so many most-likely-to-succeed lists that I was called, ‘Most Likely To’ by my friends.” He let that sink in. “Augustus, then.”

“Wil, what are you doing here?”

Swedenborg pointed at Jonathan. “Jonathan invited me. He said you need my help concerning this little conundrum.” He looked at the two for a moment as if waiting for an outpouring of gratitude. “I understand you’re the center of it.”

Augustus nodded.

“Why?” Swedenborg watched him carefully.

“I wish I knew. I think my only connection is Christine Fortune.”

“Ah, yes. Christine.” Swedenborg smiled, remembering.

Augustus had never really experienced jealousy until that moment and it was an ugly, living feeling whose tendrils grabbed at him.

“So, you feel Zach Fortune has leveled his sightless eyes on you because you were schtupping his wife?” Swedenborg looked at the two of them. “What I know of Zachary Fortune tells me that’s unlikely.”

“I agree,” Augustus said. He forced his feelings down. The way things were going, he decided he needed as many people on his side as he could manage. “He kept saying he wanted ‘The Words’ from me. He tied it to my priesthood, somehow.”

“Your ex-priesthood,” Swedenborg corrected.

The feelings sprang right back up. Augustus compressed his lips and took in a big breath to control his anger.

“What ‘words’?” Swedenborg’s demeanor changed. He carefully turned the chair to face Augustus and perched in it.

“I wish I knew. At first, I thought it was the Absolution from the Rite of Confession. Now, I think it might be exorcism.”

“Exorcism!” Swedenborg laughed. It was a delightful, movie star laugh. Both Jonathan and Augustus smiled in response. “No offense to your beliefs, but I don’t think exorcism will have any effect on this.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I saw the things that caused Paul Stephens to tear his eyes from his face. I saw them. It wasn’t devils. It was ...” his demeanor broke completely. Gone were the celebrated smile and twinkle in the eyes. In their place was a dark insecurity that sapped him of every ounce of resolve. “... aliens.” The word came out sober and final.

Jonathan and Augustus looked at each other. A hint of a smile played across Jonathan’s lips. Augustus caught it like a virus and a laugh bubbled out of him. Jonathan joined him.

The moment of reverie broken, Swedenborg jerked out of the chair. “I didn’t come here to be mocked.”

Augustus put a hand on his shoulder. Swedenborg brushed it away with an angry swipe. He was at the door when Augustus spoke.

"Everyone at my home saw something completely different."

Swedenborg turned the handle. "You mean different from little gray men."

"I mean each person, standing side by side, saw something different from the others." He gestured toward Jonathan. "Jonathan saw the mob at the Bastille. Maria, devils, Christine, Inquisition." Mentioning Maria and Christine made Augustus incredibly weary and he sank into the chair Swedenborg had vacated.

Swedenborg released the door handle. Mollified, he smiled his smile at Pam and said to Augustus, "And what did you see?"

Jonathan leaned forward. No one outside of the police had heard Augustus' story.

"I was the god of a tribe of ancient Celts."

Swedenborg was riveted. Augustus was lost once again in the primordial forest and his feeling of utter failure. After a moment, Wil laughed his Hollywood laugh.

"And everyone says I have a god complex!" Swedenborg laughed again and Jonathan joined him.

"They burned a woman as a sacrifice to me."

Sobered, Swedenborg perched on the edge of the desk. "I've spent the last month trying to sort out what happened that day in the mountain. I saw Paul Stephens. I heard his babble about finally seeing the world for what it is."

"What did he say?"

Wil closed his eyes and reran the memory in his head. "He stared at me with that eyeless face and said, 'The world we know, we live in, is just an illusion to keep us from understanding the truth. Our eyes deceive us.'"

Jonathan and Augustus stared at him.

He looked at Augustus. "Then he mentioned you three times: 'The Priest must open The Gate. The Priest must say The Words. Sacerdos!'" Augustus blanched. "I see that has meaning to you." Augustus nodded. "Then he said he had to 'report.' "

"Report? To whom?" asked Jonathan.

"If he hadn't ended up at Zach Fortune's office, I would have thought Saint Peter." Swedenborg shrugged. "Nothing in my education prepared me for this. I would have dismissed the whole thing as babble from a severely injured man. I would have gone back to my happy life. I would have reported to Washington that everything was fine and Paul Stephens was a lunatic and I would have lied my way into a serious drunken stupor because what I saw..."

"Why didn't you tear your eyes out? Why aren't you preaching the new religion like Stephens?" Jonathan asked.

"I don't know." He sat silent for a long minute. To Augustus he said, "Jonathan tells me you stared into the eyes of the madness. Why didn't you catch it?"

Augustus started laughing. It was insane. He was sitting here having a civilized conversation with the man Christine was still smitten with while the world around them fell apart.

"Maybe I did. I'm finding life either tragically sad or hysterically funny lately. Is there any insight you can give us about this or is this just a coffee klatch?" he asked and started laughing again. "In which case, I need some coffee.

"If you'll give me some time, I'll explain what I've come up with," Wil said. "I have to thank Jonathan who knows how to reach people. I was on my way to Los Angeles anyway, looking for you. For some reason ..." he looked at Augustus, "... you are the key to this whole thing. Other than your school and Christine, I had no idea where to start looking." Wil lost himself in memory.

A CAR SLOWED. It was somewhere west of Las Vegas. It could have been Nevada or California, Wil didn't know. He had been walking the desert close to the road. On his previous trek from Yucca Mountain he discovered that the desert wasn't a safe place for a man in Italian loafers. Cacti, snakes, scorpions, and things that howled in the night made the desert a place to avoid. He would gladly have avoided it but the mountain kept him moving toward the "Priest." Hugging the road was the only real option. The trouble with the road was the crazies were prowling for innocents to prey on.

Wil walked for days. His rations, stolen from vending machines, were running out. He drifted off into visions of his old life, of Christine, of a future with servants that would do his walking for him. Normally at the sound of a car, Wil would have scampered for shelter or simply played dead. But his dreams kept him blissfully unaware of his surroundings.

The car stopped beside him. A part of Wil hoped the driver was going to shoot him dead.

"You look like you could use a ride," the man said. Wil leaned down to peer into the car. Sitting there, like a dream, was Santa Claus. Wil fainted.

Miles later, in the direction of Los Angeles Wil discovered later, he awoke in the passenger seat of a nineteen-eighty-six Ford Crown Victoria. Open windows let the California, high desert wind slap at him. He sat up in alarm and tried to say or ask something meaningful but only gibberish came out.

Santa laid a fatherly hand on Wil's chest. Wil screamed.

"It's okay," Santa said calmly. "I'm not one of them." He pointed at the jammed road they were easing their way through.

"That's good, I guess," Wil stammered.

"I don't blame you. Nowadays it's hard to trust anyone." Santa laughed heartily.

Wil eased back into the seat. He scrutinized his benefactor. The man was eighty, at least. His Santa suit aside, the man had a Santa aura coming off his rotund form and cherry red cheeks. Wil suspected that the man's belly was a bowlful of jelly. His demeanor was so soothing that Wil relaxed into his first smile in a long time.

Santa reached into the backseat, pulled a lumpy bag forward, and dropped it in Wil's lap. Wil jerked sideways and almost screamed. For a moment he assumed it was body parts.

"I stopped in the city back there ..." Santa thumbed over his shoulder, "... while you were asleep. Figured you could use some clothes and, no offense, deodorant." He waved his hand under his red nose. His merry laugh filled the car.

Tentatively, Wil opened the bag. It was full of clothes including socks and shoes. Like a child on Christmas morning, Wil ripped off his shoes, to the complaint of his blistered feet, and pulled on fresh socks and tried on the shoes. They fit perfectly.

He stared at the priest in grateful shock. "How did you ..."

"It's amazing what people let you do when they think you're Santa Claus." He smiled at Wil. "You really might want to try out that deodorant."

Wil search the bag. Took out a new shirt and the deodorant. He stripped off his dusty shirt, applied the deodorant and put on the new shirt.

"What do I owe you?"

Santa pulled to a stop amidst the mass of dead cars and dead people. "You haven't been out much, have you?" His face was intense. A very serious man who wasn't nearly as old as Wil had supposed replaced his merry, rotund patron.

"Life as we know it is gone. Stores are just places you go to take anything that's left on the shelves. Cars are just gas cans and shelter from storms. People are enemies until they aren't." He grabbed Wil's old shirt and shoes and threw them out the window.

He patted his own jacket. "I used to do Santa for some charity events."

Wil stared at him, mouth agape.

"Sorry to burst your bubble. There still isn't a Santa Claus. The loonies, for whatever reason, leave me alone in this costume. I assume they think I'm checking my list."

"Then, who are you?" Wil asked. He searched the man, the car and the landscape for any clues as to whether this was real or an hallucination.

"Chris." He offered a hand. Wil shook it anemically. "I'm the father of the mayor of Las Vegas. As if my son didn't have enough to do, some hot shot in Los Angeles called the governor who called my son and told him to get you to Los Angeles as soon as possible. My son looked around his dwindled staff and I was elected."

"How did you find me?"

"Your cell phone. The military... what's left of it, knew where you were. You did sneak out on us. I waited for a while figuring you'd come back then I started searching the roadway." He looked Wil over. "You got more gumption than I would have given you based on your television interviews."

Wil looked up at Augustus, Pam and Jonathan. "That's how I got here."

Jonathan shrugged. "That's as good a story as any."

Vaz São Luis, Brazil

VINICIUS VAZ WAS A BEAUTIFUL MAN. He had a mixture of every race in his blood and the result was breathtaking. As he stepped out of his limo in front of his palatial home, the staff lined up to greet him. Women and men did this gladly. There was a magic that happened when he passed nearby.

It had not always been so. Vinicius came from the street. His earliest memory was working as a three year old decoy for Joao Gilbran, a notorious thief on the ports. Gilbran taught him all he knew about the fine art of bribery, intimidation, fencing contraband, and dealing with one's enemies in many creative ways. The fights with other gangs and security forces and the simple act of aging somehow made the awkward youngster simply magnificent as an adult. Gilbran was fond of referring to him as "his Adonis."

When Vinicius turned twenty-one, Gil threw an enormous party in his honor. Even his enemies, who met him face to face for the first time at the party, had to admit that he was the most amazing and charming person they had ever met. Ardent enemies, who spent a little time with him, found they couldn't remember any of the details of the disagreements that led to hostility between them. After the party, he negotiated peaceful arrangements between factions that had been fighting for years. Once he had them under the spell of his pax Vinicius, he killed all of them off in one amazing blaze of murder.

He lived in São Luis, which sits on an isthmus in Bião de São Marcos in the northern Brazilian state of Maranhão. It is called the Brazilian Athens and the Island of Love because it is the center of higher education in Brazil and artists, musicians, and poets have spent their days there since the founding of the state. Vaz always told people, especially as he held their lives in his hands, that he was descended from Ferreira Gullar, the pen name of the famous Brazilian poet, Jose Ribamar Ferreira, who was regarded as a saint in São Luis. For all Vaz knew of his parents, it could be true. No one dared, even in the privacy of their own home, to suggest that it might be otherwise.

While most of his competitors were Catholic, Vinicius was an animist. On the street, he had learned the Candomblé religion brought to Brazil by African slave priests.

Waiting inside his amazing palace was Beatriz Van Der Lay, his Iyanifa or priestess who interceded for him with the gods or Orixás. Her bedraggled looks, hardened by years on the streets and in prison, belied her thirty-one years and stood in stark contrast to the spectacle of Vaz.

Luiz and Leticia, his young children—the only happiness in his life—bounded up to him as he glided into his house. He knelt before them and held them tight.

“Things are changing, my beauties. The world is remaking itself.”

They beamed, so happy to have him home. The mere sound of his voice petted them. The words didn't matter.

He looked up to see Beatriz standing at the entrance to his study. He kept his children close to him for a moment. Tears formed in his eyes.

“I will protect you. This I promise.”

They kissed him and giggled. He gave each of them a goodbye pat on the rump as he went into the study with Beatriz and shut the door behind them just as his wife entered the foyer excited to see her lover return. The closed door ended any hope of slipping into his arms and basking in his heat. His attention was, instead, on the witch he allowed to dominate him. He would allow no jealousy, but it was only the hideousness appearance of the sorceress and the belief that no one could love her that kept his wife from becoming a raving, green-eyed demon.

Inside the white, cool study lined with treasures representing his conquests and artifacts of his religion, he faced his priestess.

“I must be seen with Ifá.”

Beatriz looked him over. If his power frightened her, she did not show it. She took her cowrie shells, whispered a prayer, and dropped them onto the velvet she had spread on his massive desk. She prayed to Odu for guidance. Her recitation became self-hypnotic and she began to sway to some internal rhythm. Her eyes rolled back in her head and her dance became spasmodic. As if the heavenly drummer had stopped, she jerked to stillness and stared, white-eyed at Vaz.

“Ogundá Meyi comes with you,” she said in a voice that quavered with raspy effort. She shrieked, a spasm wrenched her body, and then, as if an unseen, enormous hand grabbed her body to stop the jerking, she stood like stone before him. Her voice grew in strength and volume until the whole house could hear it. “Ogunda was very hungry one day. He decided to take a hook and put it on a pole and go to the lagoon to catch a fish, even though the lagoon belonged to another man. He encountered a man who was throwing meat into the lagoon and grabbing at the fish as they came to feast on the meat. The man had been at it all day and had caught nothing. Ogunda, took a piece of the meat and fixed onto the hook before casting it into the water. Soon, he caught a wonderful fish. As he pulled the fish out of the water, the owner of the lagoon came forward and claimed the fish for himself. The man with the meat also claimed the fish but Ogunda said that hook was his, the idea to lure the fish onto the hook with meat was his and the work was his therefore, the fish was his.

“Olofi watched as the men fell into a horrible fight and he screamed, ‘Atoto! Silence, now!’ The men stopped. Olofi demanded the fish and they gave it gladly to him because, after all, the fish, the lagoon, and even the men along with the rest of the world belonged to Olofi. Olofi divided the fish into three and gave each man a piece. Each piece was enough for many dinners so the men left in peace and harmony.”

Vaz had heard this story many times before. He waited for his Iyanifa to continue.

“You are drawn to this fight. It is a fight that you cannot win. You must turn your back on the devil or you and your family will be pulled down into the depths of his hell. Nothing but death, Vinicius. Nothing but death. There is treachery in your own house. The evil spreads. It spreads.” She rocked violently. Her eyes rolled back to normal and she collapsed. Vaz caught her just before her head crashed into the desk.

He sat on the floor and rocked her in his arms. She squirmed and moaned but soon became quiet. He thought about the terrible sight he had seen in Zachary Fortune’s eyes. He thought about the world he knew. The idea of saving people who wouldn’t go out of their way for anybody sat sourly in his gut, but the idea of carrying out the wholesale slaughter Fortune wanted sat like a white hot ax in his heart.

How was he to avoid this fight? Was it the fight Fortune wanted him to undertake or a fight against Fortune and his forces? He didn’t doubt for a moment that Fortune could raise the devils of Hell. He had seen them in Fortune’s eyes. He had seen the dead men Fortune surrounded himself with. He had seen the end of the world he knew, but he did not see the heaven Fortune promised. He only saw hate and terror and death.

His Iyanifa was right. This coming war was something he had to protect his family from and the only way was to take a path he had never taken before.

Jonathan's Office

SWEDENBORG DREW A STICK FIGURE on a blank piece of paper. Augustus and Jonathan leaned over the desk.

"Back in the eighteen eighties, a school master named Abbott—in fact I think his name was Abbott Abbott—wrote a satirical book called "Flatland" about a two-dimensional world with two-dimensional creatures.

"This is Augustus," he pointed at the figure.

"Looks just like me," Augustus said.

"Wait'll you get to know me, I'm a man of endless talent. Anyway, Auggie is walking along in his two-dimensional world. It's a beautiful day and Auggie feels good about life. Now, if you would be so kind, please lower your face to the desk," Wil asked Augustus.

With some pain, Augustus did. Wil slid the paper until it bumped into Augustus' nose.

"He's whistling a two-dimensional tune when he bumps into something. Not paying attention, he backs off a step, apologizes and tries again."

He moved the paper back and in a small, flat voice says, "Excuse me." Then slid the paper into Augustus' nose again.

Augustus was annoyed but fascinated.

"Auggie staggers back. He can't understand where this impediment came from. Does he see a face?"

Augustus and Jonathan stare at him. Wil picks up the piece of paper.

"No, he can only see two-dimensionally so what he sees is..." he holds the paper up to Augustus' nose again. "...is this line comprised by a two-dimensional cross section of Augustus' head being closer than this..." he moves the paper to Augustus's cheek.

"...which is closer than this." He moves it to Augustus' ear.

Swedenborg put a hand on Augustus' shoulder. "Step back for one second."

Augustus did.

"What's this?" Swedenborg asks in his Auggie voice. "The impediment just moved!" He points at Augustus in mock alarm.

"Now, I'll save you the trouble of moving and just imagine that you share Auggie's perspective." He moves the paper up and down Augustus' face.

"Two-d Auggie can't believe his eyes. The impediment is morphing in shape!

Then in a timorous Auggie voice, “How is that possible?!” Back in his professorial voice, “Even though he can only see in two dimensions, he feels that there is something more to the story his senses are telling him. And that feeling, that ineffable, intangible perception makes him run away screaming that the sky is falling.” He slides the paper quickly away from Augustus.

He looked at them expectantly. They looked at each other.

“Very entertaining. I’m not sure I understand,” Jonathan said.

“This is what I experienced in Yucca Mountain. It’s taken me a while to understand. Indeed, until I heard your experiences, I didn’t. It wasn’t little gray men with big eyes I saw.”

“No?”

“I saw something I couldn’t understand. Something that came from a much higher dimensional world. Just like Auggie’s two-D eyes couldn’t comprehend the three dimensions he was encountering, my three-D eyes couldn’t see it, at least not in its entirety and my four-D brain couldn’t comprehend it. So my brain, the great storyteller, made up a story: little gray men.”

“Why?”

“Our brains hate disorder. They take all the information we store,” he touched his forehead, “mix it with our sensory input, and collate and codify until they have a happy little story to tell. The story may not make a lot of sense, but the brain is happy because it has a beginning, middle, and end.”

Swedenborg smiled. “It could’ve been devils or Celtic villagers or the Spanish Inquisition had my brain been filled with that.”

“First of all, my brain wasn’t filled with Celtic villagers,” Augustus said a little peeved. “Second, we never saw the power surge or whatever it was you saw at Yucca.”

“And this ... this madness is happening around the world,” added Jonathan.

“I believe that there are portals to hyper-dimensions everywhere. When the one in Yucca Mountain was disturbed, it opened all of them. I believe they force our brains to create stories because, like Auggie, we can’t understand what we’re seeing. I wasn’t dreaming of aliens when I saw the little gray men. Auggie wasn’t dreaming of morphing impediments when he ran into you. It’s just the thread my brain picked up and wove into a story to keep my emotions in check. When people saw witches, ghosts, angels, religious sightings, UFOs, and devils throughout the ages, they, in fact, encountered this, for lack of a better word, energy and the resulting hysterias are the human mind’s attempt to understand the phenomenon I encountered in Yucca Mountain.

“Mass hysteria and mass hypnosis. The ‘theory-of-mind’ psychologists speak of,” Augustus said.

“Yes!” Swedenborg was impressed. There was more to the priest than he expected.

“What’s theory-of-mind?” Jonathan asked.

“It’s the ability of humans to be aware of our own mind. It’s how we look at other people’s motives and thought processes. It’s also why we anthropomorphize everything including Auggie, here. And, to the utter annoyance of religious people, an explanation of why we believe there is an ultimate being who gives a crap about any of this. Notice I said ‘an explanation.’ One of many.”

“Exactly! I never thought I’d hear a priest say that.” He smiled and gathered his thoughts for a moment. “From what I understand, the first people this affected, beyond Paul Stephens and Zachary Fortune, were the homeless. It spread through them like wildfire. Now, it’s going from church to church. No denomination is immune. Certain people are, but no demographic pattern has emerged.”

“How does it spread?” Augustus asked.

“Person to person for the most part, but let’s assume for a second that I’m right and that Yucca is a portal. What if the bursts of energy are hyper-dimensional escaping into our world? Some people are more prone to sensing this energy than others. But our minds have to translate the higher dimensional message and that’s where the madness comes in.”

“It makes me think of Sipapu and Uhepono,” Augustus mused.

“What?” Jonathan asked.

“The underworlds of the Hopi and Zuni. Their belief systems hold that star people came and went via another dimension through the underworld.”

“Another dimension!” Jonathan said

“That’s right!” Wil agreed.

“Why the homeless and the religious?” Jonathan was fascinated. The idea was ridiculously simple but nothing else even came close to explaining the news coming from around the world.

Augustus spoke up, “The homeless because they have a big void in their hearts. They’ve lost faith in the system ... in themselves. The religious because, well, the religious make room in their hearts for belief. What some people may see as silly superstitions, the religious take to heart because it fits with what they believe or what they fear.”

Wil nodded. It was the best explanation he’d heard so far. “For a long time, mathematicians have understood that assuming higher dimensions actually makes complex equations simpler. Assuming ten dimensions makes some equations that are otherwise next to impossible, easy. Einstein agreed that there had to be a fifth dimension.

“That isn’t a proof for the existence for higher dimensional life. But it makes the possibility intriguing. Here’s the kicker. Some people seem immune. The three of us have been exposed but for some reason still see the world in its true colors. At least, I assume what we see is the real world. It’s spreading so fast that it’s going to overwhelm all of us if we don’t do something now.”

“The military seems totally in its throes,” Jonathan said glumly.

Wil used his well-practiced ability of keeping his face from showing the dread that welled up when he recalled what he had seen. "When I left Yucca, you could see the effect this was having on military personnel. Like us, a few were fine, so many others were lost in whatever world their brains created as a safe haven for them."

"Have a plan?" asked a very subdued Augustus.

"I wish I did. I wish I knew why I had to ally myself with a broken priest. I wish I understood any of it." They looked at each other.

Augustus let the slur go. He was a broken priest. He looked at the stick drawing. How could he be that simple, that vulnerable? He picked up the page and crumpled it into a ball.

"If what you say is true, what prevents these higher-dimension creatures from doing that to us?"

"Nothing. The only thing we have going for us is that they probably haven't even noticed us or we're like Auggie to them. We don't perceive him as a threat or, for that matter, much of anything." They looked at the crumpled piece of paper on the desk.

"But that's probably the wrong way to look at this. Higher dimensions could mean other realities. A place where all possible worlds exist. All possible us exit at the same time. And time can move in both directions at the same time." Wil shrugged. He was explaining something that he could explain mathematically but putting into laymen's terms was exhausting.

"Schrodinger's Cat!" Augustus said. Wil nodded happily.

"To think of it as beings from another world is as misguided as thinking of it as little grey men. Think of it as energy packed with the information of all those possibilities, all the futures and pasts, hitting our brains in a single instant."

Augustus pondered for a long moment. "Why words? Why should words, any word, have an effect on what you're describing?" Augustus asked.

"That's your department," Wil answered.

Augustus paced. "All of this means nothing. It's intellectually interesting, but it doesn't solve the problem."

"I agree. We need to get you into play. For lack of a better place to start, my guess is that means getting you in front of Zachary Fortune."

"That's what I've been telling the police," said Augustus.

"Take care with the police. They're like the military. When they are turned by this ... you can forget earthquakes and fires. Los Angeles will sink into Hell," Swedenborg said.

"It's already started," said Pam, who until this point was standing in silence near Jonathan.

Augustus mumbled, "The cop's gun was in my face. I thought I was dead ..." He wiped his face with a hand to try to wipe away the memory along with any remnants of the Officer Wilson's blood. "We need to find out where Fortune is hiding."

“While you wasted time in police stations, Pam and I were doing real work. And it’s getting harder. Most television and radio stations have stopped broadcasting. Only some cell towers still work. Land lines,” he patted his computer, “are still operational. God only knows how long we’ll have power.” Jonathan pulled a piece of paper from his desk.

“Fortune has several warehouses in Long Beach. One in San Pedro. My guess is he’s in one of those.”

“We’re off!” Augustus stood straight and headed for the door.

“Augustus,” Jonathan said as calmly as he could. “I’m sorry. I’m not a warrior.”

“Give me the addresses. I’ll go alone,” Augustus said. Jonathan sheepishly handed the paper to Augustus. Swedenborg grabbed it.

“I hope you don’t mind me tagging along. I’ve got to meet this Fortune. He must be quite something. Any man who could have landed Christine...”

“The two of you should hit it off,” Augustus offered as he looked over Swedenborg. He hoped there was more to him than good looks and quick wit.

Outside of Jonathan's Office

LERON JAMES AND TED LISTON HAD FOLLOWED THE COP KILLER, Hobbes, to the east side of downtown, just north of Skid Row. They waited in their unmarked Chevrolet drinking coffee and bitching about not being allowed to just shoot Hobbes and get it over with. When they finished with that topic, they kvetched about working for a woman and police work in general.

They were so into their complaint they barely noticed the gathering of homeless on the sidewalk near them.

"Ted, look at the street behind us."

Ted craned his neck around to look behind. The size of the crowd shocked him. He looked in the side view mirror.

"Where the fuck did they come from?" he asked Leron.

"Beats the hell out of me."

Ted got out of the car and looked at them. The homeless stared at him like he was an ogre they had to kill.

"I don't think they're looking for shelter."

Leron opened his door, straightened himself, and made sure his badge and gun were visible. His partner was right. Leron didn't know what these people were doing and he didn't have to be told that the two of them weren't going to control a crowd this big.

"You people are in the way of an ongoing police investigation," he said in his best, no nonsense, police voice. "The shelters are thataway." He pointed to the south. Ted smiled to himself. The badge and gun always had the same effect as an ICE badge in a known immigrant hangout. People found better places to be in a hurry.

This time, the effect was the opposite. The badge seemed to draw them in. Leron was surrounded then besieged. Ted leaned in and grabbed the radio. "Officer needs assistance." He tried to clear a path to his partner. Before he could reach Leron, he disappeared into the crowd while reaching for his side arm.

THE POLICE DISPATCH OFFICE WAS UNDER SIEGE. Only three people, including the older, rotund supervisor, manned the radios. Calls had been coming in non-stop all day. Half went unanswered as the beleaguered staff did what they could to rout calls. Sweating from the pressure and in tears of frustration, the supervisor tried to calm an officer down who claimed that God was telling him to jump from the roof of the building he was standing on. She didn't notice the call from Ted Liston. Even if she'd answered it, it would have been too late.

TED HOLSTERED HIS GUN, his eyes glazed over with a joy beyond his experience. He and Leron found religion in the midst of the reeking mass of humanity now surrounding them. When the two cops looked into the eyes of those people, they suddenly understood that they had a higher calling. They no longer cared about their jobs, their families, their benefits, or their retirement. All they cared about was serving the new order. So, when Augustus and Wil Swedenborg exited the building, climbed into Jonathan's town car, and sped off, it didn't even register on the two men assigned with tailing them.

San Pedro, California

THE DRIVE TO SAN PEDRO FROM DOWNTOWN normally was a straight shot down the 110 freeway. Generally it took around an hour, on good days less than half that.

Augustus drove down the highway, now littered with vehicles and people roaming the pavement. Accidents had claimed some of the vehicles, the rest were abandoned. People attacked each other violently, some with tire irons and other objects, some with their fists. A few stood and preached the new order to the wind. An occasional gunshot made both Augustus and Wil duck. Augustus inched the car through the maze of metal and flesh. Occasionally, he could pick up speed but, for the most part, it was a crawl.

They had decided to explore San Pedro first because one of the storage facilities listed for Fortune Enterprises was based at the Los Angeles Air Force Base buildings in the old Fort MacArthur area. Jonathan's task was to reach someone of authority on the phone and open a path for them to search the warehouse. Swedenborg assured Augustus that Swedenborg's face alone could get them through any military security. Rather than reassure him, it made Augustus want to rearrange that face.

Fort MacArthur, named after Douglas MacArthur's Civil War hero father, was established by Grover Cleveland to defend the city's port. Prior to World War I, it became home to fourteen inch guns and mortars aimed to stop a seaside invasion. With the advent of the missile age, the defense of Los Angeles moved up to Los Angeles Air Force Base in El Segundo. Some of the fort was razed and dredged to become the Cabrillo Marina in San Pedro. Another part became Angel Gate Park. But the Air Force had housing and administrative buildings in what was left of the center of the old fort. The southern tip of the administrative building was listed as a storage facility belonging to Zachary Fortune.

All three of them felt sure this was the place. Only Augustus seemed bothered by the fact it was located in a restricted military area. But he'd agreed, reasoning if they were wrong and they weren't under military arrest, Long Beach was only minutes away across the Vincent Thomas Bridge.

Three hours after leaving Jonathan's office, they made it to San Pedro. Even Swedenborg seemed disheartened by what he'd witnessed on the way. They approached the military gate on Pacific and Meyler Road. Augustus was prepared to ram his way through the gate. Swedenborg grasped a pendant under his shirt and whispered some invocation. He blinked twice when he realized that Augustus was watching him and turned his charm back on full blast as he restored the amulet to its hiding place.

The gate house was abandoned, the barricades lifted and the concrete maze pushed aside. Augustus stole across the barrier as softly and quietly as the big car would allow. No one was anywhere in sight.

“Your friend Jonathan is really good.”

“Maybe.” Augustus looked around. “Where are we going?”

Swedenborg checked the map, “Pacific and twenty-sixth.”

They pulled past the orderly buildings and grounds that spoke of the military and the open area where clumps of men milled. At the south end of the building, the clumps had merged into an army. Some were still in their Air Force uniforms. Augustus stopped the car well shy of the largest group of people. He looked at Swedenborg who sat eyes wide open and slack-jawed.

“You know what you’re going to do?”

“I thought your face was going to pave the way,” Augustus said.

Swedenborg looked sourly at him.

“I’m going to give them ‘The Words’,” Augustus tried to smile but it came off as grimace. He forced down a laugh and wondered what in the world he could possibly find humorous in this situation. Cautiously, they got out of the car. Initially, no one seemed to notice them. Augustus set his face and took two determined strides forward. Swedenborg put a hand out to stop him.

Wil’s experience at Yucca Mountain told him that each one of these people saw him and Augustus as either their enemy or their deliverance.

“Tread softly,” he said. “They may not look like they’re paying attention to us but they are.”

Augustus searched the faces for some recognition. What he saw was terror, not aimed at him but rather at the building behind them.

“Move with me. Slowly, slowly. Get ready to spring for the doors. If the crowd turns, you don’t want to be flat footed,” Swedenborg said.

Augustus didn’t like taking orders from him. He barely liked being with him, but the man had dealt with Paul Stephens and his words might have value.

It felt like they tiptoed the first thirty yards. It reminded him of the scene in *The Birds* in which Rod Taylor eased Tippi Hedren and his family through the resting birds.

The door to the building swung open. Lila came out. The effect on the crowd was electrifying. All around Augustus, the people who had until that moment seemed like a painting, were moving with some speed. He thought they were moving toward the door, but they were surrounding him and his companion.

“It took you long enough, Priest,” Lila snarled. The tone of her voice made the tempers of the people surrounding him boil. They closed in until Augustus feared for his life.

“Run,” whispered Swedenborg.

Augustus looked at him like he was crazy. Swedenborg took his hand and took off into the crowd. The two of them brushed back the tide of people around them until they reached a group of men near the door. Swedenborg ran straight into them and bounced back. Augustus pulled up short. He turned to see that they were now completely surrounded by a crowd of people who looked at him like he was dinner.

A noose of people tightened around them. An alien sound percolated through the crowd as they began to mumble something in unison. Hands reached out and brushed against them. Augustus and Wil pressed back to back against each other trying to avoid contact with the throng.

"Leave!" The word resounded. It was Swedenborg.

Although it commanded Augustus' attention, the effect was unnoticeable on those around them. Augustus felt a growling inside of him.

He opened his mouth and said in a gravelly, nearly demented voice, "I exorcise you!" It sounded idiotic to him but he had no idea what else to do.

The effect was dramatic. It was as if they had been frozen in place, arms outstretched, expressions of anger, even their breaths seemed congealed on the spot. Swedenborg turned to Augustus.

"You did it! I can't believe it," he said.

"Tell me about it," whispered Augustus.

"Bravo, Sacerdos," came from Lila. She watched from the steps to the building. "Come in." The crowd parted and Augustus and Wil stepped forward uncertainly.

"Come. Have faith in your voice, Priest," Lila said. "Your words have opened the door for you and your attendant is welcome as well."

Swedenborg bristled at being referred to in that way. He was about to say something as Augustus passed him and walked up the stairs. Lila opened the doors for him. His bruised ego aside, Wil decided it was better inside with Augustus than outside with the mob. He hurried to catch up while the invitation was fresh.

Inside the clean, modern, open space, stood Christine. Beside her, with his back to the door, was Zach Fortune. When Augustus saw Christine, he broke into a run.

"Now, Priest," Zach said and turned his empty eyes onto Augustus. Augustus faltered to a standstill. He looked to Christine whose eyes were locked devotionally on her husband.

"Christine!" The word scorched his throat. She turned toward him but didn't see him.

"Who have you brought me? Someone to trade?" Fortune turned toward Swedenborg. Wil felt as if he were pressed backwards by an overwhelming weight and he stumbled into Lila's waiting arms. He scrambled away from her. She laughed delightedly.

"A clown! You brought us a clown for entertainment," she said.

"Get on with it, Hobbes," Wil screamed.

"By all means, get on with it, Gus," Fortune said.

“Release Christine and my uncle.”

“In the first place, Christine is free to go anytime...”

As Fortune spoke, Wil took in Lila who radiated hate. He followed her gaze and saw she was looking at Christine.

“By all means, Priest, take her,” Lila said.

“...in the second place, you haven’t lived up to your part of the bargain, yet,” Fortune finished his thought.

“What bargain? You’ve sold your soul to the devil and you want me to buy it back?” Augustus asked.

Fortune and Lila burst out laughing. Christine stared at Augustus as if he were an object of pity.

“You have no idea, do you, Priest? All of this is just a bump in your life of ease and complacency.”

“I know you have taken my uncle and Christine against their wills...”

“You know nothing. Christine, my dear, were you coerced?”

Christine shook her head. Her gaze focused somewhere behind Augustus. He turned to see Wil standing behind him.

“Ah, in fact, it seems that Christine has found a new white knight. If I am in league with the devil, Gus, why would you be the person to save me? A defrocked priest? A traitor to the Church? I don’t think so.”

“I only told the truth.”

“Does that include indiscretions with my wife? Were you truthful about those?”

Augustus was nailed backward. When he found his voice, it was weak and broken. “There is no sin in love.”

“Really? Have you ever read the Ten Commandments? Isn’t there something about adultery? Isn’t there something about ‘thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife?’”

“I love her.”

“Your cock, yes, no doubt you love that. Christine, I don’t think so. But we digress. You’re purpose is to open the gate.”

Fortune seemed very pleased with himself, but Augustus watched as Christine’s eyes connected with his own. It bolstered him. He found his footing again.

“What gate? What is this bargain I supposedly entered into? Return my uncle and Christine to me. If you want something that I can give, tell me what it is and I’ll do it, but release them first.”

Fortune ignored Augustus’ statement. “It is the portal to the promised land. This world is come to an end. Only those who can see will move on to the new earth.”

“You rant like a wannabe messiah. This world has survived a thousand false prophets. It will survive a thousand more. An arms dealer leading the chosen to Heaven? That’s actually comical.”

Fortune’s demeanor darkened. It made Augustus step back as if a wave hit him.

“The Words, Priest. That’s all I need. Then you can have the woman and the old man and suffer through the end of your world together.”

Lila moved around to the front. Dismissed, Christine stepped off to the side, her attention now lost in a private agony. She had given up everything for the man and he tossed her aside like a used tissue. Swedenborg took the lack of interest in him as an opportunity to step closer to Christine.

He couldn’t explain it but looking at her filled him with a sense of hope, something from his past lost to him but now returned. He didn’t know what was going to happen but he thought if the words of the exorcism had as much effect here as they did outside, there might be an opening to hustle Christine outside and make a run for the car. It made as much sense as anything had since that day at Yucca Mountain. The meeting with Jonathan and Augustus was the first time he’d felt like there might be a future.

Augustus inhaled and, like an opera singer, created a dynamic tension between his diaphragm and his larynx. In his best commanding voice, began the rite of exorcism.

“I command you, unclean spirit!” There was a moment of stillness that almost equaled the reaction of the crowd outside. The women appeared enrapt by his words. Fortune lowered his head and seemed to cease breathing. Could it be this simple?

Augustus took a step forward, “I command you, unclean spirit, whoever you are, along with all your minions now attacking this servant of God, by the mysteries of the incarnation, passion, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, by the descent of the Holy Spirit, by the coming of our Lord for judgment, that you tell me by some sign your name, and the day and hour of your departure. I command you, moreover, to obey me to the letter, I who am a minister of God despite my unworthiness; nor shall you be emboldened to harm in any way this creature of God, or the bystanders, or any of their possessions.”

The moment lingered. Augustus stood transfixed by his apparent success. Swedenborg took the moment to grab Christine around the shoulders and hustle her toward the exit.

The silence continued. “I have done as you asked. Give me my uncle.” It came out with the same command and power in his voice. He waited. “My uncle.”

A laugh started deep inside of Fortune. “Your uncle. Indeed, your uncle. He should be here. He’d find this very amusing.” The laugh shook his body. Lila joined in.

Swedenborg maneuvered Christine through the doors and outside. The crowd was affixed to the spot he had last seen them. He heard the laughs grow and noticed that Christine’s body started to resist. He hurried her as best he could through the crowd. Thirty feet from the car. Fifteen.

Inside, the laughter had grown maniacal. Augustus’ confidence frittered away as he tried to understand the scene before him. “My uncle,” he said again. It came out like a humble plea.

Fortune stopped laughing and turned his empty sockets on Augustus, who stepped back, again buffeted by a freakish invisible force.

Outside, a few feet from the car, Swedenborg and Christine were surrounded by an unyielding mass of humanity.

Under his breath, Swedenborg prayed, "Come on, Hobbes. Do something," and took hold of his talisman again.

Christine looked around at her surroundings and a small shriek escaped her. She moved close to Wil, who took her into his arms and closed his eyes in hopes that the nightmare would simply disappear.

"You are a false priest!" Fortune's voice slapped Augustus back another step. "You understand nothing. I offer you partnership. You can belong to the new order. You can be a god. Don't you remember the forest? The adoring people who offered their love to you?"

Augustus went into shock. The dream, the fire. Christine was there, so was Fortune.

"You bring English to me? What do you plan to do with that? Scare little old women into sucking your cock? Get out of here. Take the slut with you. You will find your uncle at Signal Hill. Maybe he can talk some sense to you. Let your English speaking angels guide you."

Outside, Augustus found himself in a gauntlet. Each person took the opportunity to spit, slap, and hit him. One man stepped before him and connected a roundhouse to Augustus' jaw. Augustus fell. The people started to kick him, landing as many kicks on each other as on him. Curses filled the air.

Christine screamed. Augustus tried to locate her through the forest of legs surrounding him. He forced himself up, swinging wildly to get people to back away.

Swedenborg got Christine down on the ground and shielded her with his body. Part of the crowd focused on her, screaming out, "whore." Blows and slurs bombarded them from every side.

Augustus saw the crowd near the town car. "Christine," he cried out as he flailed at the people trying to stop him.

A metal trash can came out of nowhere and caught him on the side of the head. He found himself on the ground, curled up in self-protection.

Kicks kept landing. He put one hand out to block them. It was knocked to the ground. Before he could withdraw it, someone jammed their foot down on it. He heard the bones break. His back, kidneys, legs and arms were all suffering the outrage of the crowd. He fought to stay conscious but he could feel himself slipping away.

"Hobbes, for god's sake, The Words."

It came through the haze of pain and the vague hold he had on reality. It was Swedenborg's voice. Augustus laughed to himself. The Words. Yeah, they had worked so well inside the building.

What had Fortune said? Something about English. Latin. Latin was almost a mother tongue to Augustus, but he couldn't remember a word of it. What was it? The word, "exorcism" came from Latin. He knew it but couldn't quite form the words.

Finally, he breathed out, "Exorcizo te."

He used the Vulgate pronunciation of the Church. Nothing happened. He said it again with as much volume as he could muster. The people closest to him stopped their attack. The ones behind them, continued to press forward in their desperation to destroy.

Augustus kicked at those in front of him. He forced himself up to a sitting position and said it over and over. A space cleared around him. Unsteadily, he stood. Repeating it again and again, gaining volume and pace. The space grew. His control over his muscles was tenuous. He stumbled but didn't fall.

Ahead he could make out the crowd around the car. He grabbed the closest person to him, used him as a crutch, took in a big breath and screamed the words. The crowd fell back: some turned and ran away, some froze to the spot. The person he had grabbed twisted and writhed under his hands until Augustus was forced to let go. A few paces ahead, he saw Swedenborg crouched over Christine. She was crying.

He lurched over to them and, as he reached them, he heard, "Bring the whore to me." Wil was cast aside as if he were an empty bag. Christine was lifted up and carried from person to person overhead back to the door. Augustus used his Latin phrase over and over but found that, although the people around him cringed and pushed away as if he were whipping them, those further away were untouched. He watched helplessly as Christine, screaming for her life, was carted into the warehouse.

The door slammed behind her, but not before Fortune's voice raged over the distance, "You failed again, false priest. You had your chance to join the new world. Be gone."

Both Wil and Augustus tried to go back to the warehouse but they were blocked. The mob turned into an impregnable wall before them. The Latin had no effect on them whatsoever.

Swedenborg helped Augustus into the car. He took the keys from Augustus and climbed behind the wheel, started up the car and inched his way forward until he was clear of the crowd. "Where are we going?"

Augustus was foundering. The question seemed to come from miles away. All he wanted to do was sleep. Swedenborg stopped the car once he pulled out of the base. He shook Augustus and slapped him lightly on the cheeks to bring him to.

"We're going back to Jonathan's office. Stay awake, Augustus, stay awake."

"Signal Hill," Augustus mumbled.

"Where the hell is that?"

SIGNAL HILL WAS ONCE CALLED Porcupine Hill because of the oil derricks that stuck out quill-like across its landscape. Although most of those were gone, the oil was still being pumped endlessly by the nodding donkey pumps.

Swedenborg drove through the little enclave city in the middle of Long Beach. He passed apparently abandoned residential neighborhoods and entered a commercial area. Outside a run-down building, stood two homeless men, unlikely sentries against the world.

"This has to be it." Augustus looked at the two men. "Let me get out. I'll take care of it." His head pounded. He held his damaged hand close to him. Every movement brought a stabbing pain somewhere in his body. As he stepped out of the car, he wondered if he could walk to the door of the building under his own power. Swedenborg moved to help him.

Augustus straightened. "Stay here," he said with what force he had left.

The men turned to watch as the priest crawled out of the town car, leaned heavily on it and took several deep breaths.

"Keep the car running. I'm going to get my uncle and we may have to leave in a hurry. With any luck, the Latin will work on them. At least long enough to get him out."

He pushed off from the car and careened toward the men.

They came blankly to him. Each raised a hand to strike at him.

Wil was out the door. His only impulse was to save Augustus.

The men started their fists downward toward Augustus who stood his ground.

"Exorcizo te!"

The men hove backward, their attention then their fists finding each other rather than Augustus. Their anger, far from abated, exploded on each other.

Augustus sighed in relief and fumbled toward the door.

"Get back in the car," he yelled over his shoulder.

Inside the warehouse, he squinted into the gloom and filth. Although he couldn't see anyone, he knew he wasn't alone.

"Ham?"

He stumbled through the dim space. He stopped to listen for a moment and heard raspy breaths and headed their way. He found Ham's crumpled form on the floor bloodied and delirious.

Augustus bent over him and laid a hand on his chest. Ham feebly reacted to the touch. His breath was sporadic and wet.

Augustus felt his uncle's body to see if anything was broken. Ham rocked his head weakly back and forth. No one point seemed to cause him more distress than any other. Kneeling beside him, he slid his arms under his uncle's neck and knees. He had no idea how he was going to stand up with his uncle in his arms. He doubted he could stand back up on his own without his uncle's weight. He tried once and couldn't budge him.

"Ham, I am so sorry."

“Augustus...” Ham opened rheumy eyes and stared past Augustus.

Augustus straightened up and lifted his uncle into his arms. He knew his uncle weighed very little but the strain on his arms and back was extraordinary. The pain in his broken hand rocketed into his brain.

He lumbered up to one foot then, grunting as if he were lifting the world on his shoulders, got his second foot under him. He turned. The door looked a football field away. He forced himself to take one step then another. After an eternity, he made it to the door, foundering to one knee three times along the way. It opened easier than he expected and he toppled out of the door. In the sun of the late afternoon, he saw no sign of the two men who had guarded the place. He didn't remember the step down from the landing in front of the door and stumbled forward almost losing his grip on Ham as he fell again to one knee. Wil came to his rescue.

Spent, he stayed down while he watched Wil deposit Ham in the back seat of the town car.

Wil looked back at him. “Where should we take him?”

“UCLA.”

He tried to stand but his legs had decided against it. Wil helped him to his feet and into the car.

UCLA Hospital

THE CITY HAD FALLEN INTO CHAOS. The hospital lobby had turned into a war zone. Augustus ignored the overwhelmed emergency room, grabbed a collapsed wheelchair leaning against a wall and he and Wil bundled Ham up to the top floor where Augustus had been so well tended.

It was all but abandoned. After some searching, Augustus found one of the nurses who had cared for him. She looked at his blooded face and broken hand.

“We need to get you to emergency.” She grabbed him by his good arm and spun him around. Then she saw Hamilton. “Oh, my God. What are you doing on this...”

“Have you seen the first floor? Have you seen emergency?” Augustus’ eyes pleaded with her.

She stared at him for a minute then broke down into tears. “I’m scared to leave here. We’re hiding...”

“We?” Swedenborg caught the pronoun.

“There’s another nurse and a neurologist. We don’t have any patients and there’s almost no food and...”

Augustus turned on his confessional voice. “I understand. We’re not here to cause problems, just to see that my uncle has someone to look after him.”

“We’re not allowed to intake patients here. That has to be done through admitting. And anyway, this floor is all suites and...” she looked them over. They were bedraggled and filthy.

“I understand that too. I must be a sight but I stayed here not that long ago and so did my housekeeper, Maria Wolton.” The nurse didn’t immediately register the face or the name. “I’m Augustus Hobbes ...”

“The crazy priest!” A hand flew up to her mouth to try to stop the words.

Augustus laughed, “Yeah, that’s me. Can you do anything for us? Anything at all?” He could see in her eyes that the answer was yes but she was going through a serious inner argument. She looked at Wil and tilted her head slightly.

“I know you! You’re that ... that scientist that’s always on TV,” she smiled in recognition and he gave her his best smile which almost caused her to swoon.

Augustus cleared his throat gently, “Anything?”

She spun around to him all business, “Of course, Father Hobbes ... Mister Hobbes. We can do something. Let me get the others.” With that she left. In twenty seconds the other nurse and the neurologist who had attended Maria showed up. Neither looked as pleased as the first nurse.

The neurologist first looked at the wound on Augustus’ head.

“That’s not good,” he said.

“Honesty! I like your bedside manner, Doctor,” Wil said. “I’ve been telling him he doesn’t look good all along.” No one joined Swedenborg in his joke.

“Please, look at my uncle first. I’m feeling better than I have in a while so I can wait.”

The doctor barked out a few orders to the nurses while he looked over Hamilton. “Do we know the status of radiology?”

The first nurse said, “We can’t go to emergency or down to radiology. We’ll have to use the portable one up here.”

“That’s not acceptable,” said the neurologist in his practiced, doctor impatience.

“It has to be,” said Augustus. The floors below this are war zones.”

The doctor thought it over. His education told him that neither of these men should wait much longer for care. His education also told him that he shouldn’t proceed without adequate tests. He thought about the insurance company and the liability he would face if he made a diagnosis without results from every test he could think of.

He looked at the faces of the men in front of him. Augustus and Wil showed no signs of patience whatsoever. Although he thought they were exaggerating about the state of the hospital below his floor, he knew things were bad and, for all he knew, getting worse. He sighed deeply and closed his eyes.

“I’d like to have an MRI on this man but I guess we’ll have to do it the old fashioned way. One of you clean and stitch up Mister Hobbes here,” he indicated Augustus. “I want x rays on both these heads. Both lateral and frontal.”

Beverly Hills

DANIEL FREMONT COULDN'T BELIEVE WHAT PUSSIES his teammates were. His fifteenth birthday had turned into a gigantic sleepover because of what was going on outside.

He grabbed Jim Brenner. The eight beers Brenner had downed in an hour had put him into a profound sleep. Daniel pulled and grunted to lift his favorite receiver's slim body out of his chair without significant success. He thought about how easily that bastard Hobbes had carried him to the front of the class in his desk!

The memory burrowed out of the depths and his face contorted in hate. Daniel bent over his insensate friend and slapped him hard. Brenner swiped feebly at whatever was disturbing him but never came out of his stupor. Frustrated, Daniel looked over the dismal, drunken group sprawled over the huge patio of his parents' house. Clearly, this party was over but the idea for another party sprang into his head.

He didn't care that his father had told him to stay home. That all his friends had to spend the night. The curfew! The curfew! If he heard that word one more time he'd throw up. He hopped into his father's Mercedes, saw the Beamer belonging to one of the senior's sitting in the drive, and noticed a Bel Air sticker in the windshield.

Back on the patio, he searched pockets of his passed out classmates until he found keys for a BMW. He raced back, climbed in and took off, clipping a parked Audi on his way out of the drive. He was waved through the main gate of Bel Air and made his way to Hobbes mansion, which he recognized from the newspaper articles that had covered Augustus' excommunication.

The place was dark. Either Hobbes was asleep or no one was home. It didn't matter if Hobbes was waiting in the dark with a shotgun; Daniel was going to get some revenge. He had boasted that he had Hobbes thrown out of the. Although most of his classmates were upset at the loss of a teacher who was willing to say things that weren't part of the curriculum passed down by the Vatican, his teammates stood behind Daniel and made it clear that no one should disagree with him. In his father's den surrounded by awards and honors bestowed by the Church on such a faithful donor, he learned that the Church was just as mercenary as the rest of the world.

Despite his bravado, he parked in the driveway as close to the road as he could and not arouse the suspicion of the night patrols. He took a can of lighter fluid and his Zippo lighter and crept through the shadows up to the dark entryway.

Alcohol made this plan seem brilliant when he'd come up with it, but standing before the massive front door, he wondered how he was going to get in. He had no tools. There was likely a security alarm, perhaps a dog. Maybe he could set fire to the bushes. He

looked at the manicured and well watered shrubbery and then at his lighter. Even his drunken brain decided there wasn't much chance of success in that approach. Various options came to mind, most of them involving using his own waste in one artistic way or another. He chuckled as he thought about Hobbes coming home and stepping in it.

Wouldn't it be so much better if it were in the house? Hobbes' bed would be the best. He tried the door. The latch gave and the door swung open. Dumfounded, he waited for alarms or shotgun blasts or snarling, attack dogs. The silence was broken by a long belch from him that resounded in the empty foyer. This prompted laughter that crippled him. For two minutes, the incredible folly of the whole situation wracked him with laughs until the sloshing it caused in his stomach brought its contents cascading forth all over the blood-stained marble floor.

"That takes care of plan B," he said out loud, after he could breathe again. Drenched in sweat and splattered with vomit, the laughter started again. He found the door to the kitchen, looked around without satisfaction. Even the refrigerator lacked any sort of real opportunity.

He tiptoed back into the foyer as if the gales of laughter and retching wouldn't have roused even the soundest sleepers. Ham's study lay before him. He had found the heart of Father Augustus Hobbes. No other Jesuit even came close to Hobbes' love of books. If you asked anyone to describe Hobbes they would say, "the tall priest with his head in a book."

He looked at the desk covered with old books. He unzipped his pants and unloaded his bladder all over the books and desk. He splashed lighter fluid along the bookshelves, emptied it on the desk and lit his lighter.

The lighter fluid sputtered and had trouble catching because of the urine. He laughed at his stupidity and wondered why all the alcohol in his system didn't make his urine flammable. Finally, he found enough dry paper with lighter fluid on it that the fire started in earnest. He stood a little too close, basking in his deed, and the fluid that had splashed onto his sleeve and pants caught fire as well. It took the pain of his own burning flesh to bring him out of his self-congratulatory fog. Slapping alternately at his arm and crotch, he dropped his lighter by the desk.

He flew out of the room, through the front door and screamed as he rolled on the damp grass at the side of the drive. He laid there laughing while a passing night patrol stopped to investigate the car at the end of the drive.

Inside the car was the same guard who had called in Augustus' theft of the police cruiser. He knew the car in the Hobbes' driveway belonged to the teenage son of an entertainment attorney who was out way past curfew. It wasn't his job to harass the residents, but things were too weird not to be concerned. Now, he could see the damage on the side of the car and it looked fresh. On top of that, why would the boy visit Hobbes?

He was pretty sure that Hobbes wasn't home. Since the insanity began, his fellow guards had drifted away until he had become the only one showing up for work. His regular shifts stretched into long, boring, as many hour days as he could stand and he took the responsibility as a personal challenge.

The guard got out. He took in the early morning sounds of the quiet street. Laughter was coming from up the drive. He pulled out his taser and radio—although who he could call that would answer was beyond him. As he approached, taser held shakily before him, he found the laughing teenager on the grass, the open front door and flickering light coming from somewhere inside the house.

Hobbes' Mansion

THE QUIET OF THE DIM MORNING gave the impression that everything had returned to normal. Augustus, head freshly stitched and hand in a cast, rolled down the window and breathed in the air which smelled ripe. It filled him with a sense of ease. The doctor had underlined how important to stay away from stress and driving. Augustus laughed at the simpler world in which you could heed a doctor's advice.

He pulled in through the gate at Bel Air. Wil slept in the seat next to him. The guard house was empty so he drove up the winding route to his house. Outside the house stood a small collection of neighbors surrounding the guard's car. He stopped and got out.

The young guard came over to him. "Mister Hobbes. There's been a fire." The guard stared at the stitched, bruised and broken man in front of him. He was about to ask what was wrong when he decided that it would be another crazy story and he had heard too many as it was.

Augustus looked past the young man. Other than the front door to the house standing wide open, everything looked fine from the outside.

The guard led Augustus up the driveway.

"What happened?" Augustus asked.

The guard pointed at a figure seated on the grass. "That one over there decided to have a little bonfire in your house."

Augustus squinted at the distance. The boy looked familiar but he couldn't quite make him out. He crossed over to him, the guard in tow. As he closed the distance, it became clear who it was.

"Mister Fremont. What is this?"

Fremont was in pain from a hangover that was just kicking in, burns on his arm, hands, and groin, and a general sense that no one appreciated his work. Here was the man who had better appreciate what he did.

"Father Fuck-up. I gave you a little present."

Augustus and guard hurried past Daniel into the house.

"Don't miss the gift wrapping I did by the door," Fremont yelled after them. The guard pointed at the vomit. "He evidently got sick right here." Then he pointed dismayed at the blood stain, "I don't know ... this isn't fresh."

Augustus nodded. He looked very weary.

The guard grimaced. *Crazy rich people*, he thought to himself. *Blood stained entryway and all he does is a nod.* He led Augustus into the den.

The garden hose still snaked across the foyer to the threshold of the den. Inside were smoke and ash and wet. What had been Ham's source of pride and power was a

smoldering ruin. Books, which Augustus loved almost as much as his uncle did, lay charred and sopping wet on the floor. The desk was a ruin. The leaded glass was covered in soot and cracked. One crack ran up through the center of the rosy cross. Augustus' heart sank as he looked over the ruin. This would kill Ham. He was so glad he wasn't there to see it. There was a smell like a toilet that lingered somewhere behind the smoke and damp.

"What's that smell?"

The guard scrunched up his face. "I think the kid peed on everything." He watched that settle into Augustus. "You know that boy?"

"He was one of my students."

"Boy! I hated a couple of my teachers but ..." The guard shook his head in disbelief. "Things is really fucked up."

Augustus nodded. *Is they ever*, he thought.

"Listen, I tried the police and fire," the guard said. "Anyways, no one's answering."

Augustus turned to the guard. "I owe you a lot." He shook the young man's hand.

"What I'm getting to is that I can't hold the kid or nothing. The city is nuts."

Augustus nodded. "I can't thank you enough. I hope the day comes when I can repay you. What are the bandages for?" He pointed at Fremont.

"On the kid? Burns. He set himself on fire while he was at it." He shrugged.

The young guard hung around while Augustus cleaned up the puke.

"What do you want to do with him?" He pointed at Daniel.

"I don't know, yet. Leave him. How do you get the handcuffs off?"

"It's those plastic bands. You can just cut 'em." He looked around. "I can stick around ..."

Augustus looked up from his disgusting chore. "You've been great. I don't know what to do for you but we'll figure it out when everything's quieted down. I'm sorry to admit this but I don't even know your name."

"Brandon. Brandon Cooper."

"Mister Cooper, you are my hero. Where do you live?"

"Near Westwood."

"Is someone waiting for you there?" Augustus asked.

"My wife."

"Why are you still here?"

"It's my job."

Augustus looked at him and could only nod. He placed his good hand on Brandon's shoulder.

"I just came from that neighborhood. Steer clear of the U.C.L.A. campus and get yourself home. God bless you for what you did and God protect you."

The young man nodded. He backed off uncertainly.

Augustus thought about the way he had said “God.” It had regained its force in his mind, in his life. If the exorcism ritual words worked then there must be something to all of it. As soon as he thought that, he wondered if he was now guilty of a formal fallacy in his thinking.

“You motherfucker. I’ll fuck you up when I get free,” Fremont screamed as Brandon walked by. Brandon turned and in one wild-west-gun-fight motion, pulled his taser and lit Daniel Fremont up. Once the convulsions stopped, Cooper pulled the darts out of Daniel, gave a small salute to Augustus, who had to stop himself from laughing. Brandon paraded down the drive to the applause of the neighbors still clustered at the property line.

Never Waste a Breath on Breathing Hobbes Mansion

AN HOUR LATER, Wil and Augustus sat at the breakfast table. In the background, Daniel Fremont screamed obscenities.

“God, I must have been tired,” Wil said. “I missed all the fun.”

“Fun! That’s the word for it.”

“What are you going to do with him?” Wil asked.

“Let him wear himself out. When he quiets down, I’ll cut the restraints and get him home. What about you?”

“We better get Jonathan,” Wil said. “He’s been stuck in his office.”

“Let’s see if we can reach him through his land line,” Augustus said.

He located his cell phone and hit the speed dial for his friend. Nothing. He looked at the phone. It indicated that it was out of range. He tried through the house land line.

Jonathan answered on the first ring.

“Thank God,” Jonathan exclaimed. “I thought maybe you were ...”

“Dead? I’m not sure that’d be a bad thing right now. What’s it like down there?”

“Eerily quiet. I don’t know what’s happening. Internet is full of wild news. It’s getting bad. I mean holocaust like numbers. What happened to you?”

“I failed.” He felt the intense shame of the loss of Christine and that because of him, his uncle had been beaten nearly to death. “I got Ham. He’s in a bad way. I left him on the top floor at UCLA but that place ...”

“Yeah, I heard that all the hospitals are overwhelmed.”

“That doesn’t begin to describe it.”

“So, what do you mean you failed?”

“I don’t know what Fortune wants. I gave him what I thought made sense, but he laughed. He wants words. For some reason, he thinks I know what they are. If they aren’t from the Roman rituals, I have no idea what to do. I was a priest. Priest is what I know.” He thought about his failure for a moment. “Fortune still has Christine.”

That sat heavily on both Augustus and Wil.

“The Latin worked,” Swedenborg offered.

“That’s right. The opening Latin words for exorcism seemed to stop the crowds. They are, ‘exorcizo te.’ Remember that, Jonathan, ‘exorcizo te.’” He paused while he thought about Zach Fortune and the words he’d said. “False priest.”

“Augustus?”

“Sorry. Those words only seem to work on the rank and file. Jonathan, I’m like an actor who’s on the wrong stage in the wrong play. It’s surreal.”

“It is surreal, Augustus.”

“The Roman rites aren’t the answer. I don’t even have a glimmer of an idea of what is.”

It was Jonathan’s turn to take a long pause. “Any chance I can get my car back? I need to get Pam home.”

“That’s why we called. Wil’s going to get the car to you. Maybe we should consider circling the wagons. You know, moving in together. This house has plenty of room.”

Images of the last time he was at Augustus’ house filled Jonathan’s head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Augustus understood immediately. “Wil’s on his way. Anybody’s guess on how long it will take. If it weren’t Los Angeles, this would have more meaning but the roads are literally parking lots.”

“What are you going to do?” Jonathan asked.

“I wish I knew. Please consider moving you and Pam here. Bel Air is a little enclave of sanity right now.”

“Maybe that’s because you’ve been away.” Jonathan hung up.

Augustus looked at the phone and laughed in spite of the pain that observation caused him. Jonathan was right. The only problem with the world was his own presence in it. He didn’t fit. He was supposed to be a priest but he wasn’t a priest. He was supposed to be a baron of industry but he was beyond inept at commerce. He was supposed to be the love of Christine’s life but he had failed at that on so many levels. His existence was some kind of cosmic joke.

“I guess I’d better get going,” Wil said.

“Yeah, he and Pam are waiting for you.”

“Maybe I can pick up a few supplies while I’m out.”

Wil left without much pomp and Augustus searched through the kitchen drawers for scissors. He found a pair that would cut anything and headed toward the door.

Young Fremont leaned forward. His legs straight out, arms pinned behind him. It looked uncomfortable. He was panting. All the screaming had done the trick. He was completely enervated. Augustus carefully snipped the restraint. Daniel’s arms fell to his side.

“I’ll get you, you son of a bitch. My father will sue you. I’ll ruin you.” It came out as a string of words, hoarsely whispered without any inflection.

“If you spent less time planning revenge for imagined injuries, your life will work a lot better, I promise you.” He put hands under Daniel’s armpits and lifted him to his feet. Daniel gasped in pain. “I’ll sue that punk-ass guard, too.”

“Daniel, let’s just see if we can make it to your house without getting killed by the crazy people on the street. Is that your car at the end of the drive?” He pointed at the BMW.

“Yeah. I’ll drive.” But he could barely move. The exertion of maintaining his stance was wearing him out.

“I don’t think so. Besides, think of all the things you can say to me while I’m driving you home. Where are your keys?”

Daniel slapped at his pockets and groaned in pain. Careful not to move too quickly, he looked around the ground where he had been cuffed.

“You don’t know where they are?”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m not that kind of priest.”

“You’re not a priest because of me. I got you fired. It was me.”

“There’s a highlight for your résumé.”

“That’s right!”

“Stay here. I have to find another way to get you home. You have a phone?”

“Fuck you.”

“See, if you’d studied instead of sleeping through classes, you’d have snappier repartee.”

“Fuck you.”

Augustus walked back into the house. Daniel took a few wobbly steps toward the BMW and collapsed onto his butt.

Augustus made a futile search through the kitchen for keys. He ran up to his room and found the school directory which listed contact numbers for all the students. He found Fremont and called.

“Mister Fremont?”

“Yes.”

“This is Augustus Hobbes.”

“Now listen, I have nothing to say to you. You brought this down on yourself and there are a lot bigger things to worry about...”

“Mister Fremont, this has nothing to do with my excommunication. This has to do with your son. He is at my house.”

“Nonsense. He’s on the back patio with his friends.”

“You might want to take a second look. He’s on my front lawn. He set fire to my uncle’s priceless library and himself and passed out on the lawn.”

“Is he all right?”

“Except for his abysmal choice of vocabulary, yes. His burns are minor.”

“If he’s hurt, I’ll...”

“You’ll what, Mister Fremont? Sue me because your son broke into my uncle’s house and set fire to it? Maybe if you thought about people instead of money for one moment...”

The line went dead. What right did he have to lecture anyone anyway? He had always prided himself on his intellect but that seemed to be fairly worthless of late. So what did that leave him? Self-loathing crept up his spine. He forced it back down. There was time enough for that. Augustus looked at the directory again and saw that the address for the Fremonts was in Beverly Hills. Blocks away.

He decided he’d have to invade Maria’s space to find the keys. In her room, he kept his attention on his task and ignored the amazing, visual treat of her collection. He checked the drawers of her dressers. Nothing. He looked on all the surfaces. Again, nothing. Standing in the middle of the room, he closed his eyes and pictured the keys. Then he opened his eyes and took in the room. As he glanced around, he noticed something odd hanging off a plaster, brightly painted, cherub’s wing. The keys!

He pulled the town car out of the garage, and looked for Daniel. The boy was nowhere to be seen. Augustus was about to sigh in relief when he noticed the door of the BMW open and a foot hanging out of it. He pulled the town car close and found Daniel’s sleeping body in the driver’s seat. He checked the ignition in Daniel’s car but didn’t see any keys so, with great effort and only one useful hand, he dragged Daniel Fremont over to his car and stuffed him in the back seat. Daniel woke up and started up his chorus of “fuck yous.”

Augustus laughed and continued to chuckle the whole way. He decided the world should be viewed in H.G. Wellsian terms and he was the Time Traveler taking it all in. The Fremonts and Fortunes of the world were Morlocks and the dainty masses who saw the world as basically a good place were the hapless Eloi who ended their lives as slaves and food for their rougher hewn brethren.

The drive to Beverly Hills was uneventful except for crossing Sunset because there was a steady stream of cars and people trying to get to the ocean. While he waited to cross the street, he watched them pass. It was a movie, a horror movie. Some faces were twisted in rage, some in desperation, some in agony and loss, some filled with hope, some filled with a crazed belief that somehow, the world would be a better place if they could just get down the road a piece. Finally, the inbred kindness of Los Angeles drivers kicked in and he was able to cross the west bound lanes. Horns erupted from behind the drivers kind enough to let him in as if the five seconds it took him to go through two lanes cost them a victory in whatever race they were part of.

Total chaos had not set in yet. Although there were a few convoys driving at insane speeds the wrong way on Sunset, most kept in their prescribed lanes. After two narrow misses, new horns sounding, the sound of screeching brakes and curses from a line of speeding cars going the wrong way, Augustus made it across the boulevard.

Daniel never wasted a breath on breathing. He spoke of Augustus' shortcomings in the most profane manner the whole way. Augustus was coming around to his point of view.

"You're probably right," Augustus said. It didn't stop the stream of invectives from the back seat but it kept Augustus chuckling until they got the boy to his house. His father and mother rushed out at the sound of the car in the drive. They started in on threats against Augustus but once Daniel was out of the car, Augustus threw it into reverse and sped away.

It took much longer to go home. He joined the long, slow-moving line of exodus from the city but finally arrived at his destination.

Augustus made a beeline for his room. He collapsed, face first, on his bed.

Everything hurt. He laughed as he took stock of his body. Cuts and bruises covered every inch of it. His hand was held together by plaster, his head by stitches. His body was a map of pain. It made him laugh again, which hurt so much that it made him laugh more.

Augustus' last bit of energy faded. It was entirely his fault. It wasn't Fortune and it wasn't Swedenborg and it wasn't the man in the moon. It was him. He had thought Christine was the answer to everything. He thought he'd figured it out. He'd used logic to diagnose the situation and assign a fix for it all. Christine was the family he never had; the exorcism ritual was the key to the other problem. Both things made sense. Maybe that was the problem.

He replayed Fortune's words over and over. He was a false priest. He was a failure in the dream forest and in real life. When he told Fortune that everything he did he did for love, what did Fortune say?

"Love of your cock, yes. Christine, I don't think so." Was that what it all boiled down to? Was he a pubescent libido controlling an adult body? Had he been wrong about everything? He wanted a drink. He tried to sit up but fell asleep instead.

SEVERAL HOURS PASSED. When Augustus woke up, the house was silent. He was stiff and incredibly sore but managed to haul himself out of bed. One slow, painful step after another got him to the kitchen.

Lionel Sharp Hobbes' Mansion

LIONEL SHARP HAD DREAMED OF THIS DAY. It didn't bother him that society had fallen apart, that his lawyers didn't answer their phones, that driving was a nightmare. None of that mattered.

Over and over he imagined Hobbes' face when he delivered the summons and the document of the suit. His lawyers—when he'd last spoken with them a month ago—were almost as excited as he was. It was as open and shut a case as they had ever seen. Years had passed but Augustus Hobbes had committed an unprovoked, violent assault on their client. He had been damaged physically and, more importantly to the legal team, he had been damaged emotionally and psychologically.

As Sharp approached the door, he ran over all the things he could say. "You thought the Roman Collar would protect you forever?" Or maybe more petulant. "You ruined me." Or maybe he would stand silently and watch the reality of the suit sink into Hobbes' eyes then spit in his face like Hobbes had done to him eleven years ago. Yeah, he liked that one.

He rang the bell and stood before the beautiful door. If things went right, he'd be living there soon and Hobbes would be out on the street. He turned to take in the grounds and inhaled the clean, moist air. No one answered. He rang the bell again then leaned on it.

Hobbes opened the door. His face was bruised and stitched up. Sharp appraised him and offered a Cheshire Cat grin as he held the papers in front of him. The shock on Hobbes' face was delicious.

Augustus stared in disbelief at Sharp. The archdiocese had clearly spent a lot of money on the cosmetic surgery because Sharp looked remarkably like his bland self.

"You're not a priest anymore."

Augustus looked at the papers. "You're suing me after a decade?"

"You're not a priest anymore. I can sue you," he looked around the foyer behind Augustus, "for all of this."

Augustus laughed. At first, it was just a chuckle but it grew beyond his ability to control. Sharp fumed. In all the scenarios he had played out in his head, Augustus never laughed at him.

"Stop it," he screamed. "I'm going to make you poor. I'm going to take everything from you."

Augustus tried to stop laughing, but the more he tried the harder it became. Laughter wracked his beat up body but he couldn't stop. Sharp spun on his heel and stormed down the drive.

"See you in court, you sanctimonious bastard."

Augustus straightened. Between chuckles he managed, "I'd love to go into court with you."

Sharp stopped. At last the man understood the gravity of the situation.

"That means," Augustus swallowed the last few chortles, "that I'm not bound by the sanctity of the confessional," his voice grounded and sincere. "I can't wait to tell the world why I hit you."

Sharp started toward him, his face wrenched in anger. He wagged a finger at Hobbes but Hobbes faced him in dead earnest. Sharp pulled up short. The moment had slipped away. He was presented with the choice of calling off the suit or hoping that his attorneys, who were ignorant of what had been said in the confessional, could stop Hobbes from talking. He turned back to his car. His walk became a run.

Augustus called after him. "I don't want to be a party-pooper, but have you noticed anything different lately? I'm not sure there are courts anymore. But yeah, let's go to court." Then to himself, "I hope you win."

We All Need Wine

AUGUSTUS CLOSED THE DOOR. He threw the papers on the rose marble-topped table near the door and shuffled his way back to the kitchen. "When all of this boils over," he thought to himself, "maybe Desmond will show me the ropes of living on the street." The laughs started again. The pain the laughs caused made him laugh more. Wine was what he needed.

The front door opened behind him. Wil walked in with Jonathan and Pam in tow. They brought in bags of canned and dry goods with them. Jonathan looked around the foyer as if the teeming masses were lying in wait for him. Pam took in the beauty that impressed all first time visitors. Through it all, the house retained its magnificence.

"You came. Thank God," Augustus said.

Jonathan and Pam saw Augustus' face and both hurried over to him.

"What happened to you?"

"I gave Fortune 'the words.'" He started laughing again. Jonathan and Pam exchanged worried looks. "I guess Wil didn't tell you, I was brilliant." Laughter again. He held his sides to hold his beaten body together and laughed until he doubled over. They came over to him and gently petted him to calm him down.

"Wine. We all need wine." He broke away from them and shuffled toward the kitchen. They followed.

In the kitchen, he looked at the door to the cellar. He imagined himself going down the steep steps and couldn't see any chance of him making it. "Jonathan, you know your way around the cellar..."

"No, I don't."

"Please go fetch us some insouciant vintage to go with ... oh, what shall we call it ... insanity."

"I'll get it," Wil offered and was through the door before anyone could react.

"Well, it may be a while before the wine arrives, I say we play pin the tail on the ..."

Augustus' cell phone buzzed on the table interrupting Augustus' self-deprecation. They all looked at it. Phones weren't ringing much lately. It was a rare enough occasion that it took a moment for him to answer it.

"Ah, Priest," Fortune said, his voice full of a mocking tone that was loud enough for Pam and Jonathan to hear his words.

"You had a chance to join us. Take us to the Promised Land. Unlike Moses, you even might have crossed over. Think of it, Priest, you could have been the leader of the new congregation. And women! You could have been the father of the next generation. All you had to do was say the words. I can't tell you how disappointed I am in you."

“Get in line, Fortune. There’s a lot of disappointment I have to account for.”

“Save your self-pity. I called to tell you that your whore will provide the blood we need to open the gate. Four days at the place where it all began. She has four days. It’s a shame, really. She was a good fuck.”

“I’ll...” Augustus voice trembled with hate.

“You’ll what? You? You fail at everything you do. Ask your uncle. Maybe he can save Christine’s life.”

“He’s incapable of talking, thanks to you.”

There was no response. “Fortune?” Augustus asked. The line was silent.

FORTUNE SPUN AROUND ON LILA. His gaze backed her up and she screamed in panic. “What did you do to the uncle?”

“WHAT DID HE WANT?” Wil asked as he topped the stairs. “Did he mention Christine?”

Augustus repeated what Fortune said in a lifeless monotone.

“Yucca,” Wil said.

“What?” Augustus asked.

“That’s where it started.”

“What are you going to do?” Jonathan asked.

“Go see my uncle,” Augustus said.

She Needs Us. We Need Her.

TRAFFIC HAD THINNED OUT. People trying to get to the sea had reached it or had died trying. The roads were littered with abandoned vehicles. Even the hospital seemed less like a scrambled ant hill and more like an overcrowded hospital.

Jonathan, Pam and Augustus made their way through the throngs still hoping for medical treatment, and up the stairs to the tenth floor. There they found the nurses and doctor looking a lot worse for wear considering it had only been hours. They were happy to see friendly faces.

"Mister Hobbes! Thank God! You may have to take your uncle with you. The word is we're about to lose water service in this district. That means, we'll all have to leave," the doctor said.

"All public services are on the verge of shut down," Jonathan offered.

To Augustus, this was just another wound, another pain. He was in danger of laughing again. He was trying to find some magic words that would stop the insanity before the insanity stopped everything. And, evidently, that depended on his uncle.

"How is he?"

"He's stable."

"Can he talk?"

The doctor shook his head. "He is in a stage two coma."

"Coma! Stage two?"

"He responds to stimuli, some stimuli, but slowly. Often a long delay. He can't speak but he has not entered the profound state that most people think of when the word, 'coma' is used. We have him on intravenous drip to keep him hydrated. He's able to chew and swallow but the delay is so long to the stimulus that we hesitate to give him anything orally lest he aspirate it."

"Let me see him."

The doctor led them into the suite Augustus had been in. Ham lay flat on his back; monitor and IV lines connected him to his bed and machines.

Augustus leaned over the rail and looked at the bruised face. Ham looked ancient and grey as if he were covered with dust. His breath was so shallow that Augustus found himself trying to breathe for him. He could feel death hovering nearby.

"I'm so sorry."

Ham didn't respond at first but then licked his lips and mumbled or groaned something.

"He's speaking!" Augustus turned to the doctor.

"In a way, yes. If you want words, you'll be disappointed."

Words. That's exactly what he wanted. He wanted somebody to give him the answer.

"Ham, you've got to help me. I need The Words." Nothing. "The Words. Fortune says you know them." A long pause. Ham grunted and moaned then sighed and his breath returned to its shallow pulse.

"The body and brain are trying to heal themselves. All medicine can do is make sure that nothing worse happens while the body works."

Augustus was lost in the pit of his own despair. Without Ham, he had no hope of doing whatever he was supposed to do.

Finally, the doctor spoke up. "We need to get him—and for that matter us—out of here. The hospital is out of a lot of basic supplies. Water and, eventually, electricity will go. Being here will be bad for him soon."

Pam spoke up. "Why don't we take them to the house?"

"What house?" The doctor and nurses were hopeful.

She pointed at their patient. "His house. It's enormous."

"That doesn't change the problem of water or electricity," the doctor said.

Augustus came to. "It's in Bel Air and the little community is calm right now. Most of the neighbors are gone. Others are hunkered down in their homes hoping it will all pass over. The water is gravity fed so we should be okay for water. Plus, he..." he points at Ham, "... has a well. As for electricity, we'll cope. There is a well-stocked pantry and enough bedrooms for all of us."

The doctor looked at the nurses, who shrugged, but there was a glint of hope in their eyes.

It took forty minutes to get Ham into a wheelchair and down the stairs to the lobby. The doctor and nurses stopped at every floor to scrounge for medical supplies. No one trusted the elevators. The lobby was wall to wall people. Some coughing, many crying. Some sleeping, many bloody. A few were eyeless and a couple preached the new religion at the top of their lungs. In their midst, a few harried and exhausted medical personnel tried to bring even the smallest order into this scene. Most of the staff had wandered off in their own version of the madness or out of sheer exhaustion. It was everything that was wrong with the world in one contained space. Augustus eyed it with detachment.

They were almost clear of the mob when Augustus rose out of his self-pity. Someone against the wall had caught his eye.

"Cruz," he called out.

Cruz was huddled over a large body sitting against the wall twenty feet away. She didn't respond.

"Just a second." Augustus made his way a little closer to her. "Cruz!" He screamed it over the din in the room.

She turned around to see who was calling. Hobbes! She couldn't believe it. The man who'd started this whole thing was calling to her like a long lost friend.

With difficulty, he made his way to her. "What are you doing here?"

She was covered in dried blood. She didn't know whether to shoot him or hug him. It seemed like forever since she had seen a friendly face. Was he a friendly face? Hobbes looked like he had spent the time since she'd seen him being beaten. She pointed at the person on the floor. It was the huge cop who had arrested him, Box, she called him. Augustus got close to him and laid a hand on his shoulder. Dark blood oozed out of a wound in his side.

"What happened?"

"Saved my life."

Augustus waited for the story. Finally she continued.

"After you left, fights broke out. Blue against blue. It was..." She looked at the gun she held in her hand. Augustus backed up a step when he saw it. "I patched him up best I could but it got infected. We've tried every hospital. Believe it or not, this one's better than the others."

His mouth against her ear, in a whisper, Augustus said, "I don't know this for a fact but we're moving my uncle to my house because water and electricity here are supposed to shut down soon." He nodded in the direction of his little group. "We have a doc and two nurses and some supplies coming with us. You should come too. It might be the only way."

She stared at him in amazement. Only he would come up with his own private hospital. It seemed like the best chance Box had.

She bent over and whispered to Box who shook his head weakly. She insisted and bent to the task of lifting him up. In great pain, he struggled to his feet with her help. With Augustus parting the sea of complaining people before them, they made their way out of the hospital with the rest of Augustus' troupe.

Jonathan got close to Augustus. "What are you doing?"

"She needs us. We probably need her."

Cruz and Augustus got Box to her police SUV while Jonathan got everyone else situated into the town car. Laboriously, the little caravan made its way back to the house.

Haven

WITH EXTREME CARE, the exhausted group got Hamilton up to his room and Box to the dining room. In Hamilton's room, they all—Augustus included—stood in awe of the strange collection of artifacts, relics and piles of books and papers that made the enormous room appear too small. The doctor and nurses made sure he was stable.

He introduced them to Cruz. Downstairs, the nurses cleaned up Box and, using the dining room table as a make-shift operating table, they reopened, cleaned out and sewed up the wound. Afterward, Cruz, Jonathan, Wil and Augustus helped them get Box up to a room and he was set up with an IV.

Augustus showed each person a room. He showed them the kitchen and told them about the hand water pump Hamilton had installed as a reminder of his childhood. "My uncle is a bit of a survivalist," he said and shook his head as he remembered scoffing at all the weird things like the water pump in the house. Things that now were likely to save his worthless hide. "The hand pump goes to a cistern beneath the house that's fed by a private well."

"The water treatment facilities may go down at any time which means the water that gets here won't be potable," the nurse warned. "We'll have to boil it."

Augustus showed them the country-kitchen sized Aga stove that was Maria's pride and joy. He pointed out that it ran on gas but, as Maria had said time and again, it could run on coal and the basement had a month's supply. He went back up to his uncle's room. Although it was furnished with a sofa and four chairs, they were the home to mountains of books and papers. He cleared one off and pulled it next to the bed as quietly as he could. He disintegrated into it and fell asleep.

HE HAD NO IDEA HOW LONG HE HAD SLEPT. When he woke, the room was dark. His dream of the forest roiled inside him.

Ham was moaning. Augustus stood but the blood took a second to get up to his head and he had to sit down again. After two more attempts, he was able to stay erect.

"Ham, I'm here." He leaned his ear close to his uncle's mouth hoping that Ham would miraculously wake up and tell him everything he needed to know.

After a moment, Ham mumbled again. If it was a word, Augustus didn't recognize it. Yet, something inside him resonated when he heard it. It must be the lack of sleep or rest or alcohol. He never did get his wine. He laid a hand gently on his uncle. After a moment, Ham shifted slightly.

Augustus spoke softly, "Don't worry. Everything's taken care of." He left the room before he started crying. He hated lying to his uncle.

He passed one of the nurses who was coming in to check on Ham. He mumbled that everything was going to be all right as he stiffly moved down the hall. Downstairs, the house was quiet. In the kitchen, the doctor was nursing a cup of coffee and staring at the screen of his laptop.

"Mister Hobbes, would you join me?" He hoisted his cup up as an offer.

"My uncle is Mister Hobbes. I'm Augustus."

"Tom," the doctor said.

"What are you doing?"

Tom nodded toward his laptop. It was patched into the internet line that Maria had installed in the kitchen for her surfing the net for signs of the coming apocalypse. "This is a live feed from New York. I went to Columbia. I recognize the streets."

Augustus watched picture. It was of a city street being shot from a window on the second floor of some building.

"Who's shooting this?" Augustus asked.

Tom shook his head.

"Is there volume?" Augustus

"Every once in a while, the guy ..." Tom started when the videographer spoke.

"Here they come. Oh, Jesus. Here they come."

Augustus stared at the screen. Pain and terror sounded through the cameraman's window as three young people ran across the scene followed by a mob led by a man dressed in white, carrying a cross on a long pole. As the man with the cross came into the center of the picture he looked up toward the camera.

The picture jerked as the cameraman ducked down. It settled on the interior wall and shook as the cameraman prayed for deliverance from the horror show before him. The sound of the crowd grew louder and sounds of something pelting the outside of the building increased until a rock crashed through the window.

"Oh, Christ! Oh, Jesus!" The cameraman jumped up. The camera bounced onto the ground and settled on the floor aimed at a door across the room. The barefooted cameraman jumped toward the door. He flung it open. Sounds of the crowd inside the building came through the open door. Back inside, the cameraman slammed the door closed, locked the three locks on the door, inserted the door security bar into its slot, and leaned against it. His terrified, teenage face bobbed up and down in the camera's field of vision as he wept. His cries for salvation turned into gibberish punctuated with sobs. Shouts in the hallway were heard and violent pounding on the door began.

"Turn it off," Augustus said.

On the screen, the door splintered. The cameraman pressed his meager weight against it but the door gave way to the crowd outside it.

"Turn it off!" Augustus said.

The mob grabbed the cameraman as he tried to scoot away. They held him face up on the floor in front of the door. It went quiet as the man in white came up the hallway and entered the room. He stood over the cameraman and whispered a prayer which started the chanting again. He lifted the cross, which was mounted on a brass rod and brought it down with all his might, impaling the cameraman with the end of the rod. The cameraman screamed. The mob's chant elevated in ecstasy. The man in white looked in the direction of the camera and came to it. He picked it up and held it so that his face filled the frame.

"We're coming for you," he said.

"This can't be ..." Tom said.

Augustus shut the laptop. Tom looked at him for direction. Inside the house, life seemed almost normal but the world was ending. Fortune was right. Maybe he should just join the madness. He started to laugh.

"What's going to happen to us?" Tom asked.

"Don't worry," Augustus lied. "Everything's taken care of."

Call Me Ray

AUGUSTUS WENT OUT TO THE FOYER. He looked at the blood stains. He looked at the papers on the table. They weren't funny anymore. Even though he dreaded it, he wandered into Ham's library. A smoky miasma colored the air and made breathing unpleasant. He flipped on the light. The overhead had exploded in the heat of the fire. He stumbled through the soggy books Brandon had torn from the shelves to make sure the fire was out, and felt his way to the standing lamp in the corner. Amazingly, it had survived. He twisted the knob on it, half expecting an electric shock. Instead, the socket beneath him hummed a little and the lamp came to life.

Even though he had seen the room in the daylight, it was appalling to look at it again. The heart of the house was dead. The corniced ceiling was charred and smoked into a skeletal suggestion of itself. The books and bric-a-brac Ham had spent a life collecting were in sopping, burnt piles around the room.

Most disturbing was the magnificent desk that lay in scorched shambles on the floor. However many years it had survived, it was no more. The Gothic chairs that Ham used as guest chairs had survived. They were smoked into a shade of black but they looked usable. Augustus chose to slide down the wall onto the wet marble floor. He let his legs flop onto the soaked Persian carpet, mindless of the water leeching into his clothes. After a moment, he remembered that the guard had speculated that Daniel had urinated all over the room. As tired as he was, he forced himself off the floor and into one of the chairs.

He fumbled through the books, hoping that the few remaining legible pages held the answer. If only he knew what he was looking for? He sat on one of the chairs and sighed. He looked at the cracked leaded glass. The lead had melted in several spots. It created a bizarre design on the already intricate glass.

There was little reason to stay. The room was a disaster. He would be more worried about the effect it would have on his uncle if he thought any of them had a chance to live very much longer. He wasn't the Time Traveler. He and the others in the house, except the cops, were Eloi all trussed, basted and perfectly roasted for Fortune's dinner table.

The outlet the lamp was plugged into buzzed a couple of times and the lamp flickered. Water and electricity were a bad mix, he thought and he struggled out of his chair. He made his way over to the lamp and, as he was switching it off, he happened to look in the opposite corner. Electricity coursed up through the lamp, the bulb exploded and Augustus got a nasty shock.

In the dark, the image grew in his mind. It was the odd, metal plates on which Ham had been shaping sand and water with his voice. Absently, he tried the light again but only got another shock for his efforts.

Almost slipping several times on the trashed floor, he made it to the out of the room. This house must have a flashlight. He went into the now empty kitchen and began rifling through the drawers.

"If you were a large, muscular woman with ambitions towards joining the Knights Templar, where would you put a flashlight?" he whispered to himself.

He heard music. He didn't think the radio was working and, as far as he knew, Ham didn't have any sort of stereo system. Out in the foyer, the music was louder. The piano in the living room!

He assumed it was the doctor. The piano was out of tune. Not enough to ruin the Chopin but enough to make one wish it were tuned. If he had to guess which one of his guests was playing, except for Box, maybe, he'd pick Cruz last but there she was, freshly scrubbed and gracefully playing one etude after another.

"A hidden talent," he said.

"My mother hoped the piano would bring out my feminine qualities." She added a delicate flourish on the piano.

"You're quite good."

"I'm quite hopeless. To be a good pianist, you have to practice nonstop. To be a good cop, you have to survive." She switched to the Bach prelude in C that Augustus knew. Softly, he sang along to the tune Gounod had laid over the prelude, "*Ave Maria, gratia plena...*"

She looked at him with new eyes. "Aren't we both full of surprises?"

She continued to play but switched mid-note to a simple piece in G from The Well-Tempered Clavier.

"Although my career as a concert pianist didn't pan out, I've always found that music, especially Bach and Chopin and Telemann helps me think. Calms me down." She sighed deeply. "You saved him. You didn't have to."

"Glad I could help somebody. I think of all those people in the hospital I couldn't do anything for. But, it might not make any difference in a few days."

She stopped playing and leveled her cop eyes on him. He told her about the phone conversation with Fortune and the abortive attempt in San Pedro.

"Why you?"

"I have no idea. He and I share something from the past..."

"His wife."

It didn't even faze Augustus anymore. "I mean from another life, maybe."

"Okay, now you're losing me."

"Believe me, Lieutenant, I'm as uncomfortable with this whole 'paranormal' thing as you are."

She tilted her head as she took him in then started playing again.

"Call me Ray." She saw his questioning look. "Short for Ramona. If you tell anyone..., she warned

Augustus smiled sadly. “So, I have three days to figure out what the answer is and make my way to Yucca Mountain to save the world.”

There was a long pause. Cruz started playing again. “Mind if I tag along?”

“Got anything better to do?”

Whatever Way We Go, We Better Be Going

WHILE THE DOCTOR AND NURSES TOOK SHIFTS SLEEPING, Augustus slept fitfully by Ham's side. Box had come out of his drugged recovery and—according to Tom who felt the need to remind them every time he spoke that he was not a surgeon or an ER doctor—seemed to be in a good place.

Every time Augustus drifted off, the primordial forest would engulf him and once again he was forced to revisit his failure. The sensation was not burning but blinding. Instead of consuming him, it lifted him up into some other place. Beyond it, he didn't see Zachary Fortune as much as he sensed him. If he had to describe it, it was like a psychic pulse. A throbbing that seemed to connect them. He felt the woman's proximity. She had transformed into Christine and each time he helplessly watched her burn. He smelled the forest and heard the chanting Celts who surrounded the pyre with their prayers and adulation.

Someone was pushing him. He swung out.

In Ham's room, he woke to the startled look of the nurse who had just tried to rouse him and was now scampering backward out of range of his flailing arms.

"I'm sorry. I was dreaming."

The nurse stopped her retreat and came back to the side of the bed. "I'm sorry I disturbed you," she said softly. "I thought you should know. Your uncle has slipped into a more profound state of coma."

Augustus stood and leaned over Hamilton's quiet body. "What does that mean?"

"I'm not a coma nurse. The doctor's asleep right now. He can tell you more."

"Does it mean he's dying?"

"His vitals are stable. We have no ability to do a brain scan or EEG so we can only look for external signs. The thing it means for sure is that his body is drawing everything further inside. That may be because it is rallying everything to heal or it could be that he is slipping away. I simply don't know."

Augustus burst into tears. It was so unexpected. His uncle was such a distant and unknown quantity to him in so many ways that this outpouring of emotion caught him by surprise. He stood there stroking his uncle's ancient, craggy head for a moment until he calmed down.

The nurse kept her distance and her eyes down. She felt her heart breaking. Over the years, she had learned to separate herself from her patients and their families but everything had changed. When Augustus was a patient on her floor, she thought of him as an interesting case because of all the cuts, the police, the odd rumors that swirled around him, the suicide in the other room that he was associated with, and the fact that he

was one of the wealthiest men around. But, simply put, he was a patient and little more. Now, he was her benefactor in a way but also a human being. Humanity was something she didn't let herself see in her patients. Symptoms. Procedures. Duties. That was the way she got through shift after shift of dealing with the years of the grief, of illness, and injury patient after patient brought in with them. Their personhood got in the way.

After his grief seemed spent she said, "If you're interested, it's morning and someone is cooking breakfast." He looked at his uncle. "I'll be here," she assured him. They shared a simple moment of being helpless together, then Augustus let the smell come to him. He followed it to the kitchen.

At the stove, Pam and Jonathan stood side by side husbanding bacon and eggs and French toast into a comfort-food medley aimed at soothing the wounds of the entire household. They laughed softly. Augustus stood in the doorway and watched. It underlined the loss he felt and joined the rest of his misery in a big lump somewhere in his gut.

"What's for breakfast?" he asked, as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"Last of the fresh food," Pam answered.

He grabbed a plate and some food and sat at the table with Jonathan and Pam as Cruz walked in. She looked rested and elated.

"Box is hungry!" That was all the explaining she was going to do as she heaped food onto two plates and went back upstairs.

Augustus was starving. He hadn't thought of food in a while and suddenly he couldn't imagine taking another step without eating a lot of it. Wil joined them and the four of them ate in silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

When his appetite allowed, he excused himself and went to the patio. It was a beautiful day. Sunny but cool enough to make being outside a thing of leisure and wonder. There was nothing in the breeze that suggested the world was screeching to an end.

Cruz joined him. They stood quietly and listened as nature breathed. Something was missing. There it was. There was no sound of the city. Even in the protected enclave of Bel Air, the sound of the city was a constant...until today. Pam and Jonathan came out.

Augustus looked at his tribe. "I've got to leave."

"Leave?" Jonathan looked alarmed. "You think you can actually change anything?"

Augustus ignored him. "I don't have any idea how long it will take to get there."

"What are you going to do when you do get there?" Jonathan asked.

"Give them your number," Augustus smiled.

They went back into the house and methodically searched for maps and anything else they could remotely justify as needed for a road trip. In the kitchen, he searched through the drawers. He found the elusive flashlight. Cruz found a road atlas for the United States.

"What about gas?" Augustus wondered out loud.

“My car has a full tank plus I have a spare tank,” Cruz offered. “On top of that, it’s an SUV which might come in handy driving on highways that are clogged with broken down vehicles and peo...” She let the last word die before it left her lips.

Pam came in from the garage. She carried a foot-pump siphon and two gas cans. “Found these.” In the pantry, they gathered easy to open canned food, the Vienna sausages his uncle loved so much, crackers and a bag of pretzels. They found a six pack of beer and three half-gallon sized bottles they filled with water. The beer must have been Maria’s because, as far as he knew, his uncle never drank. His wine cellar was for investment purposes the importance of which had faded in recent weeks. But the cellar yielded scores of batteries held in a refrigerator that sat beside an unused generator, six flashlights, a hundred phosphorescent light wands, more food than they could believe, a root cellar filled with potatoes, carrots, apples and other hardy foods, and two shotguns with boxes of shells. Hung on the wall above the shotguns were two intricately designed Samurai swords.

While they bundled everything together, Wil came kitchen. “I’m going too,” he said.

“You should stay here,” Augustus said.

“You forget I’m the only one who’s been there. I know where it is and I know how to get into the cave.”

“Starting to be quite a field trip,” Cruz said.

Jonathan said, “I’m not going. I’d rather meet the end of the world sitting on your beautiful patio, sipping some of your beautiful wine and looking at this beautiful woman.” He smiled at Pam and she returned it happily.

Augustus chuckled in amazement. Jonathan: a ladies’ man! It really was the end of the world.

“You and the medicos stay here. There’s enough canned and dried food to last for quite a while. Do whatever you can for Ham.”

“Besides, Pam found a vegetable garden teeming with plants that need some attention and could feed us for a while.”

“My uncle never stops giving.”

The lights went out.

“Well, we won’t have to worry about when that’s going to happen.”

Jonathan said, “You should take the shotguns. You don’t know what you’re going to encounter...”

Jonathan and Augustus looked at each other.

“I’ve got that covered as well,” Cruz said. “You should keep the shotguns here.”

Augustus nodded. Jonathan looked at Pam who shrugged.

“I guess it’d be better than trying to use the swords,” she offered.

On the counter next to the windows the group looked at the map of Nevada. “Just take the 10 to the 15 to Las Vegas then 95 up to the mountain?” Augustus asked.

“I came back that way,” Wil pointed at another route. “It was jammed with cars then and that was early on. What about the 10 to 395 to Mammoth then veer off to the 95?”

Augustus looked at the map and shook his head. “Why can’t the portal be in Beverly Hills? Whatever way we go, we better get going.”

Road Trip

THE SEATING ARRANGEMENT ASIDE, the easiest part of the trip was getting out of the driveway. Each took a turn behind the wheel. It seemed wherever Augustus was, Christine was in his line of sight. That line of sight often included reflections in mirrors or off windows or even sideways glances but she was always there. For the time being, he accepted it as his vision of the Holy Grail leading him forward ever forward on his quest. It was also his punishment and he suffered it gladly. On top of that was the nagging certainty that he had no idea what he was going to do once or if they made it to Yucca Mountain.

Cruz' SUV was a life saver. The road was almost impassable with stalled and abandoned vehicles. It took ten hours to get out of the metropolitan area. They had already used the siphon to take gas out of other cars. The car also had a shotgun, a forty millimeter riot gun with six pepper spray and six bean bag rounds and a CB radio. For a while, they listened intently to the CB but gave up after the isolated calls were all pleas for someone to save them from the mob or someone preaching the gospel. They turned to her collection of classical and tejano music CDs which helped drive away the feelings of doom that met them at every turn. They listened to *Sicut Servus* by Palestrina followed by *Playa del Sol* by Elida Reyna.

They had pretty much exhausted Cruz' collection sixteen hours later when they pulled into the outskirts of Las Vegas. The atlas they were using didn't give enough detail of suburban Vegas. They knew roughly where the 95 was, but getting there proved to be more difficult than the few faint lines on the map would indicate and stopping for directions was not an option. Swedenborg claimed to know where they were and—with him behind the wheel—they drove around, skirting road blocks set up by the newly insane. Somewhere outside of Tudor Park, they found themselves faced with a bunch of armed zanies, more organized than the others they had bypassed without incident. It became apparent that he had driven them into a trap.

"This neighborhood is a brotherhood of the book of Mormon," a voice announced through a bullhorn. "You are transgressing."

A rock came out of nowhere and hit the bar between the passenger windows. Another clattered along the roof and a gun sounded nearby. Cruz woke with a start and, unlike the other inhabitants of the car, quickly took in the situation and decided on a line of action.

"Crank the wheel to the left and drive in a circle!" The shotgun and riot gun were resting beside her. She pulled up the riot gun. It was loaded with the bean bags. She

pumped the first round in, lowered the window and flattened the closest fiend, pumped again and flattened another.

"Keep the circle going," she screamed out and she emptied the chambers, each bean bag finding a target.

A bullet whizzed by Augustus' head. He felt it more than heard the dull impact with the side of the car. He looked in disbelief at the angry crowd around them. Cruz quickly loaded the pepper spray canisters into the gun.

"Don't worry," she said. "The vast majority of people, even trained shooters, can't hit a thing under combat conditions."

"I'm so glad to hear that," Augustus said. Somehow her statement wasn't as reassuring as she meant it to be.

"I'm going to shoot these rounds. Turn off the air conditioning," Cruz ordered. Wil did so. "See that corner to the left?"

Wil nodded.

"When I say go, hold your breath and close your eyes. Wil, you're going to have to suffer for us and get us through the crowd and around that corner once this gas has pushed them back a bit. "

Still circling madly, Wil nodded. Three more gunshots. Augustus checked himself and his environs for bullet holes. Cruz fired her first canister at the two closest people. Normally, she would skip the gas canister into the crowd not wanting to cause any impact damage but this situation was beyond normal police procedure. Both people went down. The gas exploded and people screamed in pain. As the car circled, she fired three more, keeping two in reserve. The crowd roared in pain and terror and backed away from the car.

"Now, Wil," Cruz screamed.

Augustus couldn't help himself. Squinting, he watched as Wil careened through the dispersing mob. Pepper spray, he found, was indiscriminate. It didn't care which side of a fight you were on or if you were squinting or not. Wil somehow managed to steer the car around the corner and away from danger. He sped down Rampart Boulevard until there was no sign of unfriendlies. Tears streaming down his face, he pulled to a jerky stop and rubbed his eyes.

"Eye wash. In my glove box, there's a lot of it. Everybody out and we'll get this shit off us." She traded the riot gun for her shotgun and climbed out of the truck. Although she wasn't at all free of the effects of the pepper spray, she assumed guard duty. She waited while the two civilians cleaned out their eyes then did her own. She handed Augustus her shotgun who held it like a baby, hoping he wasn't expected to be a commando any time soon. As she finished up, he noticed a handful of people, two blocks away, running toward them.

"I think we better get going," Augustus pointed at their pursuit. He saw some blood on the driver's front bumper over a broken headlight. "We hit somebody," he said.

“We caught a few of them,” she said, as if she were talking about shagging flies on a baseball field. “Wil, in the back. Augustus take the wheel. Let’s go.” As she got into the passenger seat she added, “Wil, crawl into the back and see if there is ammunition either for the riot gun or the shotgun.”

Wil complied as Augustus pulled away. He looked in the side view mirror at the shrinking image of the people. What were they supposed to do now? Just survive, he thought to himself, just survive. Cruz reached over and toggled a switch labeled auxiliary tank.

“We’re good for a bit.”

Ahead of them, lay an elevated highway. A resort was off to their left. The highway sign read, Route 596, Summerlin Parkway, with an arrow indicating a left turn and Veterans Memorial Highway, Interstate 95 indicating a right.

“Ninety-five!” Augustus pointed at the sign. The ramp to the freeway was jammed with cars. He drove under the highway. In the distance to the right, he could see another elevated highway. He felt they were headed north and he knew the 95 they wanted ran to the north, so he hoped that was it. He came upon Vegas Drive and took a right.

“You know where you’re going?” Cruz asked.

He looked into her reddened eyes. She looked back at his swollen, watery, red ones.

“Do I look like a man who knows where he’s going?”

She gave a short laugh. “I’ve learned not to underestimate you, Mister Hobbes.” She turned to the backseat, “Wil, this seem right to you?” Wil peered out at the very unfamiliar landscape.

“I...don’t know.”

“Find anything?”

Kneeling in the cargo space, Wil held out a box of shotgun shells and tried to smile but it came off miserable instead of happy. Cruz took them.

In her best cop voice she said, “It’ll be all right.”

“All I can say is thank god you wanted to come along,” Augustus said to her. He had to drive up off the street and through some yards to get around cars and trash. When he got to Tenaya Way, he turned left which, he hoped was still north.

“Would you do me a favor?” Augustus asked.

“If I can.”

“Turn off that tejano shit!”

“You said you liked it.”

“That was twenty hours ago.”

São Luis, Brazil

NORMALLY, VINICIUS SPENT HIS SATURDAYS PLAYING FUTBOL on Praia de Calhau, a wide expanse of hard packed sand perfect for soccer and lined by nightclubs and restaurants. He and his Team Vaz, were good enough to compete and were feared enough to let win.

Today, however, he'd stayed home and pulled up the figurative drawbridge. Vinicius's house was literally a fortress. It had originally been the site of a Dutch fortress and he'd took advantage of its solitary location on the hill and built it up so that it was all but impregnable.

He spent a moment looking into the eyes of each of his followers. He did this from the low cement wall overlooking a sheer drop to the sea. Like a Roman Centurion decimating the ranks, he got the read of each person and shot those he suspected were already aligning themselves with the insanity. Their bodies plummeted to the rocks below. When he was sure he had a loyal crew, he locked himself and them up in his house and waited for the onslaught.

São Luis was an impenetrable sea of madness. Any hope those still in control of themselves had of escaping was long gone. All they could do was wait for the end. Reports from around the world made it seem like the end was coming for all of them very soon.

Vaz's wife had been distant. At first, it was her unease about Beatriz Van Der Lay staying in the house. The Iyanifa had always disquieted the household but this was more intense, more personal. Now that he felt his staff and bodyguards were loyal, he could spare a moment to reassure his wife.

She was not in their private rooms. He walked into his daughter, Letitia's room. There, his wife Maria, singing an old song to herself, sat rocking his daughter's lifeless form in her arms. She looked up at her husband, her eyes gone.

The madness sang a siren song in Vinicius' brain. He could feel the seduction pull at him like it had in Fortune's presence.

"I freed her, Vini. I freed her."

Vinicius walked up to the two. "See? She won't have to fight. I freed her. It is time for you to join us."

About to fall into the abyss, Vinicius looked down at his lifeless daughter. A mixture of revulsion, hate and heartbreak almost crippled him. He forced himself to take Leticia from his wretched wife.

He laid his daughter gently on the bed and straightened out her dress and the bed linens. After kissing her softly on her head, he turned to his wife and grabbed her by the

throat. He lifted her up until her feet no longer touched the floor. He held her there until she stopped beating and clawing his arms and hands.

When he was sure she was dead, he carried her in his arms to a balcony, and dropped her onto the rocks below. Back in Leticia's room, he knelt beside the bed and prayed for forgiveness, weeping over his daughter's body. Luis came out of hiding.

"Papa?"

Vinicius turned to his son, who crawled out of the closet. He opened his arms to him and held him so tight that Luis had trouble breathing, but he was so happy to be in his father's arms, he didn't complain.

Vaz listened to the sounds of rioting in the town below. It was making its way to his home. He looked at his son, kissed him on the forehead and held him tenderly by the shoulders.

"Go back to your hiding place. Papa's got some business to take care of."

He watched as his son crawled back into the closet.

Janos

HUNGER GNAWED AT JANOS. It had been so long since he had eaten. Over the days, he nibbled the little things his mother had brought with them: raisins and nuts, some fresh fruit. They had lasted him until a couple a days ago. Now, the only thing he was full of was fear.

He crept from his hiding place. Activity outside the room had been chaotic for a while. They even came into his room.

At first, he'd thought it was his mother returning to take him home. He sat up eagerly but the voices he heard—male, gruff and mean—made him understand that he was alone with strangers. They did a half-hearted search of the room with their flashlights. He scrunched down under the sacks as his mother had showed him and held his breath. He worried that they could smell his refuse. He had eaten and drunk so sparsely, there was precious little of it but the smell sat in the still air of the basement.

Finding nothing, they left. Janos took in a deep breath and listened carefully. When the sounds of the men left the building, he took another breath and sighed. He rocked back and forth in fear and frustration. A whimper escaped him before he could clamp it down. He sat and listened to the sounds of the building and the street, hoping that no one had heard him. Where was his mother? Why was this happening?

He went over to his peephole and just as he neared it, someone on the outside squatted down before it and stuck their eye in it. He pressed himself into the corner next to the window and willed himself to disappear. After a long moment, the person left. It took forever for Janos to build up the courage to look through that peephole and when he did, there was nothing but empty street.

He had to find something to eat. One more look out the peephole. Nothing. As quietly as a seven year old can, he inched his way out of his room. He listened for what seemed like forever at the door. Hearing nothing, he cracked open the door to look down the hall. It was empty. He inched out the door and just as he was standing up in the doorway, a hand came from around the jamb and grabbed him by the collar.

"There's a reward for you, my boy," said the voice. Janos screamed with all his might but the man lifted him up off his feet and let him wriggle and scream as much as he wanted.

"You didn't think I saw you through the window, did ya?" Janos let himself go limp. This could not be happening. He had been so careful. He and his mother were good. Things like this didn't happen to good people. His body cried but, he was so dehydrated, his tear ducts were dry. The man laughed and lowered the boy to the floor and pulled rope out of his pockets to truss Janos.

The moment his feet hit the floor, he was all motion. He broke the man's unprepared hold and ran up the stairs and out of the building.

The street was empty. He turned right and ran for his life. As he approached a corner, he looked behind him. The man wasn't yet out the door. Janos stopped himself and walked around the corner as if he had every reason to be there. A few people down the street looked up at the movement but then returned to their business.

"Stay calm," he ordered himself with his mother's voice. She had told him to act like the people on the street so they won't take notice. A sob threatened to burst out of him but he forced it back down.

Janos made his way through a group of them without any of them looking twice at him. The man who would be his captor ran around the corner. Janos calmly walked into a doorway.

As he was searching for an open door, his pursuer came up behind him. "I hate to run, boy. You made me run." He smacked Janos with a hard, back fist. Janos sprawled on the floor. "It doesn't say what shape you have to be in. Just bring you in." He quickly tied Janos's feet together. Then his hands.

Janos didn't have to stop the sobs anymore. They came as a never ending chorus.

I Yield to the Sweet Yoke Outside of Las Vegas

CRUZ LAUGHED AND SEARCHED THROUGH HER CAR for something they hadn't listened to over and over. "Aha!" She put it into the CD changer and turned it on.

"Can you tell me what it is?" She asked Augustus.

"Carmina Burana," he said and listened to "Amor volat undique." The soprano was good, the boys choir better, but the song was one of his least favorite from the piece.

"What's it mean?"

Augustus smiled at the irony. "Love flies in all directions."

Dodging cars and dodging maliciously or idly wandering pedestrians had become so second nature that Augustus didn't think about it.

He listened for another moment then asked, "Skip down a few, would you?"

She did and he asked her to skip a couple more. She settled on, "In Truitina."

"That's the one," Augustus said as he glanced in the rearview mirror and caught Christine's eyes as she was settling into the back seat next to Wil.

A beautiful, plaintive soprano voice caressed the words which tore into his heart like a bullet. It filled him with a level of rage and sorrow he couldn't believe. The short song ended and he hit the repeat button.

"Want to sing along?" he asked Christine. She slouched down in her seat and cried softly. Cruz and Wil followed Augustus' gaze to the empty seat next to Wil.

Cruz asked, "What do the words mean?"

Augustus recited as he maneuvered through the street. First the Latin then the translation for each line. "*In truitina mentis dubia fluctuant contraria*: In the wavering balance of my feelings set against each other, *lascivus amor et pudicitia*: lascivious love and chastity, *sed eligo quod video*: but I choose what I see. Don't you, Christine?" He let that pollute the air for a long moment then continued with the translation. "*Collum iugo prebeo*: and submit my neck to the yoke, *ad iugum tamen suave transeo*: I yield to the sweet yoke."

The pepper spray had done one good thing: it alibied the tears that flowed down his cheeks. He hit the repeat button again and again. After the tenth time, Cruz rested her hand on his as he reached for the repeat button and turned off the stereo. He looked at her and she nodded sympathetically. She wasn't sure what it was all about but recognized mania when she saw it.

Augustus couldn't have said what it was about her touch but it turned off his self-pity as if it were on a switch. The feeling of desolation and betrayal subsided, the tears dried

up and suddenly the world was back to the miserable place it had been since the insanity began. He looked into the mirror. Christine was gone.

"I'm sorry," was all he could say. He inhaled to say something else but everything he thought of sounded horrible. He could only repeat, "I'm sorry."

He turned right on Lake Mead. They stopped and laboriously siphoned gas from abandoned cars with Cruz standing guard until both tanks were full. Feeling like they were getting somewhere, Augustus followed signs onto 95 North. Although getting onto the highway took some doing, once on, the northbound road was relatively free of cars and people.

It took another four hours to get to Indian Springs and Creech Air Force Base. Wil came out of his stupor.

"Don't turn here." They looked at the town to their left and the Base to their right and at a mass of cars and trucks not far off the road, crowding the highway on both sides of them.

"There's a road a little further up. I think it's called Mercury or something like that. It'll take you to a small airport, another base and Area Fifty-One. But it also takes us to a dry gulch we can follow to an access road for the mountain."

"A little farther up" turned out to be twenty hard-going miles. Cars were piled up. People, in groups and alone, filed up between the cars in a mechanical, listless way. Augustus pulled off road and drove over bone jarring desert.

As they closed in on Mercury Road, more and more people were walking along the road.

"There!" Wil pointed at a turnoff across the highway. Augustus tried with the horn and then with using the vehicle as a gentle prod to make a path for the car.

"Back off," Cruz said.

"We going to walk?" Augustus asked.

"Not yet. Switch with me."

He backed away from the people and stopped the truck. They exchanged places, Cruz gave him the shotgun.

"Don't shoot unless you have to."

"How will I know?"

"I'll tell you." She shifted the truck into gear, revved the engine and took off toward the crowd, horn blaring.

She drove into the crowd and people bounced off the bumpers and hood. Although she wasn't going very fast, the sound of the car making contact with the bodies around them made Augustus close his eyes and whisper silent prayers.

"Get ready," she screamed over the rising sounds of protest and pain.

Augustus held the gun rigidly before him.

"Relax. Pump the barrel." Her words were punctuated with thumps that were the sounds of the car violently forcing one person after another out of the way. "When I say,

roll down the window and start shooting. You've got eight shots before you have to reload. We'll make it as far as we can before we have to take this on foot."

Wil and Augustus stared at her in horror.

"You're killing these people."

"Remember the crowd in Vegas? You want to walk through this?" Cruz pointed at the mass of people. "We won't get ten feet."

"San Pedro," Augustus said.

Wil shrank back as he remembered.

Augustus looked at Cruz. Her face was set with a grim determination, but he saw her wince every time the car struck someone. A tear formed in the corner of her eye and rolled down her cheek followed by another and another. He wondered what this was costing her.

Except for the sound of the road and engine, it was suddenly silent. Augustus looked. The crowd had parted. They were forming a path for the car. Cruz didn't stop to admire their new freedom; she sped up and bounced over to the north side of the highway. The roadway opened to them. People stood with faces filled with angelic joy. The sea of humanity had created a perfect path for them.

"Are we going the right way?" Augustus asked.

"Yeah!" Wil said astounded.

Augustus looked ahead at the path through the crowd. It reminded him of the gauntlet he'd run to get away from Fortune in San Pedro, but these people looked at him like he was their savior. It made him think of Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Depending on one's point of view, that hadn't ended well.

People reached out and reverently touched the passing car. Through the closed windows of the car, the riders could hear a murmur. Augustus, shotgun still held in a death grip, cracked the window.

The murmur became clearer: "The Words!"

Callide Sacerdos Yucca Mountain

FOR SOME REASON, THE HOPELESSNESS OF THEIR JOURNEY never set in until he heard that chant. He was going into the jaws of Hell to face the one man in the world he feared, and he was supposed to say something that was either going to end this world or save it. This one thing expected of him was beyond his ability to comprehend. It felt like everyone else in the world knew what the words were, except him, and this was some gigantic test to see if he could join the club.

He looked at Cruz and then at Wil. Were they in on it? His doubts consumed him. He wanted to turn back and hide in his uncle's mansion as the world crumbled around him.

He started to shake uncontrollably. Cruz looked over and grabbed the shotgun by the barrel. His hands were frozen on it.

"I'll take it."

He looked at her and her tear stained smile made him believe he wasn't alone. He let go. She crammed the gun between the console and the dash.

"Looks like we won't need it just yet."

His shoulder started to burn. It felt like that tree was growing in him again. He reached for it with his good right hand but the burn was on his right shoulder and he couldn't touch it. His left hand grabbed for it. He felt something sticking up from the skin. As delicately as possible, he slid his cast hand under his shirt. Something like a toothpick was sticking out of the wound on his shoulder. Running a finger over it caused a shot of pain that made him gasp.

"You okay?" Cruz asked.

He took a breath and forced his thumb and first two fingers through their pain and stiffness to grab the thing growing out of him. The pain sent him into the forest. He, the tree, the god, watched his people chant and move around him.

A melody came into his mind. He started humming it. Before long, the words came out in little breathy notes. "*Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus Dominus. Sanctus, sanctus Deus sabaoth.*" It was Gounod's Saint Cecile Mass. The forest disappeared like smoke. Why in the world was he thinking that? Palm Sunday? He smirked. At least he would die with a very pretty piece of music wedged in his brain.

"Holy, holy, holy ..." It made him think of the first time he had sung in a men and boys' choir. He was ... what ... nine? He'd auditioned because his best friend did. The choir was a big deal at the school. People would attend the high mass on Sunday just because the choir was performing. His friend didn't get in but he did. Although Augustus

had always excelled at sports, his parents never watched him play any of them. He'd thought maybe a place in the choir would make them proud.

Soon he learned that they didn't have any more interest in his singing than in his athletic ability. Augustus shook his head. It was amazing he'd done anything. He should be spending his fortune on a shrink's couch and living on a mountain top where no one could come close enough to make him feel insecure and unnecessary again.

He was about to force the pity out of his brain when his first mass with the choir played through his mind. He smiled as he remembered standing before the stern looking choir master who couldn't believe that Augustus had no Latin training, whatsoever. He devoted himself to learning the words phonetically and got through the first few masses blithely ignorant of what he was saying. "Sanctus" might as well have been "smegma."

He laughed.

Cruz looked at him. What was there to laugh about? If they weren't on a slippery, downhill slope into a world of crap, she didn't know shit from filet mignon.

The first time he had an intelligent conversation with Ham, he was already a scholastic with the Jesuits. Ham said, "John the Twenty-Third was a great man. He understood the place of ideas in the universe. But what in the world made him think he was improving the mass by changing it to the vernacular?"

They argued about the importance of the people actually knowing what the priest was saying. "The people don't need to know what the words mean. They only need the words," was Ham's conclusion.

Augustus froze. They only needed the words. It wasn't about meaning. It wasn't about understanding. It was about sound. Isn't that what Ham had been saying all along? He thought about Ham sitting on the floor naked, chanting an Aramaic syllable at a pile of sand. He thought about Zen koans and Buddhist monks chanting syllables for meditation. He thought about the little boy singing Latin words that had no meaning to him, yet feeling his soul move in joy at the sound of it. Music, chanting, sound. That was the answer.

His fingers slipped on the wood in his shoulder. The pain brought him back to the forest. The chanting! What were they saying? Did it matter? He gritted his teeth, overrode the pain in his hand and gripped the wood and pulled. The pain almost knocked him out. The wood gave. The relief was instant. Even his hand stopped throbbing for a moment. He slid it out of his shirt and looked at the prize he had labored for. A twig from a birch tree. He started laughing again.

Cruz and Wil looked at each other with grave concern.

"Augustus, what's going on?" Cruz asked.

Augustus held the twig up like it was the answer to everything. He showed it to both of them.

"What's that?"

"That's part of the tree I was trapped by. It's part of me. It's part of the answer."

Cruz and Wil looked at it. It was a twig. Where it came from, they couldn't even guess. A week ago, they would have laughed at his insanity. Now, they sank back in blank acceptance of what he said.

Fortune wanted a sound that would open his world up for him. He called it words but that was just the human brain trying to make it all neat and tidy. The Latin worked in San Pedro and Signal Hill because the people didn't understand it. It was a placebo effect. They only thought it was the sound they were so desperately waiting to hear, so they let it be.

The smile disappeared. What sound was the right sound? Did it matter? Did it matter anymore than the priapic priest consecrating the hosts mattered? Or the betrayed priest refusing to absolve a penitent? His mind began to wander down the intellectual path of faith versus reason. There was no answer there. He laughed again long and hard. The laughter took over and the pitch rose.

"You okay, Augustus?" Wil asked.

They were about to confront Zach Fortune again. Worlds were colliding. The man he had placed his lot with was laughing like a hyena in the front seat. Wil searched for solace in his confidence that his mind would figure something out.

In the last weeks, Augustus had laughed and cried more than in he had over his whole lifetime. He could no more explain it than fly up to the top of the hill and command the angels to join him. He turned and smiled.

Wil's unease didn't go away.

"I've figured it out." He turned to Cruz. "Either that or we're all fucked." He burst out laughing again. If it was this simple, he would have to take up professional sunbathing or something because the world was a much sillier place than he'd ever thought.

"I should have stayed home," Wil said.

"Without a doubt," Augustus agreed and laughed again.

The Woman Szeged, Hungary

THE WOMAN WAS GRATEFUL for the care these two soldiers had given her. Although her right eye gave odd images to her brain, she was healing from the terrific abuse she'd received from men just like these. But these two fed her and protected her from the other troops around them.

They escorted her to and from a bathhouse, then stood guard outside of while she cleaned herself. She had asked them over and over if they would help her escape. They assured her they would. Days passed and she worried about Janos. He was a good boy but there was scant food and how long could he last all alone? She decided she had to take a chance and confide in her new allies.

"I need to get into the city center." She told them as they shuffled toward the bathhouse. The two soldiers glanced at each other but kept their faces neutral.

"It's off limits. Why do you want to go there?"

She grew suspicious and shrugged. "I left my clothes there."

The two soldiers looked at each other. She was almost healed enough to turn over to the troops as ordered. They had been watching her bathe and her body was fine and they had every intention of taking advantage of their situation before handing her over.

"Where are they? We'll get them." They smiled at her.

"I'll remember it if I see it," she said, hoping they wouldn't press and would give her some leeway.

The soldiers looked around. No one was paying them any mind. Dressed in coveralls as she was and scarred as her face was, she didn't inspire much attention.

"Bathe first, then we go." The soldiers smiled at each other. Tonight was the night. The woman smiled. She thought about seeing her son again. She was sure that once these men saw her with her son, they would take pity on them both. The men smiled beatifically at her.

No Laughing Matter Yucca Mountain, Nevada

THE WALL OF PEOPLE LED THEM RIGHT TO THE ENTRANCE OF THE TUNNEL. Cruz pocketed as many shells as she could, checked the shotgun action and flipped the safety off her Sig Sauer P220 compact. The smiles of the people surrounding them matched Augustus'. She didn't know what was going to happen for sure, but she didn't think it was going to be a laughing matter.

Wil led the group to the shuttle. The walls still glowed in their impossible way.

"This will take us to the cavern. Once inside, against the far wall are containment doors that hold back whatever this force is. What I heard Fortune say makes no sense. If those doors are opened, no one will survive."

"Terrific," Cruz said as she made sure a bullet was in the chamber.

Augustus laughed. His new approach to life pleased him. Live or die, it was hilarious.

"If the doors budge even an inch, turn away and close your eyes tight and don't open them until you feel it go dark again," Wil warned.

"Ah, the eyes!" Augustus nodded sagely then, unable to hold it in, laughed again.

His companions tried to shut him out of their worry. His merriment rubbed against them and made their own lives seem so hopeless.

The shuttle slowed as they entered the brightly lit cavern. Augustus looked ahead at the doors which shimmered with power.

"Wow," was all that he could say before a delighted giggle escaped.

Fortune, Christine, and Lila stood near the containment doors.

"Ready for one more failure, heretic?" Fortune said. His voice boomed off the walls. An excited shudder went through the room. "How thoughtful. You brought sacrifices for the gods."

Wil's and Cruz' eyes opened in fear.

The crowd remained parted for them and they made their way to Zach Fortune.

Augustus turned to them. "He's kidding." He took a few steps toward Fortune, stopped and added, "I think," and laughed again.

"You had your chance. You think you can worm your way into the Promised Land? False priest! Outcast! The only thing you can do is witness the sacrifice."

Zach yanked Christine from where she'd been standing behind him. She looked at Wil and then at Augustus. Her eyes sat open in a stare that spoke of nothing. She could have been watching late night infomercials. Lila held a large, hunting knife out for

Fortune who took it and raised it to Christine's throat. She offered no reaction to the threat.

Augustus jumped at Fortune and hit him on the side of the head with everything he had. Fortune dropped like a felled tree. The knife clattered to the ground. Augustus reached for it. Lila jumped on Augustus, wild and vicious. Cruz used a combination of blows from the butt of her gun and all of her physical strength to pull Lila off. The crowd quickly gathered around Cruz and Augustus and held them fast. Lila picked up the knife and helped Fortune to his feet.

"You think that's going to stop me?" Fortune screamed through his hand that covered his mouth.

"I just really wanted to do that," Augustus answered.

Fortune stood stock still. A smile spread across his face. He began to laugh. Augustus laughed with him.

"Callide Sacerdos!" Fortune said.

"And then some."

"Let her go, Fortune. You have me. Wouldn't the blood of a priest, false or not, be better?"

Fortune looked sideways at him. "What game are you playing?"

"Your game."

"Christine, say goodbye to your lover."

Tears streamed down her face but she was watching a sad movie playing inside her head.

"You have got to be kidding," Wil said.

Fortune leveled his eyeless gaze at Wil. Wil staggered backwards into the arms of Cruz who couldn't believe what she was seeing. She could feel Fortune stare at her, but he had no eyes. The crowd backed off a few feet. Cruz slowly raised her gun and took aim at the madman.

Fortune took Christine's arm. For the first time, she recognized her surroundings. A small cry escaped her. She took one last look at Wil and then Augustus and then shut her eyes against onrushing death. Fortune held the knife to her neck.

"No!" Wil screamed.

Cruz pulled back the hammer. She tried to pull the trigger. At first she thought her gun jammed but her gun never jammed. She realized her finger wasn't receiving the brain's instruction. She changed hands. She wasn't the best shot with her left hand but she'd have to make do. The gun sat in her useless hand.

Lila and the other people jammed into the cavern began to chant, "Blood."

Augustus looked back at Wil, who was stuck in some half world of his own. Cruz was trying to get her gun to work.

"Try not to shoot me with that, Ramona."

Her name shook her free. She took the gun in her right hand and aimed at Fortune again. His eyeless face turned on her and drained her of her will.

Augustus saw it go away. He opened himself up and said a little prayer to whoever might be listening, "I could use a little help here." Laughter threatened again interrupted by a chant.

"El, El, El, El, El..."

Where was it coming from? He could feel it! He checked the room. It had quieted and all eyes were on him. The feeling grew. It was coming from him. For a moment nothing happened. But the chant got richer and louder.

His mind joined the chant and he riveted his attention on the giant doors.

"False priest." Fortune's voice rose in pitch.

Augustus didn't change his chant but his pitch started to modulate.

"The Words," The others began to chant but Augustus watched as the door began to pulsate.

His own chant grew. The doors radiated light and heat.

Lila chanted, "The Words" over and over.

"He is not allowed in the promised land. I am the Priest. The vessel of change," Fortune screamed. He held the knife with a hand that started to tremble as Augustus continued his chant.

The doors vibrated. Cruz and Wil stood dumfounded. Christine and Lila turned toward the doors.

"The priest did it!" Lila said. Her face returned to the same expression of angelic state as when she'd first discovered the truth in Paul Stephens's gaze.

Fortune turned to the door. He dropped the knife. Augustus continued the chant. The doors opened a crack.

Wil turned away and forced Cruz to turn from it.

"Christine, shut your eyes!" he cried.

The door opened up an inch, then another. Augustus continued chanting, but closed his eyes and lowered his head.

"I am the vessel, not the priest." Fortune bucked against Augustus' success but was taken over by the thrill of the moment. The doors groaned. Wil and Cruz screamed out in pain. Cries of pain and exaltation came from the people in the cavern and were echoed by the people along the tunnel and outside.

"You are the vessel of perdition," Augustus said and continued his chant.

Fortune was drawn to the light. Lila never took her eyes off him, and followed two feet behind. The other people filed toward the door. Augustus' ears filled with a low level keening. He dared to glance back at Wil and Cruz. They crouched, backs turned to him and the doors, trembling.

He glanced forward, afraid of being caught in the mesmerizing force that seemed to have power over all human flesh. He saw Christine, eyes squeezed shut, turn to the gaping maw that could only mean her destruction.

He replaced his chant with her name. Over and over. She hesitated but still edged toward the opening. He could feel his brain melting, his eyes catching on fire but he strode forward. He reached out. Everything was so bright, so blurred. Flesh met flesh. It was Christine's wrist. He leaned back and held on. He started a new chant. It was a diphthong of "a" and "o." He could only concentrate on holding onto the slender wrist in his grasp. The sounds came out of him without conscious effort.

His mind writhed. He wanted to let her go. She had let him go. All he wanted was her love but she'd chosen another. His mind turned to Swedenborg and darkened. Jealousy grew and grew. It was Swedenborg. He was the enemy. He could no longer see anything but he knew the treacherous bastard was cowering just a few feet behind him.

He wanted to turn away from the light that burned away his ability to think. He should let her go. There was nothing to gain by saving her. But was he saving her? What was on the other side of the doors? Heaven? If it was a heaven of Zachary Fortune's making, it was a heaven he could turn his back on.

Augustus sensed people filing by him. Desmond, the street congregation, an endless procession. He felt their hands drag across him as they tried to pull him along. They tugged at the tender bond between him and reality and the physical bond between him and Christine.

The light became pain. The pain became his world. More and more people brushed by. He could only see the dimmest shadows of them as they passed before him. But he could feel the countless hates or fears or hopes that drove them. It felt like sinking into an enormous vat of oil with no sides to cling to. Still he clove to Christine's wrist and continued his drone.

The light increased. He saw or felt or churned in the procession of ... of what? He saw faces he thought he recognized. As the beings passed him, he understood. It was every god from every religion in the world moving with military precision past his dumfounded gaze. The god of the Christian bible was Michelangelo perfect. Buddha and Jesus strode by each perfect versions of their religious representations. Siva and Kali were just as he had seen them in books. The gods of Valhalla and Olympus strode by, each carrying the emblem or tool that helped identify them. The angel Moroni carrying the plates could have walked out of Mormon texts.

Time was gone. Days could have passed or just a few moments. The light eased. The pain receded. Christine had collapsed at his feet, her wrist still caught in his grip. He felt space. For the first time in days, he felt space. He looked around but saw nothing. He wondered if the cave had gone dark, but he saw light or a memory of light.

Behind him, he heard movement. Cruz and Swedenborg. He could feel them come to either side of him.

“You did it,” was all Swedenborg could say.

Cruz put a hand on him. “Are you all right?”

He turned toward her. She gasped as she looked at his face. The color of his eyes had drained away. Dead, white eyes stared back at her.

“Oh, my god,” she said.

Swedenborg grabbed his face and turned it toward him. He could feel Swedenborg’s revulsion as he backed off a step.

With his free hand, he felt his eyes. He hadn’t ripped them out, but other than a sense of light, he could see nothing. Swedenborg knelt by Christine, who lay sprawled out at Augustus’ feet. Augustus could sense her coming to as Swedenborg caressed her cheek. Swedenborg tried to pry Augustus’ fingers loose from her wrist. Augustus couldn’t let go.

“You saved us,” Cruz whispered to him. “It’s safe now.”

It felt safe. The never ending pull was gone. The ocean of hopes and fears had dissipated. The pain was gone. He told his fingers to let go but they were frozen in place. Finally, with calm soothing words from Cruz and Swedenborg they started to thaw.

“Augustus,” Christine’s soft voice said, “you can let go.”

He stared sightlessly at where her voice came from, at the tenuous link of flesh between them. He opened his mind to his surroundings. There was a calm and quiet that had been missing for so long. He could let go.

“Jesus!” Swedenborg yelled out.

“What’s wrong?” Augustus asked. Nothing felt different except that now his friends were frightened.

“It’s gone. The light,” Cruz said.

The four of them stood in abject darkness for a moment. It crept into their souls, dangerous and thrilling. Christine clung onto Augustus, who stood quietly lost in his own world of a new light. Cruz reveled in the feeling for a moment before she turned on the small flashlight she always carried.

It took them a while to make it to the outside. Augustus felt the breeze and sun and heard the wind as it gently blew across the desert.

“I don’t believe it,” Cruz said.

There was no sign of the thousands of people they’d had to force their way through to get into the tunnel. Those who didn’t make it into the doors had simply wandered off, wondering what had brought them to this place, creating stories to fill the enormous gaps in their memories and comfort the feelings of guilt that were pandemic.

“Let’s go home,” Augustus said.

São Luis, Brazil

VINICIUS' WORLD COLLAPSED IN AROUND HIM. Dead bodies had piled up to the point where the high walls were no longer high. His ammunition was running low and a few more of his loyal guards had turned.

He turned to see Luis, who had come out of hiding to be near him, crouched in a corner, his eyes glued on his father. He smiled and his son smiled back. He counted his ammunition. Five bullets. Then hand to hand. He steeled himself for the last stand. But something had changed.

The devil's dogs were no longer barking at his gate. There was a silence. He peeked over the wall. The men and women who had been flinging themselves relentlessly against his walls were now wandering down the hill as if a bell had rung and the boxing match were over. They appeared lost. Any thought of fight was gone from them.

It was palpable. It was over. The crone came out of his house and listened to the new silence. The world, just moments ago filled with screams, gunfire and hatred, was alive with the subtle sounds of wind and surf. His fellow defenders looked at one another in amazement. The amazement grew to celebration. Vinicius went to his son and hoisted him up in his arms. They had won. Somehow, inexplicably, they had won.

Mother and Child

Szeged, Hungary

JANOS SOBBED. This man was taking him to his father. His father would burn him the way his friends' father had burned them. He wanted to see his mother. He wanted to feel her close to him.

Down the street, three people walked toward him. Two soldiers and someone in coveralls. There was something about the person in coveralls. He knew her. Her! It was his mother. It couldn't be. Her face was a mass of scars. One eye pointed out to the side.

His mother saw the man ahead carrying a bundle. As they got nearer, she realized that the bundle was a boy. Could it be? She hurried her pace. The soldiers with her laughed but stepped up to keep pace with her.

The soldiers saw the boy and before they could put it into words understood that he was her son. The son of the devil of whom Sandor had warned the believers. They pulled their weapons. They would return to camp as heroes.

As the boy and mother came closer together, the soldiers found themselves wondering what they were doing there. It seemed like they had a reason to be there but they couldn't remember what it was. They looked at each other, weapons drawn, militia gear on, and assumed they were there to kill each other.

As they turned murderous intent on each other, the mother stepped boldly forward to the man carrying Janos. He looked lost.

"I'm supposed to bring this boy," he said. But the words clearly had little meaning to him.

She held out her arms. "You have done well. Give him to me." The man hesitated for a moment, then offered the boy as if he were carrying a sack of potatoes. She took him in her arms. Janos' heart almost burst with joy. She dared not look down at him. "You can go," she said to the man.

She walked past him carrying her son in her arms. She turned and watched the man walk away in a fog. Her kisses covered every inch of Janos' face. She set him down, undid his bindings and hugged him so hard that Janos cried out in pain. She gently pushed him away apologetically, but he jumped back into her arms.

Homeward Bound

THE TRIP HOME HAD BEEN difficult. They had to go off road so many times, Cruz' vehicle drove and sounded like it belonged in a demolition derby. They spent several cold nights huddled together in the car, shivering as much from fear of a lingering insanity as from the chill air. Without anything to drink, they broke into a diner. The water taps were dry so they grabbed cans of juice. As they left, a stream of people who had been hiding and waiting for someone to show them the way, descended on the diner. Cruz watched the desperate people rampage through the place and wondered if this was the future of the human race.

Wil was overwhelmed by the feeling that the world had ended and he was someplace else. A person whose time had been allocated carefully by publicists and agents now didn't know what he was going to do tomorrow or the next day or the next year. But behind the feelings of relief and lack of structure he was nagged by the desire for connection of another kind.

Wil watched Christine watch Augustus. She was Wil's new obsession and she was obsessed with the blind man sitting beside her in the backseat. Whenever he looked, she was touching or leaning on Augustus. Deep down, he felt obligated to the man for saving all of them, but it didn't stop the surge of jealousy that spiked every time he looked at Christine.

Christine had rediscovered her own path. It was the priest, her savior. She was oblivious to the world poking its uneasy head up from the ruins around her. Her light, her god, was sitting beside her.

Augustus was aware of his companions in the car. He was aware of Cruz and her concerns. He sensed Wil's mix of emotions. He felt Christine's touch and her renewed passion for him. Before the cavern, she was what he yearned for. Now, she was just another blip on his radar. An overriding sensation filled him that he was outside of it all looking in on these people as if they were in a movie. The real world had become not quite as real.

The fabric of society was torn and it would take a herculean effort to reweave it. Millions had died and millions more were missing. Some—no one knew how many—Fortune and Lila included, were somehow absorbed, body and soul into the continuum between dimensions.

The car radio picked up occasional bursts of information that told them the war was over. No one knew what the war was or who fought whom, but it was, apparently, over. The rest of the broadcasts were piteous pleas for help.

The only good part of the trip was that roving gangs of people bent on destroying those who didn't look or sound or believe they way they did no longer ruled the countryside. Their madness led to their own destruction in the end. Survivors were pulling themselves out of their holes and taking a look at what the chaos had left behind for them.

As so often happens with human beings, the end of the catastrophe had brought with it a sober peace. People, nations, religions banded together to recast society in a better way, a way of healing, moderation and understanding. Governments, big and small, their military and police forces in shreds, earnestly sought peace with citizens and neighbors they had been killing with great abandon mere weeks before. There was no end of heartfelt praise for one's fellow man coming out of the capitals of the world. There was a sense that this would last, that maybe humans had learned a lesson—at least until governments could rebuild and rearm. Utility services were gradually restored. The gargantuan task of clearing roadways of abandoned and wrecked cars was begun and the daunting work of dealing with the dead was underway.

When Augustus and the others finally reached the Bel Air house, they were greeted as heroes by those left behind. Had there been a fatted calf, it would have been sacrificed for the celebration. Instead, they supped on grilled Spam, canned vegetables and fruit. All washed down with some of the wine from Ham's splendid cellar.

"To Hamilton Hobbes," said Augustus as he hoisted his glass. The others joined him silently. Emmet Jones, almost fully recovered from his wound, did two things he had never done before: he sipped wine instead of gulping it and bowed his head to the memory of someone he didn't know in gratitude to the man proposing the toast. A man, a week ago, he gladly would have beaten to death if Cruz had let him.

They sat in the living room, each with a drink before them. The room hadn't changed. The way the light from the French doors played across the Isfahan rug was the same. Some of the seating still bore linen sheets. The diverse, little tribe of individuals that had thrown its lot in with Augustus hadn't changed except they were one fewer. Hamilton Hobbes had passed away while Augustus was gone. A fresh mound near a fountain on the property, a three dimensional version of a William Blake drawing, was his resting place.

Christine and Wil were to Augustus' left. He could feel Christine's yearning for him, for assurance that he loved her. He could feel Wil's growing resentment and the internal conflict that caused. Perhaps, he could explain to both of them that he was different now. There was no reason to hate or love him. He wasn't better or above them in any way. His lot was not easily defined. Neither the same or different. Neither better or worse. Simply put, he was not. Perhaps it was madness. Perhaps he was the same lost soul looking for answers he had always been. But the light of the cavern had touched him and part of him had become that light.

So there they sat. Tales of the road and the cavern told, retold and analyzed. Would they ever know what happened in the cavern or to all the people there and around the world who wandered around with unanswered questions and basketsful of grief and guilt? Or the people like Zach Fortune who simply weren't? A collective sigh of relief was given and a friendly silence entered into, as each was lost in their own sense of "what now?"

The silence dragged on. Augustus sampled one memory after another of his uncle. What would he have made of what Augustus experienced? Hamilton had given him the answer, after all. Augustus smiled as he thought of the peculiar and precise nature of his uncle's philosophy.

His reverie was broken by Cruz playing, "Denn Alles Fleisch, es ist wie Grass," on the piano. Augustus smiled. He sang along in a sweet, light tenor.

"What's it mean?" Cruz asked.

Augustus spoke as she played the refrain again. "For all flesh is as grass and all glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower thereof falleth away." They all listened silently as Cruz continued with the beautiful movement from Brahms's German Requiem.

Finally free of earthly restraint, Hamilton was a part of the eternally evolving cosmos, which was moving on. The world was moving. It still spun on its axis and orbited its sun. The false glory of man had indeed fallen away. Augustus smiled as he thought about the piece Cruz had chosen to accompany their new beginning.

The End

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<http://lawriterslab.com/category/blog/> gives you an idea of what he can do.

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