

THE LAST MARTYR



TODD RUSSELL

The Last Martyr

by Todd Russell

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"The Church will enter the glory of the kingdom only through this final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his death and Resurrection."

Catechism of the Catholic Church
paragraph 677

Preface

When the Son of Man comes again, will he find faith on earth? I have often pondered these words of Christ. What kind of deception could be so convincing that even those of seemingly strong faith would abandon everything they have held dear? I have played through many scenarios in my mind over the years, and only one has stood out as a real candidate for such a dramatic shift in the traditions of man. I have found it rather alarming that the very scenario I envisioned seems to be entering the popular conscious at a rapid pace in the past several years.

To give the story a stronger sense of believability, I have written it as an historical fiction, though set in the recent past, and have used actual people as some of the characters. Obviously, I am not depicting anything these people have done or said, and am merely putting words in their mouths that I could imagine them saying in the given circumstances. If they read this and are not flattered by my depictions of them, hopefully they will see that no libel is intended. They are just literary devices in this tale.

This sense of believability is hopefully enough to make the reader pause and ask, today and not tomorrow, "Where does my faith reside... in that which I can see through the eyes of sight or that

which I know by the eyes of faith?" We must each choose now, lest the day catch us off guard.

Notes on formatting

Since the book is largely driven by conversation, vocal and internal, it can be difficult to quote voices, thoughts, and written text with enough clarity as to prevent the reader from having to reinterpret a sentence upon reaching a phrase at the end such as "he thought" or "he read." For that reason, I have taken some liberties with established literary style in order to make the story more clear and readable.

Whenever there are **double-quotes**, " , that indicates something **spoken verbally**.

Whenever there are **single-quotes**, ' , that indicates something that is being **read from a text-based format**, whether a book, newspaper, or blurb on a digital screen of some kind. I have broken conventions relating to sentence punctuation inside quotes where appropriate. In other words, if I end a sentence with something someone typed on their phone, and they did not use a period in what they typed, the period will fall outside the single quotes, which is contrary to common usage. If the typing did include a period, it falls within the quote, so there appears to be an inconsistency in my formatting in some places unless you are aware of this usage pattern.

Whenever there are **tildes**, ~, that indicates that the words are being **thought internally** by the character. Italics do not always appear clearly in digital formats, so I still use them to indicate thought, as is the common usage, but I am adding the surrounding tildes for clarity in cases where the italics may not be easily discernible.

Please forgive the liberties, but I believe you will thank me for them by the end of the book. Clarity is more valuable than making my high school English teacher approve of the manuscript.

Notes on technology terms

In some places, I use technical language that will not be familiar to all readers. In these cases, it is not necessary to completely understand every word of what is written and the reader can safely keep reading with just a general idea about what the terms refer to. I wanted to be technically accurate for the readers who do know the terminology, and to demonstrate the technical ability of the characters involved in these scenes.

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Part I - Death

[Those who have skipped ahead to this point should go back and read the notes on formatting at the beginning of this book as they are essential to avoiding confusion.]

I. In the Shadows

August 30, 2011, 1:12pm

"Thirty gigabytes?! How did you get so much data?" Father Marco asked. He watched the man's fluid motions as he slid his right hand through the pocket opening in his black clerical robe then pulled an SD memory card from somewhere within. The man rubbed his black, wiry beard with his left hand as he held the SD card up before Father Marco with his right hand. A broad grin peeked out from behind the beard and his green eyes seemed to light up from within as he began his explanation.

"It was easier than expected. You will like this one. As I was looking through the Mossad's classified file server, I noticed that the backup script had read permissions on all three levels, so I was able to read it without even needing to waste time gaining root privileges."

"What?" Father Marco exclaimed. "You'd think the Israelis would have a more stringent screening process for their server admins, especially if they are dealing with top secret data."

"Yes," the man continued, "well, inside, there were comments explaining all the options that were used in the rsync command and why. It mentioned that the '--delete' option would ensure that anything deleted from the file server would also get deleted from the backups and even explained why this was necessary to be sure there were never copies of removed files floating around. However, there was no '--delete' option present in the rsync command within the script. My guess is that someone in the IT department got tired of explaining to annoying officials why he could not retrieve files that they had accidentally deleted unless they reported it by zero-thirty-three hours, which is when the script would run."

"Right," Father Marco interrupted, "so he finally decided he'd had enough arguing with superiors and just removed the option so he could get their files from the backups whenever someone would call in a panic. Wow, it's a shame when a lowly priest from backwoods Louisiana knows more about proper data security than the people managing a server that requires top secret clearance to access."

Father Marco noticed a smirk in the man's lips as he reached up to rub his beard for what must have been the tenth time since they had begun their conversation. The man shifted his weight to his other foot and resumed his casual lean against the door jamb of the small janitor closet. In the dim light, the man's black clerical robe seemed to cause him to melt into the shadows. *~How fitting,~* Father

Marco thought to himself. He glanced back down at the fourteen karat gold bar he was holding in his left hand. It was making his palm sweat and he desperately wanted to be rid of it as soon as possible. The man noticed Father Marco's nervousness.

"Anyway," the man continued, cutting his story shorter than he wanted to, "it was a simple matter of reverse rsync-ing the files from the backup server to another location on the main file server, then downloading them from there to this SD card which was plugged into the workstation I was sitting at. I did remove traces of my adventure, of course. I doubt any of those clowns will ever know what happened, though, if they can't even manage the basics of data security. No wonder the Israelis fear their enemies so."

Father Marco felt a surge of admiration for this man, and it made him feel guilty. He looked down at the gold bar again. ~Should I praise the ingenuity of someone engaging in such deception? And yet, am I not about to ensure this man continues such practices by paying him for his crimes?~

The man observed the priest as he stared at the gold bar with his deep, brown eyes. He watched in silence for another moment as a bead of sweat ran down the side of Father Marco's clean-shaven face from the edge of his parted brown hair. "Father, do not let your conscience torment you so. Remember, it is I who came to you and offered to find this info for which you were seeking in vain."

"Yes, and I still puzzle over that. How did your people know of me in the first place?"

"My people? No, Father, there are no other people involved. I work alone. I have ways, though I dare not discuss them with anyone. Fear not... I do not engage in any dark arts to obtain the information I use to seek out my next benefactor. Will it put your conscience at ease for me to tell you that I work solely for the ideal of justice? Not being a religious man myself, I am sure our definitions of justice would differ in some aspects, but it is justice, nonetheless, which I work for. I only care for the gold inasmuch as it will fund my next excursion."

"Even for justice, can you really live these lies all your life?"

"Father, not being a religious man, I have no qualms with allowing the ends to justify the means."

Father Marco closed his eyes. ~Am I not allowing the ends to justify the means myself?~

He opened his eyes to look at the man again. "What if I discover that this info is not what I am looking for after all? How will I find you to see if you can dig deeper?"

"Father, no one finds me. I do my own detective work to find those who are seeking justice, and I go to them and offer my services, as I did with you. When I leave this building, I will lose this priestly disguise, and the name I have used during our dealings, and every other trace of the part I have played. I will remain the man with no identity until

such time as I determine my next task. Then I will create a character that will best suit the scenario to gain me the access I need. And the cycle will repeat."

"What have I become?" Father Marco asked himself, this time out loud. "In my quest for this knowledge, I have dared to deal with such men as yourself, and for what? Is this all to end in vain?"

"If it comforts you, Father, remember that I deemed your quest worthy of my assistance. I am still not entirely sure why myself, but something about the quest captivated me. I tried to write you off as another religious zealot on yet another crusade, but I could not stop thinking about the questions you were asking. The theory you had seemed to put together certainly sounded plausible, provided you hold certain a priori assumptions in regard to religion. As I have said, I have no religion, but, if your theory happened to be true, would this not be the most important task any man has ever undertaken?"

"No, not any man, but perhaps all men other than Christ himself."

"At any rate, I did inspect the data before bringing it to you, and every one of your theories looks to be true, so I was right to trust my gut instinct in helping you. All the proof that you are looking for is there... assuming that I have read between the lines of your online discussions well enough to piece together what you really believe. I'm sure I have read you right. I have yet to be

wrong in my assessment of a person's motivations and beliefs. I suppose you could call it a gift, to use your own religious term."

Father Marco felt excitement rise into his throat.
~I knew it. What now, Lord?~

"I must admit," the man continued, "I am somewhat amazed at how you managed to piece this puzzle together, as twisted and unexpected as it seems. To have connected the threads you have connected, I can't help but wonder if you are one of the many KGB agents who have infiltrated your church hierarchy. No priest I've ever met has such a knack for info gathering, much less the technical know how to get as far as you did on your own. I'm sure, however, that you will account it to some sort of divine intervention."

"Divine intervention comes to those who are observant, and that is all that I have been... nothing more. The puzzle just seems obvious to me, as I watch what is progressing in our world events. If anything, I am surprised that others have not also seen it so clearly, especially someone who claims to be as observant as yourself."

"Well, Father, to be honest, I would not have come to you in the first place had I not believed you were onto the truth and that justice would be on your side to expose such atrocities to humanity. I must admit, after cross-referencing your theories against my own sources, it did seem altogether obvious. I don't know why I didn't see it sooner,

either. I suppose there are some things that no human wants to believe could be true, and so our subconscious biases us against those truths."

"One such as yourself speaks of truth? That is ironic. You might try it some time, and leave this life behind. Return to your real life. The truth shall set you free."

The man shifted his position against the wall, rubbing his beard again. "Truth... what is truth? To me, truth is merely that which is. I do not subscribe to the idea that there is a 'maker of truth' somewhere out there. Truth makes itself. If I am wrong, however, I shall be pleased to meet him when that time comes. When one has seen the things I have seen, Father, it will take something fairly drastic to convince him otherwise, like a face to face encounter."

"You have pointed out your own lack of faith enough times that I am now certain you once did believe in the truth of which I speak."

Father Marco noted the uneasy movement the man made in shifting his weight again at this accusation, then continued. "And I have no doubt that you have a deep insecurity that you may not have entirely rooted this out of your heart. Why else would you still care so much about justice?"

"Let's just say that I have been on the suffering end of injustice one too many times in my life, and I watched the failure of those whose jobs it was to enforce justice as they gave in to corruption. I finally

realized that justice is not something one can do as a job. Only those who thirst for justice can avoid corruption in bringing it about. So, I decided to take matters into my own hands."

"By dodging my question, you confirm my suspicions," Father Marco playfully taunted.

"Time is wasting, Father. Do you want the files or not?"

Father Marco sighed. He could not bring himself to hand the man the gold, so he set it on the shelf beside him and waited for him to take it and leave the SD card in its place.

"Do not fear, Father, your task very well may be one of the greatest and most important tasks to be undertaken by any man since your Lord Himself supposedly came down to save you. If the God you believe in is real, surely *He* is on your side for this one. Whether or not He is out there watching over you, I will be. I will continue to monitor your progress. If I see that you are failing and I can offer some assistance which may swing the tide, I will reappear under another guise to do what I can. It is safer for you, though, if those who you go up against do not know you have received any help. If they begin to suspect you are more than just a priest, your background in computers may be enough to convince them that you managed this alone. They will leave you alone as long as they believe you are nothing more than a vigilante priest from New Orleans trying to save the world on your own."

The man slid the gold bar down into the same hidden pocket he had pulled the SD card from and stood straight up. "And now, Father, I must fade again into shadow. I wish you all the fortune you will need to accomplish whatever you can to expose this great lie. For your sake, though, I hope I am wrong, and that there is a God. You will need His help to succeed."

Father Marco closed his eyes and sighed. "Yes, I know."

When he opened his eyes, the man was gone, and the door was settling shut. He picked up the SD card from the shelf and hid it in a cargo pocket of the pants he was wearing beneath his clerical robe. He grabbed the broom, mop, and mop bucket and headed out of the small janitor closet, lost in thought as he walked down the hall to begin his post-lunch chores.

II. Meetings

September 1, 2011, 3:13am

Fr. Marco sighed as he sat up in bed. He glanced at the clock before moving over to his computer desk.

~Three thirteen in the morning. How many hours is this going to take?~

This was the eighth time he had been up to check the progress of the file indexing. No matter how hard he tried, he could not force himself to sleep. He had prayed all twenty decades of the rosary without so much as a brief dozing off.

~Why has this got such a hold on me? It's not like this is so urgent it can't wait until daylight.~

He looked up at the painting of Christ crucified that hung above his computer monitor, not expecting an answer but wishing for one nonetheless. He glanced at the progress window on his screen. Ninety-one percent. He opened his web browser and clicked the bookmark for his custom Google News page. He glanced at the top stories while waiting for the rest of the page to load.

~Yes, yes, Rick Perry, Mitt Romney, Barak Obama. Is this all anyone can be bothered to talk about for the next year?~

He scrolled down the page to the section titled 'ufo mayan calendar' and checked each of the stories Google News had culled from the internet for him.

~Hmmm, the same ten articles for the last week straight. Maybe I should drop calendar from the search terms to see if it manages to find more articles.~

Losing interest, he closed his browser and opened Skype. He watched Father Allesandro's icon in the contact list patiently while he waited for the status indicator to show whether or not he was online.

~Oh good, he's available.~

He started a voice chat and checked the progress of the program that was indexing the top secret files while he waited for Father Allesandro to answer.

"Father Marco, it's early in your part of the world, how are you?" came the voice over the computer speakers.

"Sleepless, and you?"

"Enjoying some lovely Fall weather. I presume you are hoping for an update on your request?"

"Actually, I didn't expect you to have one yet. I was checking in to let you know I have some files that I expect to prove my theory, and will be spending the rest of my day poring over them. Is there an update, then?"

"Yes. I was able to make it to confession with the pope today and I presented your request. He asked to know what was so important that a priest would set aside his obligations and spend his diocese's money to travel halfway around the world to talk to him in private. I told him of the files you were trying to obtain. His expression changed rather visibly. He simply responded that he will hear your confession in Berlin during the first evening of his visit there in three weeks. Then he said, 'Speak of this to no one,' and looked around as if he was expecting spies to be hovering about. I bowed and left."

"Father Alessandro, have you heard rumors of Russian KGB agents becoming priests to infiltrate the magisterium? My benefactor made a comment about this as if it was a well-known fact. I pretended to be aware."

"You American priests really don't bother to learn much history outside the early Church and your own borders, do you? Of course this is well known, to all Europeans and Easterners, anyway. In fact, I suspect the pope may know of some currently embedded in the Vatican based on his response to my words today."

"What about the Israeli Mossad or the British MI6?"

"I am afraid to say that every intelligence agency of every nation, hostile or otherwise, has attempted to do the same. Many of the cases of

priestly misconduct turned out to be these agents. That's why these cases were so often mishandled. Which is worse, admitting to the faithful that some priests can fall quite far, or admitting that the priesthood has been so widely infiltrated by agents that we have no real way of knowing which priests are truly faithful Catholics and which ones are just going through the motions? The sacraments are valid either way, but many of the faithful would have a hard time accepting this. As you know, our enemy never sleeps, and he has devised every scheme under the sun to destroy the Church, from within and without."

"Deep down, I suspected, but not to the level you suggest. May the curse of Judas be upon them. I suppose, then, we should converse no more on the topic. If there really are agents around, the less this is spoken of, the better... at least until I can ask the pope what course of action to take. Thank you for your help."

"Any time. I must be going, and you should really get some sleep, although I don't suppose you will sleep any better after this news."

"Too true. Thanks again, Father Alessandro. Pray for me."

"Likewise."

Father Marco closed Skype and took one more look at the progress window on his screen. Ninety-four percent. He opened the web browser again and began searching for plane tickets to Berlin.

6:17am

Father Marco walked into his room, set his keys on his dresser as usual, then set his coffee down on the table next to his keyboard. He grabbed the back of his chair and turned it to sit down, but hesitated. He walked back to the door and closed it, then checked the blinds to make sure there were no gaps in the blades. He returned to his seat and pulled up to the computer. He closed the status window of the file indexing process, which reported that it was complete. He brought up the file search window and began with the broadest search term for the info he was looking for... '2012'.

He waited for a few moments and watched the list of documents begin to pile up. When the cursor stopped its 'busy' animation, he scrolled slowly through the list of filenames.

~Three hundred and ninety two documents. There must be something in here.~

He quickly discovered that many of the documents related to the annual budget of the Mossad, or, at least, so the filenames suggested. There were others which seemed to pertain to a planned maneuver in the West Bank. Many related to something going on with the Palestinians. The

rest were all code names. Upon reaching the bottom of the list, he scrolled back up, highlighting each strangely named document as he went. When he reached the top of the list, he checked the bottom of the window to see how many were selected... '87 items selected'.

He quickly hit the keyboard commands to copy the files, switch to the desktop, create a new folder named 'corrupted_files', and paste the files in it. He then initiated a new search within this folder.

'mayan', he typed, then paused for a moment before pressing the 'Enter' key. When the results had filtered, the window showed one file. He opened it, grabbed his coffee with his left hand, then rested his right hand over his keyboard with his finger on the 'Pg Dn' key.

His heart sank as he began to read. While the document was written to be decipherable only to agents with certain inside knowledge, enough of what was there made sense to him in light of the other research he had been doing... and it all confirmed his worst fears.

~Oh Jesus, have mercy on us. Forgive them, for they know not what they do.~

He closed the document, opened the True Crypt software, encrypted the file, transferred a copy to his phone over Bluetooth, and uploaded a copy to the Dropbox account that he and a benefactor named Thomas Mann had set up for passing files back and forth.

He shut down his computer and pulled the phone out of his pocket to send a text message to Thomas.

'Fears confirmed. Meet me at 19:30, silent zone.'

He leaned back in his chair and stared at the painting of Christ while waiting for a reply. He felt his heart racing and it was hard to breathe.

The phone buzzed in his hand and he looked down at the reply. '10-4'.

He stood up from his chair, but grabbed the desk to steady himself as his knees began to buckle underneath him. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths to keep himself from passing out. He checked his phone to make sure it was on silent, already forgetting that it had just vibrated without playing the ring tone, then headed out to spend several hours in the chapel before making his way to the rendezvous point to meet Thomas.

7:34pm

Father Marco handed the flight info printouts to Thomas, then leaned back on the bench and began scanning the horizon of Lake Pontchartrain while he waited for Thomas to look over them.

"No problem, Father. I will print the tickets to PDF and save them in the file share for you. Encrypted, of course." Thomas stood up, folded the pages, stuck them into the back pocket of his jeans, then grabbed the bottom of his black button-up shirt and adjusted it to make sure it was not tucked into his pocket with the papers before sitting back down next to Father Marco on the bench.

"Thanks, Thomas. Have you thought yet about your game plan?"

Thomas took off his sunglasses, cleaned them with his shirt, then put them back on. He stared out at the lake blankly for a few more moments before shrugging his shoulders. "Well, I was hoping you'd be wrong, so I haven't planned yet. We both know there won't be any safe places. I will probably just begin spreading the truth as far and wide as I can until the hammer falls. That may be my only chance for atonement after all the things I've done."

"There's always a chance for everyone, Thomas, even without the martyrdom ticket."

"I pray you are right, Father. Is there anything else you need?"

"No, I don't think so. Thank you for your generosity over the past few years. I could not have pulled this off without your help. It's not like I have gold bars lying around under rainbows. Just so you know, my hacker was very curious as to where that came from. I don't know if he has bothered to try

and solve the mystery, but I have no doubt that he can if he sets his mind to it."

"So what if he does? If he wants my gold, he can have it. Gold will not be worth much in a little more than a year. I can spread the message without it anyway."

"Well, we should get out of here before we start looking like more than a priest counseling a member of his flock. I suppose this is the last time we will need to meet, but we can still use the file share to pass info to each other if needed. Only call or text me if it is really important."

"Yes, Father. Can you bless me before you go?"

"Of course. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit...."

III. Secrets

September 22, 2011, 6:26pm

Father Marco looked at the address written on the scrap of paper and compared it to the name and number on the plaque beside the door before knocking. He noticed the curtains in the window on the right side of the house shift slightly and he caught the gleam of white hair reflecting the sunlight through the thin material. The door opened to the smiling face of an old lady, perhaps in her late seventies, with her white hair up in a bun on the back of her head.

"Father Marco?" she asked in a German accent.

"Yes," he answered, smiling back.

"Come," she said, turning around and leading the way into a hallway, to the left, then into a small foyer. She stopped and waved her right arm toward a door in a sweeping gesture. "He waits."

"Thank you madame," Father Marco replied, bowing at the waist before opening the door into a stairwell that led down into a lower floor.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he entered into a basement with a low ceiling and dim lighting. He looked around as his eyes adjusted to the light.

"Over here, my son," spoke a voice to the far right end of the room. Father Marco turned to see Pope Benedict stand up from a chair, dressed in simple black clerics. He noticed immediately that there was no hat on the pope's head and he had the beginnings of a scruffy beard.

Father Marco walked over to him, knelt to one knee, and took the pope's hand to kiss his ring, but stopped short as he realized the ring was not on the pope's finger. Perplexed, he looked up at the pope's face. Pope Benedict nodded his head silently, with a sad expression on his face, then turned and entered a door into a wine cellar. Father Marco rose, followed him in, and closed the door behind himself.

"We can speak openly here," Pope Benedict began. "This house belongs to my cousin, who just let you in. No one knows I am here except she and my guards. You are wondering why I am dressed as a parish priest and am growing a beard, yes? Something is happening, my son, though I am unsure what it is. I must stay here for a time until God shows me the next step. For now, I wait and pray."

He paused and stared intently at Father Marco, as if reading his soul. He finally broke his gaze with a small, knowing smile and a barely perceptible nod of his head. "Tell me what you have found."

"I have managed to get a copy of the files from the Mossad backup server. I found a document they

thought they had deleted. This document confirmed some of the research I have been doing in regards to a coming event that will destroy the faith of many. I believe it will be the great deception. You were in Germany during World War Two. How much do you know about the technology they were developing?"

Father Marco watched the pope's eyes open wide in a stunned expression. He relaxed his face into a somber gaze and let his head droop a little as he sighed. "Continue," was all he said in reply.

"Much of that technology was given to Israelis scientists as a consolation for their sufferings, and they have been improving upon it ever since. Now, one claiming to be the long-awaited Jewish Messiah is going to use that technology to fool people into believing that an alien civilization is returning to earth at the end of the Mayan calendar. He will claim that this civilization created humanity, that they are the true gods, and that they left us the Mayan calendar to show us when they first arrived and when they would return to bring us into the intergalactic community, which he will refer to as the Promised Land."

The pope closed his eyes in a pained expression, so Father Marco paused for a moment and waited for him to open his eyes and look back at him before continuing.

" With his technological signs and wonders, he will lead so many astray that we will surely ask

ourselves, when the Son of Man returns, will He find faith on earth? Those who do cling to their religion will almost certainly be martyred. If Saint Malachy's prophecies are to be believed, then this is, in fact, The Antichrist. "

The pope stared at him with a piercing gaze. "Is all of this in the document you found?"

"Not all of it. I had pieced this all together myself through my research, but I did find in this document references to the German anti-gravity technology, the sons of god, the Anunnaki, and the Mayan calendar. The document was written in a sort of code, of course, so that only someone with some knowledge of these possible outcomes could really see the references clearly, but they were definitely there. What do you think of this?"

Pope Benedict remained silent, deep in thought for almost an entire minute before responding. "As you know, my son, I was forced into service in Hitler's army when I was a seminarian. I was placed in the anti-aircraft division. I saw things... that frightened me very much. The weapons and crafts Hitler was preparing to use would have given him complete dominion over the earth. I prayed every day that God would prevent these technologies from being completed. Some of the troops gave their lives in an effort to warn the Allies. I don't know if any ever succeeded, but the tide turned before Hitler completed his plans. I feared, though... I feared that this technology would fall into other hands and not be destroyed. I have prayed every day since then

that God would prevent these technologies from being developed."

Pope Benedict looked up, as though he was peering through the ceiling above him, and let out a deep sigh. "Even this we must surrender to God." Turning back to Father Marco, he gave a peaceful smile, saying, "Let us pray that you and Saint Malachy are wrong."

"I suppose we will know soon enough," Father Marco replied.

"If I die here in Germany at the hands of the enemies of the Church, assume that Saint Malachy spoke the truth. Do not be afraid to speak it yourself. The people will need someone to help them see through the lies. The eyes of the senses will be useless if what you say comes to pass. I will do what I can to prepare the faithful priests and bishops for the worst. There are many Judases, though. If what you speak of is to come to pass, some of them will be working toward this end."

"I fear as much."

"If this is the way, then let us take comfort in knowing that His time is near at hand. Maranatha!"

The pope looked at Father Marco, this time with a fatherly concern. "This must be taking a toll on you. Such knowledge is a heavy cross."

"Yes."

"Well, we both have work to do, my son. But first, why not make a good confession? You will

need all the grace God will grant you for the work ahead."

Father Marco nodded, closed his eyes, lowered his head, and recollected himself for a few moments in silence. "Forgive me father, for I have sinned...."

IV. Abduction

October 12, 2011, 10:08am

Father Marco set his coffee cup down on the edge of the sink, causing it to teeter and nearly spill onto the counter. He came out of his daydream as he adjusted his motion to avoid the spill. "Wake up, Marco," he muttered to himself as he turned his attention to the breakfast he was in the middle of putting together. He yawned deeply and stretched his arms out wide, trying to shake off the exhaustion of a late night spent reading.

His phone buzzed to let him know a text message had arrived. He picked it up off the counter and looked at the screen while returning the box of cereal to the cabinet.

'Thomas Mann,' the screen read. "Trouble already?" he asked aloud. He opened the message. 'turn on tv now'.

He picked up the television remote and hit the power button, then began pouring the milk into his cereal while he waited for the television to boot up.

As the news channel appeared, he immediately stopped pouring the milk, set it down, and walked over to sit on the couch, forgetting his breakfast in bewilderment at what he was seeing.

A newscaster was sitting at his desk, commenting on video footage that he was watching on a screen that was mounted to the wall behind the desk.

"You are seeing footage that was submitted to us by a viewer from her smartphone only a few minutes ago. An unidentified aerial craft of some sort has landed in the streets of New York City after hovering in place for about five minutes. We have received a report that someone wearing a white robe and a golden helmet shaped like the head of a bird has entered the 92nd Street Y, where the Singularity Summit is underway."

Father Marco glanced from the footage the newscaster was watching to a corner of the screen where a small info box popped up showing a picture of the face of the old New York building where the Singularity Summit was being held this year. Under the picture, two lines of text appeared:

'92nd St. Y

Hebrew Cultural Center'.

Father Marco felt his pocket for his phone, then remembered it was sitting on the kitchen counter. He got up from the couch and walked backwards to grab it, then returned to the couch, keeping his sight on the television the whole time.

"We're switching now to live news footage of the craft as we await some word from reporters on the ground, who have just arrived," the reporter said as he turned to face the viewers. "Oh, wait, I'm

getting word now that the pilot of the craft has just interrupted the presentation that was being given by Ray Kurzweil. We're switching now to another camera inside the event hall."

As the camera switched, the inset photo of the 92nd Street Y was replaced by a head and shoulders picture of Ray Kurzweil in his typical attire of a nice suit and tie, rectangular-framed glasses, and his short brown hair combed back to accentuate the balding spots above his forehead.

Father Marco woke his phone from standby, then hit the icon for the voice commands feature. "Dial Thomas Mann mobile."

"I guess you're seeing this?" Thomas asked as he answered the call.

"I don't get it, this seems too early. I wasn't expecting anything to happen until next December twelfth."

"Kurzweil, isn't he the synthesizer guy?"

"Yes, among other things. I've come across his name several times during my research because of his promotion of cybernetic transhumanism."

"Cybernetic transhumanism? You wanna translate that to English for me?"

"It's basically the integration of technology into the human body in an effort to take us to what its proponents refer to as the next step in human evolution. Scary stuff, really. Wait, he is following the... what is going on?"

Father Marco and Thomas watched in silence as Kurzweil followed the pilot off the stage of the conference room, through the building, out into the street, then into the craft with its pilot.

"Kurzweil has just entered the craft," the reporter began again, "and the craft appears to be taking off."

They watched as the craft rose slowly to about fifty feet above the streets before shooting straight up into the sky in the blink of an eye.

"That's a weird helmet that pilot is wearing. It looks like it is made of real gold, and the shape seems like some sort of parrot head. What do you make of all this?" Thomas asked Father Marco.

"If I remember correctly, the macaw is a sacred animal in Mayan religion. As far as why Kurzweil is involved now, I need to think for a minute."

Father Marco and Thomas watched the news in silence for a few minutes as the newscast began replaying the footage for the third time.

"I think I get it. If you look at Kurzweil's predictions and those of other transhumanists, they expect technology to reach a point where microscopic nano-computers will be injected into our bloodstream to clean out the foreign cells, attack diseases, and heal injuries in order to prevent disease and aging. Some also believe that these nano-computers will be used to upgrade our brains and senses to give us what amounts to super powers."

"Well," Thomas interrupted, "I see why they call this transhumanism. When they are done with us, we won't even really be human anymore."

"Yeah, as I said, they want to use cybernetics to force the supposed evolutionary process to take us to the next step of humanity. They want to increase our intelligence, remove our limitations, and extend our lives to essentially be eternal as long as we aren't killed by some accident."

"You will be like gods," Thomas interrupted.

"Precisely. It's the original temptation all over again. They also believe that once we reach that point, the lack of material needs will propel us into a peaceful utopia of sorts."

"The kingdom of man, in all its glory. Except you and I both know that never works out."

"Yes," Father Marco replied. "Wow, how did I not see this part of the scheme coming? It's so obvious now that it's in motion. Transhumanism is the perfect complement to the kingdom of the false messiah. Solving the problems of the world, doing the miracles of Christ, all through technology. I suspect Kurzweil was just taken away because he has been chosen to be the prophet of The Antichrist, the anti-John the Baptist who will prepare a way. But why now? I thought for sure they wouldn't show themselves before December twelfth of next year?"

"Maybe that is the date they plan to begin their utopia? They have a lot of work to do in a short

time, if so. We're nowhere near that level of technology yet."

"The moment of singularity."

"What?"

"That's the phrase the transhumanists use for the moment where man enters this 'new creation' they hope for. Essentially, it is the same hope we have in the resurrection, but brought about by technology in time rather than by God after time ends. I haven't paid them much heed because, as you say, we seem to be nowhere near that point with today's technology. I figured everything would be over long before their agenda ever became a threat. It never occurred to me that they'd combine it with the alien deception to show up and promise a shortcut to this supposed promised land. Yes, the two go perfectly together. For those who have awaited a messiah to come and make things right in this life, the whole scenario will seem like the fulfillment of that dream."

"Father, a few months ago, you told me you believed that the Israeli government was working on a scheme to make people believe aliens would come and fix the problems of our world. So, you're telling me they have the technology we just saw?"

"I didn't say the Israeli government, but certain members within the Israeli government. And yes, the documents I got my hands on would confirm that they have technology like what we just saw."

"I know there have been some pretty crazy breakthroughs in science over the last decade, and, yes, I have seen the headlines about the experiments of the Israeli scientists, but this is awful hard to believe. I have to give them credit, though, it is a pretty brilliant plan if they pull it off. It will do more than just convince people that this is real... it will give them hope... a hope which many have not felt in decades. Hell, after seeing what I just saw, I have to say that even I am wondering whether you are right or whether this might really be aliens from another planet."

"When the Son of Man comes again, will He find faith on earth? Okay, look, I gotta go. I need to read through a few Wikipedia articles on some of this then go for a drive so I can think. This changes everything. Time is short. There's so little time."

Father Marco hung up the call, forgetting that he hadn't even said goodbye.

On the other end, Thomas chuckled to himself. "Absent-minded professor is about to get even more absent-minded." He smiled for a moment before looking around his living room and letting out a deep sigh. He got up and walked over to the entertainment center, turned off the television, retrieved a backpack from the bottom drawer of the entertainment center cabinet, and opened it up. He pulled another drawer completely out, then emptied the drawer into the backpack. He carried it to the kitchen table and tossed his laptop in before closing it up.

He made his way to the foyer, pulled a small suitcase from the coat closet, then walked out the front door, not bothering to lock it behind him. When he reached his car, which was parked in the front circle, he looked back for just a moment. "Leave all you have and come and follow me," he whispered as he turned to slide into the car, tossing his bags into the passenger seat.

After cranking the engine, he pulled the phone out of his pocket and triggered the voice activation, saying, "drive to Brevard, North Carolina," before mounting it in its dock. He put his shades on, then opened the music app on his phone and chose a playlist titled 'Final Roadtrip.' He leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, listening to the opening sequence of "Where the Streets Have No Name." He dropped the stick shift into first gear and took off with a squeal of his tires as he belted out the opening words of the song... "I wanna run, I want to hide."

V. Proclamation

October 16, 2012, 3:33pm

Father Marco grabbed a handful of almonds from the bowl and began slowly popping them into his mouth one by one. He sat on the couch with his attention transfixed on the television screen. The newscaster, for once, was silent, not sure exactly what to say as she watched the screen behind the news desk. That screen was a direct feed from a news camera focused on an aerial craft that appeared to be the same one from the previous day. It had been hovering outside the 92nd Street Y for more than ten minutes, as if those inside were waiting for all the news crews to arrive before they began whatever show they had planned.

"The door of the craft is opening," the newscaster finally broke her silence. "Someone is leaving the craft. Yes, that's Ray Kurzweil, who entered the craft yesterday with one of the craft's crew members. He is making his way into the 92nd Street Y."

She watched in silence as a camera followed him through the building, into the conference hall, and up to the podium on the stage where he had been speaking the day before when he was interrupted by the appearance of the craft.

"I've just been informed that the craft has departed in the same manner as yesterday, and we can see now that Mister Kurzweil is waiting to be fitted with a microphone so that he can speak to the conference attendees. We will switch over now and broadcast his speech to you live from the Singularity Summit."

Father Marco grabbed the remote and turned the television volume up several clicks.

On screen, Ray tapped the mic that he was wearing to make sure it was active. He took a deep breath, clasped his hands behind his back, and stared down at the stage for a moment, waiting for the crowd to quiet down. With his head bowed, Father Marco noticed that his hair was slightly puffed up around his right balding spot, and his grey suit looked wrinkled on the right side as if he had slept in it. After a few moments, he looked up, and adjusted his rectangular glasses frames. Father Marco could detect a little stubble on his chin, and his eyes looked exhausted. Ray touched his right index finger to his lips as if pondering, then began.

"Ladies and gentlemen... where do I even begin? I have just been on the most amazing journey you could ever imagine. I have learned so much in the last twenty nine hours that it would take me days to expound it all to you, along with the implications and consequences thereof."

He paused, pacing back and forth several times while looking down at the stage.

"Let me begin by addressing those of you who are here for this conference... with news that will certainly delight you beyond your hopes... the singularity is at hand!"

The assembled crowd erupted into cheers and applause, which quickly evolved into a standing ovation. Ray let them carry on for almost a full minute before signaling to them to quiet down so that he could continue.

Father Marco took another handful of almonds while waiting for the noise to die down. *~So, I was right on that prediction.~*

When the noise stopped, Ray began again. "I suppose by now you have guessed what I mean, although those who are watching at home on their televisions certainly have no clue as to what I speak of. For their sake, I must explain why we are gathered here and what we have been working towards. The Singularity is the moment in time when man will transcend his present state, to reach the next stage of his evolution, in which he will suffer no illness and live as long a life as he chooses to. Those of religious persuasion await such a promised kingdom in a life after this one. We of the Singularity Movement, however, have determined to press technological advancement in the fields of computing and medicine at a rapid pace to one day create technology which will achieve these ends for us in this life."

He paused a moment, looking around the crowd with a slight smile on his face, giving the television audience time to process his explanation.

"Many scoff at us, especially those of religious persuasion, but we have the science mostly worked out already. The only stumbling block has been the manufacturing, and it is only a matter of time before we would have reached this end. I had predicted 2035 as the year of this breakthrough given the current exponential rate of advancement. I am happy to report to you, though, that we have just been visited by those who will share their technology with us and bring us into our moment of Singularity in little more than a year."

At this, the crowd erupted into such an elated uproar that Father Marco had to turn the volume down on his television until it subsided. Ray tried in vain for several minutes to get the crowd under control. Meanwhile, Father Marco began jotting notes down furiously on his notepad with his digital pen.

"Yes," Ray began again, "we have finally reached the point at which we have been deemed worthy of entering a galactic society of other civilizations like us... those who have already been granted this favor by their makers."

Ray paused, pacing a short circle on the stage, again looking down at it, before continuing.

"What I am about to say will disturb many. As you probably noticed, I said, 'their makers'. Those

whom I have just traveled with are our makers, in whose image and likeness we were created. When they created us, and these other societies, they planted certain ideas into our very DNA, which form in us hopes, desires, fears, beliefs... then they watch. They have been here from the beginning... the Anunnaki."

He paused again to wait for people to process what they were hearing.

"They have watched us develop and evolve. With each society, they intervene only when necessary, appearing as gods, to give just the bits of wisdom or help needed to foster progress. Sometimes, things threaten to go horribly wrong, and they interfere more concretely, leaving behind evidence of their presence... evidence which happens to be all around us, though we have chosen to remain blind to it through our own distortions of the wisdom they have attempted to impart to us. They watch and wait, though, until a civilization reaches a point in their mental evolution where they begin to see the truth through the distortions, where they are open enough to that truth as a society that they can be brought into adulthood without falling apart at the seams. I fear there are many today who are watching this who are, in fact, falling apart at the seams."

He pulled a handkerchief from his suit coat pocket and wiped the sweat that was forming on his forehead, then folded it neatly and returned it to its place.

"This revelation will bring a great deal of upheaval, but it has taken us longer to reach our evolutionary breakthroughs than the Anunnaki had hoped. I was told that those of us in the Singularity Movement, and many others besides, are the first fruits of that mental evolution into adulthood. Other civilizations have reached their moment before the appointed time and were brought forward earlier than hoped, but our race has proven too dim-witted in general, and has only just begun to see, and only just before we reach our appointed time. The further a race progresses before their appointed time, the smoother the transition."

He paused for a moment, pacing again. The crowd in the conference hall remained in stunned silence.

"I fear that not all my news today is good. Due to the fact that we have failed to fully progress before our appointed time, there remain factions in human society that will make much trouble among us as we prepare for the coming of our creators, and we must have the resolve to do what we must in order to prevent them from disrupting our entrance into the new heavens and new earth."

Ray paused again, his amiable expression changed to a more stern expression, and he scanned the crowd, looking many of them in the eyes.

"Already I have given you several hints of what will happen by my choice of words. As I said, we will be preparing for the coming of our creators.

They left us a calendar to mark the date they first intervened in our history and the date they set as our appointed time. Many of you know that calendar as the Mayan calendar thanks to popular media, which has failed to grasp the full importance of its existence. Since we have failed to progress as far as we might have, we will not be brought into our destiny until the final moment they have set for their return, which is December 21st, 2012."

Another uproar broke from the crowd as many, though not all, began to cheer wildly.

"Are you listening?" he interrupted their applause, then waited for silence to return to the hall. "I said this would not be good news. I was told that only those who embrace the truth will be allowed to enter into this new creation. Some have already left their old systems of belief behind, even as I have been speaking. There will be many, though, who will resist. What shall become of them? I do not yet know, but my teacher had a very grave look on his face as he spoke of this. There will also be many who will attempt to disrupt everything that is happening, bringing much sorrow and misery among us in the meantime. I fear that the days from now to the arrival of our creators will be the worst humanity has yet seen, though it need not be so."

He paused, standing still and staring down at the floor of the stage as he pondered how to explain the next part of his speech.

Father Marco sighed deeply and set the bowl of almonds down on the couch beside him. *~And so begins the final persecution.~*

"You have heard me refer to my teacher. I have even used some of his own phrases, such as 'the new heavens and new earth'".

He paused again, looking at the faces in the crowd.

"What I am about to say will cause cognitive dissonance to many who hear it, yet for different reasons depending on your system of beliefs. Do not judge my words immediately, though. It will make sense by the time I am finished."

He paused for effect, hoping that the expectation of shock would prepare many of those listening to be less shocked by the time he spoke.

"The pilot of the craft, who picked me up, took me on my journey, explained all this to me, and returned me to prepare you all for his return... was none other than Jesus the Nazarene."

He clasped his hands behind his back and paced about the stage for more than a minute in silence, giving the people a moment to get over their shock and wait for his explanation. The silence was so intense that he could hear the blood rushing in his ears.

Father Marco breathed a deep breath and leaned back in the couch, looking up at the ceiling.

"Oh, my Jesus, why must it come to this? Why, oh Lord, why?"

Ray took a long drink of water before continuing.

"Surely, those of you who know Jesus as your messiah are refusing to believe me at this moment. You will soon enough, though. Your world is about to be turned upside down. You might say that he died and rose from the dead, and how could this be by any means other than spiritual ones? Much to the shock of those of us who always believed Jesus was more a myth than a reality, I can say that you are right... he was crucified and rose from the dead. His rising was different than you have been taught, however. I was shown the technology by which the Anunnaki preserve their lives from decay. It is much like the nanotechnology we in this crowd had envisioned. It does more than simply preserve a body from decay and aging, though. It preserves every neurological transmission carried out by their nervous systems. Each little nano computer stores the information, so that if one of the Anunnaki dies, they only need to retrieve a single one of these devices from the remains of the body. Using that one device, they can clone the body and reinsert the device into the bloodstream, where it replicates its information to the other nano computers, which then rebuild the synapses to match the previous body's precise makeup. When the body awakens, the being lives again, with all memories, feelings, and thoughts intact. They truly rise from the dead. It

is the most remarkable thing I have ever seen or imagined."

He paused to take another sip of water.

"You Christians, upon reflection, will find many hints of the Anunnaki in your scriptures, especially the Old Testament. The new heavens and new earth he promised you were none other than this reality we are about to enter. If you re-read your Bibles, you will find it absolutely in harmony with what I am telling you. The primitive minds he spoke to were simply unable to grasp the fullness of what he was telling them."

He paused again, looking straight into the camera nearest him. The television screen was filled with a close up of his face, and Father Marco stared at the eyes on the screen, noting how serious and confident Ray's expression was.

"Speaking of the Old Testament, I must address the people of my childhood, the Jews. Your long-awaited messiah is at hand. You were half-wrong in rejecting him the first time. He was, in fact, the messiah to come, although his time was not imminent... he was only trying to take you forward a large leap in opening your minds to what awaited. The early believers were closer to the reality than those that came after the diaspora. The later Jews had lost much of what had been handed on, and they over-spiritualized the teachings. For this reason, they failed to understand what Jesus was preaching. They were right to reject the distortions

of his teaching that were being spread by the followers of Jesus, but they were letting these teachings color their understanding of his very words spoken to them, and missed his true meaning. At any rate, it was clear to the Anunnaki that we had many centuries before we would truly be ready."

He paused for another drink of water, this time draining the bottle. He looked around the stage, shaking the empty bottle as a signal for someone to bring him another. He waited for someone to bring him one, opened it, took another sip, then set it down on the edge of the stage before continuing.

"Those among us who have watched the skies with interest for the last hundred or so years are less surprised today than those I have already addressed. The Anunnaki have been allowing us glimpses of their presence in order to slowly prepare us. They have inspired many through direct contact to begin planting these ideas into our mainstream media entertainment. They have written books themselves, under pen-names, which have become best-sellers. They foresaw that our deadline date would be reached before we had evolved on our own, so they began doing what they had to in order to at last prepare us for the revelation to come. Without this preparation, society may have come apart at the seams. It still may, to some degree, before we transcend. There will be those who refuse to accept the truth which is before their very eyes. Some of them may even have their hands on the

buttons of nuclear power. Will we who embrace the truth allow them to deter us from this glorious future which awaits us?"

He took a moment to look at many of the faces in the crowd. His expression was stern, but peaceful and resolved.

"The Anunnaki fully expect there to be a great deal of turmoil for the next few weeks as people come to grips with the new reality they face. For this reason, Jesus has decided to wait before he walks among us again... to give us time to prepare. This December 25th, at daybreak, he will come down among us again upon the mount where he left us. He will march into Jerusalem to begin the rebuilding of the temple and the coming kingdom of glory, in which the earth will enter the galactic civilization to take its place among the other races. We have from now until then to clear the old Temple Mount of the past, to leave it bare for its new foundation."

He paused for a moment, clearly wrestling with himself as to how to word the next declaration.

Father Marco stood up from the couch and began to pace around the living room as he waited for Ray to begin again. His mind was racing in an effort to figure out how this Jesus figure came into the plot.

"He will spend the year from his arrival until the arrival of the Anunnaki preparing humanity for this emergence into full consciousness. As I said, there will be those who resist what must come to

pass. Just as cancer must be removed forcefully from a body to prevent its untimely demise, those who refuse what he will decree for our progress will be treated as a cancer. For the good of humanity, the cancer must be removed, lest it destroy itself without fulfilling its destiny. As a man of peace, I plead with you all, can we not walk this path together as one family, in harmony? Do not resist. Believe and be free. If it is hard for you to accept, all you need to do is go along with it peacefully for a little more than a year. If I have lied, it would become clear on December 22nd of next year, and you can then return to your myths and fairy tales. A simple compromise, is it not? There need be no turmoil. We will have an eternity to discuss how we went so wrong in what we have believed, and we will all look back and laugh at our foolishness."

He walked over to the water bottle he had left at the edge of the stage, looked around, then looked down at it and kicked it over slowly. He watched the water pour out onto the stage and off the edge onto the floor below. When the water had stopped pouring out, he looked up and began again.

"The old water of our false spiritualities will be poured out, and we will be filled with a new, living water, welling up unto eternity. The future that waits us, which I have seen with my own eyes, is so glorious that we will not allow anyone to dissuade us from reaching it. We have just over two-and-a-half months to prepare for his coming. To that end, I propose that the United Nations take the helm as the

new global government, to oversee the clearing of the Temple Mount and the organization of the global government which will be handed over to our new Prime Minister upon his arrival. I offer myself as an adviser to this new government if they will have me. Having seen so much of what is to come, I feel I have much to offer in directing our course."

He stopped and stood still on the stage, pondering whether to continue. After a moment, he put his hands in his pockets and began again.

"I have given you much to ponder already, so I will leave you with this and ask that you waste no time in acting. I know that many will want to ask me questions about what I have seen, but I must rest. I have had an eventful twenty-nine hours, to say the least."

He smiled and chuckled a little.

"I will offer an interview to the AP two days from now. I ask you to direct your questions through them. We all have much to do, and no time to waste on idle multiplication of words. Thank you."

He turned and walked off the stage. The television newscast returned to the reporter, who was clearly speechless. She seemed to be on the edge of a mild panic attack, and looked around as if for an escape. The newscast quickly switched to a replay of the speech that had just been recorded.

Father Marco stopped his pacing, turned off the television, and walked out the door. His mind was

consumed as he remembered quotes from the speech and cross-referenced them to the research he had been doing over the last few years. He was almost entirely oblivious to his surroundings as he walked to the chapel.

VI. Shepherds

October 20, 2011, 11:22am

Father Marco pulled his phone out of his pocket and loaded the Google News website. He glanced at the time again, wondering why it was taking so long for him to be invited into the assembly area. One of the first links in his news feed was an article about this very meeting of almost all of the United States Catholic Bishops, who were gathered to discuss their options in handling the reactions by the faithful to the event that occurred only four days prior. He skimmed the headlines as he scrolled down to his section on Ray Kurzweil. The first link was to an Associated Press article which confirmed that things were already moving quickly.

'Nicholas Sarkozy elected Prime Minister of newly formed Global Council of Nations', read the headline. Father Marco clicked the link, waited for it to load, and skimmed the article, focusing on the lines that most grabbed his attention. 'Nicholas Sarkozy, president of France, was today elected as the temporary Prime Minister of the newly formed Global Council of Nations and granted emergency powers so that he would be free to fast track the organization of participating nations into regional provinces. His first act as Prime Minister was to establish the Chief Counselor position, which answers directly to the Prime Minister, naming Ray

Kurzweil to fill the position until formal elections are held in early 2012.'

Father Marco was interrupted from the article by the opening of the door to the assembly area. A priest in clerics poked his head through the opened door and motioned for him to enter. Father Marco silenced his phone and slid it into his pocket as he made his way into the room. Upon entering, he looked around the room to see that there were a number of large conference tables, each surrounded by bishops in their rose-colored caps, with a podium at the head of the room. The priest motioned him towards the podium with a sweep of his arm, and Father Marco made his way around the room to it. He adjusted the microphone and looked around at each group of bishops, taking mental note of those he personally knew.

"Your Excellencies," he began with a bow of his head towards the crowd, "I am honored to be among you today to share my own estimation of the crisis at hand. As you know, Archbishop Alfred Hughes invited me to speak to you today. I am Father Marco Calafati, priest of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, Louisiana. I have been teaching the World Religions classes at the University of New Orleans for the past five years and am working under a research grant to study the effects of purported extraterrestrial encounters and myths on the popular culture at large. I have been assigned to the parish attached to the Blessed Seelos Shrine for just over a year. It was at the Blessed Seelos Shrine that I met Archbishop

Hughes, who has been there often since his retirement."

He paused and looked around the room again to gauge whether the bishops were responding positively or negatively to him. *~Hmmm, tough crowd.~*

"I am sure there has been some lively debate today as to whether or not this is the time of merely another antichrist, or the time of *the* Antichrist. I believe it is the latter, for reasons I will now explain. In my research over the last five years, I have been paying close attention to current events and popular culture and how they are affected by reports of UFO sightings, alien abductions, and alien mythology presented in various entertainment media. Tangential to my grant research, I have been studying the response to these events by governments throughout the world and analyzing trends to determine when the governments may actually be the ones responsible for these events. With that knowledge, nothing that has transpired in the past week has entirely surprised me. I was expecting almost all of it. All the signs were there before our eyes and have been growing in number and intensity right up to the point of the arrival of the UFO."

A hand raised in the audience and Father Marco turned to see a bishop he did not recognize waiting patiently to be addressed.

"Yes, Your Excellency?"

"If you were so sure of this coming to pass, why are you only now bringing this information to our attentions?"

"Had I received any visions or locutions to lead me to the predictions I was forming, I would have brought them to the attention of my local bishop, Archbishop Aymond. However, it was purely through common sense and observation that I was able to piece this all together and I wanted to be cautious not to presume too much on my own abilities. I had been planning to request an audience with you all later in the year to share my findings, but I thought I had a little more time. The one place the enemy caught me by surprise was the time of the arrival. I had figured out the inclusion of the Mayan calendar in this whole scenario through my UFO research. I had expected the supposed first contact to occur at the end of the Mayan calendar. I did not consider the possibility that the enemy would rush events to the point of using the end of the Mayan calendar as the day to complete the establishment of the deception rather than to begin it. I also had not anticipated the use of a false Jesus. Following the thought of the early Fathers of the Church, I had expected one of Jewish descent, and was too busy evaluating possible candidates from among the world scene to give a lot of thought to this option. Aside from these two surprises, everything else seems to be pretty close to what I had pieced together."

Father Marco paused and looked around the room, seeing confusion on several of the faces. Another hand raised in the back of the room.

"Yes, Your Excellency?"

Archbishop O'Malley of Boston rose to ask his question. "So who do you think this false Jesus is and why is he a necessary part of this scheme?" He returned to his seat.

"It is difficult to tell at this point who they have chosen, but, surely, they know that people will demand proof of these claims at some point. The only proof anyone would accept at face value in today's world is DNA evidence, which has become exceedingly difficult to fake. So, I am inclined to believe that they must have used DNA from the Shroud of Turin or one of the Eucharistic miracles that has been tested to actually create a clone of Christ."

Father Marco stopped as he was interrupted by a mix of reactions. He glanced around the room and noticed everything from shocked gasps to ridiculing laughter. Clearly, the bishops were not all of one mind as to the situation that was unfolding in the world.

"I'm sorry... we've gotten a little off track. Let me simply portray the chain of events I expect to happen based on my research. I have often pondered Christ's words, 'When the son of man comes again, will he find faith on earth?' I have wracked my brain considering what kinds of

deception could be so convincing and complete that it could lead enough people astray as to cause Christ to suggest there will be almost no faith left on earth as a result. As the unfolding of the UFO mythology became clearer and clearer over the last decade, with a definable end game coming into view, I realized that UFOs would somehow play a part in it. There was one difficulty, though. Desmond Birch's book, 'Trial, Tribulation, and Triumph,' presents the most likely chain of events I have found in regard to the end times, as it is largely based on the tradition of the Church Fathers. I had used it for years as the basis of my research. As I began to suspect that the UFO deception would play a part in the enemy's plan, I was having a difficult time seeing how it could fit into his predictions. In the last year or two, it became clear that the essential elements of his predictions were already in place and were beginning to cross paths with the growing UFO mythology."

Father Marco paused, realizing he was headed off track again, and focused his thoughts for a moment before continuing.

"He predicted a global war with radical Islam that would begin in France and then Italy, quickly spreading everywhere. This is to be the final conflict of radical Islam and Western culture. Surely you are aware that, for the past several years, France and Italy have become the hot spots for Muslim discontent, being the first nations to ban traditional Muslim female attire, and making the first steps

towards a more complete effort to force integration of Muslims into Western culture. The Muslim population across the globe has grown dramatically in the past few decades, and now comprises the majority in some nations that historically had very small, and even nonexistent, Muslim populations."

Father Marco noticed a bishop at the closest table check his watch and glance around distractedly. *~Better focus on the important stuff before I lose them.~*

"The pronouncement earlier in the week by Ray Kurzweil has sent many radical Muslims into an absolute frenzy. I have seen many sources already stating that even moderate Muslims are becoming enraged and calling this a plot of Israel, Europe, and the United States. President Ahmadinejad of Iran has announced a press conference for the Muslims of the world which will take place this Friday. I fully expect that he will claim to be the twelfth Imam and will incite global Jihad. Nicholas Sarkozy, under whom the cultural war against Islam in France began, has been named the Prime Minister of the newly formed Global Council of Nations, so it makes sense that they will strike first in France in retaliation against the leader of their new enemy. The Muslims in Italy are already fairly mobilized and will be quick to follow the lead. It will spread rapidly across Europe. If Desmond Birch is right, the pope, who is now in hiding in Germany, will be killed there when the chaos spreads. I think the only reason Ahmadinejad has waited until later this week

for his press conference is to buy more time for his spies to try and locate the pope. Personally, I believe this also fits into the prophecies of Saint Malachy, and that the next pope will be the last. As I said before, I believe that this Jesus who Ray Kurzweil claims will appear at Christmas is, in fact, a clone created by DNA from the Shroud of Turin and that he has been possessed by Satan himself... the enemy's own mockery of the incarnation... *the* Antichrist. He will begin his persecution of Christians, which will be the final persecution, in which, as the Catechism says, "The Church will follow her Lord in his death and resurrection."

At this, several hands raised throughout the room, but Father Marco continued without stopping, realizing he was already losing the attention of those who did not believe his claims.

"This does leave some unanswered questions, I know. What of the Jews? Aren't we to expect the grafting of the olive branch back onto the tree before the end? I tell you it is coming. You heard the words of the false prophet. He specifically referenced the coming impersonator as the awaited messiah. The preaching of the truth by the faithful throughout the events to come will cause the faithful Jews that remain to be converted to the Church and to be martyred with us. Part of what will convince them of this is that we will expose the truth of who is behind the establishment of the coming regime. The government of Israel, through its global influence and advanced technology has created these UFOs

and inserted themselves into leadership positions in all forms of modern media to propagate the UFO mythology and its supposed ties to ancient religions. Those who do this are not God's true people. God's Israel is no more. The current Israel has been hijacked by the enemy to drive his deception forward."

"Ironically, I have no doubt that the use of Israel as the center of all this was meant to persuade the remaining Jews that this is the promised messiah, but it will backfire, leading to a mass conversion of the faithful Jews who remain. There is a great deal of debate as to whether Enoch and Elijah will truly return to preach to them, and I think that may also play a part. However, I believe that our preaching alone will be enough to persuade the pure of heart."

He paused to observe the reactions in the room. Some nodded their heads knowingly. Many, however, had expressions of anger or mockery. It was clear that far fewer of the bishops agreed with his assessment of the situation than he had hoped. Father Marco's heart sank a little. *~If the shepherds are scattered, what will become of the sheep?~* He had hoped that all those gathered would be wise enough to see the reality of what was happening and be emboldened by this threat to make a last united stand for the truth, but it was clear now that few would believe him. The rest had already lost their faith and were looking forward to the new world

promised by their false prophet. Father Marco felt his temper rising.

"Those of you who see through the lies that are being presented to us have a mission to save as many as you can before you die for your faith. I hope the rest of you enjoy your thirty pieces of silver while you still can."

With that he turned from the podium and stormed out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him. As he walked out into the hallway, he paused and leaned against the wall. He was feeling dizzy and short of breath. His heart ached for those who had already betrayed their Lord.

"Jesus," he whispered, "if there is so much darkness already drowning out the light, how black will the darkness be before the dawn?"

Immediately, his mind pictured the entrance of the Paschal candle into the dark church at the Easter Vigil... that one small light piercing through and promising that the True Light will never be extinguished. He took a deep breath and began again to put one foot in front of the other. *~Pull yourself together Marco, there is much to do, and little time left to do it.~*

VII. Jihad

October 22, 2011, 9:17am

"You caused quite a stir the other day with your denouncement," Archbishop Hughes said with a mischievous smile.

"I didn't plan to turn over tables, but my anger got the best of me," Father Marco replied with a sigh. "I had hoped that only the faithful bishops would be there. Why did they come at all if they have already accepted this myth?"

They walked along in silence for a moment as they pondered this question. The morning sun gleamed off the Archbishop's glasses, pectoral cross, and the grey hairs showing from around the edges of his rose-colored cap. The two men in their priestly clerics stood out abruptly from the lightly-clad crowds of people making their way through the streets in the New Orleans heat.

The Archbishop nodded with a smile at someone sitting on the bench along the sidewalk as they walked by before answering. "I think some of them were hoping you would convince them. Their hearts wanted to believe, but their heads are in the way. Your call to martyrdom was probably what made up the minds of everyone present more than the predictions you laid out. Those who are prepared to die for the Faith became firmly resolved.

Those who are afraid probably decided then and there that they could do more good, as they reckon it, alive than dead."

"If the shepherds are scattered, what will become of the sheep?" Father Marco asked with a hint of desperation in his voice.

Archbishop Hughes stopped walking and turned to look at him. "Marco, I have been among the people of this diocese for long enough to know that the lay people are often stronger in their faith than many of us in the clergy. Sure, those of weak faith will fail this test, but I have met the most amazing saints, people whose ordinary lives are inspiring their pastors to a renewal of faith and fervor. No, the lay people are no worse off in this than the clergy except for the fact that they will endure this cross longer than we will before facing the choice for martyrdom."

"Hmm," was Father Marco's only reply as they continued their stroll into the Riverwalk mall. They walked for several minutes in silence, each lost in his own thoughts before the Archbishop broke the silence again.

"I think I am in the mood for fried alligator tail today," he said with a smile as they arrived in the food court area.

Father Marco chuckled. "Well, I'm glad at least one of us still has the presence of mind to consider such simple necessities as lunch."

"As your spiritual director, I must insist that you read 'The Abandonment to Divine Providence' again before you waste any more time on the news," the Archbishop replied.

"As you wish," Father Marco retorted, assuming the Archbishop did not recognize the reference.

"Are you calling me Princess Buttercup?" the Archbishop asked with a chuckle.

"No, of course not, I just have a bad habit of quoting movies and songs whenever I make a snarky reply to anything. Please forgive the unintended connection," he finished with a smile and slight bow at the waist.

His smile quickly turned to a look of fear as the entire mall shook and the sound of a loud and distant explosion reverberated throughout the building. "I'll meet you out on the street," Father Marco yelled back to the Archbishop as he took off running through the mall. As he passed through, he saw hundreds of people looking around wildly in fear, wondering if they were in danger. Some looked at him with suspicious glances, wondering if he was somehow involved in whatever was going on.

~*The cathedral*,~ he thought to himself as he sprinted through the long building and out onto the sidewalk. He looked over in the direction of it, only to have his fear confirmed by a large, black plume of smoke rising into the blue sky. He continued running, following the old train tracks toward the

Jackson Brewery. As he finally got past it and could see the cathedral clearly, he gasped and slowed to a walk. The front of the church was missing and the steeple lay in a pile on the sidewalk. He saw people scrambling to pull bodies out of the rubble.

One of the ladies who normally ran a palm reading booth on the sidewalk in front of the cathedral was bouncing back and forth, yelling loudly and wildly like some sort of crazed prophet, "They comin' for you. They comin' for all you. The dark night is about to begin. The spirit of death walks among us!"

Father Marco turned up the side street alongside the garden, but stopped short when he noticed something that grabbed his attention on one of the televisions in the restaurant he was passing. He walked into the restaurant, his eyes glued to the screen. He could not hear the sound over the noise of the people discussing what had happened. He grabbed a chair and moved it under the television, then hopped onto it and turned up the volume until he could hear it over the crowd.

He was watching a scene of police trying to maintain order around what appeared to be the fallen remains of the Eiffel Tower. A female reporter's voice came in with an explanation, "What you are witnessing is the scene of police and emergency workers trying to clear people away from the vicinity for fear that there may be more explosives yet to detonate. For those just joining us, the Eiffel Tower has fallen after several explosions

went off on and around it only minutes ago. We are receiving breaking news reports that explosions have also damaged several of the churches throughout Paris. The extent of the damage is unknown at this point. These explosions went off almost immediately following the press conference that President Ahmadinejad of Iran gave in which he called for all true Muslims to join him in fighting what he called 'The Great Satan' in order to usher in a global nation of Islam. These attacks in Paris were apparently planned to coincide with his call to arms."

The video on screen changed to show the female reporter sitting at her desk. She was swiping the screen of a tablet computer in front of her, apparently reading quickly through some breaking news that was being pushed to her screen. Father Marco noticed her expression change to one of fear and the color seemed to drain from her face.

"God help us," she muttered before looking up at the camera. "We are receiving more reports now that similar attacks have occurred throughout all of Europe and America, although most of them seem to be from France and Italy. It is reported that Saint John Lateran Church, which many people know simply as the Vatican, has been completely destroyed."

She glanced back down at the tablet for a moment.

"It appears the pope was not harmed in the attack as he is on a personal leave at this time in an undisclosed location. We will let you know more as we receive further information."

Father Marco stepped down from the chair and turned to go out, noticing that everyone in the bar had turned to watch the news with him. As he was headed to the door, he noticed the Archbishop jogging by outside, clearly winded and struggling to continue. Father Marco ran through the door and grabbed his arm, pulling him back into the restaurant.

"Wait, we don't know yet if it is safe. There may be people looking for us. Let's just wait for the cops to surround the area before we take any chances."

The Archbishop was too breathless to argue, so they sat down at a table near the window where they could see what was going on outside the ruined cathedral.

"Dark days!" the palm reader continued to scream. "The angel of death is among us! He's comin' for you. He's comin' for you!"

VIII. Chaos

October 28, 2011, 10:20am

Father Marco put his phone back into his pocket and looked both ways down the street and along the sidewalks, scanning the faces quickly. He had never known Archbishop Hughes to be late to anything, much less twenty minutes late. He turned and looked back at the entrance of the hotel, considering whether to go into the meeting of bishops alone despite not having been invited. It still seemed odd to him that they were meeting in a hotel rather than the archdiocesan offices. He chuckled. *~Like the apostles before Pentecost, hiding away in the upper room for fear of what will happen to them.~*

He sighed, though, as he recalled the numerous attacks on Christian religious facilities throughout the past week across the world, especially in the United States. *~I guess they have reason to fear, but....~* He broke his thought mid-sentence as he noticed three men with large duffel bags enter the hotel across the street. They were hard not to notice in their ridiculous-looking attempt at putting together street thug attire. They looked like wanna-be gangsters with their unlaced basketball shoes, jeans with one pants leg rolled up to the knee, and bandana hanging around their necks like something out of a wild west film. The most striking part of the scene was that the men were clearly middle-

easterners, and he had never seen middle-eastern street thugs before.

He looked both ways down the street to be sure there were no cars coming, then crossed the street and followed them into the hotel. As he entered the lobby, the elevator doors were closing and he caught a glimpse of them at the last second. He watched the numbers above the elevator to see where it stopped. ~*Third floor. I better hurry.*~

He turned to look at the lady behind the front desk and yelled, "Quick, call the cops, something is about to happen on the third floor!" He then sprinted to the stairwell and began running up the stairs, saying the Saint Michael prayer the whole way.

As he came out into the hallway of the third floor, he could see that there was a hall across from the elevator. He ran up to the edge of the wall and stopped, then peeked around the corner to see into the hall quickly before jerking his head back behind the wall. The world seemed to slow down around him as he processed what he had just seen. The three men were walking out onto a balcony that overlooked the street, carrying rocket launchers. "Oh Jesus, the bishops!" he whispered, his mind racing, trying to decide what to do. He noticed a brass table lamp on a small table next to the elevator entrance. He grabbed it, holding it like a giant club, and turned to run after the men, still not sure what he would do when he caught up to them. He watched the men raise the rocket launchers to their shoulders

to fire at the building across the street. He was halfway to the men when he saw the explosion rise up from the other building, followed quickly by the loud booms. The men stuck the launchers back into their bags, then jumped over the balcony just as he was reaching for the door with his free hand. As he reached the wall of the balcony, he leaned over to see what had happened to them. They were lying on piles of bags in the back of a garbage truck that had apparently driven onto the sidewalk just under the balcony right after he entered the building. He was trying to get a good look at the truck and the men and failed to realize they had drawn pistols and were looking back at him. Father Marco made eye contact with one of the men as he realized the man was aiming a pistol at him. Before he could react, he felt himself knocked back onto the balcony floor and felt the sharp pain of his head hitting the tiles. He lay there for a second, confused, before realizing there was a stinging pain in his right shoulder. He tried to move his arm and stopped, screaming out loudly in pain. He suddenly felt very cold, and could feel sweat beads forming on his forehead and running down his face. Everything was fading to white. Scared, he tried again to lift himself up off the ground, but felt dizzy and light-headed. Everything was turning white.

He lay back down, closed his eyes, and listened. There was a growing ringing in his ears, but, through it, he could hear a voice just above him.

"Father, are you okay? Can you hear me? Father?"

He felt cold and afraid. "Jesus, save me," he whispered as everything faded away.

IX. Awakening

November 16, 2011, 10:11pm

Father Marco opened his eyes slowly and looked around at the unfamiliar surroundings. He felt weak, the way one does after a flu, as if he had been in bed for days.

~Bed, yes, I am in a hospital bed.~ Suddenly, the memory of being shot rushed back to his mind. He remembered passing out, but nothing after that. Remembering his wound, he tried to move his right arm lightly. It felt like it was strapped to his side somehow. His shoulder throbbed with a dull ache, and he realized his collar bone was the source of the pain.

"Can you send the doctor in?" he heard a female voice ask near him in the room. She walked around to the foot of the bed, grabbed his chart, made some notes, then exited the room without ever looking at him.

He felt around with his left hand on the bedside to locate the television remote and found that it had been left right next to him so that it would be easy to find when he woke. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath as the room began to spin. He realized his head had a feeling of pressure throughout, as if a migraine was about to set in. He set the remote down and rubbed his eyes to clear them. He felt

very queasy. He could feel his mouth drying up and knew that he was going to vomit. He looked around and found that someone had anticipated his need, as there was a vomit pan resting in his lap. He lifted it just in time as the first wave came. With each heave, his collar bone stung with a sharp, stabbing pain, causing him to cry out as soon as he could breathe again.

When it had all passed, he breathed a deep sigh of release and lay back in the bed.

"Nurse," he heard a man call from the door of the room. After a moment, he felt the pan lifted from his lap and someone wiped his face with a cool, wet rag. He opened his eyes to see the nurse pushing the food tray over the bed and setting a styrofoam cup of something onto it. She set a fresh vomit pan in the bed by his good arm and turned to leave with the used one.

"It's good to see you moving around," the man began as he entered the room and stood by the bedside. Father Marco noticed that it was a doctor in the usual white coat, with a stethoscope hanging around his neck. He was an older man, with grey hair, mustache, and beard. He reminded Father Marco of his childhood doctor.

"I feel like I'd rather still be sleeping," he replied to the doctor.

"Most people do after what you have been through...." He paused, looking back at the door to make sure it was closed and then looked to the wall

behind Father Marco to be sure the microphone was off. "Father," he continued, "I'm sure you have a lot of questions, but if you will hold them until the end, I will give you a quick synopsis."

"Fair enough," Father Marco replied, grimacing as he settled himself more comfortably in the bed.

"As far as I can tell, one of the men who fired the rockets into the hotel fired a shot at you and hit you in the collar bone. It seems the bullet caught the top edge of the bone, knocking a marble-sized chunk right out of the bone. From there, the bullet must have ricocheted upwards, which spared you further injury. Unfortunately, we did not find the missing piece, so your collar bone is now only about half as thick as it should be in that spot. It is also broken in two at that spot. It's starting to mend, now that it has had three weeks to heal, but..."

"Three weeks?" Father Marco asked in a shocked tone.

"You agreed to save your questions, so let me finish. Apparently, the pain from the injury and the knock you took on your head in the fall sent you into shock, because you were unconscious when the paramedics arrived. They were smart enough to realize it was a clean break, and that it hadn't been separated, so they immediately gave you anesthesia to prevent you from coming out of your shock and flailing around, which could have caused more damage. When we received you here at the hospital, we were able to get you splinted up enough to

ensure the bone would stay together and heal quickly. You never actually woke from the anesthesia, though, and you have been in a coma for three weeks now. It's the darndest thing. I have never seen anything quite like it in my forty years. Someone in your excellent health should have fared better. Anyway, go ahead with some questions before I catch you up on what's happening with the rest of the world."

"I don't really have any questions, I guess, except about your next topic. Well, actually.... I am an organic naturalist who uses homeopathic and herbal remedies. I haven't had a pharmaceutical, preservative, or chemical in my body in over twelve years. Do you think my coma might have been a reaction to the chemicals?"

"Actually, no, we get your kind in all the time and they do just fine. To be honest, I think it was a miracle."

"Huh, that's a funny kind of miracle if you ask me," Father Marco replied in a sarcastic tone.

"Well, you haven't heard the second part of my report. I think you'll change your tune when you do."

Father Marco closed his eyes with a sigh. "Okay, go ahead."

"I think it was a miracle because you might not be alive if you had been back at your parish. Actually, you almost certainly would not be alive. The attack on the bishops you witnessed was just

one of many strikes that the Islamic extremists have made against Catholic clergy. And yes, many have been killed. Those who are still alive are mostly in hiding. Your parish rectory was blown up last week. The other priest there and all the employees died. It has gotten crazy. I have done what I can to make sure that no one here at this hospital knows you are a priest, so you should be safe. Now that you are out of your coma, I will do what I can to make sure you stay admitted as long as you want to stay so that you can remain safe."

"Father...," the doctor continued with a sigh, "the whole world is falling apart around us. Counselor Kurzweil recommended a retaliation against Islamists, and Prime Minister Sarkozy pushed it through within the hour. The militaries of the world are now out in full force on the streets of every nation, shooting to kill. It has caused complete global chaos. Even the regular Muslims started to join the side of the extremists, causing the civil wars to escalate. It is starting to wind down now. Most of the mosques have been destroyed by military air strikes. The troops are sweeping the neighborhoods to find the final pockets of resistance. The death toll is staggering. We haven't seen anything like this since the holocaust. The Prime Minister says order should be established by next week at the latest. The odd thing is, they weren't intervening when the Muslims were just attacking Catholic clergy. It was when they started attacking government buildings that the troops were deployed. So, Father, I wouldn't assume that you will be safe when the Muslim threat

has been removed. Let's face it, the Catholic Church cannot peacefully coexist with this new religion that is rising up around the Anunnaki, as they are calling them. I expect that we will be next on their hit lists unless we keep our mouths shut."

Father Marco opened his eyes and looked at the doctor, who pulled a crucifix up out from under his outfit to show. The doctor looked down at it for a moment before putting it back within his shirt. "Father, do you believe this is the time of the Antichrist?"

"Is the pope Catholic?" he asked with a little chuckle. Then, after an awkward silence, he apologized, "sorry, I guess this isn't a time for humor."

"That's okay. When you are feeling better, will you hear my confession?"

"Of course."

"Thank you. I better get going before the nurse comes along and hears us talking about this. It will be hard to keep your true identity secret if I keep running my mouth. Father, I know you will want to watch the news to see all this for yourself, but, you just came out of a coma... please don't put yourself right back into it just yet. Get some sleep and save it for the morning. Good evening, and God bless."

"You too, doc. Thanks for everything."

The doctor smiled a sad and knowing smile at him, then turned to go. Father Marco hit the button to call the nurse's station.

"May I help you?" a female voice came back over the speaker.

"More pain medicine please."

"We'll be right there Mister Calafati."

Father Marco sighed. He couldn't remember the last time someone called him mister.

X. Prophecy

November 17, 2011, 8:09am

Father Marco looked around the room, checking to see if his cellphone was nearby. He tried leaning up on his left elbow to get a better view, but was having a hard time of it with his arm still strapped to his side.

"Good morning. Looking for something?" came a voice from the door as a female nurse entered the room.

"Well, I was looking to see if my phone was laying around here somewhere, but I'm just realizing the battery is going to be dead after three weeks."

"Actually, it's right over here and fully charged." She walked across the room and picked his phone up, unplugging it before bringing it to him.

"Plugged in? Who did that?"

"I have no idea. I noticed it sitting there plugged in last week when I started my shift. Before that, it had been in the drawer of the nightstand." She turned it on before handing it to him. "Just so you know, it's working now while you are here because we have our own mini-tower at the hospital. When you leave, though, coverage will be a

problem. The Islamists have been using sat phones, so they started blowing up cell towers to reduce everyone else's ability to report them. About half of the towers in the area are down, and they've been working on them non-stop for days. I'm guessing no one knows you are here because I haven't seen any visitors during the morning shift and the nurses from the evening shift say they haven't seen any either."

"Thanks for the info," he replied as he took the phone from her and started checking the notifications. They were all from Thomas, except one that was from an unfamiliar number six days prior. It was a text message reading, 'text me when you wake up'.

"You say it was last week when you noticed the phone on charge. Does six days ago sound about right?"

The nurse stopped writing on Father Marco's chart and began to think back, counting days in her head. "Yeah, maybe, I can't remember exactly." She returned to jotting her notes.

~The man with no name... he must have found me,~ Father Marco thought. He hit the reply button and began to type. 'have had a nice nap, come see me.' He tapped the send button and put the phone to sleep, laying it in his lap.

"How's the pain today?" the nurse asked.

"Down to a dull ache. When do I get my arm out of this contraption?"

"Well, now that you are out of the coma, we can give you some X-rays and then we'll be able to answer that question. It might still be a while, though. You only have half the bone mass at the point of the break, so the doctor is going to want to make sure it is fully healed before he lets you start moving around. It would be real easy to snap it again."

"Well, I'm not planning to play volleyball or anything, but it would be nice to use a computer. I'll be curious to watch the news for the next few days to get caught up on what is going on in the world, but that will get old fast."

"That's going to be a problem."

"What?" Father Marco asked, almost sitting up in his bed.

"We have cable tv here and the lines got damaged around the corner or something. Time Warner says they'll be back up in a few more days. Do you want me to bring you the old newspapers from the last few days?"

Father Marco sighed. "I guess that will have to do. Thank you."

10:34am

Father Marco fumbled with the page, trying to hold it up from the top so that his arm would not be in the way of his view.

He heard a laugh by the door, and turned to see his mysterious informer, the man who had obtained the Mossad documents, standing there with a grin on his now clean-shaven face. He was wearing his usual attire of a black turtleneck, black dress slacks, and black leather trench coat. He was holding a black fedora hat in his hands. His green eyes gleamed as always, as if lit by some inner light. Without the beard he had grown in his previous disguise, his sharp jaw line and cheek bones stood out clearly, making him look almost like he had been chiseled out of stone.

"That is really a rather amusing sight," the man called out as he walked into the room. "Why don't you ask them to tape it to something and prop it over you?"

"Good idea. I'm still not thinking very clearly. So, what has brought you back into this adventure?" Father Marco asked as he set the paper down onto the television tray that was positioned over his lap.

"Indeed... what has brought me back? I am still asking myself for the answer to that riddle. I guess you could say I was intrigued at seeing all your predictions more or less coming true, though in some ways that have surprised even you, I presume?"

"Yes, Mister Kurzweil has certainly made this game more complex than I expected it to be. Was that you that plugged my phone in last week?"

"Of course. You're surprised that I found you?"

"Not really... only that it took you so long."

"You have a kindly doctor to thank for that... one who clearly perceives the danger you are in. He has left no discernible paper trail that I could locate. Fortunately for yourself, you were obscure enough in your duties to your church that no one outside it seems to know who Marco Calafati is. You will be safe here until the present danger passes." The man looked around the room, seemingly examining it for any signs of surveillance or anything out of place.

"Let me guess," Father Marco interrupted his inspection, "I guess you want to know what happens next? You didn't seem very interested the first time we discussed these matters, so I only gave a brief overview of the first stages. I actually did that on purpose. I figured that if you were the kind of man who could decide to get involved, you would come looking for me, wanting to know more. If not, then you would just ignore it and continue your plots and schemes as if nothing had changed. So, I presume you want to get involved?"

The man smiled at him with a look of respectful admiration. "Well read, Father. Before you answer my nagging riddles, though, I suppose I should first bring you up-to-date on what has passed during your little nap. You will need to know where we are

in the chain of events before you can tell the rest of the story. And perhaps there may need to be some slight adjustments to your calculations based on the current state of things. Shall I begin?"

"Then you believe me?"

"Well, I can only say that you have predicted the future accurately enough to get my attention. Whether I believe the whole tale, I cannot yet say."

"Fair enough. Go on then."

"As you know, Ahmadinejad's reaction to the appearance of the ufo was to claim that he is the twelfth Imam, and that the time is now for Islam to rise against the infidels, to make the world Allah's. As you predicted, their attacks began in France, followed immediately in Italy, and then began to spread across the globe as more Muslims took his claims seriously. As you predicted, a leader from France rose to power, uniting all of Europe under his leadership to retaliate against the attacks. I think that brings us up to the time of your coma, does it not?"

"Yes."

"Since then, all of the world, except the Islamic nations, have joined the Global Council of Nations, and your prediction has come true that this leader from France would wipe out Islam. In the past few days, swift progress has been made in stamping out the Islamic attacks. They are calling it World War III, and the death tolls on both sides have been staggering. There is very little resistance left now,

though, and those that remain are being hunted down. With their last efforts, they are attacking every Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish building they can find. Apparently, Ahmadinejad believes that if they wipe out the three religions, Muhammed himself will come down to lead the final assault, allowing them to grasp victory from the jaws of defeat. Just yesterday, the Council elected to send squadrons of bombers to the Islamic countries to finish them off once and for all. They are giving time for any who will reject the Islamic regime to flee to Europe. In three days, the attack will commence. Most of the remaining Muslims in Europe are flocking to Iran, stubbornly believing that they will be saved by Allah. So, your prediction that Islam would be wiped out by the French leader has all but come to pass. I believe you told me, 'when Islam is no more and the world seems to be at peace, ask me what will happen next and I will be happy to tell you.' So, here I am, and I believe it is now your turn."

"Hmmm, well, I had not expected the Islamists to directly target Christians and Jews in such a way as to try and stop them from worshipping. I had expected it to be more general. How far have they gone?"

"Well, there are still priests alive, but they are in a shortage. In fact, the church has given a dispensation to relax the Sunday obligation for attending mass because there are many places where people cannot go to mass at all. Those who can go

still do, and the churches are filled to overflowing every time there is a mass. The new pope has made many allowances since this all began."

"New pope? Of course. Pope Benedict was killed in Germany, was he not?"

"You are correct again."

"Has the new pope chosen the name Peter the Roman?"

"Yes. Why does that matter?"

"It proves that he believes in the prophecies of Saint Malachy, which ascribe that name to the last pope, the one who will face the persecution of the Antichrist. Has Sarkozy converted? Is the pope acting as his spiritual guide?"

"No. Sarkozy asked him to renounce the faith and become his right hand man in order to help transition Christians into the new reality, as they are calling it, but the pope refused."

"Hmmm. So it seems some things have turned out slightly differently. No doubt because of the Anunnaki myth." Father Marco stared out the window blankly, pondering how all the threads of this tale were intertwined in light of the events that were passing.

After a long moment of silence, he continued. "What happens from here is really quite simple. There will be peace across the globe after this final strike on Islam. It will last until the Antichrist comes on Christmas. He will ask all peoples to put aside

their former religions. He will give them a period of time to comply, then he will begin killing off the remaining ordained ministers of the Catholic and Orthodox churches who refuse to renounce their priesthood. As the numbers dwindle, he will plead with the lay faithful to renounce their Christianity and accept the Anunnaki as our creators so that they can usher us into a new enlightenment. He will reach a point at last when he no longer tolerates dissent, and the final persecution will begin. Somewhere in the midst of all this, something will happen that will convince practicing Jews that the true Christ was indeed the messiah, and there will be a mass conversion of Jews to Catholicism."

"Practicing Jews?" the man asked.

"Yes, meaning those who still observe the Jewish faith and traditions as opposed to those who are of Jewish descent but no longer hold to their faith. After their conversion, the persecution will continue until Christ comes again."

He paused and continued to ponder other details that might yet come to pass. After more than a minute, the man finally spoke up again.

"What of this one who claims he is Jesus? You call him the Antichrist, but where would you claim that he is from?"

"I suspect he was cloned from the DNA on the Shroud of Turin and that, being without a soul, he was a perfect vessel for Satan to fully possess as the

Antichrist. What greater mockery of the Incarnation could he have conceived?"

"I see." The man leaned back and propped his arm onto the arm rest of the chair, resting his chin in his hand. Several minutes of silence passed as both men pondered what had been spoken.

"Well," the man finally broke the silence, "I told you that I was not yet sure if I believed and that I was yet only curious as to what else you had to say of the coming events. I must say, this is all very hard to swallow, even though what you predict seems as if it could follow from what has so far come to pass. I still cannot say that I am ready to believe such things. I still cannot say that I am even convinced that your God is real. If what you have spoken all comes to pass, though, I suppose there will be no other logical conclusion to be made. If you are right, I only hope I live long enough to snatch heaven at the last moment like the good thief."

"Will it really take that much before you accept? You sound as if your heart is ready to believe. It is your mind that is in the way."

"Perhaps you are right, Father. We shall see. But what now of you? What will you do when you are free to leave the hospital?"

"I have no idea. I can only trust to the Spirit to lead me day by day. I suspect I will travel around and seek out the believers that remain, offering them mass, hope, and counsel to face their martyrdoms with courage and faithfulness. Eventually, the

persecutors will find me, and then I shall face my own martyrdom. And what of you? There won't be much demand for your kind of work anymore."

"I have means to last me through all this, and enough safe places to stay out of harm's way. I suspect that I will have no problem staying alive through it all, and that I will have my last moment to decide whether or not I have come to believe you and your god."

"I am certain that you will be more involved than that before all is done," said Father Marco with a knowing grin. "But have it your way."

"We shall see. Speaking of safe places, I should probably be going now, as I have many preparations to make. I wish you the best. I don't suppose we shall meet again, unless there really is an afterlife and we both end up there. Is there anything else you need before I depart?"

"No, but thank you for offering. May God bless and keep you until we meet again."

The man turned to go, and spoke over his shoulder as he went, "As I said, we shall see."

Part II - Resurrection

XI. The Messiah

December 24, 2011, 11:40pm

The man with no name walked slowly through the crowd, scanning faces as discreetly as possible. He had been roaming the streets of Jerusalem all afternoon and night. He pulled out his phone again, and started a text message to Father Marco's number. 'are you here? if you spot me, you can call me John. I will be listening for your call.' After sending it, he put his phone back into his pocket and looked around for anyone who might be staring down at a phone.

~Surely he is here somewhere,~ he thought. ~I can't believe he would not be here to witness firsthand the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah. How strange that even those of no previous religious persuasion are calling him this. The hope in these expectant faces. Has such hope been seen since Christ entered this city on palm branches two thousand years ago?~

John stopped outside a shop to look at the television through the window. He could see a reporter up on a rooftop somewhere, with these crowds in the background, crawling like ants over the entire city. The caption at the bottom of the screen read, 'Estimated 3.5 million'.

~That many? Can these streets even hold that many? I guess I won't be finding Father Marco after all.~

He glanced at his watch.

~Eleven forty three. I'd better get moving to a better spot.~

He made his way toward the Temple Mount. The crowds grew thicker and thicker and he began looking for flat buildings that could easily be climbed. As he turned a corner, he looked up to notice several men in Jewish yarmulkes sitting on the edge of a flat roof with their feet hanging over the edge. There was just enough room next to the one on the end for him to sit. He waved at the man, who noticed him and reached a hand down to help him up. He stepped up onto a pile of crates and grabbed the man's hand and jumped up into a seated position with the help of the man's pull.

"Thank you, brother," John spoke loudly over the crowd.

The man in the yarmulke simply nodded at him with a kindly smile then turned his attention back to the Temple Mount, where the grand mosque had been leveled and cleared to leave a wide landing flat, surrounded by spotlights. The only thing that remained from before the demolition was a black, square patch of rock set in the ground that appeared to be obsidian by the way the lights gleamed off its surface.

He checked his watch again.

~Just in time.~

He looked up and began scanning the sky above the Temple Mount. Suddenly, bells began to ring out throughout the city to mark the passing of midnight. He looked around to see that many people had also begun ringing bells that they must have been carrying in their coat pockets.

As he looked back up, he noticed a star moving across the sky. It stopped directly overhead and began to get larger. Within seconds, it had descended from an impossible height and was now clearly the glowing orb of a craft. It was the same one that had appeared in New York. It slowed its descent and settled gently down onto the landing area.

The crowd became very silent, watching and waiting. Suddenly, a song began to spread throughout the crowd, starting near the craft and growing into a wave of sound as it was picked up by more and more people. John strained to hear what they were singing at first, but it had become clear long before it reached his place in the crowd.

"Hosanna! Hosanna!" they were singing. The tune was moving and he could feel the energy of the crowd swelling around him, compelling him to join in. He was just about to begin singing when he felt a sick feeling in his stomach, as if he would vomit.

~What is this? Disgust? Embarrassment? Shame? I do not have such feelings. What is wrong with me? What are they doing? This should not be.

How dare they? Why should I care if they make him a god? I do not believe in a god, so why should I be offended?~

As he looked around the crowd, he began to feel anger at the momentary weakness growing within him. He clenched his teeth and hands, turning back to look at the craft, trying to ignore the emotions that were rising from some unknown place in his heart, a place he thought he had put to death as a young man.

A small orb rose up from the top of the craft, lifted by a pole that extended to about ten feet. The crowd went silent.

"Children of the Anunnaki," a voice spoke, the sound projected from the small orb above the craft. "You have come to witness the beginning of your transformation."

The landing ramp lowered from the craft, and a man in a white robe, with long brown hair, a beard, and facial features to match the many popular depictions of Jesus descended out of the craft to the ground below. From this distance, he appeared to John as a small glowing spec, but it was clear enough by his motions that he was the source of the voice that was being projected.

"You are the seed that shall bring the flower of peace to your race," he began again. "Tonight we break ground, here in this spot which was the place your race began, many thousands of years ago. From this spot, your race spread and subdued the

earth. Yet, this spot has become the place of so much division among you in recent centuries. You have wiped it clean of that past, and, tonight, we lay a new foundation stone of peace and tranquility. You are the first children of the new humanity and I send you forth from this spot to bring hope and the seeds of the new world that we will build together."

He moved several feet to the edge of the black rock, then knelt down and placed his right palm upon it.

"This spot is the cornerstone of your new world, and we begin rebuilding tonight."

With that, a deafening cheer rose up and quickly morphed once again into the song that the crowd had just been singing. After nearly a minute, he stood up and raised his hands to silence the crowd. When the only sound was the wind, he began again.

"Do not cry, 'Hosanna,' to me. I am merely the messenger of your creators. When they come, we will cry out 'Hosanna' together, to welcome them when they bring us the secrets of the universe and bring us into the glory of the heavens. No, merely call me by the Latin name Lux, for I come as a light into your darkness. Tonight, you all become lights yourselves, and I send you forth to spread the light of hope to all the peoples of this world. For now, though, let us rejoice, for the coming of glory is near at hand!"

With that, the crowd began to cheer again, and people took up song all throughout the crowd. Each sang his own song, though, and the cacophony of mixed tunes, languages, and words sounded like a sea of ecstatic chaos.

John felt the hair on his neck stand up and he felt a chill all over. He slipped down off the house and back onto the street below. He wrapped his coat around him as if to contain the sinking feeling in his gut. He looked around at the faces as he walked through the crowd toward the outer reaches of the old city and they filled him with an overwhelming feeling he had not experienced since mastering it as a teenager... fear.

XII. Seeds

December 28, 2011, 2:11pm

John stopped walking and backed up to the wall of the building to allow a small group to pass him unhindered on the sidewalk. Several members of the group smiled at him to show their appreciation as they went by. He forced a brief smile back at them before pulling his cellphone out of his pocket and looking down at it, pretending he was checking a message.

~What is happening to me? I can't even act enough to fake a genuine smile?~ He put the phone back into his pocket when they were gone and continued his aimless wandering. His stomach felt ill, twisted in knots by emotions he did not understand. *~How long has it been since I let feelings get such a hold over me?~*

Memories of Jamie, his middle school girlfriend came rushing from some hidden recess of his mind. He saw her face, her smile, her bright orange curls, the green t-shirt that read, 'Kiss me, I'm Irish'. He remembered words from the poem he had written her, 'If tomorrow never comes, and all our days should end, may we spend eternity, living this day again and again.' He remembered tearing it to shreds and throwing it in the trash when he saw her behind the gym with the boy from the basketball team. He remembered cutting his finger and leaving

a bloody finger print on his grandfather's grave as a pledge to never again let himself give in to emotion.

~I bind myself to death, for today, I am no more. Those were my words. So many years ago. I guess some wounds never really heal. And now, here I am again, feeling like a teenager, my emotions directing my thoughts. Why can't I shut them off now? What has changed?~

As if in answer to his question, one more memory filled his mind. He saw himself standing in his bedroom, holding the crucifix he had just taken down from the wall. He remembered saying out loud to it, "The one time I needed you, you failed me. You're not real." He remembered snapping off the arms of the body and cross one at a time and throwing them into his trash can, then snapping the rest in half over his knee and slamming it down into the can with all his might. He could still see the broken pieces, lying in disarray among the torn pieces of his picture of Jamie.

As his daydream passed, he noticed someone in front of him look up at the top of a passage, make the sign of the cross very discreetly, then pass through into the street beyond. He looked up at the capstone of the passage and read the inscription:

'SIMONI-CYRENAEO

CRUX IMPNONITUR'

~*Simon of Cyrene. Is this where you took up His cross?*~ Another flood of memories came washing over him from his childhood. He remembered the

hand-painted Stations of the Cross in the little church his mother took him to as a child and he could see clearly in his mind the image of Simon taking the cross upon his shoulders. He remembered the painting of the same scene in his little children's missal that he would take with him to Mass. He remembered how that station had been his favorite, and how he would wonder what Simon was thinking at that moment. He remembered the soldiers with their whips.

~You didn't believe either, did you? Not at first. What was it that changed your heart? Was it the look in His eyes? Was it the empathy you felt at the weight of that cross? Or was it something like what I am experiencing now? Some unknown feeling that will not go away... that gnawed at your heart and mind? Was it seeing Him spat upon, jeered at, cursed, and defiled that stirred your heart to love? Was it that love that became the fulcrum that rolled the stone from your heart?~

He looked down from the inscription and around at the streets. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

~What are these feelings? Why now? Who am I?~

As he opened his eyes, he noticed a cart roll by to his left. Out of the corner of his vision, he noticed a large crucifix, broken into several pieces that were scattered on top of a pile of garbage bags in the cart, much like the pieces of his own broken crucifix. His

heart ached as his eyes welled up with tears. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall.

~Simon, if you are real, and if you can hear me, pray for me.~ He let out a deep sigh, and felt a feeling of relaxed peace come over him and clear away the tormented feeling that had gripped him for days. He opened his eyes and turned to continue his wandering through the streets of Jerusalem, not sure where he was going or why.

XIII. Charlatans

January 4, 2012, 7:24pm

John looked over the hand-written outline on the back of a business card one more time, quizzing himself as he went in order to be sure he had all the details straight. He had only hatched his scheme twenty four hours earlier. Learning the ins and outs of a religion in such a short time, and to the point of being able to put on a convincing act as the head of that religion, was no small task, especially for one who had ignored religion and its sentiments for most of his life.

"Excuse me, Archbishop," John said to the man in front of him in line. Archbishop Rowan Williams turned around and smiled warmly before speaking. "Yes?"

"Would you happen to have a pen or pencil on you? I forgot mine and would like to make a note on my outline before I go on the air."

"I'm sorry, sir, you must have mistaken me for a Catholic Archbishop. We in the Church of England have secretaries to do our writing for us, so I never carry a pen." He laughed heartily, clearly amused by his jest, and John joined him in the laughter.

"Yes, those Catholic priests do tend to be more inclined to work for themselves, now, don't they?" John replied with a grin. The Archbishop's laughter

stopped and he turned silently away from John with a parting glare.

"Archbishop Williams, you are on," a man with a headset announced, poking his head around the backstage curtain, then disappearing again.

"Break a leg," John called out to the Archbishop, who made no gesture to acknowledge that he had even heard him.

John looked over at the backstage snack table to observe the characters that were standing around discussing something with a great deal of excitement. They were the leaders of various religions, who had made the journey to The City of Light, as Jerusalem was now being called, to appear on the global news channel and publicly exhort the faithful members of their religions to abandon the practice of their traditions and accept the new Law of Peace that was to replace religion worldwide in preparation for the coming of the Anunnaki.

~*Cowards,*~ John thought to himself as he fought to compose himself and not show any visible signs of the disgust and anger that was growing inside him. ~*Of course the Raelians, the Modern Essenes, the Buddhists, the Hindi, the Hari Krishnas, and the others fell for this... their religions prepared them for it... but these Christian leaders? Didn't they expect this day?*~ His scorn grew strong as he looked upon the Lutheran priest, who, during his speech, had casually made a joke of the Catholics as the last

backward people to not see the truth before their eyes.

John turned away, uncertain whether or not he may be showing his emotions, and listened to the end of the Archbishop's speech.

"And, as if these evidences were not enough," the Archbishop continued, "we have the DNA sample he has provided us, which matches exactly that of the blood from the Shroud of Turin and several other seemingly miraculous manifestations that have been maintained by the Catholic Church all these centuries, including the blood from the chalice at Loveto. What more proof should we demand?"

The Archbishop held his arms out wide as he scanned the faces in the crowd. "I know that the Catholic Church claims this is the antichrist and that he is just a clone or some such nonsense, but do our hearts not tell us what science has already confirmed? When we look up at Orion in the night sky and see the flickering lights of our creators traveling towards us, do we not feel that the truth is finally clear and plain? Do our hearts not yearn to meet them, and to be given the gifts that will allow us to venture out into the stars ourselves?"

The Archbishop clasped his hands together before his chest in a pleading gesture.

"I ask you, my children of the Church of England, do not cling to stubbornness as so many Roman Catholics are doing. Do not force the hands

of those who are preparing a way. Join us in this new era of peace and plenty, of brotherhood and love. May the light of the cosmos shine upon us all. Thank you." With that, he bowed to the crowd and turned to leave the stage.

"Mister McCullough, you're up," came the voice from the stage manager. John looked around him at the religious leaders still waiting their turn, then turned and walked up to the podium.

"Good evening. I am Ian McCullough, and I am here to represent The Children of the Nephilim. We are a religion that is largely unknown to the mainstream media, so I had to request to be here as we were not invited. Despite our lack of notoriety, we are quite numerous, yet, our beliefs are not such that they require us to gather in community, and we have no public practices to speak of. We are, rather, a Church of the mind, and have found the internet to be our most fitting home. You may be wondering, then, why I requested to appear here tonight, since the internet is already a suitable place to discuss the events at hand and how they affect the beliefs of the Children of the Nephilim. I asked to be here, actually, merely to show our support for Prime Minister Lux, whom we have waited for anxiously for decades now. The Children of the Nephilim have studied all the ancient religions thoroughly, and we have examined an immense amount of archaeological evidence, and we were expecting events very much like what has come to pass. We had hoped that the end of the Mayan calendar

would, in fact, represent the beginning of a new era for man, and so it does. I would like to speak to those who still do not believe by saying that I can assure you, with most definite certitude, that Prime Minister Lux is truly Jesus, called by many the Christ, who was a Nephilim at his birth, and who is now going to lead us into the house our fathers have prepared for us."

He paused a moment, clearing his throat, trying to act just a little nervous to help make his false identity seem a little more genuine.

"I invite those of you who persist in disbelief to do some research yourself. There is more than enough information available online to show you the web of connectedness throughout human history that easily proves the intervention of the Anunnaki in all that has come to pass. There is more than adequate proof of the Nephilim throughout the ages. These are the children the Anunnaki produced by cross-breeding with humans. We believe that their genes still reside with all the present human race, though diluted enough to only rarely manifest themselves in a human of exceptional genius."

Turning toward the center of the stage, he looked at Prime Minister Lux, seated at the center of a small table, with several of his advisers to either side. John bowed deeply to him.

"Our king, we have awaited you, and we salute you. Thank you for taking pity on this undeserving race."

He turned back to the cameras and crowd.

"I will be present within the city for the next few days, frequenting the nearby cafes so that others may have the opportunity to seek me out and ask questions if they desire. If you are resistant to the truth that is unfolding before your eyes, please, come and visit and I will be more than happy to show you the evidence you need to get over your long-held superstitions. Good evening, and may the light of the cosmos shine upon you all."

With that, he turned and walked off stage, through the backstage area, and out onto the sidewalk. He paused and looked up at the stars.

~If Father Marco is still here in the city, then that should get his attention. Okay, Lord... I am ready to believe in you. If you are truly there, and if you want me, all you have to do is bring him to me.~

He turned to walk down the sidewalk and entered the small alley behind the building he was just in. He found his garbage bag of clothes right beside the trash cans where he had left them. He walked deeper into the shadows of the alley before pulling out a shirt, jacket, and wool cap. He took off the glasses, jacket, and shirt he had been wearing, stuffed them into the bag, then put the others on and tossed the bag into a dumpster. He walked back out onto the main sidewalk and began his journey toward his hotel, all the while pondering which cafe

he should visit first in the morning to begin his search.

XIV. Conversion

January 6, 2012, 7:52am

John walked out of the bathroom into the main room of the little cafe. He noticed a man standing just inside the door, scanning the crowd as if looking for someone. He could not see the man's face clearly since he was silhouetted by the bright daylight shining through the window behind him. He walked toward the man, who turned to walk out immediately after seeming to spot John in the crowd. As he turned onto the sidewalk outside, John could see his profile clearly, and recognized Father Marco's sharp cheek bones just above the newly grown beard that covered his face. John followed him at a quick enough pace that he made his way right up beside Father Marco only halfway down the block.

"Clever move," Father Marco spoke without turning his head to look at him. "You must have something pretty urgent to have gone to such lengths to try and find me."

"I believe," John replied.

Father Marco sighed. "You and almost all the rest of the world."

"No, not that. Credo."

Father Marco slowed a half-step, almost stumbling a little. "Oh. So, my prophecy has come to pass, then? Is the place where you are staying a good place to discuss this?"

"Yes, you of all people should know that a man like me would never choose any other kind of place, especially in times like these."

"Lead the way, then."

8:20am

Father Marco tossed his jacket onto the hotel bed, then sat in the chair beside the small table on the side closest to the door. John sat across from him and folded his hands, resting his elbows on the table. He did not wait for Father Marco to ask, but began immediately.

"The night of his coming, I stood in the crowd, and as they all began their chanting and cheering, I felt sick to my stomach. It was the strangest feeling I had ever felt. It was a mix of rage and disgust. At the same time, I did not know why I felt that way. Why should I care if people were in the throes of religious euphoria? But I did care... and I hated it. I wanted to make it stop. I hated him. I wanted to strike him down. I thought about it all night. I couldn't sleep.

For days, I wandered the streets, still processing where such emotions had come from. Little things kept happening. Once, as I passed a playground, I saw a mother sitting on a bench with her child in her lap, reading him a book. At that moment, I had a flashback to a similar scene from my own childhood. I remembered sitting in my mother's lap, and she was reading to me from a children's Bible. I remembered her explaining how much God loved me. I remembered saying that I loved him back... and I remembered meaning it. Another time, at the spot of Simon's taking the cross, I had a flashback of the moment I rejected God and love and emotion as a teenager. I called out to Simon to pray for me, and I felt such peace as I have never known before."

Father Marco smiled at him. "Though you blocked these memories out, they were always there within you, like seeds waiting to sprout. Were you ever baptized?"

"No, my parents were... I guess you would call them liberal Catholics. They did not baptize me as an infant because they had mixed a lot of Protestant notions into their Catholicism and believed that I should make that decision myself when I was old enough to choose. My faith was long gone before I reached the age at which they tried to encourage me to get baptized. But I am ready now. Surprisingly enough, the Catechism of the Catholic Church can still be found online and I have read through the entire thing in the last few days prior to my stunt to get your attention. While reading it, I just knew..."

this is truth. Ironic, isn't it, Father, that someone who has spent almost his entire life in secrecy, lies, and surreptitious deeds could ever recognize truth? Yet I have. I believe. I want to receive the sacraments."

"Then you shall," said Father Marco, smiling now with all his heart.

"When?" asked John.

"Why not now? Have you also done some studying on what is required of you to receive the faith?"

"Yes. I have studied the baptismal rite, the rite of confession, and have memorized the Creed."

"Excellent, but you will not need to make a confession. Baptism washes away all your previous sins. We need not even perform the full rite of baptism in times like these. In fact, in the interest of not being seen together for long, I recommend that you simply recite the Creed and I will baptize you in the simple form. I have no oil for anointing, so I cannot confer the sacrament of confirmation on you... which is a shame because that is the sacrament which prepares you for martyrdom, and you will likely need that grace soon enough."

"Would olive oil do?" John asked as he pulled a to-go box out of the trash can near his chair and opened it to show Father Marco a puddle of oil from the previous night's salad.

Father Marco chuckled. "Well, I've never seen anyone anointed with leftover salad oil before, but I

suppose God is not too picky about the details in these circumstances. Have you chosen a baptismal name?"

"Yes, that too. Thomas, for Saint Thomas More."

"Excellent choice. Then you understand what this means for you and are prepared to accept it?"

"I am prepared to be a martyr if that is to be the way of it."

Father Marco grabbed the empty ash tray from the table, inspected it to be sure it was clean, then carried it to the bathroom and filled it with water. He then blessed the water and set the ash tray down onto the table. John used his thumb to scrape up some of the oil from the to-go box, then wiped it onto the edge of the table and threw the box back into the trash. Father Marco blessed the oil as well. John dropped to his knees before Father Marco and bowed his head.

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," Father Marco began. "Lord, you who know the hearts of all men, see in this man's heart that same desire expressed by Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman, and the Good Thief which won for them the riches of Your love as they renounced their past in a moment and called out for Your mercy. Hear in his words the faith of the centurion and grant him the grace to truly believe all that he professes now."

John looked up at Father Marco and began to recite the Creed, feeling his heart swell with

excitement as he did so. "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into Hell; the third day He arose again from the dead; He ascended into Heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen."

"This is our faith," Father Marco continued. "This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it, in Christ Jesus our Lord. Is it your will that you should be baptized in the faith of our Church, which you have now professed?"

"It is."

Father Marco took the ashtray filled with water and held it over John's head. "Thomas, I baptize you in the name of the Father." Here he poured some of the water over John's head. "And of the Son." He poured again. "And of the Holy Spirit." Here he poured the rest of the water over John's head, then used his shirt to dry the water out of the ashtray before setting it back onto the table.

"God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into his holy

people. As his children, we now pray, Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen. In baptism, God our Father gave the new birth of eternal life to His chosen son, Thomas. Let us pray to our Father that He will pour out the Holy Spirit to strengthen his son with His gifts and anoint him to be more like Christ, the Son of God."

Father Marco then held his hands over John's head in a gesture of blessing." All powerful God, Father of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, by water and the Holy Spirit you freed Your son, Thomas, from sin and gave him new life. Send Your Holy Spirit upon him, to be his helper and guide. Give him wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence. Fill him with the spirit of wonder and awe in Your presence. We ask this through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen."

"Amen," John responded.

Father Marco then used his thumb to wipe the oil from the table, and traced the sign of the cross onto John's forehead with the oil. "Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit."

"Amen."

"Peace be with you."

"And with your spirit."

"May almighty God, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless you," Father Marco finished as he made the sign of the cross over John, who made the sign of the cross himself and responded, "Amen."

Father Marco returned to his seat and looked around the room as if something was missing. "Now you know, it is customary to have a little reception afterwards, right? With juice, coffee, cake, cookies, finger sandwiches... is the caterer on the way?" He broke a smile in response to John's own smile.

"Why," John replied, "I was actually planning to take care of the refreshments myself. Don't you smell the cookies baking in the oven?"

"Oh, yes, my favorite... snicker doodles."

At that, both men broke into laughter. John laughed more heartily than he had in as long as he could remember. When he finally collected himself, he sat down in his chair and let out a deep, contented sigh.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" Father Marco asked.

"It does. I feel... free. Odd."

"I suspect there has never been any freedom in your style of life. Welcome back to reality."

"Yes. Reality. So, now what?"

"It is the time for the olive branch to be grafted back onto the tree... so I will spend my remaining

days, that is, until I am caught, going to the Jews and preaching Christ to them."

"You don't think they will follow Lux and claim him their messiah?"

"That is his intention, and many will follow. You must know, though, that many of those who call themselves Jews are not Jews in truth... just as many who call themselves Christian are no more Christian than all those who have already forsaken Christ. The true Jews that remain, though, they will believe. They need someone to show them the way, and they will need someone to administer the sacraments to them so that they will be ready to face the Lord when the last Christians are rounded up and ground under the heel of the enemy. That guide will be me. When I was in the hospital, the doctor made sure I became a lost person. The enemy has no idea where I am. I fear for my brother priests, though. I suspect Lux already has compiled a list from the Vatican records and is busy accounting for every one of them. If I am careful, I can remain for a while. I am certain I will be the last."

"Is this certitude based on more of your logical deductions, or have you received some kind of vision?"

"No visions. And while logic says that this is a reasonable assumption, it's not that either. I have always just known. From the day I told the Lord that I would follow Him in His priesthood, this deep

sense has grown within me that I would be the last priest. I can't explain it. I just know."

"And what if you are wrong?"

Father Marco looked John in the eyes and smiled. "Then it won't matter much, will it?" He looked back at his watch.

"Yes, I know, you must be going, forgive me." John looked around the room, then back at Father Marco. "Let me come with you."

Father Marco smiled and leaned back in his seat, thinking for a moment. "Now wouldn't that look odd... a distinguished head of an established religion suddenly tagging along following a wanderer who seems suspiciously interested in talking to no one but Jews. I'm afraid that won't do."

"But what about receiving the Eucharist? I want to be a full Catholic."

"I understand, but this would jeopardize something much larger than either of us. You must offer up the sacrifice of this desire. The Lord will honor it as if you had received. Besides, the faster I do my part, the sooner you will be with Him in the place where no sacraments are necessary."

"Okay. God be with you Father, and may he guard you until your race is run."

"Thank you, brother," Father Marco replied as he stood up and walked to the door. He looked back and smiled, nodding his head toward John. "I'll see you on the other side."

John made no reply, but watched him go in silence. He pulled a small crucifix from his pocket and gazed at it for several minutes.

"Now what, Lord?"

XV. Artifacts

January 10, 2012, 4:27pm

"Damn Catholics! Kill them! Cancer of humanity! Die!"

John walked up behind the man at the back of the crowd who was shouting in anger. The sidewalk was a mob scene and he could not press through the crowd to see what was happening.

"What's going on?" he asked the man as he tried to peek over the top of the crowd.

The man turned to him and looked him up and down. "Hey, you're that guy from the conference the other night, right?"

"Yes." He did not look at the man, but continued to try and find a spot to peer over the crowd.

"Proselytizers spreading lies about Prime Minister Lux," the man finally answered.

"Aren't we supposed to be saving humanity, not killing others who have not seen the light yet? I thought the Prime Minister wanted to help everyone see the truth?"

The man turned and looked him up and down again with a suspicious glare. "Haven't you been watching the news? Surely you've heard that the

pope has made a public declaration claiming that recent events fulfill some kind of prophecy and that Prime Minister Lux is the antichrist. The Catholics are spreading lies that their saints Peter and Paul were the ones who selected this current pope back in November and that those who do not reject the Anunnaki are all going to hell."

It took every ounce of John's concentration and training to keep his composure at that news. His mind began to race, remembering things Father Marco had told him, but he brushed them away and focused on the moment at hand. If he failed, he would be next.

"Antichrist, you say?" he asked the man.

"Yeah, but the way I see it, Prime Minister Lux *is* the antichrist, and that's a good thing. At least he is the anti-mythological-christ. If the Christ they believe in is a lie, then anyone who leads people to the truth would be an antichrist to them, and good for it."

"Yes, I see your point. Well said, sir."

At this point, the crowd began to disperse and John could finally get a look at what was happening. There were three people lying on the sidewalk and five members of the security force were clearing everyone away from the scene. The people on the ground were clearly dead, as no living person could lie in such twisted shapes as they were now arranged. There were thousands of hand-made tri-fold pamphlets lying all over the sidewalk around

them, many of them covered in spatters of blood. John walked closer and stooped to pick up one of the pamphlets, looking it over briefly before sliding into his coat pocket.

"Hey you, put that back," one of the security guards yelled at him.

"Forgive me, sir, I just thought it would be useful in my ministry of debunking the Catholic myth and helping them to see the truth." He made no motion of compliance with the order, waiting to see if the guard would buy it. He looked the man directly in the eyes, the way he always did when he was trying to act out a disguise.

The guard hesitated, then looked John over. "Leave it," he finally replied.

"Okay, no harm intended," John said as he pulled the pamphlet out of his pocket and dropped it onto the pile at his feet. He turned and walked away as nonchalantly as possible.

After turning the corner down another street, he began to scan the shops he passed to see if any might have a television running the news channel. At one point, he spotted a newspaper lying beside a garbage can, but noticed it was in another language and continued his search.

After several minutes of roaming the crowded streets of Tel Aviv, he discovered a small diner that had the English version of Al-Jazeera news running on a television behind the bar. As he entered, he heard people speaking English throughout the

room. He took a seat at the bar and skimmed the menu mounted on the wall.

"English?" the bartender asked.

"Yes, I'll take the gyro plate, please, and some water."

"Got it," the bartender said as he turned to walk back to the kitchen.

John turned his full attention to the newscast. At the moment, the newscasters were discussing the improving global economy, so he turned his attention to the text feed scrolling along the bottom of the screen. After several lines about the crop yields in Mexico and America, he finally saw what he was looking for.

'First audience of Pope Peter II calls for faithful Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, Jews, and Muslims to unite in defense of the God of Abraham. Invites Orthodox and Protestants to return to Catholic Church. Invites Jews to "graft the olive branch back onto the tree" by converting to Catholicism.'

At this point, John turned his attention from the text feed to the video as the newscast switched to coverage of an excavation underway at the Temple Mount.

"This just in... archaeologists have found a vault beneath the Temple Mount in the precise location Prime Minister Lux instructed them to dig. The area has been cleared and the door to the vault is about to be opened. You are seeing this live. There are no

reports yet as to what is in the vault, but the Prime Minister has merely stated, "The contents of this vault will verify my words for all those who persist in clinging to their historical religions."

"The Ark of the Covenant," John whispered out loud unintentionally. He almost choked on his words as he realized what he had done. He immediately yawned and stretched his arms to buy himself time to recompose himself.

"What makes you say that?" the bartender asked him as he turned to look at John.

John had to think quickly to decide what slant to take. He coughed into his hand after finishing his yawn to buy a few more seconds to think.

"Can you think of anything else that would convince Christians and Jews that this is, in fact, the messiah they thought they were waiting for? Besides, it has been discussed among ancient alien theorists that the ark likely was meant to be a shield from the radioactive technology that the aliens had given man to perform certain tasks. It only makes sense that they would direct Lux to relocate this artifact to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands at times like these, as well as to prove his words to be true."

John took a long sip of his water to let that sink into the man's thoughts before continuing. "So, I'll bet you the cost of my meal that they pull the Ark of the Covenant out of that vault, and that it contains some kind of alien technological artifact. I'll bet you

the cost of dessert and a cup of coffee that it still works and that Lux will demonstrate its power."

"Sure, I'll bet you. No big deal if I lose the bet, won't be much longer before we stop using money anyway."

Several of the people sitting nearby, who had overheard the conversation, moved up closer to John and began watching the newscast more intently than they had been.

In the time it took the archaeologists to get the vault open, John had finished his meal and was watching intently.

"So," the bartender looked back at him from the television, "you ready to order dessert?"

"Not just yet. I'm waiting to see whether or not you will be paying for it so I can order the most expensive item on the menu." John smiled at the bartender, who chuckled at him. Several of those sitting around joined in the laughter.

"Look," John interrupted their mirth, pointing at the television.

The attention of all those gathered quickly refocused on the newscast just in time to see a group of workers bring out some large box-like item, carried at the four corners by poles that ran alongside the box. One of the archaeologists walked up to the box and began brushing thick layers of dirt and dust off of it with his tools. Suddenly, a bright glare lit up a spot that had just been brushed. The

camera shifted to the right side to get out of the sun's reflection, to reveal a bright shimmering gold angel on the top of the box.

"There's the gold. Looks like I am going to be right," John said as he leaned back in his bar stool.

Several of the archaeologists began scurrying around, grabbing their tools and joining into the labor, all of them clearly excited by the discovery.

"We are receiving reports that the archaeologists have uncovered the long lost Ark of the Covenant," the newscaster began. Cheers erupted all around John and several people patted him on the back.

John looked around at them and got caught up in the excitement for a moment, then looked back at the bartender with a smile. "Thanks for the meal. Now let's wait and see if you owe me dessert as well."

Just as the archaeologists cleared away all the dirt, Lux walked into their midst, signaling for them all to stand back. He lowered his ear to the box, closed his eyes, and appeared to be listening for something. He then stood back up and pulled a strange object from his pocket and held it up to the box. He looked at it as if he was observing some kind of measurement. After a few moments, he returned the object to his pocket, then signaled several of the archaeologists to come forward and remove the lid. It was clearly heavy, as they seemed to struggle with it a good deal, but they managed to

move the lid off the box and set it gingerly onto the ground, taking care not to scratch or mar the surface as they released their grips.

Lux walked up to it and leaned over to look into it. He reached in and pulled out some kind of golden rod, which looked like a sceptre. He held it up close to his face, then wiped a layer of dust off a certain spot as if clearing a display to see some indicator. Next, he pulled up the end of his robe and used it to wipe down the device, clearing it of the dust that remained. He then turned to face the sun and held it aloft. As he held it up, a small red glow appeared on the bottom of the rod, growing brighter by the moment, until it finally reached the brightness of a red LED light.

Finally, Lux brought his arm down and pointed the rod at the lid of the Ark. Mysteriously, the lid began to lift off the ground and Lux moved his arm to direct the lid, guiding it onto the Ark. He then used it to lift the entire Ark and move it back into the vault. Lastly, he used it to lift the massive stone door of the vault from the ground and float it through the air as if it were as light as a balloon, putting it back where it had been at the entrance of the vault. He then held the rod before him with both hands, laid across his palms, and looked it up and down with a smile before hanging it from the belt at his side.

The scene switched back to the newscaster in the studio, who was still staring at the screen behind him. John realized the newscaster had remained

silent throughout the whole unveiling. The newscaster turned slowly to the camera, still trying to collect his thoughts. "Ladies and gentlemen, you have just witnessed a glimpse of the marvels that our creators have in store for us later this year. I... we... we will have more when we return from this commercial break."

John looked at the bartender and cocked his head at an angle, giving a little shrug of his shoulders and a smile. "I'll have the large order of baklava and a double-shot of Turkish coffee, please."

XVI. Peter

January 11, 2012, 9:56am

John checked his left pocket to make sure his SIM card was still there. He had not put his hand in his pocket since the last time he checked, so the odds of it falling out were extremely unlikely, but he always got a little nervous when operating in clandestine mode and this manifested itself in a constant fear that he would lose something and leave evidence behind. He scanned the courtyard of the small restaurant as he walked up to the entrance.

~Already crowded. At least a dozen checking their phones. Smartphones. Perfect.~

He pulled out his phone to make sure he could pick up the wireless signal from the nearby router he had hacked into earlier in the week. It was still there, and his phone connected to it without any problems, so he continued his stroll right into the entrance of the restaurant and made his way out to the courtyard. He checked his watch.

~Three minutes.~

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and set it on the table, retrieved a set of earbud headphones from his back pocket and put them in his ears as quickly as he could while still looking calm. Some days the rebroadcast of the daily papal address started early and he didn't want to miss this one.

The buzz had already hit the street due to the news media putting out some odd warning that the pope had made a statement that effectively labeled Prime Minister Lux a liar. They were avoiding repeating his actual words, though, leading John to suspect they were going to try and shut him up once and for all before the message could spread widely. He had just started the audio streaming in the app on his phone when the waitress walked up.

"Bottled water, stuffed grape leaves, double order of hummus, and a Turkish coffee, please."

"Not quite the usual," she replied.

"I guess I am in an appetizer mood today." He smiled at her and shrugged.

She smiled back and turned to walk off, then paused and looked back over her shoulder. "Just don't short me on my tip, okay?"

"Never."

He turned up the volume just in time to catch the end of the intro as the translator began translating to English.

"Sons and daughters of the God of Abraham, be not afraid. Be at peace. Many of you are shaken from the events of yesterday. My Jewish brothers, you have waited for the Messiah to come and reveal himself through the uncovering of the Ark of the Covenant. Do not be fooled by this counterfeit. Where were Enoch and Elijah? Surely you still hold that tradition that they will be present at the

revealing? Yet they were not there, and many of you may now think that the prophecy was merely a misinterpretation of tradition. Do not be fooled. They shall be there when it is revealed, and it shall be soon."

There was a brief pause, and John, fearing he had lost his connection, turned up the volume several more clicks until he could hear some of the background noise of the crowds at St. Peter's Square.

The pope waited for almost a minute before beginning again. "I was visited in a dream last night by the archangel Gabriel. He revealed to me that Enoch and Elijah shall meet us at the house of the Virgin Mary in Ephesus this Friday to reveal to us the true Ark of the Covenant. Brothers and sisters of the God of Abraham who long for the Messiah... join us there and you will see your hopes fulfilled. Come with an open heart. Seek and you will find. I encourage my brother priests to be there as well. Come prepared to perform baptisms, for I am told this will move the hearts of many. Do not be afraid. The time draws near for the coming of glory. All is set in motion now. May the light of Christ shine on you in these dark times... in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

~Ephesus. Could this be it? Surely Father Marco will not miss it for the world. Or will he? He seemed convinced his work was in Jerusalem converting the Jews. What will he do? Should I go? It will be dangerous. Lux must be in a rage over this effrontery. Yes, I will go. I will likely be caught and

locked up afterwards, but perhaps I can protect Father Marco... to buy him more time for his work. I suspect the flights will be filling up quickly. I should leave at once.~

His racing thoughts were interrupted by the waitress returning with his order.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "You like you have just seen a demon."

"No, but perhaps Enoch and Elijah."

She raised her eyes, looked around to see if anyone at the other tables had reacted to his statement, then scolded him, "You should be careful how loudly you say such things. Now eat your food before your mouth gets you in trouble." She turned to go back to her duties.

"Wait. I'm going to eat and get out of here as fast as I can. Do you know my total?"

"No, I haven't entered it yet."

He pulled out a wad of bills, thumbed through them, then stuffed them in her hand. "Keep the change. One last tip. Spend it while you still can."

Her eyes opened wide as she looked at the wad of cash. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. You will understand when you watch the news tonight. May the light guide you to the truth." He smiled at her then began to eat his food as quickly as he could without making himself sick.

She gave him one last puzzled look before heading to the cash register to pay his bill.

John looked at his watch. ~Perhaps I can get out of here before the rush begins. I doubt there are many others here who have been risky enough to listen to Vatican Radio for fear of a lynching. St. Thomas, pray for me.~

XVII. Ark of the Covenant

January 13, 2012, 4:42pm

John walked up to one of the security guards who lurked behind the crowd and whispered, "I've spotted another one over there by that building."

The security guard stood up on his toes and craned his neck to try and see over the crowd. "I don't see him." He reached up to the radio in his shirt pocket and pressed the call button. "Position Delta, southwest of your location, two story building with a terrace and an old lady sitting at a table. Keep an eye on that spot, my visibility is blocked. Possible priest sighting."

"We've got it covered," came back the reply.

John wandered back into the crowd and continued scanning the faces. By pretending to be one of the undercover agents, he had taken the attention off himself enough that he could continue scanning for Father Marco without revealing his true purpose. The crowd that had turned out was much larger than he had expected it to be. What surprised him most was the percentage of the crowd that looked to be Jewish. He had expected a few, but not this many.

He had been wandering the crowd for over three hours and Father Marco was nowhere to be found. By carrying on his fake undercover agent act,

he had drawn enough suspicious glares from the crowd that Father Marco would surely have noticed him by now if he were here.

A sudden gasp throughout the crowd brought him out of his quest with a start. He turned to look at the house where Mary had reportedly lived after the death of Christ, and from which tradition says she was assumed into heaven. As he turned he noticed the crowd around him looking up, so he followed their gaze to the top of the house. Standing there were two men in what looked like traditional Middle Eastern casual robes. A murmur rose up around him that he could not understand. He looked at the people surrounding him and it seemed that the Jewish members of the crowd were growing excited. He looked at several of the security guards, who were beginning to form a perimeter around the crowd. The undercover agents he had spotted in the midst of the people were now making their way to the back of the crowd, so he followed them.

~It's all about to go down. I better get out of the way.~

He listened intently to the people he passed and managed to make out that some were calling the two men on the roof Enoch and Elijah. As he exited the crowd and stood among the agents, he turned to see what he was missing. The two men were speaking in Hebrew, and he could not understand what was being said until one of them said, "Miriam," very loudly. Almost immediately afterward, there appeared slightly behind and above

the two men a glowing image of a woman in white. It looked like a hologram or projection at first, but, the longer he stared at it, the clearer it became to him that this was some sort of quasi-physical manifestation. When the smell of roses hit him, he felt a wave of peace and had to fight the urge to fall to his knees, which would give away his disguise.

~My mother, protect them.~

Then there appeared near her head an image of a mouth speaking and the child Jesus appeared in her arms holding up a hand in a sign of blessing. The mouth disappeared and the child morphed into a vision of the Eucharist, which she held up for the crowd to see, then that vanished and next to her was a vision of Christ the King seated on the Ark of the Covenant, holding up a golden rod. Then Christ vanished and Mary bowed her head, pressed her hands together in a posture of prayer, and morphed into an image of the Ark, which vanished after a few more seconds.

~The Ark of the New Covenant.~

The crowd erupted into a cheer, then began to move in a chaotic swirl that reminded him of boiling water. After a moment, it became clear that there were lines forming at various places in the crowd, and he could see men baptizing people at the head of each line. He walked back to the security car parked behind him and climbed up onto the trunk so he could see out over the swirling masses of people. He spotted priests in numerous places, but

Father Marco was nowhere to be seen. He saw that almost everyone in the lines were Jews, and the men were removing their yarmulkes to be baptized, then putting them back on as they walked away from the priests. He looked back to the two men on the roof, who had raised their hands and were looking up into the heavens, chanting something in Hebrew.

The next thing he noticed was an even larger group of security guards arriving on the scene and surrounding the crowd. The vehicle he was standing on was outside the perimeter they were setting up. Loud voices sprang up all around him as the security guards began barking orders through megaphones. The two men on the roof looked down to the crowd and began pleading with them and seemed to be contradicting whatever the guards were saying.

Several gunshots all rang out at once, from several positions around the crowd, and the two men fell lifeless to the roof on which they stood. The crowd froze and there was a silence that was overwhelming after the noise that had filled his ears only seconds before.

One of the guards carried some kind of device about the size of a small suitcase onto the steps of the house that the two men had been standing on. He held it up over his head while a voice over the megaphones said something in Hebrew that stirred the crowd back to life. The man turned the device on and it began projecting an image of Mary onto the wall of the house. It was clearly different from the

Mary he had seen before. The crowd began to shout. One man walked up onto the stairs to grab the device from the guard. Another shot rang out and he fell to the ground. There was a moment of stunned silence. John looked around him and noticed a long line of transport trucks parked down the road behind him.

~They're claiming it was a fake. They're going to haul everyone off. Lord save us.~

What happened next caught the guards by surprise, though. Many of the men in the crowd who were waiting to be baptized rushed at the guards nearest to them and tackled them to the ground, wrestling to take away their guns. The priests seized the moment and began to baptize people again as quickly as they could. The crowds were overtaking the guards all around until one panicked and began to shoot everyone that rushed at him. Absolute chaos broke out and several other guards also began to fire shots. John stood there, above the crowd, watching helplessly as all the guards joined in and began mowing the crowds down without regard to who was resisting. He watched them fall, one by one, to the ground all throughout the streets.

~What can I do? I have to do something?~

He climbed down from the car, not sure what his next move was going to be when he heard a voice clearly in his mind.

~Drive away, now.~

He froze in his tracks, but recovered quickly and looked into the car to see that the keys were indeed in the ignition. As casually as he could, he opened the door, slid into the seat, cranked the car, and drove off, thinking frantically about where he should go. The sun was setting before him as he drove out of the city. He felt numb as he drove, trying desperately to fight back the tears that were welling up in his eyes and blurring his vision.

~And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire, and them that had overcome the beast, and his image.~

XVIII. Counted by Name

January 14, 2012, 12:25pm

John slumped down into the chair at the table and picked up the menu. He didn't need to look at it, he already knew it by heart. It distracted him, though, from his frustration. He fidgeted with it, tapping its edge on the table, flipping it around in his hands, balancing it on one finger, and so on until the waiter interrupted his thoughts.

"Haven't seen you in a while," the waiter said as he set a bottled water onto the table. "The usual?"

"Actually, I think I'll just have the vegetarian salad today, with tahini instead of the usual dressing."

"Okay. Do you want me to take that menu away? You seem kind of attached to it."

"Oh, sorry, yes," John stammered as he handed the menu over. He looked over the other patrons as he opened his water bottle, then took a long drink while watching one person in particular out of the corner of his eye.

~Looks like an agent. They're everywhere. There's no way Father Marco will be able to continue his work without getting caught at this rate. I have to know what they are up to.~

John got up from his table and walked over to the table of the suspected agent and sat himself down in the chair across the table from the man. He looked up from his paper and peered at John with scrutinizing eyes over the top of his bifocals, which rested low on his nose. John noticed his lips tighten amidst the mustache and beard that covered his face. The skin on his balding forehead began to turn a little red. Clearly, the man did not like being interrupted from his daily paper.

"Hello comrade," John began, "what news? I am just returning from Ephesus and am trying to relocate a priest I was following before being called away for that." He pulled a security badge from his jacket pocket, just enough for the agent to see, then returned it to its hiding place.

The agent's face relaxed a little. He looked back down at his paper. "You should return to headquarters for another assignment, then. All the priests in this area have already been taken in."

"How can you be sure? Surely, there were many visiting priests in this area, many operating undercover."

"According to the list, all the ordained priests in this region are accounted for. If there are visiting priests, they will be known soon enough. The order went out this morning to round up all the priests on the list in every part of the world. When was the last time you checked in with your superior? Traveling does not give you leave to avoid your duties."

"My superior told me to check out for a few days. I had a bit of a breakdown after the massacre. I'm not used to seeing... that." John looked down at his hands and held his breath for a moment to try and make the act as authentic as possible. The agent seemed to fall for it as he glanced up from his paper and noticed John looking just a little pale.

"Get used to it. There's going to be more. Just this morning, the pope was shot on live television during his public audience. The people in the crowd tried to storm the guard who shot him, and another bloodbath ensued. The old man should have known better than call Prime Minister Lux a liar in public. He tried to claim that his little trick with the projector in Ephesus was actually the work of the security force. That was the last straw. That's why the order went out. I'm sure your superior will tell you whatever additional details you need to know when you finish your sabbatical. I'd call him today if I were you." The agent looked up from his paper and stared directly at John. "You wouldn't want him thinking you have gone rogue."

"Of course not. Thank you for the update, comrade. I have missed enough already. I will report in after I eat."

John bowed his head toward the man, then got up and returned to his table, where his food was waiting for him. His mind raced as he took his first bite.

~Father Marco. I must do something. What is this list? Perhaps a record from the Vatican containing all ordained priests and their assignments? He's nowhere near his assignment, though. It will take them a while to find him if he is careful. He has so much work to do. The remnant of Israel have finally believed. For their sake, he needs more time. But how will he...? Wait... Yes, it should work. It's perfect. And it will answer my questions.~

A chill ran up his spine. Fear began to overcome him and his chest began to hurt. He closed his eyes and imagined the image of Christ's Divine Mercy which he had come to love as his sole comfort in the last few weeks. As he imagined the red and white streams flowing from the heart of Christ, peace drove away the fear and he felt an unexplainable joy welling up within, making him feel as if his own heart would burst forth with streams of living water.

~Yes, Lord, I will do it. Saint Thomas More, pray for me.~

XIX. Lambs to the Slaughter

January 15, 2012, 3:11pm

John looked around frantically, trying to appear as suspicious as possible. He turned down an alley which he knew led to a dead end around the corner, and slowed his pace just enough to be sure the two agents could catch up to him. He reached his right hand into his pocket and wrapped his rosary around it. He waited for the agents to enter the alley, then he deliberately tripped and pulled his hand out of his pocket, the rosary still wrapped around it, to catch himself as he fell. As expected, the agents spotted the rosary and called out for him to stop. He jumped up and ran down the alley, around the corner, and to the locked fence at the end of it. When the agents got within line of sight, he looked back at them, then looked all around as if in panic, then dropped to his knees and began to pray the prayers of the rosary he was still holding.

The first agent began to speak to him in Hebrew. John held up his hands and said, "English."

The second agent unbuttoned his jacket and pulled a chain out of the inner pocket, then a set of handcuffs from another pocket.

"Not very smart, now, are you holy man?" the agent taunted.

John held his arms up to cover his head, saying in a wavering voice, "Please do not hurt me!"

"I don't need to, holy man. That's the Prime Minister's job."

The agent wrapped the chain around John's neck, fished one end of it through a metal ring on the other end, then handcuffed his arms behind his back, and finally pulled the neck chain down to the handcuffs and connected it all in such a way as to put pressure on his arms. In this position, any attempt to lower his arms would cause the chain to tighten on his throat.

"Walk, holy man. We'll tell you when to turn. Say a word and that chain will shut you up. Understand?"

John nodded his head and turned to walk back out of the alley. As he neared the sidewalk along the roadside, the English-speaking man barked a command at him.

"Left at the sidewalk."

John turned out onto the sidewalk and paused as he noticed that everyone was looking at him. He looked all around and could see only hatred and disdain. There was not the slightest glimpse of pity from anyone in the crowd. As he began to walk again, a path cleared before him. People stopped and moved aside so they could watch him walk by. Almost immediately, the cursing began, followed by spitting. He closed his eyes and continued to walk as straight as he could by feel alone, peeking his eyes

open just enough to steer himself occasionally. All the while, spit continued to rain down on his face, running into his eyes, onto his lips, and into his mouth and nose when he had to take breaths. He imagined Christ carrying His cross through the crowds, taking some consolation in sharing in His long walk to Calvary.

~For the sake of His sorrowful passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world.~

5:12pm

John walked into an audience hall, where a seat rested on a raised dais toward the back of the hall. It was completely white, aside from one rectangular slab of black stone at the foot of the dais, with smooth walls and no decorations. There was an ambient light that filled the room with a soft, even white light. It reminded him of the holding cell in the old science fiction movie 'THX-1138.' He looked up at the seat as a white-robed figure rose from it to stand at the edge of the dais. As John neared it, one of the agents pulled the chain to make him stop, then kicked him in the back of his legs, forcing him down into a kneeling position on the black stone.

Prime Minister Lux stared at him for a moment, then squinted his eyes just a little in the nearest

thing to emotion that crossed his otherwise completely calm face.

"Your name?" he asked after a long silence.

"Father Marco Calafati."

"Your real name, please?" the Prime Minister asked after a few seconds.

John looked up at him with a confused look and stammered as he replied, "Father Marco Calafati."

~Does this mean they already have him? Is this all in vain?~

"I will give you one last chance to speak your true name, then you will tell the whereabouts of Father Marco Calafati. If you hesitate, you will find out what true suffering means and the pain will not end until you speak the truth."

The Prime Minister crossed his arms in front of his chest and waited.

~Forgive me, Lord, I have failed. All I can do now is try to throw them off his trail for a time. Jesus, protect him.~

"My name is John. I do not know where Father Marco is. I have been looking for him for weeks. I expected him in Ephesus. Perhaps your butchers slaughtered him there."

The Prime Minister stood there staring him down for nearly three minutes. John did not back down, but looked him directly in the eyes in an act

of utter defiance. Finally, the Prime Minister smiled a condescending smile.

"You thought you would save him. How noble. How foolish. You underestimated the amount of intelligence we have gathered on each of them. Your friend, in particular, had left quite a trail on the internet. There are few left. We have spent a great deal of energy over the past several days scouring the earth for them. In your desperate attempt to save your friend, you have told me everything I need to know to narrow the search. A man who has spent his life operating incognito really should have known better. Have a seat, you look exhausted."

John slumped down onto the floor and sat with his knees raised so that he could rest his head on them for a moment. The guard gave the chain a jerk, though, pulling him back into an upright position.

The Prime Minister looked up at the guards. "Father Marco Calafati is in this city. He is working to convert Jews to Catholicism. Start by searching a four block radius around every Jewish neighborhood. He will almost certainly be in hiding in the house of a recently converted family. Keep an eye out for any purchases of wine or unleavened bread. If you see any, investigate every corner and shadow of the home to which it is delivered."

The guard who had been holding the chain bowed, "As you wish." He dropped the chain and both guards turned to leave.

John felt fear well up in his stomach, but it quickly turned to anger. He had never felt so helpless in all his life. He had accomplished every mission he had ever set out on. This was his first failure. He hated this feeling of fear.

The Prime Minister sat down in his seat and looked John over again. "Does a cancer patient hate his doctor?"

John looked up at him, pondering, not sure where he was leading him with this question.

"How can you hate the surgeon?" the Prime Minister continued without waiting for an answer. "Religion is a cancer. It has spawned untold amounts of bloodshed throughout the centuries, always threatening to destroy humanity with its wars and xenophobia. Like any other cancer, it must be removed or it will destroy its host. Our creators planted within humanity a desire to love them. It did not flourish quite as they had intended. It took on a life of its own. If it is not checked, humanity would carry all its prejudices and hatred into the universe, spreading the disease of this false piety along the way. There would be death and destruction in our wake. The time for enlightenment is upon us. The cancer must be removed so the body can live."

John just stared at him, trying to hide the rage that was boiling inside his chest.

"You have heard this discussion before, of course. You are well read. Let me take another angle

for you. When a drug addict enters rehab, he hates the doctors with every beat of his raging heart. The suffering he must undergo in the early stages seems to be too awful to bear... too awful to survive. In time, however, the addiction subsides, and he begins to see with new eyes. He is once again in control of his own destiny. The freedom is exhilarating. Before finally leaving the clinic for good, he blesses the doctors, calling them his saviors, for they have set him free from one of the worst forms of slavery man can endure."

The Prime Minister paused for a moment to allow the metaphor to sink in. "Religion is the opium of the masses, said Freud. Man is addicted to the emotionalism that religion provides. Every child must eventually lay down his pacifier. Every addict must be freed from his addiction or perish. This time is painful for the world, but when people have been freed of their addiction, they will taste their freedom, and they will bless me for administering the difficult cure. Open your mind, listen to reason."

John stared him in the eyes. "Your words will not convince me. I have spoken the same things in my youth. I too berated the emotionalism of religious people. It is reason that led me to my faith, and peace that keeps me there."

"Peace." The Prime Minister spoke the word as if spitting out poison. "What is peace? It is merely the sense one man has when he believes he has finally discovered that which confirms his decisions to be true. It is a lie. Inner peace does not exist. It is

merely a mental state. The Buddhists could have told you as much. What the Anunnaki will reveal to you is the nearest you will ever come to what you call peace."

The Prime Minister looked up from John at several people entering the hall. "Ah, see, I will show you what your peace amounts to. This priest will believe he has peace in his martyrdom, but watch his face as the light goes out, and you will see the last spark of recognition as he crosses over into the void of nothingness."

The Prime Minister reached down to a small stool that stood next to his seat and picked up a dagger nearly the size of a short sword. He then lifted up a small cloth in his other hand before standing and walking down the dais steps to the black stone in the floor before it. John watched as two guards marched a priest up to the Prime Minister.

John looked at the priest with a feeling of pity at first, for he was an older man, slightly overweight, with grey, unkempt hair, and a receding hairline. He was dressed like a chef, and looked very much the part. His expression was one of grim acceptance.

The Prime Minister looked at him for a moment. "Father Lucas, welcome. I trust you have already said your prayers on the way here. Just so you know, you are one of the last few. You would have made a great agent. Know that we are on the

trails of the remaining priests. Your Church will be a memory very soon, and humanity will take the next evolutionary step without it. I now send you to the void which you so continually denied in your preaching. Good night."

Another guard had just walked up with a small bucket and set it on the black stone, then the two guards who escorted the priest lowered him so that his head was turned sideways over the bucket and he was facing John. He smiled at John and silently mouthed the words, "Jesus I trust in you."

The Prime Minister turned to John. "Watch him to the end, or I will cut your eyelids off and force you to watch the next one."

He then walked over and gently slit just the carotid artery on the side of the priest's neck. He turned to John and pointed the knife at him.

"Watch."

John did watch... out of fear for his eyelids, but also out of curiosity. Would the priest see something? Would he cry out in recognition? Or would he simply fade into oblivion as the Prime Minister had said? He listened to the labored breathing of the priest, which was almost drowned out by the sound of the blood squirting into the bucket with each beat of his heart. The eyes began to sag, the breathing slowed, and the sound of the blood stopped. There were no miracles, no visions. The priest made one last panicked expression just before he froze in time and moved no more.

John coughed. He felt like he would throw up. He could feel tears stinging his eyes. *~Where were you Lord? Are you there? Speak to me.~* He closed his eyes and listened, but he could hear nothing aside from the pounding of his own heart.

XX. Surrender

April 5, 2012, 11:41am

John sat staring at his food. ~Roasted lamb... again. He is mocking me. He is mocking Christ. No one eats roasted lamb every meal of every day for several months straight.~

He pushed the plate towards the middle of the table and leaned back in his chair. For three days, he had not been able to force himself to eat. The smell of it made him ill. He was weak and dizzy, his body desperately needed more than water and coffee, but he could not force the food into his mouth without vomiting.

"What's the matter, John, not hungry again?" The Prime Minister had taken to speaking to him in a relaxed and comfortable tone over the past two weeks. "Or, does it remind you of the poor little lambs being led to the slaughter? If you truly believe in your perverse religion, shouldn't you be rejoicing that I am sending them all to heaven? You should be thrilled that they are avoiding judgment for their sins. Believe me, many of these priests would have no hope of forgiveness for the sins they have committed were it not for the cleansing baptism of martyrdom. Or, John, is it that you are beginning to see more clearly, and the conflict within is

overwhelming you as truth battles with myth? Do you still believe in heaven?"

John looked up at him and stared him in the eyes, a look of disdain contorting his face.

"John, put away hatred, it will destroy you. I may choose to have mercy on you, even if you persist in your little game. You need not tell me where he is. I will find him. For the sake of humanity, I will find him. Besides, I am actually enjoying this little game at least as much as a good game of chess. Speaking of which, would you like to play? Perhaps you could share some stories about your friend while we play?"

John never broke his gaze from the Prime Minister's eyes. "The last time I played chess with a captor, I rammed the queen through his eye and into his brain. Then I walked away a free man."

The Prime Minister smiled at him. "What kind of fool would have let you have your hands free for a game of chess? The idiot should have simply asked you to call out the moves. You impress me more every day, John. When the priests are gone and your religion is no more, you will stop hoping in this Lord of yours to come and save you. Then you will make a fine leader in the inter-galactic council. There is a race that we will have to negotiate with often to avoid a horrible war. Your cunning will be just the touch that is needed to ensure talks go our way. They won't expect ordinary humans to outwit them."

John felt a brief rush of pride swell up in his heart, but brushed it away before it took hold. ~*He's lying. Jesus, I trust in You. Jesus, I trust in You.*~

Just as he was prepared to accept the challenge to a game of chess, John heard the sound of chains from the entrance to the hall and looked up to see another priest being dragged in. He closed his eyes and turned his head. For these last two weeks, he had sat chained to this seat at this small table near the back wall of the hall. The Prime Minister had stopped forcing him to watch after about the twentieth time. He had stopped counting them after the thirty-third. He lifted his hands and covered his right ear with his right hand, turning his head so that the left ear faced away from the business that was about to take place. The chains kept his hands too close together to cover both ears.

The priest cried out, "For the sake of His sorrowful passion, have mercy on.... "

John heard one last gasp from the priest as his prayer ended short. He felt his rage boil up and he clenched his teeth to release some of the pent up energy. He fought the urge to jump up and charge the Prime Minister. He had started to once before, but the chair he had to drag behind him was too heavy to make his effort anything more than a pathetic stumbling act.

"Check mate, John."

John looked up to see the Prime Minister standing in front of him, wiping the blade of his dagger. He waited in silence for an explanation.

"Your friend is now the last remaining priest. I think I have gathered enough from your own personality to know what sort of man he is. You will now play the part of the sacrificial queen to draw the opposing king out of his corner. Do not worry. It will merely be a ruse. I do plan to offer you a chair in my government once you have seen the light. You will just be the bait to draw him out of hiding."

"Save your breath. He will not give himself up to save me. He knows there is a greater goal at stake. He will know my soul is secure and allow me to die the death of a martyr. He still has souls to save. He will not throw those away for the sake of sparing me some suffering."

"Thank you for confirming my suspicion, John. Before I allow you to negotiate with the Allurans, you are really going to have to learn to keep your mouth shut."

John's jaw dropped as he realized what he had just done. *~Why did I speak? The dizziness. I'm not thinking clearly because of the hunger.~* "WHY?!" he screamed out loud at the Prime Minister.

"There now, John, do not blame yourself. If you had been eating your meals like a good boy for the past few days, you would not be so out of sorts. You are being stretched and strengthened. You will be fine in time."

John looked back at the plate of food and stared at the slab of roasted lamb. ~Have I just condemned the last of the remnant Jews? Jesus, no. Give Father Marco the grace to do what he must do to spare them. Forgive me Father, for I know not what I have done.~

2:59pm

As the guards dragged John along out of the main entrance of the hall for the first time since he had been here, he felt the hair stand up on end and goosebumps covered his skin. He looked out from the balcony of the new Temple of Jerusalem, only now realizing where he had been these past months, where the throne of Lux stood, and where all these priests had been sacrificed. ~*Of course, why didn't I realize this before? The black stone.*~ He remembered the night of the appearance of Lux, who stood on that bare black stone and declared it the cornerstone of a new world. From this place, all of the old city of Jerusalem was visible, but it no longer looked old. The buildings were in the first stages of renovation, with scaffolding around many of them. Each building was being covered in a pure, white finish, like that on the inside of the temple, causing them to gleam in the sunlight like pearls. He turned back to see that the new temple, which looked more like a

pyramid than the rebuilt Jewish Temple he had been expecting, was also covered in this smooth, white finish.

John looked out over the crowd that had gathered for the Prime Minister's press conference. Thousands of people were pressed up to the barrier at the bottom of the Temple steps. There were guards everywhere, doing their best to keep the adoring masses from running up the steps to beg for healings or blessings. This was the first time he had been forced to watch one of these press conferences and he puzzled over the possible motive for the Prime Minister's coercion.

"People of the world," the Prime Minister began, "we are very near to an historic day. As of today, we have removed all Catholic priests but one. He is attempting to convert people of traditional Jewish faith to Catholicism. We are asking all of you here in the great city of Jerusalem to be watchful and to report him if you see him. Keep in mind that the Catholic Church is the last dissenting voice which prevents the promised land of peace from being granted to us. Do not let this man delay our day of glory, but turn him over to be...."

The Prime Minister stopped mid-sentence, interrupted by a loud uproar of shouting people near the front of the crowd. His shocked expression was quickly replaced by a smile as he turned to look where so many of the people were pointing as they shouted.

Standing halfway down the flight of stairs, near the side where all the television cameras had been set up to film the speech, one of the security guards had walked out into open view and begun stripping his uniform. The moment people began to shout was when he removed his outer shirt to reveal a rosary hanging around his neck over a black tank top. Lastly, he removed the uniform pants, so that he stood in just the tank top and a pair of loose black shorts, then knelt down on the stairs, stretched his arms out wide, and looked straight up into the sky.

John stood there, stunned, watching this unfold as if in slow motion. His head began to swirl with dizziness as he watched the security guards descend upon Father Marco, chain him, and drag him off. Everything was fading to black, so he sat down to avoid passing out. He still could not think clearly from the shock that overcame him. He looked up into the sky as he lay down on his back and saw what Father Marco must have been looking at... the full moon was visible in the daytime sky and, despite being well above the horizon, it was the color of blood.

XXI. Revelation

April 6, 2012, 6:32am

Father Marco awoke and raised his hand to block the morning sunlight that was streaming through the window into his eyes. He looked around to try and determine where he was. His back and bottom ached from apparent long hours of sitting on the floor while leaning back into a corner of the room as he slept. The room was bare with only one window. He noticed a man in the opposite corner of the room, also sitting on the floor and leaning against the walls on either side of him.

"Father Marco, how are you?" John asked.

Father Marco remained silent for a moment, thinking. "Ready. And how about you, John?"

"Oh, I've been ready, but I don't think I will be getting the easy way out like you will. That bastard has decided he wants me to be one of his top agents after you are gone. He thinks I will give up on the faith when there is no one left to carry on the apostolic line... like many other Catholics already have."

Father Marco sighed and leaned his head back into the corner, closing his eyes. "When the Son of Man comes again, will He find faith on earth?"

"Not much from the looks of things."

Father Marco opened his eyes and looked directly into John's. "Well, I'll make you a deal. I'll resolve myself to die manfully as the last priest if you will resolve yourself to hold on to the end and be the last faithful Catholic."

"I'll try. I must admit, though, at this point I am just having to choose to believe. The eyes of faith are the only hope now. There is nothing left for the eyes of sight to see that can lead to belief."

"How long have you been here, John?"

"Ninety two days."

"Ninety two? Why so long?"

"He's convinced I will renounce the faith eventually."

"He wants your skills that badly, huh? Have you been in this cell the whole time?"

"No, I have spent most of my time in the royal hall, or the holy of holies as it would have been called in the Old Temple. At nights, I was given a windowless room with a nice bed. During the day, I was chained to a chair at a small table at the edge of the hall. He kept me there to force me to watch the death of every priest since I arrived. It's been part of his process to break me down and make me lose my faith."

"Hmmm. How did you end up here in the first place?"

"I pretended to be you and got myself captured on purpose. I had thought that if he fell for it, you'd be safe for good and have more time to convert more people. It was a fool's hope, I guess."

"Well, John, you have already earned your martyrdom, even if you do not die as a martyr in the strict sense of the word. I see now why he has kept you all this time. He knows that there is likely to be one last revolt by the remnant faithful. He needs to surround himself with people who are willing to die for a greater cause. Perhaps he will put you to the test one last time now by offering you the opportunity to die in my place... just to see what you are made of. If he does, refuse, and perhaps he will think you are weak after all and then you can join me in paradise a little sooner."

"You don't understand him. He would be more likely to try and force me to kill you myself than to die in your place."

"Yes, I see your point. By refusing to kill me yourself you would show that you were willing to die for me, and that you would remain faithful to the end. That will only make him want you in his ranks all the more."

"Now you have an idea who we are dealing with. Pure logic, no emotions, and seemingly believing his own account of events as they unfold."

"You said the eyes of faith are no avail. You've been here three months. In all that time, have you

seen no hint that my theory about his origins is true?"

"You mean the cloning of the DNA from the Shroud of Turin? No. He speaks of other galaxies, planets, and races in too complex a way to simply be making it up on the fly. None of his details have yet contradicted each other. It's pretty convincing, whether it is meant to be or not."

"Yes, well keep in mind, if this truly is the Antichrist, and every event so far confirms that he is, he will have a demonic intellect, not a human one. You cannot match wits with him, and he will make no mistakes. That is, if you discount the one mistake being his pride and belief in his victory over the Church."

Both men turned in surprise as the handle twisted and the door opened slightly. A platter of food was placed into the room by an unseen guard, followed by a pitcher and two mugs. The door slammed shut and the two men looked back at each other.

Father Marco looked at John with a puzzled expression. "Why have they put you in here with me, then?"

"I have no idea. I guess for the same reason he made me watch all the executions. It's just meant to crush within me all semblance of emotional reactions. Maybe he wants me as numb and cold and calculating as he is."

"Strange. Well, at least he was kind enough to give me a last breakfast before finishing his work."

"You don't want it, trust me. It's meant to mock us. It's roasted lamb. It's always roasted lamb."

"I guess I have to give him a little credit for creativity. Today is Good Friday, so I'm sure he knows we can't eat it anyway. One last mockery. One last temptation."

"Good Friday? Really? I've been counting the days, but haven't thought much about the calendar. Wow. If he knows so much, hasn't he thought about the obvious symbolism in killing the last priest on Good Friday? I would think he would avoid playing according to what looks like a divinely ordained schedule. Wait, no. Of course. He is probably reveling in it, thinking of it as the ultimate mockery... to put the Church to death on the anniversary of her birth. If he really is the Antichrist, shouldn't he know how this is all supposed to go down? Shouldn't he be at least a little worried that it all might be true?"

"You underestimate pride. In my years of hearing confessions, I came to understand that there is no sin which darkens the intellect like pride. The Antichrist is pride incarnate. He will see only what he chooses to see."

"Speaking of pride, can you hear one last confession before they drag you out of here? I doubt they will leave you in here much longer."

Father Marco smiled. "Of course. But make it a good one... this is the last one in recorded history."

John smiled back. "No pressure, right? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...."

3:29pm

John looked out over the crowd. This was, by far, the largest he had yet seen in all his time here. He stood at the side of the stage which had been set up on the top of the hill outside the city. The crowd covered the sides of the hill like ants surrounding a damaged mound, each shoving and pushing to get a little closer to the action for a clear view. There were no chains this time. John had been given the uniform robe of a member of the parliament. He had accepted it earlier in the day without a fight, putting on the best acting of his life to convince the Prime Minister that he had given up the fight and was prepared to simply accept his new role. There would be time to resist later. For now, he simply wanted a front row spot.

At the center of the stage, a beam hung upon two supporting posts, and Father Marco hung face-down from the beam by his hands and feet, which were tied together behind his back, making him look

like an animal hung over a fire to cook. A thin cord hung down from the beam and was tied around his head at the temples to support it in such a manner to allow him to breathe without having to hold his head up by his own strength. Despite the excruciating pain in his limbs and joints, Father Marco's eyes were closed in a peaceful expression and his lips moved slightly as he recited some silent prayer. John watched the priest's hands for a moment and noticed that he was using his fingers to count off the prayers of the Rosary.

~I should be praying as well. Eternal Father, I offer you the body, blood, soul, and divinity....~

John's prayer trailed off as he was distracted by a shadow that passed over the stage. He looked up at the blimp floating overhead, then around the stage at all the cameras covering the scene. This was being broadcast on every terrestrial, cable, and satellite channel, as well as every AM and FM frequency. The whole world was going to witness together the final passing of the Church on earth. The words from the Catechism echoed repeatedly in his mind as he looked around in awe at this spectacle of hatred. 'The Church will follow her Lord in His death and resurrection.'

He turned to watch as the Prime Minister walked up to center stage and raised his arms in a silencing motion.

~This is it. Father, have pity on your people.~

"People of the world," the Prime Minister began in his clear and commanding voice. "Today is an historic day. In the time of our creation, the Anunnaki gave us tales of their coming, of our making, of their guidance, and of their eventual return to bring us into maturity. Over time, man corrupted these stories and they multiplied into the varying religions of the world. There were two pieces, however, that no religion or myth entirely falsified. The first was that we were created by another and given this planet as our home. The second was that they would come again to purify us. We are drawing near to that time of purification, that time of glory. And today," he lifted his arms and paused for effect, "we do our part to hasten that purification by removing the last of the false myths from the world of man."

At that, the crowds burst into the most deafening cheer John had ever experienced. He wanted desperately to cover his ears, but feared that he would give away his act too early if he did so.

The Prime Minister began again as the cheering started to subside. "People of the world, you see here before you the last man ordained in the supposed faith of the apostles... the faith of *my* apostles, whose message was corrupted by those who could not accept the message. Today we right that wrong by putting an end to the lies and by initiating my new apostles, who will carry my true words forth into the galaxies to proclaim that man has finally evolved."

John felt his stomach sink. He looked around quickly and counted that he was one of twelve men who wore the parliamentary robes. He had not realized he would be participating in a mockery of the apostles. He clenched his teeth and fists. He wanted to rip the robe from his body, but it was too late for that now. It would have to wait.

"I speak now to Christians of the world, those who still cling to their misguided faith. With this man's death, the Church will be no more. There will be nothing left for you to cling to. Your Bible says that the gates of hell would not prevail against the Church. Yet here we are, and it is no more. Do not persist in your stubbornness. There is nothing left for you to cling to. You are the last stumbling blocks to prevent the Anunnaki from bringing us into the heavens. Our time is drawing short, and, from this day forward, anyone else who refuses to accept the truth will simply be removed as surgically and unmercifully as cancer is removed from the body. We want you to join us as we enter into our glory. Please, let this man's death be the last that mankind will ever see. With his death, we enter the era of eternal life, of everlasting peace. Behold, the beginning of the new dawn of mankind!"

The Prime Minister walked slowly toward Father Marco, drawing his sacrificial dagger from its sheath as he went. John could see Father Marco's lips uttering prayers right up to the moment that the dagger slid across the carotid artery in the side of his neck. He stopped his prayer, and smiled slightly as a

look peace came over him. The blood shot from his vein in bursts, leaving a trail of blood across the stage.

John wanted to look away, but could not make himself. After several bursts of blood, each one seemed a little weaker than the last, until at last, they stopped. Father Marco hung from the beam, limp and motionless. John noticed the last of the blood forming a stream down the side of Father Marco's neck and dripping onto the stage below him. It felt to him as if everything was moving in slow motion. The crowd erupted into another deafening roar, and the sound numbed his mind as he felt his eyes welling with tears. He tried to fight them back at first, then let go, letting them stream down his face like the blood on Father Marco's neck. The parliamentarian next to him noticed, and stared at him with a look of shocked disdain. John ignored him, no longer caring what happened next.

As the last drop hung from Father Marco's neck, it seemed to take an eternity to let go and fall to the stage. John watched it all the way down. As it splashed into the pool of blood on the stage, all the sound was suddenly sucked up into silence as if into a void. He looked around and noticed that he was not the only one experiencing this. Everyone was glancing around at each other with bewildered looks on their faces, trying to discover whether others were also affected. Some were rubbing their ears as if trying to clear water from them.

A bright light appeared in the sky above. John swooned as he felt the earth beneath him convulse and sway as if it was a teetering top. The silence was overwhelming and he realized he could not even hear the rush of his own blood as his heart began to pound wildly at the shock of what was happening. He looked at the Prime Minister and noticed that he was staring up at the sky with a look of utter terror. John followed his gaze up to the light, lifted his arms, and cried out, though the words never penetrated the silence, "My Lord and My God."

He stood transfixed, arms raised, and eyes to heaven as he watched the bright light in the sky grow like a giant crack being ripped across the heavens. Everything around him turned to a blinding white light as he saw one like a Son of Man, riding on a white horse and surrounded by a host of angels, coming to judge the living and the dead.

The End