



THE
LATTER-DAY
KILLS

E. J. CAMPFIELD



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by

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HIGH
ROAD
E-PRODUCTIONS

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HIGH ROAD E-PRODUCTIONS FIRST EDITION

JANUARY 2016

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*Jesus answered him,
“Have not I chosen you twelve?
And yet one of you is a devil.”*

--Gospel of St. John 6:70



PROLOGUE...

Rain drizzled down. Beneath a tangled multi-canopy of primeval Mexican jungle, an ancient stone city lay hushed and hidden from the ages. Its chiseled ruins peeked cautiously out through dense vines. A wall carved with jaguars, serpents and parrots. Toltec warrior statues, strewn and fallen like captured pieces from a mammoth game of chess. The colonnades and broken bulwarks of a thousand year old temple. Lost to time and civilization in the vast Chiapas rain forest that spread to all horizons.

The air was saturated with mosquitoes.

A fifty foot pyramid slumbered beneath a millennium of mulch. Atop its flat summit lay dead men, dressed for safari. Dead pack mules lay bloated in the dank tropical heat at its base, all stiff and covered with flies.

A lone Mayan Indian guide staggered out through the flaps of a tent, one of a half dozen pitched in a neat row along what had been once the main piazza of a grand native city. Inside the tents, archaeological gear and Toltec artifacts lay tagged and numbered on tarps. And more dead men in safari wear reposed on canvas cots.

Last survivor of the expedition, delirious with yellow fever, the bronze-skinned Mayan slumped to the ground. His eyes focused and unfocused on the image of a snake hanging on a cross, sculpted eons ago into the base of the pyramid.

He muttered incoherently over and over, "*Anticristo... anticristo... anticristo...*"



Mormon Catechism:

Section 7: We believe in the gift of tongues, prophecy, revelation, visions, healing, interpretation of tongues...

Section 8: We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.

*--The Prophet Joseph Smith
The Articles of Faith
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

Fearlessly, he stepped out into the aisle and toddled toward the front. She followed, leaning low, whispering encouragement. Row after row, the saintly faces turned to smile. She helped him onto the stage, and the little chain on his jacket jingled. It leashed a doggie to a hydrant, appliquéd on the pocket. She adjusted his bow tie and stepped away. Fearless and tiny, Caleb stared out at a sea of folks in Sunday best. The big men sitting by the pulpit crossed their legs and smiled.

“Go ahead,” she prompted in a whisper, “say them.”

Without hesitation, he did. “Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.” Not a quaver in the distinct little voice. “...Joshua, Judges, Roof.”

A low giggle ran through the chapel. She had never corrected that one, though he could have learned to say it quite clearly. Watch my lips. Not Roof, it's Ruth. Thhhhh. But he was barely three. It was too cute.

"Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes." The word was twice the size of him, "...Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi."

They were amazed. There was thinly scattered applause. It was a highly improper thing to do in the chapel, and it stopped immediately. But he was so cute. The big men seated near the pulpit uncrossed their legs and crossed them the other way, hands stacked piously on their knees.

"Keep going," she prompted.

"Matthew, Mark, Luke, John." The clear little voice took on a rhythmic cadence. "...Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, First and Second Fessalonians." Fewer giggles this time. "...Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, First and Second Peter, First, Second and Third John, Jude and Revelation."

"Good, Caleb! Very good!" she whispered. "Do the others now. The other ones."

"First and Second Nephi, Jacob, Enos, Jarom, Omni." He shoved his hands in the pockets of his short pants, twisting his shoulders to the beat of the words. "...Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, Third and Fourth Nephi, Mormon, Ether, Moroni..."



Mormon Catechism:

He called me by name, and said unto me that he was a messenger sent from the presence of God to me, and that his name was Moroni; that God had a work for me to do....

He said beneath a large stone there was deposited in the earth a book, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the ancient inhabitants of America, and the source from which they sprang....

Also, that there were deposited with the plates two stones in silver bows--and these stones, fastened to a breastplate, constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim...and that God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book....

I obtained a lever, which I got fixed under the edge of the stone, and raised it up. I looked in, and there indeed did I behold the plates, the Urim and Thummim, and the breastplate....

*--The Prophet Joseph Smith
The Pearl of Great Price, 1838*

Caleb's dreams began nearly a month before Elder Knox Wesley came to Hector Falls.
More accurately, they were not dreams, but rather

visions, for he had them both while asleep and during waking hours. His thoughts would narrow, and he was able to actually feel the transition as he entered the lucid, visionary state. In the beginning it was not really even a trance. Once he became accustomed to the sensation, he found that he could actually will himself in and out of it while maintaining his full conscious faculties, though strangely he could in no way use those faculties to alter what he saw. As the visions continued, their grip on him grew drastically stronger, and as his control over them retreated, it gave ground to fear.

There was little variation in the phantasmic scene, though he perceived that he progressed a bit further into it each time before coming out of the spells. It seemed to Caleb that the action was building, like a story line, leading up to something significant. Some dramatic climax. And this became the draw which brought him back again and again, at first voluntarily and with curiosity, then compulsively, until finally the frequency and onset of the seizures was completely beyond his control.

A deep, rocky chasm in semi-darkness. He would enter it from above, as though gliding in on wings. Below him, all was slow motion. A hellish place, lit scantily by flickering firelight. Shapes darted about, silhouetted against flames. He would drop down into the center of it, the fear rushing around him. Amid the clangor of hand-to-hand metal warfare, human shadows pitched like storm clouds across the rock faces as anguished wails of unspeakable terror echoed in many voices.

Then he would see the sword, sailing down in a whistling arc. A fantastic battle sword, its iridescent blade flashing in the firelight. In butcherous combat, it crashed against barbaric weapons of lesser metal--the lances, short-swords and shields brandished to pathetic avail by the shadowy human shapes -- beating them savagely down and shattering them to fragments....

* * *

Panting with fright, Caleb Easton came out of the hellish chasm hallucination, jolting upright in his bed. He slept in jockey

shorts, a young man of seventeen, tall side of six feet, though still beardless and lank with lingering adolescence. The tousled sheets slung about him were dank with the same cold sweat he swabbed from his face. Morning sunlight met the dark terror in his deep set eyes. He pushed a damp lick of thick, unstyled hair back off his forehead, rolled out of the rack and into a pair of jeans that lay across a chair.

He hadn't mentioned the visions to a soul. It didn't seem like a smart thing to do. Most of the other students and even faculty members at his small, rural high school already regarded him as odd. He didn't need the added grief of something like this getting back to anyone there. So he hadn't told his mother, or his seminary teacher or anyone else at his church ward, or even Buddy Rickenbaugh, his one best friend. Most likely, no one would know what to make of the visions any more than he did.

When his mother came out into the kitchen of their mobile home in her house robe, Caleb was already dressed for school. He sat eating breakfast cereal and memorizing scripture from what looked like a Bible -- actually a copy of *The Book of Mormon*. He would glance at the verses, then cover them with his hand and recite them silently to himself, his lips moving. Lucy Easton was almost as tall as her son. In her mid-thirties, she was pretty, but in a very plain, unembellished sort of way. Her wavy hair was simply washed and worn long, well below her shoulders.

"Can you catch the bus again, Caleb?"

Caleb glanced at her quizzically. She usually dropped him at school on the way to her job from which she hardly ever missed time. But she had stayed home sick yesterday, and this morning, her face seemed drained of color. His brow knit with concern, Caleb got up and felt her forehead.

"You still sick, Mom?"

"Just don't feel good at all. I'm not going into work today." She nodded toward a kitchen wall clock. "You better hurry. You'll miss it."

Caleb gathered up books and kissed her on the cheek.

"You gonna be alright?"

"Yeah. I'll be fine. You go on."

The house trailer sat partway up a steep slope on a country lot bounded by woods. Caleb hustled out, vaulting the handrail by the concrete block front steps. He trotted off across the yard and gravel drive that ran down to the graded county highway. The road skirted the rim of an old reclaimed strip mining pit, now filled up with water and known locally as Furnam Quarry. The setting was actually quite pretty. Over time, the trees and vegetation had grown back around the pit. Wildlife had returned, and few traces remained of the once vigorous coal mining operation there. A bay window off the trailer's living room offered an appealing view of what now appeared to be just a calm, rustic lake. It wasn't uncommon for Caleb and his mother to see deer and other wild creatures in their yard.

* * *

Caleb pledged allegiance in home room, all the time watching Rebecca Bryant and not the flag. Her family had moved to Hector Falls over the summer, so she was new at school that year, petite and remarkably slender with straight, jet black hair that reached nearly to her tiny waist. She looked like an Indian princess, Caleb thought. He delighting in the too-frequent-not-to-be-telling glances that he would catch her giving him in the hallways or across a classroom with those big, winsome, dark brown eyes of hers. The crush he'd had on her since the first day of school was apparently mutual. At least a little bit. But the two of them had never exchanged a word, even though she was also in a couple of his classes. She was pretty and outgoing enough to have fallen quickly in with the popular kids and had become an on-again, off-again steady of Joel Miller.

Joel was a guy Caleb made a point of staying away from. At every opportunity, he persecuted Caleb mercilessly, and though generally regarded as a loud-mouthed, unmitigated jerk and considerably less than gifted academically, he was none the less blessed with an overabundance of brawn, good looks and athletic ability that made him sufficiently well liked around school. Caleb by contrast was studious, soft spoken and kept to himself. He

tended to be more popular with faculty and school staff than with his own peers, who took his quiet, guarded demeanor for arrogance. It didn't help that he had a reputation for annihilating the curve in virtually every class he was in either.

A prime example was trigonometry. A ritual dance of manners transpired in this class time and again, its choreography having become precise and automatic through rote. Mr. Smith, the lively trig teacher, would waltz along the chalkboard, writing a long-winded equation. Then inscribing an equal sign like a penultimate flourish, he would pirouette dramatically in search of raised hands and answers. The trigonometric mysteries he posed were deep ones. Hardly a single student would ever make eye contact with him and run the risk of being called on -- except of course Caleb Easton in the back row, always ready to fill the phrase and complete this *pas de deux*.

Smith would let ten seconds of pregnant silence pass, waiting for a hand to go up. Near the end of the ten count, Caleb would look to his left, and seeing no hands up, glance to his right. None there either. His elbow would thump the desktop as he posted his hand, his thumb and forefinger pointed at the ceiling like a mimed pistol. It was always the same. A barely perceptible nod from Mr. Smith, and Caleb would exhale the answer. He was hardly ever wrong.

They had presentations in English class that day. It was one of the classes he had with Rebecca Bryant, and she had chosen to do an oral interpretation of a favorite poem. Caleb watched in adoration as she strolled gracefully to the front of the room. She flipped her hair back over her shoulder and opened a book to a marked page.

"The Look, by Sara Teasdale," she announced in a clear voice. Getting into character, she struck a dramatic stance. "Strephon kissed me in the spring, Robin in the fall." The book was a prop. She never once glanced at it, had the poem memorized. "...But Colin only looked at me and never kissed at all. Strephon's kiss was lost in jest, Robin's lost in play." She made a gesture that meant insignificance, then pausing, locked her gaze firmly on Caleb, her voice just above a whisper. "...But the kiss in Colin's eyes -- haunts

me night and day.”

Caleb started breathing again a second after she sat back down. The presentations continued. He barely took his eyes off her the rest of the class period. But she never once looked his way.

* * *

At lunch time, Caleb sat alone in the high school cafeteria, memorizing more scripture from The Book of Mormon. He lurched back, startled, as someone abruptly slammed the book shut on him. It was Joel Miller, flanked by Ted Lazarus and Jeff Busher, a couple more jerk jocks that Joel hung out with.

“Whattsa matter, Holy? Lose your place?” Joel sneered at him as the three moved off snickering. Loud enough to turn heads, Joel hollered back at Caleb, mocking, “Holy, Holy, Holy!”

In history class, Caleb sat looking at an empty seat two rows over that was assigned to Rebecca Bryant. The teacher circulated, handing back report papers. With a smile of approval, she gave Caleb his. It was titled “Early American Civilizations” and marked A-...Very Imaginative, Caleb! in scrawled red ink. The grade didn’t surprise him in the least. He was a branded A- student in this class, and he had quickly figured out that it made no difference how much or how little effort he put into his essays and reports, the wages were the same with this teacher. Always an A-.

Sixth period, he took a detour while running errands for one of the staff and slipped into the auto shop garage to visit Buddy Rickenbaugh. Things were a lot looser over there on the vo-tech side of the building, and the auto shop teacher never seemed to care when he dropped in. Caleb was mechanically inclined and had an inventive mind. He liked tinkering with cars and such. But when he had tried to fill out free periods in his schedule by signing up for auto shop at the beginning of the semester, his guidance counselor had pitched a fit. He was tracked academic and would quite likely be a contender for senior class valedictorian after all. No way were they going to put him in with those auto shop guys, no matter how interested he was in learning about cars.

Caleb tagged along as Buddy wheeled a Sun engine scope in

front of a Mercury Cougar and leaned in under the hood to finish installing a set of ignition points. Buddy was almost a year older than Caleb. He was clean cut, wore shop coveralls and round, wire-rimmed glasses that had been his trademark since he was just a tot.

"You gonna come over tomorrow?" Buddy asked. "I got the dirt bike fixed."

"Can't, Buddy. Gotta stay home and do yard work for Mom." Caleb pointed at the car's distributor. "Forgot the condenser."

"Huh?... Oh, yeah." Buddy attached the condenser wire as Caleb turned to go. "Hey, see you Sunday, man," he called after him.

"Sure, Buddy."

The car idling with its hood up in the next bay suddenly backfired, the open carburetor belching flame. It scared Caleb. He spun, backing against a low retainer wall as a fire started under the hood. The shop teacher was on it in an instant with an extinguisher, dousing the blaze.

As Caleb peered at the smoke and flame, his eyes rolled suddenly back in their sockets, and he felt himself at once yanked into the fiery chasm hallucination. There were the cries of the tortured human shapes, the noises of battle, and the great, glimmering sword...and then as instantaneously as it had begun, the vision was over. Buddy Rickenbaugh stood shaking him.

"Caleb! Caleb! Hey, man, you alright?"

The shop teacher and all the auto shop guys were clustered around him, staring.

"Yeah...I'm okay."

He slipped past them out into the hallway, realizing that he was drenched with sweat.

* * *

After the last period dismissal bell, Caleb worked the combination on his hall locker. Loading books under an arm, he caught a glimpse of Rebecca Bryant whose locker was three down from his.

"Hi."

The lone word startled Caleb visibly. She was actually speaking to him. He turned toward her, all thumbs, adolescent panic coursing through him.

"Hi, Rebecca," he said.

She smiled -- he knew her name. Well, of course he knew her name. As she moved closer to him, Caleb drew an anxious breath. Here she was, the object of his deepest wantings, standing right in front of him. Looking straight into his eyes. Talking to him. He could barely believe it.

"I had an appointment. I missed history today."

"Yeah. I-I noticed."

She smiled again -- he had noticed. How sweet.

"Well, I was wondering if you could give me the homework? The assignment, that is. You know, for tonight?"

"Uh...yeah, sure." He nearly dropped his books trying to get at his assignment pad. She walked beside him down the hallway. Very close beside him. He could feel her, warm and delicately perfumed, brushing against his arm. More adolescent panic. "Just read the chapter on the Reconstruction and answer study questions two through four and number seven," he told her.

Joel Miller came out of nowhere, blind siding Caleb and shoulder-jamming him into the lockers. His forehead hit the edge of vent slits on a locker door, slicing a crease above his eye that took its time about bleeding.

"You better stay away from my girl, Holy!" Joel threatened him. He was typically loud, attracting lots of attention as he hauled Rebecca along by the arm.

"I'm not your girl!" She was angry, vehemently so. She pulled loose from Joel, planting her feet. "He was just telling me a homework assignment!"

"Yeah. Prob'ly wants you to be one of his...twenty wives."

"They don't still do that," she snapped back at him. "You're just such a dickhead sometimes, you know it, Joel?"



THREE...

Mormon Catechism:

On the Means of Detecting and Distinguishing Angels and Evil Spirits

A revelation given to Joseph Smith the Prophet at Nauvoo, Illinois, February 9, 1843...

When a messenger comes saying he has a message from God, offer him your hand and request him to shake hands with you. If he be an angel he will do so, and you will feel his hand...

If he be the devil as an angel of light, when you ask him to shake hands he will offer you his hand, and you will not feel anything; you may therefore detect him....

*--Section 129, Doctrine & Covenants
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

A peculiar atmospheric phenomenon took place in the skies over Hector Falls the same morning that Knox Wesley materialized there.

On a cool, cloudless and dazzlingly sunbright Friday morning, there were dozens of reports of rolling thunder heard over the entire county, followed by an immense thunder clap and a crackle of chain lightning -- all of this coming out of a perfectly clear,

deep blue autumn sky.

Clem Mott observed the phenomenon while plowing under a field of standing corn in his lower sixty acres. A farm subsidies act had paid him not to harvest it in an effort to keep prices stable following a year of heavy yield. He even shut down his tractor's diesel so as to better make out the source of the rumbling commotion that emanated apparently from the open sky above him. It was all very strange. Fronts, especially those bearing rain, tended to approach from the northwest. But he was unable to determine if the sounds were from any particular compass point. They seemed to come from every direction at once. And the display of lightning that followed was equally strange, not quite like any chain lightning Mott could ever recall having seen. And he had seen lots of it, plowing, planting and harvesting fields since he was ten years old.

He gave up pondering the conundrum and went back to plowing, only to be startled half out of his wits by a tremendous thunder clap and a spike of lightning. He got off the tractor, holding his arthritic hip as he limp-ran to look down a slope where it should have hit. The air was alive with the pungent bite of ozone and so ionized it sent a chill through him.

He reached the brink of the slope, expecting to see fire and charred ground where the blistering bolt had struck. But instead he found only silence and the brown wrecks of corn stalks weaving in a light breeze.

Mott squinted. A figure appeared far off in the field, faint at first, like something coming out of heat waves. A shaggy-headed man dressed all in black, walking briskly toward him between the rows. The breeze that shook the corn stopped. The sun-blached field grew unnaturally still and quiet.

"Might a weary traveler trouble you for some water?"

Mott studied the stranger's pale blue eyes as he approached. They hooked and held him almost hypnotically.

"No trouble at all, friend," Mott told him. He limped ahead of the man back to his tractor and poured him a cup of water from a jug. The stranger drank it down in even gulps. Mott poured him another.

“Been walking long?”

The man smiled at him. “You might say that.”

“Where you coming from?”

“From back there a ways,” the man gestured. He laid a hand meaningfully on Mott’s shoulder. “Lord bless you and all your house, brother.”

Mott stepped back cautiously. He suddenly clutched his arthritic hip and looked at the stranger in cold astonishment. “Who...who are you, mister?”

“Just an old missionary,” the man said.

A half hour later, Mott came sprinting up to the porch of a farm house shaded by oaks. “Mattie!... Mattie!” he called, winded and wheezing for breath.

His wife, Mattie, rushed out, drying her hands on a dish towel. Her jaw dropped at the sight of Mott, running and prancing about like a happy child on his arthritic leg.

“Mattie, I’ve just met the most amazing man!” he told her.

* * *

In the course of the day, Knox Wesley visited a number of households and businesses in and around Hector Falls. He introduced himself as an itinerant missionary who was just passing through. He was seen on foot for the most part, but later in the day was witnessed driving an old, gray Chevrolet sedan. It was curious that Clem Mott and all those he spoke with were L.D.S. -- members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Mormon church. All attended the small Hector Falls Mormon church house that had been built by many of their fathers and grandfathers decades ago at the outskirts of town. It was even more curious that all belonged to the same L.D.S. ward congregation as Caleb Easton and his mother, Lucy.

There were in fact three wards active in the Hector Falls chapel, and they drew worshipers from the surrounding rural communities of four counties. The Mormons were if anything an efficient sect. From the highest level of the First Presidency down to the various regions, stakes and wards or branches, they were

painstakingly practical in both the structuring and governing of their church. Shared use of a meeting house by two or more ward congregations, scheduling their various Sunday school, sacrament, priesthood and other meetings in tandem, was commonplace and deemed prudent use of church resources.

Knox Wesley claimed to be a Mormon who had spent nearly his entire life in missionary work among the native Indians of Central and North America. The American Indians had always been people of particular significance to the Mormons. They believed that these Indians had a great prophetic destiny and were indeed what they termed the people of the book--that book being *The Book of Mormon*. There were many references in Mormon scriptures to the vital importance of missionary work among these tribes in the last days.

But Wesley was, in both his appearance and trade, a walking anachronism. Somberly dressed, he looked as though he had just stepped forward through time. He might have fit better somewhere a century ago. Furthermore, he was spirited and overpoweringly charismatic, with all the fire and brimstone flair of an old time traveling Pentecostal revivalist. This was a sharp contrast to the modern Mormon Saints, whose demeanor was always subdued and reserved during chapel services. In truth, they looked down on the evangelical frenzy and the rant and rave carryings on so common among the shouting Baptists and new wave of Christian fundamentalists. Such outbursts were regarded as undignified, the simple minded antics of deceived and ignorant gentiles, their term for all who were not worthy Mormons, even including Jews.

Wesley was moreover a self-professed life missionary of a religion that shunned the concept of career clergy entirely. A Mormon called to life-long missionary service was an unheard of thing. There was essentially no paid clergy within the L.D.S. church, and those serving as missionaries likewise received no salary. All were lay priesthood positions, held for a period of time, at the end of which the chosen were released from their call. But when the Mormons of Hector Falls met this Knox Wesley, spoke with him face to face, somehow they never doubted his claim. Something about him made them believe intensely that he had

answered a unique call -- one that had come perhaps directly from the Father himself.

By sunset, the phone lines were abuzz with faithful Saints exchanging gossip of their day's encounter with Knox Wesley. An autistic child Wesley had spoken to in one household was laughing for the first time in her life. Others proclaimed similar odd occurrences. The impression had been planted and now grew that Wesley was certainly an individual of great importance who may have come into their midst by celestial design and with supernal purpose. Truly, this man was a miracle worker, a messenger from God. None could recall exactly, rationally, how they had arrived at that conclusion. The conviction had just seemed to leap into existence from somewhere deep within their souls, like a simple truth they had always instinctively known, but had never before had the perspective to grasp.

And so it came to pass that when Knox Wesley showed up the following afternoon for sacrament meeting at the little Mormon church, he was warmly welcomed by a small throng of awestruck Saints. The things he began to tell them, offhandedly at first and then with increasing vigor, struck still more profound awe in them than they could ever have imagined.

He stayed on in the community for several days. People saw him everywhere, strolling through town, driving the gray Chevy out on the county roads, and missing hardly a single meeting of the second ward congregation at the Hector Falls Mormon church house.

Strangely, no one could say for certain where he was lodging.

* * *

Sunday evening. Knox Wesley knelt on one knee at the front of the small chapel, his hands raised high in an attitude of spiritual concentration. Through lips pulled tense and thin against his teeth, he spat a fervent prayer.

“Our almighty Father, author and finisher of our faith, abide with these, Thy children, Thy chosen as they venture forth upon this heathen land...”

The tone of it was fierce, hissing, as if each word were fueled by some unbounded inner rage. Out before Wesley, the little congregation stood with arms folded and eyes closed in prayer. All but Caleb Easton, beside Buddy Rickenbaugh in a pew bench near the front. Caleb held his head high, eyes open in seeming defiance of the huge, rugged old man who prayed on the platform.

“Let Thy holy wrath precede these brethren and sisters and protect them as a shield and a buckler!” Wesley intoned rhythmically, hypnotically, his prayer taking on a chilling cadence.

A close observer might have detected the erratic flit and dilation of Caleb’s pupils. What seemed irreverence of Knox Wesley’s prayer was in reality one of Caleb’s visionary seizures. It was the most numbingly severe one he had experienced yet. A shudder ran through him as he went catatonically stiff, completely powerless in its clutch.

Deep behind his eyes burned the hellish hallucination of a barren, rock-walled chasm, lit by firelight. He envisioned the blade of the awesome battle sword again, but now in more vivid detail than ever before as it arced and flashed repeatedly about him. From tip to crossguard, it was slick with bright blood that trailed from it in a spray as it swept broad, crisscrossing swaths, left to right, right to left, over and over again. The shrill screams of the shadows that fled before the blade were horridly real for Caleb and penetrated him like spears of hot glass.

“And like Nephi of old, avenge their righteousness with a mighty sword upon the wicked,” Wesley fumed, “that they be hewn down as wheat and the blood of their abominations be upon them!...”

Within Caleb’s slow-motion phantasm, naked bodies contorted and tumbled as the sword ripped them, eviscerating, splintering bone, dismembering. He could see the glistening, bronze flesh, all strangely tattooed and blood wet. The glinting steel whistled down on a fleeing form, severed the head, set it somersaulting as the body dropped away, limbs flailing.

“...Who heed not Thy commandments, who seek to defile and destroy Thy Gospel with the ways of their filthiness! For Thou art the Lord. We say in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior...”

Then at last, Caleb glimpsed what he had never before been able to see -- the wielder of the great sword himself revealed, striding swiftly through the murk on powerful legs. He personified primitive death. An enormous mauler, strapped inside a fortress of archaic Chaldean armor. The face was lost in blackness behind helmet brim and cheek plates, but the molten cruelty of two eerie blue eyes burned savagely through. With a berserk cry, the warrior again hefted the massive blade, winding up for a devastating blow. The sword sheared clean through a bare, tattooed torso. Firelight grazed the features beneath the helmet, and for a fleeting instant after the kill, Caleb perceived the face of the slayer. Sparged with blood, it was the wild, remorseless visage of Knox Wesley!

“...Amen.”

The congregation uttered the word in unison after Wesley as Caleb started violently, snatched from his trance. Wesley came to his feet. He was a pale, hoary-headed study in black and white, shaggy and imposing, like a Clydesdale in a dark suit a hundred years out of style. His eyes opened -- piercing, pitiless blue eyes -- and he scanned the small congregation, stepping to the pulpit where two leather-bound books rested. Gold stamped on the spine of one was Holy Bible. The second volume lay open.

“Those among us here tonight there be who shall never taste of death,” he rasped, “for the great day of the Lord is at hand.”

He closed the open book on the pulpit, raised it above his head. Clear, gold letters on the cover proclaimed The Book of Mormon.

“There are yet many other mysteries I shall reveal unto you, shown me by God’s own hand--”

--Praise His name,” Bishop Vollfachs interrupted, crowding Wesley from the pulpit. “Elder Wesley, we are thankful for the testimony you’ve brought to us of your life-long missionary work among the Indian people.”

Wesley moved off the platform, his chin tucked low. At the corner of his eye, he fixed Caleb Easton.

* * *

The ward choir sang a closing hymn, and Bishop Vollfachs gave the benediction. The solemn air slowly dissolved into one of chat and fellowship at the back of the chapel. Many of the brethren and sisters gathered about Knox Wesley who laid hands on the bowed head of a young man. Raising his eyes to the rafters, Wesley uttered a blessing.

Several elders, Bishop Vollfachs and the Counselor members of the ward bishopric stood in a group with their hands folded, cautiously regarding Wesley from a distance and speaking quietly among themselves.

The wards had saved for a long time to purchase new hymn books, and they were due to arrive in the morning. Gathering and boxing up the old, worn hymnals was a troop of young Aaronic deacons and teachers. At the age of twelve, worthy boys were ordained deacons by the laying on of hands in a formal ceremony. At fourteen, they became teachers, and at sixteen the title of Aaronic priest was conferred. When they turned eighteen, they would be eligible to receive the greater Melchizedek Priesthood and the office of elder, held by most men of the church. And after that, they might recognize their dream of being called to serve a mission.

Caleb, Buddy Rickenbaugh and another young Aaronic priest supervised the hymnal troop. Caleb and Buddy were virtually inseparable at church -- like two heads on the same set of shoulders. Though his grandfather was one of Bishop Vollfachs's counselors, it was a sore point among the adults that Buddy was by leagues the more unruly of the pair. Caleb by contrast was a particular favorite of the ward families.

"He sure teaches things different than I ever heard," Buddy confided quietly to Caleb while adjusting his round, wire-rimmed glasses.

"He's all cruelty and hate," Caleb replied, pointing out uncollected hymnals to a roving deacon.

"Just lookin' at his eyes scares me."

"It scares me the hold he's got over everyone." Caleb watched the wondering gaggle flocking Knox Wesley.

"My grandfather says those prophecies he keeps talking about

aren't even in the scriptures," Buddy said.

"Your grandfather's a counselor, Buddy. Can't they stop him?"

"Hey, Caleb, you know you got some grease on your neck?" Pete Cooksey, the other young priest, poked his finger at a smudge under Caleb's ear.

"Cut it out!" Caleb slapped at Pete's hand and rubbed the smudge himself. "I had to tighten the oil filter on Mom's car. It was leakin' real bad. Did I get it all off?"

"Yeah."

At the back of the chapel, Knox Wesley laid hands on the head of Lucy Easton. Caleb watched them uneasily as Wesley drew her close to him. Too close, it seemed. Her face was all but pressed against his barrel of a chest. Again, Wesley tilted back his head to speak a blessing.

"Brother Hancy said he saw Elder Wesley's old gray Chevy parked over by you and your mom's trailer Friday," Pete told Caleb. "How come he was at your place?"

Caleb was surprised at this. "I don't know," he said. He watched the littler boys struggling with the hymnal boxes. Most hadn't gotten their growth yet, and the loads were a bit much for their lanky arms. "Must have been when I was at school. Mom didn't go into work Friday. She didn't feel well all week."

"I saw it parked over at Jenny Tarkoff's yesterday," Pete said, taking a box from a smaller boy who was on the verge of dropping it. "Okay, here. Load me up. We'll tote 'em back to the storeroom." They piled another carton of the books into Pete's husky arms.

Buddy and Caleb each hoisted boxes too. Carrying them toward the back, Caleb eyed Wesley disdainfully as he took his hands from Lucy Easton's head, trapped both her hands in both of his, keeping her close. They exchanged words he was too far away to hear.

"I'll be glad when he's gone," Caleb said.

"Yeah," Buddy chimed in, "me too."

As the boys passed by, Lucy Easton pried her hands away from Knox Wesley. "Oh, Caleb," she said, tugging at his shirt sleeve, "I want to introduce you to Elder Wesley. This is my son, Caleb."

"Hello, Caleb," Wesley said in a measured low voice, "I'm very

pleased to meet you, son.” He loomed over Caleb, offered his hand, palm down. It was a subtle bit of male to male body language, a power ploy betokening superiority -- sometimes even challenge. His hand on top, yours below, off-leveraged, forceless. And that’s the idea.

Caleb looked at it for what seemed a long time, hoped it would be retracted, but feeling the eyes of everyone upon him, passed his armload of hymnals to Pete and reluctantly returned the handshake. His hand was fully engulfed by Wesley’s massive paw. He flinched at the deliberate crush of the man’s grip. But it didn’t stop Caleb from purposefully twisting the handshake upright, though it took all the strength in his arm. Hands even -- challenge met.

“Mister Wesley,” he replied coldly with a nod. It was an intentional slight, and from the narrowing glare of the blue eyes, Caleb knew it hadn’t been wasted. A missionary’s title was Elder. Always Elder. Even the common appellation Brother would have been taken by many as disrespectful. His mother missed it entirely, or she might have corrected him.

“We believe Caleb’s called to serve a mission as you were, Elder Wesley,” she piped happily. “He’s studied scripture since he was three.”

Pete’s armload of hymnals crashed to the floor, and the others standing about stooped to help pick them up. Caleb pulled away from the ongoing handshake, but Wesley mashed viciously down on his knuckles as though they weren’t even there. It seemed impossible that flesh and bone could inflict such horrible force. Caleb’s mouth gaped as he was jerked suddenly close to this man who towered over him.

“I see you for what you are, demon!” Wesley’s words were an icy hiss in Caleb’s ear. Wide-eyed, Caleb wrestled free and backed away into his mother.

“Caleb Easton, watch you don’t knock me over!” she chided. “You ready to go?”

“Uh, no...er, yeah. I’m gonna walk down by the quarry with Buddy, Mom. I’ll be home later.”

Caleb hurried out, favoring his hand, Buddy in tow. He risked

a glance over his shoulder. Knox Wesley's blue-eyed stare burned menacingly back at him.

* * *

The ward bishopric was comprised of three men, all ordained high priests in the Melchizedek Priesthood of the Mormon church. Bishop Vollfachs himself was charged with overseeing all ward matters and with ultimate responsibility for ministering to the spiritual needs of the congregation. He was closely assisted by two counselors. His first counselor was Buddy Rickenbaugh's grandfather, the patriarch of the close-knit Rickenbaugh family.

The arrival of Knox Wesley had brought about a quiet but considerable rift in the ward, and Bishop Vollfachs had become gravely concerned. It was indeed difficult not to admire Wesley's powerful and unorthodox persona, and the amazing revelations he gave were deemed wondrous by most in the congregation. But others found them shocking, bordering on heresy and even blasphemy. Those in complaint were a decided minority, and as such, they had kept their sentiments discreet. The overwhelming majority held Wesley in the highest esteem, and their ranks were increasing.

Bishop Vollfachs had discussed this problem with his counselors. Wesley, they all agreed, had set an ominous ripple in motion through their peaceful ward. It threatened to become a tidal wave. Word of him had spread to other wards, and he had begun to wield a power that, if unchecked, might soon rival their own authority or even that of the stake leaders above them. They were suspicious of the source of this strange, new spiritual doctrine Wesley proclaimed and of the miracles he purportedly performed that had swayed so many. They weren't certain what motivated this man or indeed what it was he was bent on doing, but they knew he was most clearly not to be underestimated.

Bishop Vollfachs sensed that, once challenged, Wesley could become an even more formidable menace. No question, the matter had to be addressed and addressed promptly. But it had to be handled with extreme caution. A blowup could have unfortunate

consequences: a further rift in the ward or even a complete split. Such a thing was monumentally rare, almost unthinkable in the strictly governed Mormon church. But there was historic precedence for it. Splinter groups, spun off from the main body, rejecting its authority and governance. Almost a hundred of them, some had estimated, since The Prophet Joseph Smith had brought about the re-establishment of the church more than a century and a half ago. And this they knew was exactly how such a thing began. Small at first. Some colorful individual, professing new revelations, drawing off a following. It was enough to warrant much concern.

A group of elders gathered with Bishop Vollfachs and his counselors in the bishop's office just off the front of the chapel shortly after the meeting. Their solemn murmuring hushed instantly as Knox Wesley entered the room, closing the door behind him.

The lingering silence was broken finally by Bishop Vollfachs. "Elder Wesley, there are some questions we would like to ask," he said, trying hard not to sound acquiescent.

Wesley's eyes flared a moment with a fervor that subsided almost as quickly as it came. His chill gaze roved from face to face, sizing up each in turn. "An evil one stalks your congregation, brethren," he told them, low voiced. Not a single one of them took his gaze without looking almost instantly down or away.

Grandfather Rickenbaugh stepped forward. "Elder Wesley, concerns have been raised about these...revelations you claim are from God--"

Wesley spun on the frail old man, cutting off his speech. "--It is written! In the latter days, demons shall take on flesh to walk the earth!" he hissed. "Yea, the very Sons of Perdition, seeking the plates, to destroy them, and deceiving the church with profound knowledge mingled in lies!"

More awful silence.

"I don't seem to recall that prophecy, Elder Wesley," Grandfather Rickenbaugh said simply. "Perhaps you could remind me of where it appears?"

"Book of Zenos, chapter twelve!" Wesley replied. He seemed almost amused by Grandfather Rickenbaugh's astounded

expression. His answer no doubt confounded the lesser studied elders there. But those holding the high priesthood of the Melchizedek certainly perceived.

There are what has been termed lost books of the Bible, referred to by name in scriptural cross reference, though curiously not included in the authorized scriptures we now know. No one can say for certain if they survive in any form. Moses wrote of the Book of the Covenant and the Book of the Wars of Israel. Joshua referred to the Book of Jasher, and the prophet Isaiah to the Acts of Uzziah and the Book of Jehu. But these works are not among the thirty-nine books comprising the Old Testament. In the New Testament, there is direct reference to additional epistles written by the Apostle Paul -- a third Book of Corinthians, a second Book of Ephesians, as well as a now unknown epistle to the early Christian church at Laodicea.

The Book of Mormon similarly is not without references to its own lost books. The great prophet Nephi cited the writings of Zenock, Neum, and Ezias -- all works that are absent from present Mormon scripture. But most extraordinarily, Nephi related scant excerpts of prophetic passages from a hitherto unrevealed Book of Zenos, a prophet who Mormon scripture says was martyred for his incredible predictions.

Among Mormon scholars, it has been theorized that the full text of the Book of Zenos was likely included in the golden plates delivered by the spiritual being Moroni to the Prophet Joseph Smith for translation in September of 1827, but that it was part of a portion of the plates which was sealed up and which Smith was forbidden to open.

Church doctrine held that the truths contained in this sealed portion concerned the end times, and that the plates would be brought forth again by God and the secrets of the sealed portion revealed at a time of God's choosing, presumably during the last days. "Touch not the things which are sealed," the scriptures said, "for I will bring them forth in mine own due time."

Grandfather Rickenbaugh eyed Knox Wesley narrowly, an undeniably eerie and awesome terror creeping through his innards. Was this man professing to be God's chosen revelator of the secrets

of the sealed portion of those vanished Plates of Mormon? And if so, how had he--?

“One apostate demon grows among you!” Wesley continued in deep baritone, blue eyes searing them one by one. “A young priest, well versed in scripture and deception.”

They watched Knox Wesley in sweaty silence. Bishop Vollfachs ended the nervous quiet. “By whom were you ordained, Elder Wesley?” he asked.

“Our Lord.”

“Well, yes...but by whom? Specifically.”

Wesley brought his head up, seeming to rise full extra inches in height. “By the hand of Jesus Christ himself,” he told them.

Incredible... Preposterous.

“And when did this ordination take place?” Bishop Vollfachs inquired carefully.

They watched awestruck as an aura of brilliance grew around Wesley until it surrounded his entire body. His face glowed like a saint's, so bright that it hurt their eyes and they put their hands up to shield them.

He looked like an angel!...

Wesley shook his head, as though the answer to Bishop Vollfachs' question should be obvious to them.

“Almost two thousand years ago,” he said plainly.



FOUR...

Mormon Catechism:

Jesus spake unto his disciples...

And he turned himself unto The Three, and said unto them: More blessed are ye, for ye shall never taste of death ... even until all things shall be fulfilled and I shall come again in my glory with the powers of heaven....

They were changed into an immortal state.... And in this state they were to remain until the judgment day of Christ.... And behold, the heavens were opened, and they were caught up into heaven, and saw and heard unspeakable things. And it was forbidden them that they should utter the things which they saw and heard....

And now I, Mormon ... was about to write the names of those who were never to taste of death, but the Lord forbade, for they are hid from the world. But behold, I have seen them, and they have ministered unto me.

And they are as the angels of God, and they can show themselves unto whatsoever man it seemeth them good. Therefore, great and marvelous works shall be wrought by them, before the coming day when all people must surely stand before the judgment-seat of Christ.

--The Prophet Mormon, c. 400 A.D.

III Nephi, Chapter 28

A sliver of daybreak sun crept above the vast ocean horizon in the east behind him. He knelt on the broad, surf-washed beach, bowing low, as the other followers had, his long, tawny-colored hair whipping freely in the offshore breeze that pelted him with drifting sand.

“Zedekiah,” his master said quietly. He reached out to embrace his master’s feet, feeling the man’s hands rest gently upon his head. Just above the wrists, between the bones of both forearms, were pierced the frightful pocks of wounds that looked as if they must go all the way through. His master spoke, as always, compassionate words, removed his hands from Zedekiah’s head, bidding him to stand. Zedekiah raised his head and looked up. His young eyes were of the same cast as the dawn sky and seas billowing beyond him--cold, unsettling and blue.

He was a full-blooded son of the people of Nephi by birth, born unfortunately in a time of terrible war. On a moonlessly dark night, the roving invaders from the lands to the south had come, quick and destructive, slaughtering countless hundreds of his homeland people -- his father, mother, all his siblings. After the assault, they regrouped to pillage and take spoils of the atrocity they had so mercilessly inflicted. They found him, tiny and alone, wandering amid the grand dwellings as they collapsed in flame, through all the raw, sprawled carnage covering a landscape astink with the fumes of burning flesh. Just this small boy, naked, filthy and blood smeared, but otherwise so ominously unharmed that they took it for some kind of sign.

For all their fierce war costumes and painted faces, their animal howling and rushing at him, they could not make him cower, could not make him cry. The child stood his ground, chin up defiantly, speechless and angry, glaring at them all until they ceased their antics and went silent too, standing about him at a distance, panting from their exertions.

He was carried off and forced into slavery. Given his birth, he might certainly have died a slave, as did many others captured by the war tribes. But as he grew, he achieved honor among them and earned his status as a free citizen, even developing a reputation as

one knowledgeable in the craft of potions and medicines and the practice of healing. His birth name was long lost, as was his ability to speak his native Nephite dialect. Among the nomadic heathen tribes he became known as Zoram.

But powered by the convictions of young manhood, he forsook savagery and idol worship and went off to live alone in the wilds and wrestle with his thoughts. He later journeyed back to the land of his birth, to the civilized border territory of Moriantum. The strange, forgotten dialect of his early childhood was rekindled in him by renewed contact with his own kind. He repented his past and went on to become a scholar of astounding reputation among the Nephites, embracing the old traditional religion and ways of Nephi. But though he was in truth full Nephite by bloodline, he quickly discovered that many of these Nephite people were bigoted against him and distrustful of his pagan upbringing.

For that reason, his teachers gave him his new name, Zedekiah, which was favored among the people and hence very common throughout the land. To distinguish him from others called Zedekiah as he traveled to study and teach, he attached his repatriated homeland like a surname. It was in this way that he became known finally among all Nephite people as Zedekiah Moriantum-Zoram.

But over his life span, he was destined to be known by many, many names....

* * *

Lucy Easton glanced at the clock on her mobile home kitchen wall. It was getting on past nine o'clock. Caleb had yet to come home, should have been there by then. He was usually pretty good about letting her know when his plans changed, saying where he was and when he would be in. But he hadn't called.

Was that a car engine she heard outside? She was sure it was. Maybe he had caught a ride with someone rather than walk the entire distance with Buddy Rickenbaugh.

She pushed aside the drape on the front bay window. Peeking out, she glimpsed just a trace she thought of something moving in

the yard, strained to get a clearer look, but could make out nothing in the country darkness. No car that she could see. No one there. It was peculiar. She was quite certain she had heard an engine shut off. Nervously, she uncranked a pane of jalousie window louvers a crack and called outside, "Caleb?" She listened carefully, then called again, "Caleb? Is that you out there?"

No answer. She moved slowly and uneasily toward the front door, as though anticipating a knock. But there was no sound for many seconds. Undoing the deadbolt and safety chain, she cautiously turned the knob and opened the door. She jumped back startled. Outside on the front step stood Knox Wesley, still and staring.

* * *

Thomas Easton had disappeared the same night he threw out the stake missionaries.

Their weekly visitations to the Easton's home began shortly after their ward bishop determined the family was again having problems. He had promptly notified the stake president concerning their situation.

There were a number of capacities in which worthy Mormons could be called to a mission. Aside from those dispatched to Missionary Training Center for instruction and then on to proselyting missions throughout the country or in foreign mission fields, there were also those who served closer to home.

It was notable that as a young married couple, Thomas and Lucy Easton had themselves been temple missionaries and as such had once paid their own way to live near a large Mormon temple for several months, serving there together daily. This often involved participation in proxy baptisms and other vicarious ordinances and endowments for the dead -- most of them, genealogical ancestors of living Latter-day Saints, researched back numerous generations. It is a belief peculiar to the Mormons that even the long deceased may have their souls interceded for by the faithful living and receive atonement, advancing them to a higher state, or kingdom, in eternity.

Dressed in white baptismal togs, the proxies would descend into a font as witnesses stood by, to be immersed by an elder, reciting his baptismal incantation over and over. "Sister Esther Lucille Easton, having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you for and in behalf of..." and consulting a list he would fill in the name of the departed person, "...who is dead, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." And the elder would dip them beneath the water, already beginning his incantation for the next decedent on the list even as he drew them up from the water. A rote, mechanical, assembly line procedure. Each proxy might be immersed this way a dozen times or more in succession.

From there, they would move on to confirmation, receiving spiritual baptism for each of those they represented. A number of elders would lay hands on them as one prayed, "Brother Jonas Thomas Easton, in the name of Jesus Christ, we lay our hands upon your head for and in behalf of..." fill in the blank again, "... who is dead, and confirm you as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and say unto you, receive the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Many other Mormons served part-time missions right in their home communities several evenings a week as stake missionaries. Their call was not only to lead gentiles to the faith, but also to assist when backsliders needed to be rehabilitated and brought once again into the good graces of the church.

Thomas Easton was having trouble with his faith. It wasn't the first time. He had backsliden before, quite seriously. Two previous episodes of it no less. His bishop had found that something which often helped those who struggled with their beliefs was being asked to prepare a message and give testimony at sacrament meeting. It was something which all L.D.S. did from time to time at the bidding of their bishop. It was customary to end testimony with a pronouncement of faith: I believe that this is the only true church.

But Thomas Easton would not say it. He would not say this is the only true church. He said, "I believe...I believe this is all a lie. An awful lie. And that all of you have been deluded and deceived.

I can no longer be a part of this. Not any longer." And he sat down.

The stake missionaries doubled their visitation efforts. Thomas Easton was a fully temple-endowed elder of the Melchizedek priesthood. If he could not be turned, they knew he was damned to spend eternity in perpetual outer darkness, a traitor to the Holy Ghost. But there was more than the soul and exaltation of one man at risk here too. There was a family. A faithful and worthy wife, a delightful son -- young Caleb. And a new child on the way, they had just learned. According to church beliefs, it was impossible for a woman to participate alone in the spiritual resurrection of the righteous that was to follow the latter days. On that morning of the first resurrection, unless her worthy Mormon husband were there to draw back the burial veil from her face, call her by her temple name, and raise her from the dead, she would be denied her exaltation in the Celestial Kingdom to come, no matter how worthy a life she may have lived on earth.

When Thomas stopped attending services with his family entirely, the stake missionary president contemplated whether they should up the visits to three a week. When the ward bishop notified him Thomas Easton had also ceased giving his expected tithe of income to the church, that settled it. Three times a week they came, for two months. There was no set schedule. They might turn up at his home any day and at any time. They would stay for hours -- reasoning and pleading, and later demanding and threatening -- until he fled the house and slept out. Lucy Easton would let them in again and again, though Thomas reasoned and pleaded with her -- and later demanded and threatened. But she was more Mormon than she was wife, he realized at last. It was no longer his home. He dreaded being there, dreaded the thought of going home each night.

The irony of it was that he was indeed a good man. He worked hard and was conscientious about providing for his family, and he was well liked and highly respected, both at his job and in the community. People knew he never drank or even swore. And he was not a man given to violence. Which made what happened all the more unbelievable and tragic.

One night, he just simply had enough. He went over the edge.

He slung wide the front door of his house, and latching onto one stake missionary by his hair and belt, heaved him out so hard and with such bitter rage that the man lost skin off his palms and knees skidding along the walk and rolling into the yard. The second missionary was ejected no more gently, thrown against the door post and booted in the seat as he scrambled out.

"This is my home! I will no longer have this in my home! Do you understand? No longer!" Thomas shrieked at them, grabbing the nearest object off the porch -- a garden spade -- and going after them with it.

He chased them through the yard, and though in a hurry to leave, they stopped long enough at the edge of the lot to pantomime the shaking of dust off their feet, as the Prophet had commanded: "Whatsoever house ye enter, and they receive you not, ye shall depart speedily from that house, and shake off the dust of your feet as a testimony against them."

The foot shaking ritual was cut short and an even more speedy departure ensured as Thomas walloped them with the spade, hard enough to crack ribs. The missionary with the skinned hands and knees bristled. He turned, planted his feet, apparently intent on putting up a fight, or at least posing some resistance to this gross indignity. For his effort, he got the back of the spade square across the mask of his face. Thomas Easton wound up and laid into him like a batter going after a high outside slider. It cost the guy a half dozen front teeth and the perfectly plumb line of his nose. It was fortunate the other missionary recognized instantly the utter depth of anger he read in Easton's eyes. No question, the man was mad enough to kill someone.

The missionary latched onto his ailing partner, who had just sucked in the first agonizingly cold breath of night air over the splintered, nerve-bare stubs of his broken out front teeth. He hauled him along by the collar, roaring with pain. They ran for their car, arms protecting their heads from a hail of shovel swats. Thomas wouldn't let up, stayed on them like a nest of frenzied hornets. He went to work on the car body once the two were inside, cracking the windshield. With a peal of tire rubber, they at last outdistanced him, running after them down the street.

Thomas threw the spade down on the porch and stormed back into the house. Instantly, he was confronted by Lucy Easton, just as angry as he and six months pregnant. They postured, railed loudly back and forth, shoving at each other. She chased after him, pounding him with her small fists as he rampaged through the house, filling his arms with books of Mormon scripture, religious magazines and wall hangings. He thrust them all onto the flaming logs that crackled in the living room fireplace.

In their bedroom, he dumped out dresser drawers. She knew what he was after. All faithful, temple-endowed Mormons -- both male and female -- wore a special white undergarment beneath their outer clothing in constant contact with their skin. Called temple garments, the lightweight, one- or two-pieced under apparel covered the torso, upper arms and legs to the knee. Like the Orthodox Jewish yarmulke or the tallith katan, Mormons wore their temple garments always as a token of faith and a symbolic shield against harm or evil influences. Thomas gathered an armload of them, and fending Lucy off as she clawed at him, got them all into the fire.

Upstairs in his bedroom, young Caleb sat on his bed, hunched over his scriptures with which he was obsessed. Frightened by everything he had seen and heard going on downstairs, he prayed earnestly. The bed sat in a corner of the room, and he had his back all the way against the two walls, the books open around him like a spiritual barrier. His father burst in, and taking in the scene with an enraged grimace, raked up the scriptures off his bed, tearing them from Caleb's hands, pulling more off his bookshelves.

"Dad, don't! No, please, please!" Caleb pleaded, crying. But he quickly became angered himself, slapping at his father with both hands. "Stop it! You stop!" he screamed.

Before he could realize and get control of what he was doing, Thomas Easton felt himself close a fist tight with hateful rage. "Damn you, kid!" he snarled.

He lunged and struck his son across the jaw, hard as he might hit a full grown man. Caleb arced back, falling small and loose on the floor, holding his face and gaping up at his father. Thomas saw his son's eyes, read the emotions there: shock, terror...and

accusation. He dropped the books, stood aghast at what he had just done, groveling and stammering about for words. But there were none to be found. The wrath welled up again, and he raced out of his son's room.

Caleb heard more violent racket and screaming voices downstairs. The glass in the front door shattered as it rebounded on its hinges, flung against the wall. He heard his father's car start up and the engine rev as it pitched out onto the street and roared away. Teeth not meeting up as his face swelled, Caleb stumbled down the staircase to the living room, hanging heavily on the handrail.

Religion blazed on the fireplace logs. The wrecked front door hung open, letting in cold, fresh quiet. Lucy Easton sat on the floor, gasping, dress torn off one shoulder. She heard Caleb on the stairs, with a jerk of her head, looked at him. He saw her tear-wet face under a damp tangle of hair, her eyes seeming to reach out for him. Then he noticed with horror the tide of water and blood that swelled in a pool under her. Her high-pitched wail all but shattered him. She clamped a hand over her belly, the other between her thighs, feeling every thrash as the new little soul inside her struggled and clutched at the raw, shrinking edge of life.

The next day was to be Caleb's birthday. His eighth. In the Mormon perspective, it was the day on which a child reached the age of accountability and was responsible for his own sins.

* * *

A full moon shone down on Furnam Quarry as Caleb and Buddy Rickenbaugh walked the county road around its rim, approaching Caleb's mobile home.

"Gimme the flashlight again," Caleb said. He took it from Buddy, put his right hand in the beam.

"Gee, Caleb, your knuckles are all swollen up," Buddy remarked. "You're just lucky he didn't break your whole hand."

"I'm still shaking. It really hurts."

"Still feel like you're gonna barf?"

"No."

“Well, I’m tellin’ you, they oughta lock that guy up,” Buddy asserted loudly. “He’s some kinda nut case! I’m gonna let my grandfather know about it.”

“Buddy--”

--“And you better tell your mom.”

“Buddy, you don’t say a word to anyone,” Caleb insisted. “We just stay away from him till he’s gone. I’m scared what he might do. What if no one believes me?”

“Well, I still think you should tell your mom.” They stopped and stood at the end of the driveway leading to the trailer.

“It’s late,” Caleb told Buddy, gritting his teeth as he tried to close his hand in a fist but couldn’t quite for the pain. “I’m gonna go in and get some ice on this.”

“Caleb!” Buddy’s voice was a hiss. He dragged Caleb off the drive, pushed him to his knees in the ditch that ran along the roadside.

“What’re you--?”

“Shhhhh!” Buddy snatched the flashlight, flicked it off, peering up over the edge of the ditch. Sticking out from behind a large bush in the yard near the trailer was the nose of an old gray Chevrolet sedan. Caleb’s stomach twitched in a nervous knot when he saw it.

“He’s in there, Caleb,” Buddy whispered. “Whudda we do?”

 FIVE...**Mormon Catechism:**

And now, whether they were mortal or immortal, from the day of their transfiguration, I know not.... And they were cast into prison, and the prisons could not hold them, for they were rent in twain. And they were cast down into the earth; but they were delivered out of the depths of the earth; and therefore they could not dig pits sufficient to hold them.

And thrice they were cast into a furnace and received no harm. And twice were they cast into a den of wild beasts; and behold they did play with the beasts as a child with a suckling lamb, and received no harm.

--The Prophet Mormon, c. 400 A.D.

III Nephi, Chapter 28

Leaning low and running in the ditch, Caleb and Buddy made for a tree line that edged one side of the property, then worked their way stealthily around to the back of the trailer. They crouched behind a picnic table. The drapes on a broad back window were open, and they could see in. A table lamp illuminated Lucy Easton, standing with her head low and arms crossed.

The boys watched intently as Knox Wesley stepped into view behind her. He took something from his jacket pocket.

"What is it?" Caleb whispered urgently.

"I can't tell," Buddy shrugged. "Looks like a bottle or something."

Lucy Easton seemed completely unaware of Wesley. From inside his jacket, he drew a large, white handkerchief, folded it neatly and dampened it with the contents of the bottle. Caleb gasped as his arms encircled Lucy Easton and he raised the handkerchief to her mouth and nose. Strangely, she didn't resist in the least. Her arms dropped limply at her sides. Wesley turned her and lifted her chin with a finger to inspect her face, then let it fall again.

Buddy strained to see, squinting through his round glasses. "What did he do to her, Caleb?" he breathed.

"I don't know. I don't know what to do." Caleb bounced to his feet. "We better go in."

"Caleb!" Buddy hissed, grabbing his shirt and holding him back. "Maybe...maybe we shouldn't." He made a limp pointing gesture toward the trailer window.

Inside, Wesley undid the buttons of Lucy Easton's blouse, revealing beneath it the silky white temple garment that was her constant under apparel. With a grim frown, he grabbed the garment at the neckline and shredded it open down the front. He slid the blouse and underwear off her shoulders and let them drop away. What confused the boys was the complete absence of any resistance from her. Was she consenting to this? Seduction and sex were mysteries to them. Was this what adults did?

Caleb settled slowly back into the shadow of the picnic table, looking timorously at his mother's bared breasts and at the dim features of Knox Wesley, hulking over her and stroking them backhanded with his huge, coarse paw -- the same one that had all but crippled his own hand. The sick feeling inside him worsened by the moment. He glanced toward Buddy who had turned his eyes modestly and uncomfortably away, embarrassed for him.

Wesley slid his hand up Lucy Easton's spine and into locks of her full, long hair, clutching, pulling her head back. It slumped easily and rolled to the side. Caleb saw her eyes close. She didn't move at all as Wesley bent to nuzzle the graceful curve of her neck, then turning her around, pulled her to him with a virile prowess and ease that seemed somehow astoundingly out of place in a man of his repute and of his age. His loins rode up over her hip,

pressing into the small of her back, full of lust, pulsing slowly and rhythmically against her body. Caleb saw his hand move under the waistband of her skirt, cupping her.

“No!” Caleb bolted for the trailer with Buddy just a step behind him.

Wesley’s head turned warily. His piercing blue eyes glared straight out into the dark yard. No possible way he could see the boys...but he could!

An invisible force lifted Caleb and Buddy and pitched them back. Buddy bounded up, scared out of his skin and ran for the road.

“Buddy!” No stopping him. Caleb got up and made for the trailer again. He saw Wesley’s face twist in a snarl. The force nailed him a second time, hurling him a dozen feet against a tree. Stunned and terrified, he got up, running for his life toward the stand of oak woods bordering the lot.

Behind him, the light in the trailer window went out.

* * *

Amid a weedy clearing in the woods, Caleb lay sprawled and out of breath, his eyes welled over with tears. He gazed into the starry night sky, murmuring over and over, “Oh, God...oh, God... oh, God...”

Indelible images of events from earlier in the evening crowded in on his mind’s eye: Knox Wesley laying hands on his mother’s head; Wesley’s crazed scowl and the crushing handshake; Wesley ripping his mother’s temple garment, his big hands roughly squeezing at her breasts; and from his vision, Wesley’s cruel eyes beneath the Chaldean helmet brim....

A covey of birds darted up. Alarmed, Caleb sat up stiffly. Resolve gripped him. With a surge of vengeful emotion, he ripped up handfuls of weeds, flung them in the air, bellowing, “God...God dammit!!”

* * *

Caleb crept out from a storage shed behind the darkened mobile home. Metal tools, clutched in his hands, clacked faintly as he moved low and quiet across the yard. Watching for any slight trace of movement in or around the trailer, he advanced slowly on Knox Wesley's weather-beaten old Chevy sedan.

He laid tools down and dropped to his knees in front of the grillwork, hands probing for the hood release. The latch popped, louder than he would have liked, and he eased the hood open by inches, jaw tight, hoping the old springs and hinges that held it wouldn't creak. The rangy bush next to the car gave him partial cover from the front of the trailer. But it also blocked his view of it.

Staying as flat as he could against a fender, Caleb leaned in under the hood with a spark plug wrench. His fingers curled around the lens of a flashlight, letting out only thin slices of the beam. He pulled loose a spark plug wire, and gnashing teeth against the pain in his hand as he gripped the ratchet handle, unsnugged the spark plug and cranked it out of the engine head. With a pocket knife, he stripped an inch of insulation off one end of a coil of light-gauge, blue bell wire, and using a stubby screwdriver, prodded the bared end snugly up inside the boot of the plug wire he'd removed and left dangling from the distributor cap. He inspected carefully with the flashlight, making sure there was good contact between the stripped wire and the connector clip up inside the spark plug boot.

He dropped the roll of bell wire down into the engine compartment, watched it fall all the way through and uncoil on the ground under the car. He doused the flashlight and inched the hood back down, flinching as it contacted the latch. There was no quiet way to do it. He pressed all his weight down on the hood until the latch caught. It made less noise than he expected.

He scuttled around behind the car and rolled onto his back. Holding tools against his chest, he scootched in under the rear bumper on his flanks and elbows until only his feet stuck out. The gas tank was right over him. He tapped lightly on the side of it with his screwdriver handle, found the fuel level and marked it with a scratch.

Twenty yards away, the front door of the trailer creaked open.

Someone stepped outside. Caleb didn't hear it, didn't see it. The bush blocked his way. At the exact instant the trailer door banged shut, Caleb put a husky steel chisel to the side of the gas tank just above his scratch mark and smacked it through with a mallet. With a precision only coincidence could engineer, the two sounds masked each other out entirely.

Large, shoed feet approached the car. A man's feet. But Caleb was unaware of them. He wedged the spark plug he had removed from the engine into the hole he had made in the gas tank. It was a good, firm fit. He cut the roll of bell wire that ran from the engine compartment and stripped insulation off the end.

So intent and focused was he on what he was doing, it didn't register with him that the driver's side door had opened and feet were stepping up into the car until he had the bared bell wire twisted tight around the metal tip of the plug. Now all it needed was a spark. The engine would turn over, and a hot bolt of coil-charged electricity would whip down the thin bell wire just long enough before melting it to fire the spark plug into the gas tank, and then...

Sagging suspension and the bang of the car door drove realization home with a chill. Someone was inside!

Caleb heard the faint jingle and tick of metal, could envision the key sliding into the ignition. His nose was two scant inches from the spark plug. He gasped, scrambled frantically and rolled from beneath the car into a tight fetal knot, arms wrapped over his head, anticipating the explosion that would certainly envelope him too this close.

The engine gave a puny chug, and the solenoid chattered. The battery was dead.

The car door opened. Caleb caught half a breath, scurried to hide behind a fender. Out of gear, the car rolled away from him. Through the country darkness, he saw the shadowy outline of a large man pushing it, one hand in on the wheel to steer. Coast-starting it. The man hopped inside. The old Chevy lumbered down the sloping drive, the driver's door still open. It had picked up a good bit of speed by the time it reached the end of the gravel driveway and swung out onto the county road.

The car nosedived and gave a lurch as the clutch was let out, a split instant before an enormous explosion. Flame and black smoke heaved a hundred feet into the air as the Chevy was instantly transformed into a billowing fireball.

Behind the darkened front window of the trailer, Lucy Easton stood naked and motionless, illuminated in the sudden fire flash. Her eyes were dull. There seemed to be no awareness, no life at all in her body.

Outside, Caleb gaped in shock as the molten bulk of the car was blasted out over Furnam Quarry, tumbling end over end. It plunged into the dark water, and with a swirling hiss of hot steam, instantly and completely disappeared. Waves surged away from the spot where it went in, then smoothed out and settled. Over and done with in seconds. Startlingly fast. Silent night returned. Like nothing at all had ever happened.

Caleb raced into the trailer. He saw his mother in profile, unclothed at the window. Slipping quickly into her bedroom, he returned with her robe. He draped it around her shoulders, covering her, and got her to a chair, putting his arms around her. He pressed his cheek into the nape of her neck, smoothing the mussed hair gently back out of her face. His voice was quavery, like a tiny child's, "Mom?... Mom?"

She didn't respond, didn't move at all. Just stared mutely off into the darkness as though entranced.

Caleb lifted her, carried her into her bedroom and put her under the quilt on her bed. He settled at the foot of the mattress, uncertain what he should do, or if there were indeed anything else he could do now.

Some minutes later, he went outside and picked up the tools that had been left in the yard. He put them away, exactly as he had found them in the storage shed. He was on his way back to the trailer when he had an afterthought. Fingerprints. He returned to the shed, and wiped down the tools and everything else he could remember touching inside with a rag. Another afterthought hit him. He fished the coil of blue bell wire out of the bin he had tossed it in and walked far out in the back yard to where a capped pipe stood. It led into the shaft of an old well that had gone all but

dry. He flipped up the cap, and wringing the coil of wire tight so it would fall the whole way without jamming, let it drop down the shaft which he knew ran down several hundred feet.

Back inside the trailer, he checked on Lucy Easton. Her eyes had closed, and she was breathing slow and shallow, appeared to be asleep.

Caleb went out and sat in a stuffed chair in the front room. He thought of calling Buddy Rickenbaugh. Calling someone. No. Better to keep quiet now, he reasoned. See what happens. He stayed there awake all night in the dark, fending off his conscience.

* * *

His mother was no better the following morning. She was awake, but wan and hollow eyed. Her pulse and breathing were both very slow, and she had broken out in a sweat. Caleb knew he had to call someone.

He phoned the Rickenbaughs. Buddy had already left for school. Caleb told Mrs. Rickenbaugh that his mother was very ill and he couldn't get her to respond, didn't know what was wrong with her or what to do.

An hour later, Sister Rickenbaugh arrived at the trailer along with Bishop Vollfachs, his wife Sister Vollfachs and Dr. Foster, a physician who was a member of another ward that met in their chapel. Caleb ushered the four of them into the bedroom where Lucy Easton lay, eyes fixed unblinkingly on the ceiling. The others looked on as Dr. Foster made his preliminary examination. He listened to her heartbeat, which was faint but regular and even. She was conscious he determined, though not very aware. There was some minimal pupillary response and a reflex or two, but aside from that, she seemed essentially paralyzed and without any muscular control at all, though her body was not particularly limp.

She didn't react to the prick of a sharp object on any of her extremities or to light touching in any commonly ticklish areas. When he lifted her hands into the air and let them go, they would hang there extended awhile, then gradually lower back down onto the bed, as though run by some excruciatingly slow hydraulic

mechanism. It was baffling. Dr. Foster looked up at Bishop Vollfachs and the two women. He gave a perplexed shrug and motioned them out of the room before drawing a vial of blood from her arm and putting it in his bag. It was when he opened her robe to examine her for marks that he found the bruises on her breasts, torso and thighs. He perceived immediately that they had been made by forceful hands.

“Oh, my lord,” he muttered.

Turning her over to check her back and buttocks, he found something even more startling. Deep gouges, like might be made by an animal’s claws...and what looked to him like bite marks.

He then discovered what he had dreaded he might -- the viscid deposit of semen that seeped out of her still, pooling in the robe beneath her, and finally, the clear evidence of rough intercourse. He turned his head, exhaling a troubled breath.

“My lord,” he whispered again. And with that, he capped off a sample vial of the semen and set it inside his bag.

Caleb sat at a counter out in the kitchen, memorizing his scriptures as he customarily did, covering them and reciting to himself. Hearing lowered voices and suddenly sensing the eyes of the others on him, he looked up to find them leaving in what could only be describe as a controlled hurry.

“What’s wrong with her? Is she going to be alright?” he asked.

They were tense, all four of them, faces low, risking uneasy glances his way. Strangely, not a one of them said so much as a word as they filed past Caleb and out. They even seemed to be keeping a distance from him.

Caleb moved to a window and watched them all get into Bishop Vollfachs’s car and drive off. He went and checked on his mother again. She lay on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. There seemed to be no change. He couldn’t imagine what was going on, why they hadn’t even spoken to him before they left.

* * *

It had turned cold out. Caleb put on a coat and went out the front door. He walked pensively down the driveway and across the

county road to the rim of Furnam Quarry. He gazed down at the still water in the pit. From where he stood, he could see the full expanse of the quarry, clear to the other side some three-quarters of a mile away. All was quiet. There was no one else around that he could see. He knew how dramatically deep the water was in this hole. Not like a natural lake. There were no shallow spots. It dropped straight down over 200 feet near the sides, then sloped quickly to a maximum depth of more than 400 feet out toward the middle. Ever since the state had stocked it to ensure good ecological recovery, the quarry had been a great place to catch pan fish and even the occasional bass. What if someone fishing someday snagged something and hauled it to the surface, he thought. The notion made him queazy again.

He got down on his stomach and stuck his head out over the edge of the pit to scour the water. He looked all along the sides for anything that might have washed up. Nothing. At least nothing that he could make out. He turned his attention to the water farther out in the quarry, straining to catch a glimpse of anything possibly floating on or just below the surface. But it was all clear and smooth. Hardly a ripple as far as he could see.

Someone would find out though. Sooner or later. He knew that. It was how things worked after all, and it was only right. Good people always got caught or always gave themselves away it seemed to him. If he never said a word, it might take a long time. Maybe even years. But somebody would find out.

Why should he get away with what he had done? Why should he not get caught? No one except truly evil people ever got away with anything like this, did they? Or at least got away with it in this life. Was he one of those evil people now? He had killed someone. He had deliberately set an ambush and shed blood in vengeance. For such an act, he had been taught that he would have to atone with his own life, by the shedding of his own blood. But didn't it make a difference somehow, wasn't there some provision if the blood he shed was not innocent blood?

Caleb pushed himself up and dusted off his coat and hands. Walking away, he stepped on something, felt it hard under the sole of his shoe and stooped to pick it up. He was surprised and

unnerved to see what it was -- a chipped and scorched spark plug. He turned it over and over, feeling its weight like guilt in his hand. Then he spun and threw it high out over the quarry pit, watching it peak, then plummet and splash in.

Underwater, it sank, threaded end first, spiraling. Down, down, down to cold, murky depths. Light was all but gone that deep when it clanked against the burned out shell of an old car, resting upside down on its roof in the silt. The paint on it was nearly all seared away, parched and blistered. Two twisted tires were blobbed around the rims on the rear axle. The crumpled trunk lid hung by a mangled hinge, crushed under one misshapen rear quarter panel. Windshields and glass were all blown out. Someone knowledgeable of car body styles would still have recognized it as a Chevrolet sedan of bygone vintage. The front door on the driver's side hung wide open, its top edge wedged into the uneven quarry bottom by the weight of the vehicle, listing slightly to that side.

The interior was entirely fried, the carpet and headliner incinerated, the dash crisp, the steering wheel melted and Salvador-Dalied over the steering column. Nearly bare of upholstery and padding, the bench seats were skeletons of metal strap frame and spring coils.

But there was nothing else inside. No burned body. No charred human remains of any description anywhere to be seen.



Mormon Catechism:

There is a unified pattern in Mormon folklore.... One important item in this pattern is the story of the Three Nephites, a type of legend current among members of the Church....

One hundred and fifty versions of the legend were collected for this study. The subjects who experienced the visitation of a Nephite, and the informants who tell the stories are from all economic, social and education levels.

Both the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its rival, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, still accept the authenticity of the Three Nephites and acknowledge the current possibility of visits to individuals and communities.

*--Hector [Haight] Lee
The Three Nephites, Ph.D. dissertation
University of New Mexico, 1949*

There will be strangers in your midst walking with you, talking with you; they will enter your houses and eat and drink with you; go to meeting with you, and begin to open your minds...

*--The Prophet Brigham Young
"The Three Nephites"
Journal of Discourses, Volume VI, 1858*

“I would like to regard this as a ward matter, Brother Foster,” Bishop Vollfachs told Dr. Foster as the two sat conferring in private. “I’d just as soon this didn’t get out into the community any sooner than necessary. Not at all, if it’s something we can deal with among ourselves.” Foster had confided to Bishop Vollfachs all the details concerning his examination of Lucy Easton.

“There’s just too much potential for harm here,” the bishop continued, getting up and pacing with his hands in his pockets. “Too many people who stand to be hurt by... attitudes. You understand. That is, of course, if what we suspect proves to be true.”

Donald Foster nodded his understanding. What the bishop was saying was that he would prefer not to notify police officials of their suspicions immediately. A scandal involving members of the church, especially a scandal of this nature, would not auger well for anyone.

“I’ve treated the boy on an occasion or two in the past,” Foster said. “In fact, there was an appendectomy couple years back. His blood type would be on the records.”

“Could you take a personal hand in this?” Bishop Vollfachs asked. “Gather the information without alerting anyone to what’s involved here? Is that possible?”

Donald Foster nodded again. “Yes, I can,” he said firmly.

Foster drove to a medical testing lab facility in the neighboring county where the regional medical clinic and hospital were located. He gave the vial of semen he had collected from Lucy Easton to a testing lab technician who was a long time acquaintance.

“Need a favor,” Foster told the man discreetly. “Could you run this for blood type for me? Quietly? Do the test yourself?”

The technician pushed his bottom lip out in suspicious disapproval at first, but gave a shrug. “Sure. No problem.”

“I need it as soon as possible,” Foster said. The lab technician arched his brow and squinted at him narrowly. “Please,” Foster said with urgency in his eyes. “It’s -- it’s sensitive.”

With a sideways movement of his jaw, the technician nodded. “Okay, sure. I’ll run it right away.”

Dr. Foster left and drove four blocks to the hospital facility

and medical clinic where his offices were located. He slipped into the central records room and, opening file drawers, located the folder he wanted. He took it out and browsed through the sheets of records and form copies hole-punched and fastened inside. He turned up what he was after. A blood type. AB-negative. A comparatively uncommon type, he thought. Good. It would make a match more conclusive.

As he slid the folder back into the drawer, it occurred to him something wasn't right with the records.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, what's going on here," he muttered to himself. He checked again the index tab on the file folder and the top sheet bound inside. The name typed plainly on both was Thomas Easton. He leafed through the record again. Nah, this wasn't right, he thought. What is this? This is the father, isn't it. He had all but forgotten about Thomas Easton. Would have liked to have forgotten about him completely. Wasn't the boy's first name Thomas too? No, wait. That's not it. Something else.

He dropped the folder back into the file cabinet and retrieved another, flipped it open. "Caleb Joshua. That's it," he said to himself.

He ran his finger down a page of medical history, found a box tagged Blood Type. A ballpoint notation in it read: AB-negative. Hmm. What were the odds? Same uncommon type as the father's, Foster thought. He returned the records to the file cabinet and walked out.

Foster drove back down the street to the testing lab, intent on waiting for results from the semen sample. He was barely through the front door of the building when the lab technician trotted out from a hallway and drew him aside. The look distorting the man's face was hard to characterize. Something halfway between bewilderment and fright.

"What the hell did you take that specimen from?" he whispered hoarsely. Foster stared quizzically at the man, couldn't figure what he would be so riled up about.

"In twenty-five years I have never seen anything like this," the technician said earnestly. "How fresh is this sample?"

"It would have been fresh sometime late last night, I suppose," Foster told him with bewilderment. "Why?"

“Because it’s still alive.”

They stood there looking at each other, hard to say which appeared the more indredulous. “There’s something else,” the technician said. “If you don’t take a look at this for yourself you’ll claim I’m crazy. Come on.”

Anxiously, he pulled Dr. Foster along with him through a set of swinging double doors.

* * *

The following Sunday. Buddy Rickenbaugh moved past the small groups of third ward congregation members mulled at the back of the chapel before sacrament meeting. Slipping by each little cluster, he picked up snippets of hushed gossip.

“He’s gone. Nobody’s seen him in days,” he heard an elder intone low.

“Just like the Nephites do. They vanish! Just as suddenly as they appear,” another elder added.

“He was one of the Nephites!” a third elder exclaimed. “All the prophecies, everything he told us. How else could he have known?”

Among a group of women, the topic was different.

“And now that pretty little Jenny Tarkoff too. It’s the same way with her,” an older woman was going on and on. “They just can’t figure out what’s wrong with them, either one.”

“My word, his own mother if you can believe such a thing,” another said. “How horrible! ‘Course that situation there has always been a bad one.”

“Like their souls left their bodies,” the older woman said, “Probably not a one of us been safe all along. Could have happened to any of us. It’s witchcraft, I’m telling you, that’s what it is!”

Over his shoulder, Buddy picked up another comment.

“Elder Wesley warned us about that one,” an elder stood impressing on his group. “No question in anyones mind.”

Another man picked up the tune. “Yes, and everyone knew immediately who he meant too. I think we’ve always been able to see through that one. Just a little bit. I know I’ve never trusted him. Not really.”

Buddy stepped outside into the evening air as late arrivers brushed past him and went inside the chapel. He saw Caleb approaching from the parking lot. How could he tell him? What would he say? He knew he couldn't look Caleb in the eyes, just couldn't do it. He kicked at the parking lot gravel with a toe.

Caleb latched on to Buddy's arms and pulled him aside. Buddy wouldn't meet his gaze. Caleb's worst dread welled up. He had confided in Buddy the secret of what had happened the night they had seen Knox Wesley with his mother and what he had done about it. It was just too troubling to keep entirely to himself. And anyway, after what Buddy already knew, well, Caleb really had to tell him, had to explain. Had someone reasoned out that he would have said something about it to his closest friend? Put pressure on Buddy to tell what he knew?

"What did you do, Buddy? You told your grandfather, didn't you!"

Buddy's head came up. Stung by the question, he gave Caleb a biting, almost resentful look. "No!" he said emphatically. "I didn't say a thing to anyone!" He met Caleb's stare, held it. Caleb saw the truth in his eyes and softened.

"No one will talk to me, Buddy! What's happening to everyone?"

Buddy pushed Caleb away, keeping him at arm's length. "Caleb, he told them you were evil. A demon or something. They're afraid of you. They all think you...hurt your mom."

The words sank in. "What am I going to do?" Caleb reached out for Buddy, but he backed sharply away. It was then that Caleb saw it -- that look in Buddy's eyes. Fear...and doubt. It stunned him. "Oh, man, not you too. You don't--"

--"You can't come to live with us, Caleb," Buddy said. "My grandfather says I can't even bring you in our house anymore."

"Buddy, you were there! You saw what he did! How could you think--?"

--"I don't know what to think! I don't know what to believe!" He had never felt so torn up inside. "I never saw anything! Not really, you know, man? Only what you told me. Only what they told me!" He pointed at the chapel door. "For all I know..." He

threw up his hands, his face a tangle of accusation, bewilderment and grief.

They stood looking at each other, neither finding words for quite some time.

“Caleb, I gotta tell you,” Buddy said at last, “I’m scared. I mean really scared, man.” This was the same Buddy Rickenbaugh who was always such a cut up. It was the most earnest and grown up tone Caleb had ever heard in his voice. And that made Caleb really scared, too.

Sacrament meeting was starting. Buddy entered the chapel stoop-shouldered and skulked to his usual place on the pew bench near the front. Heads turned as Caleb entered. He walked down the aisle, enduring stares of fear and hatred. He took slow, deep breaths, trying not to let on that he noticed. He took his seat in the pew bench beside Buddy, who suddenly felt the weight of every eye on him as well.

A chord sounded on the chapel organ, and the choir began a sacrament hymn, O God, the Eternal Father. The young deacon boys in their white dress shirts prepared to pass the sacrament through the congregation -- trays of white bread torn in tiny fragments and small cups of water. Under the watchful eye of Bishop Vollfachs, an Aaronic priest, one of Caleb and Buddy’s peers, consecrated first the bread, saying a sacrament prayer.

“O God, the Eternal Father, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this bread to the souls of all those who partake of it, that they may eat in remembrance of the body of thy Son...”

As the sacrament was passed down their pew, Caleb and Buddy took it from the trays. Caleb looked at it in his hand uneasily. It was a serious thing for a Mormon to partake unworthily -- if guilty of sin and unrepentant. “For whoso eateth and drinketh my flesh and blood unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to his soul.”

The young priest continued his prayer, blessing now the sacrament water. The earliest Mormons had used wine in the observance, as was the custom with other faiths. But God had given the Prophet Joseph Smith special revelation in the matter,

stipulating the use of water instead of wine, in keeping with the Mormon church's strict abhorrence of strong drink.

"...Bless and sanctify this water to the souls of all those who drink it, that they may do it in remembrance of the blood of thy Son, which was shed for them, that they may bear witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they do always remember him, that they may have his spirit to be with them. Amen."

Caleb raised the cup of sacrament water to his lips. It was Brother Clem Mott who snatches it away from him.

"You dare blaspheme the body and blood of Christ, demon!?" Clem snarled at him.

He pitched the sacrament water in Caleb's face. Caleb flinched stiffly, like he'd been slapped open handed. He let go a gasp.

"Get out from among us!" Clem Mott bellowed, arm out like a lance, finger pointing toward the back.

The air in the sanctuary became saturated with utter silence. Bishop Vollfachs, Grandfather Rickenbaugh and the bishop's second counselor all three watched what happened. But no one made a move to intervene. Another elder flung the water in his sacrament cup at Caleb. Then one of the women, followed by another, and another.

"Demon! Son of Perdition!" an assortment of pitiless voices rang out. "Get out from among us! Get out!"

Their rabid, hellhound baying grew steadily louder and hysterical. Distraught and mortified, Caleb moved through this mob of a congregation, callously doused by cup after cup of sacrament water, as though he were walking some savage ceremonial gauntlet.

"Get out! Get out, demon! Get out from among us!" The cacophony of exorcismic shouts blared about him until he slumped forward and clapped his palms over his ears to keep out the hate. Rough, heartless hands shoved at him. His eyes teared over, his face turning blotchy and flushed with hurt that gradually transformed itself into blood-rushing anger. He broke into a run but, reaching the back of the chapel, pulled up short and suddenly wheeled about. He showed them a face not one of them would likely ever forget. It sent a frigid shiver prickling through most,

shocked and silenced them all instantly.

“Damn you,” Caleb spat back at them. It didn’t seem possible, but his visage turned blacker and more beastlike still with mad, decimating rage. “Damn you all!” he roared in a raucous voice that didn’t sound remotely like his own. He whirled and threw the double doors at the back of the chapel open wide and ran out into the darkness.

Buddy Rickenbaugh gazed sadly after him, a full cup of sacrament water trembling in his hand.

* * *

Lucy Easton stood motionless in an institutional gown by a hospital bed, staring out between the bars on the window in her tiny room. A sign out on the lawn read Meadow Woods Psychiatric Asylum.

“Our most severe cases are housed here on the third floor,” a staff psychiatrist droned to a group of interns strolling past the door. “You’ll be dealing with everything here from somatoform disorders, first order catatonia cases, to a few more acute schizophrenic patients as well.”

There had been no discernible improvement in Lucy Easton’s condition since she had been admitted there. Her appearance deteriorated rapidly over the many months that followed. It was a horrible transition to watch as her straightforward, country-folk prettiness disappeared. Her eyes grew hollow and sunken, and her skin became so sliver thin and pale it was almost translucent. It sagged and wrinkled as she lost weight. Her flowing hair turned from its vibrant auburn brown to total white in just a few weeks. To ease the task of bathing her, the staff nurses had cut it short. When they did it, she had evinced not the least sign of caring at all.

A letter lay open on her night stand. It had been there with its envelope for months. The nurses had opened it and read it to her when it first arrived. It was from her son.

“I’m going away to school, mom. A real good one. I got a scholarship, just like we used to talk about. But it’s far away, so I

won't be able to come and see you as much." They might as well have been reading to the wall. She had just stared vacantly out the window as she did most of the time.

"I miss you so much. When I visit you, I always think, 'Where did you go? Are you even still here at all? Is there any of you left in there, or are you completely gone away?' I wish I knew. And I wish I knew somehow that you forgive me for what happened. I love you, mom. I'm sorry I didn't take care of you better..."

Her symptoms were largely puzzling to her doctors, who had been unable to ascertain the exact cause of her ailment. For lack of a better diagnosis, her condition had been classified as first order catatonia. She had not responded at all to any of the various methods of treatment which they subjected her to before conceding unanimously that her case was most likely hopeless.

A little over half the cost of her care and treatment there was covered by federal Medicare and state Medicaid assistance sources. The majority of the balance was taken care of by a check which arrived quarterly, drawn on an account titled Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints - Welfare Plan Fund. The small amount remaining after that would be invoiced monthly to her son, her only known relative, who worked while attending a university in another state. Though payment of these latter invoices often left something to be desired in terms of promptness, they were still none the less eventually paid in full.

* * *

Nightfall. A crude hut sat amid forest wilderness, a dome of bent saplings covered over with animal hides. Dismal chanting came from inside where several native American Indian men sat cross-legged on the ground, their garish features and outfits lit by the ember glow of a dying fire.

What seemed a patch of the forest floor itself came suddenly to life and got up. A man, caked with dried mud, covered in leaves and moss. He wore the headdress of a holy man. A shaman. His face and chest were daubed with colored clays. Shaking a noisemaker, he repeatedly uttered an incantation.

Among the Indian men, a young white man wearing a college logo sweatshirt hand-held a 16mm Bolex movie camera, panning to keep the shaman in frame. The camera whirred steadily, documenting the ritual. A microphone picked up the sounds, carried them to a durable field-packed tape recorder, tended by twenty-year-old Luis Montero. Luis was tall for a Mexican kid, almost six feet, stalwart and good looking with a heavy mustache.

Caleb Easton sat beside Luis, raptly jotting notes on a pad in ballpoint. His dark hair was thick as thatching and grown long, pushed casually back. A sparse beard clung to his face which, like the faces of the other two college boys with him, was emblazoned with the same hue-rich clays smudged and streaked along the foreheads and cheeks of all the Indians.

The shaman lifted a big kicking lizard, lay its pale belly to the blade of a long knife and slid it down the steel. The lizard bled and quit kicking. Among the Indian men, a crude bowl was passed, each of them sipping its tinted, liquid contents. They handed it to Luis who drank and passed it to Caleb, who drank and made a face.

“Shit, Luis, what is this stuff?”

Luis shrugged indifferently. Caleb scooped pulpy nodules and shreds of spotted mushrooms from the bottom of the bowl. “Oh, christ. Mescaline and mushrooms,” he breathed.

Luis couldn't hear him over the chanting. “What?”

“Peyote and psilocybin,” Caleb said louder. “We're going to be sick as dogs.”

Luis just grinned at him. “You told me you wanted the whole experience, gringo boy.”

The chanting became intense. The shaman's incantation rose to a yowl as he pranced before the others, raising the bleeding reptile high and bowing low, over and over. He moved in an arc, working his magic before each of those present -- until he came face to face with Caleb. The holy man's body froze and he went silent. The chanting ceased. Caleb observed in awe as the man's dark eyes filled with fear. It took plenty to throw a fright into an old conjurer like this. He inched warily back away from Caleb.

* * *

Minutes later, the participants came single file out of the crude hut and into the night. Caleb and Luis were among the last. Still slim waisted and boyish of face, Caleb had sprouted more height and a bit of beef, his body ranging out toward Daniel Boone-like proportions.

The shaman approached Caleb cautiously, almost reverently. He laid a small, hand-woven cloth bag with a leather draw string into Caleb's hand. There was a symbol stained on it and something soft and shapeless inside. He closed Caleb's fingers firmly around it, held them tight. Caleb was not proficient enough in the language to clearly understand the words the old holy man uttered in native tongue before shrinking away. He looked to another Indian man standing near Luis for an explanation.

"He says a powerful warrior's spirit lives inside you. But Uktena, the Snake Ghost, follows you," the Indian man translated for him. "The medicine bag he prepared for you. Very powerful." He nodded his painted face for emphasis. "It is to protect you. Until you are a man. Then, you must face him."

Caleb looked at Luis, who wore an expression midway between somber and dubious. They saw the shaman crouched at a distance. The old conjurer seemed to be watching something behind Caleb. Something moving.

Something no one else there could see.

* * *

A station wagon rolled down the blacktop road and turned into the drive of the Rickenbaugh's rural Hector Falls home. It was just after twilight on a spring evening, and the crickets had taken up their nightly serenade. The front passenger door of the station wagon opened, and Buddy Rickenbaugh got out, pushing his round glasses up on the bridge of his nose. He wore a plain white shirt and tie, carried the jacket of his dark colored suit over his arm.

He looked at the house he had grown up in -- a house he had

not seen in a very long time. A trace of a smile pulled at his lips. He had traveled a long way to come home, and it was good to be back there again, even though the reason for the visit was not so happy.

His father got out from behind the wheel of the wagon stretching cramped legs and got a duffel and a small suitcase off the back seat. He passed the suitcase to Buddy and carried the duffel himself. Shoulder to shoulder, they walked toward the house.

The screen door on the spacious front porch exploded open, and an avalanche of family poured forth onto the front yard. They surrounded Buddy, welcoming him and telling him how good he looked. It was notable that, despite the obvious closeness of the family and their jubilation at seeing him, they all addressed him in a reverent tone as Elder Rickenbaugh and never just Buddy -- except for his mother, from whom his name slipped as she brushed a tear off her cheek and gave him a big hug.

"How are Sandra and the kids, Buddy?"

"All doing fine, Mamma."

"I'm so glad you could come."

Buddy looked around him at children who were taller than he remembered. At siblings who looked older. At uncles, aunts and others who were grayer and rounder. There was a somberness in their faces that revealed the true purpose of this gathering of kin at the Rickenbaugh family home. It was a death watch.

Fifteen years had passed since Buddy Rickenbaugh had either seen or spoken to Caleb Easton. In the months following the events that brought about Caleb's departure from Hector Falls, Buddy had become intensely despondent and withdrawn, so much unlike himself that it had caused everyone great concern. He seemed to be weighted down by an unfathomable guilt, the exact reason for which he would not disclose to anyone. There was fear he might depart from his faith or even do himself physical harm.

It was during this time that he formed a close, mutual bond with his grandfather, who previously had little tolerance for the boy's frivolous and often irresponsible attitudes and behavior. Grandfather Rickenbaugh was the only one who seemed to be able to get through to Buddy back then, the only one to whom

he would reveal any hint at all about the things which tore at him so relentlessly. They spent much time together, often entire days, turning over deep matters of theology and life's problems. A change took place in Buddy, and his parents soon began to wonder if he might someday even become the branch of their family through whom the fire of patriarchal responsibilities would pass.

* * *

Buddy and his mother stepped quietly along a dim hallway on the second story of the house to a bedroom door. Buddy pushed the door open a crack. Inside, a dim lamp glowed on a night stand.

"He keeps asking for you," she told him. "It's been going on for weeks now. He doesn't have very long."

"Do you think he'll know me, Mamma?"

"Some days his mind is very clear," she stated. "You just go in and talk to him, son. The way you two used to talk. Something's troubling him terribly."

Buddy left his mother in the hallway and slipped inside the bedroom, closing the door noiselessly behind him. Grandfather Rickenbaugh sat disheveled and feeble in a stuffed, high-back chair, shivering under a blanket. He was nearly ninety, Buddy knew, but even at that his grandfather's appearance shocked him. His drawn and wrinkled face seemed immeasurably old, cadaverous and haunted. Buddy knelt and took his hand.

"Grandpa."

Grandfather Rickenbaugh twisted his head around and strained to make out Buddy's face in the low light. Buddy saw a flicker of recognition in his eyes. The old man grew agitated, his mouth working, though words at first refused to come out.

"T-t-tell Caleb to watch out and pray for deliverance! You tell him!"

"Grandpa, I don't know Caleb anymore. I don't even know where he went to--"

"--There's danger!"

"Danger? What do you mean?"

The old man sniveled and wept, his voice a high-pitched

whine.

“He’d held the plates in his hands! Those same hands he laid on all of us to bestow gifts and heal! We were being blinded, Buddy! It was him all along!”

“Grandpa, what are you--”

“He was the apostate demon. The one among us. The deceiver!”

“Who, Grandpa, Caleb? No, that’s just--”

“--His doctrine, those prophecies, so strange. When we questioned him -- he’d read them from the sealed portion! The end times, Buddy, he knew things about the end times no man should know!”

Buddy became suddenly very uncomfortable. “Who are you talking about?” he asked, lips drawn against his teeth as though the words were gall.

Grandfather Rickenbaugh seized Buddy by the arms. “Knox Wesley! Caleb better watch out!”

Buddy leaned close to the old man, his voice hushed. “He’s dead, Grandpa. Knox Wesley’s dead.”

Grandfather Rickenbaugh squirmed back in the chair, pointing across the room as though terrified. “No, no, no! Last night, right there! He was right there! In this room, looking at me!”

Buddy tried to calm him, but to no avail.

“No, Grandpa! Listen to me! Listen!” Buddy lowered his voice again. “Knox Wesley’s dead! Caleb killed him. His car’s at the bottom of Furnam Quarry, and so is he. Caleb made me swear I’d never tell a soul.”

Grandfather Rickenbaugh seemed not to hear.

“Something corrupted, wicked about him. Something satanic,” he ranted on. “He was the demon! The one among us!” Then taking in a sharp breath, he became instantly calm, level headed. He looked straight into Buddy’s face, speaking softly and sanely. “Oh, Buddy. He is one of The Three! A Nephite. He can’t die.”

Buddy shook his head. “No. No, Grandpa. That’s impossible. You’re confused. We were all confused back then.”

“Warn Caleb! Beg his forgiveness, son. For all of us. For what we did to him...in God’s name.”

Buddy squinted at something he had not noticed until that

moment on his grandfather's forehead. He pushed hair back away and looked at it closer.

Smudged there faintly in ash was an ominous mark ... the image of a snake hanging on a cross.



SEVEN...

Mormon Catechism:

And I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do.

Nevertheless I went forth, and as I came near unto the house of Laban I beheld a man, and he had fallen to the earth before me, for he was drunken with wine. And when I came to him I found that it was Laban.

And I beheld his sword, and I drew it forth from the sheath thereof; and the hilt thereof was of pure gold, and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine, and I saw that the blade thereof was of the most precious steel....

And the Spirit said unto me again: Behold the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands.... Therefore I did obey the voice of the Spirit, and took Laban by the hair of the head, and I smote off his head with his own sword.

--The Great Prophet Nephi, c. 600 B.C.

I Nephi, Chapter 4

A teenage boy and girl cavorted down the snow-covered slope of a gorge in the Fontana State Reserve at the foot of the Great Smoky Mountains in the western tip of North Carolina. The shimmering maze of waterways that was the Little Tennessee River and Fontana Lake sprawled picturesque

and placid in the clear distance. Bounded by the Cherokee National Forest to the south and west and the Qualla Federal Indian Reservation for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians to the east, the area had long been one of the most beautiful though brutally rugged regions in the eastern United States.

Some ten thousand or more native Cherokee people inhabited the lands on and surrounding the Qualla Reservation. Once the largest tribe in the Southeast, the Cherokee culture was believed to have developed around the lower Great Lakes in historic times. Their language was of Iroquoian extraction, and it is widely conceded among anthropologists and historians that the people themselves descended from Iroquoian stock. Conquests with the Iroquois and Delaware tribes resulted in their migration south to the mountainous regions of the western Carolinas, eastern Tennessee, north Georgia and the northeastern tip of Alabama. Hernando De Soto's chroniclers wrote of the people of the province of Chalaque during the mid fifteen-hundreds, most likely Cherokee. Henry Woodward narrated accounts of the Chorakae Indians living along the head branches of the Savannah River in 1674, more than a hundred years before a strong Cherokee nation would side with the British in a little skirmish that became known as the American Revolutionary War.

It was a sunny but bone-chilling winter morning. The girl dipped her slender self to snatch up snow and throw it at the boy. The first handful missed, but the second caught him square in the nape of his neck.

"Ooooh, so that's how you wanna play, is it?" he grinned, reeling about to retaliate.

The girl squealed and ran, weaving like a boxer slipping punches to evade the rapid-fire snowballs he heaved after her. He caught her by the arm. She squealed some more but didn't quite get her mittened hands up and under her wool muffler in time to keep him from stuffing a whole cake of snow down her neck. She caught him off balance, tripped and tackled him, then giggling triumphantly, lost her footing trying to get up. The two of them went sliding together down the slope. They slipped and rolled most of the way to the bottom of the gorge.

No damage whatsoever done, they lay spilled in a steep drift, laughing. There was no other sound in the cold morning air except the hiss of wide open distance all around them. Snow hushed everything. They clung to each other, just simply listening to all the deep, dead quiet.

"Come on," the boy said, bounded up and pulling her to her feet.

The broad mouth of a cave slit the rock face at the foot of the slope a hundred yards ahead of them. He had found the place while out exploring with a couple guys during the fall, though none of them had mustered enough nerve to venture into the opening very far, being without any kind of light. They planned a return expedition, bent on bringing the proper cave exploring paraphernalia. But they never quite got around to making the excursion.

The idea of bringing her here had popped into his head some time back. For the past several days, he had teased her with the promise of a special place where he wanted her to go with him. It took some doing just to get out there and find it again. The gorge was well out in the middle of nowhere. All the leaves were down now, and most of the trees were bare. It had been snowing daily for almost a month, and snow changed the shape of everything.

Hand in hand, they ran in under the low overhang, stopped and peered down into the stony gullet that gaped off below ground.

"So whatcha think?" he asked, his voice reverberating back at them.

"I dunno. Looks real dark down there," she replied a bit uneasily. It was a little more adventure than she had figured he might come up with.

"It's a cave. It's suppose to be dark."

He pulled a flashlight from inside his coat and gave the girl's sides a sudden tickling. She escaped with a giggle and scampered down the dark hollow.

"C'mon, fraidy cat!" she taunted with a toss of her hair. He grinned his fullest, turned on his light and chased after her.

They went in quite a distance, leaning back on their heels to resist the pull of the incline. It didn't take long till every last trace

of light leaking in from the entrance was swallowed up in the baffles of the steep, twisting passage and completely gone. Their insides got tingly, awash with that swelling sensation which is at once both excruciatingly anxious yet somehow oddly pleasurable. The place felt intensely spooky...and fun.

But geez, just how far did he intend to take her down here? she thought.

“Wait. Here, take this,” his voice echoed. He handed her the flashlight and flicked it off.

“Hey, come on! What are you doing?” It was a blacker black than she had ever experienced. Blind black. Like being thrust suddenly into deep outer space.

“Just a second,” he whispered. Came the crisp chick of a match, and he lit a candle, sheltering it with his hand. It made a softer, yellower light than the flash beam had.

“Ewww!” she cooed eerily. “The snow monster gets romantic.”

“Uh-huh, like Tom Sawyer and Becky, lost in the cave.”

“Oh yeah? So what about Injun Joe?”

“He shows up, he gets a dose of my brass door knocker.”

“It’s cold enough in here to freeze your brass door knocker, darlin’,” she said with a shiver.

They sat Indian-style on the cave floor. He dripped some wax on the rock and set the candle down in it, twisting it till it stuck there.

“Wanna get real comfortable?” he asked, trying to sound suave and suggestive.

“Uh-uh. Too cold.”

He leaned in, gave her a coy, exploratory kiss, and leaned back. Pausing for what seemed a dramatic enough interval, he raised his eyes to lock with hers.

Aw, what the hell, maybe it wasn’t all that cold down there after all, she thought. She certainly felt warm enough...in places. Christ, who was she kidding anyway. She had been hot for him all morning. And he really was being extra sweet about this, bringing her way out there and all. She melted, countering his shy little kiss with a full-frontal, open-mouthed assault. They rolled on the cavern ground, groping each other, kissing deep and passionately

and kicked over the candle.

She made a little yelp in the darkness.

“Stay cool. It’s all under control,” he whispered by her ear.

He flicked on the flashlight and set it down. The beam scorched a sharp-edged tunnel of brilliance across the cavern floor.

Back to the hot n’ heavy. She rolled him over and straddled his midsection. He pushed her bulky, pullover sweater up, being careful his chilled hands didn’t contact her bare midriff. Popping the snap, he unzipped her tight jeans and eagerly see-sawed them along with her panties down over her hips to mid-thighs. Forgetting his cold hands, he was about to help himself to a feel between her legs when she happened to glance up. A stiff shudder coursed through her, and she let out the most mind-splitting of screams. It trailed off, and she screamed again.

“Baby, what’s wrong?!” he asked clumsily.

More screaming.

Several yards off, the bloodied, disembodied head of a man lay hideously lit in the flashlight beam. The eyes and mouth were open wide, gaping back into the glare as though he had been caught by surprise in the light and freeze framed that way. The young guy twisted to look but got barely a glimpse before the girl grabbed up the light and took off.

“Hey!” he bellowed after her, sitting upright. His mind frothed with question. What the fuck was going on?!

The girl nearly trampled two more severed heads. Screeching hysterically and tugging up her britches, she backpedaled, only to get goosed on the outstretched hand of a solidly frozen headless corpse. She shrieked louder still and bolted away at a dead run.

“Hey, come on, I can’t see!” her young beau yelled in panic from the blackness.

It didn’t stop her.

The girl appeared shortly on the slope outside the cave, in tears and sprinting headlong through the snow. She struggled still to get her tight jeans up, nearly impossible now as they clung snug from being wet in. The shock of what happened had literally scared the piss out of her, and she had peed all down the legs.

Behind her, the young guy’s voice echoed, faint and far

underground. “What’s wrong?!” Dammit, come back here, I can’t see a thing!”

* * *

An arc of flying red collided with a big sheet of stretched canvas, followed by an arc of orange from the opposite direction.

Ellen Masterson attacked the colors with a brush, shaping them with wild, impassioned sweeps. Inside a large art studio, she wore plastic rain gear over her clothing and splattered the canvas fiercely with a sopping sponge that she dipped in wet black.

She was thirty-five and tall, a cinnamon brunette with ginger highlights and eyes the color and climate of warm honey. There was a wholesome, almost ravishing prettiness about her that was thoroughly natural and achievable without a touch of makeup. But in her line of endeavor, perfect beauty often worked against her, so she wore the makeup anyway, not to enhance so much as to tone down and hide. A year of sessions with a good linguistic therapist had put a straight edge to her rolling diphthongs, changed the pace of her speech and gotten rid of most of her clipped-off i-n-g endings. Yet when she didn’t try awfully hard to hide it, there was still a whole buncha Texas in her talk. The lone star twang would stick its head up for a peek anytime she got angry.

She was plenty angry at the moment.

A dozen other artistes worked at stations in this spacious atelier as midday brightness poured into the outspread vault of a room through banks of skylights.

A smocked sculptor scraped clay off his fingers, muttering to his art partner, “Only paints when she’s mad. Otherwise, she just does drawings.”

Ellen’s hot-blooded technique pulled lots of looks from the others working there. She slapped down more paint, stippling it mercilessly with a brush tip.

“When she’s really mad she does that splatter stuff,” the sculptor added.

Somewhat later, wearing a fashionable business outfit and looking very professional, Ellen exited the studio. Her clothing

was well styled and expensive. It spoke of a single, educated woman who earned enough money being good at what she was good at to do and spend pretty much whatever she wanted.

She passed a table where a gray-headed woman sat tending the studio shop. Signage behind the table read:

West Raleigh Artists' Co-Op
Studio Space by the Hour - Day - Week
"Art for Relaxation!"

For all the vigor and violence of her painting, Ellen's voice was controlled and smooth.

"And how have you been doing, Myra?" she addressed the woman at the table as she signed out.

"Oh, been just fine, Dr. Masterson."

"Good. That's good."

Pulling on a smart, full-length winter overcoat, Ellen strode out of the building, frowning at a crust of black paint around the cuticle of one salon sculpted fingernail. A crisp gust teased at her hair. She slipped her key into the door lock of a gold Lexus, got in and pulled it out of the lot.

She drove across town to an aging high rise and parked in the visitor section of the garage beneath it.

Up on the fifth floor, she stepped purposefully off the elevator and into a suite, then pushed her way through a door with a brass plate engraved:

LONNY CRANDLE
Deputy Director Field Investigations

"Is he in?" she demanded of Crandle's secretary.

"No, ma'am. Down working out."

Ellen spun coldly and went out. The secretary mumbled in a sing-song voice after her, "And he doesn't wanna see you."

Down on a sub-level, Ellen shoved open the oak door of a men's exercise workout room. The mixed scents of Lysol, liniment and male sweat stung at her flaring nostrils. She marched past a

troupe of semi-bare male bodies straining under free-weights and zeroed in on Lonny Crandle, who labored on a rowing machine.

Crandle was at least fifty, probably more, struggling to keep a grip on his prime. Exercise wasn't his favorite enterprise. He forced himself to do it, and it showed on his face. He wasn't having a good time. His expression soured even more when he saw Ellen Masterson beelining his way wearing that familiar, tenacious twist on her face.

"Oh, god," Crandle breathed between his count.

She planted one Italian leather pump, struck a defiant pose with a fist on a hip and did her best to look peeved.

"Morning, Ellen!" Crandle beamed under his sweat, trotting out his phoniest executive smile.

"So you wanna tell me who did get the staff position, Lonny?"

"Well, Charlie Buckley, now that you ask," Crandle puffed.

"Nother good ol' boy, huh?"

Crandle cut her a cautioning look. Ears perked all over the room. An amazing number of fellows just happened to finish their allotted reps at that precise instant and sit up attentively. They tried to look inconspicuous about it of course, stretching, flexing, swabbing at themselves with towels. But it was pretty obvious. God damn, Crandle hated it when she pulled this shit. The woman seemed to specialize in making him squirm while he was under scrutiny of subordinates.

"C'mon, what's the story here, Lonny," she pressed impatiently. Her Texas got loose. "Just shoot me straight for once, how 'bout it?"

Crandle had been above all else a straight shooter, way back when. He had been among the first few classes of North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation agents to graduate from the state justice academy back in the early 70s. If there was anything he hated about his advancement to senior positions in recent years it was being stuck constantly in situations where he could not tell people the plain, simple truth about things. He had in his time been an able investigator, and for his efforts his superiors at the bureau and at the state attorney general's office had regularly recommended him for promotions. Now near the top of the

heap, he had little choice except to be some lousy, bureaucratic departmental politician. It went against his makeup. He used to loathe people like him.

“You want it straight, lady?” Crandle let go of the oars and came up off the rower. He planted a Nike, mirroring Ellen’s posture back at her. “Alright,” he said with a glint, “I’ll shoot you straight.”

His fingertips tapped at the small of her back, moving her along toward an adjoining locker room and out of range of too many ears. He walked her through and shoved the door shut. A half dozen guys showering and dressing muttered expletives upon seeing Ellen and scooted out of sight or whipped towels around themselves -- all except one, who merely glared at her, returned to soaping his crotch and eventually turned his back.

“You can stop with this ‘woman’s twice as smart, does twice the work, gets half as far’ crap. Got nothing to do with it,” Crandle fumed.

Ellen laid into him vehemently. “You know the conviction ratio for cases I consult on--”

“--Hell yes I do!” Crandle cut her off. “But fact is, you’re reckless, Ellen. Not ‘hey, I got something to prove’ reckless. I mean, everybody knows you’re damn good. But you work way too close in, lady!”

“If you don’t get right down inside these people, you don’t get the evidence you need to convict!” she snapped back at him.

“There’s close and there’s close,” Crandle retorted. “You can’t tell the difference, and it scares everyone! Everyone but you.”

Crandle didn’t have to spell it out for her. She knew exactly what he meant. Yeah, people bitched about her. Even people on their side, investigators and prosecutors. Worried about the clean case. Worried about what might stand up or fall through on appeal. They claimed she routinely overstepped the boundaries of what was called for in her profession. They claimed she was more often than not a loose cannon. But she couldn’t play from the sidelines. Just wasn’t her style. On the other hand, the whole time she’d been under independent contract with the State of North Carolina, only one case conviction she’d ever been associated with had taken a tumbled on appeal. And it had nothing whatever to

do with anything she had done. No question about it, convictions stuck and stuck hard when she was brought onto a case and got involved.

She had a knack for busting loose the really weird ones too. The ones none of her colleagues could quiet get the line on. Her male colleagues. So there was jealousy of a professional sort. And resentment. Once suspects were in custody, she had a further knack for getting confessions -- confessions her male colleagues couldn't get. It wasn't that they weren't competent, they just lacked certain advantages in these circumstances, advantages Ellen undeniably had in abundance. And true, it was a gender thing.

Statistically, the overwhelming preponderance of people who committed felonies were men to begin with, and the ones responsible for the quirkiest kind of cases Ellen was frequently brought in on were, with only historic exception, members of an ultra-exclusive male criminal subculture. Something about the chromosomes or hormonal chemistry maybe. Men were the only ones who seemed to have that level of violence in them and the physical power to pull off the truly twisted stuff. In this line of work, a woman who had the stomach and the nerve to deal with these types possessed a God given advantage.

Ellen possessed extra God given advantage, and she used every legal ounce of it -- appearance, intelligence, insight and training. Her services were retained frequently by various local police agencies and prosecutors, and she had been a contract consultant on cases for attorneys general in three states. She was highly experienced and damned effective.

Freud was right, she believed, at least when it came to men. Deep down, the bulk of male aggression had a natural link to the libido. The majority of male behavior, and especially aggressive or anti-social displays, could be traced to primal, sexually related mechanisms that were a natural part of the human male brain makeup and deeply ingrained on the male psyche.

Unchecked, it resulted in everything from habitual speeding in traffic to mass homicides. It was all somehow intricately triggered by the baseline yin and yang. This obvious relationship to sex drive was reflected in everything from male auto insurance rates to law

enforcement statistics on frequency of violent offenses in younger males. As the curve on sexuality waned with age, so did the curve on violent incidents.

There was however another subset of the dangerous male criminal population. They were a bit older, and their jets had cooled some. Their motivations were significantly more complex and more apt to be associated with some puzzling interplay of desire and frustration than was the case with the younger, free-base testosterone driven set. Even more so, their violent behavior could be an outcropping of their perceptions about or relationships with women in their lives, or the lack of those relationships.

This was the subset most of the seriously disturbed ones fell into. They were the men who committed the crimes that took lots of figuring out. And they were the ones Ellen Masterson was most perceptive concerning and efficient in dealing with.

She went to work on their emotional needs, turned on her talents and wiles and played the part, whatever part was necessary. She became the mother, the sister, the girlfriend, even the would-be lover she might let them think...or the next victim. Whatever she saw it was going to take, she created and behaved the role. She got them to need her, want her, trust her, enticing them into a fantasy belief that there was some easy escape, some way around their situation that she alone could help them find. Then she wrapped them in that web of trust and stripped away their secrets layer by layer until they told her everything. Everything. All the details they thought they could never entrust to anyone.

One high profile criminal defense lawyer was reprimanded in open court for referring to her in cross examination once as Dr. Delilah. You did what you had to. Ellen saw to it the prosecutors got what they needed to put the really dangerous ones down for good.

Lonny Cradle cooled. He'd scored the point. He had his authority back.

"Ellen, I'm sorry," he said diplomatically enough, looking her hard in the eyes, "but I won't put someone on permanent staff who I can't manage." He walked away from her as if that were that, but then turned back quietly. "Your contract's about up. Like you to

finish it out over in Western District with Davis Buffington. Half hour ago, they turned 'em up a real messy one. Got the turboprop standing by, can fly you over."

Crandle chewed at the insides of his cheeks, thoughtful and perturbed. For all the friction between them, the truth was he didn't dislike her all that much. And he did certainly enjoy the way she dressed and presented herself. She was a classy woman, showed fine tastes. He wasn't a coarse man. They were tastes he could appreciate. He happened to note her fine leather footwear. His tone became almost fatherly.

"Might wanna pack you some boots," he said frowning. "It's down in a cave."

* * *

The icy, wilderness cavern in the Fontana State Reserve had become the site of an astonishing amount of activity since two local teenagers had reported finding the mutilated remains of several bodies inside it that morning. Uniformed state troopers, photographers, forensics team members and plain clothes state police officials from the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation - Western District Headquarters in Asheville all worked in agitated clusters, shouting and shuttling back and forth between groups. It took a goodly number of people to do justice to investigating the scene of a single murder. This present example was more massacre than murder. Everyone was in on it.

Propane field heaters blazed at opposite ends of the cathedral-like main cavern chamber in the center of which a row of decapitated forms slouched against a stalagmite formation. Five headless male bodies, naked to the waist, arms and legs sprawled and overlapping as though they had been frozen suddenly amid some macabre, frenzied dance. All were stained by an enormous amount of blood, now solid and crystalline. A row of police and investigative officials surveyed the brutal spectacle, breathing out plumes of vapor in the cold air. Their attention focused on the disembodied heads that lay near about, scattered like a broken rack of pocket billiard balls. Much of the hair on the scalps was

shaved away. The faces were all marked with a similar pattern of thin bluish lines and spots.

“What the hell did somebody mean by all this?” an investigator asked no one in particular.

Several yards opposite them, Ellen Masterson knelt, dressed in trendy winter outdoor wear. No frilly Ralph Lauren foolishness either. Straight Eddie Bauer, stylish stuff that was sturdy enough to actually take what the elements dished up and still look good. Her outfit was completed by a pair of expensive high-top boots that were equally rugged and gave plenty of ankle support, lacing up to her mid calves.

On an art pad, she skillfully sketched in soft lead pencil the face of one of the victims, documenting the line and spot pattern. She was an extremely gifted sketch artist and had a special talent for eyes. She made them look liquid. Wet and alive. The eyes in the drawing she worked on reflected fresh horror, absent from the glazed orbs in the head before her. It was as though she could look back through from the present and, working with mere inklings of what was now faded, reclaim and reconstruct the emotions on the face as it had appeared just before the moment of death.

Ellen looked up toward the cave wall beyond the bodies, harshly crosslit by two hot banks of quartz-halogen work lights on stands. A worker reached up to warm his hands in the heat coming off the lamps. They cast a sinister, writhing shape on the smooth curtain of limestone, like some devil-possessed shadow puppet. In rigid, uniform columns, paragraph after longwinded paragraph of religious sounding text was painted there legibly and meticulously in dark, dried blood.



EIGHT...

Mormon Catechism:

And I bear record that the people of Nephi did seek diligently to restore the Lamanites unto the true faith in God. But our labors were in vain.

They became wild and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness; feeding upon beasts of prey; dwelling in tents, and wandering about in the wilderness with a short skin girdle about their loins and their heads shaven; and their skill was with the bow, and in the cimeter, and the ax. And many of them did eat nothing save it was raw meat; and they were continually seeking to destroy us.

And I saw wars between the Nephites and Lamanites in the course of my days.

--The Prophet Enos, c. 500 B.C.

Enos, Chapter 1

In a rough off-road area just above the ridge that sloped down to the cavern, a dirty jeep skidded to a slushy stop amid official vehicles and North Carolina Highway Patrol cars with their emergency lights running. A couple vans and a truck parked nearby displayed the names of T.V. stations and a newspaper. The afternoon sky was all but blocked out, packed with a flat, low hanging layer of dark gray clouds that sprawled to all horizons. It was pouring down snow.

On the jeep door, behind a haze of dirt and road salt, was a

U. S. Department of the Interior - Bureau of Indian Affairs decal. A past collision had done damage to the leading edge of the door and the adjoining quarter panel, jamming them together. It took a good, nasty shove to pop the door loose, bound up against the fender that way.

Caleb Easton gave the door a good, nasty shove and, amid teeth-jarring sounds of metal buckling against metal, stepped out of the jeep. His full shoulders and sun-tawny features said plenty about time spent out of doors. He wore his mid-thirties roguishly well, though with a look that, for all its ruggedness, still could not completely conceal the underlying boyishness of his face.

Like many state highway patrols, North Carolina preferred that its officers be of imposing size. For men, six-one to six-three and something over 210 pounds was considered ideal. Size, along with the uniform, communicated quick authority. Few normally law-abiding folks were apt to give a trooper of those proportions a hard time. Caleb Easton flashed his I.D. at two North Carolina state troopers who were of the preferred ideal proportions. But for all their size, neither of them overshadowed Caleb.

"Easton, B.I.A.," he offered smooth voiced.

One of the troopers nodded. "Yessir. It's down there," he said, pointing off. "Watch your step, it's pretty steep."

Caleb followed the mass of foot tracks mashed into the snow leading down the slope.

* * *

Inside the main gallery of the cavern, Senior District Inspector Davis Buffington crouched near one of the bodies, shuffling a stack of Polaroid snapshots. He headed the North Carolina S.B.I. district field team investigating the crime scene. He was a badly preserved fifty, had probably given up smoking too late to ever completely reverse the effects of his former two-pack-a-day habit. A photographer flashed another Polaroid and handed it to him.

Nearby, two senior N.C.S.B.I. special agents compared notes. Special agent Janson Skeeter was the older of the two, a crusty but shrewd hard-knocks graduate with twenty-some years of

seasoning in state police work. A homelier face than Skeeter's would have been hard to come by. He hid his smarts behind an affable, threadbare manner. By contrast, special agent Lewis Manzi was straight honors academy material. He was impeccably clean-cut, precise and way too intense for his own or anyone else's good.

"Awright, form up," Buffington barked loudly enough for nearby senior staffers to hear. "Let's run through it from the top." They all filed in behind as Davis Buffington moved through the cavern.

"Whatta we know for sure?" Buffington shot the question in Janson Skeeter's direction.

Skeeter chewed on a wad of gum. "Well, we got five decapitated bodies, all male," he said matter of fact. "All of 'em Cherokee people."

"Couple matches on missing persons," Lewis Manzi spouted overzealously. He indicated the broad columns of bloody text on the wall. "This stuff's a real labor of love, too. Take a couple hours to do all that. Real tidy. No smears. Didn't spill a drop."

"Looks like it was done right-handed. Some kinda Bible verses," Skeeter said. "Whatcha call it, Manzi?"

"It's a lineage. Or at least the first part is."

"Somebody's ancestors," Skeeter explained. "We got a Bible from a motel. We're looking it up."

"Old Testament probably," Manzi added.

"So what's your gut call on this, Skeeter?" Buffington watched Skeeter survey his fingers and pick at a ragged fingernail. He took his time answering.

"I'd say we got one perpetrator." Skeeter peeled off the fingernail with his teeth, spat it away with a little pffff!

Buffington arched an inquisitive eyebrow at him. "Tha'd be one industrious son of a bitch."

"Yessir."

"Place looks like someone threw Charlie Manson a birthday party down here."

"Yessir."

"So how you figure just one?"

"Look, this wasn't any group kill, inspector. This was all one

single seriously psychotic sad sick mother fucker.” Skeeter let that hang there a moment. He had a distinct if often tawdry talent for turning a phrase. He went back to work filling the silence. “I mean, this twisted shit all came outta the same head,” he grumbled. “It’s all got the same personality. Hell, you couldn’t tell someone how to help you do all this and have it turn out lookin’ this way.”

Skeeter looked to see Buffington still regarding him skeptically. “Buff, you said gut,” he admonished, putting up his hands.

“I think Skeeter’s right,” Manzi joined in. “Guy must have moved like a spirit, too. All this blood, and there’s not a smudge or foot track of him anywhere.”

Buffington smirked dubiously at both of them. “So you two’re saying one man -- a man you think, Luther?” This last he directed to Luther Martin, state medical examiner, an astute looking black man with a balding pate and razor thin mustache.

“Most likely. Good sized one, too,” Luther enunciated, giving his eyeglasses a tweak. “Be, oh, least six-three, six-four to scrawl that top line up there.” He puckered his brow at the text in blood on the cave wall.

“So this one guy keeps five men -- who show no trace whatsoever of being tied up or restrained in any way -- keeps them down here, draws marks all over them, shaves their heads, then one by one decapitates ‘em? Shaved ‘em first, Luther?”

“Couple hours prior I’d say, yessir, most likely.”

“But they weren’t restrained.”

“No sign of it.”

“And none of them put up a fight.”

“No sign of it.”

Luther offered no further conclusions. Buffington shuffled the Polaroids, raking teeth across his lip. “Jesus,” he breathed. He caught sight of someone at the corner of his eye, stopped walking and turned. The others all stopped in ranks and turned with him. “You make anything outta this, Dr. Masterson?” he asked.

Ellen crouched sketching close by. The question broke her concentration on the forms of the slain men. She closed her art pad.

“Those of you who haven’t met, this is Ellen Masterson, on

loan to us from H. Q. in Raleigh,” Buffington said.

Ellen stood and looked at them. “I’d say your killer put the fear of God into these people, inspector,” she stated calmly.

On the cave floor at her feet, the eyes and mouth of a severed head gape up in an expression of unearthly terror. The blue line and dot pattern covered the face. Blood had been cleaned from the torsos of the bodies nearby, revealing words cut into the flesh across their bosoms. On one, *Sword of Laban* had been patiently sliced. On another, the words: *Avenged of Moroni*. And on yet another: *Sons of Laman*.

* * *

Three statuesque state troopers stood watch outside at the cavern entrance. One of them leaned, keeping a steady hand on the shoulder of a man who knelt on all fours, gasping and heaving up violently into the snow. The mouth of the cave was completely cordoned off with yellow vinyl ribbon imprinted *Police Line -- Do Not Cross*.

Caleb Easton arrived just behind a squad of news reporters who immediately started grilling the troopers. A T.V. cameraman dropped to his knees on the trampled snow, zoomed in and rolled tape on the guy who was throwing up.

“Tell us what’s happened,” a female reporter hounded. “Are all of the men who were killed Indians? Was it racial? Is this a hate crime?”

“We heard all their heads were cut off. Can you confirm that?” the voice of another reporter overlapped her. “How long they been down there?”

“We don’t know much at this point,” the ranking trooper responded in trained fashion.

“Can we get a camera down there?”

The trooper shook his head patly no. Take a T.V. camera down there into that butcher shop? Jesus, where the hell do they find these sick toadeaters anyway. “They’re still sorting through evidence,” he said.

Two forensics team workers came up out of the cave in a hurry

toting a tray of plastic bags that held gory evidence. "Everything goes to serology in Swannanoa," the first worker told the other. "Full electro-foresis, PGM-AK factors, the works. Let's have blood types on the double."

"Right," the second replied. He limboed under the yellow ribbon, catching the attention of the pushy female reporter.

"Is that blood?" she cawed, grabbing her cameraman by the belt and slinging him toward the forensics worker. "That's blood! Get some light on it so the color shows!"

The cameraman ran along with the fellow, crowding him and shooting down into the tray. Get the shot! That's all that matters.

"Get the hell away from me, man," the forensics worker hissed.

Caleb Easton saw it. He angled past the cameraman, discreetly tripping a toggle switch on the back of the video camera, and kept going. No one noticed it. The cameraman pulled back from the viewfinder and hit it a couple blows with his hand.

"Aw shit, not again!" he whined.

Caleb dipped and went under the yellow ribbon.

"Wait a minute, hold up!" A trooper blocked his way.

Caleb flipped open his I.D. "Easton, Indian Affairs." The trooper nodded his approval and let him by. "Fuckin' parasite media pukes," Caleb mumbled as he brushed past the man and strode into the open throat of the cavern. The stone-faced trooper cracked the least trace of a smile.

Caleb strode uneasily down into the cave. His breathing quickened as daylight faded behind him. He turned and looked back, but couldn't see the entrance anymore. He scanned the dimness warily, like he expected something might suddenly jump out at him. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he detected lights pulsing deeper back in the cave. Camera strobes flashing.

His eyelids fluttered, and he slumped suddenly to the passage wall. His chin dropped down onto his chest as he lapsed into a rigid trance that jolted him to his knees. In it, he saw a dismal, slow-motion vision of darkness, fire and tattooed bodies. Like the visions from his youth. Shrieks of fear. A fantastic sword, flashing in broad swings through dancing firelight. Blood trailing off the blade.

Caleb pulled himself up, vigorously shaking off the vivid images, only to be seized by phantasm again. Torchlight. A massive hand brush-stroking words in fresh blood on a rocky wall. Faces of the Cherokees who lay slain in the cave -- only now they were alive! Eyes riveted with fear. Then a streak of fiery glare, the sword blade rushing forward. It severed two heads in a single pass, dashing short their screams. The tumbling heads hit the rocky cavern floor, rebounding and spraying off arcs of dark, rich red as they rolled at last to rest.

* * *

Down inside the cave, Buffington and Manzi surveyed the bloody text on the wall.

"Preliminarily we've identified blood from at least two of the victims was probably used to do this. He sure wasn't in any hurry to flee the scene."

"No, I think he was real comfortable with all this," Buffington concluded.

A rumbling noise came from overhead. Rocks and chunks of melting ice dropped from high up in the darkened ceiling.

"What the hell was that?"

"I'm no geologist, but if I had to make a guess, I'd say there's likely a fault line up in there. Look," Manzi pointed out crevices high in the overhead. "Probably full of ice and water, leached down from the surface." Buffington squinted to make out what Manzi was talking about. "Hot air off these heaters is melting the ice. All the noise down here doesn't help any either, I'd say."

"Awright, shut the propane units off," Buffington ordered. "And spread the word to watch the noise. We better finish down here before this ceiling ends up around our ears."

Caleb Easton emerged from the entry shaft, sweating and breathing hard. He took a good look around the bustling main gallery of the cave. What he saw obviously disturbed him. A profound sadness pulled at his facial features, weighing them down. He shook off a shudder and clenched his jaw to stop it from quivering, hauled in a deep breath and got a grip. Quickly sizing

up who was likely who among the investigators, he shoved his hands snugly in the pockets of his shearling-trimmed, roughhide parka and fell in quietly with Buffington's crew.

At center cavern, Skeeter, Ellen Masterson and Luther Martin knelt, inspecting the victims' bodies.

"Avenged of Moroni. Only Moroni I ever heard of was in that song," Skeeter told Ellen.

"What song?"

"Aw, you know," Skeeter did his best Chuck Berry impersonation. His singing was none too good. "Knew a girl named Bony Moroni," he warbled.

"Just a hunch, Skeeter, but I doubt there's a connection," Ellen dead panned.

"Whatcha figure's the deal with these marks all over the faces and shaving the heads. He didn't just chrome dome 'em. It's some kinda pattern. They all been done the same."

"Secret medicine society."

The words came from behind them. Skeeter, Ellen and Luther turned and looked up, a little startled to find Caleb Easton standing there bleakly over them.

"Beg your pardon?" Ellen said, rising.

"Scalp shaving and tattooing. Both were pretty commonly practices among the eastern American aborigines," Caleb told them. As he did, he caught himself doing a double take on Ellen Masterson. It was not merely because she was a woman, or because she was an especially attractive one either. It was something else entirely. There seemed an odd familiarity about her, though at the same time he felt certain he didn't know her and had never seen her before that moment. Or had he? Judging by the way she was looking back at him, it was something they were both aware of. "Historically, they all had distinctive styles of hair and body adornment tribe to tribe, even different societies within tribes," he finished.

Buffington and Manzi approached from the cave wall as Skeeter cocked a questioning glance at Caleb. "You mean like Mohawk haircuts?" he asked.

"Mohawk, Susquehannock, Chippewa, Creek. This particular

style was a Cherokee secret medicine society...one that disappeared well over a hundred years ago.”

It struck Caleb suddenly what it was about Ellen Masterson. The ages were all off, of course, but if Lucy Easton had ever had, say, a prettier kid sister...well, that girl could have been Ellen Masterson. Her near resemblance to Caleb's mother as he remembered her looking so many years before was almost uncanny. And there was something else he wondered if she realized also. The two of them standing there facing each other looked enough alike to be brother and sister.

“You're suggesting they might have deliberately shaved their own heads this way?” she asked Caleb. She had indeed picked up on their similar appearance. But there was more to it than that, and they both felt it. Some sort of sensation prickling under their skins, like electrons rushing from positive post to negative post.

“No, not at all,” he said. “Person did this to 'em knew one hell of a lot more Cherokee history than most Cherokee know these days.”

A peculiar, unspoken rapport was taking shape between them, as though they were the oldest of friends and no introductions or explanations were necessary at all. It was very strange, and though admittedly intriguing, more than just a little unsettling to both of them. It showed in their body language as well, so much so that the others there read it for familiarity and assumed they were acquainted.

“Cuts through these necks are unusual,” Luther Martin noted. “Real clean. No crushing, no ragged hacks like an axe or a machete would leave.” He stooped over two of the bodies. “In fact, judging from where everything came to rest, angle of the cuts and all, I'd say these two were decapitated in a single chop. Be a big, heavy-bladed implement of some kind. Heavier than a scythe or a sickle, I'd say. Like maybe a--”

“Medieval broadsword,” Caleb volunteered quietly. They all looked at him with curiosity and mounting suspicion.

“Something like that,” Luther said, getting up. “Real good with it, too. Wounds indicate he swung the weapon left to right and right to left with equal skill.”

Manzi turned to Skeeter and Buffington. "Who's the genius?" he asked low voiced.

"I think Masterson knows him," Skeeter shrugged.

A state highway patrol sergeant sidled up with a Gideon Bible that a fellow trooper had liberated from a motel down on U. S. Highway 74. "Sorry, Manzi, I been all through here," the officer said. "I though I knew where it was, but I can't find it. Guess I flunk Sunday school."

"And Morianton was a descendent of Riplakish. And Riplakish was the son of Shez," Skeeter read aloud from the text on the wall. "Screwiest buncha names I ever heard."

"Try the Book of Ether, chapter one," Caleb Easton said. That prompted more amazed looks in his direction. "The last part's from First Nephi, chapter four."

Ellen Masterson read the passage out loud, articulating it thoughtfully, "Therefore I did obey the voice of the Spirit, and took Laban by the hair of the head, and smote off his head with his own sword."

"There isn't any Book of Ether or First Nephi in the Bible," the highway patrol sergeant contended.

"No, there's not," Caleb said curtly.

"You yankin' my leg or something, son?"

"Far as the killer's concerned, sergeant, your King James Bible there's shy about fourteen books."

"Nephi..." Ellen Masterson said the word under her breath, and then louder to Caleb, "Nephi...Mormon?" Their eyes met for just a moment. Hers were full of question. Should I know you? Have we met somewhere? they seemed to be asking him.

From far above came a loud shifting and cracking. Water, ice and ton-loads of rocks cascaded from the cavern ceiling, storming down and covering the decapitated forms at the center of the chamber. As the investigators scrambled, a massive stalactite grated loose and plummeted. Ellen looked up and saw it dropping directly over her.

With not so much as an upward glance, Caleb Easton reacted to a pulse of fright that flashed through his consciousness. His move wasn't the result of any stimulus acting on his own external

senses. The fright didn't even feel like his own fear. It felt like fear coming off someone else. He lunged instantly like a blitzing linebacker and boosted Ellen Masterson off her feet, sweeping her clear, though he hardly understood why he had done it. They landed violently, all but dashing the breath out of her. Big as a column on some ancient stone temple, the stalactite impacted like a dropped bomb and burst apart with a boom on the spot where they had been standing. Shards of it spewed everywhere. Caleb rolled atop Ellen, huddling over and shielding her. A large fragment clipped his shoulder forcefully enough to jolt and sting. He sucked in a rasp of air through teeth gnashed against the pain.

"Everyone alright?!!" Janson Skeeter roared.

"Dammit, keep your voice down!" Davis Buffington hissed at Skeeter, his eyes riveted on the cavern ceiling.

Caleb got off Ellen Masterson. She sat up, examining her own shoulder for damage. But as the phantom sensation she felt there faded, she realized she wasn't the one who had been injured. Kneeling next to her, Caleb raised and rotated his upper arm slowly and gingerly in its socket, his mouth round with apprehension of the joint catching painfully any moment. But it didn't. His elbow made two complete circles in the air as Ellen watched him, speechlessly pushing hair out of her face. His shoulder seemed to be working, but he was going to be plenty sore for a while.

Far across the cavern, the voice of an investigator echoed from down in a side chamber. "Buffington! Skeeter!" The investigator bounded into view. "We found another body! Down here!"

Caleb helped Ellen to her feet, remarking quietly in earshot of her only, "If this one's a woman, there'll be something marked on her forehead."

Instantly mindless of the clamor they were making, Buffington, Skeeter, Manzi and the others raced toward the investigator who stepped back to usher them down the passage leading to the other chamber.

"It's a woman, inspector!" the investigator announced loudly.

"Done same as the others?" someone yelled.

"Not a thing like the others! You're just gonna have to see this one!" the investigator hollered back.

Astonished, Ellen stared hard after Caleb, then took off to catch up with him, already hurrying toward the other chamber.



Mormon Catechism:

Behold, the Lamanites have many Nephite prisoners, which they took from the tower of Sherrizah; and there were men, women, and children. And the husbands and fathers of those women and children they have slain; and they feed the women upon the flesh of their husbands, and the children upon the flesh of their fathers; and no water, save a little, do they give unto them.

And notwithstanding this great abomination of the Lamanites, it doth not exceed that of our own Nephite people in Moriantum. For behold, many of the daughters of the Lamanites have the men of Moriantum taken prisoners; and after depriving them of that which was most dear and precious above all things, which is chastity and virtue--

And after they had done this thing, they did murder them in a most cruel manner, torturing their bodies even unto death; and after they have done this, they devour their flesh like unto wild beasts, because of the hardness of their hearts; and they do it for a token of bravery.

--The Prophet Mormon, c. 400 A.D.

Moroni, Chapter 9

Flashlight beams crisscrossed in the murk as the investigators worked their way down the dark passage to the side chamber. There before them, a spooky scene reposed, lit in the low umbrellas of glow that sprawled from three

Coleman gas lanterns sitting like points of a triangle on the cave floor. Little above knee level was visible. The seemingly detached feet and legs of the investigators stalked delicately about the outer reaches of the lights.

In the center, where illumination from all three lanterns overlapped, a woman's body lay face up, naked and splay legged, frozen to the cold cavern floor amid an icy flood of red. Unlike the others, she had not been decapitated -- but there was plenty else amiss.

Caleb and Ellen arrived last, just as Luther Martin began dictating into a minicassette tape recorder. "The victim is a middle-aged woman of apparent native American descent, approximately forty-five years old," he uttered into his clenched hand.

A state police photographer popped pictures of the body from various angles. Each chirp-fizz of his motor driven Nikon coincided with a wash of stark light from a potato masher Sunpak flash unit he held above his head. Caleb Easton crowded through the circle of onlookers. He stopped cold at sight of the body, revealed bright as noonday in a pulse of camera strobe. Someone held a flashlight beam steadily on the woman's face. Caleb's stare zoomed to her forehead. Inked there in black was the clearly drawn shape of a quarter moon. There were no other marks on the face.

"What's she doing way down here away from the rest? Figure she ran?" Janson Skeeter's voice echoed from the dark stratum above the Colemans.

Luther continued taping his clinical exposition on the body. "Extreme trauma, massive superficial and deep muscular tissue fascia crudely removed along both upper arms, extending from the axillar regions to just above the bend of the elbows, and similarly removed along both thighs, extending from immediately below hip joints to immediately above the knees. The respective humeri and femora are denuded and all generally exposed both anteriorly and posteriorly. The missing muscular tissue is not immediately in evidence anywhere within visible proximity of the body," he rapid-fired with professional detachment into the recorder.

What it meant in lay-speak was that the meaty flesh of the woman's upper arms and thighs had been savagely shredded off

and was gone, clean down to the slick, bare bones.

"Figure maybe wild animals could have got down here and done this? Bears, coyotes or something?" someone asked hush voiced.

"And leave those other bodies untouched? I'd bet against it," Skeeter's voice came again.

"Trauma continues along the lateral aspect of the pectoral region extending from the axilla to both sides of the sternum as both breasts have been removed in crude fashion and are not immediately in evidence about the body. There is trauma to the underlying superficial fascia but no significant trauma apparent to deep pectoral muscular fascia."

"This mutilation is nowhere near random enough for wild animals. There's calculation here. There's symbolism," Ellen Masterson said, moving next to Davis Buffington.

Luther overheard her and nodded his concurrence. He continued his recitation. "A deep laceration above the pubic crest extends in a transverse line between the inferior spinous processes of the ilia, along and over the juncture of the lower peritoneal cavity with the upper pelvic cavity. Depth of the laceration and the extent of its implications to internal structures and organs is at this point impossible to determine pending autopsy examination, due to the frozen condition of the body."

It sounded hardly as grisly in medical terms as the plain reality that lay before them. The woman's lower abdomen had been viciously unseamed by a broad chop from one pelvic bone to the other, presumably while she was still alive if the volume of blood loss was an indication.

"Sexually assaulted?" Buffington asked.

"Difficult to say conclusively at this point. We'll find out." Luther turned and moved toward them. "This woman was killed and eaten by -- something," he stated summarily. That seemed to everyone an absurdly obvious thing for him to say, until he added, "And hopefully, in that order."

"Whadda ya' mean, something?" Skeeter asked.

"I don't know yet. There are some gnawing impressions on the bones that just don't add up. Not what I expected. I have to get

some measurements and link up with a couple data bases. Can't do it here. We need to get this body moved and thawed out as soon as we can."

"Okay, people, let's get busy," Buffington ordered.

"All these passageways, you wonder how many more of 'em we'll find down here," Manzi said. "Cave could go on for miles." He shined a flashlight beam in turn down each of a trio of narrow offshoots that angled away into stygian blackness.

Buffington twisted around, suddenly searching. He touched Ellen's arm.

"Hey, where'd he go?" he asked urgently.

"Who?"

"That guy you knew. The big one. Where'd he go?"

Ellen looked about her. Caleb was no longer among them.

"I don't know who he was," she said. "I thought he was one of your people."

Buffington bolted down the passageway leading back to the main gallery chamber. He hit an icy spot and lost his footing, came skidding out into the open cavern on one hip. The misstep cost him the knee out of his trousers, abrading the skin beneath the tear. He groped for the wall and hauled himself up, sifting the faces of the few workers remaining in the main chamber. He looked down at his torn pants in dismay and cupped a hand hard over his knee.

"Shit!" Buffington bellowed.

There was no sign of Caleb Easton.

* * *

Caleb's jeep fishtailed through standing snow, making for paved road. He keyed the mike of a radio transceiver installed under the dash.

"Two-six-niner, Easton. Put me through to Caroline."

"Stand by."

A sweet as syrup southern drawl came spilling out of the speaker. "You know you got a stack of messages here a foot thick? You sure you still work here, Caleb?"

He keyed the mike and put it to his chin, "Need a couple

things. Run me an approval on a weeks furlough and book me on the earliest flight you can get me on tomorrow morning into Tulsa.”

“How do I go about explaining this?”

“You’ll think of something. Hey, cut me some intro with B.I.A. in Tahlequah, too. Not sure I still know anybody out there.”

“Got it. You know you missed your meeting with the superintendent? I think it was about firing you again.”

“Two-six-niner out.”

He tossed away the mike and switched off the set, spinning the wheel to counter a skid as the jeep muled its way through slush up onto a paved road. He put his hand across to keep a stack of file folders on the seat next to him from ending up on the floorboards. A book was wedged between them and the seat back. Gold lettering on the eroded old spine read *The Book of Mormon*.

* * *

Full night. Caleb Easton’s jeep sat parked next to a cabin in a heavily wooded area, a thin trickle of smoke rising from its coarse stone chimney. The snow had stopped coming down around sunset. The cloud layer was still low and oppressive, not budging an inch in the cold sky. Somewhere behind it was a fraction of a moon, impossible to say just where. Miles away, a coyote wailed. The American coyote is, if nothing else, a stubbornly pervasive breed, hardy and adaptable, a lot like pigeons, roaches or rats. Though typically identified with western climes where their populations are highest, they range in sparser numbers commonly from the wetlands of Florida and the coastal South clear to Canada. Anywhere they can find enough open space and something slower or weaker or ailing to run down and scavenge. Their woeful cries, however atmospheric and romanticized in lore, belie a varmint that has become a universal American nuisance.

There was no other sound in the nightscape except a regular creaking that came from beneath the overhang of the cabin’s darkened front porch. Caleb Easton sat there in a stout bent-wood rocker, slowly rocking beside stacked cords of split firewood. His

face passed in and out a patch of warm light, spilling through a small window from oak logs that glowed hot on the hearth place inside. In his hand, he held a small rough-spun bag with a leather draw lace and a stained symbol on the side. He stroked the soft, shapeless something it contained absently with his thumb.

Alert and suddenly wary, he shot up out of the rocker. He realized he had dozed off. Something had awakened him. In a sweat, he leaned against the smooth logs that braced up the porch roof, his eyes probing the snowy, darkened countryside like he expected to discover something lurking out there. But there was nothing. Only the yaps of the distant coyote, baying the invisible moon.

He turned and went inside the cabin. Stooping by the fireplace, he looked at the old cloth medicine bag in his hand. For years, he had carried it constantly on his person or kept it in close reach -- his shield against harm and evil influences. As though arriving at a hard decision, he reached out and dropped it on the fire logs. The bag instantly burst into flame, flaring brightly. A peculiar wisp of strange-colored smoke spiraled up from it and was gone, like an escaping spirit.

At a personal computer on a desktop stacked with books and papers, Caleb called up a screen displaying a map of the eastern United States. He rattled a couple keys, and a colored dot appeared in the northwestern quadrant of Pennsylvania. Next to it, a text block read:

Tuscarora Slayings - N.W. of Warren, Pennsylvania
Discovered: 15 Oct. 1974 - Victims: 3 Male/1 Female
7 Jan. 1975 - Victims: 7 Male/1 Female

He tapped on the keys again. As if tracking a course, a line of arrows traveled north across the monitor screen into New York state. Another dot and another text block popped up:

Seneca Slayings - S. of Lackawanna, New York
Discovered: 9 May 1982 - Victims: 3 Male/1 Female

The arrows ran southwest. A dot and more text:

Wyandotte Slayings - Logan County, Ohio
Discovered: 2 Jan. 1989 - Victims: 5 Male/1 Female
17 May 1989 - Victims: 6 Male/1 Female

The arrows zipped west. Dot and text:

Shawnee Slayings - Fayette County, Illinois
Discovered: 15 Aug. 1993 - Victims: 4 Male/1 Female

Then, to the southeast. A dot and more text:

Cherokee Slayings - Fontana Reserve, N. Carolina
Discovered: 20 Feb. 2001 - Victims: 5 Male/1 Female

Caleb focused on the image of his own face, mirrored in the dark border of the computer screen. Through his mind's eye ran recollections from the cavern crime scene. He envisioned vividly, as though in tight close-up, the female Cherokee victim's face and the deathly black crescent moon inscribed on her forehead.

He tapped at more computer keys. The line of arrows marched west across the map. Northeastern Oklahoma popped up in colored highlight. Dots marked Tulsa, Muskogee, Tahlequah and Ft. Gibson. Colored shading filled in a zone labeled Cherokee Indian Area. Beside it, a text block scrolled out:

Cherokee Slayings - Oklahoma Cherokee?
Discovered: - Victims:

Caleb grew thoughtful again. He reached for the keyboard and filled in the blanks, twice typing the word *unknown*.

He heard something moving outside. It sounded like hurried footsteps. He shifted his glance just in time to catch an impression of a hunched form streaking past a windowpane. The front and back doors of the cabin were kicked open simultaneously. Police officers with shotguns leveled and pistols drawn flooded inside

and converged on Caleb at his desk. Among them were Davis Buffington and Lewis Manzi. There was lots of loud shouting, an antic cops learn is typically successful in intimidating an arrest subject and ensuring no resistance.

“Get ‘em up! Hands up! Get ‘em where we can see ‘em! Get ‘em up now!”

“State Bureau of Investigation, Easton! You’re under arrest,” Davis Buffington blurted.

Defying their hands up order, Caleb tapped the escape key on the keyboard four times in rapid succession. The map vanished, leaving nothing but a phosphorus afterglow of its shape on the screen, amid which a message flashed in dangerous red:

Fatal Error - Deleting Folders - Do Not Interrupt!

Cops flattened him over the desk and yanked his arms behind him. Manzi tossed in a pair of handcuffs. They clinched them onto his wrists as another plainclothes cop frantically searched the computer case for the master power switch and shut the system down.

“You boys forget your warrant?” Caleb wanted to know.

Manzi slapped a folded paper down on the desktop an inch from his nose. “Read it, pal.”

“Take him out and give him his rights,” Buffington told his officers. He and Manzi fell to examining the cabin.

The place gave an impression of nothing so much as a large, shabby, disorganized library and museum. Books, papers and journals were crammed into make-shift shelves and every imaginable cranny. The walls were decorated in a seemingly endless assortment of relics, most of them distinctly native American -- rattles, war clubs, calumets, headbands, various utensils, native musical instruments and hard telling what all else.

Over the fireplace hung some two dozen antique military swords and ceremonial sabers. Buffington and Manzi were drawn immediately to these.

“Get a load of this.”

“Better get Luther up here for these,” Buffington said.

* * *

“She bled to death,” Luther Martin told Janson Skeeter and Ellen Masterson. “The gash through her abdomen penetrated deep enough to sever both the left and right external iliac arteries. At that point, you might as well have sliced open the aorta. They receive over two-thirds of its flow. Wouldn’t take long. A real quick bleed.”

The modestly draped remains of the Cherokee woman’s body occupied a sparkling, stainless steel examination sink beyond them. He directed their attention to a spread of front-lit 8x10 color photographic prints clipped on a display board. Trauma shots. Documentation of a preliminary autopsy. They were the kind of shadowless photographs achievable only with a very specialized long focal length lens -- like a Contax close-up/macro or a 200mm medical Nikkor -- fitted with an electronic ring flash unit around the barrel. An expensive piece of glass. As forensic medical photography goes, they were excellent quality, including some extraordinary macro work. People on Luther’s staff knew their stuff.

“Fierce amount of force in that sword slice too, if it was actually a sword. See here? It cut deep grooves in the pelvic bone on both sides. The left ilium took the initial force of the swing, which tends to support our theory that the perpetrator is right handed.”

“Either that or he’s got one hell of a powerful left backhand,” Skeeter commented, studying the damaged pelvic bone in an x-ray print hanging on the board.

Luther nodded. “You can see here, the initial impact not only sheared through the heavy hip bone, it fractured it in three places. The entire left iliac plate is broken loose from the rest of the pelvis. That and the characteristics of the laceration itself considered, we’re almost certainly dealing with the same implement used for the decapitations.”

“There’s significant evidence of sexual assault too?” Ellen asked.

“Oh yeah,” Luther exhaled emphatically. “The pelvis hasn’t thawed enough to examine closely for semen yet. Initially, I haven’t found any. But she was penetrated vaginally with violent force, no

doubt about it. At least one episode and possibly more during, say, the forty-eight hours immediately preceding death.” He pushed his fingers under his glasses and rubbed at his eyes. He was tired. They all three were. “But even that’s not the worst thing going on here,” he told them. “There appears to be a very deliberate purpose for the radical incision through the pelvic region. You’ll notice I say incision. It wasn’t just some wild chop. You want to guess which internal organs are the only ones missing from the body?” Luther hung the question out.

Ellen swiveled her head toward the remains on the examination tray. Understanding sprung a leak, then came full gush. She looked back at Luther with a minuscule squint. “Uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries?” she guessed correctly.

Luther nodded again. “They were probably pulled out of the pelvic cavity through the laceration, then judging from what I see here, I’d say the uterus was chewed off right at the cervix and the female organs presumably eaten, same as we’ve already concluded the breasts were.”

“Kinda like an...oral hysterectomy?” Skeeter asked through a dyspeptic scowl.

“And then some,” Luther agreed. “You getting a picture here?”

“Jeezy-peezy!” Skeeter canted a glance toward Ellen. “Symbolism, wasn’t that what you called it?”

“This boy’s a hardcore case,” Luther told them. “About the hardest I’ve seen. What I still can’t make sense of are these groves and indentations on the upper arm and thigh bones though. See? Here, and these over here.”

Skeeter and Ellen saw the markings, magnified in the photographs. There were furrows and a few deeper pocks in the bones.

“Now this right here is mostly molars,” Luther went on, pointing. “And these deeper fissures and the sharp pits? They’re from cuspids and canines.”

“Gnawing,” Ellen offered.

“Uh-huh. The problem arises with the size and shape of the bite measurements and their apparent force. You know what?”

Ellen gave him another of her tiny squints. “It doesn’t look

like it was done by human teeth," she stated rather than guessed this time.

"And it measures too small to be a bear, which is about the only plausible creature indigenous to these parts that has nearly enough bite power to drive teeth this deep into bone."

Skeeter saw what Luther was getting at. The femur was one of the densest bones in the body, he knew. But there was fierce penetration of femur bone evident in the teeth markings detailed in one photo. He scrutinized it closer. "Right here," he pointed, "Looks like it actually begins to splinter this bone."

"Yeah. Much more force and it could have crushed through and split it entirely. That speaks not only to the force of the bite, but to the incredible hardness of the teeth that could inflict it. Something with a smaller bite measurement, like a dog or a full grown timber wolf even, the teeth would break out before they'd stand up to this kind of force. And the bite impressions here and elsewhere on the body are all wrong for any kind of canine -- dog, wolf or coyote. Wrong for a bear for that matter. Configuration of the teeth isn't right."

"Did you analyze against bite impressions of any larger, occasionally carnivorous primates?" Ellen asked.

Luther grinned his appreciation for her smarts. She was pretty sharp, he reasoned. "Yeah. That occurred to me, just for the heck of it and strange as it sounds. Hell, I even ran crocodiles, if you can image that." He blew out an exasperated breath. "Great apes, baboons, even a male mountain gorilla, though they're notably vegetarian. I can show you if you want. The size is more in line, as well as the position of the canine teeth. But it still isn't right. Still not near enough force in the jaw."

He plopped down in a chair, interlacing his fingers like a cap over his balding head. "Only one thing I'd be prepared to say for certain," he said finally. "Whatever it was left these impressions, no way was it human. Not by a long shot."

* * *

In a rough part of downtown Tulsa, a drunken man staggered

along, gulping from a bottle in a paper bag. He was outlandishly swacked. Tottering off the sidewalk, he twisted an ankle overstepping the curbing and fell into the street, directly in the path of an oncoming car. The driver locked up brakes and stood on the horn. The car spun completely around and nearly clipped a vehicle coming the opposite way. The drunk ended up nose to nose with a trailer hitch and an Oklahoma license plate.

The driver gave his side window an angry uncranking and hung halfway out of the car to scream, "You fuckin' drunk, redskin cocksucker! I oughta get outta here and kick the goddamn shit outta you, ya fuckin' son of a squaw bitch!"

"Okay! Okay! Get the hell outta my road!" the drunk yelled back. His lank, black-brown hair hung in dishevelment down over his small, black-irised Cherokee eyes, set deep above his rounded, bronze cheeks. They were teared over and so awfully bloodshot they were painful to look at.

The car whipped around and sped off. The drunk crawled off the street and wrapped an arm around a streetlamp post to pull himself up. He went swaying off toward two young dudes who strolled along the sidewalk in heavy jackets and Garth Brooks cowboy hats. When the drunk reeled and fell in front of them, they stopped to help him up.

"Whooooa, chief! You alright there?"

"Oh yeah, I'm great! Merry Christmas to ya'!" the drunk slurred at them wetly.

"Couple months past the season, chief, but Merry Christmas, all the same," one of the young guys chuckled at him.

They went on their way as the drunk broke into song. "Mammas, doan' leeeeeee-tch'er babies grow up'm be cowboys," he caterwauled. Taking a swig of brew, he rammed square into a building and toppled a trash can. It rolled on its side, spilling refuse.

"Mer-r-r-ry Christmas!" he yelled with abandon after the young guys.

"Yeah! Happy New Year!" one of them yelled back without looking.

From between two darkened buildings, a shadowy form

descended on the drunk. A massive hand mashed a dirty rag over his face. The drunk struggled briefly, then went limp. His heels dragged as he disappeared into the narrow, black crack of an alley.

One of the cowboy guys thought he heard a gasp, half turned and peeked back over his shoulder to where the drunk should have been on the sidewalk a good distance behind them. There was nothing there but the trash can, slowly oscillating to rest.

“Crazy ol’ fucker,” he laughed with a snort to his sidekick.



For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

--St. Paul the Apostle, 63 A.D.

Ephesians, Chapter 6

Caleb Easton sat alone at a table inside an interrogation room at the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation - Western District headquarters complex in Asheville. There was no clock in the room, and he wasn't wearing a watch, so he had no idea what time it was. But he knew it must be getting on toward midnight. He had been there quite awhile. He spied a long strip of cellophane tape stuck to the tabletop and focused on it intently, almost comically for a moment. Picking at an edge of it with a nail till he got enough up to pinch, he patiently peeled it off the tabletop, then wrapped it around his thumb tip while gazing distractedly into a corner. He had no doubt that he was being watched and probably videotaped through the smoky mirror that formed the upper half of one wall in the room, though he could detect no lights or shapes of anyone on the other side.

Papers were strewn on the table, as well as some paperclips. Caleb had straightened most of these and rebent them into little horseshoes. Twisting up the bared end of a paperclip, he impaled a

cigarette on it, then spread the clip so it formed a base and stood the cigarette upright on the table. He pitched the horseshoes at it, throwing three ringers before he missed.

In the next room, Skeeter and Ellen observed him through the one-way mirror. They were quiet and all but motionless. Skeeter chewed on his gum and cracked it now and again. Ellen sketched Caleb Easton, her pencil tip frisky, making fuzzy sounds on her art pad. Caleb sat thoroughly expressionless on the other side of the glass, his eyes as blank as a T.V. screen at sign-off. But in her drawing, she depicted them much differently, vividly alive and evincing a wary cunning. A video camera stood on a sturdy tripod aimed toward the see-through mirror. A tiny, red spot glowed steadily on the front of the case, and the spools on a cassette inside crept in little orbits as the camera made a magnetic record of everything it saw.

Davis Buffington entered, a finger marking his place in a copy of *The Book of Mormon*.

"Enjoying the book?" Skeeter smirked.

"Reads like a bad parody of the Bible. Anything new with him?"

"Tried talking to him again. Ever been around someone makes you feel like you been shot with a stupid gun?"

"Same smart-ass bullshit?"

"Like talking to Mister Wizard."

"He doesn't want to consult with an attorney, doesn't want one present. Waived it all," Ellen Masterson said. "Still won't talk to Skeeter about what went on in the cave."

"Yeah, but pick any other topic, you get the Encyclofuckinpedia Britannica," Skeeter said with a yawn.

"And a cynic's viewpoint," Ellen added.

"Real bright boy, huh?"

Ellen referred unenergetically to some notes. "Well, we got a couple university degrees here. History. Cultural anthropology." She tossed the sheets aside wearily. "That and everything I've observed from here? Yeah, I'd say he's a real bright boy."

"Past fifteen minutes, your real bright boy's been peeling tape off that table and pitching paperclip horseshoes to amuse himself."

Skeeter jacked a thumb at the camera. "We got it all on video. You oughta getcha a copy. I think the kid's a contender."

"What else you two been able to put together on him?" Buffington prodded.

Skeeter consulted his note pad and a printout. "Got one Caleb Joshua Easton. No priors. Field rep, U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs."

"You talk with anyone at B.I.A. yet?"

"Yep. Woke up his boss. Easton's a real loner, not popular with his supervisors. Imagine that. Transferred around a lot. Said Easton hardly shows up at the agency office. Puts in most of his time out on the reservation."

"You interviewed anyone out there?"

"Couple old Cherokee fellas. Claim he's the only white at B.I.A. really gives a damn about their history or heritage. Said B.I.A. terminated him with cause once. Tribes raised so much hell, they reinstated him." Skeeter dropped himself into a chair and tilted his head back. He shut his eyes and let a long, fatigued breath slide out through his nostrils.

"We checked him back through Washington," Ellen picked up where he left off. "Pays his taxes. No known living relatives. Most recently deceased, his mother, several months ago."

"Still going through all the stuff from his cabin," Skeeter popped an eye open to say.

"Did Luther turn up anything on those swords?"

"Said none of them was anywheres near heavy enough to be the murder weapon. All tested negative on recent blood. Real colorful collection though. One of the scabbards was engraved. Used to belong to one G. A. Custer, Colonel, U.S. Army."

Lewis Manzi entered the room in a rush, carrying a stack of important looking papers and an oversized fax that trailed below his knees.

"Think maybe we got a match up. Fayette County, Illinois. It's on the books as an unsolved group execution, back in '93. Four men and a woman. Get a load of this. All of 'em Shawnee Indians. All killed about four hundred yards back up inside one of those big, underground drainage culvert pipes."

"They got sewer pipes that big in Illinois?" Skeeter questioned.

"Not sewers, drainage. And they're like nine foot diameter pipes," Manzi corrected. "You got big open vaults, like rooms underground, at points where the pipes junction. It happened in one of those."

Buffington leafed through the photostats and faxed clippings from the Fayette County crime scene. They all looked grimly familiar.

"Decapitations, scripture in blood, the works. Down to the details," Manzi went on.

"Son of a bitch," Buffington breathed.

Manzi's eyes were all aglitter. He looked at Caleb Easton, seated in the other room. "You know we definitely got us a damn serial psycho here."

"Or maybe a copy cat," Skeeter said, getting a gander at the photostats himself.

"Or possibly we don't have either...yet." Ellen Masterson sounded cautious, unconvinced.

"What are you saying?"

"That all we have is someone who knows much more about all this than we do," she told Davis Buffington. He couldn't quite keep his skepticism from showing. There was a look men gave her that she was way too familiar with. That why don't you let us handle this, sweetie, look. It was a look that always really chafed her. Davis Buffington was giving her a close cousin of that look right then.

She got unexpected backing from Skeeter. "Has a point, Buff. I mean we got cause to hold this asshole for now. But hard evidence to charge him?" Skeeter gave a nasty sniff. "Right now, don't amount to a squirt of piss in a hurricane."

Buffington scrunched half his brow toward Easton. "So you don't think it's him? You don't think he's possibly maybe an accessory, or that he's involved in any way...in your professional opinion?" he challenged Ellen.

"He knew that last victim would be a woman. But he didn't know what was marked on her forehead."

That look from Buffington again, and this one wasn't just the close cousin. "Dr. Masterson, the guy could have been--"

--What, faking it?" she cut him off. "No. No way. I was watching him. He was anxious to see that woman for himself. Genuinely anxious. It's why he was there. Nothing else down there surprised him. He knew it all, like a school lesson."

"Yeah, because he did it maybe, huh?" Buffington rejoined with just a little too much sneer.

"Then why come back? Think about it. Nearly a week after? Place full of police? What does it accomplish?"

"Doctor, c'mon, you know these schizo guys play--"

--Acute paranoid schizophrenics? Yeah, I know a little bit about 'em," she trumped. "Gentlest people on the globe, till somethin' trips their trigger."

The two of them faced off for a long spell, Buffington regarding her doubtfully. Skeeter's startled face drew Ellen's attention.

"Hell...you from Texas?" he asked, sounding amazed.

With a blink, she turned her eyes to the floor and cooled off fast, took a couple steps that put distance between her and Davis Buffington. She got control of her inflections. "Look. Maybe you're right. Maybe it is him. Or maybe he's in on it." Her sidelong look took in the three men in turn, "But there's still too much we don't know to be drawing conclusions."

Buffington caught Skeeter scrutinizing him. He didn't care much for the senior agent's expression. "So what are you giving me that look for?" he demanded.

"I dunno, Buff. Just keep gettin' this picture of us all here doin' a do-se-do with this clown while the real culprit rides off into the sunset."

"I say we lean on this fucker," Lewis Manzi broke in, watching Caleb through the mirror. "Sweat him big time. One way or the other, the guy needs to come clean."

Buffington scowled, studying Ellen. "So you think that mark drawn on the woman's forehead was pretty important somehow, is that it?"

"I'll go you one better," she countered. "If there's any significant difference between the killings we're investigating here and those in Illinois, it'll have something to do with the women. Most likely something about what's marked on their foreheads."

Buffington weighed it for substance, coaching Manzi with a shift of his eyes. He drifted toward the one-way mirror, thumbs stuck through his belt loops, as Manzi shuffled through papers.

"I don't think I saw anything on it here," Manzi said, shaking his head.

"Why the damn racial overtones, people?" Buffington asked perturbed. "That's what I can't figure. Why all Indian victims? Can you tell me that?"

"A vendetta motivation," Ellen offered. "Reason could be so bizarre it only makes sense to the killer."

Buffington sucked at his lower lip and seemed to accept that as sound analysis. He turned back toward the observation glass at his shoulder to find Caleb Easton leaning on it with both hands, staring coldly as though he could see right through and had heard every word they said. It startled him so badly he actually jumped and a couple joints in his spine cracked mutely.

"Jesus Christ!... Alright, Skeeter, let's find out where this joker was in August of '93."

"I'm on it." Skeeter hopped up and headed out the door.

Buffington peeked at his watch with a tired sigh. "Damn, it's after midnight." He looked at Ellen. "You never got a chance to check into your hotel."

"No. Drove straight from the airport."

"Why don't you leave your car here. I'll have someone drive you over. Pick you up after you get some rest."

"It's not necessary. Thank you."

"Sure?"

"Yeah. Call me if we get a break?"

"You bet." He managed a lukewarm smile for her, then turned to Manzi. "Alright, cowboy, let's go get tough."

They followed Ellen Masterson out into the corridor and watched as she paced off, easing into her winter coat. She slipped her sketch pad into her purse and hung its long leather strap over her shoulder. Buffington waited until she turned a corner to say low toned to Manzi, "You know, you gotta wonder if some lucky son of a bitch somewhere is getting the benefit of that and just how often."

The more Manzi thought about it the less he understood how to take the comment. Whatever he had on his mind to say, he let it pass. Buffington pushed open the interrogation room door. In steely silence, he surveyed Caleb, who was seated again at the table. He pulled up a chair opposite him and settled into it. Manzi took to prowling like a caged cat behind him.

“You believe in God, Easton?” Buffington asked without any particular expression.

Caleb looked up from the tabletop and dusted Davis Buffington down with an equally dispassionate eye. “Don’t think I’ve ever had an ontological discussion with a cop before. God, did you say?”

“You’re Mormon, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, right,” he jeered. “I’m Mormon. I’m Catholic, Methodist, Hindu, Shinto, Moslem. Taoist. I’m anything you wanna talk about.”

“So you believe in God.”

“Maybe...I believe there’s a little good in the worst of us. Hell of a lot more bad than most people ever know about in the best of us. What about you? You believe in God?”

Buffington was thoughtful. “I don’t know anymore. I believe in evil though. I see it every day.”

“That’s the question, isn’t it,” Caleb nodded his grasp of Davis Buffington’s meaning. “Why put faith in some all-powerful God who tolerates so much evil. Every day. What’s he waiting for if he’s so powerful? Why not just destroy evil and have it done?”

Buffington shrugged. “You tell me.”

“Because he can’t,” Caleb trumped in whisper. “Skip all the pious P.R. and bullshit the churches crank out to further their own power-hungry agendas. They wouldn’t know the truth if it crept up and fucked them in the ass. What it comes down to is this: God and all the hosts of heaven are as terrified of the evil one as the evil one is of them. It’s a big stand off, with both forces evenly matched. And the truth is, in the end it could go either way.”

Buffington nodded, intrigued by the thought. “So which way you think it’ll go?”

Manzi rushed up and got right in Caleb’s face. “You were

awful worried about getting something off that computer screen of yours. Now what was that?"

"Hey, we were having a nice talk about God here," Caleb smarted off. "So what's this now? You gonna play good cop, bad cop with me? Is that it? Jesus, guys, that gig is s-o-o old."

"Nuffa this shit, pal."

"Alright, see if I got this straight, okay? You're the good cop, huh?" he taunted Buffington, then shammed an expression of stark realization at Manzi. "So that must mean--"

--Keep it up, wise guy," Manzi sawed him off. "You know, we got a whiz kid cracking into that computer."

"Oooh, whiz kid. Somebody brighter'n you, huh?" Caleb saw Skeeter come into the room. "Hey, what about him? Are you a good cop or a bad cop?"

"You wanna see bad cop, brother?" Manzi mouthed, making a hyperdramatic face.

Caleb dissed him with a sour smirk and a roll of his eyes, slouched back in his chair. "On your knees 'n pucker up, pal."

Manzi slapped the table and came around it, going for Caleb, but Skeeter got in the way, hooked an arm over his shoulder and held him back.

"You could make this a lot easier on yourself," Buffington put his elbows on the table and leaned in. "You're in deep trouble here, Easton. You had any sense at all, you'd be scared shitless."

Caleb leaned in too, locking eyes with Buffington. "I got plenty of sense," he flipped back at him. "Lot more than you're equipped to deal with. Do I look scared shitless to you?" Buffington blinked first and sat back. "You buckaroos got anything more serious than suspicion to charge me with, do it. Otherwise get the fuck off my back," Caleb told him.

"Awright, on your feet, Easton. Spend some time in a cell and it's gonna change your mind."

Caleb got up promptly. His hand brushed over the paperclip horseshoes on the table. Buffington and Skeeter conducted him out and through an open office center with numerous desks and work cubicles. The place was scarcely populated at this late hour. The regular graveyard crew at the headquarters was a small one.

Manzi tagged close behind, claspng a handcuff bracelet onto Caleb's right wrist. He reached to cuff his left hand, but Caleb yanked suddenly away, hooking a trash can with his toe and kicking it into Manzi's path. It wedged like a fulcrum just under Manzi's knee and leveraged his balance right out from under him. Manzi flopped forward and went down hard, his leg collapsing the can.

Caleb vaulted sideways. He eluded Skeeter's open armed attempt at a tackle and bowled Davis Buffington into one of the work cubicles. Spying an electrical outlet on a counter top, he made a jab at it with a hand. Between his thumb and forefinger, both insulated now with wraps of cellophane tape, he held one of his paperclip horseshoes. The prongs of it slid neatly into the outlet. He jammed it home. There was a sparky pop and a whiff of ozone before a breaker somewhere let go, plunging the room into semi-darkness. Uproar broke out.

"Hey! What the hell?!" A guy stepped from a cubicle and got shoved out of the way as Skeeter and Buffington charged past, tugging pistols out of holsters.

Buffington caught sight of Caleb scooting down a lighted corridor. "Somebody grab him! Grab that guy!" he roared. He and Skeeter bounded out into the corridor, taking aim. "Halt!" Davis Buffington ordered loudly.

Manzi and more state cops barreled around a corner out of the darkened room and plowed blindly into Skeeter and Buffington. Skeeter's Smith & Wesson went off. The concussive crack sent staffers flattening out and bailing for cover. Down range, the stray bullet lifted an acoustic ceiling square from its frame and heaved it out of view up in the suspended overhead. Caleb darted between two female clerks who carried stacks of files, pushing them aside like saloon doors. The files flew everywhere as the women added their screams to the general commotion.

"Hold your fire! God dammit!" Buffington rumbled.

Caleb dove to the polished tile floor. He sailed past an electrical outlet, and spinning onto his side, poked another of his paperclip horseshoes in it. The corridor went soot black. The general commotion tripled in volume.

An observer on the street outside the low-rise complex could

have traced Caleb Easton's trail through the building just by watching the windows go dark, like power going down over a city grid.

On the parking deck beneath the headquarters, Ellen Masterson probed her purse for car keys. The lights in the corridor behind her went out, and she spun around to see what had happened. A hand clapped snug over her mouth and pulled her into the shadows. She found herself facing Caleb Easton.

"Don't scream," he cautioned.

Tiffed, Ellen yanked his hand away. "I don't scream," she told him venomously.

"Car keys. Now."

She didn't move fast enough to suit him. He yanked the purse away from her and fished for them himself. She saw the handcuff dangling from his right arm. On an impulse, she grabbed it up and crimped its jaws shut around her left wrist.

"Not a smart move, lady."

"You can't drag me along. Give yourself up."

She hadn't seen it, but mounted in the wall directly behind her was a glass fire case with a coiled hose and a redheaded fire axe. Caleb contemplated the axe. "Could just chop off the hand," he suggested indifferently.

"Right. Using what?"

"Good point," he seemed to concede. "Come on." He jerked her tight to his side and force marched her toward a row of parked cars.

"This is not going to happen. Just give it up."

He read the rental car make and tag number off the key chain. She hadn't parked very far out, and it didn't take him but a few seconds to match them with a dark-colored sedan. She clawed hold of the door frame and planted her foot against the rocker panel, vehemently resisting when he tried to shove her into the front seat. But she didn't scream.

"This is as far as it goes," she said, her controlled voice straining as she got more and more riled. "Up till now, no harm done. But you force me into this car and it's kidnapping."

"Only if you didn't want to come along."

“Well I don’t want to go along,” she insisted.

“Then why’d you put the cuff on?”

“I--”

“--In the car!” Caleb dozed her through the door and across the bench seat to the passenger side and tossed her purse in back where a small suitcase lay on its side. He adjusted the seat to give him head and leg room and hit the master door lock button on his arm rest. When he tried to fit the key in the ignition right handed, she tugged hard on the handcuff chain. He nearly lost the keys.

“Stop it,” he said sternly. He reached over the steering column with his left arm and transferred the keys to his other hand. He got them clumsily into the ignition and started the engine. She pulled the same bit with the cuff chain when he tried to shift the column-mounted transmission selector into reverse, half expecting to get hit for her efforts. He merely reached across and did that left handed too. She sat in a huff, thinking fast and determined to stay cool and not to lose it. Not to do anything anyone would accuse of being typically female. She wasn’t some distressed damsel who needed rescuing. She would work her way out of this herself. She was confident she could.

The sedan crept up an incline, then out through the garage exit gate and onto a side street as a full muster of state cops poured from the main entrance of the building and spread out, scouring the grounds. Police cruisers pulled to the curb, cut off blue lights and switched on their spots to aid with the search. Caleb Easton piloted the sedan coolly past the police cruisers, doing nothing to give himself away. But he could sense Ellen eyeing the horn pad on the wheel.

“I wouldn’t try that,” he warned.

She tried it anyway. He used her trick and hauled back hard on the handcuff chain, snapping her hand up short like a hound on a leash. It hurt. She gasped, but went for the horn again. He snatched her wrist out of mid air and held it with bruising pressure until she flinched and pulled away from him, comprehending suddenly just how physically strong he really was.

“Stop it!” Caleb told her more firmly. He merged the sedan in with the skimpy, late-night traffic bound for a freeway

artery. Moving only his eyes, he watched his rearview mirrors inconspicuously, keeping his speed in line with the flow of traffic around them. There was no one tailing them, he seemed satisfied.

They accelerated up onto the freeway and drove quite some distance in silence, both looking straight ahead. Ellen broke the quiet.

“I suppose I should say thank you.”

“For what.”

“I never got a chance to thank you for, you know, in the cave. Most likely, you saved my life.”

He didn't act impressed. She looked down at her wrist and the length of chain connecting it to his wrist, then eyed him askance, wanting to get him talking.

“Caleb. Would it upset you if I asked where we're going?”

“Probably.”

He seemed annoyed that she knew his name and used it. Typical. Most of them bristled a little when she sprung the first name basis gambit on them. Knock down all the formal barriers and impersonalisms right off the bat. It was one of her more fruitful techniques. Get them thinking of her as a person, as a specific warm and breathing woman. Not just an icon for something they hated and would never trust. After that, they were less dangerous. And easier to handle. It was almost like a first date.

“My name is Ellen, by the way.”

With a succession of sideways glances, he canvassed her features, looking her over thoroughly -- her styled hair, the boots, fashionable clothing, her manicured hands. And there still that undeniable resemblance.

“You're not a cop, are you.” He stated it like a fact.

“No...I, well, I work with them sometimes.”

“Some kind of psychiatrist?”

“Uh, psychologist, actually. Forensic psychologist. I work with police agencies.”

He sensed she was up to something. Her free hand had come gliding slowly across her lap and was inching toward a dull, dark colored object sticking partway out from under the seat atop the transmission hump. She gauged her movements to coincide with

moments when he was busy being attentive to traffic, nudging the object with her fingertips and trying to get it out of view under the seat.

Caleb Easton pulled the car off at an exit. At the bottom of the ramp, he turned onto a darkened, two-lane state highway heading straight out of town toward the mountains. He pegged a button on his armrest and rolled down his window. The air came in, a noisy rush of cold. Without comment, he reached across his lap and plucked the black cell phone from under the seat where she had pushed it. In the same motion, he flipped it out the window. He didn't once look at Ellen, never took his eyes off the road. He tagged the button and rolled his window up.

"West," he announced as quiet returned.

"I'm sorry?" she made herself say calmly.

"West. We're going west," he told her.

* * *

It was still about a half hour till sun up. Trailing a fog of diesel soot, a ratty, flatbed G.M.C. delivery truck, growled its way up a gravel drive to a house that sat well out by itself on a sixty acre tract. Faded lettering on a front fender read: Muskogee Grain & Feed - Muskogee *Tulsa *Tahlequah.

Jimmy Coosa got out, wearing work clothes and dragging a thermos and lunch pail off the front seat. He had worked hard his whole life, was tall and robustly built with a peaceful, dignified face. The lines on it said he smiled easily and often. His straight, dark hair, lively eyes and curving eagle beak of a nose were distinctly Cherokee in character.

A noisy mutt crawled out from under the house and ran to greet him. Coosa scratched the pup's ears. "Alright, alright. These damn midnight shifts got you all screwed up too, huh?"

He had taken on an extra night time delivery shift four nights a week to bring in additional cash and pay down the loans for new equipment he had purchased in the fall. There was always more demand for feed during the early months of the year and on into spring, especially on the heels of a harsher or wetter winter

than expected. The almanacs had missed it by a fair piece this go-around for the whole of northeastern Oklahoma. The cold Canadian air mass that typically pushed down and clipped them good all winter had done so only a time or two. More often there had been rain, heavier and more prolonged than usual this year. So Coosa spent his nights from sundown to sunup on the back roads of Rogers, Mayes, Wagoner and Cherokee Counties, sipping hot coffee to stay awake and offloading grain bags by lantern light at the farms and ranches of people who relied on him to have it there by predawn feed time. As the old rural saying went, you had to make hay while the sun shone, or in this case, Coosa reasoned, before it even came up.

The dog licked Coosa's face and streaked off through an open field. Coosa watched him go until something else snared his attention. Something far up on a haze-wrapped hill beyond the house. It was rough territory up there. He squinted to make out what it was. A flickering speck of light like a torch flame, he thought, moving steadily through the distant mist, like a satellite making its way slowly across a night sky.



ELEVEN...

Documents show that international maritime commerce was conducted in an orderly manner in the sixth century before Christ... But, you may protest, all this evidence comes from the relatively sheltered and closed Mediterranean Sea.... Show us one scrap of evidence that men in the pre-Christian era could cross oceans by ship....

It is a mistake to think that the so-called age of navigation (of Vasco da Gama and Bartolomeo Diaz and Christopher Columbus) was something entirely new....

As to the relative sizes and strengths of ancient ships in comparison with those used by Columbus, medieval Europe of 1492 was in a state of nautical skill that the ancients would have regarded as benighted. Columbus's whole expedition could mount only 88 men, carried on three vessels of which two were only 50 feet in length, about the size of a small Boston fishing boat.

Contrast that with the Pharaohs of the Ramesside dynasty, 1200 B.C., who could mount expeditions of 10,000 miners across the Indian Ocean to the gold-bearing lands of South Africa and Sumatra. Julius Caesar's triremes carried 200 men, yet he found his ships outmatched in size, height, and seaworthiness by those of the maritime Celts.

*--Professor Barry Fell, 1989
Harvard University*

America B.C.: Ancient Settlers in the New World

An A.P.B. went out on Caleb Easton. After flopping down for a half hour of sleep, Janson Skeeter went back to work hoofing down leads.

Skeeter had never put much stock in polygraph tests. He had his own methods for determining when the things people told him were the truth. And it didn't require a special machine or some expert qualified to interpret the results for him. He simply utilized his own acute perceptions.

Asking questions he already knew the answers to was a good way to establish a baseline, he had found. He never broke eye contact when he questioned a subject. That alone was enough to unnerve most liars. People like to use distance as a barrier and for camouflage when they lie. Skeeter knew this too, so he would close in on their personal space, positioning himself innocently but deliberately nearer to them than they were comfortable with. You could walk a nervous liar clear around a room, he knew, just by closing the space between them and you. Or even back them into a corner where they couldn't get away.

In close, he could watch for minute reactions and see the little giveaways. Pupillar dilation revealed a lot, as did nervous ticks. Even the direction they looked away when they answered his questions was a clue. Did they look up and over his head, their eyes moving from side to side? Or did they glance down and to the left maybe? It all had to do somehow with brain physiology, he believed, and with the brain areas that were active when a person lied. He would manipulate the rhythm of the Q & A and wouldn't always give the reassuring nods and prompts that were part of normal conversation. He had found that most people, even when telling the truth, were uncomfortable with silence. So he would let silence fall often while he continued his unblinking scrutiny. It was never any one factor that determined when he was being told the truth. It was a combination, the overall ensemble. Skeeter had perfected lots of little tricks and techniques to bring out the blend.

His accuracy was something to comment on, well on its way to becoming state bureau legend. He hardly ever got lied to

successfully. And he often came away from an interview knowing much more than what the simple Q & A itself had revealed. It wasn't on account of any sixth sense or psychic ability either. Skeeter just possessed a stronger than natural intuitive comprehension of people's underlying motives. For all his misleading appearances, he was one hell of an instinctive cop. Good police work, he was fond of aphorizing, came not from the heart or the head, but from the gut. Beyond that, it was all thoroughness and persistence. His other favorite professional axiom was: Buy good shoes. The job was tough on foot leather.

His attempts to question Caleb Easton had been a real experience for Skeeter. Virtually one of a kind. Caleb couldn't be made uncomfortable with closeness or silence. He seemed to know exactly what Skeeter was up to with all that. And he could take Skeeter's merciless eye contact without ever looking away. That was rare. He even seemed to be reading Skeeter back every bit as intently and accurately as Skeeter was reading him. Skeeter had started to feel like he was being had at his own game. But for all of that, he was still certain Caleb Easton had never once lied to him. He was equally certain Caleb was holding back a heap of truth and wasn't about to part with it easily.

Caleb's escape had convinced everyone else on the investigation squad that he was guilty as hell. Exactly what he might be guilty of however was still a question in Skeeter's mind. It was a question he felt they would find the answer to most quickly by finding Caleb Easton himself. Where would Easton go now? Logically. Whom might he contact? That's what Skeeter got busy trying to figure out.

The sun had just broken above the horizon when Skeeter's somber-colored sedan whipped down a snowy highway past a road sign welcoming him to the State of South Carolina. Skeeter hadn't seen but three other cars coming or going in the past ten miles. He fumbled with a road map draped over the steering wheel, but catching sight of something out the side window, he slung the map over into the passenger seat and hit the brakes. The car skidded around sideways. He straightened it out, backed up to a little side road and turned down it. Partially covered with snow, a

small, faded, white on brown sign read:

Catawba Reservation - 11 miles

Skeeter hadn't driven more than a few minutes before the sound coming off his tires got lower in pitch and the steering grew trickier to control. He realized that the road under the snow had changed from concrete pavement to hard packed dirt. It narrowed, becoming little more than a fire break through the tall pines and scrub undergrowth. He drove on, steering against the sedan's tendency to break traction and send its rear end sliding around every time he gave it gas. He hoped he wouldn't wind up running off into a ditch.

Past a sharp curve at the bottom of a long grade, he emerged all at once from trees and coasted into a cleared stretch. A ways ahead on his left was an unpainted, wood frame building with a clapboard exterior. It looked as though it might have been put up over the course of a few weekends by a couple shade tree carpenters working with whatever they could get cheapest at the lumber yard. A 1x12 pine board with the words Mission School routed out in big letters was nailed above a stout old door that was sturdier than anything else in the structure. The door and its frame looked conspicuously like they had been salvaged from some other building when it was torn down. Skeeter slowed and scoped out the school building, then pulled past it and rolled on toward a rundown, two-story farm house and barn that sat farther down the dirt lane on the same side.

Sandra Rickenbaugh was a rotund woman in her thirties, naturally blond with a country clear complexion and gentleness as big as the sky in her pale colored eyes. She peeked out through a cracked window pane as Skeeter walked up to the farm house, his jaw working the ever present wad of chewing gum. She went out onto the rickety front stoop, snugging a beige knit sweater around herself.

"Morning. Help you?" she inquired, not all that suspiciously. Skeeter had that effect on people. He didn't look like someone who could possibly ever do anybody a bit of harm.

"Yes, ma'am. I hope so. I'm looking for Reverend Rickenbaugh."

"Buddy?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well if he's not at the school house there tending that old furnace, he's probably around in the barn. You go on back and find him if you want. He expecting you?"

"No, ma'am, he wouldn't be." Skeeter gave her a polite nod and flipped his collar up to ward off a gust of wind. He shuffled through the snow around the side of the house to the barn beyond. There was a light glowing inside. As he approached, he called in through the open door. "Reverend Rickenbaugh? Reverend?"

Inside the barn, Buddy Rickenbaugh shouldered a bag of feed and poured it into a trough for a quartet of steers. Two Catawba Indian boys who looked to be about twelve years old wore coveralls under their coats and hauled slop out for pigs penned behind the barn. Winded, Buddy peeled off a pair of wire-rimmed bifocals and swabbed them clean of grain dust with a handkerchief. He hooked the arms back over his ears and peered through them out into the fresh morning. "Yes, hello! Come on in, please!" he hailed Skeeter.

Skeeter let his I.D. case tumble open so Buddy could take a look at his badge. "Reverend, my name is Janson Skeeter, I'm with the State Bureau of Investigation up in North Carolina."

"I see," Buddy said, wondering why a cop from North Carolina would be standing here in his barn. "Well, you're out mighty early."

"Yessir, I am. Reverend, do you know a man named Caleb Easton?" Skeeter went to work with his unwavering eye contact. Buddy seemed to be a little taken back by the question.

"He in some sort of trouble?"

"Well, sir...I don't know," Skeeter breathed. "Right now he's missing." One of the steers watched Skeeter steadily, as if it were as interested in what he had to say as Buddy was.

"Missing? Well did someone say he was here?"

"No sir. There was a letter on his desk that had your address on it. You wrote to him a while back, I believe, after his mother died?"

"You read the letter?"

"Well, yessir, I did. Sounded like maybe you were pretty close

friends. You haven't seen Caleb? Recently?"

"Seen him? No. Not since we were kids."

Skeeter mulled that over silently. Buddy Rickenbaugh was definitely telling him the truth, he was satisfied. In fact, Buddy didn't seem the type apt at all to tell him anything but the truth. That could be useful.

"I see. Anything you can tell me about Caleb could be extremely helpful right now."

Buddy eyed Skeeter expectantly. Skeeter offered nothing more. "Has something happened to him?" Buddy asked.

"We're trying to figure that out."

"I see." Buddy turned back to the steers, stroking one along the spine as he gazed off in thought. Whatever he was thinking about brought on a brief smile that turned quickly sad. "Funny how it turned out with Caleb and me," he observed at last. "I was the one always acting up, always in hot water. But everyone figured Caleb would likely be a bishop someday. Maybe even a leader of the church."

"The Mormon Church, you mean?"

"Yes. By the time he was ten or twelve, he could put elders to shame, he knew his scriptures so thoroughly."

"By scriptures, now, what scriptures do you mean? Like the Bible?" Skeeter asked.

"Yes, the Bible too, The Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl and other writings of the Prophet." Buddy forked out silage for a young heifer in a stall and stepped out, spanking at his sleeves to give them a dusting. "Anyway. Now here I am, president of a mission. And Caleb? Well. Caleb lost his faith, I guess you'd say."

"I see. Tell me, reverend, did--"

"--President. I'm called president, Mr. Skeeter," Buddy interrupted, smiling again. "Or bishop, if you like. You want some hot chocolate? Take the chill off."

"Uh, sure, cup of cocoa'd be great," Skeeter said, genuinely appreciative of the offer. He was cold and doing all he could to keep his teeth from chattering.

"Got a whole kettle of it simmering over at the schoolhouse.

Come on. I could stand to warm up a little myself.”

They left the barn and made their way through the brittle snow toward the school.

“You know very much about the Mormon Church, Mr. Skeeter?” The golden question. The one Mormon missionaries were schooled to lead with when they proselyted new prospects.

“Uh, well, I know there’s lots of Mormons in Utah. Got a real good choir at the tabernacle there and all, I guess.” An awkward pause and Skeeter fessed up. “No, I’m afraid I don’t. Not much at all, no sir.”

Buddy smiled. He had known the answer to the question before he asked it. “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the Lord’s kingdom reestablished on Earth to prepare it for his second coming.”

“You expect that’ll likely happen soon?”

“Within our lifetime, Mr. Skeeter, mine and yours, I expect it, yes.”

Skeeter realized instantly he had fallen into a trap. He was about to be witnessed to, or preached to, or hear testimony, or whatever it was these Mormon folks called it. At any rate, he was fixing to get an ear load of religious how-to, he figured. He had no prior experience with the Mormon missionaries who show up at people’s doors, canvassing neighborhoods. Fundamental Baptists and Jehovah’s Witnesses a time or two. But he had no earthly idea what he might be about to get into on this Mormon thing. At the very least, he reasoned, he was going to get a few questions in, find out a few things he sincerely wanted to know.

“So just what is this Book of Mormon anyway?” he asked Buddy Rickenbaugh. The answer came back so smoothly phrased and rote perfect, it reminded Skeeter of the audio filmstrips they used to run in his high school classes. All it lacked was the irritating little beeps to let someone know when to advance the frame.

“Some hundred and seventy years ago on the side of a hill called Cumorah near Palmyra, New York, a set of ancient golden plates was revealed by God’s will to the Prophet Joseph Smith. They had lain underground for centuries, hidden. With them were a pair of crystals, or seer stones, called the Urim and Thummim.

God provided these for Joseph Smith to use so that he would be able to translate the lost language of the plates. That translation became our Book of Mormon.”

Buddy swung the door to the school building open, and they went inside, shaking off the cold. Skeeter looked around. With the exception of a thickset pulpit at the front, the trappings were those of an old-time, one room schoolhouse, down to the big, round, wood-burning furnace in a corner. Buddy poured Skeeter cocoa from a pot sitting atop the wood heater and passed it to him with care. He poured another for himself, took a sip and settled back into his lecture.

“Inscribed on the plates were the writings of ancient prophets and historians. They told the stories of long vanished civilizations that had once flourished on the American continents.”

“Civilizations like, what, Aztecs and Mayans you mean?”

Buddy shook his head. “Long before those cultures ever developed. These ancient people built fantastic cities, greater even than those of Egypt or the Greeks. Their forefathers crossed the oceans in wooden vessels from Jerusalem and the Holy Land in ages past. But over time, great disasters befell them. Volcanoes and earthquakes, floods, plagues from the heavens...and war. Cities were swallowed whole by the earth, and great masses of land were sucked down into the ocean.”

Skeeter hoped it wasn't too plainly obvious that he wasn't buying all this. Buddy Rickenbaugh gave a school globe on a tabletop a twirl and stopped it with North America facing up.

“Scholars of our church have discovered astounding evidence that North and South American were once much more broadly connected than they are now by a great land mass that all but vanished beneath the sea centuries ago -- just as it was described in *The Book of Mormon*.”

As Skeeter looked on, Buddy's fingers spread to trace a shape that began at a point just below Philadelphia, then opened south, wide enough to take in the Florida peninsula, Cuba and most of the Caribbean before it reached the coast of South America.

“All down through here, the many islands of the Caribbean are the only traces now remaining of it. They were once the uppermost

tips of its mighty volcanoes and of a mountain range that must have extended from the Appalachian chain clear to Venezuela. All the rest, gone now for centuries, deep beneath the ocean.”

Skeeter’s eyes narrowed and he sipped his cocoa. There was just enough semblance of possibility to the notion to make it an interesting theory, even if it panned out to be total bullshit.

“The earliest migration to the Americas chronicled on the gold plates was that of the Jaredites, who came when God confounded the languages at the Tower of Babel,” Buddy went on. “God directed Jared’s people to build a fleet of great wooden barges. In these, he brought them across the waters to this new land, which we’re told in The Book of Mormon was a land that was choice above all lands of the earth.”

Yeah. God bless America, Skeeter thought, snidely.

“Much later, around 600 B.C., a descendant of Abraham named Lehi fled from Jerusalem. Instructed by God, he made a giant ship of wood timbers and sailed his family and followers to this land of promise.” Buddy directed Skeeter’s attention to one of several colorful illustrations tacked up on the walls in the schoolroom. It depicted people loading provisions and livestock aboard something that looked to Skeeter like Noah’s Ark. Lehi’s Ark? Skeeter guessed to himself.

“From Lehi’s son Nephi sprang the great Nephite nation. But Lehi’s son Laman betrayed his father. Those of his seed, who became known as Lamanites, God cursed with a darker colored skin.”

“We’re not talking about Vikings or Atlantis or anything here, right? These were Jewish people you’re saying?” Skeeter interrupted.

“Lost lambs of Israel,” Buddy replied.

“And all this stuff’s in The Book of Mormon?”

Buddy turned to a flannel board story graphic of an archaic looking stone city. Cut out paper figures stuck to it wore Biblical era clothing. All looked up, shielding their faces with their arms as though something dazzlingly bright were in the blue flannel sky.

“Yes, Mr. Skeeter. All that’s in The Book of Mormon. As is the most wondrous event recorded in the plates -- the coming of Jesus Christ to America!” Buddy pressed a flannel-backed paper figure

in the sky and smoothed a hand over it to make it stay there. It was Christ in a sunburst aura, nail-pierced hands extended.

Skeeter closed his slack jaw after a moment and started chawing his gum again, thoroughly incredulous.

One of the Catawba Indian boys from the barn stuck his head through the door. "Sister Rickenbaugh says to come in for breakfast."

"Thank you, brother," Buddy smiled at the boy as he darted back outside. He turned again to Skeeter. "The Book of Third Nephi tells us of Christ's ministry here in the New World after his crucifixion. How he healed and performed miracles, even as he had done in Israel. And how in this land too he called twelve apostles from among the Nephite people. But after our Lord ascended to heaven from America, the Lamanites and Nephites waged wars against each other until all were annihilated except the Lamanites, who the Prophet Mormon tells us were a loathsome and filthy, dark-skinned people, an idle people who hunted beasts for food and dwelt in tents in the wilderness."

Speechless, Skeeter watched the Catawba boy out a window, sprinting over the snow toward the barn. He turned to face Buddy Rickenbaugh who wore a visage of divine enlightenment.

"The Lamanites, Mr. Skeeter. Clearly the ancestors of the American Indians."

Skeeter had nearly put it together already by himself. Jesus Christ! So that's what Mormons believed? Holy shit...

"Mormon's son, Moroni, the last of the Nephites, buried the sacred plates on the side of the hill Cumorah, knowing that the Lamanites would seek only to destroy them," Buddy burred on in his best thespian air. "After that, Moroni too was slain. So the doctrines and chronicles of Mormon lay hidden in the earth for fourteen centuries, awaiting the day of their revelation."



TWELVE...

A strange unrest is apparent among many of the younger historians and archeologists of the colleges and universities, a sense that somehow a very large slice of America's past has mysteriously vanished from our public records. For how else can we explain the ever-swelling tally of puzzling ancient inscriptions now being reported from nearly all parts of the United States, Canada, and Latin America?

The inscriptions are written in various European and Mediterranean languages in alphabets that date from 2,500 years ago, and they speak not only of visits by ancient ships, but also of permanent colonies.... They occur on buried temples, on tablets and on gravestones and on cliff faces....

There was a time when such finds were attributed to the misguided folly of uprooted colonists from Europe, to forgers or cranks fabricating tradition for a society that has none. But skepticism changed to bewilderment when it was discovered that American inscriptions, some of them known for a century or more, turn out to have been written in ancient scripts of a type only recently deciphered in Europe or North Africa.

Thus the truth has slowly come to light, ancient history is inscribed upon the bedrock and buried stone buildings of America, and the only hands that could have inscribed it were those of ancient people. America, as we now realize, is a treasure house of records of man's achievement upon the high seas in bygone ages. Even more so are our inscribed rocks and tablets a heritage from a forgotten era of colonization. They tell us

of settlers who came from the Old World and who remained to become founding fathers of some of the Amerindian nations.

--Professor Barry Fell, 1989

Harvard University

America B.C.: Ancient Settlers in the New World

Inside the farm house, Sandra Rickenbaugh and her five children set a heavily laden breakfast table. Buddy and Skeeter sat in stuffed rockers on opposite sides of a fireplace in the front room, sipping a second cup of hot chocolate they had carried over from the schoolhouse.

"Sure you wouldn't like some biscuits and eggs, Mr. Skeeter? Plenty here for everyone," Sandra Rickenbaugh called in from the kitchen.

"No ma'am, I'm fine with the just the cocoa. But thank you very much." There were still a couple things Skeeter wanted to find out. He eyed Buddy Rickenbaugh. "Any idea where Caleb might go? Family? Friends?"

Buddy shook his head. "I lost track of Caleb a lot of years ago. I wouldn't know of anyone else. His father was gone before we ever knew them. I think I heard someplace he was dead. With his mother passed away now, I don't believe he had anyone else. I don't know where he'd go."

Forwarding labels with Caleb's name on them clustered an envelope Skeeter took from his pocket. Buddy gulped recognition as Skeeter unfolded the letter from inside it. "In your letter here, you seemed to be warning Caleb about a man you called... Wesley, I believe?"

Skeeter watched Buddy stop rocking and go tense. He hadn't expected quite that much reaction to the question. Visually he parsed Buddy's features, settling on his eyes, screening the scurry of emotions he saw there.

Buddy peered at the glowing logs on the hearth, dredging up the past for quite some time before answering. "Years ago, when Caleb and I were young, a missionary came to our chapel," he told Skeeter in a low, angst-ridden voice. "A wild, charismatic man. His

name was Knox Wesley. He had the gift of healing. He ministered among Indian tribes for many, many years, and he spoke strange, astonishing doctrine. It upset many of the people in our ward."

The log fire reflected like something diabolic in Buddy's eyes. An expression of terrible distress had lodged on his face. Shrinking back in the rocker, he seemed to become small. "The ward bishopric and several elders took Wesley privately and confronted him about his ministry," Buddy went on. He glanced anxiously in at his wife and children and continued in an even lower voice Skeeter had to lean in to make out.

"There are three great mysteries of the Mormon faith, Mr. Skeeter. The first is that of the Gold Plates of Mormon themselves. Following their translation, a radiant being, an angel, took them back from Joseph Smith, along with the Urim & Thummin -- the seer crystals he translated them with. No mortal person knows where they are now. The second mystery is that of the sealed portion. A part of the gold plates held secrets about the latter days. It was sealed up by the Lord and forbidden to be opened or translated on pain of everlasting damnation."

Cold sweat came out on Buddy's face in beads.

"But the third mystery is stranger still -- the mystery of The Three. I told you how Jesus Christ had ordained twelve disciples among the Nephites in America, just as he had done in Palestine. But before Christ ascended again into the heavens to return unto the Father, he made three of these Nephite disciples immortal with power over death to continue his ministry until his return to Earth."

"Immortal disciples?" Skeeter raised an eyebrow.

Buddy nodded vigorously. "Yes. The Prophet Mormon and his son Moroni themselves saw The Three, still alive and ministering hundreds of years later. But when the nations became so evil toward the end of the time of the Nephite people, these three blessed disciples were hidden away in some fashion. And as Moroni later wrote, whether they be upon the face of the land no man knoweth..."

"Everyone from our ward bishop down to the last elder became convinced this Knox Wesley was indeed one of The Three

Nephites, still among us after almost two-thousand years. They believed his prophecies came from the part of the Gold Plates of Mormon that God had sealed up. Wesley branded Caleb an anti-Christ, a demon incarnate. Then he did something... something terrible to Caleb's mother." An ugly memory. Buddy trailed off, went silent.

"Something terrible?" Skeeter prompted him softly.

"Everyone in the ward believed it was Caleb who... raped her."

Cops see it all. But this information jarred Skeeter. "Was this rape reported?"

Buddy shook his head sadly. Glancing uneasily toward his wife and children, he lowered his voice so no one but Skeeter would hear him, "The Church deals with its own, Mr. Skeeter. They were all terrified of Caleb. It was awful how quickly everyone turned on him. They..." Buddy stopped abruptly, tears welling in his eyes, "We... drove him from our congregation."

Skeeter took it in thoughtfully. "He was your best friend?"

"Yes. But after a while, I was afraid to side with him."

"Why? Did you believe for some reason he had actually done what they said he did to his mother?"

"She died in a psychiatric asylum. She never spoke another word the rest of her life."

"Did you believe Caleb did it?" Skeeter was firmer.

Past events careened through Buddy's mind. He remembered the fear from those days, the desperate insistence of people from the church he knew and trusted. He remembered his own fear of Knox Wesley, and of a force that had lifted and hurled him in Caleb's back yard that night.

"You don't understand how it is," he said to Skeeter, his voice little more than a whisper. "The Church is everything to you. Family, future...everything. You don't go against that."

"And that was the last you saw Caleb?"

"Yes."

"What happened to this Knox Wesley?" Skeeter saw the question sting Buddy.

"Wesley just...disappeared."

Skeeter waited for more. But there was nothing. He got up,

handed Buddy his business card. "If Caleb contacts you or you think of anything else you think might help, would you please call me?"

Buddy stared at the card in Skeeter's hand, struggling with something else he didn't know whether he should say. "Caleb told me he killed Knox Wesley, Mr. Skeeter," Buddy said with terror in his eyes, "But I don't believe that man can be killed."

* * *

In a cubicle at the North Carolina S.B.I. district headquarters in Asheville, Lewis Manzi ran an electric shaver over his stubble. He watched closely each sheet of paper that dropped out of a fax machine and into a bin. Manzi looked like he could stand to sleep. He was running on sheer stubbornness and his third or fourth wind. The faxes were of credit card receipts. All bore the name Caleb J. Easton. One was from a motel. Others were from a hardware and a department store. All were located in or near Vandalia, Illinois. The receipts carried transaction dates from mid-August of 1993.

Manzi switched off the shaver and laid it down. He scooped up the faxes and carried them down a corridor into a well appointed office where Davis Buffington snoozed in a high-backed chair at his desk. It was still very early morning. The place had not gotten lively yet.

"Buff," Manzi said. He shook Buffington's shoulder, waking him, and presented him the faxes. Buffington looked them over and handed them back.

"Bingo, huh?" he said to Manzi.

Manzi nodded. He was pleased with himself.

Buffington picked up his phone and, consulting an index, touch-toned in a number. Someone on the other end answered. "Morning. This is Davis Buffington. Ring Ellen Masterson's room for me, please," he said into the receiver.

* * *

John Qualla and his two children sat at breakfast in the kitchen of their small home on an outlying tract of the Oklahoma Reservation for the Cherokee Nation. They were a family of early risers. John studied the classified ads in a section of a Tulsa newspaper. He was looking for a good, late-model used car for sale. His old, late '70s vintage Monte Carlo had about run through its useful life and then some. He had pulled the factory engine at about 130,000 miles when it had too much wrong with it to fix and dropped in a new one. Now it was ready for another. The valves had gotten noisy and it sounded to John like there was a piston rod grumbling, handing in its two week notice, so to speak, that it was about to part company with the crank shaft. It had been a good, reliable buggy, and he liked driving it. But the engine wasn't the only thing ailing now, and he couldn't see putting more money into something that old. It irritated him that they quit making Monte Carlos like his some time back. If he could have found a good price on one a few years old, he wouldn't have minded having another one.

The children were bright faced and already dressed, though the crowd of Native American youngsters they walked with to the reservation school wouldn't swarm past the front of the house for probably another hour yet. They preferred getting up early and dealing with homework in the morning rather than in the evenings when there were shows on television they wanted to watch.

Dee Qualla whisked a hot skillet of eggs from the gas range and shut off the flame. She hadn't taken two steps toward the table to serve them up when her shoulders sagged, and she collapsed to the floor. The cast iron skillet clanged hard on the tiles. The noise startled John, who thrust the newspaper aside and jumped up. He got about halfway to his feet before he too pitched forward and crashed down onto the breakfast table and lay there motionless. The children didn't seem to notice. They were both already slumped back in the dinette set chairs with their arms hanging loose and their heads canted at limp angles.

From under a door, a distinctly bluish vapor slowed its surge into the room. It crawled agilely along, an inch off the floor, billowing and dispersing through the kitchen.

A dark hulk moved noiselessly into the house. The breakfast eggs hopped and quivered in a spill of hot grease on the tile. Beyond the skillet, Dee Qualla's outstretched arms trailed as she was dragged face down out of the room.

* * *

Among the Chickasaw Indians inhabiting parts of what later became Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee, there was a name for the marauding creature that had been raiding their villages by night and carrying off their young women. They called it *lofa*. The word had survived from their ancient tongue. It meant one who skins. Lofas reputedly had the habit of ripping the skin or pelt completely from their prey before they fed on it. And that included human prey.

To all accounts, lofas were huge, upright walking beasts with small heads, half again the height of a Chickasaw warrior. They were said to have a massive torso and muscular arms, much longer than a man's arms, as well as squattier legs with large, clawed feet. Bloody shreds of a stripped animal hide and some scattered bones left behind were sure signs of a feeding lofa.

They were horrifyingly powerful creatures, tended to be nocturnal, and could run swiftly enough to take down wolves or even deer. Because of their size they were not especially stealthy. They were often heard far off in the night, thrashing noisily through the woodlands. Their mournful cries, emanating from deep within the forests, were well known and easily distinguishable from those of other things that prowled at night.

Lofa was a hairy beast, though not furred like a bear. Chickasaw who had encountered one close up and escaped alive always spoke of one other characteristic: its horribly repugnant smell, so foul it was nearly suffocating. How a lofa could creep up on anything undetected seemed beyond imagining. Many believed lofas were not animals at all, but rather spirit creatures or supernatural beings.

Descriptions of them could be somewhat suspect. Extremely few Chickasaw had ever actually seen a lofa. Sightings of them were rare, even more rare than sightings of the oddly clothed men

with the peculiar pale skin and eyes who were said by some to have come onto the Chickasaw lands. By the calendar of these strange, white men, who the Chickasaw would learn were explorers and missionaries, the year was 1579. But the Chickasaw had little understanding of numbers and not that much use for them. They measured time by the moon and the sun and the seasons, accurate enough for their purposes.

One particular lofa had taken to stalking into their villages by night. Bending low, it would warily invade the round, winter houses the Chickasaw constructed of oak limbs lashed to upright pine posts and thatched over with split saplings, palmetto fronds, grass, bark and clay. Since the time of the last full moon, it had carried off more than half a dozen young Chickasaw women. It seemed to be locating them from the scent of their menstruation, it was decided. Their remains would later be found, devoured down to the bones.

A tribal myth keeper chanced to glimpse the giant interloper by firelight late one night as it fled a village. He commented on its pale skin under the shaggy hair that covered its body. White skin, like that of the strange hunters and missionaries some had seen. It was peculiar. Lofas were commonly thought to have dark hides under their hair, hides that were grayish brown and speckled with black.

Early one morning it was discovered that the daughter of a tribal priestess had been abducted during the night. Painting their faces and bodies red and black and affixing tufts of swan feathers into their roached hair, a hunting party of Chickasaw warriors danced a war dance. With swan wings tied to their arms, they set out to track this bold lofa and attempt to kill it. They were heavily armed with arrows and the short javelinlike lances the Chickasaw were so deadly at using. They could be a fierce people when provoked, cunning and unrelenting in war. Their warriors often fought in small parties like this squad of hunters, and they were skilled at ambush and surprise attack. Two of their best trackers were among the party. They easily picked out the lofa's huge footmarks in earth softened by recent rain and were already on its trail as the sun spread its first rays.

Lofas were thought to live in trees. Chickasaw hunters would occasionally come across their abandoned sleeping nests, constructed from weeds, pine straw and palmettos in the sprawling lower branches of oaks. From the stench of the nests themselves and of the scat spread about the trees beneath them, there was no mistaking the habitat of lofas.

This white-skinned lofa was different however. It had made its den back in a cavernous rocky fissure at the base of a hill near a hot spring. Freshly picked human bones lay heaped outside, still bloody and ripe with morsels of carrion which buzzards strutted about tugging at. Others hovered or hunched in tree boughs, awaiting a turn. The scalp and skin had been stripped from the skull, the top of which was clearly rounded. It showed no signs of the head deformation ritually inflicted during infancy to permanently flatten and slope the foreheads of males born into most Chickasaw totemic clans. That meant that the bones were those of a woman, presumably the priestess's missing daughter.

The warriors laid out their weapons and readied themselves to rush the lofa's den and draw it out into the open where they could attack and kill it. But before they could mount their assault, the lofa came ambling out of its den. Every bit as fantastic and fearsome a creature as the tribal legends held, this one was indeed light skinned. They could see pale flesh clearly, especially where the shaggy hair was sparse around the cheeks, nose and brow. The beast's eyes were uncharacteristic and disturbing too. It had intelligent eyes that were pale in hue, not dark like the eyes of animals. The warriors were amazed to see that it wore a shabby loin cloth. They had come prepared for a fight to the death of every last one of them if need be. But they were not at all prepared for what happened next.

As they drew back their arrows and lances to strike at the lofa, it lifted one dangling, hairy arm high and spoke to them fluently in their native language!

Furthermore, it used a dialect prohibited to all except their highest order of shaman priests.



THIRTEEN...

Mormon Catechism:

For this Lamanite people shall be scattered, and shall become a dark, a filthy, and a loathsome people.... And behold, the Lord hath reserved their blessing, which they might have received in the land, for the Gentiles who shall possess the land.

And behold, it shall come to pass that they shall be driven and scattered by the Gentiles.

--The Prophet Mormon, c. 400 A.D.

Mormon, Chapter 5

Ellen Masterson awoke lying on the front seat of her rental car. It felt like early morning to her. She couldn't recall having dozed or fallen asleep at all, she had been that tired. Waking up in a car was disconcerting enough. It got even more so as details of her situation sifted back down like hourglass sand into her fuzzy consciousness. She sat up sharply and looked around. It was definitely daylight out, though not very bright. The car was parked someplace. She couldn't tell where. The windows were completely steamed over inside. Caleb Easton was not in the vehicle. Her wrist was now handcuffed to the shoulder strap of her purse which lay on the floor.

Fretful, she rubbed a spot on the side window clear and peered out. From that vantage point all she could see was that the car sat beside a stand of bare bushes banked with snow. She rubbed clear another spot, this time on the windshield, and got her face

to the glass. Before her spread a spectacular panorama of winter mountains and valleys. It was densely cloudy overhead, but the sky at the horizons was clear. The sun was barely up. All the distant snow and the undersides of clouds reflected a faint, warmish cast from its red-orange rays. Shadows spilling off everything were long and dramatic. The sky to the far west was fairly dark yet. Past the edge of the cloud layer Venus and a few stars still shone.

Caleb Easton leaned against a tree at the rim of a sheer drop-off several yards away. He wore a sweater that was conspicuously feminine in style and color. Ellen recognized it immediately. She twisted hastily around and reached over the seat for her suitcase in back. It was still there, she was relieved to see. Both latches were open. She pushed the lid up and rifled through its contents.

From somewhere near the bottom of it she retrieved a snub-nosed revolver that was wrapped in a wisp of silk lingerie and slipped the gun promptly into her coat pocket. She hesitated a moment before dropping the clean, silken panties that had served as its holster back into her suitcase and closing the lid. Had she been wearing a skirt and not the heavy corduroys and lace-up boots she had been in since the day before, she would probably have taken off the panties she wore and quickly slipped the clean ones on. However foolish it seemed under the circumstances, the compelling lure of having on fresh panties was something only a woman would fully appreciate. She looked at her outfit with just a tincture of exasperation.

Ellen popped the door handle and stepped out into the shallow snow. Slinging the strap of her captive purse over her shoulder, she kept her free hand in the coat pocket with the pistol and walked cautiously toward Caleb Easton, curious why he would stop the car here. She observed now that he held something in his hands. Another tinge of recognition. She gripped the purse at her side, her eyes darting down to its open top. Her sketch pad wasn't there. Caleb had it, looking through her drawings.

He stopped on the one she had penciled of him, sitting alone in the interrogation room. It was abundantly clear from the powerful, lifelike sketches he had seen in the book that Ellen was a talented and even gifted artist. But the page now open before him

thoroughly stunned and amazed him. She had captured every tiny dimension of him with remarkable craft and rendered his features flawlessly, especially the shrewdness and expression in his eyes. Finding this portrait of himself suddenly on the pad there in front of him was like unexpectedly coming across a lost identical twin. He couldn't turn the page, lingered on it nonplused.

It confirmed what he had already suspected, that Ellen had been one of those observing him from the other side of the one-way mirror. His curiosity about her had grown unbearable, and he had gone through her purse and taken her book with the intent of discovering something more about her. But just seeing this drawing, it was obvious to Caleb she was already far ahead of him on that account. She already perceived much more about him than he had imagined someone possibly could in such a short time.

Oh, good, he found the portrait, Ellen thought to herself when she saw the page Caleb was fixated on. She was accustomed to being more in control of the circumstances under which her case subjects saw the portraits she invariably drew of them. The sketches came easy for her, hardly felt like work at all. And they had proved to be a worthwhile little gimmick in her inventory of tricks. She used them often. She would either leave them out where they were sure to be discovered while she took a break from an interrogation, or turn the pad around and display them to the subject after evoking his substantial curiosity while she sat there penciling it. Or sometimes, she would just simply walk in and present them like a little gift, saying nothing more about it.

In truth, this particular portrait had been inspired more by her own curiosity about Caleb Easton -- or did she dare characterize it as fascination with him? -- than by any premeditated intent to use it as a device for getting at and manipulating his emotions. This was however a fortunate accident, she decided. The timing was good. It might work out just as well as something she pulled off on purpose.

She understood thoroughly the impact of her drawings and the effect that seeing these portraits had on her subjects. At the simplest level, it was flattery, a wile most women learn to use well when dealing with men. But there was more to it than that in

these cases. Right on the heels of flattery came the impression that someone had effortlessly penetrated all their defenses and had figured them out down to the slightest twitch. That would unnerve them at first. But as the notion settled in, they would warm to it, often becoming significantly less guarded, though they hardly even realized it. On yet another plane, it all worked on their need for recognition and their desire to feel important. It made them believe that someone understood and was impressed with them. If she could then successfully cultivate that level of relationship with them, she invariably gained the upper hand. She possessed them.

“Ever wonder about the people whose pictures get printed on our money?” Caleb asked, sensing her approach and then hearing the scrunch of her footsteps packing the wet snow. The question was strange enough to stop her.

“Haven’t really ever thought about it,” she said, keeping her distance.

“Dollar bill, you got George Washington, father of his country. On the five, Abe Lincoln, the great emancipator.” He looked at the rugged daybreak vista outspread beyond them and gave a derisive snort. “So whose damn picture we go and put on the twenty?”

Long silence. He apparently expected her to answer.

“Jackson?”

“Andrew Jackson...worst damned murdering racist ever lived in the White House.” He drew in a breath and let it out dramatically as he closed Ellen’s sketch pad. “Old Hickory, Andrew Jackson... war hero. Got parks named after him all over the deep south. Big stone statues.” He gave another snort more derisive than his last. “Would have got his ass drop-kicked to oblivion if the Cherokee hadn’t fought under him at Horseshoe Bend in 1814.”

“I didn’t realize that,” Ellen said even voiced. Caleb had been annoyingly silent all night in the car. Finally he was talking, she thought. She could work with this.

“Well, turns out old Andy didn’t much like blacks. And he just flat hated Indians.” He turned at last to look at Ellen, stood taking in her face for a goodly spell before he spoke again. She caught his eye contact dip just once to her breasts and hips through the open front of her coat. He was jet quick about it, not like most men who

hadn't learned to mask this innate habit. Another woman with less trained perceptions might even have missed it entirely. But in an instant, it told her something she wanted to know about him.

"Come 1817, General Jackson organized an expedition into Georgia and Florida, to round up runaway slaves, you understand. And unofficially, a few thousand Indians got themselves massacred too, their villages burned and looted by Andy and the boys. Oh, they slaughtered Indian women, butchered little kids. Even killed the Indians' animals, like they were wiping out Philistines or something." He gave a big shrug. "Dozen years later, the man's elected president. He roundly defeated John Quincy Adams who campaigned by characterizing Jackson as an ignorant, uncouth barbarian. Accurate mostly, except for the ignorant part. A while later, someone discovered gold in the Cherokee territory, and Jackson pushed through the Indian Removal Act. Going to relocate them all to wonderful reservations in Oklahoma. Indians couldn't even appeal the action. Weren't allowed the right to stand in court. They weren't American citizens."

Ellen was beginning to wonder what, if anything, this history lesson might be leading up to. But she didn't interrupt.

"John Marshall was chief justice of the Supreme Court and one of Jackson's old enemies," Caleb went on. "He tried to stop him. The high court ruled twice that laws denying Indians their human rights and due process were unconstitutional. 'Course John Marshall wasn't head of the executive branch and Jackson was. He had power of enforcement. Soldiers did what he said. He was commander-in-chief. So Jackson just flat defied the Supreme Court. He said, 'John Marshall has rendered his decision; now let's see him enforce it.'" Caleb got quiet again.

"Seems very cruel and unfair," Ellen furnished to keep him talking.

"Yeah, doesn't it. Anyway, they got displaced, most of them. Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Seminole and the rest... just savages." He let that hang there a moment. "You know the Cherokee published a bilingual tribal newspaper as far back as 1828?"

"Did they."

“Cavalry troops herded virtually all of them into camps at bayonet point, then drove them west like cattle the winter of 1838 to ‘39. Sixteen thousand Cherokee people.” He blew out a long vapor cloud of breath and started walking along the precipice. Ellen followed at a safe distance. “It was a brutal winter. Most of them were on foot. They got swindled out of their possessions to buy food. There was dysentery, tuberculosis, exhaustion...the cold.” Caleb sighted along his arm to a snowy foothill on the horizon. “They lost hundreds before they rounded that farthest pass there in the east. All down through these valleys. No headstones. Hundreds of silent Cherokee graves. Four thousand died on the way.”

Ellen scanned the snowy mountain slopes with realization. “The Trail of Tears,” she said just above a whisper. It must have been a winter very much like this, she reasoned. She could recall having seen paintings of it hanging in a gallery exhibit once.

In the abstract eye of her artist’s mind, she could almost envision the U.S. Army troops with their blue uniform mantelets on their shoulders and their tall, napoleon blue shako hats, riding on horseback through the vale below where they stood, carbines slung over their backs. Around them like a human stream, a nation of once proud native people, spaced in scattered detachments as they pushed their way through the gorges between the mountain ridges and razorback hills. A few riding horses or in oxen drawn wagons, but many, many more plodding along on foot, wrapped in woven blankets and shivering, carrying infants, dragging litters on which their sick and elderly lay, and bearing bundled on their backs their few permitted belongings.

It was a vision of racial hatred as blatant and villainous as the Russian pogroms, or of Nazi troops routing Jewish throngs from the ghettos and aboard boxcars bound for the internment camps. They had been the sorrowful, tattered remnants of a sophisticated culture and of an ancient people who had stood innocently in the path of greed and treachery and as a result were nearly driven over the brink of extinction.

“The Cherokee distinguished each direction of the compass with a color.” Caleb looked somberly toward the sun, low in the eastern sky. “Red is the east, land of the sacred fire. Blue is north,

the land of defeat, and south is white, land of peace and well-being. And the west," he spun grim faced toward Ellen. "...Black. Land of the moon, coldness, souls of the dead. Death itself."

She put it together, perceiving something all at once. She couldn't explain exactly where the notion had come from. It just seemed to pop into her head full formed. If she had scrutinized it before she voiced it, she would have wondered why it made sense at all. "The black moon. On the Cherokee woman's forehead," she said.

Caleb looked at her. That strange prickling again, it was strong now. He could tell they both felt it. "A Cherokee symbol for the Trail of Tears," he affirmed. He stared urgently into her eyes, seeming to want explanation from her of this sensation under his skin. But he realized then she had no more idea what it was than he did and was probably wishing he would explain it to her. She looked down at the purse handcuffed to her wrist.

"Pretty good trick, opening cuffs without a key," she segued uncomfortably.

"Tweezers in your luggage. I bent them a little. Sorry. I borrowed your sweater too."

"I noticed."

"I was cold."

"Yes... Yes, I guess you were." He moved toward her, and she started to draw the gun from her pocket. His words stopped her.

"He'll kill again in Oklahoma," he said.

"Who?"

"Something there he desperately wants."

"Caleb, you have to level with me or I won't be able to help you."

Caleb dropped his chin, studied her through tightened eyes. "What do you expect me to do, lady, drive into the next town and turn myself in?"

"Yes!" she insisted. "Right now that's the smartest thing you can do. Caleb, clue us in. Let us help."

"Oh, yeah. Of course there's this little mass murder charge--"

--You haven't been charged--"

--Unlawful flight. Let's not forget you made me kidnap you,

for crissakes.”

“Caleb--”

“--Crossed a state line. Yeah, you’ll help me alright.” He turned and plodded toward the car.

“Caleb, stop,” she said. There was a note of warning in her voice.

“We’re low on gas. There’s a little burg an hour up the road. Be a station open by the time we get there.”

Ellen drew the gun from her coat pocket and pointed it at Caleb’s back. “Caleb, I said stop!” She wasn’t playing. She knew full well how to use the weapon. She cocked the hammer with a practiced flick of her thumb, and the cylinder rotated a notch.

Caleb heard the cackle of the hammer. He knew instantly what it was and stopped cold. He turned around slowly, giving a smirk. “Guess you keep more than tweezers in that luggage of yours.”

“I told you, I work with cops.”

“Right. So you blown away a lot of psychopaths with that thing, huh?”

“This ends right here,” she enunciated each word.

Caleb slowly extended a closed hand. She glanced at it, mystified. What was he up to? He looked her dead in the eyes and opened his fingers. Six .357 magnum bullets lay in his palm. Damn it! It had struck her the moment she got it out at arm’s length that the gun felt a tad light. Holding her aim, she tripped the release and shook the cylinder out from the frame. Six, smooth empty holes through it.

“Gee, looks like you’re fresh out,” Caleb taunted. “Here, take a few? I got a whole box.”

About six different expressions wrestled for prominence on Ellen’s face, among them embarrassment and irritation. She settled at last on none of them, just lowered the gun and looked at him coldly, her back teeth apart, cheeks clinging hollow and tense between them. Her eyes felt hot.

Caleb walked to the car, gesturing at the road that wound farther up into the mountains. “That road? This time of year? L-o-o-n-g walk,” he told her. “Hope you’re up to it, lady.”

He got in the car, pitching her sketch pad up onto the dash, and started the engine. Ellen stood ashen, trying to gauge whether he would actually leave her out there. He hadn't been kidding about their being a long way from anyplace. A good look around confirmed that. Nothing but mountains, trees and snow far as she could see. It occurred to her that no traffic had come down the highway from either direction since she got out of the car. And now that she paid more attention to it, it didn't look like a main road at all. More byway than highway. Not much of one at that.

Caleb backed the car up and swung it past her. She heard the electric window roll down and canted her head to glare at him as the car lurched to a stop.

"Come on. I'll drop you in the next town," he said without looking at her. "Then I got things to do."

She thought that over, but not very long. Pushing the gun back into her coat pocket, she walked around the back of the car and got in the passenger's side.

"You realize, soon as I get to a phone, I'm tellin' 'em you're headin' for Oklahoma." So much for cleverly penetrating his defenses and gaining the upper hand. She snatched her art pad off the dash and stuck it in her purse.

"They've figured that out by now," Caleb said, jockeying the car around in the snow. "So what part of Texas did you grow up in?"

Ellen's jaw tightened. She sat silently as they pulled out onto the narrow road, headed up the mountain incline. Had they turned in the opposite direction, they would have gone only about a quarter mile down the incline and around a bend before encountering a pair of county sheriff's cruisers, parked in the road with their blue lights twirling and trunks open.

A trio of deputies were in the process of positioning saw horse roadblocks across the roadway, cutting off passage in either direction. One of them hammered nails through holes in a broad, reflective metal sign, securing it to the center saw horse. Finishing up, he scuffed through the standing snow toward the cruisers where the other two deputies were shutting down trunk lids.

"Call it in the air!" he hollered out. "Loser buys breakfast!" He

reared back underhanded and flipped the hammer spinning in an arc toward one of the other deputies.

“Heads!” the other sounded off. He took the hammer out of the air with a gloved hand. The head was down, the handle up. “Damn!” he grumbled. “That’s three days in a row!”

The deputies piled into their cars. Switching off their emergency lights, they drove bumper to bumper down the incline.

The sign on the center roadblock in their rearview mirrors read:

Road Closed – Dangerous Snow Conditions

* * *

Janson Skeeter entered Davis Buffington’s office. He folded his topcoat and draped it over a chair back. “Know how sometimes you start looking into some really twisted shit, and you figure, this is real weird shit. This shit just couldn’t get any weirder?” he offered.

“Yeah?” Buffington came back.

“Well, it just got a lot weirder.” Skeeter plummeted into a stuffed leather chair across from Buffington.

“Ellen Masterson’s missing. Never checked into her hotel last night.”

“You fuckin’ kiddin’ me?” Skeeter’s mental wheels clicked into motion, adding things up. “Whaddaya figure? Easton snatched her before she got out of here last night?”

“Car was a rental. Gone too. Got an A.P. out on it.”

Lewis Manzi zipped past, sticking his head through the door only long enough to say, “He missed the plane.”

“What plane? Who missed a plane?” Skeeter wanted to know.

“Easton had a reservation to fly to Tulsa first thing this morning,” Buffington told him.

“Yeah? So?”

“It seems they’re investigating a few Cherokee disappearances out there too.”

“No shit!”

“Manzi’s working it. I might send him out there.”

“You calling in the Fed boys yet?”

“May have to,” Buffington glowered. “Records show Easton was in Vandalia, Illinois during August of ‘93. Same week as the killings there.”



FOURTEEN...

We can come to no other conclusion than that Quetzalcóatl and Christ are the same being....

*--The Prophet John Taylor, President
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1880-87*

Laborers had been up and hard at work a good hour before the sun rose over archaeological ruins deep in the dwindling rain forests of Chiapas. The climate of the southern Mexican interior was a sultry one. Even during the more clement months, the days grew brutally hot and humid. It was deemed smart practice to get as much work as possible done early, then find a shady place with a breeze to stretch out and stay there, drinking plenty of liquids while waiting out the hottest part of the day. The well-known custom of siesta was one that had developed, not out of sloth, but rather out of practical necessity. Dehydration and heat prostration were terms anyone who spent much time in these climes quickly learned the seriousness of.

There were more than sixty workers on the site, including students and archaeologists from both the University of Mexico City and the Mexican National Museum of Anthropology. They excavated the gridded-out tracts by hand, shoveling soil into sieves and sifting it well for anything of significance before carting it away from the area in wheelbarrows. Though less than a major dig, this was yet regarded in archaeological circles as a highly

significant one.

In the mid-sixteenth century, accounts of the Spanish explorers had made mention of a deserted Toltec ceremonial center called Tzompec. It was said to lie somewhere near the confluence of the Rio Jatate and the Rio Lacantún, along an ancient trade trail that had once connected the older Maya cult centers of Bonampak and Yaxchilán to the northeast and Chinkultic to the south. But for more than four-hundred years, the mysterious city of Tzompec had proved impossible to find. Its edifices had lain undisturbed, wrapped in the slumber of ages, completely overgrown and cloaked by a canopy of rain forest campeche, kapok and mahogany trees.

Mexico boasts some 13,000 known sites of archaeological significance. Astoundingly few have been actively excavated and studied. In the tropical southern states of Campeche, Tabasco and Chiapas, scores of new sites came to light in the wake of heavy logging by the timber industry and deforestation to provide new lands for lucrative crops such as coffee. But it was ultimately Chiapas State's political revolution rather than its agricultural revolution that forced the jungle to cough up the secret of Tzompec.

Chiapas had become an embattled zone following a disputed election when native Indian guerrilla forces of the Zapatista National Liberation movement seized control of numerous villages. They announced their intent to set up a parallel government if the ruling party's candidate in the election were inaugurated. Despite a shaky truce with the rebels, the Mexican government had secretly dispatched army tracker squads to search out the jungle and mountain hideaways of the movement's leaders.

During the second week of this operation, a Mexican army squad leader had marched his small jungle assault force up a sloping hillock, intent on getting above the rain forest insect layer and having some respite from them while they settled down to midday mess. As they sat awhile, their eyes grew more accustomed to the shapes camouflaged by the thick jungle growth spread below them. They began to make out the ornamental friezed walls and chacmools, the lopped-off columns and toppled atlantean warrior statues -- the relics of some of their ancestors. It occurred to their squad leader that the hillock they sat upon was not a

natural hillock at all, but rather the flat summit platform of a fifty-five foot tall stone pyramid, buried under the jungle greenery and mulch of a millennium.

The Zapatista hideouts were never found. But it seemed a fair tradeoff to this squad of soldiers that they had accomplished something purely by chance which eight competently organized expeditions over the past century had failed to do. They had found the lost Toltec city of Tzompec.

The diggers had been there for six months now all told. First had come the careful clearing of trees and vegetation. Sector after sector, they had defoliated and reclaimed from the jungle Tzompec's thousand year old sanctums. It had taken the entire fall just to reveal the topmost contours of all the structures there. Now followed the more in-depth excavations. That would take much, much longer. Like the pace of time that created them, archaeology and anthropology were slow sciences.

Among the most curious discoveries to date had been the remains of members of a British expedition that had set off in search of Tzompec in 1903, never to be heard from again. Metal bits of their gear turned up in the sieves first, and then the bones were unearthed along with clumps of rust that had once been Enfield .303 rifles, their wooden stocks rotted to mush.

A runner bolted through the compound toward a quadrangle of tents pitched in Tzompec's central plaza. Breathless with excitement, he threw back the flap on the front of a beige canvas tent and called inside. "Doctor Montero! Doctor Montero! Come quick!"

Luis Montero got up from a cot, squinting into the bright sunlight that knifed through his sleeping quarters. He pushed a hand back through a glossy thicket of straight, black hair. He looked not that much different than he had nearly a decade and a half ago when he and Caleb Easton had documented a reputedly lost mystic ritual performed by a mud-caked Shawano shaman in a forest hut made of bent saplings and animal hides. The same tall, handsome Mexican with ample mustache.

"Come quick!" the runner urged. "They've broken through a new level."

Luis slipped on a pair of dark aviator sunglasses and came out into the already blisteringly hot morning on the double. He got his arms through the sleeves of a shirt still dank with last evening's sweat and pulled it up on his shoulders as he raced along after the runner.

At the far end of the plaza, there was plenty of buzz and commotion around a crude platform elevator that hung suspended from A-frames over a vertical shaft sunk near the base of the complex's largest stone pyramid. Luis made his way through workers and onto the platform, signaling for them to lower him into the shaft.

"Ori! Ori!" he called down the shaft. He took off the sunglasses, straining to catch sight of anything in the gloom beneath him. The elevator stopped as it hit bottom. Luis got on his hands and knees. He wormed his way down a cramped length of rough hewn rock passage. A man's voice echoed somewhere ahead of him.

"Unglaublich!"

Luis wedged through a break in the passage wall and found himself in a small, startlingly bright-colored chamber with a low ceiling. He duck walked along the floor toward Ori Gerhard Kästner who sat in a profuse sweat, panting amid shards of broken pottery.

"Unglaublich!"

"Ori! What's wrong?"

Ori snatched up his lantern off the floor and, unthinking, put the beam on Luis Montero's face. Luis put up a hand to shield his eyes.

"Luis! Kannst du glauben was wir hierin gefunden haben?"

"English, Ori, English!" Luis pleaded for their common language. "You're hyperventilating. Breathe deep. C'mon, easy now. Tell me what's wrong."

Ori turned the lantern until it shone on a trio of rectangular folios, strewn on the broken pottery. A lay observer might have judged they were made of some matted, butternut-tinted fabric that had been thoroughly starched to stiffen it. The material was in fact a primitive paper stock, similar to that which Mediterranean cultures once made from papyrus sedge. The erstwhile folk of

Mesoamerica manufactured this durable variant by pounding overlapping strips of tree bark until they fused together in a sheet of fibrous pulp, then sun drying and burnishing it with smooth stones. The panels were accordion folded like a road map and bore columns of hand scripted symbols and vividly colored two-dimensional painted figures. That they were ancient was unquestionable. Ori moved his hands above them as though afraid to touch them. He swept the lamp beam across the chamber to where more of them were stacked, standing on end in painted clay pots along a wall.

Luis gasped out loud. His amazement stemmed not merely from what it was Ori had discovered, but also from the sheer number of them that were there. Ori got his breath, then started giggling like a joyful child. "Luis, can you believe it? Can you believe what these are?" he asked, dispensing with his native German.

Luis pulled clean cotton gloves onto his hands. With practiced care, he lifted the folded codex that lay nearest him off the shards and held it in the beam of Ori's lantern. His eyes roved over the rich-hued figures on it with tense wonderment.

He had unusual colored eyes for a Mexican, Luis did. They were the color of the sea under a clear summer sky -- a deep, peculiar blue.

* * *

Tense and tired at the wheel, Caleb Easton drove Ellen's rental car along what had become increasingly hazardous mountain road. They had yet to come across a plowed stretch. Snow had blown in broad drifts over the pavement. In places it lay more than a foot deep, and most of the time it was difficult to tell where the roadway under it was exactly. On top of that, fresh snow had begun raining down in big, wet flakes, reducing visibility all the more.

They were making poor headway, especially up a series of grades, moving along only yards at a spell. The back tires would bite but then spin, pitching the vehicle from side to side as they alternately caught and lost traction. Caleb shot for the clear spots.

They slid catty-cornered from one to the next, traveling sideways as much as forward. As the wheels whirred angrily and the speedometer needle darted up and down, he kept a nervous eye on the fuel gauge, sitting on empty. They were using up lots of gas this way.

Reaching more level ground, they came almost immediately upon a steep downgrade. The car slid crazily through curves, despite Caleb's best efforts to steer into the skids and hold it straight. It wasn't that he didn't know how to drive on snow. Actually he was pretty good at it. But he was dealing with deep, wet snow and lots of it. It didn't help that he was pushing his luck pretty hard. There was someplace else he wanted to be.

Ellen wasn't enjoying the ride at all, but she endured it silently. Her hands were vice-locked onto the seat edge and arm rest, white knuckled. It mortified her how little guardrail there was along this roadside, even at curves. Often there was nothing but a thin strip of snow-capped berm separating the pavement from dizzying drop offs. More than once she just shut her eyes, certain that they would careen over the edge.

"You know something of Mormonism apparently," Caleb observed, not taking his eyes off the road.

"A few things," she replied. She tried hard but couldn't quite keep the shake out of her voice.

"How come?"

She opened her mouth to answer but hesitated, reluctant by habit to reveal anything personal about herself to him, yet knowing he would see through anything short of an honest response to his question. "I had a college roommate. For a while, she used to date a...Mormon guy. As I recall, he had been a missionary out west. To an Indian tribe, coincidentally."

She saw his mouth wrinkle with sarcasm. "That's no big coincidence really," he said. "Mormon prophecy makes such a big deal about how their scriptures will be carried to the Lamanites and how they'll be converted again in the last days."

"Carried to whom?"

"Lamanites. The American Indians. Gotta send missionaries out after those Indians, you know, save their poor Lamanite

bastard souls. Make sure all those prophecies get fulfilled.”

He had been without sleep and driving most of the night. It was beginning to tell on him seriously. Ellen could hear the fatigue in his voice, and it made her all the more nervous. Beyond the roadside out her snow wet window yawned an expanse of deep, airy nothing. Caleb hadn't been silent more than a few seconds when he nodded off for a moment and the car drifted. Ellen grabbed at the wheel and straightened it. He snapped to, rubbing his eyes. Letting out a relieved breath, she looked toward the road ahead and suddenly screamed out loud.

Caleb sucked air in through his teeth. With a heavy thud, the head and shoulders of a deer filled the windshield, cracking the glass. He hit the brakes and fought to get control. No good. The car veered off onto the berm, slammed a small embankment, then vaulted partway up onto a long section of guardrail.

Clawing hold of the dash and seat upholstery Ellen screamed again, much louder than before. Out her side window she could see nothing but distance straight down. Losing little momentum, the car shrieked along the guardrail top, its tail hanging out over empty space. Metal gnashed and sparked on metal until an upright post ripped the whole rear axle and drive shaft away. Ellen felt herself wrenched forward off the seat, the lap belt and shoulder restraints catching her and slingshotting her back.

The sedan came to a jarring halt. Its tail section tottered out over the guardrail a moment before the vehicle teetered back and came to rest on the safe side of the rail, propped up on one front tire.

Ellen looked over to see Caleb battering the now deflating airbag aside with his forearms. It had deployed when they hit the embankment, she realized. She saw concern on his face for an instant as he pivoted to reach for her. But seeing she was apparently unharmed, he blew out an exasperated breath. “What happened to ‘I don't scream?’” he wanted to know.

They slid in tandem out the driver's side door which wouldn't open all the way before jamming into the ground. Ellen hitched her purse strap over her shoulder to get its weight off her wrist. She stood surveying the damage to the car while making a good effort

to get herself composed and calm. A couple places on her legs and just above one elbow had started to radiate hurt, and though she didn't recall it, she knew she must have banged them into the dash or door or something during the collision. It was nothing serious, but she could tell she was going to have a few bruises.

"How far did you say--?" She realized in mid-sentence that she was talking to no one and turned to see Caleb crouched over the deer. It was a full-grown doe, still alive, head and forelegs jerking in pain. She bled freely out her nose and open mouth and made a quavery mewling sound deep in her throat. Caleb stroked the doe's neck gently, got her settled and lying still. Wet vapor came up as she panted shallow puffs of breath, heart racing from fright. He glanced at her twisted flanks. Both back legs were broken. Probably the spine too. He looked around, searching for Ellen and found her standing nearby, watching him almost clinically.

He got up and moved very close to her. She couldn't read anything at all she saw in his eyes. She flinched back when she felt his hand suddenly at her hip, then realized he was reaching into her pocket. He drew the .357 magnum pistol out, pointed it up and let the cylinder fall loose from the frame. A single bullet materialized in his fingers. He loaded the gun, closed it up and ratcheted the hammer softly twice to bring the round up under the firing pin and left it cocked.

As she looked on, he knelt and put the muzzle to the deer's head. His brow clenched tight and his eyes closed. Ellen angled her head away, anticipating the shot. It still jolted her when it came.

Caleb got up. He dropped the cylinder open again and let the spent casing fall out smoking. It hit the snow with a little hiss. Dangling the pistol by its trigger guard, he gave it back to her. There was a spot of blood on his cheek. He didn't seem to realize it. She wondered if she should tell him.

"Guess we walk a ways," he said stepping past her.



FIFTEEN...

Mormon Catechism:

A revelation given through Joseph Smith the Prophet to Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris, at Fayette, New York, June 1829, prior to their viewing the engraved Plates that contained the Book of Mormon record...

Behold I say unto you, that you must rely upon my word, which if you do with full purpose of heart, you shall have a view of the Plates, and also of the breastplate, the Sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim....

*--Section 17, Doctrine & Covenants of
The Church of Jesus Christ
of Latter-day Saints*

Through a double set of metal push-bar doors, Davis Buffington and Janson Skeeter entered the larger of two gymnasiums on a university campus. The building housed two full-sized basketball courts side by side and buzzed with the sounds of various phys-ed classes.

A coed volleyball game shared space on the near court with an indoor archery class and a couple aerobic workout groups. At the far end of the other court, ten guys lolled about laughing and shooting hoops, still sweaty and winded from a basketball game they had just ended. It had been a friendly student and faculty

game, and for once the upstart youngsters had gotten their tails whipped proper. The oldsters were going to be feeling it for a couple days though. Ted Schoenbrunn was one of the faculty oldsters. Blotting his face with a towel draped over his head, he walked off a leg cramp while catching up on his breathing.

Buffington and Skeeter conferred with a short woman in sweats who wore a whistle around her neck and refereed the volleyball game. The woman pointed out the group of guys shooting baskets. Mindful of their street shoes, the two state bureau agents recalled enough about gymnasium etiquette to walk all the way around the edges of the lacquered wood floor rather than cutting straight across to reach the other court.

“Professor Schoenbrunn?” Buffington inquired of the basketball players collectively.

“Yes?” Ted Schoenbrunn’s head came up. He let the towel drop down onto his shoulders, shaking out a wild mane of springy, off-blond hair that encircled his bald pate. A tiny, bug-eyed man, Schoenbrunn wore a constant expression of oxygen-starved simple-mindedness. The appearance was grossly misleading. His grade school Stanford-Binets and later Wechslers all confirmed an I.Q. just a point or two shy of the 180 range.

“Davis Buffington, professor, State Bureau of Investigation. I called and spoke with you this morning.”

“Oh, yes, certainly. Inspector Buffington, isn’t it? Yes, well I’m pleased to meet you, inspector.” Schoenbrunn wiped his hand hastily across his towel before offering it to Buffington. His characteristic tone of voice was a low hush, as though he were always narrating the clandestine.

“This is special agent Janson Skeeter. Do you have some time now that you could talk with us?”

“Oh, certainly.”

A few minutes later, Schoenbrunn came out a men’s locker room door with Buffington and Skeeter. He wore his street clothes, and the three of them made their way down a campus hallway teeming with college students.

“Peculiar canon of beliefs, the Mormons. Most curious. An American oddity really,” Schoenbrunn told them. He strolled at

an academic pace with his hands thrust into his trouser pockets. "The notion that God selected white, Gentile inhabitants of the United States as his new chosen people. Most curious indeed. Unparalleled in religious studies."

They passed a trio of youthful coeds, one of whom spoke up. "Hi, Dr. Schoenbrunn!"

Schoenbrunn nodded to them, waved and smiled. "Still, The Book of Mormon itself? Strange piece of literature if nothing else."

"Why do you say so?" Buffington asked.

"You're familiar with it?"

"I thumbed through it. I think I recall commenting to Agent Skeeter that it read like a bad parody of the Bible."

Schoenbrunn let out a low chuckle. "Yes, it does have that ring to it, doesn't it. And that peculiar adherence to the Elizabethan era English used in the King James Version of the Bible, even though that style of speech was more than 200 years out of date by the time The Book of Mormon was purportedly translated. Does give it a certain sound of religious importance in many people's minds though, I suppose."

"Dr. Schoenbrunn!" Another long-stemmed coed, fluffy blonde and especially pretty, overtook them and interrupted all excited. "Dr. Schoenbrunn, I'm really enjoying your comparative religions class. It's just opened my eyes to so much."

"Oh, good. Thank you, good. Well then I'll see you there Friday, yes?" Schoenbrunn turned back to Buffington and Skeeter. "Still, it's hard to accept how all the intricate story lines and themes in The Book of Mormon could have been created and woven together entirely by an uneducated, twenty-one year old, Presbyterian farm boy like Joseph Smith. Most curious."

"Smith, now that's the prophet who the Mormons claim translated the book?" Buffington asked him.

"Yes, copyrighted it in 1829, if I recall the date. Though lord knows it's been a hotly debated point with the Mormon church almost since the onset that the history presented in The Book of Mormon bears an embarrassing similarity to certain highly romanticized historical novels by a little known nineteenth-

century writer and minister named Solomon Spaulding.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, it seems Spaulding’s stories related tales of far ancient pre-Columbian cultures in the Americas who buried a record of their history and beliefs in hopes that they would be found by future generations. Something like this whole Celestine Prophecy thing that became so popular.” Schoenbrunn raked fingers through his untamed hair to smooth it back, but without much effect. “It’s been argued that Joseph Smith likely read Spaulding and plagiarized the story line from him, as well as some of the principal proper names found in *The Book of Mormon*.”

“Hmm. That’s amazing.”

“Yes. And if you add to that the striking similarities between Mormon temple rituals and the secret lodge rites of Freemasons, considering also that it’s been documented Joseph Smith was a first-degree Mason for a brief time too, well, it does tend to paint him in a rather suspicious light to say the least I’m afraid.”

“I guess so. Still, some other things seem pretty intriguing,” Buffington said. “I mean the Jewish ancestors coming and establishing these great civilizations here and Jesus Christ himself appearing in America and all. Pretty startling. I’ve got to wonder what inspires concepts like that. Pretty original to my view of things.”

“Well, one would think so these days, inspector, but in actuality, theories concerning the true fate of the legendary Ten Lost Tribes of Israel and such were pretty common parlor chat in certain circles during the seventeen- and early eighteen-hundreds, both here and in Europe. You see, the American Indians and their exotic tribal lifestyles were still very much a novelty to many people of European extraction back then. Very little was commonly understood about them really. So-called civilized people in general hardly knew what to make of them or where they might have come from. There was an assumption that since white and black men weren’t indigenous to the New World but had come there from other lands that the same must be true of Indians. One curious contention popular at that time was that the lost Hebrew tribes, following some miraculous ancient migration,

somehow descended to become the American Indians.”

“Have to confess I don’t quite follow you here, professor. There were some lost tribes of Israelites at some time period you say?”

“Yes, the ten Hebrew tribes of Samaria who were carried off into captivity by the Assyrian kings Shalmaneser V and his successor, Sargon II, in 721 B.C.,” Schoenbrunn explained to Buffington. “In truth, these lost Jewish tribes -- some 27,000 people by biblical account -- were in all likelihood scattered across the entire Assyrian empire and their identity totally lost. It was how the Assyrians historically prevented collusion and uprisings among the people they conquered and took captive, you see. But any number of pseudo-factual conjectures existed regarding some hitherto unknown divine regathering and sheltering of the Ten Lost Tribes. The Mormons themselves professed for the longest time that the Ten Tribes were never dispersed at all, but were led off by God and hidden in the north polar regions for whatever reason. More modern explorations however never revealed any great lost civilization of Jews living in the tundras. So at some point, to sidestep embarrassment on the issue, they adopted the belief that a portion of the earth had been snatched away and shaped into another planet for the Lost Tribes, and that it now lies off in the galaxy somewhere to the north of us. Of course, they also believe that God himself resides on yet another distant planet that Smith called Kolob, the rough Mormon equivalent to what we’ve come to think of as Heaven.”

Skeeter cast a glance toward Buffington. “I told you this gets pretty wild, Buff.” They went through an atrium and up an architecturally elaborate ramp into another building.

“At any rate,” Schoenbrunn went on, leading them back through hallways, “any number of less than scholarly treatises theorizing about the fate of the Ten Lost Tribes were published during that time. One in particular, around, oh, 1823 or so, called *The Ten Tribes of Israel in America* cited supposedly unquestionable similarities between native American Indian and ancient Hebrew language, customs and religious rites, which included such things as anointings and avoidance of unclean things. The book contended that Indians were without a doubt evil Israelites from

the Lost Tribes who destroyed the weaker, righteous ones and lived as savages here for centuries before Europeans discovered the Americas. It's highly conceivable that Smith was influenced by this or other such fanciful works. Quite curious. The timing was certainly right, just a couple years before the emergence of *The Book of Mormon*. Several well known religious figures of that time period had already speculated in print about this exact same Hebrew Indian theory, I guess you'd call it, including William Penn, Cotton Mather, Roger Williams, Bartolomé de Las Casas and others." Schoenbrunn grinned at them both, then hooked onto another train of thought. "Anyway, it doesn't surprise me at all that Joseph Smith would dream up a tale about finding ancient gold plates and strange seer stone crystals buried in the ground either."

Schoenbrunn checked post-its stuck to an office door before he opened it with a key and let them in. His office was exactly what one would imagine the digs of a professor of theology and philosophy might look like. It was organized after a fashion, but hopelessly cluttered. Books and papers, even scrolls and other relics that bore a semblance of antiquity, all lay open in squared-off piles, marking the likely final resting places of dozens of incomplete projects. Dust and grime collected on them were clues that some stacks had been standing that way for years. The whole place was summed up tidily by the plaque on Ted Schoenbrunn's desk that proclaimed *God Bless This Mess!*

Fascinated, Skeeter roved, scrutinizing items on the bookshelves and hangings on the walls. Ted Schoenbrunn lit up a Meerschaum pipe that dwarfed him and gave it a couple energetic puffs. Like a geologist indexing his way down layers of a sedimentary sample, he ran his fingers along titles on the spines of books piled in one of his stacks and deftly extracted a heavy bound text from the middle of it without toppling the rest. He sat down at his desk and skimmed through the book.

"There was another popular obsession back in Smith's day with legends of buried Spanish and Indian treasure, especially in New England and around the Great Lakes states. Something akin to our U.F.O. fascination today maybe, I suppose. All sorts of maps

and myths circulated. Hard telling what of it was true. But Smith was taken with all this, and he was known to have participated in a number of treasure hunts. Ah! Here!”

Finding the illustration he was looking for, he shoved the book across the desk to Buffington. The artwork depicted a stack of rectangular metal plates that were gold in color and covered with tiny inscriptions, as well as another contraption that held two large, transparent crystals.

“Gold Plates of Mormon,” he told Buffington. “Etched on laminae, or metal plates, and described as not quite so thick as common tin. Bound together with three rings.”

As Buffington contemplated the illustration, Skeeter looked back and forth from Schoenbrunn to an old photo hanging on the wall. In the picture, a younger Schoenbrunn wore the gray robes and hood of a monk and stood with several others of the order. Schoenbrunn noticed what Skeeter was looking at.

“I used to be a Franciscan,” he offered. “There were...suspensions, I guess you’d say, concerning my vows. So now I teach university.”

The very next thing Skeeter noticed was a gloriously ripe-bodied woman in a black knit dress standing in the open doorway to the office. She wore glasses, carried an attaché and looked like faculty. Skeeter noticed her for a long time.

“...Far too many suspensions,” Skeeter heard Schoenbrunn mutter absently to himself.

The woman in the doorway eyed Ted Schoenbrunn adoringly. Skeeter recalled having seen that same look on the faces of the coeds who had greeted Schoenbrunn in the hallway outside the gymnasium.

“Free for lunch today, Teddy?” she asked in a voice that was a little too playful.

Schoenbrunn jerked to attention. He laid down his pipe as he spun around to face her and consulted his wristwatch. “Oh...no, Phyllis, gee, I have a class in just a few minutes. I’m sorry.”

Shaking her head and smiling, Phyllis pivoted and strolled off. Skeeter found himself gazing at her shapely legs. What was it this little troll of a guy had going for him anyway, he wondered. Guy must be hung like a water buffalo or something, he thought

to himself.

Phyllis's showing up reminded Schoenbrunn about lunch. He slid a desk drawer open and took out a cellophane wrapped hoagie and a carton of fruit juice.

"These other things here--" Buffington started up.

"Yes, the Urim and Thummim. Actually, they're mentioned in the Bible. Levite priests wore them commonly. But there's little explanation concerning them or what they might have been."

"What do they have to do with these...Mormon Plates?"

"Well, Smith envisioned them as a pair of crystals held in a breastplate. Claimed he looked through them to translate the hieroglyphs on the plates. Pretty clever, really."

"But these plates and things," Skeeter interjected, "they're all missing now, right? So there's no hard evidence they ever existed."

"Not the way you as a criminologist might define evidence, no. There's just the signed testimony of eleven witnesses among Smith's family and close followers who claimed to have seen and even to have held and examined the golden plates and the Urim and Thummim. After the translation was finished, they were taken back from him, Smith said, by a radiant being. An emissary of God."

"Do I take it correctly you don't put much stock in Mormon beliefs, professor?"

Schoenbrunn looked down at his desktop diffidently. "Oh, I don't know, Mr. Skeeter. Into each lie a little truth must fall, I suppose. The trouble we have with half truths is knowing which half we've gotten hold of though, isn't it."

"So for whatever reason, people back then just readily swallowed all this Mormon stuff?"

"Well, you have to take into account that it was an unusual era. A time of new enlightenment and science. And a time of great crisis consequently for the traditional churches. More than ever, some people needed miracles, or at least the appearance of them, to sustain their belief in God which was being assailed on all sides. Not all that different from the New Age and Spiritualism movements we have today, I suppose. There were many homespun religions and cults spawned back then, based on some angelic visit

or professed revelation. But few developed any lasting following.”

“Except the Mormons,” Skeeter said.

“Yes. Curious. Their beliefs were so radical though, most of the Mormons were driven west, into Ohio then Illinois and Missouri, and eventually Utah. After statehood and the Utah War, some who refused to give up polygamy even broke off from the main church and fled south into Mexico. It seems strange, but today Mormonism is one of the fastest growing sects in existence. Over ten million believers worldwide, twice what there were just twenty years ago. Perhaps it’s not just people back then who were eager to swallow all this Mormon stuff, as you put it.”

Buffington laid a manila envelope on the desk. “Professor, I have some forensic photos here. These are the victims I told you about when I called. I apologize for it being right before your lunch, and I know you have to get on to your class. But could you look through these and tell me if anything strikes you as especially significant or symbolic somehow? I believe it could help us out a lot.”

Schoenbrunn looked from his sandwich to the envelope. “Well...I suppose so, yes.” He took a set of 8x10 color photos of the cavern crime scene from the envelope and sorted through them, flinching at the more gruesome views.

“A Mormon missionary or bishop or something I talked to said something about some immortal disciples. You know anything about that?” Skeeter asked Schoenbrunn.

“Ah, yes. The three wandering Nephites. Another enigma -- but a very beautiful legend too actually. Every so often, some Mormon claims to have had an encounter with one of The Three. Or all three. Most peculiar. And a little strange too, because the scriptures here in this photo are a direct reference to The Three.” He passed the picture to Skeeter.

“And they were cast down into the earth, but by His power were delivered out of it’s depths,” Skeeter read.

“Do you make anything of the words cut into the bodies, professor?” Buffington asked.

Schoenbrunn handed a couple photos to Buffington also. “Well, judging from the names here -- Laban, Laman and Moroni

-- I'd say your killer's still fighting a very old war, inspector. A war Mormons believe ended some sixteen hundred years ago."

"Battle between the Nephites and the - -what was it?" Buffington looked to Skeeter for help.

"Lamanites," Skeeter supplied.

"Yes. An ancient struggle. Like Israelites and Arabs. Ended in the death of Mormon and his son, Moroni, at the hand of the Lamanites."

Buffington squinted at details in one of the photos. "Lamanites...Sons of Laman...the Indians. So that's why he's killing them."

"Does all this scare you, Inspector Buffington?"

"It scares you?"

Schoenbrunn made a face. "There's nothing in this world or beyond it so frightening to me as people's religious beliefs," he told them.

* * *

Lewis Manzi hurried down a busy corridor at the North Carolina S.B.I. district headquarters, carrying a briefcase and garment bag. His clothes looked as though he had slept in them -- for good reason. A matronly clerk with files in hand crossed his path. When she stooped to stretch sags out of her nylons, she spotted Manzi.

"You're supposed to be in Tulsa." Her inflections were pure Bronx, and she was giving him lots of attitude.

"Leaving right now."

"Well, here. Take this. Then I won't have to fax it to you. Reading material for your trip." Impatiently, she shoved a file folder at Manzi. He took it in the same hand with his briefcase.

"Whatta you got here, Hildy?"

"Another match on your Mormon M.O. Back in '89. Logan County Sheriff's Department up in Ohio."

"You're kidding me. Identical?"

"You told me you wanted Indians didn't you? Okay, it's right there. You got Wyandotte Indians, killed in two separate locations

about four months apart.”

“Alright, get a copy of this to Buff.”

Manzi trotted off. Heads turned as Hildy hollered after him. “What am I, new around here or something? It’s already on his desk. You know, Manzi, you look like hell. New thing they got out nowadays called a steam iron.” She laughed at her own joke.

“I keep telling you, Hildy, stop flirting with me if you don’t mean it,” Manzi called back to her, not slowing down.

* * *

Luther Martin sat at a counter in the forensics lab peering through the twin oculars of a towering Olympus microscope. What he was looking at still stubbornly eluded accurate identification, though he and another specialist had been working on it for more than an hour. It was more evidence from the cavern killings. He was hard pressed to recall another case in which he had slammed up against so many absolute dead ends.

Crisply lit and focused on the scope were the shafts of two hair follicles, each about an inch and a half in length. Frequently in cases involving sexual assault, close examination of the victim’s pubic thatch would yield an incriminating strand or two of loose pubic hair that might later be matched back to a suspect. It wasn’t as foolproof as fingerprints, but it was at least indicative, and given recent advances in D.N.A. helix identification and matching, it was becoming increasingly promising. But in the case of the Cherokee woman assaulted and killed in the Fontana State Reserve cavern, the examiners had turned up no such stray follicles clinging among the victims own pubic hairs. It wasn’t until the pelvic area of the body had thawed completely and they had gone in with a speculum and dilated the vaginal cavity fully to seek traces of semen, that they had discovered the two hairs that now lay under Luther’s scope.

“Hector, take a look at these, would you?” Luther said to an assistant medical examiner who entered the lab.

Hector peered into the microscope. “This from the Cherokee woman?” he asked Luther.

“Yeah. Found them so far up inside her vagina, they had to be rooted on the shaft of the culprit’s penis.”

“Real wooly booger,” Hector noted, observing the follicles. They were extraordinarily coarse and straight, not curly like human pubes at all.

“Yeah. What do you make of this pigmentation and shape?” Luther asked him.

The pigment in the hairs was not consistent throughout their length, but rather mottled between shades of tan and dark brown. The ends tapered to fine, white points.

“This doesn’t really look like pubic hair to me at all,” Hector said. “Looks more like some kind of... bristles or fur.”

Luther shook his head in agreement. “That’s what I thought too,” he told Hector.

Like the gnawing impressions on the victim’s bones, this was something else that didn’t appear to be at all human in origin. In fact, it defied him to say just what it was. The cell structure and configurations didn’t resemble anything on his reference templates. Perhaps the D.N.A. testing would be more enlightening. He tweezed the follicles off the microscope slide and deposited them carefully in a small glass test tube which he capped then slipped into a clear plastic polybag and labeled with an adhesive sticker for processing. He was paging a courier to send the bag out when a staffer entered from an adjoining autopsy room with a similar glass test tube pinched between his fingers.

“You ready to take a look at this?” the staffer asked Luther.

“Yeah.” Luther slipped a rubber surgical glove over his hand. He took the test tube from the staffer and held it up to the light. A thick dollop of milky fluid, tainted with a tiny streak of blood, filled little more than the rounded tip of the test tube. “This all you could get?” he asked the staffer.

“You saw how mutilated it was in there. Had a tough time finding a clean deposit. That’s the cleanest I could get.”

The courier came in and picked up the hair follicle bag from Luther’s outbound bin.

“Hold up,” Luther told the courier. “Just a second and you can take this one too.” He twisted the cap off the test tube. Using

a slender glass rod he dipped out a drop of the semen sample and smeared it on a glass microscope slide. Recapping the tube, he sealed it in a polybag like the other and attached a label. The courier headed out with both bags.

Luther carefully dropped a thin glass coverslip on the microscope slide. The daub of semen spread out in a wet, paper-thin splotch. He positioned it on the microscope stage under the lens barrel and changed light sources. After switching out eye pieces, he peered again into the scope, fingers tweaking the control for a sharp view as the semen smear unblurred and came into crisp focus.

He hadn't looked at it more than five seconds before he shot up off the lab stool and raced out to stop the courier.



SIXTEEN...

The grim spirit was called Grendel, known as a rover of the borders, one who held the moors, fen and fastness. Unhappy creature, he lived for a time in the home of the monsters' race, after God had condemned them as kin of Cain....

The...wretched shape trod the tracks of exile in the form of a man, except that he was bigger than any other man. Land-dwellers in the old days named him Grendel. They know of no father, whether in earlier times any was begotten for them among the dark spirits.

*--Beowulf, c. 700 A.D.
an anonymous Anglo-Saxon epic*

Caleb and Ellen made their way down the mountain road, plowing step at a time through knee-deep snow. They had finally reached lower elevations. The road had stopped winding so much and started to level off somewhat. Through the course of the day, the weather had turned increasingly gloomier. Snow continued to come down in torrents around them, whipped and swirled by blizzardy gusts. It was biting cold. Ellen lagged a few paces behind, taking advantage of the path Caleb cut through the snow with his legs.

She slid the strap of her purse back up on her shoulder for what seemed like the thousandth time. It kept falling down. Being cuffed to the bag was really beginning to irritate her. She had

hinted twice that it might be nice if he would just uncuff the damn thing. He had ignored her both times. In addition to her shoulder bag, she dragged her suitcase along on top of the snow. Caleb had stopped short of demanding she leave it behind when he saw her pull it out the door of the wrecked car. If she wanted to carry it, well, that was her business. She wasn't his responsibility.

Behind him, he heard her let the suitcase drop. "Can we rest a minute?" she pleaded, out of breath. He had been setting a good stiff pace for the past hour, and, tall as he was, the snow was less of an obstacle for him than it was for her. She settled to her knees, leaning on the suitcase. "I can't believe not a single car's passed by."

"When it snows this bad, people stick to the interstates," Caleb told her, turning around reluctantly and traipsing back to stand over her.

"Couldn't you have gotten to Oklahoma on the interstates?"

"Yeah, right. With an all-points bulletin out on me? Probably a description on you and that rental car too by now. Too risky."

She looked off at the snow-laden trees and slopes. "Risky," she muttered. "Well since it looks likely we'll both freeze to death up here, would you mind telling me a few things?"

Caleb hoisted her suitcase and walked off with it. Rest time was over. Exasperated, she got up and waded through the snow after him. "What's in Oklahoma that he wants so badly?"

"Sacred objects."

"Sacred to you?"

He thought for a while before he answered that one. "Cherokee call them Ulunsuti. Pair of magic crystals. Give their possessor great powers of prophecy."

"Oh," she said calmly, as though that were a perfectly sensible answer. She was freezing her ass off over magic crystals. Great. It was good to know there was a reason.

"Legend is, a brave warrior took them long ago from a fearsome snake creature called an Uktena. For many years, or so the oral history goes, they were passed among shamans and diviners of the eastern tribes as a peace gift. Until the early eighteen hundreds."

"So what happened then?"

"They vanished."

“Vanished?”

“Gone. Believed to be lost.” Caleb straightened, suddenly attentive. “Listen! This way!” He took off running toward a rise in the road.

Ellen cocked her head, listening. She heard it too. Not far off, the sound of some kind of metallic clacks and groans. She hurried through the heavy snow after Caleb and her suitcase. He crested the rise several strides ahead of her and stopped. A hundred yards below them, a lengthy freight train inched past what was apparently a railroad crossing. The road itself was completely indiscernible under the snow cover. A crossing sign sticking up was the only clue to where it might lie.

“Come on!” Caleb fixed his eyes on the crossing sign and took off at a gallop, pulling Ellen along by the arm. He lost his footing three times before they made it to the tracks, taking a face dive into the snow and tripping Ellen each time.

Reaching the crossing, they angled off the roadway and ran along beside the train. A snow engine with a plow attached had churned through earlier in the day, clearing the tracks. The snow banks it had raised along the sides of the gravel railbed made for tricky footing. A misstep could mean a nasty tumble down the grade and into the ditch, or worse yet, onto the rail and under the rolling steel wheels. The engine was well out of sight ahead in the snowfall, but they heard the distant sound of it accelerating. A clanking leap-frogged from car to car as slack was jerked from between them.

“You going to just hop a freight?” Ellen yelled at Caleb over the sound of the wheels. “We don’t even know where it’s going.”

“Tracks run west,” he called back and slung her suitcase through the narrowly open door of a freight car as they overtook it. Caleb caught a handhold and pulled himself up into the car, shoving hard against the door till it gave and slid open wider. He swung his legs inside and rolled onto his stomach, hanging back out to reached for Ellen. She ran with one arm outthrust, closest to the train -- the arm with the handcuff and purse. The bag had again slipped off her shoulder and hung swaying at the crook of her elbow. Her fingers strained to tag Caleb’s outstretched hand.

Ahead of her, something lay beside the tracks, partly obscured under the snow. A hefty tree branch. She didn't see it until it was too late. She tripped and plunged forward over it just as Caleb made a desperate grab for her hand. He missed and caught hold of the handcuff chain instead. The links shuddered through his fist like anchor chain letting out. He clamped down on it fiercely as the purse whipped up and smacked against his arm.

Ellen was towed along, off her feet and twisting, the metal bracelet doing awful things to her wrist as her legs zagged, clipping the snow banks or dragging under the boxcar. She cried out in pain, "Let go!... Let go!"

But Caleb knew if he did, she would likely tumble under the car and be crushed by the wheels. He hooked his knees against the structural frame inside the door, freeing his other arm. Hanging out even farther and flexing with everything he had left, he drew her up by her cuffed wrist until he could dip his free arm around her. Heaving back with his full weight, he hauled her up and inside.

She rolled across him coming through the door, and they tumbled together back into the darkened boxcar. With a startling beat of wings, a slew of pigeons took flight out the door opening. Frightened by their commotion and not knowing what they might be, Ellen scurried into Caleb's arms. They ended up nose to nose. Their eyes met for the sparsest moment too long, betraying her secret attraction to him. She realized she had given herself away, and her expression went quickly cold. She gave him an angry shove and sat cradling her wrist.

"Let me look at your wrist," he insisted and tugged lightly at her elbow. She resisted, twisting her back around to him. The shock of the injury past, her wrist was beginning to really hurt. Tears welled up in her eyes. She held it close to her stomach and didn't want to look at it. The thought of what she might see if she did made her queasy.

Caleb tried again, this time more gently. "Ellen...let me take a look at your wrist."

It was the first time he had said her name. She softened, released her hand and let him move it into a wedge of daylight that

angled in through the door, but she kept her head turned away, still not wanting to see. Her wrist was badly skinned and welted, but miraculously it wasn't dislocated and didn't look broken. Probably a bad sprain though. Through the clack of the train wheels under the floor, she heard the tick of metal on metal and looked to see Caleb opening the cuff bracelet with her bent tweezers. He drew it off her wrist, his hand supporting hers. His thumb moved, gently stroking over her palm, soothing.

"Can you move your fingers?" he asked softly. She could. "Close 'em up and make a fist? Can you?" She tried, but it hurt too much "Better pack it in snow. Stop the swelling," he said.

His eyes settled on a drift that had blown in through the door. He scooped up a handful of snow and packed it firmly but delicately about her wrist, then tugged off the woolen scarf she wore around her neck and used it to wrap the snow snugly in place.

He knew how to be gentle with things that were hurting, it occurred to her. Same as he had been with the injured deer. For all his aloofness and bitterness, there was none the less remarkable tenderness within him, a nurturing quality which seemed an instinctive part of his makeup. His touch had the same calming effect on her that it had on the ill-fated doe.

"I'm sorry," he said, little more than whispering. "I really am sorry. It was stupid to make you keep wearing that." He was feeling sheepish. Had he not impishly left her cuffed to her purse, this wouldn't have happened to her. On the other hand, had there been no cuff chain for him to catch hold of, she wouldn't be in the freight car with him now either. She would have stumbled and been left behind. He wondered, if that had happened, whether he would have jumped from the car himself and gone back to her. Or would he have just kept going and left her out there alone?

Again their faces were very close together. A long moment slid past. Ellen's eyes closed, and she let her lips angle up toward his. That inexplicable tingling along her neck and cheeks again... what was it? Something in her wanted to kiss him very much, and it was abundantly clear that he wouldn't mind at all if she did. But she caught herself and turned her face, then got up hastily and moved away from him. What the hell did she think she was doing?

Retrieving her purse and setting her suitcase up like a barricade beside her, she settled into a darkened corner of the boxcar. They glanced at each other awkwardly.

“Just something about traveling on a train, isn’t there,” he said.

She watched covertly as he got up and moved to the open door, leaning against the frame and staring out at the trees and snow going past. The wind whipped in, tousling his hair. Behind the gray overcast, the sun was heading down.

He was a curious study, this one. So very different. Resourceful, determined -- driven even -- and possibly still wilder in his ways than she had yet observed, Ellen sensed. She wished she knew what the eerie thing was that connected them and exactly why he excited her so. She gazed at him a bit more boldly, sorting out his features, his eyes and lips in profile against the sky, his broad shoulders, strong hands...strong hips. It made her breath come quicker. Then with a glance, he caught her. She lowered her face and looked away.

There was no one steady man in Ellen Masterson’s life, and there had not been for years. She had a very few of what she regarded as close male acquaintances, a couple of whom she would even take a tumble into bed with from time to time, it was true. But she soured whenever someone casually referred to a man she might occasionally be seen out with socially as her boyfriend. She hated that insipid, juvenile word anyway.

In general Ellen had found that she simply intimidated the hell out of most men who got interested in her, and she did it without even trying. For that matter, she did it even when she tried hard not to. She met very few men who she believed really had what it took to keep pace with her. When it came to those who did, there was either no chemistry, or she would discover quickly that they lacked any true depth and dimension, offering little promise of anything meaningful or lasting. Friends of convenience at best. Except for maybe one man some time ago who had been everything she wanted -- individualistic and astute in his field, confident, ambitious, warm and caring...but for her, ultimately unpossessible. Since him, there had not been another who seemed worth either the time investment or the emotional gamble of an

exclusive and ongoing close-quarters relationship.

That was a terrible shame, because when in love, she was an intensely passionate woman, imaginative, playful and devoted -- not to mention one hell of a thrilling bed partner. But things had not been that way in a long time. She immersed herself in her work to make up the difference. And the deeper she got into the work and the more reputation it brought her, the less likely it seemed she might ever be in love again. She just didn't have the time to look for it.

Caleb slid the boxcar door in its glides till only a crack of light spilled in. It shut out the wind and considerable noise. As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he made out Ellen in the corner, leaned across her suitcase with her head pillowed on her arms, falling asleep

* * *

Inside a spacious tent pavilion that served as the lab and cataloging center for the Toltec dig site at Tzompec, Luis Montero sat inspecting the codex which they had determined was the oldest. There were eleven of them in all, laid out on the tops of folding tables. As he worked, Luis dictated notes into a hand held tape recorder.

“Within the ruins of Tzompec, we continue to find the remains of a British archeological expedition that vanished in 1903. It appears that all of them, more than thirty individuals we estimate, died here from yellow fever.”

Beyond him, Ori Kästner led a scholarly discourse with a handful of university students who were interning at the site. English seemed to be common to everyone there, so they had agreed some weeks before that all group discussions would be held in that language. To a person, they stood in awe of the colorful, arcane documents spread out before them. There was reverence in their voices. This was why they had competed so hard for the few internship posts available at dig sites. The excitement of this caliber of find and the experience of witnessing and participating in it as it unfolded was something that just couldn't be replicated

inside a classroom or lecture hall.

“Hard to believe codices like these were almost as common as Bibles among the Maya at one time,” Ori Kästner noted.

“Wasn’t the Catholic Church somehow responsible for the destruction of most of them?” a student asked.

“Das stimmt,” Ori nodded, then realizing he had lapsed into German, translated his thoughts. “That’s quite correct. Following the Spanish conquests, you’ll recall that Catholic friars were sent here in droves as missionaries. To say the least, they were appalled by the rampant ethic of human sacrifice and even cannibalism that they found among these native people. They diligently gathered and burned as many of the written codices of the Maya, Toltecs and Aztecs as they could find, trying to wipe out the history and liturgies of their so-called pagan religions. That way they thought they could more easily convert them to Christianity.”

“That seems a terrible tragedy for people in our field,” another student said.

“It’s one of the principle reasons it took so many years before anyone could decipher and read these ancient languages again,” a graduate assistant supplied.

“Only sixteen original codices were known to have survived the purge of the Spanish friars,” Ori said. “But now, we unearth all these here. A find of major proportions.”

“Yes, certainly a major find,” Luis Montero agreed. He studied closely the colorful figure of a large, fair-skinned warrior among many of darker complexion, painted on the front panel of the oldest codex. A fair-haired warrior who towered over the Toltec braves. In both his hands, the white warrior held a gigantic sword, fully as tall as he was. Luis pushed buttons on his tape recorder.

“Notes on the newly discovered codices at Tzompec,” he dictated into the microphone. “The first and oldest will be called the Codex Kästner after its discoverer, Dr. Ori Gerhard Kästner,” Luis smiled up at Ori who beamed back at him. “The Tzompec Codex collection is unquestionably Toltec, as the carbon dating will most likely confirm, tenth century or very shortly thereafter. Its age and the appearance of a fair-haired warrior in serpent skins prominent in the text suggest that the Kästner Codex is the first

volume of six codices found here that comprise an epic chronicle of a messianic priest-king of Tula named Ce-Acatl Topiltzín, commonly called Topiltzín Quetzalcóatl the Great.”

“Professor Kästner, I’m curious,” a student said. “We all know of course that there’s a great academic dispute over the Quetzalcóatl legend and its origins. Could I ask your feeling about who Quetzalcóatl was and when he lived? I mean, do you believe there really ever was such a man, or in your view was he just a myth?”

“Actually,” Ori replied, “I believe both.” He let that dangle there a moment while he mentally outlined his response. “The myth had to have some foundation, you see. It seems likely to me there was an actual flesh and blood man Quetzalcóatl, who we might call Quetzalcóatl the First. Somewhere, presumably along the gulf coast of Mexico, he rose to power around the time of Christ, though some authorities put the era much earlier and others as late as, oh, 300 A.D. or so. A wise priest, perhaps a king, he was a great lawgiver and charismatic religious leader who became deified and eventually worshipped, by all the higher Mesoamerican cultures.”

“Yes, professor, but accounts of him from the Teotihuacáns and Maya all the way through to the Aztecs span a thousand years or more,” a student interjected.

Ori smiled knowingly. “Well, it is here we encounter in part our old problem with the ancients hereabout. They so freely blended fact with fable it is often impossible to say when one lets off and the other starts up.”

“Do you think then that his later recorded exploits are all just myths that grew out of his fame?”

“What seems likely the case is that the name Quetzalcóatl, or Kukulkán, as he was known among the Maya, became an honorary title that was later taken by many successive priests or kings deemed to have received divine enlightenment in the doctrines of Quetzalcóatl the First. Their exploits too may have been incorporated into his myth.” Ori gave an exaggerated shrug. “Otherwise? Well, Quetzalcóatl would had to have lived a very, very long time now, wouldn’t he?”

Ori laughed, thinking that a pretty good joke. The student diggers laughed politely with him. "According to legends, Quetzalcóatl was eventually defeated and driven into exile by a warrior-deity named Yaotl-Tezcatlipoca. God of the night sky," Ori continued.

Luis Montero examined the ancient documents on the table using a large loupe magnifier. His attention was drawn all at once to a small image on the oldest codex -- a tiny but bold black insignia painted on Quetzalcóatl's chest armor.

The dark likeness of a venomous snake, crucified to an X-shaped cross.

Luis seemed surprised and not a little distressed to find it lurking there. His old college cohort, Caleb Easton, would have found it surprising as well, though for an entirely different reason.

The painted face of Quetzalcóatl on the codex, staring out at Luis through intense blue eyes, curiously resembled that of a young Knox Wesley.

* * *

Sam Bird slept on his back alone in a twin bed. His room was on a second-story corner of a small wood-framed house that was hardly as long or wide as it was tall. A little wood cube of a building with a slight slope to its roof. He lived there with his granddaughter, whom he had cared for since she was ten, and who now in turn cared for him as much as he would let her. Sam Bird's wife, his son, and his son's wife had been taken in a tragedy which he and his granddaughter had put behind them and no longer spoke of. It was more a way for them to cope personally than it was observance of any oldfangled belief a few atavistic Cherokee still held that it was disrespectful and may even invited disaster to speak of the dead. Most now regarded such foibles as foolishness, and it was true that Sam Bird himself had forsaken many of the traditional ways of his Cherokee people. There was irony in that, considering his blood line. The ichor of dead generations of shamans flowed in Sam Bird's veins.

The undeniable reality of encroaching old age was a hard thing

for him to accept. He had always been an independent spirit. His mind had stayed sharp, and in his mind he envisioned himself still as the strong, young man he had once been, still capable of anything he had been capable of then. But the past half dozen years, he had experienced difficulty getting around from time to time. Sore stiffness had found its way to settle in his joints, and his bones were becoming brittle. His once coal black hair was now gray-white and thinned. Shoulder length, it lay about his face on the pillow like sundrying flax ready for spinning.

Near him, a window sash stood open an inch. Summer or winter, he slept with it that way. The night air that moved the curtains smelled like his boyhood and gave him good dreams. But as he lay there, a bluish vapor crept in over the sill, cascading to the floor and spreading low. The small muscles around his mouth and nose tightened and squirmed, then went slack as his jaw sagged loose.

A sable-black shape moved like death's angel through the room. Monstrous hands pulled Sam Bird from under his blankets as though he weighed no more than a sparrow. He did not awaken.

There came a faint knock at his door and it opened. Tall and delicate of frame, Katalsta Bird peeked into the room. She was perhaps nineteen, raven-haired and girlishly slender. "Grandfather? Grandfather, I heard a noise outside," she called in sure voiced.

The curtains tossed like flags in the breeze coming through the wide open window next to Sam Bird's bed.

"Grandfather?"

Sam Bird was not in the room.



SEVENTEEN...

Mormon Catechism:

And now behold, this was the desire which I desired of him--that if the Nephites should be destroyed, and the Lamanites should not be destroyed, that the Lord God would preserve a record of my people, the Nephites; that it might be brought forth at some future day unto the Lamanites, that, perhaps, they might be brought unto salvation....

And I did cry unto God that he would preserve the records; and he covenanted with me that he would bring them forth unto the Lamanites in his own due time.

*--The Prophet Enos, c. 500 B.C.
Enos, Chapter 1*

The Book of Mormon, as its frontis-matter will attest, is a latter-day translation of an ancient history of the Americas, inscribed by the prophet-historian Mormon more than fifteen-hundred years ago on golden plates which he himself handcrafted. This avowed sacred record was not an entirely original work by the prophet, but rather an omnibus -- an edited abridgment of the various texts of yet even older epic plates, allegedly dating back to the earliest times of the Hebrew people.

These earlier plates, referred to in The Book of Mormon and

upon which its scriptures are either directly or indirectly based, include the Brass Plates. Along with the legendary Sword of Laban, it is said they were taken by Lehi and carried from the Holy Land to the Americas around 600 B.C. and preserved by his descendants. Their contents allegedly paralleled the Old Testament of the Bible, including the Pentateuch, or five books of Moses, and a complete history of the Jews up to the time of Lehi.

The Plates of Nephi picked up the history where the Brass Plates left off. They were said to be fashioned of ore and further subcategorized as Small Plates and Large Plates. Passed down and appended by each successive generation, they chronicled the exploits of the Nephites and Lamanites until the time of Mormon.

A final collection of twenty-four gold plates, called the Gold Plates of Ether, related the lost history of the Jaredites, the earliest voyagers to the New World, who fled the debacle of the Tower of Babel. The first part of them was said to parallel the biblical book of Genesis, recounting the creation and global flood.

During a time of great wickedness, all these various plates were hidden away by their protector on a hill called Shim, The Book of Mormon tells us. Skeptics of Mormonism cite contradictions entering the account at this point, but apparently all except the Brass Plates were later entrusted to the Nephite prophet-historian Mormon, who made an abridged transcription of much of them. The resulting Gold Plates of Mormon were bound together with the Small Plates of Nephi and purportedly buried on the hill called Cumorah, near present-day Palmyra, New York, around 421 A.D. They were subsequently revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1827 to make his translation, and then taken back by a heavenly being who, Smith later wrote, "has them in his charge until this day."

All of that said, there remains one burning question that will seem obvious to anyone who has done translations or transcriptions. After he was finished with them, what became of the various original ancient plates from which the Prophet Mormon made his abridgment?

Excellent question. Certainly, artifacts so precious to the Nephite people and so diligently preserved down through the

ages would not have been discarded or destroyed by a historian of Mormon's stature, any more than ancient source texts would be tossed aside by historians and translators of today.

Indeed, what did happen to the Large Plates of Nephi? And to the Gold Plates of Ether? And what ultimately became of the primordial Brass Plates that Lehi brought across the ocean from the Holy Land a thousand years before Mormon's time?

Mormon scripture is strangely mute on this matter, offering no clear answer whatsoever....

* * *

At one end of the freight car Caleb and Ellen rode in, produce cases stood stacked wall to wall on loading skids that reached nearly to the ceiling. The wood slats that formed the end panels of a number of them were split open. With the sliding doors on the sides of the boxcar all but shut, it had been so dark they had not been able to make out just what the car's partial load of freight might consist of. It was the smell that finally gave it away, a scent of citrus that Caleb picked up as he sat with his back to a wall, watching Ellen sleep.

A trail of peels now littered the floorboards and ran to where the two of them sat ravenously devouring large Florida navel oranges. A modest fire burned atop a scrap of sheet metal, fueled by splintered laths Caleb had broken from the produce crates. It put off just enough heat to ward away shivers, so long as they stayed hovered right over it.

"We're pretty lucky you know," Caleb told Ellen.

"We are?"

"Yeah."

"What do you mean?"

"Could have been a shipment of onions or broccoli or something."

True. They had been pretty lucky in that respect, Ellen thought. She detested onions. Hungry as she had been, going all day without food, there was no way she could have made a meal out of a half dozen onions the way they had with these oranges.

They were cold, juicy and sweet, and they tasted wonderful to her. Using the sharp point of Ellen's bent tweezers, Caleb scored a line completely around another one and handed it to her. She got her nails under the skin, husked off a hemisphere of peel in one piece and tossed it away, tidying up her sticky fingers by brushing them through snow.

"The long bridge we crossed over just after dark was the Mississippi," Caleb said.

"I figured that."

"We're in Arkansas. Surprised we didn't stop in Memphis."

"So just when and how do we go about getting off here?"

"Got some time to worry about that. Why don't you try to get some more sleep."

Ellen stretched her arms, at last starting to feel full. He was right. She was still tired from the half day of trudging through snow and the other rigors of the past thirty-six hours that she had undergone with little sleep. Near exhausted was more like it. "Tell me a story first," she yawned.

Caleb turned his head away, looking irritated. "I'm really not in a mood for any psycho-analytic bullshit right now if you don't mind."

"Oh, so I'm sitting here numb and shivering in a boxcar, stealing oranges and burning crates to stay warm, with a wrist that should probably be in a cast, but you're 'really not in any mood.' Tough. Tell me about the lost crystals. The Ulunsushi."

"Ulunsuti."

She smiled with secret pride. She had mispronounced the word that way on purpose, figuring he wouldn't be able to just let it go uncorrected. "They vanished," she prompted.

Several moments of silence. She thought he wasn't going to take the bait. "If you believe tribal legends," he muttered at last.

"Then should I take it you don't believe tribal legends?"

Again he let a lot of quiet go by before he answered. "Great, great grandson of a Cherokee sachim, descended from a Tuscarora medicine woman. Story the old men told him as a child is different than the legend. He said after the Ulunsuti vanished, they were recovered from another Uktena by an Iroquois warrior

the Cherokee call Uktenabee. They were secretly passed among the six Iroquois nations for a time. But there seemed to be some spell cast on them, like a curse. So, he said, they gave them to the Wyandotte. The Wyandotte in turn passed them to the Northern Chillicothe and Piqua Shawnee, who passed them to the Southern Kispokotha Shawnee.”

He glanced over at her, figuring he must certainly have lost her by then. She saw the look.

“So after the Chillicothe and Piqua Shawnee gave them the Ulunsuti, what did the Kispokotha Shawnee do with them?” she rattled off, not getting so much as a syllable wrong. Her photographic ability to retrieve and playback flawlessly the spoken words of others was yet another of her handy parlor tricks.

Caleb blinked a couple times, surprised and suitably impressed. “They thought they could use them to release the power of the legendary Tukabachee Plates,” he told her.

Mischievously, he waited until she was on the verge of asking the obvious question he knew she would be forming before he went ahead and answered it. “The Tukabachee Plates were a collection of very ancient brass and copper plates with sacred inscriptions on them which the Kispokotha Shawnee claimed supernatural beings from the heavens came down and gave to them and to their spirit brothers, the Tukabachee Creek Indians, for safe keeping. The Tukabachee came to regard the plates as palladium. Nothing bad could happen to the tribe as long as they had them, they believed.”

She absorbed that quietly. “So did they release the power?” she asked him at length.

“Who knows? It’s just an old Indian tribal legend.” He shrugged it off with a smirk, watching for her reaction.

“So that’s it? That’s all there is to this tribal legend?”

“No,” Caleb admitted. “As a token of peace, the Creeks and the Kispokotha Shawnee eventually returned the Ulunsuti to their original possessors, the Cherokee.”

Ellen put it all together. “Who carried them west to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears?”

Turning more somber, Caleb shook his head slowly in affirmation. “Yeah.”

“Why are these crystals so important to you?”

He went silent on her once more. She moved in closer to him. “This is going to sound a little weird,” she said. Then she thought about who it was she was talking to. “Well, maybe not to you. But sometimes, when I get near people, physically near,” she took his hand, “I start to feel what’s going on inside them. Such a storm of emotions raging in you. Something you’ve carried a long time. Something that infuriates you. But it terrifies you too.”

He regarded her with a solemn look that turned quickly to skepticism. He got up and moved away from her. She followed, brushing gently but deliberately against him, her voice becoming ever so compassionate.

“Now it’s like you’ve drawn a circle around yourself and you won’t let anyone else in.”

“Either you’re re-e-eally good, lady, or else--”

“Let me in... I feel like I could help.”

Caleb watched the moonlit countryside go past the thin slice of open door. There was that prickling sensation again, under the skin of his back and arms. When he at last spoke, the voice Ellen heard coming out of him chilled her a moment. It hardly sounded like him at all. More like he was but a spirit medium through which channeled the voice of a haunted child.

“Seems as though I’ve tracked him most of my life.”

“Who? Who is he?” Ellen followed up quickly.

“Evil incarnate. I thought he was dead once. But he turned up again, among the tribes. Then I became aware of the cavern massacres. Every few years, another.”

“There’ve been that many?”

“Yes, that many. Such remote places, I doubt they’ve all been discovered.”

“Why only Indian victims, Caleb?”

Sounding more like himself, he gave his familiar cynic snort. “Mormon’s avenger. Nephite warrior, slaughtering the Lamanite infidels. He avengeth the blood of the saints upon you, for he will suffer their cries no longer,” he quoted. “So sly, so deceptive. He moves among them, lived among them. Learned their ways, their medicine, their tribal secrets. Like chasing a spirit more than a

human being.”

She hung onto the meaning of that just by the bare edge. “Then what you’re saying is that all of this is just some kind of fanatical religious revenge?”

“No, that’s not all. There’s much more to it than that.” He turned back toward her, wondering for a instant what it was that had possessed him to even start into this with her. What he knew, he had always kept to himself for what he felt were exceptionally good reasons. “It’s the crystals.”

She squinted an eye, not quite following. “What about them?”

“The massacres are like a road map, leading to the Urim and--” He cut himself off sharply. “Leading to the Ulunsuti.”

“The victims then all know about these crystals, is that it?”

“Their ancestors did.”

Ellen looked at him, baffled.

“Every one of them,” Caleb explained, “were descendants of a holy man, priestess, or tribal medicine man. The woman he killed in the cavern that you saw? Direct matrilineal granddaughter, six generations removed, of the most powerful holy man in Cherokee history.”

“I don’t think I under--”

--In the lore of the secret medicine societies, there’s myth of a method known to ancient conjurers. They could make the spirits of those long dead speak through their pure-blooded descendants while on native ground.”

She looked at him with amazement. “You honestly believe in things like that?” she asked him.

He didn’t answer her. Something just wasn’t adding up. She wasn’t certain what it was yet, but she took an educated stab in the dark.

“It’s not the crystals, is it. It’s him you’re after. Why, Caleb?”

He turned away from her, struggling with emotions, pulled in a deep breath and let it out with a shudder. “He took my family,” he told her with great effort. She saw him sweep a hand across both his eyes. He pushed the hurt and anger down, steeling himself once again. “I don’t need a bunch of lame minded cops in the way. This is personal.”

* * *

Sometime after midnight, Ellen Masterson put fresh crate wood on the waning fire atop the sheet metal and blew gently on the embers until they glowed hot. The soft pine caught readily and blazed up crackling. She had awakened not long ago, her face flushed, pulse pounding in her neck and peculiar dream images fading away inside her head. What was perhaps most peculiar about them was the fact that Ellen hardly ever had dreams at all. When she did, she could never recall what they were about after she awoke.

The nature of this dream too had mystified her, until she brought her thighs together and sensed the warm dampness high between them. She had cut a nervous glance toward Caleb, fearful that he might have been awake, watching and listening while she wet dreamed. The thought of that brought a rush of heat around her throat and made her stomach tingle. She had been relieved to find him asleep, sitting with his back against the wall of the boxcar, arms crossed over himself and chin down on his collarbone.

Ellen now lay propped on her elbows over her art pad, quietly sketching Caleb while he slept. But in her portrait, his eyes were open and alert. They were the eyes of the voice she had heard coming from him earlier that night. A child's eyes, full of anxiety and fright. She finished detailing the shadows on the face, then laid her pencil and pad aside and sat up. Lost in her thoughts, struggling with them for a lengthy spell, she contemplated Caleb across the fire from her. She longed to do what she knew she was about to do. Yet at the same time, she was uneasy and even a little ashamed of being so indiscreet and taking such an impulsive risk.

Caleb sensed movement near him and came out of his light sleep. He opened his eyes to find Ellen kneeling next to him and reaching to touch his shoulder, then realizing he was already awake. What did she want? He cut her a questioning look and watched confused as she slip off her coat. His first sleepy thought was that she was offering it to him, far as he was from the fire.

"No. I don't need that--"

She pressed silencing fingers to his lips, shaking her head. The expression on her face mesmerized him. There was something hungry and unbridled there that he had seen only guarded traces of up until then. Ellen leaned to spread her coat on the floor nearer the fire. She took him by the hand and drew him over to it. What was she doing?

“You don’t--”

Again she hushed him with her fingers, then slipped her hand around his waist to feel out the strong contour of his back as her lips glided wet and whisper-light along his cheek.

“Keep me warm,” she breathed into his ear. Her nose tickled at his lobe. The touch set him blazing with delectable sensations that mixed with the now familiar prickling already spreading under his skin. It swept through him, stronger than it had ever been. A low, baritone purr resonated in his chest as he eased his arms about Ellen’s lithe, willing body and gathered her urgently in. The delicate female heat of her was a stark contrast to the icy darkness inside the freight car. Her head dropped back and her throat seared hot against his cheek. With a long exhale of breath, she clung to him, arching herself and leaning back to weigh him down with her onto the coat.

Their breathing escalated together into a panting rush as she caught back from Caleb the fire she had so deliberately ignited in him. Faces rubbing deliciously together, their heads writhed, their mouths crossing over each other and latching in a trenchant kiss. The low purr sounded again in his throat as her tongue leaped abandonly into his mouth, frisky and circling, searching for his. Finding it, she captured it with her lips and sucked it from the cloister of his mouth into the hot, liquid recesses of her own.

The cold was an obstacle. They groped and thrashed dangerously near the orange crate fire, getting just enough clothing out of the way between them to accommodate their passion. He helped her kick free of her high-laced boots as she lifted the front of her bulky cashmere sweater and thermal silk undertee. His hands moved up her torso, tenderly tracing the bold swell of her breasts. Her nipples stood up hard at the bite of the chill air. He warmed them with his lips. The areolas were petite, perfect, and

of that paler rose-mallowy hue characteristic in women who had never birthed a child. His fingertips discerned the turgid ductile masses beneath the breast flesh, tight and swollen, hinting of her impending menses. He didn't ask her if they were sensitive but rather told her without words that he already knew they were by the infinitely tender manner in which he kissed and caressed them.

What Caleb knew of women and sexuality was mostly Indian knowledge, garnered from the old traditional native ways. It was an earthy philosophy of sensuality that accepted the naturalness of the act. In tune with the needs of the body as well as of the spirit, it concerned itself more with the physiology of closeness and came without the sanctimony and thou-shalt-not condemnation of the guilt-ridden white religions. There was nothing any more innocently natural than a woman and a man together, aroused by each other. It was that way by supreme design.

The totemic American Indian cultures were notably fond of classifying and naming. Tribes of interest to Caleb had long ago parsed the generous range of female vulval shapes and features into a zodiaclike array of types. Each was represented by an animal it was thought to resemble in appearance or manner. There were specific, practical lovemaking techniques set forth for stimulating each type, deemed to render the most pleasure possible.

When Ellen clasped his naked hips firmly into the spread of her thighs, it was too dark for Caleb to see clearly that most secret part of her body. But he didn't have to see to know. Exploring her mound and the viscid, extruding folds of her with his fingers, he easily identified the shape, whispering without thought the Cherokee word for panther. She took the strange syllables for love mewling and mewed back in kind. He had extra satisfaction from the knowledge that hers was indeed the one shape he himself was most passionately responsive to, and to which his own physical type was most well suited. Coition with her would be smooth and effortless, the form, angle, dimension and power of their every intimate surface and muscle gracefully matched to fit and move together without the slightest conflicting energy.

With his arms swept under hers and cradling her head in his hands, he considerately took his weight up on his elbows and off

her breasts and ribs and plunged himself feverishly into her. She yielded coyly at first, but soon twined her legs around him, locking him in with crossed ankles. She met and matched his steady thrusts, unconsciously in cadence with the rail clacks through the freight car floor.

Afterward, she lay pillowed in his easy bear hug, the glowing fire warming her in front and his heat warming her from behind. The sweetness and gentleness of him was magnificent. She couldn't recall when she had felt so cared for, so engulfed by anyones concern.

All their desires finally sated, they fell asleep that way, clinging together like orphaned children. An hour later they awoke and, as if to reaffirm what they had done, restoked the orange crate fire and without words loved again.

* * *

The shadowy form bent low, bearing Sam Bird easily over one shoulder down into the blackness of a subterranean shaft. There was a sound of air rasping through its gullet and huge lungs. It moved swiftly, the almost total absence of light apparently no hindrance at all, surefooted as the big, predatory jungle cats with their night vision.

Far underground in a dim chamber, a dying torch spilled light over several Indian faces. The bodies reposed propped against timbers that shored up a length of wall. They slumped there expressionless like warehoused string puppets, their eyelids drooping. The tiniest suggestions of movement in them -- little more than skin twitches -- gave away the fact that they were yet alive. Among them were Dee Qualla and the drunk abducted from the downtown Tulsa alley.

The dark form dropped Sam Bird in place with the others and retreated like black fog back up the murky shaftway. Sam Bird's old face hung slack and staring into the torchlight, as though he hadn't a thought or a care.

EIGHTEEN...

For the monster was relentless, the dark death-shadow, against warriors old and young, lay in wait and ambushed them. In the perpetual darkness he held to the misty moors: men do not know where hell-demons direct their footsteps.

--Beowulf

Janson Skeeter ate a jumbo chili dog with cheese and chives for breakfast as he, Luther and Buffington viewed decapitated victims from the cavern slayings, laid out on morgue drawer slabs.

“No drugs, no poisons. In fact, no trace of any extrinsic substances,” Luther told them. “It’s incredible.”

“Just doesn’t make sense, Luther,” Buffington said.

“I couldn’t agree more. But the toxicology work-ups are all conclusive. Liquid and gas chromatographs both. Nothing there that shouldn’t be there in any of them.” Skeeter finished off the last of the chili dog. “How can you stand that damn thing this early?” Luther grimaced at him.

“Anymore I couldn’t tell you what time of day it is.” Skeeter swallowed hard. “You ready for the rest of the breaking news, Buff?”

“You’re going to love this too, inspector,” Luther said.

“It seems Easton worked out of B.I.A. Great Lakes office in May of ‘89,” Skeeter said, tidying up his fingers with a napkin, then arcing it perfectly into a trash can ten feet away. “Same as before,

credit card receipts from Lima and Urbana, Ohio put him less than twenty miles from the scene right before the second batch of Wyandotte kills. Tell him about the hospital stuff, Luther.”

“May third of ‘89 an Ohio state trooper comes across a guy face down by the road. Got a wallet, I.D. and eighty-four dollars cash still on him.”

“Caleb Easton. No wants, no warrants,” Skeeter filled in.

“No apparent injuries, either. But the trooper can’t get the guy to come around. Some strange smell on him. Sweet. Trooper figures drug overdose. Maybe he’s full of cough syrup or something. They transport and check him in at the E.R. of a local hospital. To make a longer story shorter, they turn up no trace of drugs in him whatsoever. The attending M.D. doesn’t know what to make of it. Diagnosis: shock. No change in condition all night.”

“Right. Wanna guess what happens next morning?” Skeeter added the icing. “Easton disappears from the hospital entirely. Nobody saw him leave.”

Luther closed the drawer holding the remains of one Cherokee victim. The phrase *Avenged of Moroni* was carved plainly over the chest. The words were bisected now by a razorback track of staples closing up an autopsy incision that ran the full length of the thorax and abdomen.

Buffington watched Skeeter silently. The senior agent was wired, like somebody on too much caffeine. But caffeine had nothing to do with it. Buff had seen him get this way plenty of times before when they would hit on a real puzzler. He knew what drove Skeeter’s frenzies. “That gut feel of yours really got you going on this one, doesn’t it, Skeeter?”

“The guy’s always almost exactly where an innocent guy shouldn’t be, almost exactly the time he shouldn’t be there. Almost exactly. Now if he isn’t doing these kills, and if he isn’t involved in any way, how does he know, Buff? What tips him off where to be... almost exactly?”

* * *

Caleb Easton opened his eyes to find himself lying amid

pitch blackness. It was cold and stuffy around him, and he sensed somehow that he was in terrible danger. He tried to sit up but discovered he couldn't. There was nothing at all restraining him or holding him down. The message to move would leave his brain, only to go astray somehow before it could reach his limbs. He wasn't paralyzed, it occurred to him, at least not nerve paralyzed. There was the sensation of firm surface beneath his entire body. He focused hard, strained and forced, but try as he might, he could not make any part of himself budge so much as an inch. Even his head wouldn't turn.

He tried to speak and then to cry out, but no sound would come from his throat. His jaws seemed cemented shut. All he could do was blink his eyes. When he thought consciously about breathing, to his horror his lungs seized up and refused to draw air. Suffocation panic closed in on him. His mind raced until with great concentration he got a grip, forced his thoughts off breathing and onto something else. Ellen. He thought about Ellen. Lovely, passionate Ellen.

The constriction around his lungs eased, and he breathed freely again. But then it struck him...my god, where was she? Where was Ellen? Was she there with him? He couldn't tell, couldn't feel or sense her anywhere near him. A dim light came into his field of vision, darting through the hellish black. It didn't seem real at first. Just a spot in his vision. It flickered like flame, grew and spread until his surroundings took on an eerie, umber glow. With something now to see, he realized he was moving his eyes. There were shapes, objects, just outside his field of sight. He hadn't quite enough peripheral vision to make them out, to tell what they were.

All at once, a flash of reflected light and a steel-shrill wheeze of air passed just above his face. His perceptions seemed stuck in slow motion. It took a moment before he registered the image of the sword blade that had just passed over him. Then instantly, as though someone had switched on an amp at full volume, there was soul-splitting noise all around him. Death screams. Whoosh... whoosh! And a tearing of flesh. The sword blade glinted again in front of Caleb, a hot spray of something dousing his face. It smelled like iron and leached gradually down into his eyes, stinging them

till they teared up.

Something rocked him and jolted his body over. It felt like a foot in his ribs. His arms flailed limp, and his head came to rest at a new angle. Directly out before him slumped naked, bronzed bodies that were etched with fantastic schemes of lines and swirls. Their faces were Indian faces, agape in terror, screaming. Came a whistling hiss of the sword blade, and one face went sideways before bolting out of view. A wet splash rained down on Caleb. The iron scent again. The air was heavy with it. He could taste it between his teeth.

Through that ferric smell, he caught a pungent draft of something hot and animal-damp. It was very near. He could see now the rolling, humid vapors of labored breath in the cold air. The darkness seemed to separate into shades, like a shadow passing through a prism, leaving a gray blur of a thing hunched over him. Its features were indiscernible, except for the faint, blue-white sear of its eyes. There was movement, and the sword arced high and rushing down upon him. Caleb threw out a fending arm and screamed -- only the arm wouldn't move, and the scream refused to come out....

In the freight car, Caleb snapped out of his frightful trance with a start, pounced up warily on his hands and knees like a crouched cat. "He's close by!" he uttered in a raw, delirious voice. It woke Ellen Masterson. She sat up sharply next to him.

The train was stopped and silent. Specks of light spotted the inside of the boxcar. The only sound to be heard was a distant thump and creaking that repeated again and again, exactly the same. Caleb got up and slung one of the sliding doors open wide. Fierce, blinding sunlight flooded in.

Outside, a chilly expanse of flatlands and busted-down oil derricks lay spread. The thump and creaking came from a lone pumping station, its counterweighted arm swinging like a sledgehammer, around and around.

Ellen looked up at Caleb, backlit against bright morning sun. Her eyes widened with alarm as she made out the pasty froth thick on his chin and down his neck. She had wanted to tell him about the horrifying dream he had awakened her from. A dream

of firelight and naked bodies spattered with gore--and of an incredible sword and a terrifying, shadowy being that used it.

* * *

Steel cable uncoiled from the winch mounted on the back of a wrecking truck. A quartet of state troopers stood by their cruisers, munching maple-iced bear claws and sipping hot coffee that steamed in styrofoam cups. They watched the cable feed steadily down into the cold, murky water like fishing line coming off a reel and plummeting behind a heavy lead sinker.

The winch spool stopped turning, and the cable went slack. A full two minutes later, something broke the surface of the water. The head and mask of a scuba diver wearing a black wet suit hood. He signaled the troopers with a wide wave of his neoprene gloved hand.

A trooper licked maple icing off his fingers and called toward the wrecker, "Alright! Let her rip."

The electric winch motor whined and the spool turned in the opposite direction, ratcheting in yard after yard of cable. The troopers ambled closer to the rim that was some thirty feet above the water, watching expectantly.

Another full two minutes passed, the oscillating drone of the winch motor growing monotonous. Then morning sunlight glinted off a shape moving beneath the quiet surface. Like a breaching harbor whale it broke the water and sent it surging.

The wrecker hauled the silt-coated chasis of an old burned-out Chevrolet sedan completely up out of the waters of Furnam Quarry. It turned slow pirouettes dangling at the end of the cable. Beneath the charred finish and rust there was little hint left of paint that had once been gray.

* * *

"The car was listed as stolen. Divers didn't find any remains."

Davis Buffington scowled across his desktop at Janson Skeeter. "So another stolen car ends up on the bottom of a quarry pit," he

tossed back at Skeeter. "What's the connection?"

"The guy it was last registered to," Skeeter replied. "Gregory Timberlake. He was a full-blooded Indian."

"Yeah?" Buffington perked with interest.

"His wife reported him missing the day after she reported the car stolen," Skeeter continued.

"You're still not convincing me."

"I did some checking. Within two weeks of Timberlake's disappearance, three other Indians turned up missing there abouts as well. Nobody ever saw any of them again," Skeeter summed up.

"Son of a bitch..."

The phone rang. Buffington scooped it up. "Buffington," he barked into the receiver. His face went long with amazement. "Who?... Yeah, yeah. No, put it through! Run a trace!" He hastily keyed on the speaker phone and dropped the handset into its cradle. "Ellen Masterson!" he informed Skeeter.

Skeeter came around the desk in a hurry. He mashed down two buttons on a tape recording deck and gave Buffington a nod.

"Where are you? Are you alright?" Buffington asked urgently into the phone.

Ellen Masterson's calm, neutral voice came over the speaker. "Oklahoma. I'm with Easton."

"Ellen, if you can't talk freely, just be silent--"

--No, it's alright. I'm fine. Everything's fine."

"Awright, okay. Where are you? We'll get someone right there."

"I'm somewhere between Muskogee and Tulsa--"

Skeeter broke in. "--Ellen, it's Skeeter. Is Easton there? He close enough to hear you?"

"No, no he's not. Look, I'm on the verge of finding out what this is all about. But you've got to keep clear."

"Ellen, god dammit!" Buffington roared.

"He has a deep-rooted personality dysfunction regarding male authority figures."

"Yeah, it's got him out killin' people. For crissakes!"

"Ellen, Skeeter again," Skeeter spouted into the phone. "Now you listen to me, doll. You're in a heapa danger. You don't know everything we've dug up on this Easton. The guy hugs profile on a

serial psycho tighter'n a G-string up a stripper's ass. There's a real good chance he raped his mother and murdered some missionary when he was seventeen."

"We've got three previous cave kills now," Buffington put in. "He's been in the vicinity every time."

"Not surprising, but he isn't the one who did them."

"Ellen, listen. I've got Lewis Manzi there in Tulsa working with the locals and the Federal Bureau. Now someone's already snatched some Cherokee people out there too."

"Well, it's not Easton. I've been with him. Just give me some room on this. He can lead us right to--"

Buffington cut her off, "--That's not smart, Ellen, it's dangerous. Now what you better do is--"

"--Listen! I'm alright, and I'll call you again when I know more," her voice came with finality over the speaker.

In a phone booth seven-hundred and fifty miles west of them, Ellen Masterson slammed down the receiver. "You jack-arounds are gonna screw this all up, aren't you," she fumed at the pay phone, an edge of Texas slicing through her tone.

* * *

A fire glimmered deep within a dismal subterranean chamber. Around about it sat six Cherokee men and one woman, slouched as though seated at some freakish powwow for the comatose. Their faces were stark and still as death masks, ghoulishly lit from below by the flames.

Its back turned to the blaze, a beastly, macabre form loomed over worn leather bags laid out on the rocky earth. From them, hands of astonishing size drew measures of powder and mummified bits of small animals. The dark figure wheeled about, tossing the items into the fire. It flared and leaped up bizarrely and began to spin like a slow, molten cyclone. Into the center of it, the figure poured a tarlike liquid. The blaze went instantly out, and a billowing cloud rose up like black coal dust. A vague form materialized within it, a human head and torso shaped of living smoke. It cleaved down its center, swirling into two snakes of black

fog that crossed the dusty floor of the chamber and creep up the half naked body of Sam Bird, entering his nostrils.

Sam Bird's eyes flew opened wide, and from his hollow throat came a long, dreadful wail.

The dark figure spoke to Sam Bird. A linguistic anthropologist well schooled in native North American languages would have been astonished to hear the arcane dialect of Cherokee rendered so fluently.

"You will speak to me, Nokosi."

"Who are you?" Sam Bird seemed to answer in the same disused dialect. But his open lips never moved, and the ethereal voice that came from him was not his own.

"One who has power over your soul," the dark figure answered. "If you speak deceitfully to me, I will know it."

"Why do you conjure me?"

"I seek the Ulunsuti..."

"I cannot tell you."

"They are my rightful property. They were stolen from me--"

--"I cannot tell you!" the spirit voice said with finality.

"Then your soul will be damned."

Sam Bird's face contorted with terror, "I cannot--"

--"You will tell me now, or your torment will be eternal!" the shadowy being threatened.

* * *

"Why isn't anyone doing anything?!" Sam Bird's feisty granddaughter Katalsta demanded of council members at an emergency tribal meeting convened early in the evening. Agitated people who wanted to know the same thing packed the council hall. No one was giving them any answers, at least not ones they could accept. They were a scared group. Emotions were taut and about to get out of control. The tribal council head waved his hand for quiet.

"Katalsta, these incidents have all been reported to the proper police authorities. I've been assured that investigations are being made."

“And have they found my grandfather? Have they found John Qualla’s wife? No! How many are missing now?”

“Six...or possibly seven, we think,” another council member supplied.

“We have to let the police agencies do their work,” the council head insisted. “But right now, there are precautions everyone should be taking.”

“Precautions!” John Qualla interrupted loudly. “What kind of precautions? My wife was taken from her kitchen. We couldn’t move to help her. What precautions will you take?” The council head looked out at John Qualla and his two children, but couldn’t find the words to answer.

“We can’t just stand around scared,” Katalsta argued to the council. “We’ve got to do something. We’ve got to do something ourselves.”

“Katalsta, we are as angered by this as you are.”

“This is exactly what happened to the ones in Carolina,” she cut in. “They were all killed! They were taken one by one and killed!”

“Katalsta, I am Cherokee too,” the council head trumped. “I have family like everyone else here tonight has family, and I’m not blind. I can see these are hate crimes directed against the Cherokee.”

“Then Cherokee have to stop this,” John Qualla said. “Katalsta’s right. We can’t just stand around scared until...” He wasn’t going to say it in front of his children. But everyone knew what he meant. Until somebody found them all dead, like the ones back east in Carolina.

“John, we’re doing everything we can,” the council head pleaded. “We just don’t know what more we can do.”

Caleb Easton emerged from a dim corner at the back of the hall with Ellen at his side. His voice cut through the low murmur of discontent that simmered in the room. “Was there a scent? Sweet, sickening scent, like someone had spilled vanilla?” he inquired. People turned to look at him, giving way as he moved through to Katalsta Bird. “Your grandfather. He was taken from his bedroom?”

“Yes,” Katalsta answered, regarding Caleb and the white

woman with him suspiciously.

"In the room, afterward. Was there a smell? Like you'd broken a bottle of vanilla?"

Her face went blank. She stared down at the floor in thought, then back up at Caleb. "Yes... Yes, I remember it."

"That smell. It was in our house too," John Qualla said. "I thought it was from cooking."

"Mention it to the police?"

"No. I didn't think it was important."

Caleb nodded. "It's a drug he uses. Liquid, like chloroform. It turns into gas."

More murmurs ran through the assembly. All eyes were on Caleb -- who the hell was he anyway?

"Our preliminary forensic reports turned up no drugs." Ellen said quietly to Caleb.

"Never shows up. Completely traceless," he told her, then raised his voice to address the room. "It's a primitive concoction, a Yuchi Indian potion. Old medicine. Something like curari, but a lot stronger. Tiniest dose produces immobility. Prolonged, it's much worse. There's a cumulative effect. Eventually it just doesn't wear off. One massive dose might suspend all brain activity, cause slow death."

"How do you know all this?" the council head challenged Caleb.

"I've tracked this bastard for years. It's not just Cherokee. Shawnee, Seneca, Tuscarora...goes back decades. You're just the end of the trail."

"Who are you?" John Qualla demanded of Caleb.

"You're the one they're all looking for, aren't you?" a council member said from the front. "All the police and federal agents. You're...Easton. The one from B.I.A., aren't you?"

"If he's taken six or seven, he has what he needs," Caleb told them. "He'll kill every one of them now, if he hasn't already. We have to move fast."

"What can we do?" John Qualla asked.

"He's got a thing for working underground. A cave, a tunnel... someplace big, out of the way."

"I'll be damned!" a voice came through the buzz of the crowd. Jimmy Coosa got up from his seat, a look of amazement and understanding on his face. "The Pasco Mine!" he announced. "I've been seeing lights up on that hill the past few nights!"

Katalsta looked at Caleb and Ellen. "It's an old diamond mine. They never found much. It's sealed off, all boarded up."

"They condemned it over sixty years ago," Coosa added. "Nobody ever goes up there. There isn't even a road anymore."

"And you saw lights?" Caleb asked him.

"Yes, firelight. Moving around. Like somebody with a torch."

"That place is a death trap," John Qualla shook his head. "All rotted and caved in."

"No one in their right mind would go down in that hole," the council head said.

* * *

The Federal Bureau of Investigation field office in Tulsa was a hotbed of activity that evening. It served as a command post for a joint interagency operation investigating the disappearances of seven Native American people -- six men and one woman -- who had been reported missing in and around Tulsa and the Cherokee Indian Reservation lands over the past week.

Lewis Manzi enjoyed a certain degree of celebrity among this group. He was the only one there who had actually observed the crime scene of the recent North Carolina cavern slayings, the last in what everyone was now terming a chain of serial massacre killings. Furthermore, he had personally assisted in the North Carolina S.B.I. questioning of Caleb Easton, the fugitive B.I.A. field rep who was now a prime suspect, or at least a possible accomplice. At this point, new killings in the Tulsa area seemed imminent, and Manzi had already seen a prototype of the ritual. He represented useful knowledge base. Even the Feds were giving him more than his fair share of respect, and Manzi was eating it up.

A young federal agent hung up a phone and tracked down the F.B.I. inspector who was running the show.

"Inspector, they got some kinda major Indian uprising

underway over in Tahlequah," he announced.

"It's Easton," Manzi blurted out, "ten'll get you twenty."



NINETEEN...

There came gliding in the black night the walker in darkness ... from the moor under the mist-hills Grendel came walking, wearing God's anger.

--Beowulf

An astonishing brigade of Cherokee citizen militia assembled and advanced up the slopes leading to the abandoned Pasco Diamond Mining property. Intermingled with their ranks were squads of support volunteers from other neighboring reservation tribes. Word had spread quickly of the manhunt for the culprit who was thought to be holding seven local Cherokee people captive and was believed responsible for a number of prior ritual massacre killings, hate crimes against Native Americans.

Spread out over the landscape, they moved up the hill in a wave, all but encircling it. The likelihood of anyone up on top who detected them coming being able to escape seemed slim. They numbered in the high hundreds, a rag-tag force of civilian mechanized infantry and cavalry. Most moved on foot, carrying torches, lanterns and guns. Others rode on horseback or churned along overland in trucks and four-wheel-drives, headlights glaring.

Caleb, Ellen and Katalsta Bird rode in with the second contingent of vehicles to arrive at the main shafthead. More than a dozen rugged looking Cherokee men were already there,

preparing to go down into the mine. John Qualla was among them. A couple fumbled awkwardly with gas masks. Caleb got out and joined them.

There was no assigned leader to this squad, but they seemed to be looking for guidance from a stout, middle-aged Cherokee with a red bandanna tied buccaneer style around his head who everyone called Hatchee. He had a U.S. Army 75th Ranger Regiment emblem tattooed on the back of one hand gripping a vintage M-16-A1 rifle that showed plenty of wear.

"Alright, anybody starts smelling something sweet, like vanilla," Hatchee briefed them, "don't hang around. Hold your breath and get out into fresh air fast."

There was commotion and a chorus of squeals behind them. They spun about to see a half dozen shaggy wild pigs bolt out between the splintered boards at the entrance. Jimmy Coosa pulled himself out after them, fanning their dust out of his face and shutting off a beam lantern. "Somebody's been down in there alright," he coughed. "Shaft's been cleared far down as I can see."

"Find any other trace of anybody?" someone asked.

"Just footprints in the dust. Big ones. That and pig tracks. They been rootin' all over down there." Coosa coughed some more and gulped down water from an offered canteen, then peered up ominously at everyone. "Look, we gotta be awful fuckin' careful about this. It's all loose down in there. Something gets knocked outta place, slightest little thing," he made a hand motion of the overhead caving in, "and that's all she wrote. Like Big Bad John, they just gonna stick a damned grave marker on this shaft. Sure as hell don't want my name turning up on it."

A couple men went to work with a crowbar, gingerly prying off the weathered planks to widen the entrance. Ellen strode past Caleb, heading toward the shaft.

"Where are you going?" he challenged.

She cocked her head at the opening. "In there, same as you."

"No way. You don't--"

"--What do you think we're going to find down there, Caleb? Anything I haven't seen before?"

He held her in his gaze for a moment, wondering exactly how

she meant that. Was it suspicion he was reading in her tone? It was unsettling, so close on the heels of the intimate night they had together. But Ellen seemed to be pushing him away now, keeping him out at a distance. Even her eye contact had become evasive. He hadn't pressed her about it, hadn't tried to close the gap. Under the circumstances, he reasoned, she must be uncomfortable about what she had let herself do with him. It was she after all who had taken the initiative. Maybe if he gave her space, she'd work it out. Maybe she'd come around. He hoped she would. Or was there something more to it than that? Was there something about her he just didn't pick up on, just didn't understand?

"It's all kinds of dangerous down there," was the best he could come back with.

"I'll keep it in mind," she nodded and went boldly into the mine ahead of him.

The rescue party filed in and clustered a few yards down the adit until everyone got inside and formed up. It occurred to Caleb suddenly just how much firepower this crew had toted in with them. Aside from Caleb and Ellen, not a one of them was without a shotgun or rifle. More than a couple were of the exotic semi-automatic assault variety. Most of them wore sidearms to boot.

Hatchee saw Caleb eyeing all the hardware and picked up on his concern. "Okay, listen up, people," he spoke out, "Last thing we need down here's an artillery barrage. Best keep those safeties on and guns holstered unless it gets absolutely necessary to shoot. Someone goes gettin' scared and crazy, we're gonna all end up in each others crossfire. Everybody with me?" They seemed all right with that, especially Caleb. "We'll run the bastard down first, then we deal with the son of a bitch. Cherokee justice, people. Long and slow."

Hatchee banged a clip of .223 against his skull and locked it in under his rifle. He hooked a finger around the charging rod, yanked it back and let go, loading a round as he nodded meaningfully to Caleb. Caleb nodded back. Ellen wondered what they meant by Cherokee justice. It had a bloodthirsty ring to it that she didn't like.

They spread out in a zig-zag and kept about four paces apart

so they weren't all clustered together. They advanced at a snail pace, staying in a cautious crouch and keeping their lantern beams trained straight down the gangway. The main tunnel was a succession of big, square-set stopes--long rectangular compartments, one after the other, progressing into the hill. The walls and backs of these were framed up with heavy timbers, many now rotted and giving way.

Hatchee took the point with Caleb and Ellen right behind him. They hadn't gone two-hundred feet in when the ceiling above them gave a groan. A few pebbles rained down, bounding along the floor. Everyone stopped dead, barely daring to look up or even breathe and wondering if a fast dash back out the entrance might be a smart idea. The pebble fall let up, like a rain shower easing off. Just as they were about to start moving again, there came a low, rumbling shudder through the overburden. Something gave way.

"Aww, fuck," Ellen heard Hatchee say low.

Rock and dirt came cascading all around. A big timber beam broke loose, swinging down like a pendulum. Frozen in his tracks and unaware, Caleb stood right in its path.

"Caleb!" Ellen shouted a warning behind him. He spun around as she lunged forward, grabbed for his belt and yanked him just out of its way and down onto his knees. The beam crashed against the wall and fell back across the tunnel. Silence settled. They crouched on all fours, teeth gritted, waiting for the dust to clear. "Watch it!" Ellen hissed at Caleb. "It's all kinds of dangerous down here."

Rescuers bringing up the rear caught up with the point and regrouped to assess damage. Hatchee came up three shy in his head count. "We lose somebody?" he asked.

"They got scared and turned back," John Qualla volunteered, muffled through his gas mask. "I think there was three of 'em."

When they continued on down the sloping gangway, this time it was at a slower than snail pace and with a much more potent appreciation of their peril. Every ten yards or so, Hatchee raised a hand, signaling the column to halt as he and Caleb bent heads one way and then the other, listening into the darkness. There were very faint sounds far ahead, but the crisscrossing lantern beams picked up nothing in their wash except tunnel wall and timber

supports.

They pressed on. Caleb fixed his light on the foot tracks in the dust. The bulk of them angled suddenly toward one wall. He brought his beam around, illuminating the portal of a narrower side tunnel that ran off at a right angle.

"Hold up," he called ahead to Hatchee who had gone on past. Ellen brushed along side him, and the rest of the troop hurried to join up as they jammed their lights out ahead of them, eyes riveted down the smaller tunnel. It curved out of sight some distance in. Rail tracks for mine cars lay along the center of it, and the dust around them was rich with the oversized foot tracks.

Caleb pitched suddenly to the passage wall, his teeth gritted, sucking in a shrill breath. The others watched him, baffled and jittery, as he writhed and clawed the rock, all but coming out of his skin with vibe.

Ellen reached for him, then thought better of it and backed off. A low, animal-fierce purr rolled deep in his throat.

"Caleb, what..."

He spun around, eyes low and glaring hatred into the darkness. "He's here!" he rasped through angry jaws.

From the far reaches of the off-shooting tunnel, a horrid sound reverberated out into their faces. It seemed like a human bellow at first, but trailing off, ranged up the tonal scale into such an unearthly shriek, it sent them all backpedaling away from the portal with fright -- all but Caleb. He took off at a sprint down the dark side shoot, bellowing with rage.

"You bastard!!"

The squad hesitated only a moment. There was a crackle of gun safeties coming off in unison, and they rushed in after him, hearts pounding, breathing hard in the chokedamp air.

Quicker than expected, they charged out into a heavily stoped chamber amid which an ancient trepan and a rusted old tram car sat on the rails. The place reeked with a musky, ironlike smell. It was Ellen's light that first blazed across the four headless bodies. It caught her by surprise. She turned away with a gasp, then peeked back, grasping instantly what the rife, iron smell was. Hemoglobin. Slaughterhouse smell.

“Oh, Christ!” she breathed, sickened. It was one thing to arrive at an hours old murder scene, or even the site of fetid, rotting death days or weeks afterward. She had long ago gotten used to that. But when the violence was this fresh, when the spoor of it still saturated the air, it was different. Blood hadn’t yet stopped seeping down from the severed necks, and the arms of one victim were quivering still in a death spasm. It shook Ellen like few things ever had.

The band of Cherokee militia men fanned out, scouring the mine room with their lights, guns at ready, searching every niche. Warily, Caleb surveyed the near naked bodies on the ground. There was no mistaking the killer’s trademark. The hewn off heads lay littered about, scalps shaved in a bygone tribal style and faces stained with blue, mimicking the clan tattooing of a past era. On the bodies themselves, the same slogans were gouged into the bosoms.

But the hunt came up empty. There was no trace of the perpetrator. Three more tar black tunnels the same size as the one they had come in by ran off from the chamber. It was through one of these that the slayer had no doubt fled into the deeper reaches of the mine. Caleb shone his lantern down each in turn. Ellen was suddenly at his side.

“The walls!” She pulled urgently at him, turning him around. “There’s nothing on the walls!”

She was right. He passed his lamp beam over every flat surface. Nowhere was there any sign of the cryptic Mormon scriptures done in blood.

“We got here before he finished,” he proclaimed. His light came to rest on a crude pottery bowl and bristle brush on the ground. Tools for blood painting. But the bowl was empty. Not far from it sat three old-fashioned apothecary bottles. Caleb stooped to pick one up, sniffed the stopper and got the bottle away from his nose fast.

Across the chamber, a man lifted a gas mask to yell. “Over here! It’s Sam Bird!”

“Here’s two more!” another voice sounded off.

“Hey, it’s John Qualla’s wife! She’s alright! Where’s John?”

Rescuers clustered around Sam Bird. His hair was partly shaved off and a pattern of blue marked his face. Blood caked his chest in thick gouts. Only his eyes moved, very slowly, from face to face.

Nearby, Caleb turned Dee Qualla over slowly, brushing hair back off her forehead. Ellen observed closely, knew what he was looking for. But there was nothing marked there.

John Qualla knelt over his wife. "Dee Dee," he whispered low and looked up at Caleb, eyes pleading, "Is she going to be alright?"

Caleb saw an emotion in Qualla's racked face that stirred old empathy deep inside him. "John, I honestly don't know. I hope so."

Someone wet a cloth from a canteen and gently blotted blood away from Sam Bird's chest. The words *Sword of Laban* were sliced into his skin.

"Doesn't look like he's cut anywhere else."

"Okay, people, let's rig something to carry them up out of here on," Hatchee suggested.

Ellen watched attentively as Caleb strode to where the less fortunate ones lay slain. He stood contemplative, taking in all the butchery, his fists clenched at his sides.

"Son of a bitch...god dammit," he exhaled low.

He stopped a Cherokee rescuer with a spare automatic shotgun slung across his back. Words were exchanged, Cherokee words. The fellow nodded, slipped the sling over his head and passed the weapon to Caleb.

With firm resolve, Caleb moved alone toward one of the three dark tunnels, checking to be sure a shell was chambered in the gun. He clasped the handle of his flashlantern against the stock so it shined a spike of light straight out in line with the barrel, like a spotter.

Ellen perceived Caleb's intent. "Caleb, no!" she called out in alarm, running toward him.

But it was Hatchee who cut Caleb off, grabbing him firmly by the jacket. "Whatta you think you're doing? Huh?"

"Cherokee justice, remember?" Caleb snapped at him.

"The way you're thinking isn't justice, man, it's suicide." Hatchee spun Caleb around facing the slaughter. "You think you

and a few rounds of double-ott got any chance against something that could do this? Huh?"

Caleb's face was swollen out with anger. "I want him dead!"

"So do I!" Hatchee let go of Caleb. "He's trapped down here, man. No way he's gonna get out. Not past all of us."

"I've gotta be more sure than that."

"Alright, fine." Hatchee's eyes glowed with a venom of their own. "I got two crates of dynamite up in my truck and more where that came from. We get everybody outta here, then we'll come back down, you and me, blow the piss outta this place. Main tunnel and shafts, bring the whole damn top of the hill down. Bury the fucker forever. That good enough?"

Well out of view, back up a narrow, caved-in drainage drift that ran off from the stoped room, a dark shape lurked hidden, wedged in, watching them all. Its chest and back snug against the broken stulls and damp earth walls, it breathed hard and deep. Mostly, it focused on Caleb Easton. But again and again, its cruel, iridescent gaze roved over the figure of Ellen Masterson. Nostrils high, it thrust its face forward, sniffing the air -- pulling in the scent of her.

"He's not getting outta here. Not after this," Hatchee assured Caleb. "I promise you, man."

Moments later, the drift shaft was empty. The lurking one was gone.

* * *

A strophe of exclamations and cheers went up as rescuers brought Sam Bird, Dee Qualla and a third survivor out of the mine on makeshift litters into the night air. Hatchee, Ellen and Caleb followed the others out. The Cherokee council head came out of the throng and latched onto Caleb's sleeve.

"He killed four before we got here," Caleb told him, apologetic.

The bad news spread mouth to mouth. The jubilation tapered off quickly and cries of grief came from within the crowd. Katalsta broke through, running to Sam Bird.

"Grandfather! Oh, Grandfather!" She looked tearfully to

Caleb. "Will he be--?"

"I don't know, Katalsta. I just don't know."

"Can't someone help him? Can't anyone?"

Ellen walked with Katalsta, slipping a comforting arm around the young girl's shoulders. "We're going to do everything we can now, dear," she told her quietly. "You just hold on. If there's a way, I know people who can find it."

* * *

On another part of the hill some quarter mile distant from the mine entrance, an enormous slab of stone began to move where it lay on the rocky ground. A muffled, animal roar resonated out from beneath it. It was unthinkable that anything flesh and blood could do so much as budge it. But the slab tilted steadily up and tumbled away, revealing a round hole burrowed down into the ground. A dusky shape pulled itself up and out of the hollow run, vigorously shaking loose dirt off its shoulders and head.

It moved with amazing stealth and swiftness, gliding through the blackness across the craggy hilltop. As it drew nearer to the noise and lights outside the main entry tunnel leading back into the Pasco Mine, it hung closer to cover.

Only moments later, it loomed dark, hulking and hidden in the lower branches of trees not twenty feet from the onlookers gathered at the main shafthead. Its nostrils twitched, sniffing the night.

Far back, the crowd parted to let through a tiny old man with a flowing white mustache, dressed in traditional Cherokee garb. He wore Ben Franklin type glasses and had the glowing, wrinkleless skin of those few who have exceeded a century in age. A chubby mule lumbered unreined at his heels. The head of the Cherokee council approached the old one respectfully, gesturing toward the stricken three who lay nearer to the mine where family and friends hovered over them. Whispered comments of awe trickled back through the throng.

Caleb and Ellen helped John Qualla attend to his wife. "That is old Ay-Tsisiwa," Qualla told them amazed as the little man and

his mule approached. "He has the old knowledge. It was taught to him by his father, powerful medicine man."

Looking impossibly ancient, Ay-Tsisiwa knelt next to Katalsta over Sam Bird. He raised Sam's eyelids and peered in at his pupils.

"How old is he?" Ellen asked quietly of John Qualla, transfixed by the persona of this odd little man who had joined them.

"No one knows for sure," Qualla answered hushed. "We think maybe a hundred and twelve this spring."

Caleb crouched, handing Ay-Tsisiwa one of the three apothecary bottles he had brought up from the mine. The moment their eyes met, the old man's entire countenance changed. There was only one word for it -- astonishment. Caleb recalled another old holy man who had looked at him with almost that same expression once many years before. But then, the look had been one of fear, and this was more a look of recognition. Something in Ay-Tsisiwa's aged face made the skin on Caleb's nape and shoulders crawl. It wasn't that he was in any way hideous to look at. He had in fact one of the most gentle Indian faces Caleb had ever seen. There was an almost saintly glow about him, as if some part of him had already passed on to his afterlife, but still stayed in touch with him here, assuring that nothing earthly and evil could afflict him in any way.

Caleb indicated the bottle. "This was used on them," he said to Ay-Tsisiwa. "Do you know what it is?"

"He can't speak," Katalsta told Caleb. She tapped at her throat.

Caleb noted for the first time the ragged laryngectomy scar in the old man's neck as Ay-Tsisiwa held the bottle up and peered through at its contents. He started to pull the stopper, but Caleb put out a warning hand.

"That's very dangerous."

Ay-Tsisiwa smiled deliberately at Caleb and drew out the stopper. A strange, bluish vapor cascaded from the bottle. Caleb backed cautiously away. The old man pushed the stopper back in and spread a white cloth on Sam Bird's chest. He rattled a handful of beads and tossed them like dice on the cloth, then leaned in, scrutinizing them minutely.

Smiling, Ay-Tsisiwa got up and moved to his mule. Caleb

heard the old man give a peculiar, almost silent laugh that was all breath and no voice. He went through canisters and leather pouches lashed across the mules midriff.

Like a chef selecting herbs and spices, he extracted a quantity of roots, some bark, and a neatly rolled plug of cured leaves that were saturated with a resinous oil. The curious few who pressed in close around him as he sorted through his wares shrank instantly back and left him plenty of room after he dipped a steady hand into a pouch and pulled out a full four feet of live rattlesnake. He held the reptile tightly, his thumb and middle finger pinched in firmly behind its jaw hinges while his index finger stroked the smooth plateau of scales on its head. He put his face down to it and stared it eye to eye. A smile lifted his cheeks behind the long hanks of his mustache. The snake's split tongue slithered out, tickling the air in front of Ay-Tsisiwa's nose. He put pressure on the snake's head that separated its jaws, and hooking its relaxed fangs over the rim of a tin medicine cup, massaged the venom sacks until the juice coursed out in two sustained trickles. He released the snake, and it scooted off into the brush. Ay-Tsisiwa went to work, attentively adding ingredients to his cup.

"Demon!"

An eerie, whispered voice reached Caleb's ears. He reacted with a start, looking about. Surely someone else had heard it too. But all eyes were fixed raptly on old Ay-Tsisiwa and his medicine making.

"Demon!"

The shrill whisper came again. No reaction from anyone around him. Caleb couldn't understand. Was he the only one who could hear it? He spun around, tense, looking first at the dark stand of trees nearby, then toward the entrance tunnel to the mine.

"What's wrong?" Katalsta asked, sensing Caleb's alarm.

"He's out here somewhere!" Scooping up his borrowed shotgun, Caleb dashed through the crowd, hurrying toward the mine. Near the entrance, he just caught sight of the plain colored sedans pulling up when rough hands grabbed onto him from behind, stripped away the gun and threw him down.

"Federal agents, Easton! You're under arrest!"

A scuffle ensued, but Caleb was greatly outnumbered. He got popped hard behind the ear with a fist and held with his face in the dirt while his hands were cuffed behind him.

“Hey! What are you doing there?” people in the crowd protested.

“Stop that! Leave that man alone!”

“You can’t do that!”

“Just move back now, people!” a federal agent cautioned, showing his I.D. “This is a police matter!”

The doors on the government sedans swung open, and more agents scrambled out. Caleb was yanked around and planted in a sitting position on the ground. He found himself face to face with Lewis Manzi.

“Hi, pal. You ‘member me?” Manzi leered. “What did you do with Ellen Masterson?”

“Why don’t you ask her yourself.”

The attention of the bystanders shifted quickly to the commotion between Caleb and the federal agents at the mine opening. Katalsta Bird stood virtually alone at what was now the back of the throng. She sniffed a couple times, as though smelling something peculiar. It was only old, mute Ay-Tsisiwa and Sam Bird in his helpless state who observed the huge shape that materialized out of the night behind her. A mammoth hand clamped a rag over her face and pulled her back into the dark, disappearing with her like black magic.

The Feds frisk Caleb Easton. They found the two remaining apothecary bottles in his jacket, passed them around. Caleb looked about, gravely scanning faces in search of Ellen. He tried to recall at what point he had lost track of her in the crowd.

“Ellen? Ellen!” he yelled out. But she was nowhere to be seen. His eyes darkened suddenly as realization stung him. “Yeah, you’ll help me alright, won’t you, lady,” he muttered.

Federal agents came running up out of the mine opening, breathless and stirred up. “Inspector! You better have a look down here!” one of them hollered out.

The inspector pretty much surmised from the pallor of their faces what they had come across. “Alright, let’s get the lab team up

here on this.” He jerked a thumb toward Caleb. “Make sure he gets Mirandized with witnesses, then take him on into town and hold him. Manzi, you might want to ride along with them.”

The agents dragged Easton toward a sedan, advising him of his rights and stuffing a copy of the Miranda card into his pocket. Ay-Tsisiwa got in their way, waving his arms and reaching for Caleb. Manzi turned him aside.

“Out of the way, pop.”

They shoved Caleb into the back of the car. Manzi and a federal agent sandwiched him in. As the sedan moved off, Caleb craned around, looking back through the rear windshield at Ay-Tsisiwa who stood gesturing frantically toward the crowd. Caleb peered hard through everyone standing there until he spied Sam Bird, sitting up on the ground, rubbing his neck and looking around. Caleb’s eyes darted back to Ay-Tsisiwa, who stood with his arms crossed displaying a huge smile of accomplishment.

“Well I’ll just be damned,” Caleb enunciated in amazement.



TWENTY...

Those who know say that the Uktena is a great snake, as large around as a tree trunk, with horns on its head, and a bright, blazing crest like a diamond upon its forehead, and scales glittering like sparks of fire. The blazing diamond is called Ulunsuti ... and he who can win it may become the greatest wonder worker of the tribe....

Of all the brave warriors who have started out in search of Ulunsuti only Aganunitsi ever came back successful. The East Cherokee still keep the one which he brought. It is a large, transparent crystal... The owner keeps it wrapped in a whole deerskin, inside an earthen jar hidden away in a secret cave in the mountains....

No white man must ever see it and no person but the owner will venture near it for fear of sudden death. Even the conjurer who keeps it is afraid of it, and changes its hiding place every once in a while... When he dies it will be buried with him.

Whoever owns the Ulunsuti is sure of success in hunting, love, rainmaking, and every other business, but its great use is in life prophecy. When it is consulted for this purpose the future is seen mirrored in the clear crystal as a tree is reflected in the quiet stream below....

—James Mooney,
Myths of the Cherokee, 1897

It was a rough ride down the hill from the Pasco Diamond Mining property to the nearest highway. The plain, government issue sedan bottomed out repeatedly and hit ruts that would have thrown the agents riding in it up into the headliner had it not been for their seat belts and shoulder harnesses. As it worked out, Caleb Easton had no such safety restraints, jammed in back between Manzi and a federal agent. Someone had stuffed the middle belt and buckle well back under the seat cushions. They didn't discover it until they were underway and couldn't get at them. After the first time Caleb got pitched up and hit his head against the roof, Manzi and the federal agent each kept a firm hand on his shoulders to hold him down.

They eventually reached an access drive and shortly thereafter pulled out onto a two-lane highway headed into Tulsa. The agent driving the car was just a kid who Caleb judged was pretty green. He was hyper and jittery as a bass lure and kept taking edgy glances back at Caleb in the rear-view mirror. Probably the guy's first up-close encounter with a big time federal fugitive, Caleb thought snidely to himself.

A senior agent rode up front with the driver. He flicked on the dome light and held up one of the apothecary bottles they had taken off Caleb. He peered through the lower tier of his bifocals at the dark amber glass container and its contents. It got Caleb's attention and made him instantly about as antsy as the kid at the wheel. The senior agent wiggled loose the rubber stopper in the bottle's neck and was about to pop it out.

"Hey, don't do that!" Caleb blurted out. "Careful with that shit in here."

The senior agent craned his jaw around and lowered it to take a look back at Caleb through the upper tier of his bifocals. He decided with a frown it was maybe good advice and mashed the stopper back in with his thumb. As he did, Caleb detected the kid driver eyeing him once more in the rear view, but more steadily this time. He'd been waiting for that.

Looking at the road ahead, Caleb feigned a shocked expression. "Watch out!" he shouted, contorting into crash posture to help sell

it.

The startled kid instinctively stomped the brakes and locked up all four wheels before he realized there was nothing whatsoever in the roadway. With a shrill peal of rubber, the car nose-dived and skidded sideways. The apothecary bottle slipped from the senior agent's grasp and flew forward, disintegrated against the windshield. Liquid from it fizzed down the dash, evaporating at once into a dense blue fog which the defroster fan sent surging back to fill the entire cab.

Before the cloud reached him, Caleb sucked a deep breath and held it. He could barely see the others through the swirling haze as they gasped in the vapors, convulsed briefly and then went limp. The car's engine stalled out, and it slid tail first off the road, spinning to a stop in a field of bent over brown corn stalks, left unplowed for the winter.

The back doors were power locked with the master security override on the driver's arm rest. Caleb got a foot up and kicked at the window next to Manzi's slumped form. The glass resisted, wouldn't break. Frantically, he kicked harder and harder. Still no dice. The blue fumes were so thick he could no longer even see the window. His lungs ached. He needed to breathe and couldn't keep himself from drawing in a breath much longer. Yet he knew that the moment he did, it was all over. He'd be out like the others. Heavy as the vapors were, it would take only a few minutes of them lying there unconscious and breathing it in before they would all be dead from the brain paralyzing effect of the drug. He was beginning to think this had been a terrible idea.

Letting all his air go in a wild, frantic yell, Caleb hit the glass berserkly with both feet. It broke at last and sprayed out in tiny cubes. He got his heels on the floor hump, bent at the waist and tried to dive out head first. But he clipped the window frame with his shoulder and ended up hanging halfway out and tumbling to the ground.

He whipped to his feet and ran far enough from the sedan to gulp in a charge of fresh air, then spun around and sprinted back. Working with his hands cuffed behind him wasn't easy, but he got all four of the sedan's doors open wide. A cool breeze pushed

vapor out of the cab and off over the field in a low, spreading layer. Getting the seat belts unlatched and dragging Manzi and the three federal agents out of the car and upwind of the gas was tougher still. Caleb was relieved when he saw they all showed slight signs of movement, lying there in the field between the corn rows. The dose they'd breathed in hadn't been lethal.

Clumsily, he went through their pockets until he found a cuff key and freed his hands. From Lewis Manzi's shoulder holster, he tugged a husky automatic pistol, a gray-black Model 92 double-action Beretta. It was a weapon consistent with the North Carolina S.B.I. agent's personality, Caleb concluded. No short-barreled .357 patrolman's magnum or undernourished automatic for this boy. No sir. He was into high output firepower. Caleb tripped a release and examined the nine-millimeter bullets, fifteen of them Z-zagged down into the clip. He reseated the magazine, guessing correctly that Manzi had a sixteenth round already chambered and set to go down the pipe. He was just that type. A single pull of the trigger now would both cock and fire the weapon.

He saw Manzi's eyeballs move and register just a hint of emotion. That was a good sign. It meant Manzi's head was still working. It was slow in there no doubt, but he could see and understand what was happening around him. He just couldn't do a damned thing about it. Caleb liked the idea of that. He gave Manzi's cheek a couple stiff pats, hard enough to sting and get a flinch even through the stupor.

"Thanks, pal," Caleb jeered, stuffing the Beretta into his belt. He rolled Manzi and the three Feds into a jam pile on top of each other. Their collective body heat would keep them all warm enough in the cool night that way till they either came to or someone found them, he reasoned.

The breeze had blown off and dissipated all the gas. Caleb circled, shutting the sedan's doors. He took a breath and held it as he got in and started it up, mashing the driver's limp airbag back through the slots in the steering wheel and out of the way. He ran all the windows down and goaded the car through the loose dirt and corn shanks, back up the slight embankment and onto the highway again. He punched the gas pedal to the floor and, for

good measure, drove the first mile back toward the Pasco Mine with his head hanging out the window, breathing the fresh, nippy air as it rushed past.

He saw the emergency lights of ambulance vans and more police vehicles jogging their way up the slope toward the mine's entrance as he approached the hill. It wouldn't do to go charging back up there only to be apprehended again by the Feds, it occurred to him. He drove on a bit farther before turning off and taking a less direct approach to the mine that he thought might afford him more cover.

It was tough going, like pushing a small boat into the teeth of six-foot seas. With every bump the sedan would bottom out, then bound up, breaching like a dolphin and diving hard back down, skidding and going on. He was in way too big a hurry to reach the top, and it seemed at any moment the car would just give it up and refuse to take any more punishment.

He hit a rise that pitched the vehicle up completely off the ground and left the wheels hanging. Caleb hung on like a bronc rider as it plunged back down, the front bumper plowing up ground. He had just gotten control back when the car slammed into a huge stump and jammed to a stop. It threw him forward, and he bloodied his nose and lip on the steering wheel. "Dammit!" Caleb hammered the dash with a fist.

He abandoned the sedan and sprinted off into the darkness toward the mine.

* * *

Two paramedics strapped Sam Bird to a gurney and hoisted it up into a van with bright reflective orange ambulance markings. He seemed alert but sluggish, couldn't speak and couldn't get up or walk on his own. Ay-Tsisiwa pushed his way into the van with Sam Bird and stayed close by him.

"Hey, you can't be in here," the taller E.M.T. grouched at the old medicine maker. He used the tone of voice people scold bad puppies with, "C'mon, get out now. We'll take care of him from here. He'll be fine. You c'mon down out of there now." He

made impatient rolling motions with his hands, like a base coach signaling a runner to steal on a dropped pitch.

Ay-Tsisiwa just pretended not to hear and stared at the defibrillator gear in the van.

“You gotta get him out of there,” the other paramedic insisted.

“What do you expect me to do? Pick the old guy up and throw him out?” He gestured in at Ay-Tsisiwa, who looked about as formidable as a feather duster but was not about to budge from Sam Bird’s side.

“Shit,” the other breathed and got in behind the wheel to drive.

The taller E.M.T. got in back with Sam Bird. The van’s emergency lights came on. Its siren yelped once, and it moved off across rough hillscape. Every bump sent gear in back swaying and pitching in its racks. The driver tried to take it slow.

Sam Bird struggled hard to talk, but could only stutter unintelligibly. From a goatskin canteen slung across his body on a strap, Ay-Tsisiwa administered more of the antidote he had mixed. But the taller paramedic shoved it away. “I told you, stop it! You’re not helping him!”

Up front, the driver pushed his face out, squinting through the windshield. “What the hell?” he grumbled. His headlights had picked up the form of a man standing directly in the van’s path, waving his arms over his head to flag them down. He applied brakes and brought the ambulance coasting to a stop.

From where he stood, nearly blinded in the cross wash of the vehicle’s high beams, Caleb Easton squinted in through the van’s windshield and spied Sam Bird and Ay-Tsisiwa in back. He ran to the passenger side door, wrenched it open and clambered in. He showed the driver a profile view of Manzi’s Beretta, keeping the muzzle pointed up toward the headliner.

“I have this. I won’t point it at you if you just drive,” he said in a tone that meant business and no screwing around. “Get us back up to the mine. Now!”

The driver got a good gulp of the grim expression on Caleb’s face. “Alright. Alright, take it easy, man. Anything you say.”

The ambulance swung around in a wide half circle and moved out, headed back up the hill. Caleb yanked the mike loose from

a two-way radio set under the dash and went in back where Ay-Tsisiwa had managed to get a couple more swallows of antidote into Sam Bird.

"I keep telling you, now, quit that!" the tall paramedic admonished him again.

"Let him alone," Caleb told the guy. "He knows exactly what he's doing."

For several moments, Sam Bird stuttered so vehemently that under other circumstances it would have been hilarious. Then as though a splint had been removed from his tongue, he spoke out clearly.

"He has taken my granddaughter!" he squalled.

"What do you mean? Who took your granddaughter?"

"The Uktena! He took her! Outside the mine!"

Caleb looked at Sam Bird, astonished, piecing it all together. "You actually saw him? Outside the mine?"

"Yes! He took her. And the other woman. I saw him!" Sam Bird bumbled.

"What other woman?"

"The one with you," he told Caleb.

Caleb's eyes went wide, and he could feel the color drain from his face.

"He took Ellen too?"

"Yes!"

Suddenly it all made sense. She hadn't sold him out after all. But this was much worse. Somewhere at that very moment she was in horrible danger. It made him sick to think about what could be happening to her.

"He is the great Uktena, come to reclaim Ulunsuti," Sam Bird proclaimed. "He made my ancestor confess. He told of a place where Ulunsuti were hidden away. He spoke it through me!"

"And you remember all that?"

"Yes! Everything! I know where he has taken them!"

"Stop the van. Right now!" Caleb called up to the driver.

Sam Bird got off the gurney as the ambulance fishtailed to a halt. "It is a holy place," he said. "An old burial ground in the reservation land about twenty miles from here. I know the way."

“Turn us around,” Caleb ordered the driver. “Get us back down to the highway.”

The ambulance cut another tight half donut. Reaching the bottom of the hill, they pulled up and ran along the shoulder of a highway for some distance as Sam Bird got his bearings. “This way!” he pointed.

“Alright, step on it,” Caleb waved the Beretta in front of the driver. The van swung out onto the pavement. Its engine whined as it picked up speed and hustled down the darkened asphalt highway.

* * *

The dolmen looked like something more likely to be found far up in the old Celtic Druid lands of the U.K. It was comprised of three gigantic boulders with a flat slab of rock resting atop them at an angle, like a sloped roof. It seemed hopelessly lost and out of place there amid the Indian reservation lands of eastern Oklahoma.

What made it all the odder was that it hadn't been constructed that way by any feat of ancient or modern human engineering. It was a completely natural formation, left by random chance when a glacier of the last ice age melted. As it receded north, it set down in its wake the massive rock chunks scooped up over the millennia and held suspended in its thick, icy grip.

The aboriginal people who first discovered the formation were without much knowledge of glaciers and their handiwork however. To them, such a grand phenomenon could be explained only in the framework of things supernatural. And so since time immemorial, this natural dolmen had been endued with sacred characteristics and regarded as a grotto of spirits. It remained to the present day centered amid some thirty-odd acres that residents of the surrounding reservations avowed to be holy grounds.

Inside, beneath the sheltering cap slab, huge hands dug with a frenzy into the earthen floor, searching. More than a foot below the soil, they encounter a flat stone and cleared dirt away from its top and from around its sides. Through the darkness came a groan

as the hands hoisted back the stone. A chamber lined with rough-formed terra cotta tiles lay revealed beneath it.

The hands reached in to unroll a neatly placed pelt of deer hide inside it. An ecstatic gasp sounded in the dimness above the earthen cavity. Within the buckskin, atop a cushioning layer of crude linen, reposed two large, smooth crystals of slightly differing shape and hue.

* * *

Out the side window, Sam Bird saw a silhouette of something in the distance. He jostled the E.M.T. driving the ambulance. "Here! Turn off here! Up that way!"

Barely slowing, the ambulance careened off cross-country, nearly overturning as it hurdled a ditch and made way toward a vague, black profile on the skyline. At length, the headlights picked up a raised plateau with a drop-off of some fifty feet looming dead ahead. The plateau was topped with strange-shaped objects. At the base of the drop-off, a woman lay face down.

The ambulance nosed down sharply and stopped. The five men inside all piled out and ran to the woman on the ground. Ay-Tsisiwa hobbled up last as Caleb and the taller E.M.T. turned her over gently.

"Katalsta!" Sam Bird sobbed.

Blood leaked freely from her mouth and nose. The paramedic loosened her clothing, revealing a terrible wound above her midsection. Spires of rock stood nearby, stained dark with blood.

"Grandfather. Oh, grandfather," Katalsta's voice came faintly. The E.M.T. driver returned from the van on the run, bringing medical gear. Katalsta spoke between painful gasps. "I ran from him...I didn't see...I fell over...the side."

"Katalsta, does he still have Ellen?" Caleb asked urgently.

The girl pointed weakly up toward the plateau. Caleb touched Sam Bird's shoulder. "Ulunsuti. Show me where."

Reluctantly, Sam Bird left Katalsta in the care of old Ay-Tsisiwa and the paramedics. Caleb helped him along as they hastened up a winding trail to the top of the plateau. Sam Bird

stopped abruptly, hesitant to go on. It was hallowed territory up there. There were a few remnants of the old beliefs he still had some respect for. And this place indeed possessed a power and the presence of something it didn't take one morsel of conservative Indian religious faith to feel.

The odd-shaped objects that abounded up there were Indian burial mastabas, charnel huts and totemic grave markers of stone and wood. They stood sprawled out irregularly over acres of flat land. There was in actuality a scheme to the layout that took careful scrutiny to perceive. Instead of the squared lines and rows of common cemeteries, it was set up in roughly concentric circles with each burial plot or tomb structure oriented to face toward the east. The scent that wafted off the place was difficult to describe and unpleasant to inhale. Ragged pennants and noise makers dangled from staves, moving with each gust of wind to scare away intruding spirits. It would have been a spooky place in broad daylight. Under stars and a moon that was waxing toward full, it was just short of terrifying.

"There!" Sam Bird pointed out the dolmenlike formation of boulders that glowed distantly in the moonlight at the center of the concentric rows.

Caleb drew the Beretta from his belt and towed Sam Bird reluctantly along with him. They wove their way silently through the circular maze and approached the dolmen sharp eyed. Crouching against one of the boulders, they listened careful before creeping inside.

They came almost immediately upon a heavy, flat stone, set down into the ground. It was damp on top and surrounded by fresh-dug earth. Someone had been there recently. It took all the strength both of them had to pry it up. Beneath in a hollow chamber lay a couple old woven linen wraps. They virtually disintegrated as Sam Bird searched through their folds.

"Nothing."

Caleb felt through the rotting material for himself.

"Uktena has taken them back," Sam Bird said.

Back outside, wind whistled through the haunting shapes on the plateau. Caleb ranged out, recklessly searching.

“Ellen!” he called frantically for her. But there was no answer from anywhere. Only the sounds of the noisemakers, cackling their warnings to demon spirits. “Ellen!” Caleb shouted out all the louder. In a fit of hate and frustration he kicked at the ground, raising the Beretta over his head and rapid-firing till the clip was empty. The rounds whine away into space as he screamed her name at the sky. “Ellen!” his voice trailed off.

Sam Bird peeled the empty automatic from Caleb’s grasp and tossed it aside. He gestured calmly in the direction of the trail they had come up by. They rejoined the others at the base of the plateau. The taller E.M.T. looked up, soberly shaking his head at them. On the ground, Katalsta barely breathed. She was trying to say something. Caleb got close, stroked her forehead soothingly.

“The beast...it was like a man,” she whispered to him through her pain. “Doesn’t look like...but it talked to us. It said...a place... take us both to...a place... It said... Kedesh...Kedesh.”

Dread understanding showed in Caleb’s eyes. He had never been there, but he indeed knew about a place called Kedesh. Beneath hair and blood, he discovered something drawn on Katalsta’s forehead. The small, black symbol of a poisonous snake, crucified to the arms of a canted cross. Katalsta’s body relaxed, and she became still and slack.

“Oh, no, no,” Sam Bird wept over her. “Not this little child. Not this sweet little girl.”

Caleb got up and stood off by himself, staring at the shapes moving in the wind above on the sacred grounds. “The slayer is fled to a city of refuge,” he whispered despondently to himself.

Old Ay-Tsisiwa knelt beside Katalsta. He cupped his hands together over her body as though lifting something delicate and invisible from her. He raised the invisible something and extended his arms, setting it free. His eyes followed, as though watching it soar off into the night sky.

* * *

Over his lifetime, old Ay-Tsisiwa had fathered sixteen sons and two daughters in all. So far, he had outlived twelve of his

offspring. The two young priest apprentices who now attended Caleb Easton in the cool, backcountry night not far from Ay-Tsisiwa's traditional round Cherokee winter lodge were in fact Ay-Tsisiwa's youngest sons. One was perhaps sixteen and the other maybe twelve. They were the children of his old age by his third wife who he had loved deeply, and who was now also deceased. In their white sleeveless tunics and white leggings, they reminded Caleb of the young Aaronic deacons and priests of his Mormon youth, dressed in their glowing white shirts, attending to the ceremonies of the church under a bishop's monitoring eye.

At Ay-Tsisiwa's bidding, his sons performed an unction. They undressed Caleb completely. Raising a bowl filled with an oily potion to all four points of the compass, they anointed him with the oil. They then painted his face, throat and chest in a pattern of red and black, the colors of conquest, and escorted him naked through the night to a sweat hut. It was a low structure of interlocking logs about six feet square with a tarpaulin roof and a flap for a door. Inside, it was just tall enough for Caleb to sit up in alone.

The older son lay a piece of deerskin on the ground and unfolded it. From within it he drew out a single magnificent feather which he handled with great care. It was an eagle feather, very old, and the largest of its kind Caleb could recall ever having seen. The boy uttered rhythmic, nasal words in Cherokee and passed the eagle feather inside the hut to Caleb who held the quill upright in his fingers before him, a focal point for meditation. Chanting more Cherokee, the boy closed the door flap.

In two corners of the sweat hut were piled smooth, flat rocks that had been heated in fire. Both young priests poured a slag of liverwort and horehound in over the rocks, then made fast the corners of the roof tarp and left Caleb there. It grew quickly humid inside with the steam of the malodorous brew. Sweat rituals were not about comfort. They were about cleansing and driving out anything that was not pure, courageous and whole.

By the time they returned and brought him out, it was nearly dawn. They gave him a pungent, black tea of snakeroot to drink and made him kneel on the ground outside the hut. As Ay-Tsisiwa looked on and nodded his approval, his sons circled Caleb, chanting

a fierce incantation and spreading a ring of rich, red-tinted dust on the earth about him.

Ay-Tsisiwa gestured to them in sign language.

“My father, Ay-Tsisiwa, asks me to tell you these things,” the older son interpreted for Caleb. “He says, his half-brother, who was a Tukabachee Creek prophet, told him in their youth of a wise and ancient white warrior called Uktenabee whose spirit lived many times. A friend to the Cherokee, Uktenabee would come some day to do final battle with the Snake Ghost, the great Uktena.

“His brother said that Ay-Tsisiwa was the one who the spirits had selected, even before he was born, to keep the old knowledge and to purify Uktenabee and bestow the spirit power he would need in order to destroy the Uktena.”

Ay-Tsisiwa knelt, striking flint to stone. The sparks ignited the ring of red dust. It blazed up hungrily, surrounding Caleb in a circle of fire. He stood up. The flames reached to his shoulders, reflecting in his glazed eyes like something alive. He fixed his gaze on old Ay-Tsisiwa, who stared back at him stern and stone-faced.

Without the slightest trace of fear, Caleb stepped calmly and confidently through the fire and stood outside the circle, not burned in the least.

The young priests walked him down into a cold stream and stood with him there. Ay-Tsisiwa appeared on the bank with lengths of red and black cloth draped over his arms. He laid them out on the ground to either side of him. The boys turned Caleb so he faced upstream into the dawning sun. Ay-Tsisiwa laid seven red beads on the red cloth and seven black beads on the black one. His apprentices struck up a low, dissonant duet that rose and fell in intensity.

Ay-Tsisiwa scoop up the red beads and raised them toward the sun, mouthing unvoiced words. He took the black beads in his other fist, spun and raised them to the west. His features twisted into a fearsome glare as he spat a soundless incantation at the black beads he clutched. As if that were a cue, the young priests dipped up water in their hands. Seven times, they poured the chill water over Caleb’s head, working it into his shoulders, chest and back...washing his spirit clean

Knowing the ritual, Caleb knelt in the stream and dipped himself forward under the flow completely seven times. The young priests walked him straightway up out of the streambed to Ay-Tsisiwa. The old medicine man hurled the black beads vehemently into a hole he had made at his feet. He kicked dirt over them and stomped it hard with his foot.

The ritual that Ay-Tsisiwa and his sons had performed on him was one of grave seriousness, Caleb knew. It was a ceremony to invoke power for the vengeful taking of life. It foreboded a fight to the death.

Ay-Tsisiwa hung a small cloth bag by a leather tether around Caleb's neck, like an amulet. Once again, his older son interpreted the sign language he made.

"My father says, when he saw you, Uktenabee, he knew his life's journey was almost finished. Now he can die." Passing his hand over the cloth bag, he continued, "This medicine bag will not protect you, only assure your just spirit a safe passage into the hereafter if you fail."

The four of them walked away from the burbling stream without saying another word.

* * *

A weathered pickup truck pulled out from in front of Ay-Tsisiwa's round lodge with Hatchee at the wheel. A younger Cherokee fellow rode with him in the cab. They towed a flatbed trailer on which sat strapped a stout, open-top jeep, outfitted for off-road travel.

Ay-Tsisiwa watched passively until the truck disappeared from view. He sent his two young sons off on an errand, then walked calmly into his lodge and lay down on his tick mattress. The spirits had conferred on him an awesome destiny. They had sustained his life, intervening many times over the years, he realized, so that he could complete it. It was an ancient thing that had now finally been fulfilled.

Closing his eyes, Ay-Tsisiwa relaxed his limbs. He breathed in deeply the ectoplasmic nectar of familiar spirits, rich in the

air about him. Some of them he had known in life. It was their touches that were gentlest as they laid hold of him. When his body was calm, he turned his concentration on his innards, mentally shutting them down one at a time. The gut and entrails were first, then the smaller organs and the life-storing liver. His lungs ceased to fill and exhaust as his heart pulse slackened to an irregular murmur. He sensed it stop at last.

Feeling left his legs and arms. The final thing he felt was a cool surge through his spine as the spirit hands became strong under him. They bore him up, working him loose from his last, reluctant corporeal bonds. Once they had him freed, they carried off amid them the sheer ether-being from within that was Ay-Tsisiwa himself -- only now he had a new name, which he instantly perceived. He heard his own soul laugh with joy, full voiced and out loud.

It took less than fifteen minutes altogether. Old Ay-Tsisiwa lay still and dead in his lodge.

* * *

Janson Skeeter chewed his chewing gum and peered over the tops of a pair of reading glasses at a microfilm viewer inside a library. Pages of negative image newspaper spreads whizzed past in front of him. He stopped the machine and jockeyed a headline into frame, amazement on his face.

The headline was in a serif type font no longer commonly used by newspapers. It read:

*Iroquois Slain in Bizarre Cave Massacre
Sheriff Baffled by Mormon Overtones!*

The story laid out beneath it was broken up by an outline of sub-heads. Skeeter scanned quickly through these, picking up the gist:

*Deep in the Bowels of the Earth!
Onondaga Tribe Victims of the Slaughter*

*Puzzling Mormon Verses in Blood
Tortured and Beheaded!*

An artist's line sketch accompanied the story. It depicted police officers in a cave with decapitated bodies scattered about. Skeeter zoomed the viewer in tight on one of the torsos in the sketch. The lens shimmied back and forth, and the body came into sharp focus. He cranked the machine into a high magnification mode. Plainly etched on the chest in negative image were the words *Sword of Laban*.

Skeeter stopped chewing his gum. He caught it before it fell from his open mouth. He scanned the viewer up to the top of the page, again rocking the knob back and forth to get it in focus. "I'll be a fucked polecat," he breathed, thoroughly incredulous.

The date in sharp focus above the columns was *Friday, October 13, 1877*.



TWENTY-ONE...

You do not yet know the land, the perilous place, where you might find the seldom-seen creature: seek if you dare.

--Beowulf

Hatchee coasted to a stop and waited twenty or so vehicles back in line at the third police roadblock they came upon within an hour. He inched forward as each car was inspected and waived through in turn ahead of them. When they reached the front of the line, the state troopers looked Hatchee and his younger Cherokee passenger over carefully, asking for their drivers licenses, then directing them to pull off the road. Hatchee tried to mime just the right amount of annoyance and cranked the wheel hard over.

They sat quietly in the cab of the pickup as the troopers looked up under the fenders and into the truck's open bed. Hatchee kept his arm propped in his side window, gripping the roof edge so the trooper walking up would be sure to see the Army Ranger tattoo on the back of his hand. Sometimes it bought him some slack or at least more evenhanded treatment from white cops, he had found.

"Sir, we'd kind of like to take a look a what you've got in the back of your truck and also inside your jeep back here too," the trooper said. "You got any problem with us doing that now?"

Expressionless, Hatchee looked out at the statie. What the man was asking him for was permission to search the vehicles without

a warrant. Hatchee knew they couldn't do it legally without his consent unless they were prepared to demonstrate probable cause for a search. Of course if they had any solid probable cause -- aside from the fact that he and his passenger were Indian -- they wouldn't be asking his permission, now would they? He knew the cop was watching for any hint of alarm he might show at the request, trying to gauge if there was anything amiss with these two Cherokee.

"You saying you believe you have cause to stop and search me for some reason, officer?" Hatchee asked, pushing the cop to commit himself on the probable cause. There was no point in just caving in and giving them the okay to search without making an issue of it. They'd do it.

But the trooper was too good at this to go down in the first round. He sidestepped the question. "We'd really just like to have a look. Is that alright with you, sir?"

"You looking for something in particular, officer?"

"We'd just like to take a look, if you don't mind."

Stalemate. The troopers around the truck were getting edgy. Hatchee could read the signs of men starting to load adrenaline with his eyes shut. He could as good as smell it in their sweat, he'd been through the calm before a shit storm enough times in his life. He saw their postures change, perking like guys in the bush did upon hearing the trip tick of a mine.

"Hey, sure," he broke eye contact with the trooper, shaking it off. "Take a look. No problem."

The tension around the truck lightened considerably. A person with something to hide wouldn't give them this kind of crap and then back off, right? A trooper stayed outside each truck door, watching their hands, fingertips on their hip guns, while other troopers went to work searching. They climbed into the truck bed and onto the trailer to inspect the jeep.

Hatchee held his breath, watching guardedly through the rearview as a cop stooped to raise one lid on a welded sheet steel tool box that spanned the truck bed right behind the cab. Another trooper opened the other side of the box and lifted out tool trays by their handles to inspect the compartment beneath them. The

truck's engine was a beefy, high-compression V-8 with plenty of scoot-out power. But trying to make a break now and outrun them overland, especially hauling the trailer and jeep, was a nonstarter. They wouldn't get far enough to make it worth the bloodshed. Hatchee gritted his teeth. He didn't have a backup plan.

Finding only more heavy power tools piled on grimy old Indian blankets that smelled of moldy dampness and gear oil, the troopers dropped the trays back in place after only a minimal search and shut the box. One of them frowned and swore sharply at greasy smudges on his uniform sleeve.

Hatchee tried not to look relieved. Home free now, he thought. He projected hard-bitten attitude for the benefit of the trooper outside his door, careful not to make it challenging attitude though. The trooper stared back through seemingly opaque sunglasses. Don't fuck it up now.

"You wanna look under the hood and check that oil while you're at it, chief?" Hatchee's passenger jeered the cop standing on the other side of the truck. Hatchee shut his eyes. It was exactly the kind of thing he would have smarted off and said himself when he was thirty years younger and too full of sour piss and poison for his own good.

The trooper at Hatchee's elbow leaned in, his jaw tight. "You best watch your mouth, buck," he cautioned the kid across the cab. He handed Hatchee back their licenses and rapped twice on the truck roof with his palm. "Move it outta here," he said and waved them through.

Without angling his head out of line with the road in front of him, Hatchee kept a cool, unobtrusive eye on his rearview mirrors. A patrol car had pulled up onto the highway and followed maybe half a mile back for quite some way. It finally turned off at a road junction. Hatchee eyeballed the cruiser till it was well out of sight. He thought of something and stuck his head out to scan the sky for a prowl plane or a chopper. But he didn't see anything.

Another thirty minutes down the blacktop, he slowed the truck and moved to the berm. Picking a level place, he eased the wheel over and pulled off road, driving a good hundred yards out into the rough. Gaining the scant cover of some leafless trees

and undergrowth, he stopped. He and his passenger got out and flipped open the lids on the tool box in back, fishing out trays.

"You alright in there?" Hatchee called down into the box.

There was movement under the heavy tools and musty blankets, and Caleb Easton got up out of the bottom of the utility box, stretching stiffness out of his back. They undid the stays on the trailered jeep, and Caleb backed it down the ramp. Hatchee and the younger Cherokee loaded military surplus gas cans and a duffel of supplies into it, and with few words exchanged, Caleb took off cross-country.

Climbing back into his pickup, Hatchee got out a road map to plot a roving course home. If they ran back through any of those same roadblocks without the jeep on the trailer, someone would get smart enough to go looking for it, he reasoned. It wouldn't hurt to keep out of sight right there, take a good, long nap and let some time pass either. The Cherokee kid got in the other side of the truck.

"You know, if you weren't my sister's brat, there's times I could just flat kick your ass and be done with it?" Hatchee reamed him. "Check the oil, the kid says," Hatchee shook his head, but couldn't help grinning. His nephew looked at the floorboards, sheepish.

They both crossed their arms and settled back in their seats for a couple hours snooze.

* * *

Making his way southwest through the flat plains of central Texas, Caleb ran overland much of the day. He navigated by compass and sun position, venturing occasionally up onto legitimate highways only when no other thoroughfare was possible. He finally abandoned his cross-country route at sundown and took to paved roads after a couple near axle-busting spills.

He pushed himself on through the entire night, stopping just once at a truck stop in a little oil town and paying with cash to top off his gas tank and cans. He crossed over the Pecos River, and sometime after sunrise passed a road sign reading:

INTERNATIONAL BORDER

Customs Station - 5 miles

He swerved the jeep off-road again and jetted across barren plateau land, raising dust. Following the bank of a river until the flow broadened out many miles upstream, he forded at a shallow place where smooth, round rocks paved most of the river bed. Water sloshed up to the headlights and into the cab. But the engine kept churning, and he made it across.

On the other side, he stopped to take a compass heading and consult a map. There should be fairly passable highway, he decided, about thirty miles south of where he was. He considered pulling over for a sleep but thought better of it. He had just gotten a fresh wind. Best take advantage of it. There would be time to rest up later maybe.

He put the jeep in gear and rocketed off, raising more and more dust the farther he got from the river.

* * *

At the ruins of Tzompec in the Chiapas jungle highlands, siesta was just wrapping up. Workers made their way out of the shade and back to the gridded-out excavation tracts. Under a canvas canopy, Luis Montero studied a codex spread out on a table. He passed a magnifier over a colorfully illustrated series of images arranged around a Toltec solar calendar. They told a story, like a comic strip.

In the first frame, the warrior-god Yaotl could be seen, descending in wrath from the night sky. Barehanded, Yaotl battled the fair-skinned warrior priest-king Quetzalcóatl, who was armed with his huge sword. But in the next frame, it was Yaotl who now brandished the weapon. In the final frame, he attacked Quetzalcóatl, beheading him with his own sword.

A radio-telephone jangled. Luis picked up the receiver.

“¡Hola! Habla Luis Montero.”

“Luis?”

Luis hesitated, trying to place the voice. “Si.”

“Luis, it’s Caleb Easton.”

Luis's face brightened with amazement. "Caleb! It is a long time! A long time. Where are you, gringo boy?"

"In Coahuila somewhere. Just crossed the border a while back."

"Hey! You finally coming down to see me, 'migo?"

"I need some help, Luis. I need you to guide me into the Madres."

"The Madres, Caleb? Where in the Madres?"

"You know a place called Kedesh?"

Luis sat down on the corner of a table. His entire countenance changed instantly. He looked gloomily out over the stone ruins of Tzompec. "What do you expect to find up there among those godforsaken Mormon colonies, my friend?" he asked.

"I need to go there, Luis. Will you take me in?"

Luis drew a deep breath, thinking about it. "Si, Caleb. I will take you in."

"Thanks," Caleb's voice came over the phone. "Where can I meet up with you?"

"I'm not at the museum right now. I'm on a radio patch-through out on a Toltec dig in Chiapas. I need to finish a few things here."

"When can you come?"

Luis gave a long sigh, reflecting on everything he needed to do. "Head over into Chihuahua, 'migo," he said. "In Parral, look for an old monument to Pancho Villa. I'll be there...in two days."

"Two days. Good. Luis?"

"Si, Caleb?"

"I'm in some trouble, Luis."

That brought a faint smile to Luis Montero.

"Just like college days, huh 'migo?" he grinned dispiritedly and dropped the radio-phone receiver back on its hook.

* * *

Ellen Masterson awoke in a shadowy, torch-lit cavern. She lay in a high-ceilinged chamber furnished with makeshift beds and primitive wood habiliments. It was like some bizarre, subterranean bunk house with nothing but the bare essentials. There were more

than two dozen other women present in the dim reaches of the cave about her. A few of them were notably pregnant. All were dressed in little more than rags.

It was difficult for Ellen to move at first. Every thought that began to form in her head would drift off somehow before it could be completed. She discovered that the less she tried to make her mind work, to force herself to concentrate, the easier it was to think. It was just a slow process. As she acclimated to it, she began to recall the number of times she had come out of this seeming sleep state to find herself in this condition. But she had no recollection at all of how she had gotten to where she was.

By not thinking about it, she was able to sit up and look slowly around herself. Her body seemed to perform the movements without any conscious impulse, as though they were the result of some agonizingly slow autonomic afterthought. The women she was among were of a mixture of descents. Some were anglo, but more were mestizas or pure native Indian. They were a silent assemblage, sitting, sleeping or roaming about the chamber. All had in common the lethargic look and zombielike movements Ellen herself exhibited, as though laboring against the stupefying effects of a potent narcotic.

One of them kicked over cookware near a tiny open fire. Aside from that singular outburst of pan clatter, there was no other sound to be heard except the constant white noise of water flowing distantly through another part of the cavern. The sudden commotion roused flocks of fruit bats that dangled from damp holds in the overhead. They swept down in a flurry, flapping and squeaking past the inhabitants of the chamber before looping back like autumn leaves caught in an upgust to grab new perches and hang oscillating once again. Below them, not a one of the women had reacted with so much as a flinch.

With great difficulty, Ellen focused on the obscure outline of a man lurking across the cavern -- or at least she thought it must be a man. There was a profile in motion with apparent facial features, a brace of shoulders, broad torso and limbs. The analytic half of her sluggish brain kept trying to put a name to what she was seeing, kept trying to call it a man. But it was having difficulty doing

that. The word just didn't seem to fit or apply, though she couldn't formulate another one that made any more sense. When she tried, she just went blank, couldn't remember at all what it was she had been straining to think about.

It was when she almost instinctively began viewing what she saw through her artist's eye, using the other hemisphere of her brain -- the right half that registered only space and form and mass without bothering over what they should be called -- then the real horror sank in. All of the shapes seemed grossly articulated, exaggerated somehow and disproportionately huge.

Ellen saw a young woman standing in the shadows with her head sagged low. She was more a girl than a woman really. Hard hands lifted from the darkness -- or at least they looked like hands, had fingers like hands, but.... They loosened the girl's tattered clothing, let it fall away. She stood naked and entirely unresponsive as the hands moved roughly over her small, vulnerable breasts and hips, then snatched her, limp and yielding like a rag doll, into the darkness. There came a throaty, resonant sound, and then a fleshy thrashing that escalated mercilessly for many minutes, only to be drowned out by an indescribable roar. Then it all stopped.

For a long time there was silence. The quiet ended abruptly with a loud snap, like a dead tree branch letting go in a wind. It was followed closely by a crackling and tearing noise. A horde of rats came sprinting from all directions in conditioned response, converging on the source of the sounds.

From behind the hard-edged curtain of shadows where the girl had disappeared, a shape ventured out into the torch light. It crept, slow but determined, along the cavern floor. Others joined it, first peeking out from the darkness, then boldly racing forth. They looked like thick, black snakes as they slithered in S-shapes down the slight incline of the rock, until they began to split into divergent streams as only a fluid could do.

The flame light revealed more of their true color as they thinned out, not black at all, but a deep ruby red. They crossed over each other, spreading and pooling, until they overflowed another level of the rock, then streaked off again, crisscrossing -- like the gore spilling off some heathen altar of sacrifice.

Ellen's nostrils worked the air, catching a metallic scent she recognize. Inwardly, she was repulsed and horrified, but on the outside she showed nothing. She wanted to run but couldn't make herself do it.

There was another smell in the cave too. Rotting carcass smell. Nests of littered bones lay pushed out to the perimeter of the torch lights and scattered into the dark. Those farthest off were just splinters, turning to dust. They rimmed a stratum of many more, pitted and porous with age, the skull tops strewn like scallop shells on a beach. Bundles of newer vintage bones lay stripped slick but holding still some human skeletal shape. Cast here and there amid them were the freshest kills to which the soft tissues yet clung. Insect larvae scavenged morsels off them, and slews of velvet worms bored through to graze out the marrows as the brindled cave rats slinked through ribs and skeltered over the remains. Loathsome denizens of the dark cavern, they had all subsisted there for generations on the scraps cast off by the carnivore Ellen heard champing and panting in the near shadows.

They were livestock, these women. Shelf items. Some carried off by force and others coaxed with Machiavellian prowess. But to the man-beast that kept them, all were but delicate perishables, fuel for his appetites, both carnal and gourmand. He was like the foul spirit incubus of medieval fable, said to descend and force itself upon women while they slept. In their constant stuporous state, he took them whenever he liked. They existed only to be used callously for sex and then devoured for food and tossed away as he grew bored and moved gluttonously on to another.

A fruit bat screeched and flapped over Ellen's face. Its claws caught in her tangled hair and it hung there. She seemed not to notice it at all. Her eyelids fluttered, and she dropped unconscious.

* * *

The tropical nights at Tzompec came on rapidly with little twilight time. The day's digging was finished, except in one small sector where a gas-powered generator furnished electricity for light. It droned steadily in the background, drowning out the

nocturnal rain forest sounds as Luis Montero lay on the cot inside his tent, turning old thoughts over and over in his head. A gas lantern hissed on the folding camp table at his side.

By habit, he occupied his evening hours studying the finds of the day and making detailed notations about the progress of the project in his journals. But that evening, images of things he had shoved behind him and refused to think about for many years had leached through and made it impossible for him to concentrate. It troubled him that the memories came in such vivid detail after all this time. They ran projected on the silver screen of his psyche like a rough-cut patchwork of film clips, some of the earliest recollections of his childhood.

It was ironic for someone in a field so absorbed with dates and ages that Luis Montero had no accurate clue whatsoever as to his own birthdate. It had gone unrecorded. He guessed he was perhaps five or six years old when the events took place. For that reason, he would always see them from the angle of a small child, looking up at his world and trying to understand.

He remembered with uncomfortable ease the faces of all the other children, barefoot and poorly dressed the same as he. They sat outdoors in a circle on the ground. Clearly he conjured up the features of the young woman who would teach them. The mounted illustrations she held up for them to look at time and again as she told them the stories from *The Book* were engraved on his memory. To a young boy, they were pictures of magic and wonderment, tales of things that happened long ago.

Jesus Christ laying hands on the bowed head of a man who knelt at his feet... A bandaged man on a hillside strewn with warrior bodies, etching upon a tablet of golden plates that were bound together with rings lying at his side... Jesus Christ in the clouds, hands outstretched above an ancient stone city -- much like the stone city of Tzompec might once have looked. There were many others. He still knew those gaudy lithographs down to their minutest detail, the way art scholars know the great paintings.

Then had come the flurry of panic and confusion, the sudden arrival of the horses, raising dust, and the jeeps so green they were almost black. Men got out, lots of them, as others dismounted

from the horses. Some wore uniforms. They all carried guns, fired them into the air and into the dwellings, running about. They dragged flaming brands along the walls of the huts and shanties, setting afire the tiny, remote village there in the forest clearing.

People fled past him -- men, women and children, trying to get away. Something hit him from behind and knocked him down. He saw the other children he played with and the woman who taught them the Sunday stories being struck down, kicked and battered by the men in uniforms. He eluded them himself by hiding in the crawl space beneath a shack as it burned, until the heat became too much. His hair and clothing smoldering, he had rolled out and run terrified and crying into the trees.

Very deep in the forest, far beyond where he knew his way, he had looked back to where the gunshots still popped and rattled and at the smoke rising up to the sky. He ran again in fear until he fell exhausted. For a full day, he sat huddled at the base of a banana tree.

All at once there were strange faces over him -- round faces with broad, angular noses and kindly eyes. They had come silently through the forest. A bronze-skinned woman in puffy, pleated tunic and skirts bent and gathered him into her arms. He didn't know her, but she smelled like flowers and spoke soothingly to him in the tongue of the native Tarahumaras. She had rocked him patiently in her lap, looking into his peculiar blue little eyes until the terror went out of them and he slept.

In his tent, Luis Montero turned the knob that shut off the gas flow to his lantern, those same peculiar blue eyes now fixed upon the hot mantle of flame at the center of the lamp. He watched the glow fade away and turned over onto his back, knowing sleep would be hard to come by.

* * *

Caleb Easton sat sullenly by himself at a table in a dingy Mexican cantina. Out a set of swinging wood doors and across a deserted dirt street stood a small Roman Catholic church. It was recognizable as such less from its architecture than by the cross

affixed above the open front doors. They were holding evening mass inside. The bittersweet canticle of a little a cappella choir spilled faintly out into the listless night.

Caleb finished his food and got up. He left peso notes on the table and went outside. In the shadow of the cantina's front eaves, he stood listening to the choir's drifting canticle and staring up at the crude, wooden cross on the church. It felt like a foreign symbol to him. The religion of his upbringing didn't display the cross in places of worship nor deem it a sacred emblem. Mormons regarded the cross as merely a death symbol and were prohibited from wearing them. They considered the crucifixes of the gentile Christian denominations no different than the graven images of any other pagan religion.

But there seemed an uncanny magnetism about this little church that drew Caleb out into the dirt street in front of it. He walked at last to the open doors, but stopped abruptly outside, gazing in as though entry were forbidden him. At the front, holy communion was in progress. Parishioners moved in a line to kneel before a Mexican padre who pressed wafers of host to their extended tongues.

"Cuerpo de Cristo... Cuerpo de Cristo... Cuerpo de Cristo," the padre recited over and over. Caleb watched transfixed as the priest made the sign of the cross with his hand, blessing a crystal chalice of wine and raising it to his lips. He chanced to glance up and see Caleb step timidly inside the sanctuary. He looked at Caleb oddly for a moment, as though about to ask him a question, but then continued with his Eucharist ritual.

It was the first time Caleb had crossed the threshold of any church since the night he had been driven from the Mormon ward house. There was a strange warmth within the sanctuary that he hadn't expected to find there and a familiarity that was not at all unpleasant to him. He felt somehow soothed and comforted by it.

Moments later, the padre glanced again toward the back of the little church. Caleb Easton was no longer there.



TWENTY-TWO...

They hold to the secret land, the wold-slopes, the windy headlands, the dangerous fen-paths where the mountain stream goes down under the darkness of the hills, the flood under the earth.... There each night may be seen fire on the flood, a fearful wonder. Of the sons of men there lives none, old of wisdom, who knows the bottom.

—Beowulf

“Understand, Caleb, this is staunch Catholic country,” Luis Montero explained as the two of them loaded gear into the back of Caleb’s borrowed jeep in the small mining town of Hidalgo del Parral. Beyond them was the plaza of a little museum, before which stood a granite statue of the bandit liberator Doroteo Arango, better known as Pancho Villa. “The big Mennonite farming settlements up north of here have been tolerated,” Luis went on. “But these fundamentalist Mormon people? Despised, ever since they fled here from your country with their polygamy.”

“Doesn’t sit well with the Mexican government, I take it?” Caleb hoisted a pair of full G.I. gasoline cans one at a time and strapped them into the jeep.

“A century ago, Mormon refugees lived like outlaw bands up there in those canyons and mountains. Nomads, always moving about. Later the colonies sprang up -- Kedesh, Hebron, Ramoth, Golan and the smaller ones.”

Cities of refuge. Caleb had learned the names first as a boy,

reading the Old Testament book of Joshua in the Bible. The settlers of these outcast Mormon polygamy colonies, hidden high in the wilderness mountains, had thought it clever to name them after the six Hebrew cities of refuge, designated under the laws of Moses for the harboring from vengeance of anyone who had taken human life without intent. It is a peculiar coincidence that cities of refuge existed also among many of the eastern American Indian tribes -- one of many parallel customs shared by Native Americans and ancient Jews which suggest to some researchers a historical connection between the two. The old Cherokee capital, Echota, was a town of refuge, as was the ancient Creek Indian town, Coosa.

“Never understood why your federales didn’t just drive them out once and for all,” Caleb told Luis.

“It has been tried,” Luis said low as his thoughts turned inward a moment. He gestured toward the statue of Pancho Villa, whose life had ended violently there in Parral, shot to death while he sat in a car one warm July day in 1923. “You know your history, Caleb. John Pershing and an entire brigade of U.S. Army couldn’t bring Pancho down out of those mountains either.” He grabbed onto the windshield frame and swung himself up into the passenger seat of the jeep. “Where we’re going, ‘migo? You’re about to understand why.”

There was a long-standing unspoken agreement between the two of them that had existed since the very first time they ever traveled anywhere. Whoever knew the territory best rode shotgun and the new initiate drove. Caleb got in behind the steering wheel and cranked up the engine. The jungled foothills and heavily forested highlands of the Western Sierra Madres spired distantly through a thin, morning haze, far beyond the sleepy skyline of Hidalgo del Parral. He reflected on the many times in the past their seating assignments had been the reverse. But this was Luis’s home turf. He settled back in the passenger seat, resting one booted foot out on the front fender of the jeep as Caleb fed the engine gears and gas and headed them out of town.

Driven by the common thread of their unquenchable curiosities about things past, they had spent almost three years during their

youthful academic days penetrating some of the most impossible locales in the Americas together. They were an excellent research team and weathered the most extreme and far-fetched rigors of expedition well together.

As university graduate students, Luis and Caleb had stirred up a good deal of controversy in their respective fields of archaeology and cultural anthropology. They presented very convincing evidence that a site previously passed off as the burial mounds and grottos of North American Indians was in reality the barrows and dwellings of an Old Norse settlement that dated to the late Bronze Age.

Carved amulets and tablets they chanced to unearth proved to be effigies of the individuals with whom they were buried. Each bore an abbreviated biography of the person's life exploits. The practice was common among an Old Norse culture whose artifacts had only recently come to light in abundance at excavations in Sweden and Denmark, providing a basis for cross dating. The shape and design of the herma-like tablets interred with the North American remains was virtually identical to that of those found at the Scandinavian digs. Luis had recognized the inscriptions on them as being the same Old Norse Tifnag alphabet and pictorial images.

A large number of long, smooth oak poles found at the site had been used apparently as support beams for dwellings. But the wood was not at all indigenous to North America. It was Caleb who identified the thick poles accurately as the shafts of longboat oars, impressed into domestic service. They discovered no trace of the vessels they had come from, but dendrochronological analysis of the growth rings in the wood oars matched those for a region of Denmark where that particular oak flourished and had been harvested historically for shipbuilding. It dated them to about 900 B.C. Radiocarbon-14 dating of charcoal bits discovered among the partially fossilized human bones under the barrows confirmed the era. Clearly, European travelers had been in North America well before Columbus or Leif Ericson. And they had preceded them there, not just by mere decades or centuries, but rather by two millennia.

This claim by itself had proved controversial enough, Caleb and Luis found out quickly. But what was so incredibly startling about the find was where it occurred. It wasn't in Greenland, or coastal Canada or New England or anywhere else commonly conceded as possible landings for ancient Nordic or Celtic travelers. The find came rather at a dig site amid the head streams feeding into the Rio Grande near what is now El Paso, Texas.

The petroglyph tablets and rock figure carvings that Luis, Caleb and their other student colleagues were able to decipher related the saga of a great Old Norse expedition from Baltic climes to North America. Their fleet of swift, shallow-drafted longboats with their oar teams and lateen sails had sequentially split into three exploration parties. The first left the main armada to venture up the Chesapeake. From there, the rest had navigated south along the Atlantic seaboard and around into the Gulf of Mexico, hugging the coast and making shore excursions for provisioning as they went.

A second group had broken off to fight their way against the current up what was likely the Mississippi River. Whatever became of the first two parties was unknown, or at least went unrecorded. The remainder had continued on, riding the gulf coast around until they reached the Rio Grande and turned inland. Arduously, the burly Norsemen made their way up most of its length before an apparent mutiny resulted in a small contingent of the stalwart crew staying to settle somewhere along the Pecos River banks. The rest continued up the Grande under sail and staunch oar power clear to its source streams.

There, they had established the colony that Caleb, Luis and their associates had identified. The sea voyagers depicted in the glyphs were all male, though the settlement showed signs of several generations of inhabitation. The Norsemen had undoubtedly interbred with whatever ancient peoples they had found living in the region.

Luis and Caleb had been unable to find professorial advocates willing to risk reputations and confirm such radical findings. It too drastically upset the slow moving apple cart of traditional academic beliefs about New World, and indeed, even Old World,

history. So when the two young upstarts had dared to publish accounts of their find anyway in more liberal journals, the stodgier academic community had responded with everything from mild skepticism to outright ridicule and insinuations of fraud.

But there was little talk of those old days now between them. They fell into a cheerless silence as they soon ran out of paved highway to drive on. Instead they resorted to dirt roads and cart trails up into the mountainous terrain of the Madres. The scenery quickly turned majestic and breathtaking. It was frontier territory. They crossed broad, golden grasslands, edged by ravines and the occasional farmsteads and split-shake cabins of Mexican and Tarahumara Indian settlers.

Heading up the Continental Divide, they entered scrub jungle. Cultivated fields and a tiny village clung to a lofty foothill as though pasted there. They traveled dusty burro paths or ran off-road, plowing over thick growth and getting out often with machetes to hack it down when it proved impenetrable. Eerie stone artifacts and crumbled edifices emerged, overgrown with vegetation -- the remnants of previous cultures.

As the jeep coasted past an abandoned, 17th-century Jesuit mission, the terrain turned much rockier and sheer. They came across steep, startling drop-offs and deep barrancas. Later they passed through dense forests of hemlock, pine and oak, the path they traversed running like a tunnel beneath the spreading boughs. They chanced to overtake a hunting party of Tarahumara Indians who ran single file at a near sprint along the trail. The men were dressed in short, white, hand-woven sarongs, baggy tunics and blood red headbands, the tails of which trailed off to their waists behind them. The hunters greeted them with hand signs Luis seemed to recognize and fluently returned.

A bit farther on, the jeep emerged from forest growth and was instantly at the rim of an awesome canyon. It dropped away from them as though they had come to the edge of a flat earth. Luis had taken over driving duties. He slammed on the brakes and cut the wheel hard to skid them sideways. The opposite wall of the canyon was a soaring palisade of wooded cliffs, hazy miles away. They continued on, a tiny speck of machinery, creeping along

a thin sliver of ledge that slanted high across the rock face. Luis peered anxiously out over the jeep door. The wheels were mere inches from the edge. They slung loose rocks that fell hundreds of feet into a gyrating river that boiled and thrashed its way down a rocky chute, eventually to be lost in a deep, gloomy chasm.

At twilight they came upon the sparse ruins of a walled stone village set into the mountainside. High up as they were, with woodlands and canyons spread below, the place afforded a stunning sunset view.

Luis brought the jeep groaning to a stop. He set the hand brake and shut off the ignition as Caleb stepped down from the passenger side. He eyed the small, stacked-stone hovels, now roofless and crumbling, and the con-ravaged granite bulwarks built about them, as engrossed by it all as a kid turned loose on a county fair midway. There was no sound except the plinky metal ticks of the hot engine parts unswelling and contracting in the coolness.

Luis watched, knowing well Caleb's unbounded curiosity about things new and strange. "Intrigued, Caleb?" he asked smiling.

"Yeah," Caleb responded in a hush, "What did this use to be?"

"What would you guess, 'migo?" Luis quizzed.

"Aztec?"

"Si. One of their very early villages. The culture originated in these parts before conquests took them to the south."

"I thought they were purely nomadic at that time."

"Principally, they were," Luis agreed. "It's one of just a handful of stonework retreats they built in the north. Probably a sacrificial center, only for priests. A monastery of sorts, you could say."

Caleb surveyed the apricot and garnet glow on the horizon where the sun had just been. "You know, back in the States, some damn developer would probably come in here and doze a place like this just to build condos for the view."

"We have a little different attitude about our antiquities down here," Luis smiled at him. "We tend to leave them alone."

Caleb wagged his head. "Two-thousand year old Hopewellian site in Ohio got a fucking golf course built on top of it. Made greens and tee boxes out of the burial mounds." From dark cliffs

came a shrill, reverberating animal cry, answered by another some distance off. Caleb's head turned in the direction of each sound.

"Jaguars," Luis said, tossing a canteen and a sleeping bag out to him. "Relax, 'migo. They're not close. They just want to find a female and mate. It'll be dark soon. Let's camp here for the night."

They rolled out goose down sleeping bags and gathered dry wood to build a modest fire, rimming it with rocks. Caleb cooked a dinner of canned stew, and they ate it along with shepherd's bread torn off and toasted from a bulk loaf. Afterward, they washed it all down with a fresh-ground south Mexican coffee that Luis was particularly partial to, though Caleb found it somewhat bitter.

They settled in for the night without much talk. Neither of them was a stranger to sleeping *al fresco*, and their setup showed it. They lay bundled near the campfire, reflective solar blankets anchored up behind them with sticks like tennis nets to buffer any wind and kicked warmth back from the fire.

A much-handled .460 Weatherby magnum rifle rested in Luis's easy reach, propped on crossed sticks with its muzzle pointed skyward. As shoulder arms go, it was an absolute cannon with a brutal recoil kick. But it would split a grown grizzly bear's skull with no apology, Luis could attest from experience.

Just after midnight, a big mountain scorpion tip-toed along the dry branches broken up and stacked as firewood a short ways from Luis's face. Its chitinous legs scratched faintly on the bark. Luis opened one eye, half a millimeter. His pupil roved behind his dark lashes, picking out the source of the sound, poised on the wood with its stinger curled high and quivering above its back. His hand lashed out, swinging hammer-fisted, and bashed the scorpion flat.

Luis tensed his middle finger against his thumbtip and flicked the scorpion into the fire. "Chingador," he muttered low and fell right back to sleep.

Caleb Easton was not in his down bag. He sat wide awake a good distance off, wrapped in a blanket, repeatedly spinning a pistol by its trigger guard and catching the butt like a gunslinger. An outlet for his simmering nerves. Sleep wouldn't come and push away the thoughts in his head. He looked out over the expanse of

mountains, brightly lit by an almost round, white moon and a full complement of stars.

Jaguar screams blistered the silence. He stopped twirling the big cowboy revolver and cocked the hammer. The screams ebbed off. They were no closer than the last ones he had heard minutes before, Caleb decided. He let the hammer down easy and went back to twirling the gun.

"You should sleep," Luis said, sitting down beside him. For all his attentiveness, Caleb hadn't heard him come up. Luis was good at moving silently.

"He's calling me out, Luis," Caleb told him. "The symbols on their foreheads. They were for me. To keep me coming to him."

"All the years I've known you, 'migo, you've been pursuing this Snake Ghost, this thing you think is stalking you too," Luis said. "I've never asked you much about it. You have your ghosts. I have mine."

"I have to face him. It's my time."

"Si, I remember," Luis breathed. "So what do you think this thing is?"

Caleb lay back, gazing up at the starry night sky. "There's an old legend among the Chickasaw about a creature they used to call lofa," he told Luis. "It lived in the deep forest and was rarely seen. Its habit was to completely rip the skin off its prey before it devoured it. And it was said to hunt human prey as well. A huge, furry, upright-walking beast. Kind of like a sasquatch, I suppose. Except when it lived near people, it could adapt somehow. Evolve and change its features until it looked just like a man. The Chickasaw were always wary of any large strangers who came among them. They thought it might be lofa, come looking for a meal." He glanced over at Luis. "You must think I'm out of my mind, don't you?"

Luis shrugged. "There are legends and there are legends," he said. "In even the wildest, there is sometimes a morsel of truth. We'll make Kedesh by mid-day tomorrow."

He got up and left Caleb sitting alone looking at the moonlit mountains, spinning his pistol gunslinger style and catching it.

* * *

A bonfire raged against the darkness at the middle of the cave. Ellen Masterson shuffled barefoot and sluggish over glowing embers it had spat out on the ground. She seemed entirely unconcerned about them, though they seared the soles of her feet. Hollowly, she gazed across the cavern at an alcove where the gloomy form of a man huddled, handling objects she squinted and strained to make out.

About his chest, he affixed something that resembled a breastplate. It was golden in color, intricately tooled and filigreed. A pair of thin rods extended out from its pectoral crests. From a buckskin pouch, he drew two large, crudely ground crystals, each of a slightly different shape and tint. He handled them with great care, fitting them like lenses into roughly fashioned silver frames at the ends of the rods.

Ellen made out a stack of golden-colored metal plates, resting on a flat stone before him, held together with metal rings. Drawn silver bands sealed nearly half of the plates in sections so they couldn't be opened. One of the seals was already broken. The man-figure broke the seal binding the next section. He peered down through the crystals like reading glasses at the ancient inscriptions covering the newly revealed plates, leafing slowly and carefully through them.

Ellen's back was so near the bonfire, the ends of her hair singed and curled up. The rag smock that hung on her shoulders smoked, ready to burst into flame. But she seemed unaware and remained motionless, watching him as he read. He became increasingly agitated as he pored over the inscriptions. Upon digesting the final verse of the sealed passage, he slammed the plates shut with a roar of anger.

Casting the breastplate aside, he skulked off into the dark regions of the cavern.

* * *

It was mid afternoon when Caleb and Luis drove out of heavy

forest and thornbrush into the clearing of the Mormon colony of Kedesh.

Caleb had been aware of the existence of such settlements south of the border ever since he had come across furtive mentions of them in his teens. The modern L.D.S. did not openly discuss these radical refugees nor regard them as brethren. They were renegades who had separated themselves from the true church and followed false prophets, most believed. Caleb had few preformed notions about what the colonies would be like or what they might find there.

What he saw arrayed around them reminded him of pictures from the Jonestown colony in Guyana where a zealot named Jim Jones had led hundreds of his followers to grim death. It was a rough-edged little village of open-air shanties and crude log cabins. Cobbed corn dried on the roofs of wood planked huts. There was some minimal flavor of old Mexico to it, as well as the clever influence of the area's Tarahumara Indians in the way the settlement was laid out and built. But overall, Kedesh had the reek of poverty and of people just barely getting by.

Except for livestock and the barking of a few roving dogs, they found the place unnervingly quiet and deserted. Luis downshifted and turned the wheel. They swung out onto the main dirt path through the center of the village, trolling in low gear, taking it all in. A saddled horse ambled across in front of them without a rider, its reins dragging in the dust.

"Strange. Where is everyone?" Luis brought the jeep to a stop.

Caleb stood up on the floorboards, looking about, perplexed. All at once something occurred to him. "What day is it today?" he asked.

Luis thought for a moment. "Domingo," he told Caleb. "It's Sunday."

At a far corner of the compound sat something that resembled nothing so much as a large, military Quonset hut. It was set firmly in against the base of an outcropping of mountain rock that towered so high and at such a severe angle, it partly overshadowed it. The structure was in actuality the semicircular sections of a big, corrugated metal grain silo that had been cut in half down its axis

and reassembled on the ground to form a long, rounded shelter.

How such a thing had ever gotten up in those rugged mountains in the first place was a mystery of sizable proportions itself. The half-moon opening at the end not butted against the rock face had been framed in with wood furring, then covered over with tin roof sheeting. There was a double door in the middle. Window holes were torch cut through the metal at intervals along the sides and covered over with pieces of vinyl plastic tarp so weathered they could barely be seen through.

Inside the hut, an impossible number of people were congregated, hundreds of them, packed in and sitting shoulder to shoulder along backless pews with no spare leg room. The only light filtered in through the milky plastic over the windows. The place was humid and sweltering just from the heat of all the bodies. In a crude attempt at providing ventilation, two huge, uncaged fan blades turned at the front. They were run by drive belts connected to stripped-down bicycles. Two bedraggled women pedal the bikes, perspiring heavily.

The baptism ceremony in progress inside gave away the building's intended purpose. It was a chapel. A bishop in a baptismal gown stood chest deep in water inside a cut-away metal tank that had once been a large steam boiler.

"En nombre de Dios Padre, de Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo," the bishop pronounced, immersing a young man in the tank as Caleb and Luis burst in through the double door, guns and web belts slung about them. They looked like nothing so much as a couple pistoleros. Mormon elders bolted to their feet, drawing guns. Dozens of pistols, rifles and shotguns leveled at Caleb and Luis as women and children scurried for cover.

"We want no quarrel with you people. The big missionary!" Caleb called out vehemently. "Where is he?!"

Except for startled looks there was no response from anyone.

"¡Perdón! El misionero grande. Nosotros lo buscamos," Luis tried it in Spanish, softer voiced. "¡Es muy urgente!"

"He is not here," the bishop supplied from the front.

"Where is he?" Caleb demanded.

The bishop didn't answer immediately. Caleb leveled the .30-

30 carbine rifle he carried. Firing from the hip, he slammed two noisy rounds into the metal tank. It got a big reaction. Hammers clicked back as elders aimed at Caleb. The congregation surged up, mashing in alarm against the outer walls. The young man who had just been baptized tried to climb the bishop. Water streamed out two clean, round bullet holes in the side of the tank.

“Carumba!” Luis swore, “Caleb!”

“Where is he?!” Caleb roared above the panic.

A scar-faced elder lowered his shotgun slowly. “He’s gone. To the forbidden place,” he spat at Caleb. He pointed briskly out a plastic-covered window. A foreboding crag could be seen some distance from the settlement.

“Madriguera de la Serpiente,” the elder stammered out angrily. “He is there ... with his wives.”

* * *

Luis brought the jeep rolling to a stop near the summit of the crag the local folk called Madriguera de la Serpiente. Caleb Easton got out. The sun was already getting low, its rim grazing the forest growth on the peaks to the west of them.

Out before them, a nearly round hole the size of a city block yawned up out of the tangled forest undergrowth. A natural geologic chimney, it plunged down through the bedrock and on into the dark, abysmal reaches of the earth. A flat outcropping of slate jutted from one side at the rim of it, like a diving board over an unfathomable swimming pool.

Luis stepped down from the jeep and walked with Caleb to the edge of the outcropping. The hole dropped perfectly vertically around them, the sides seeming optically to slant together toward a black zone of convergence below. A slab of stone at their feet was covered with worn inscriptions that looked ancient. Among the carved figures on it, Luis almost immediately spotted the crucified snake.

“Madriguera de la Serpiente -- Den of the Serpent,” Luis proclaimed. The spectacle of such sheer distance straight down was disorienting. At almost the same instant, the two of them backed

away from the brink and onto better footing as dizziness set in.

“The earliest Aztec Tenochca tribal clans came here. Offered themselves to the man-god Quetzalcóatl, the Feathered Serpent, god of self-sacrifice,” Luis continued. “They would leap from this very spot.”

Caleb peered down into the broad pit. The long, late-day shadows slicing across it made the lower reaches indiscernible. “How far down you figure this goes?”

“Bottomless. There’s a cavern opening off the face a couple hundred meters down. See the ledge?” Luis pointed into the pit.

“Every hole has a bottom, Luis.”

“If this pit has a bottom, ‘migo, it’s in hell.” Luis bent to lift a heavy rock. He granny-shotted it over the side. “Wait for the sound.”

He walked back to the jeep as Caleb stood counting seconds on his fingers. Squinting, he was able to better make out the ledge Luis had called his attention to. A wispy flow of gray smoke vented upward from what appeared to be an open cavern beyond it.

“There’s an entrance to that cave down the other side, on the slope,” Luis called back from the jeep. “It would be an easier way in.”

No kidding, Caleb thought. Somewhere past counting ten, he stepped back farther from the edge. There had been no sound of impact. The detail with which Luis so accurately talked of this place suddenly struck him. “You seem to know this area pretty well, Luis,” Caleb noted, hoisting himself back up into the jeep.

Luis Montero gazed down at the Mormon colony Kedesh, visible in a forest clearing far below them. “I was born in one of these colonies,” he said quietly.

Caleb eyed him, astonished. In all the time he had known Luis Montero, it was something he had never brought up, never talked about, although he was quite aware of Caleb’s Mormon past.

“You mean your parents were--?”

“--I never knew them, never knew who they were,” Luis cut him off. He started the engine abruptly, inviting no more discussion on the topic.

They made their way around the steep slope of Madriguera

de la Serpiente until they reached a place where the angle was so treacherous, the jeep threatened to roll over sideways. It came up off its wheels twice, then nearly tipped as it slid into a narrow ravine. The rear bumper and fenders jammed solidly, leaving the back wheels hanging and spinning inches above the ground.

Caleb jumped out and off-loaded gear. With the lighter load, Luis got the front wheels to bite, but shifting alternately from reverse to low gear, he could only rock the vehicle back and forth in the rut. They could likely have gotten the jeep out given enough time, but the sun was headed down. Their surroundings were already becoming dim. It was doubtful they could have gone much farther anyway without disastrous results in the dark that would shortly follow. They left the jeep behind and proceeded on foot, carrying only their guns and whatever they could secure to their web belts.

* * *

Ellen stood in the cavern with her head low, staring as though hypnotized. Huge hands lifted from the blackness and snatched her back into shadows. The dark, man-like figure pressed against her from behind. His nostrils twitched, inhaling her like an animal as his hands roved over her body.

“Can you imagine, child, what it is to live fifty lifetimes?” His voice caressing Ellen’s ear was resonant and deep, almost seductive. “Teacher, apostle, healer, priest, warrior, prophet, magician... conqueror. The embodiment of a hundred primitive myths.”

He grasped her clothing and flexed violently, ripping it away. His big hands stroked her bare breasts. She stood motionless, unable to resist.

“Can you understand power to take till every earthly want is had? What it is to be worshipped, sacrificed to and feared?” Two wolf-like blue eyes flashed momentarily in the shadows behind her. Looking strangely beast-like, his face came over her shoulder, pressing against her cheek.

“Rising to rule a dozen times. Tasting godhood. And then... what? Waiting. Living in boredom. Lusting for power absolute.

No hope of death.” His breathing quickened to a rasp. His hands moved down her belly...between her thighs. “With only one pleasure left that makes it bearable.”

He yanked her thighs apart, lifting her into coital position against his loins. Her eyes teared over and a fearful whimper came from her throat. But nothing more. She was powerless. Without any pretense of tenderness, he entered her roughly, holding her off her feet while he forced himself violently inside her. His thrusts were angry, raw and unconcerned, driven by a malignant lust.

He stopped suddenly. His head canted, listening to something with animal keenness.

He dropped Ellen and was gone in the darkness.



TWENTY-THREE...

Then he saw among the armour a victory-blessed blade, an old sword made by the giants, strong of its edges, glory of warriors: it was the best of weapons, except that it was larger than any other man might bear to war-sport, good and adorned, the work of giants. He seized the linked hilt...savage and slaughter bent, drew the patterned-blade; desperate of life, he struck angrily....

—Beowulf

It was nearly twilight as Caleb and Luis approached the broad mouth of the cavern. A bonfire blazed well back in its yawning stony throat. Shadows cast by the heaving flames writhed and juked like wicked spirits on the walls of the entrance.

A twisting, slow-moving stream ran from the cavern's mouth, a tributary of some underground aquifer. It fed out into the pool of a spring, shaped like the head of a viperous snake. With sunset reflecting off the pond and the fire inside the cavern irradiating ripples on the stream like scales, it indeed resembled a giant, fiery serpent with its head thrust out from its den.

Near the neck of this snake stood what appeared to be a huge cross, silhouetted against the bonfire.

"You've been here before?" Caleb asked.

Luis shook his head. "Never. This was a forbidden place."

As they drew closer, they discerned that the T-shaped object

was not a cross at all, but rather an incredible sword thrust upright in the ground. From its tip to its hilt, there was easily five feet of blade and another foot and a half of handle and pommel. A foot and a half span of cross guard formed the crucifix arms. They examined the weapon with great curiosity. Cuneiform characters covered much of the handle and upper blade.

"Strange part of the world to find this," Luis breathed in wonderment of the relic.

"Handle's cased in gold. You know the workmanship?"

"Yes. Aramaean, seventh or eighth century B.C. I've seen another one like it, but not this big. An excavation in Syria, just outside Damascus."

"Heavily battle worn," Caleb noted, running his fingers lightly along the keen, bright blade.

"This cuneiform, Caleb," Luis Montero's breathing quickened as his voice got even quieter and rose a half register. "I don't know it enough to read, but it's definitely Akkadian...and Hebrew!"

Caleb cocked his head crisply and looked at Luis in open disbelief. There was a cold surge in his chest, as though something unspeakably evil and ancient as death itself had dug an icy claw into him and clutched hold of his spine. He peered up into the open cavern, quoting low voiced a verse of scripture. "And it came to pass also that the armies of the Lamanites came down out of the land of Nephi...and he did stand against them; and he did fight with the strength of his own arm, with the Sword of Laban."

Was it possible? Was this indeed the actual Sword of Laban, the true artifact taken by the progenitor of a legendary people from a wicked enemy over whom he triumphed twenty-six centuries hence and whom he beheaded with this very blade? The same fantastic weapon which had, according to Mormon lore, symbolized the power of the Nephite kings and, like the raised staff of Moses, been carried into countless battles to ensure victory. Or was it something else? An ingenious hoax perhaps. Or a genuine piece of antiquity, but with no such mystical history, acquired by a lunatic slayer to dress the stage and embellish his demented drama.

Luis followed Caleb's rigid stare up to the cave. Something

different was troubling him. "One of the codices we unearthed at Tzompec depicts a warrior fighting Quetzalcóatl," he said to Caleb. "He beheads him with his own sword. A sword like this one. We thought at first the codex was a chronicle, a history. But it wasn't." Caleb looked at Luis expectantly. "It was a prophecy," Luis told him.

"What if I've come to kill something that can't be killed, Luis?"

"He's a man, like you or me. All men die, eventually."

They left the upthrust blade behind them and entered the cavern. The smell of raw death roiled up out of the place. They saw no one in the huge main chamber where the fire billowed. Luis followed Caleb down an off-shooting passageway. It opened onto a smaller, torch-lit chamber a short distance in.

Here, they found the women -- the wives as the Kedesh colony elder had called them. But their intrusion brought not the least reaction from any of them. Some lay or sat motionless while others roved like lost souls. Luis viewed them in unmitigated astonishment. He approached a native Tarahumara Indian girl who he judged to be in her late teens. She was abundantly pregnant. He passed his hand before her face. She never blinked, but walked right into him as though he weren't even there.

The death rot in the chamber was overpowering. Luis brought a hand up to cover his nose, trying to imagine from what and where a stench so rank could be coming. His eyes had grown more accustomed to the dimness, and he perceived suddenly the mounds of bones out at the fringe of the torch lights. He let out a low wheeze of disgust as he reasoned out the significance of them and the horror of it sank into his thoughts. There was movement at the edge of his field of vision. A rat scampered out past his boot. Luis looked in the shadows where it had come from and saw strewn there the orts of a decaying kill. Only the ribs and lengthy locks of hair matted about the skull remained to suggest it had been a woman. The limbs were severed, taken off at the large joints, the flesh gone from them. The torso was in two pieces, snapped in half at mid spine, all the entrails dug out and the muscle meat stripped off. Luis flexed his gullet hard, clamping down queaziness.

“¡Ay, cabrón!” he swore and turned his head.

Caleb moved among the women, searching from face to face. He spied a tangle of familiar-hued hair on a slouch-shouldered figure dressed in torn rags and leaned against a damp wall. He hurried to the woman, turned her and moved her face into the light.

“Ellen!” he whispered with great relief, embracing her like he would never let go. “I was afraid I’d lost you too.”

She was pale and unresponsive, and though her eyes were open, they were mournfully vacant. Caleb picked her up and carried her gently, her head resting in the hollow of his neck and shoulder. Luis helped him get her to a crude wood bench and sit her down.

“How is she, Caleb?”

“I don’t know,” Caleb said. “It depends on how much of the potion she’s had and how often.” He cradled her face in his hands, searching for any glimmer of recognition. Her eyes seemed focused on something miles beyond him. It crushed him to see her in that state. Her face was an almost perfect overlay of another in that same condition, branded forever in the darker reaches of his memory. He looked down, despondent, until slowly he became aware of something. The skin on the backs of his arms had come alive with an inexplicable prickling sensation.

“Yes, yes, that’s right!” Caleb looked again in Ellen’s eyes, nodding vigorously. The prickling surged across his back, strong as house current. His voice broke with emotion. “That’s right, I’m here, I’m here for you, angel. You hold on now. You just hold on. We’re going to get you safely out.” He kissed her lax, yielding lips and smoothed her hair back, gently shaking his head and forcing a smile. “All kinds of dangerous, huh?”

Her eyes welled with sudden wetness, and a tear spilled onto her cheek. Caleb brushed it away with a pass of his thumb. A terrible question loomed ponderously in his mind. He examined Ellen’s arms, then her shoulders and legs for marks. She had bruises and scrapes, but there seemed no indication of rougher handling. It was then that he discovered what she held clutched tight in one hand: a crumpled scrap of kraft paper and a chip of charcoal. Shakily sketched on it was the likeness of a rugged, shaggy-

headed man. Labored and impeded as it was, Caleb recognized the distinct traits of Ellen's style in the artwork. Where the eyes should have been were scrawled two hollow, black skull holes.

Coldness gripped Caleb. A murderous urge that lived caged within him bristled loose of its restraints and pushed its way to the forefront. His eyes grew hot with rage and indignation.

From darkness far back in the chamber came an ice water whisper only Caleb seemed to hear.

"Demon!... Son of Perdition!"

He peered into the blackness, searching for the source of the voice. But he could see nothing. Again the piercing whisper came, this time from the far opposite direction, out where the bonfire burned.

"Demon!... Son of Perdition!"

From two vials he carried in a padded pouch on his web belt, Caleb poured syrupy liquids into a G.I. canteen that was partially filled with water. Old Ay-Tsisiwa had revealed to him how to concoct the antidote for the Yuchi paralysis potion. He glanced at the dazed bevy about them in the cave. They were going to need to brew a lot more of the stuff, he concluded. He capped the canteen and shook it well, then handed it to Luis.

"Keep forcing that down her till she comes around," he said, moving purposefully off toward the main chamber of the cavern.

"Caleb!" Luis called after him. The picture of a body ripped asunder was fresh in his mind's eye. He estimated the power it would take to inflict that kind of devastation on a human being. "Better take this." He unslung the .460 Weatherby from his shoulder and chucked it across to Caleb who caught the big gun by its stock.

Caleb swung the short-barreled .30-30 carbine off his arm and tossed it to Luis. Compared to the Weatherby, it looked like a pop gun. "Keep your eyes open," he cautioned.

Luis nodded and set the carbine down. He turned his attention to administering Ellen Masterson the contents of the canteen.

Caleb wove his way out through the wandering women and down the narrow access passage. He ran the rifle bolt halfway back and checked to be sure a round was chambered, gawking at

the size of the magnum cartridge. He thumbed the safety off and walked warily out into the main expanse of the cave.

Nearing what he realized was the ledge he had viewed earlier from the pit rim, now hundreds of feet above him, he stepped out to the edge of it and looked up. The sky held a full moon, just in view above the mouth of the pit. Out beyond the ledge dropped the vast abyss.

Caleb glided back into the cavern and waded across the shallow stream that ran through the main chamber. Passing an alcove to one side of the bonfire, he caught a reflection off something bright, glistening in the flame light.

When he saw what it was, he knelt in awe, laying down the rifle. He leaned in and lifted the tome of rectangular metal plates that lay there. They had been hammered very thin and smooth and were held together in the fashion of a book with metal binding rings. In the warm cast of the fire, they shimmered yellowish-orange, certainly heavy enough to be pure gold, Caleb thought. There were probably seventy to eighty of them in all he judged, counting seven and gauging their thickness together as roughly a tenth that of the entire stack. Front and back, their surfaces were covered edge to edge with minuscule inscriptions.

There was enough repetition in the ciphers to suggest an alphabet, but the language of the symbols was one completely unknown to Caleb. Indeed, had he been fluent as a native in the mysterious script, reading it would have been a strain without the aid of a powerful magnifier. The etchings were that exceedingly fine and tiny. Caleb noted the ornate bands of thin, drawn silver that appeared to have once encircled many of the plates, but were now all broken open.

His awe increased all the more when he discovered what else lay behind the hewn stone pedestal in the alcove. From the shadows there he drew out the breastplate with the Urim and Thummim -- the Ulunsuti crystals -- still positioned on the extension rods and frames. He eyed them with outright wonder.

So absorbed was he by these fantastic items and by the implications their sheer reality held, he lost all thought of his own peril....

* * *

Outside by the stream, a powerful hand clamped across the hilt of the battle sword and snatched it unstuck from the ground as though it weighed nothing. A dark, upright hulk moved death-bent toward the glow of the fire inside the cavern, trailing a long, malign shadow in its wake. The transformation from man-beast back to the form of a man was all complete, for it was indeed a man of giant proportions who crossed the stream in two strides and entered the cavern. He glimpsed Caleb kneeling with his back to him far across the sprawling main chamber. Above his shaggy, gray head, Zedekiah Moriantum-Zoram raised the great Sword of Laban and poised himself for battle.

The miraculous physical change his master had worked upon his body so many centuries before had left him with an incredible adaptive ability -- a sort of rapid, autonomous evolution, it could be called. But it had been hundreds of years before he had perceived its full scope and learned to wittingly control it.

In civilized surroundings, he could reshape himself in a very short time to appear like those he was among. His rudimental features, especially those of his face, would always remain somewhat the same, but he could effect subtle changes in their shape and prominence, even alter his complexion if need be to appear more Anglo, Caucasian, Negro, or Indian for instance, and thereby blend easily with whatever people he desired to mingle with. As his situation required, he might even take on the illusion of age or of a more youthful vibrancy at will. He could fill himself out, appear taller and more hale, or stooped and frail if he chose, even make his body soft and almost feminine.

And so he had lived for a span of more than fifty normal adult lifetimes, using his knowledge and extraordinary powers to his own advantage. He had risen to rule as a warrior-king a dozen times over. He created and became incarnate the messianic lord Quetzalcóatl of Mesoamerican lore. As such, he had taken a taste of absolute godhood. Multitudes followed and served him, worshipping and sacrificing to him.

But even all that was only the mean of his strange powers. The extremes were yet more incredible.

Forced into the wilds and living exiled once, out of contact with human kind, he found his body soon taking on the traits of a large predator. His hide toughened, and a coarse but scant fur began to grow on him for a covering against the elements. Before long, he had even developed claws and spike-like canine teeth for hunting prey, something he found he could see to do every bit as well at night as during the day.

He roved the backlands of a continent, his body altering further to suit the needs of changing terrains. There seemed little limit to the creature forms he could shape himself into. His limbs would lengthen or shorten to better facilitate his travel. Even his chest and lung capacity hastily adjusted to different altitudes and levels of exertion. It was in this way that he became the embodiment of countless beasts of aboriginal myth, regarded as devils or deities in their own right.

But at the opposite extreme, he could as easily change his appearance to that of a glorified being, a supernatural visitor from the heavens. This ability to show himself as though in the spirit, as an angel of light, had proved useful many decades before in acquiring a collection of golden plates and certain other sacred articles he had sought the location of for seeming eons. He had merely appeared magically at the right time and demanded them of the impressionable young man named Smith from Palmyra, New York who possessed them, and they were obediently given over. His quest for these items and his unquenched lust for the even more phenomenal powers and secrets he knew them to hold had driven him completely mad long before he attained them.

But relishing his triumph, he committed a grave error, and his victory had been short-lived. He lingered too long in the northern territories among wilderness people, holed up and fervently poring over the forbidden secrets of his golden find. A cunning warrior had stalked and attacked him, dealing him fierce wounds that to any mortal would have been fatal. He had recognized too late that this warrior was in truth a spirit-deity he had vied with for centuries that could incarnate itself in human form. When he

recovered, he found the warrior had escaped with precious spoils -- a pair of transparent crystal stones. Without them, the deep secrets of the plates could not be discerned.

Over the ages, he had found very few gifted with the ability to penetrate his illusions and perceive the timeless, eternal creature that he truly was. Only a handful of shamans and the most sanctified priests and diviners of bygone cultures had ever detected him. And many of them had met with sudden, horrible ends.

Now, in this more enlightened time, the old mystical beliefs once so widely practiced had all but died out. They were commonly regarded as foolish hoodoo and myth. And it was true that most who still practiced them were misguided pretenders or outright shams who had no concept of what they dabbled in. Those who still possessed the true knowledge were scarce. Hence, he had lived of late with much less threat of being found out.

Some years before, however, he had chanced across a particular young boy in whom he realized the ability was remarkably strong. It seemed a fulfillment of a dire prophecy he dreaded and sought to thwart...a prophecy hinted at in a sealed section of the gold plates he read before he lost possession of the crystals.

As this boy grew, so would the power. When he had last seen him, it was already nearly as strong in him as it had been in the warrior who captured the crystals....

* * *

Caleb scanned the gold plates in his hands with fascination. He eyed the foil-thin broken silver bands that had once sealed fully half of them.

He reflected on the dire scriptural warnings he knew so well concerning the mythical sealed portion, and how it had been forbidden that anyone should open it. With a trepidation he couldn't deny, he slipped his fingers beneath the broken straps and laid open the plates they had held ensconced. Like the others, they were covered edge to edge with the tiny inscriptions, etched in the same hand. His eyes shifted to the Ulunsuti seer stones mounted on the breastplate, his thoughts tingling with temptation.

He laid down the plates. Studying the fastenings on it intently, he was about to put the burnished breastplate on, when....

“Whole chapters of prophecy about you in those damned plates!” He heard the chill whisper again, seeming to emanate from every wall of the cavern.

Past the ledge and out over the abyss, spirit shapes rose up from the depths of the earth. A coldness crawled over Caleb as he perceived them, at first with disbelief. But they were real. Hundreds of them. Vague, vaporous forms with faces that brought a single descriptive word to Caleb’s mind -- Aztec. One of them let out a tortured shriek. Others took up its lament. The bedlam roused bats from the overhead. The air filled with their flapping.

“Found you when you were still a boy this time. Couldn’t touch you. Until now!” The whispered voice seemed closer. Caleb turned toward the bonfire where he realized it was coming from.

In the midst of the flames an awesome figure moved. A fantastic fork-tongued snake creature -- the great Uktena of Cherokee legend.

“The sword of vengeance hangeth over you, Uktenabee!” the creature’s voice blasted. It lunged like a viper from the fire, transmuting itself as it broke the curtain of flame.

The man he had known as Knox Wesley charged hell-bent toward Caleb, swinging the millennia-old battle Sword of Laban.



TWENTY-FOUR...

And now alone I shall settle affairs with Grendel, the monster, the demon....

--Beowulf

His face drained of everything but fright, Caleb dropped the breastplate and lunged aside as the sword whooshed down. It hit, smashing the stock of the Weatherby rifle beside him to splinters. The gun leaped up from the impact and went off with an angry crack. The discharged round nearly hit Caleb, blasting a deep crater in solid rock near his face.

Ricochets echoed through the cave. In the other chamber, Luis Montero looked up sharply from attending to Ellen. She was swallowing the antidote more easily now, but he couldn't tell if it was having any real effect. His impulse was to leave her there for the moment and investigate the gunshot. But as he was about to take the canteen from her lips, she closed her hand tight around his wrist.

Knox Wesley pursued Caleb, mad spittle streams spraying off his mouth as he shrieked relentless scripture.

"Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purpose! First Nephi, chapter four!" He struck hard with the sword. *Swwuunk-nggg!* The sword clanged against the stone floor, peeling like a titanic tuning fork as Caleb scuttled backward, trying to get clear.

“The Lord shall smite thee with the sword ‘til thou perish! Deuteronomy twenty-eight!” Wesley howled advancing.

With a flash of resolve, Caleb bolted up, drawing his pistol from his web belt. He gave it a gunslinger’s twirl as he leveled it at Wesley’s chest.

Wesley’s eyes lowered in a fierce sneer. A force lifted Caleb and slammed him back into the cavern wall. He lost the gun and the skin off his elbows as he skidded over the rock.

“They that have done evil shall suffer everlasting damnation! Helaman, chapter twelve!” With a commanding glare, Wesley summoned the wailing spirits. They rallied in the air above him. He pointed accusingly at Caleb. “Take him to hell!”

The spirits launched themselves at Caleb, driving him back against the wall as Wesley looked on with a confident leer. “Still don’t get who you are, do you, boy?”

Caleb caught the words. A sudden calm settled over him. His eyes became those of a hardened warrior as a strange presence entered and overtook him. He stood his ground, bravely rebuking the spirits. “Provoke me and you will feel my wrath!” The voice that came from him only vaguely resembled his own. He realized he was speaking in an ancient Tenochcan tongue which he had no learning or understanding of till that very moment. The language of the Aztecs.

Caleb’s eyes closed, and a force jolted the spirit shapes. With shrieks of sudden terror, they rushed past Wesley in a mass. In mere moments they were gone, fleeing as one back down into the abyss.

Fear flickered for the briefest of instants in Wesley’s eyes. He saw Caleb drop to one knee, the presence leaving him. Seizing opportunity, he rushed him, swinging the sword savagely. “For every battle of the warrior is with noise and garments rolled in blood! Isaiah, chapter nine!”

Caleb retreated, dodging a storm of blows. A close pass of the blade sliced his cheek, severing the medicine bag that hung around his neck and sailing it into the bonfire. Wesley pivoted, gut-slammng Caleb into the fire with the hilt of the sword. He rolled out, dousing flames.

Wesley came through the blaze after him. "He smiteth the earth with the sword of his mouth!" A savage swing and a miss. Wesley toppled to his knees, got up spewing a froth of saliva. "With the breath of his lips he slays the wicked!..."

With an ear-splitting ring, the blade dashed a furrow in the cavern floor an instant after Caleb pitched out of its path, turning a full somersault. His face came down almost on the blade of a double-hooded axe propped against firewood. He heard Wesley hot behind him again.

The sword whistled down with blood-thirsty purpose. Caleb threw up a fending arm, squirming wildly to get aside. He would have lost the arm that instant had there not come a yell from behind Wesley that caught him off guard and shunted his aim.

Launched in a feet-first leap with his knees locked, Luis Montero landed both boot heels brutally into Wesley's ribs. There was hardly any give at all when he hit, like slamming into a buffalo. But it was enough. The blade veered high, clipping Caleb's shoulder. Caleb felt it hit bone and glance off. It lodged solidly in a stump, being used for a chopping block, nearly splitting it down the center. Firelogs tumbled, toppling the axe out of Caleb's reach.

Luis unholstered a big six-gun as Wesley swooped down on him with a roar. He fired point blank till the revolver was empty. The semi-jacketed rounds with their dimpled tips tore through Wesley's middle, mushrooming bloody geysers out his back. But for all their shock power, the bullets didn't slow him in the least.

Clutching his bleeding shoulder, Caleb caught sight of Ellen at a distance, maundering unsteadily through the cavern. He heard Luis cry out and then choke. He twisted to see Wesley's hand clamped viciously around Luis's throat, lifting him up face to face. Their crisp, ocean blue eyes were identical. Indisputably, a congenital trait. Recognizing his offspring -- one of legions indifferently sired during his life span -- the vicious giant hurled Luis toward the abyss. He hit the ledge, thrashing and scraping for a hold. But there was none to be had. With a fearful stammer, Luis slid headfirst over the side.

"Luis!" Caleb yelled out, heat flashing in his eyes. He rushed Wesley in a reckless rage, swinging firewood like a club. Wesley

dodged, deviling Caleb with barehanded swats. Spying Ellen adrift in the shadows, he laughed evilly at Caleb, going for his buttons.

“Don’t know which I liked more, boy, your mama or your little girlfriend!”

It worked. Caleb went berserk, connecting wildly again and again. Wesley waited his opening. An off-balanced swing. He knocked the wood away and lifted Caleb by the throat, slavering in his face, “No, I think I liked your mama best.”

He slammed Caleb to the rocky floor and, putting a foot against the chopping block, wrestled the sword free. Roaring scripture, he raised it high. “They that plow iniquity and sow wickedness reap the same! Job, chapter four!”

Siweeeefff! Their eyes locked as the blade arced down. Caleb’s eyes hardened. A force stunned Wesley, hurling him back a dozen yards.

Caleb got up, the warrior presence again fully upon him. He rushed Wesley, bending deftly as he ran to snatch up the double-hooded axe that lay in his path as though put there with divine purpose.

Wesley rolled to his feet, shaking off cave dust. A warrior-king, veteran of countless conquests, he was unshaken, still clutching the sword. He charged Caleb with matching vigor.

Cla-a-a-ng!.. Cra-a-a-sh!.. Cla-a-a-ng!... They went at it like medieval knights. Sparks flew off the sword and heavy axe as they battled desperately, neither giving an inch of ground as they fended each other off pass after pass. The ferocity with which they struggled far exceeded the fervor of any earthly army, barbarous clan or warrior horde. They clashed over matters more eternally complex and meaningful than earthly life and death. As though the timeless cosmic contention between evil and pure had wound its way down, heat by heat, to just these two token combatants, warring it out in this most primitive eolithic fashion. No two opponents were ever more evenly matched.

And it could go either way....

With shrewd craft, Caleb feigned a misstep. Wesley missed the ploy. It drew him in. Seizing the perceived advantage, he aimed a murderous chop, roaring with finality, “Vengeance is mine and I

will repay!”

It was a masterful trap, flawlessly timed. The blade cleared Caleb by a hair as he palter-stepped with deft precision. The momentum of the savage swing and miss carried Wesley spinning in a full circle, the sword edge wheezing in the air.

Caleb swung the axe two handed, giving it everything he had as Wesley came back around. With a sickening thud, the steel head embedded in the baggy crotch of Wesley’s dark trousers and hung there. Wesley dropped the great sword. He threw back his head and let out a high-pitched, unearthly wail that echoed to the cavern’s depths. Caleb stood tall before him, bloodied and panting with effort.

“He that is wounded in the stones or hath his privy member cut off shall not enter the congregation of the Lord,” he trumped in Wesley’s face. “Deuteronomy twenty-three, verse one ... motherfucker!”

Wesley stumbled away, the axe handle jutting out from his loins. With each agonized step he left behind him a track of blood. “Caleb! Caleb!!”

It was Luis’s voice, coming up from the drop-off. Caleb scrambled to the ledge. He stretched out on his belly and looked over the side, astonished to find Luis clinging by a hand to a sliver of stone outcropping. He hung there with his legs bicycling in space as loose rocks pelted down over him.

Caleb reached for him with both hands. The deep wound in his shoulder came open wide, loosing a flow of blood that was alarmingly heavy. It swept quickly down his arm, making his hold on Luis’s hand slick and perilous. He started to feel queazy. But gritting his jaw through it, he pulled Luis up, inch by inch.

Moving aimlessly through the cave, Ellen Masterson stumbled over the breastplate that lay where Caleb had dropped it. She looked blearily down at the two lucid stones held in the silver bows. Out to one side, her eyes registered Caleb, drawing Luis up onto firm footing from the drop-off. Her head turned slowly the other way to where Knox Wesley tottered opposite them on the ledge, peering out over the pit and down into murky, moonlit nothingness. She strove to piece it all together, to make sense

of what she saw. But the harder she reached for them, the more coherent thoughts escaped her.

With a strident yell, Wesley pulled the axe head from his groin. Caleb wheeled to find Wesley limp-running at him with the axe raised to strike. His eyes flicked to the sword where it lay on the ledge halfway between them. He lunged into motion, racing for it.

Ellen blinked away grogginess as she watched them charge at each other. Clarity flashed in her eyes. With sudden ease, she stooped by the breastplate and plucked the two precious crystals from it. With an angry twist of her mouth, she slung them backhanded in a high arc toward the abyss.

“You bastard!” she screamed out at Wesley.

Catching the momentary sparkle of something in the air above him, Wesley looked up. He recognized the crystals sailing high over his head and went aghast, roaring with rage as his eyes followed them.

Caleb somersaulted and came up with the sword, swinging the massive blade with both arms in a cyclonic wind-up that carried him in two complete circles. With fateful aim, he caught Wesley hard in the neck. The savage blow cleanly severed his head, continuing through to sheer off the arm with the raised axe as well. Wesley’s roar became a shrill rasp of air as breath bellowed up from his stallion-sized lungs and out the stump of his neck.

Falling from blood loss and the overburdening weight of the blade, Caleb lost his grasp. The sword sailed off, tumbling like a huge metal crucifix. It shrank slowly down into the hell-deep pit after the crystals, Wesley’s spinning, severed head and body and his arm still clutching the axe. Propped on his hands, Caleb watched from the edge of consciousness as the pieces of Knox Wesley vanished into measureless depths.

He mustered his strength and got up to stagger toward Ellen and Luis.

“Caleb. Oh, god, Caleb!” She ran to him, overcome with tears of joy. “I knew you’d come. I knew it.”

They clung to each other like they couldn’t get close enough. The warm, electric prickling coursed through them both, stronger than ever before. Luis caught Caleb’s weight and shored him up

as he slumped against her. Examining Caleb's gravely wounded shoulder, he closed the broad gash as well as he could and got pressure on it with the heel of his hand to slow the blood.

The cavern filled suddenly with blinding light.

Caleb wrenched himself around toward the alcove where he had left the golden plates lying open. What he saw there sent a chill through him. Luis and Ellen saw it too, and they were no less stunned.

A man of giant proportions stood next to the stone upon which the plates lay. A radiant aura blazed around him. He was joined by another, who carried the breastplate. Through their shimmering glows, it was difficult to make out details. Both appeared large of stature and muscularly built, dressed in some unknown style of archaic clothing. Their faces shone with a calm blissfulness that was difficult to characterize exactly. The first one bent to touch the plates, closing the forbidden portion and pressing the broken seals in place over them. There came a searing flash, and the ornate silver bands were restored whole.

"What in God's name--?" Luis breathed.

"Nephites," Caleb answered with simple awe.

The first brilliant apparition picked up the gold plates and cradled them protectively against his bosom. He moved boldly but unthreateningly toward the trio standing near the ledge. Caleb noted how his feet did not seem to actually touch the cave floor. He had a compassionate face, they could see now, that was lined with age and looked exceptionally wise. He reached out a shimmering hand and laid it on Caleb's wounded shoulder. This was no specter, but rather a real, physical being, Caleb realized, feeling the touch and weight of the hand. The blood flow stopped, and the terrible sword gash was healed miraculously, right before their eyes. Caleb flexed and moved his arm. There was no pain at all.

As Caleb, Ellen and Luis looked on in astonishment, the two Nephite beings turned and walked onto the ledge. Their strides were deliberate but unhurried, as though there were no pressing need for them to be anywhere other than where they were. They stepped together boldly off the ledge and out into space, levitating over the abyss. An ethereal whisper filled the cavern.

“Touch not the things which are sealed, for I will bring them forth in mine own due time.”

The one who carried the breastplate extended his arm, spreading his fingers wide in a gesture that seemed both to advise caution and bid them farewell.

Almost instantly, a bright column of royal blue light materialized from the distant night sky. It spiked down into the yawning pit of Madriguera de la Serpiente, engulfing the two figures. The shining ones faded slowly from sight, and moments later the beam of light abruptly dispersed and disappeared.

It was Luis who broke the long, breathless silence that followed. “One of the twelve he chose in Judaea betrayed him too. The one they called Iscariot.”

Caleb Easton peered into the soundless dark past the ledge and held Ellen Masterson preciously tight at his side.

“Yes, he did,” Caleb acknowledged quietly with a nod. “Judas did.”



TWENTY-FIVE...

When spirits begin to speak with a man, he must beware that he believe nothing whatever that they say; for they are apt to say almost anything. Nearly everything they say is fabricated by them, and they lie.

For instance if they were permitted to describe what heaven is, and how things in the heavens are, they would tell so many lies -- and indeed with solemn affirmation -- that a man would be astounded... For they have a passion for inventing. And if they were permitted to tell of things to come, of things unknown...they would not tell the truth, but all things falsely.

Men therefore should be wary of believing them.... They induce so strong an impression that it is the Lord Himself who speaks, and who commands, that a man cannot but believe and obey.

*--Emanuel Swedenborg
Spiritual Diary, 1748*

Caleb opened his eyes to find himself slumped alone on the cavern floor. Nearby, the bonfire raged, whipping gray smoke upward to the ceiling. He tried to stand but fell back to his knees, reeling with dizziness. Everything around him seemed to be moving at half speed.

He thought he heard a voice, speaking to him from close by. "And whether they were mortal or immortal, we know not!..." He jerked his head in one direction and then another, seeking

the source of it. But there was no one else there. He heard the strange, ranting voice again and realized with a shudder that it came from the midst of the bonfire itself.

“Sanctified, that the powers of Earth could not hold them!...”

Caleb recognized the words of Mormon scripture. He shielded his eyes with a hand and squinted into the hot flames. There was nothing of substance there to be seen. The voice spoke out once more from the blaze.

“They shall never taste of death, nor endure its pains!...”

Dumbfounded, Caleb crept back away from the fire. There was motion off to his side. He spun around and saw Knox Wesley’s wives filing out like walking dead. They scattered and roved through the main chamber. One walked straight into the bonfire, bursting immediately into flame. Another collapsed at Caleb’s feet. She was profusely pregnant and looked up at him wretchedly, cradling her great stomach as though in terrible labor. She gave a thoroughly inhuman howl of torment. One by one, the others joined in, their banshee screams fusing in a chorus of agony.

Caleb covered his ears, retreating toward the drop-off. The bonfire illuminated a verse of scripture, stained as though brush painted in bloody strokes on the stone ledge:

*They were cast down into the earth
but were delivered out of its depths....*

Smoke and hellish tongues of flame rose up from the abyss beyond it. The deathly voice boomed again from the bonfire.

“They could not dig pits sufficient to hold them!...”

An enormous, bloodied hand swung up into view, clutching hold of the ledge. Then Caleb saw the great battle sword rise up from the pit, gripped by another enormous hand. It clanked down onto the rock, ringing like a struck anvil. The arm that held it bore an awful laceration. Denuded bone showed amid ragged tendons below the elbow, as though the limb had been somehow miraculously but incompletely reattached there.

Knox Wesley clambered up and stood on the ledge. His head was again joined to his body in the same miraculous but

incomplete fashion. A horrid, running wound encircled his neck, glimpses of trachea, sinew and spine showing through.

In desperate horror, Caleb leaped up and charged. "Noooooo!" he shrieked, his voice trailing off in an echo. He plowed solidly into Knox Wesley, clutching him tight.

The impact carried them both over the ledge and off into black, bottomless space....

* * *

"He's close by!" Caleb hissed in an undertone as he came out of the vision. He braced upright, grabbing the seatback in front of him with both hands. The ramshackle old khaki bus he rode in emerged suddenly from Yucatán scrub jungle onto the site of sprawling Mayan ruins and bogged to a squeaky stop.

Ellen sat next to him, jostling his shoulder. "Caleb... Caleb, wake up. You're dreaming," she said gently.

It had been a long time, years in fact, since one of the old surreal visionary trances had troubled him. He was surprised how fresh and real the danger still felt. And there was something else too. His lips and left cheek were distinctly numb, he discovered. A patch of blurriness swirled in his vision off to the left side only, and he had a faint, dull pain right behind one eye. Migraine symptoms. That had never happened before.

"We're there, sweetheart," Ellen told him. She was ravishing as ever. The years had done little to alter her wholesome, natural prettiness. It was just a bit more mature form of beauty now. Somewhere along the way, the hard, cool edge had disappeared from her too, and she had acquired a glow -- an aura of sweetness and invitation.

Caleb had changed more than she had. He had let his hair get long again, worn at what used to be called scholarly length. The glasses that had become a necessity for clear vision were of the round, wire-rimmed sort. The frames were the same tone as the silver-gray that now nagged his sideburns.

Ellen thought they made him look distinguished and wise, qualities befitting a professor on staff at a university with one

of the finest colleges of natural history in the hemisphere. She was intensely proud of him. The post couldn't have fit anyone any better than it did Caleb. It was precisely where he belonged. Of course the recommendation and lobbying of so prestigious an archaeologist and explorer as Dr. Luis Montero hadn't hurt his chances of being selected for it in the least.

"We're there," Ellen repeated.

"There?" he asked, still shaking off the trance and not entirely clear.

"The ruins, sweetheart."

"Ruins...which ruins?"

"Hmmm. Let's see here. If it's Thursday, then it must be Chichén Itzá," she said.

"Yeah, get with the program, Dad!" a small voice chimed in.

The two little boys with them were six and seven years old. They were beautiful children, bright and robust, the beneficiaries of gene pools so exceptionally complementary to begin with, they had only harmonious traits to offer. It was something Caleb and Ellen were just destined to be good at. They had made good looking babies with each other. The four of them there together had a blended sameness of look and manner that brought a single descriptor to mind: family. They were family.

The boys hopped down from the bus, followed by Caleb, Ellen, and a procession of tourists. Bright sun pounded down on the age-old remains of Chichén Itzá. A pyramid and a mammoth stone temple sat on the horizon, backed by verdant growth. Around about it all lolled the cheery, ambient silence only remote places have. The boys took off on a run, laughing and pointing.

With concern growing in her eyes, Ellen touched Caleb's arm. "Caleb... Visions? Again?" she asked him disquietly.

He let too much time go by before he answered.

"No," he said, but wouldn't face her. He looked off at the boys, charging up the steep steps of the Pyramid of Kukulkán, then turned and ran his fingers affectionately through Ellen's auburn hair. "No...it was nothing," he said to her, smiling innocently. He looked into her eyes at last, but he couldn't tell if she knew he was lying.

A group of tourists parted nearby, revealing an ancient Mayan stele. It was covered with fantastic carved and painted figures and protected by a stone canopy. The primary image depicted at the center of it was a huge man in reptile skins, wearing an expansive headdress. A crude wooden sign beneath the relic warned:

¡No Se Permité Fotografías Con Flash!
No Flash Photography!

A tourist with an SLR camera stepped up and flashed a snapshot of the stele. He zoomed in on the face of the image, focused and flashed another.

The carved and painted face beneath the headdress on the stone was that of Knox Wesley.



EPILOGUE...

*[This account was taken in the Tukabachee square,
27th July, 1759, per Will. Bolsover.]*

In the Tukabachees on the Tallapoose River... are two brazen tablets and five of copper. They [the Tukabachee Creek Indians] esteem them so sacred as to keep them constantly in their holy of holies, without touching them in the least.... Old Bracket, an Indian of perhaps 100 years old...gave the following description....

The shape of the five copper plates -- one is a foot and a half long and seven inches wide, the other four are shorter and narrower. The shape of the two brass plates [round] -- about a foot and a half in diameter.

He said he was told by his forefathers that those plates were given to them by the man we call God; that there had been many more...and some had writing upon them which were buried with particular men; and that they had instructions given with them, viz. they must only be handled by particular people, and those fasting; and no unclean woman must be suffered to come near them....

--James Adair, 1775

History of the North American Indians

They carried the ark down from the sacred stronghold and brought it into the square ground of the ceremonial busk. An oblong box, carved out of oak and inlaid with juniper wood, it was covered over with dressed deerskin. It

appeared to be very, very old.

Two Tukabachee Creek priests bore it on their shoulders by long poles affixed beneath it. They wore white outfits with bright-colored accouterments. Crescent silver breast amulets hung in triads from around their necks. Even they dared not touch the ark itself. They set it down carefully on stones so it did not come in contact with the ground and stood at either end, keeping a diligent watch. At their sides they gripped their ceremonial bows, with black-fletched arrows nocked to the hemp strings and held at ready.

The Tukabachee archi-magus approached. His name was Kasita. High priest and medicine maker of the tribe, he reverently lifted the lid off the ark. It was a panel of oak into which were carved the likenesses of two beings with wings like swans spread out before them.

From inside the ark, Kasita drew out the largest plates. They were round and made of brass. There were twenty-four of them in all, carefully kept, though ravaged considerably by thousands of years of time. The other plates and sacred things contained in the ark he left there. In addition to the brass plates, there were twenty others forged from copper ore that were rectangular and appeared almost as ancient...as well as another twenty-four smaller ones that were of pure, beaten gold.

All were covered with writing no living Tukabachee was able to read. The last one who could had been Kasita's ancestor...and he had died a hundred years back. It was said that he grew blind in his old age, but professed he no longer needed to see the plates in order to read them. He had only to hold them against his breast and open his thoughts, and their meaning would fill him and make his bosom burn with understanding, he had said.

Carrying the brass plates under his arms, Kasita led the priests and costumed warriors in a dance around the sacred busk arbor. The annual observance had changed little in five-hundred years since the spokogi had come down from the heavens and given the plates to the forefathers of the Tukabachee Creeks. No white man had ever been allowed to look upon them. Knowing too well the whites' fever for gold and treasure, the Tukabachee slyly deceived

them with stories of how the plates no longer existed, having been buried with great men as they died until none were left. This was a custom the whites knew was widely practiced among the tribes.

A white missionary once told Kasita that he and all Indian people had a great prophetic destiny, spoken of in his sacred Book of Mormon -- a prophecy that was soon to be fulfilled. The missionary had read to him from this sacred book. The words, he told Kasita, were those of an ancient prophet he called Enos: "And I did cry unto God that he would preserve the record of my people...that it might be brought forth at some future day unto the Lamanites, that they might be brought unto salvation...and he covenanted with me that he would bring the records forth unto the Lamanites in his own due time...."

Kasita had heard of this prophecy already. There had been other missionaries before this one. These Mormon folks believed he and all his people were these Lamanites their sacred book spoke of.

But the prophecy the missionary read to him, Kasita knew, had already been fulfilled long ago when the spokogi had come down and given the brass, copper and gold plates to the forefathers of his tribe.

Kasita was intrigued when the missionary told him that the sacred Book of Mormon had been copied from golden plates the spirits had given to Mormon forefathers as well. The missionary told Kasita that he and his people were living in the last days.

"All the days of my people have been their last days," Kasita told him sadly. The missionary took from this that Kasita did not understand what he meant.

But Kasita understood far more than the missionary knew. And concerning the great destiny of his people, and indeed that of all the tribes, he knew more than the missionary would ever in his life have dreamed.



About the Author

E. J. Campfield is a free-thinking religious skeptic and a seasoned scholar of early Christian and Jewish literature, history and cultural religious studies. A former teacher and advertising agency executive, Campfield lives in Southern California.

The story line of *THE LATTER-DAY KILLS* is spun off the strange Mormon folk legend of “The Three Nephites.” Blending parallel mythologies and historical fact into a single dramatic tapestry, the author relates details of the often startling Mormon religion and equally absorbing Native American cultures.

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