

Chapter 27

Great spirits have always found violent opposition from mediocrities. The latter cannot understand when a man does not thoughtlessly submit to hereditary prejudices but honestly and courageously uses his intelligence.

—Albert Einstein

Vatican City

Rome

April 11, 2025

Archbishop Mikel Castillo de Arazola was the product of a Spanish mother and a Basque father, although he considered himself all Basque. He was the librarian of the Apostolic Library and archivist of the Vatican Secret Archives, a post he had held for twenty-three years. Well versed in ancient languages and international relations, his study of religious pedagogues and ecclesiastical antiquities suited him well to the position.

Mikel had come to pay a visit to his friend of many years, Archbishop Joseph Bechou, the current head of international relations and Pruncio Uno for the EU. As he entered Bechou's office, an array of maps and photographs from regions worldwide hung from richly stained maple paneling. Unlike most of the Vatican offices, Bechou's was ornate. With two-foot-wide triple crown molding bordering the stamped twelve-foot ceiling and a carved sixteenth-century mantle framing the walk-in fireplace, the room bespoke of the power that flowed through it.

“Thanks for taking time out of your busy schedule to see me.”

“Always a pleasure to take time out of my mundane routines to meet a friend.” Bechou smiled as he stepped from behind a massive oak desk. “Please.” The small black man led him to the corner seating area set against tall bookcases that extended to the ceiling. “Would you like some tea?”

Mikel smiled to himself as he took a seat. He had known Bechou before this current post and had watched his amazing metamorphosis. Bechou was one of those rare creatures who assume any personae purely by cultural osmosis. Someone meeting him for the first time today, Mikel thought, would never guess that he hailed from a little ditchwater town in central Guyana. “Thank you, no, but if there is some coffee available . . .”

“Sure thing. AI, please send for Lesly.” Bechou’s politeness toward a machine was unnecessary but consistent with how his mind worked. After the coffee arrived, the two men exchanged pleasantries. “Are things going well for the library?”

“They are.” Mikel went straight to the point. “A report was sent to your office regarding another attack on a priest. This one was in the Basque region.”

“Yes, it was unusual to receive one from such a remote area. I haven’t had the opportunity to review the details. Was the attack personal?”

“No.” Mikel thankfully smiled. “However, I requested a detective from Chicago to be on the case due to some mitigating circumstances.”

Bechou frowned. “This is about the reported clones found in Chicago?”

“Yes, and he may have found a connection to the Ravens.”

Bechou raised an eyebrow. “Really?” He returned to his desk. “And this connection would be?”

“The coin.” Mikel nervously brushed something off his knee.

“Then he’s found one?”

“Yes.”

“I see, and naturally, you wish to pursue this.” Bechou sat on the desk’s edge. “Well, it’s fortunate that you’re willing to take this on. The Arminian bishop reports more difficulties in his region that require my direct attention.”

“Thanks, Joseph.” Mikel stood to leave.

“I know you’ve been looking for these Ravens of yours for a long time, and I trust you’ll see the importance of the issues at hand and keep me informed of your progress.”

“Of course.” Mikel bowed, conscious of the thinly veiled directive.

As librarian, Mikel enjoyed unrestricted access to approximately 1.7 million volumes, more than 82,000 incunabula—copies of books produced before 1501—and ancient manuscripts all stored digitally as images to protect them from scholastic use. Utilizing these resources, Mikel discovered a mysterious group known as the Brotherhood of the Ravens, and the coin was the connecting link.

As Mikel returned to his office, he thought about the many years spent investigating the Ravens. Considering that the group dated back to the first century, there had been much speculation on their purpose. The latest reports were confusing at face value and dangerously disturbing in possibility. Now that there was something concrete to go on, he was excited about this afternoon’s meeting. A meeting he hoped would solve an ancient mystery.

* * *

“Excuse me, sir.” The voice of Mikel’s assistant, Carmella, came over the comm. “The men you requested to see are here.”

He cleared his desk, taking a moment to compose himself. “Please send them in.”

Mikel was surprised by their appearance. They looked like they had just finished an all-night bender. Father McGinnis was a slim, pale man with short, reddish-blond hair and a strong, lithe physique. Detective Hendricks, unshaven with disheveled light-brown hair, was stocky and projected quiet confidence. Both men looked beat.

“Sit down before you fall down.” Mikel’s English held no accent.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Father McGinnis replied before the detective could speak. He was afraid the gruff American would call him “pal” or “bub” or some other such embarrassment.

After assessing the character of the American detective, Mikel didn’t bother to offer his archbishop’s ring. “I would like to thank you both for your cooperation in getting here. Detective, I understand you have discovered the existence of a coin from the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian?”

“Yeah . . . um, yes, sir, that’s right. I had some jpegs of the coin sent to the Yard, and I wrote a brief explanation in my report.”

“Yes, I’ve read it,” Mikel was amused by his surprise. “Do you believe in this whole Revelation angle?”

“Well, in the few short years I’ve been a detective, I’ve learned to keep my eyes, ears, and mind open.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“To tell you the truth, before I met Danny-boy here, I would have said definitely not. But after talking with him and hearing about his run-in with the clone, I would say I’m about eighty-

twenty.” He rotated his hand at the wrist.

“Eighty percent believing?”

“No, eighty percent confused.”

“Good enough for now.” Mikel turned his attention to the priest. “Daniel, your clone attack—do you really think the thing was possessed?”

“I really don’t have the background to make that call, Your Grace.” He looked down at his shoes.

“Look, men, I appreciate your circumspection in this matter. However, under these most unusual circumstances, what I really could use is some candor.” Mikel sat back and appraised the two men.

Time passed awkwardly.

The detective looked sheepishly over at the priest. Obviously unsure of his ground, he remained silent. The priest glanced over to the detective and winked with a barely perceptible smile.

That was good, they like each other. Mikel relaxed his face. “I’d like to see you both at my residence Tuesday night, and I’d suggest you take this opportunity to get some rest and see some of this beautiful city. This is your first time here, detective?” He did not wait for a response. “My assistant, Carmella, will see to your lodging and financial needs. Good day, gentlemen.” He rose from his chair and offered his ring hand, which Daniel kissed.

The detective did not.

Four days later, they met at the archbishop’s modest apartment across the Tiber from the Castel Sant’Angelo. Mark was surprised to see many of the buildings had been tagged. He

jokingly wondered if there were any Latin Kings in Rome.

“Well, Detective, how do you like our city?” Archbishop Arazola asked as they sat down at his kitchen table.

“The cramped street quarters are a bit unnerving, and parts of the city look a lot like the poor boroughs of Old Town Chicago, but some of the architecture is amazing.” Mark took a seat on a thinly padded metal folding chair.

“Yes, coming from a city like Chicago, you might find this place a bit shabby, but this is an ancient and unpretentious city. There are a few of what you Americans would refer to as affluent areas.” He handed out some old calcified water glasses and unscrewed a bottle of red wine. “This may not be as sweet as some of your Californian reds, but I have, however, grown quite fond of it. It’s a Barolo—Paolo Scavino 2010 Bric dël Fiasc Nebbiolo. And you, Daniel?”

“If you please, Your Grace.”

“I admire your courtesies, Daniel. However, away from the office, I would appreciate it if you could please address me as Mikel. My mother was quite fond of the name. And you, detective?”

“Yes, thank you.” Mark nodded, accepting the glass as he looked around. The humble apartment’s interior was as unpretentious as the building. The kitchen table was edged with a stainless-steel band and supported a white Formica top with embedded golden flecks. Mark raised his brow at the yellow cigarette burn marks on the edges.

“My predecessor was a Franciscan,” Mikel explained, “and as such, he preferred humble surroundings. They also suit me. To be honest, though, I’ve always been too busy to bother with interior decorations. Being single, of course, helps.” They laughed at this icebreaker. Coupled with the wine, it established an open and friendly tone. “Although I come from an impoverished

background, I've somehow managed to develop a taste for good wine." Mikel examined its color. "One of my few indulgences."

"Yes, it's good." Mark didn't care too much for wine, but he had to admit, this was not bad.

The silence grew in the small kitchen space.

"You're probably wondering why I called you both here." Mikel allowed a few moments to pass. "Especially you, detective. You've made some important discoveries in matters you've yet to comprehend. Nevertheless, you have unknowingly been a participant in the whimsical aims of an old man."

"Anything I can do to help, but yes, it would be nice to know why the Vatican is interested in this."

"Yes, I owe you that, at least." Mikel shifted in his seat. "I guess the best thing to do is start from the beginning." He let out a sigh before plunging ahead. "At the age of fifteen, I was tasked to assist in the cataloging of the library at the University of Salamanca—an utterly fascinating experience, I assure you. Handling the documents of our history 'in the flesh,' so to speak, was quite amazing. I would often make notes of the codices I wanted to explore and then return at night to read them. On one of those nights, I ran across a reference to *Culto de Los Cuervo*, or Cult of the Raven, in a 1593 Dominican Inquisitional trial.

"In that trial, a woman was accused of heresy. She spoke of a group she called the Cult of the Raven, and it was her who most likely added the word cult. Apparently, some group of traders in Seville selling religious relics, among other things. Her act of heresy was repeating comments made by one of the traders about the sovereignty of God. The trader had remarked that the earth has always been here and always will be and that God didn't make it. The woman

repeated it in the open air of the market, and some vendors had her dragged before the Inquisition.

“So, I wondered, who the hell was this Cult of the Raven? For weeks it kept dogging me, so I made it a point to find out. I started out by searching the trade records of Spanish ports. In the 1617 court records of Phillip III, I found that a large section of property just off the Bay of Biscay in the Basque provinces had been granted to *Comerciantes Cuervo*. In the court records, the Duke of Lerma referred to them as ‘merchants of the brotherhood for the Raven.’ The property was apparently exchanged for some unspecified services performed. Excited by this data hit, I continued my search, but unfortunately, I found little else. As the years passed, my fascination with this history intensified. And as I grew into the True Church, I continued to study its history and my required philosophical and theological studies at Salamanca. The mystery of the Ravens always stayed with me no matter where I went.”

“Where was your first posting?” Daniel asked.

“Oh, it was a small church in Seville.” Mikel paused. “Funny, I never really thought of that. Seville was the same place the Ravens were first recorded in Spain.”

“How did you get to be such a Church bigwig?” Mark asked.

“Uh . . . his title is archbishop, you dope.” Daniel grinned. “I told you that already, but in America, I suppose only the ballplayers are given any kind of reverence.”

“Well, at least they got some stats to back ’em up,” Mark countered.

Mikel laughed. “True enough, Detective. I guess my ‘stat’ was a paper I published in college on the Dominican theologian Bartolomé de Carranza. He was a true Dominican priest who valued education above all else and held great disdain for politics.”

“He was a Dominican?” Mark asked, somewhat confused.

“Dominican Order,” Daniel replied. “A monastic order—a church organization.”

Mark’s face colored slightly. “Okay, what is this Dominican Order? I mean, what do they do?”

“The Dominican Order’s main charter is to keep the doctrine of the Church from becoming corrupted,” Mikel answered, warmed by the playful banter. “They were responsible for creating many provincial schools of philosophy and theology throughout Europe. They also, along with the Franciscans, were one of the Inquisition orders.”

“They were the main force in educating the educators, not just the laypeople,” Daniel added for clarification. “At the time, most people couldn’t read or write in any language, let alone Latin or Greek. The Church recognized that the cause of many heretical philosophies was ignorance. Some would fill in the gaps with their own folklore, which caused much confusion. It’s one of the main reasons only properly educated Church officials at the time could possess religious writings or even publicly discuss them.”

“So, this is why they were behind the Inquisition,” Mark postulated, “to keep the ship on the right course, which is, of course, a great power within itself because—”

“That’s right.” Daniel jumped in before Mark could get started on the corruptive powers of the Church, which they covered in an earlier bout. “Of course, the Inquisitional trials could only hold this great power through the Crown, and when power is involved, there’s bound to be corruption.”

“Yes, and history bears that out,” Mikel added, noting the exchange. He decided not to weigh in on the issue and moved on. “In 1558, de Carranza wrote a paper called ‘Commentaries on the Christian Catechism,’ arguing that Christian theological writings should be published in the local vernacular for the further education of the laypeople. Under Church law, as Daniel just

explained, the scriptures were not open to laypeople, so Carranza's insistence on educating the masses on the Church's ecclesiastical writings was bending that law. In the sixteenth century, the Church did not want anything even resembling Lutheranism in Spain, so it became a political issue. For fostering Lutheranism, Carranza's enemies had him put before the Inquisition, where he was tried and sentenced to seventeen years for his supposedly heretical writings."

"Think with the learned and speak with the vulgar," Daniel quoted Bishop George Berkeley, the great Catholic philosopher.

"Correct. I believe Berkeley was referring to how we should individually present doctrine. Know that all things are from God, but don't beat it with a hammer. For example, fire is a chemical reaction, and all elements in that reaction are created by God. To say that fire is caused by God, though ultimately true, can be easily misunderstood by the ignorant. The idea would be better presented as, 'Think with the learned and explain in the vulgar.' In this, Carranza was not wrong. The Word was meant to be understood—to be translatable.

"I realized that it was as imperative back then as it is today. The modern Church needs to open herself up to the more educated people of today who are not so trusting. I was not alone in this thinking. It was, after all, the sixties, a time when the world was ready to wash away the old thinking. For the Church, it indeed was, to use a much-misunderstood maxim, a time to develop a new paradigm.

"So, like Carranza, I decided to publish a paper on the importance of education in religion, reasoning that for the truth of Christianity to be taught, people need facts to make their decisions. Using historical records, I showed that only when the European colleges finally opened to the masses, doctrinal Catholicism could separate from the mysticisms that long dogged its path. Honestly, if there is nothing to substantiate doctrine, then just the rituals are left. I used

modern-day Spanish Catholicism as an example in which the people are more attached to the ritual holiday celebrations than they are to the doctrine of the Word of God.”

“Yes,” Daniel frowned. “I see that in my parish as well, and it’s unfortunate.”

“It’s one of the ‘great opportunities lost by the Church in the pursuit of her evangelical commission.’ I believe I worded it.” Mikel laughed with a shrug. “It never ceases to amaze me how easily things get corrupted.”

“Didn’t that get you into hot water?” Daniel asked. “I mean, it’s the early sixties, and the masses are still spoken in Latin, for heaven’s sake.”

“Yes, but the paper was actually published in sixty-two, the same year as Vatican Two.” Mikel winked. “What was seen as rebellious by some was seen as compliant by others.” He laughed again. “The Church was scrambling to comply with Vat Two changes, and due to fortunate timing, my paper was vaulted to the forefront.”

“So, you had the best of both worlds,” Mark laughed. “You were both maverick and stout convert. Huh. That must have been pretty cool—kinda like a liberal-minded conservative.”

“Yes, I guess in some ways, that fits. Because of this unique situation, I was invited to post Vat Two symposiums, where I was asked to write opinion pieces on the results of the discussions. It seemed that I actually had an opinion that mattered, which is sometimes very difficult to have without rank in an organization as old as ours. You see, due to my Lutheran-leaning reputation, I was offered pro-nuncio or apostolic delegate postings in some of the minor Protestant countries of Europe throughout the late sixties. And by the way, I loved Scotland. During these various postings, I developed a knack for morphology.”

Mark gave Daniel a curious glance.

“Languages, buddy,” Daniel explained. “He was proficient in linguistics.”

“Then why not just say so,” Mark quipped.

“Just so.” Mikel laughed to himself—they talk like brothers. “Anyway, while studying in Britain, I ran across a paper on an archeological exploration in Syria. In the treatise, the authors had uncovered a sixth-century trade tablet with a coin dating from the first century. The tablet, written in Greek, proposed a deal with the Raven Merchants group for a significant amount of property in exchange for the coin. Since the coin was not worth that much even today, historians had surmised that the coin must have been a payment token for some services performed. Apparently, the deal never went through since the coin was found still pressed into the wax tablet. The back of the coin depicted a man standing on the earth with his hands spread out collecting six stars, three to each side.” Mikel nodded at Mark. “Yes, Detective. It’s the same type of coin.”

“Corvus,” Mark interjected. “That’s what the numismatics guy said the *C* on the coin stood for. Well, I’ll be damned, and he was right.”

“Yes,” Mikel said. “I read that in your report. In light of what’s been occurring, I thought it best not to draw any attention to Dr. Glaser.”

Daniel shifted in his chair. “Why are these coins showing up? They can’t be real.”

“That was my thinking.” Mikel pointed at him. “In ’95, I was appointed as the Vatican librarian. One of my principal duties was to oversee the digitization of the Vatican’s vast archives. We ‘borrowed’ a character-searchable imaging system developed by NASA and went to work preserving the many ancient books and codices. It took about three years before the data store was significant. My first test was to search for references to these mysterious Ravens. I set up a wildcard search for the different languages: *Corbeau* in French, *cuervo* in Spanish, *raaf* in Dutch, *κοράκι* in Greek, and *corvus* in Latin. Spread out over centuries of Church documents in

France, Belgium, and Spain, I received only a few hits. There was nothing of significance. Oddly enough, it seemed that wherever the Catholic Church went, I found some reference to the Ravens.”

“Is there a connection?” Daniel asked.

“Perhaps, but most of the data *was* from Church records. But here’s where the story gets a little strange. In 1998, one of the missing Lead Books of the Sacromonte turned up during a river dredging in Seville, of all places. Rome sent me to the dig to assist in the recovery of the book. You see, since the books were still under the sixteenth-century papal ban, they were not open to academic study by anyone outside the Church.”

Daniel poured another glass. “I’m surprised the Spanish government went along with that.”

“It’s still Spanish property.”

“Sorry, guys,” Mark cut in, “but what the hell are the Lead Books of . . . whatever?”

“Sacromonte,” Mikel replied. “It means sacred mount. They’re a set of twenty-two lead discs, or so-called religious books, discovered under some unusual circumstances in 1595 purported to be caused by the hand of God. These books were translated by two Morisco scholars under dubious circumstances.”

Mark looked over at Daniel, who rolled his eyes.

“Moriscos. They were apostate Moors—Muslim converts to Christianity.”

“Okay, no need for all that.” Mark mimicked Daniel’s eye-rolling.

“Yes.” Mikel smiled. “The books were first discovered on Monte Valparaiso, renamed Sacromonte after their discovery in an old Roman mine just outside of Granada during the late 1500s, along with the charred remains of twelve so-called Christian martyrs.”

“They were not Christian?” Mark asked.

“No. How could anybody tell from bones?” Daniel quipped.

“I don’t know,” Mark shot back. “Maybe they glowed in the dark or something, like one of those halo things.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Mikel countered. “*You’re* the detective. What we do know is that the bones could not have been from the first century.”

“Right,” Mark connected. “Unless they were somehow protected from bacteria, they would have mostly decayed by the sixteenth century. Then these so-called religious books—they’re not what they claim to be?”

“Correct. You see, these books were purported to contain alleged prophetic and liturgical teachings of the Virgin Mary, along with instructions for the evangelization of Spain to Saint James the Great and Saint Caecilius. They were sent to Spain during the Apostolic Age—excuse me—the first century. These books were written in what the sixteenth-century Morisco scholars dubbed as Solomonic writing—actually a lousy mix of Arabic and Latin—these books caused quite a sensation among the populace. People were desirous of anything religious at that time, and the books were carefully contrived to meet that desire. The books were researched, declared valid, and then quickly discredited. Because of this controversy, they were sent off to Rome to further verify their religious legitimacy. Initially, twenty-two of these books were found. Three were lost to history, and of the remaining nineteen, one was called the Libro Mudo, or Mute Book. It could be said that the find was the Dead Sea Scrolls of its time. It was utterly untranslatable—written in an unknown language of forty-two distinct characters or symbols.”

“Some kind of code?” Mark asked.

“That was not the thinking at the time,” Mikel continued. “The whole thing was set up to

be some mystical religious finding so the Moriscos could claim a history back to the first journeys of the apostles. They wanted to make some changes in the doctrine of the Church that would predate the Moorish invasion and thus legitimize their presence in Spain. This would allow the remaining Arabic Muslims to avoid expulsion, which ultimately failed. The Mute Book contained what was thought to be Arabic magical symbols. Healers at that time would often hang amulets with magic symbols around the necks of patients or sew them into clothing to ward off the spirits that might be causing the illnesses. They were used like the elven runes from Tolkien's books."

"It's a book of spells?" Mark asked, surprised that a high and mighty archbishop could be so hip.

"Not quite, but the newly found book added some pieces."

"So a Rosetta stone,"

"That was exactly my thought. I examined the rubbings that I had taken from the newly discovered book. Amid its sacrilegious gibberish, I recognized odd characters above the Latin and Arabic words. Some of these were the very same characters found in the *Mute Book*. So by taking a word that had a symbol over it, I translated it from either Latin or Arabic into Castilian. By associating the first letter of that word with its symbol, I used the *Mute Book* as a kind of blueprint and put the letters into order." Mikel paused for dramatic effect.

"And?" Daniel's interest was piqued.

"It was still gibberish." Mikel rose from the table, continuing the story from the back bedroom. "Back in 2000, the Lead Books, at the behest of the archbishop of Granada, were returned to Spain." Mikel was carrying what looked like an old ledger book. "As the librarian, I was sent to witness their eventual internment into the Abbey of the Sacromonte."

“So all of the books were returned to Granada?” Daniel asked.

“No, only the original nineteen. I felt the latest book discovered should remain in Rome until I could make sense of the *Mute Book*.” Mikel opened the ledger and took out some rubbings.

Both men stood to lean over the table. The detective in Mark couldn’t contain his fascination, and the little kid in him was grinning like a fool.

“I reasoned that for whomever this book was intended,” Mikel explained over the crackling of sepia rubbings, “they must have the ability to translate it. Most likely, it wasn’t a Morisco or even an Arab, for that matter. I think the Morisco historians would have figured it out. I almost missed it, but the final clue was in the Sacromonte Museum the Spanish government had constructed.”

He stood and gave them a crafty look, which spread into a smile. “You see, one of the old parchments they had on display was discovered in a sixteenth-century Moorish defense tower. It was written in the ancient Syriac Aramaic language and not in Arabic. Suppose these books really came from the first century. In that case, odds are they would have been written in Syriac—something the Moriscos probably wouldn’t have known. But the authors of a private message would. Well, I translated the book using Latin and Syriac, thinking that it might just make some sense.” He slid the open ledger across the table. “And you can see that it did.”

Castro-You-Will-Support-Authority-Lead-Books-on-Your-Life-

Raven

“Okay, so who the hell is Castro?” Mark asked. “I get the Raven reference.”

“Pedro de Castro y Quinones,” Mikel replied. “In 1595, he was the archbishop of Granada.”

Daniel tugged at his ear. “Then what you’re telling us is that embedded in this *Mute Book* are instructions to the head of the Church in Granada to back the validity of fake religious books? Now, why the hell would they want to do that?”

“Yeah, and how’d they get their hooks into this bishop guy?” Mark asked. “Or was he some kind of Raven plant?”

“All good questions,” Mikel responded. “Ones I haven’t been able to make any sense of—until now. It tells me that there was a quasi-political group known as the Ravens, and one of them, at least in that period, was embedded within the Church. Another thing to consider: there may be another message in the books that were supposed to wind up back at the Vatican. The newly discovered book only used some of the characters in the *Mute Book*. Another message may have been embedded in the books for someone in Rome, someone that would be able to gain access to them.”

“But why? I mean, why go through the trouble?” Mark asked. “Certainly, there are other ways to send a message that would be a whole lot less complicated.”

“Yes.” Daniel paused to think. “But if the message were somehow found out, it would have grave implications.”

“That was my thought as well,” Mikel agreed, “but then I realized the real reason was to expose the archbishop as a part of the fraud once it was embedded. Inevitably, like all lies, it would eventually come to light. Let’s look at this through the lens of history. I think the Ravens’ goal was to undermine the spread of Christianity by undermining the Church.”

“How would this have undermined the Church?” Mark asked. “Weren’t they the ones to

expose the books as forgeries in the first place?”

“Yes, that’s true.” Mikel shifted in his chair. “Now, let’s say Rome didn’t get involved. At that time, the Crown was arguing for a National Church of Spain—separate from Rome. If these books were viewed as legit, false doctrines might have found their way into the New Testament. The Cult of Mary would have won legitimacy—taken deeper root. Look at the adoration of the Virgin Mary that’s common even today. Could you imagine . . .”

“I see.” Daniel paced. “These new doctrines would eventually be revealed as false, but by that time, the needle in and the damage done. The credibility of the Church would have suffered considerably.”

“Yes.” Mikel leaned forward. “The Church does damage control, the Ravens expose the archbishop as an accessory to the lie, and the credibility of the Church gets diminished. Even the New Testament could have lost some of its credibility. Castro probably would have succeeded if it weren’t for the Vatican’s intervention. He already had convinced the Crown, and they were backing him to have the books declared as legitimate.”

“You think they would have been so readily accepted?” Daniel asked.

“At that time? My word.” Mikel looked away. “At that time, you couldn’t even *walk* on the Sacred Mount without bumping into some shrine or cross planted by different groups of devotees. The people were crazy over the discovery of the Lead Books. You see, the books legitimized the city of Granada, giving it roots all the way back to the Apostolic Age. They *wanted to believe*, and because of this, Castro fooled most of the clergy. So deep is the longing for religious artifacts that a parchment found with the forgeries is *still* being declared legit. People were still claiming the books as legitimate during the four hundredth anniversary of their discovery. People argue that the Lead Books the Vatican returned are forged books and that

Rome either destroyed the originals or still has them. People do like their religious conspiracy theories.”

“There are still other books unaccounted for,” Daniel pointed out. “Could they be coded as well? You suggested earlier that the twentieth book contained only a fraction of the symbols in the *Mute Book*, so . . .”

“It’s highly likely. However, I would think that any likelihood of a new discovery would be highly improbable.”

Mark nodded. “If they did possess code, odds are they would have been destroyed or at the very least stashed away. Besides, it was pure luck the twentieth book was found.”

“I don’t believe in luck, detective. There’s a reason this is coming to light, and I believe it may be related to the rise of these clones.”

“Are you suggesting all this may be the fulfilling of some prophecy?” Mark asked.

“Perhaps I am.” Mikel poured more wine and didn’t look up from his glass. “There was another sixteenth-century forgery called the Parchment of the Torre Turpiana supposedly entombed in the walls of a Moorish minaret. It was found during the deconstruction of a masonry tower to expand a church. Undoubtedly a fraud, it was most likely placed there at night during the demolition process. In it, among a lot of incomprehensible Arabic script, are cryptic prophecies translated by another Morisco historian from that era.” He picked up his ledger from the table. “Look at the top line.”

*The mysterious book of the evangelist John concerning the
destruction of the universe.*

“Now, read this passage.”

*A king who will dominate the whole world until Doomsday
And a religion which will proceed against those who have filled it
with vices and a secret which will be understood by [the power]
given to it by the divine decree to nullify sins.*

“To state its case for legitimacy, the forgers added words to mark the coming of Muhammad and the rise of the Reformation.” Mikel pointed to the bottom of the page. “Here are the translator’s notes.”

*After six centuries, furious ministers would cast Stygian
shadows, which would darken the light of the sun while the Temple
of the Lord would suffer grievous persecutions. After fifteen
centuries, a dragon would rise in the North, which would divide
the faith into sects.*

*Then three enemies would appear in the northern parts
who would fill the earth with vice, threatening mankind in general
and the priesthood in particular. They would try to extinguish the
light, which would recede and seek shelter. These miraculous
events would herald the coming of the Antichrist, who would fulfill
this prophecy and mark the beginning of the Final Judgment, as
well as the appearance of the Judge of the Truth . . .*

Mikel closed the ledger. “The goal of these mytho-historical artifacts was to cause a religious reconciliation that would combine—to use a Koranic phrase— ‘peoples of the book’ into one syncretistic Church. There was a symbol on one of the books that combined the Crucifix with the Star of David and the Crescent of Islam—kind of like an ancient COEXIST bumper sticker.”

“One religion to rule the world.” Mark glanced at Daniel. “Your Revelation theory.”

Daniel reddened, suddenly uncomfortable.

“What’s this?” Mikel turned to Daniel. “Out with it, son.”

“Well, Your Grace, please accept this from a novice in biblical exegesis.” He glared at Mark, who winked, giving him an encouraging nod. “I was just theorizing on how a world religion could form and fulfill a prophecy in Revelation on the rise of the first Beast. For a world church to form, there must be some kind of event during which the existence of God is somehow manifested, thus making his existence irrefutable.”

Mark interjected. “So I asked him, ‘Why not through conquests? Kill all the dissenters, as the Muslims once did. *Jihad*. Daniel correctly pointed out that that never works and that the Muslims no longer practice it. Willful force only creates willful counterforce.”

“Well,” Daniel continued, “history is replete with many examples of why force doesn’t work when converting someone to religion. Even our own Church dabbled in it. The Bible states that after the rise of the first Beast, a period of world peace will occur. This will arrive under the leadership of a world religion. For a world religion to form, it would have to be done through the guise of peace—a church of peace.”

Mikel nodded thoughtfully. “What about the conflict of cultures?”

“I think that the Westernization of Islam will prevail.” Daniel turned away from Mikel and strode to the window bank. “And a new moderate religion not based on violence will rise up in the West, albeit one not worshipping the true God. Perhaps a blending of the Abrahamic traditions as we just heard. Since the majority of the non-Abrahamic-based world religions are humanistic, they are therefore founded on peace. As a whole, they’re centered on human ethical concepts, and as such, there’s really no concept of a true God. No true God, no law, no sin. Sin gets degraded to a moral theory in which the dominant ethical culture, not God, determines what sin is. A fluid standard, which basically means no standard. Humankind is free to write the rules—something that many have argued is the whole point of ethics.

“Eastern humanistic religions would be quite amenable to a world church of peace. All they would need is proof of the existence of a god, albeit a false one, such as the first Beast. For this unification to work globally, there would have to be a base system of belief in an uber-god, an undefined overseer. Confucianism and Daoism are ethically based on no central god figure per se, but they do have Tian.”

Mark was out of his league, but that did not stop his curiosity. “What’s Tian?”

“Tian is referred to as the heavens where the gods exist, much like Mount Olympus. Confucius believed that the Tian had authority over all humans. If some god were to become manifest . . .” Daniel shrugged. “The Buddha discussed the gods but never really weighed in on whether there was a single, overarching god. His ethics were more concerned with the path necessary to end the Karmic cycle. To logically follow it to its end, godlike wisdom is obtainable. Since god is the source of knowledge, Buddha’s image was venerated, becoming a god. Many people pray to him.”

Mikel considered this. “Yes, the Hindu religion is returning to its roots of a central god

figure. The same is true for the neo-polytheists, Wicca, neo-paganism—they all have a central god that is unknowable. If he were to suddenly become known . . .” Mikel paused. “However, the primary aspect of the Hindu faith is that man is already god; the physical world just gets in the way of that realization. That’s an idea not lost on many metaphysical thinkers, including the disciples of science.”

“Disciples of science?” Mark asked.

“Sure, science is a religion, much like the other religions we’ve been discussing. It possesses a doctrine of faith in its method and has rituals for its advancement. Like most religions, its ideas of a fundamental truth continue to elude the faithful. For example, take the so-called Theory of Everything—ToE, something Einstein was working on until his death but could not solve the fundamental principles of gravity. There is much disagreement on fundamental principles and the dynamics of systems. There are many cults in theoretical physics.”

“Surely you can’t be serious,” Mark scoffed. “Science is a tool of discovery that employs logic, and I use it every day in my work to expose the truth, and it works.”

“The logical tools you use are limited to the task at hand. The logic of mathematics is limited to quantity, and physics is limited to movement or change. The relative aspect of time discussed by Einstein is based on change. If something doesn’t change, time doesn’t exist. All other things that can be observed are bound to these two disciplines. However, when we discuss *quality*, we discuss an aspect that possesses no measuring stick, no standard, no defining logical progression. Because it cannot be measured, it falls beyond the scope of science. This is the basic problem with metaphysics. How can our quality of life be measured? What are the measuring sticks or standards?”

“Is that not what religions try to establish?” Daniel asked. “Doctoral standards? What

determines which standard you follow? I guess that's the question."

"Yes, and not an easy one. Belief in a moral standard should happen through discernment—what we believe is true about something until proven different by a newly defined truth. Unfortunately, like the Lead Books, many people blindly believe a thing because they really want it to be so."

"Blind faith?" Daniel asked. "It has been touted as essential."

"Which aspect of blind faith are you referring to? Noun or verb? The verb is taking action because you really believe in a thing. The noun is belief without discernment. I think God discourages the latter because it cannot withstand examination or trial. Someone who believes just because they're told to is most likely not working within a relationship. They could be being used. This is why one-way idols appear. It is only through discernment that we discover elements of truth, and I feel that any method that seeks truth should be considered holy."

"Then to continue the thought," Mark joked, "science is holy."

"Yes." Mikel nodded. "I would agree that the methods can be holy. Logic could be viewed as holy, but remember, something we consider logical must be reasonable. The ability to reason is holy because it comes from God. I wouldn't venture so far as to call it divine reasoning. Math is logical, but is it reasoning? The scientific method could be viewed as a holy approach since it is not the ultimate discerner of truth; it only claims what is not true. Where we get into trouble is mistaking man's reasoning for divine reasoning, which is the ultimate truth. The Church's role is to keep these separated. Now, just how we go about doing that is one of the problems that divide the faithful."

"I guess for me . . ." Mark paused. "The argument of faith is the issue."

"Christianity is alone in its belief that only by the grace of God can we commune with

him. Simply, he cannot be compelled. When we look at the basis of mysticism, magic, and the like, these acts are supposed to compel God or tap into his divine reasoning. Christianity has no mechanism to compel. There are no deeds that can compel Him. As our Lord has said, ‘He will know the truth of our faith in him by our fruit . . .’ Or as Saint James put it, ‘Faith without works is dead.’” Mikel sighed. “It’s not my intent to give a sermon here, only to illustrate the mechanisms the forgers of these so-called holy books were trying to use. They aimed to strike at the root with a direct attack on the legitimacy of Jesus Christ as a divinity—a divinity the Jewish and Muslim traditions were, and still are, unwilling to accept.”

Mikel stood up and began to stretch as the conversation came to a close. “The way I see it, these events could be nothing more than a proverbial Morisco ploy, or a nefarious hand is steering them, as evidenced by the embedded message.”

“Well.” Daniel stood. “There was an attempt to form a unified church, but it failed. And now we have all the makings for it to rise: global connectivity, human ethics over biblical law, and the reemergence of pantheistic religions.”

Mikel nodded. “Yes, and the state religions of Shinto and Communism are failing. The deceived are being assimilated back into previous culturalistic beliefs—the lore of the ancients, if you will—but that’s an aspect unto itself. What disturbs me is this cloning. One *did* attack you after a most unusual conversation.”

“So the clones do play a hand in this,” Mark added. “Is that what you’re alluding to?”

“Perhaps. We must explore the nature of these clones. I’ll want both of you back here at eight p.m. on Saturday. We’ll be meeting with Father Stempora, our resident expert on demonic possession.”

Mark drew back in disbelief. “You want us to meet with an exorcist?”

“Think of him as a Christian therapist,” Mikel replied. “He’s well versed in both demonic possession and affliction. Exorcism is a Greek word for binding with an oath. If these clones are bound to something, I would like to know what that something is.”

“Hey, is there some kind of manual with that?” Mark quipped.

Daniel laughed. “*De Exorcismis et Supplicationibus Quibusdam*, or *Exorcism and the Prayers of Others*, is an updated exorcism manual approved by the pope in ’98.”

“Hey, I was just kidding. What do I know?”

“Exactly.” Daniel turned to the archbishop and offered his hand. “Mikel, we thank you for the excellent wine. Is there anything we can do to prepare for the meeting with Father Stempora?”

“No, but I would remind you both to keep this under wraps. If this Raven group infiltrated the Church in the sixteenth century, it would undoubtedly be a lot easier to do it today. I’ll leave you both with that thought. Good night.”