

999AD: Apocalyptic Awakening
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CHAPTER 1
CHAPTER 2
CHAPTER 3
CHAPTER 4
CHAPTER 5
CHAPTER 6
CHAPTER 7
CHAPTER 8
CHAPTER 9
CHAPTER 10
CHAPTER 11
CHAPTER 12
CHAPTER 13
CHAPTER 14
CHAPTER 15

CHAPTER 1

In the Golden Age of Caesar, all roads in Gaul led to Rome. By the year of the New Lord 500 A.D., the Roman build highways that kept the various cultures of the Empire connected led only to other roads that were more wild grass than road. Three centuries later, trees came in to fill in the spots between the wild grasses, and the remains of human bones of those slain by barbarians, roving bandits and the most merciless invaders of them all, disease and starvation. By 999 AD, the roads were all but gone, dense forests which forbade most forms of human travel taking their place, thankfully. The Viking demons from the North would have to find other ways into the thatched hut hobbles where emaciated Christians struggled to survive and, on a good day, celebrated what blessings they could negotiate from Nature's cruel hand in ways that were part Pagan and part Christian.

The woods provided you with wood to build your house, fuel for your fires and a barrier to keep vicious raiders, Christian and Pagan alike, at a distance. Norsemen from distant lands who sought to loot, pillage and leave the survivors of the raid to scratch out a living from what was left. And French speaking Christian villages whose leaders sought to enslave you and take your lands for no other reason than that they could. From your side of the thick brush and forested slopes you watched but never journeyed into, you could hear wild animals. Some you knew, as you killed them for meat. Others you drew pictures in your mind about, as no one ever saw them. After all, the forest and the world beyond were a terrible place, and if it belonged to anyone, it belonged to the devil. God owned the village and the Church, which owned the people. Men, and women, were caught in the middle of these perceptions, perhaps realities. Cold, hunger and diseases were always in more abundance than warmth, food or health. Life was harsh, brutish, and short, but, for better or worse, it was still life. Children did still have some opportunities to experience happiness before becoming adults, and adults did love their children in ways they could never love themselves, or each other.

But all this would change, as it was December, 999 AD. The days were getting shorter, the nights longer, and the end of the world as men, woman and even the clergy knew it would be a matter of only days at hand. According to what the Priests read from books no one could really understand, it was the Second Coming of Christ, a welcomed event for Christians whose lives were more misery than merriment, and who nobly did God's work on earth. These were people who endured hardship after hardship, loss of one child after another, loss of each of their senses and perhaps limbs as they grew past the 'ripe' old age of 40, without taking their own lives. People who hated and feared the Priests who kept 'time' with a calendar that no one could read. A Calendar that now said that at the year 1000 AD was at hand. Their time was up, very, very soon.

Brother Thomas gazed down the narrow window of his cell in the Monastery of St. Pierre, noting another wagon load of goods being carted in to the gates of the ancient three-man-high-walled Roman stone fortress which still towered over any structures built during the Christian Era. "More animal skins and furs, Guenevere," he said to the only companion he allowed inside his cell other than his own inner demons, his stare caught by the fear-infused eyes on the slain animal heads. This time it was three does, and a wild boar and at least a dozen rabbits barely old enough to have their own babies to lose. "Animal sacrifices for Souls who are less than animals, God help them, my good friend," the old Monk, 30 years of age, at least a hundred in life-experience, lamented to his still silent friend, who opened her mouth in a sorrowful sigh then turned around on her back, and went to sleep again. There was nothing she could do about what was going on outside the cell walls and fortress gates anyway. Indeed Thomas felt like taking that big sleep himself. He had, despite his inner wishes, survived to see the dawn of another winter. As Thomas saw, and felt it, death was the final and ultimate mercy life afforded those who endured it, but this law seemed to apply only to man, and woman. These slain animals did nothing to deserve becoming offerings the village dwellers and serfs were giving to the Church so that their Souls would be unburdened of wealth, and therefore be admissible to Heaven. But Heaven and Hell would engulf the world after 999 AD came to a close in preparation for the New Millennium, everyone on earth to be assigned a place in either realm according to what they had 'offered' the Lord, and the Church, of their own free will.

There were other offerings as well. Some of the more well off villagers unburdened themselves of gold and silver, and newly re-discovered form of wealth, money. The most valuable cargo was made of the most terrifying kind of flesh. Mothers fearing for the Salvation of their children would bring in the weakest, or sometimes the strongest, of their offspring, donating them to the Church for whatever use "God had of them". Few children came willingly, and of the two dozen delivered over Christmas week, half were already being prepared for exportation to undisclosed locations in the Spring. But such was nothing new. The Nunneries all over what used to be the

Roman Empire were filled with girls offered to the Church by families seeking salvation, along with worldly favor from grateful and sexually-gratified clergy in the meantime. No, nothing was new. Just old crap, amplified.

“I would give my Soul, if it is still worth anything, for one thing to come in on one of those carts as an offering,” Brother Thomas smiled sadly as his beloved Guenevere opened up her eyes. “Books,” he continued to his closest, and perhaps only real friend over his three year tenure at the Monastery as Guenevere nuzzled next to knee. “Books based in HUMAN speculation and imagination, based in reason rather than fear,” he lamented to his very female companion, as she rubbed her soft neck against his clammy, cold shoulder. It would mean certain death if she was discovered with him as she was, according to the new Abbot, a messenger of Satan, black as night, eyes that shined brightly in the dark, and possessing the ability to move anywhere in the village and monastery that pleased her without being noticed. But the feline who chose to come ashore three years ago had found Thomas, somehow. She not only kept out the rats that lived to eat his manuscripts, but the demons who wanted to stop him from writing new ones.

Thomas stroked Guenevere’s belly, then his still-red hair, noting once again the shaven crown which was regulation for Brothers of his order. How he longed to have hair growing there as it had in the golden days before he joined the Order, the only choice available given a short career in the military or even more deadly options his family had chosen for him. How he missed the secular days before he was ‘saved’ when he could roam the streets and choose abstinence of one thing or another rather than have it be inflicted upon him. And how he yearned to be surrounded by his most favorite friends. “Books.” he said again to the independent black cat he trusted more than anyone around him, or even himself.

Guenevere was hungry and the monastery was well provisioned with food from villagers who had little enough for themselves. “Here,” Thomas said, throwing his friend two cherry-sized pieces of chicken which he hoped was not meat of more human origin. “Eat hearty,” he smiled at the feline friend who purred back something which Thomas allowed himself to think was conversation, and which sounded like a human baby already grown ‘life experienced’. He smelled the meat again. It was a gift, something the donator insisted on giving to Thomas. Duke Lancelotierre was the richest man in St. Pierre, no matter what currency was in use, who, legend said, was descended from Knights who served with Charlemagne. Legend also held that the Duke in his younger days fought bravely against Islamic Moors, Druid Saxons and, according to the legend, Jewish Vikings, single-handedly saving St. Pierre from invasion time and time again. To be sure that the Duke kept the legend going the way he wanted it remembered, Lancelotierre needed someone who could read, and write. Thomas fit the bill, as he could also ‘compose’ new books, a distinction which separated Thomas from his fellow monks. As for who Thomas really was, that was a secret which he kept from everyone, even Guenevere. It was as well kept a secret as the fact that Duke Lancelotierre, the champion funder of a Monastery whose job it was to collect books, and a collector of books himself, couldn’t read a word himself.

Secrets were as plentiful as hunger and death-promoting dysentery in the dwindling days of the world in 999 AD. As was the fact that what Thomas wrote about what really happened in those dwindling dark days, and the very real demonic creature in woods, was put to paper with mirror writing. An inverted script upon which the date 999 was 666.

Though far from biologically dead, Thomas knew he was dying, at least in the ways that mattered most to him. With no one to read the books he wrote, and no one to share the ideas that came to his ever-active mind, the process of death was already on its way. No matter how colorfully he told the facts about the way the world in fact was through fictionalized account with ‘marks on paper’, the world was running out of readers, and ideas. After all, more was dying in 999 AD than people. Ideas were dying, because no one wanted to hear them, build on them, or come up with their own. And those who had new ideas were crucified for them, or worse. And even to mount a play, the most popular ways to relate to people about the world accessible through ‘marks on paper’, was a slow process. Thomas could write a new book in two months. Most were just ‘stories’, based in how he wished the world would be, but real fact always inspired the fiction, and what the characters did was based in scientific fact. As was the logical possibility that the various ‘magical’ devices the half-fictionalized players in the ‘myths’ used would be built in the ‘real’ world in better times. Instructions for their construction were clearly written down, the designs for these ‘wonder machines’ awaiting a workman with the money, hands and courage to put them together, the ‘miracle medicines’ thus far only tested on a few rats Thomas could trap or the even fewer human patients he had the opportunity to cure.

It would take much longer for any of Thomas' books, be they about scientific fact or human fiction, to go through the process of being read, or copied. He had no army of Monks to transcribe his writings, and no Army of Soldiers to force people to at least listen to the words. That all too painful soul vs. mind argument with its inevitable conclusion came to Thomas once again, as he saw the winter sun slowly sneak its way over the horizon of a world he loved, hated, and was doomed to serve.

"Ideas cause us and others to suffer, so to prevent suffering, which is good, one should not produce or perpetuate any new ideas," his weary mind shouted at his Soul in Aristotle 'logic'. The rest of the argument continued as he held his painful and overworked wrists, his ink-stained fingers aching as the winter air become colder and wetter. "And since to serve others is to alleviate suffering, since new ideas cause suffering, it is my duty to not provide the world with new ideas."

It made sense. And since the world was coming to an end anyway, at least according to the Abbot, what difference would it make anyway? He stared at the books he wrote for...someone. Someone other than the people in St. Pierre. As he had no known heir of his own, at least that he knew about, perhaps someone else's sons or daughters. Maybe some of the shivering sons and daughters in the courtyard who were being lined up for a head shearing, as they were donated as 'lambs of God'. Yes, for those children, or someone else's, or perhaps Sebastian's literate rodent relatives, Thomas had to keep writing. At least till 'the world' would end at the stroke of midnight on December 31, 999 AD., otherwise read as...666 DA.

Thomas gave voice to the ominous numerical coincidence, and recalled everything else about the last year, and decade, which had gone 'in reverse' to the plan of Life. The Life Promoting Salvation of Christianity seemed if anything to be the kiss of death for any people who embraced it. From his own travels, which he dared not tell anyone about, and the stories he heard from Jews who wandered into St. Pierre, whose language Thomas knew all too well from his own 'forbidden' childhood, he surmised that as soon as a people became absorbed into the Catholic Church, they were invaded by Pagans. And Pagans who remained Pagan were always the fiercest conquerers. The blessings of Christianity even made the Viking's weak. Maybe it wasn't Christ who was at fault, but the 'anti-Christ's' who seemed to pop up everywhere, professing His Name from books they never allowed their 'flock' to read. And which Thomas, thankfully, remembered, as best as he could at least, from those golden times in Moorish Spain when he learned to read, write and that most feared of tasks---think.

Thinking led to speculation, then activation of the senses. Thomas imagined what it would be like to hear the 'final trumpet' as the world came to an end, as Abbott Philip kept proclaiming to the hungry villagers. To smell the fire of burning flesh of Souls damned to hell, perhaps including that of the corpulent Abbott, or perhaps Thomas' own sufficiently-fed body. To feel on his clammy and cold skin the warm, bright Light of the Messiah who was coming for loyal Christians, as well as, according to his innermost non-spoken wishes, deserving Jews.

The trumpets did blast on that cold December morning. Three 'hawk' bursts from the North Tower. By the commotion outside his door, and the rush of people of all walks of life running to the safety of the Monastery, it meant only one thing. "Vikings!"

It was dangerous work, manning the towers. Given to the most alert, and the most expendable. By the sound of the hawk this time, it was Roland, the Miller, whose eyes could see further than any bird, and Village Idiot Peter, whose nose could smell more keenly than any dog, wild or domesticated, and who, if asked could see even further than Roland. Both, in their way, were 'good lads', according to words spoken about them in public. By the sound of the last dwindling humanly-evoked 'hawk' cry, perhaps dead ones. This was not another one of the drills which the Abbott and the Duke enforced upon the village of St. Pierre to remind them of the constant need for their protection.

"To the cellar! Now!" Brother 'Blind' William yelled in to Thomas before he could send Guenevere on her way. "And if you don't want that witches' rat to get eaten, be sure that she finds her way to someplace else."

Thomas gave a silent prayer to God for William's understanding. Maybe in the urgency of the moment and the coming of the end of the world, William had acquired enough humanity to care about 'Soul-less' animals. Under his arm were three books, painfully transcribed by his own hand while his eyes could still see the print, but

never officially read, as the Abbott valued a Monk's ability to copy the letters of scripture rather than to read the words. William blurted out something in Latin which he thought meant "Now, Brother! For the end is near", as Thomas gathered the books which bore the cover of approved scripture but whose interior pages were the writings of man, rather than the rantings of men who thought they were God. The penalty for such an offense was death, but Jesus, if He was not already killed by the Vikings in the North woods, would understand.

Feeling his way down to the Roman-built tunnels with his walking stick, and the senses in his fingers that opened up soon after his eyes started to shut down, William led a Guenevere-less Thomas, the other Monks, and the Nuns who the Abbott kept around for reasons no one spoke about, to the cellar. Villagers came in from the gates and set up the dirt and sod planks over their new dwellings. The Duke and Duchess' quarters were made ready under the Roman stones which looked more like floors to the earth rather than walls hiding another castle. Quiet and swift was the transition to the underground city build by Ceasar's legions to protect themselves against the Gauls. Now the descendents of the Gauls hoped that the Vikings, the new Barbarians, would not know that human life can exist under the ground. It had protected life while the invading Nordic hordes destroyed property before.

Prince and Pauper, Saint and Sinner, alike followed Blind William down the tunnels which were barely visible through the labyrinth of tunnels leading to the 'Last Cathedral', as it had been named. Rodents walking on their legs or flying with wings lined the way, even though Guenevere and her more elusive 'witch dog' feline friends, did their best to keep them free of them. The peasants from the village walked behind the Duke, the Duchess and their personal soldiers, men a foot taller than anyone else whose origins were unknown, who spoke little and whose eyes remained deep inside their shadowy sockets. The Abbott proclaimed the end of the world again, and Salvation to those who abandoned all of their worldly possessions to Divinely Chosen Dukes and the Church, and who confessed all of their Sins to His Priests. The older the peasant, the deeper they reached into their hold-ridden pockets to surrender the last of their earthly belongings to the Soldiers of the Duke, and the Soldiers of God.

The latter now included Thomas, who tried to hide his most personal books from the Duke, the illiterate scoundrel who felt important collecting them and who sat on his throne 'reading' stories to the children of the village that had nothing to do with what was on the page. The Duke was dressed in most 'holy' robes, burlap which was tailor made to make his underdeveloped chest appear strong, his stomach small, his shoulders Herclean, adorned with a cross around his neck that contained almost as much gold as that around the Abbott's gout-enlarged neck. His wife, the Duchess, chose a completely different attire. Her gown seemed Pagan, open enough to any man who dared or wanted to see through the thin fabric which the Duke boasted was 'silk' from the lands East of Italy. When the Duke wasn't looking, she begged any man who wished it a look through it, and even tempted Sister Bernadette to brave a longing stare. Even the Abbott felt tempted by her alluring body which reaked of something everyone remembered, or perhaps imagined, from the Dark Pagan times---Life and Happiness.

"We must move forward!" Blind William said to the congregation, hearing a commotion above them which was getting very close. "The Devil is approaching!"

"Hello! I know you are in there!" a voice rang out from above, trembling the earth above them.

"Roland!" Thomas said.

"Possessed by the Devil!" Abbott Philip proclaimed. "We must move on."

"NO!!!" Sister Bernadette insisted. "Even the devil has a Soul worth saving," she observed coming out of her mouth. Thomas recognized it as something he had said to her once, and which found its way into the 'marks on paper', that particular volume under his arm. He hoped that the clenching of the burlap bag containing it would not give it away, or him away, or the details about that night when he and Sister Bernadette started to discourse about love, then got tempted by lust. That night she said he fell asleep, 'before anything happened', and said things in her sleep in a tongue she didn't recognize but that she remembered somehow from her own childhood from parents who died before she was rescued by Abbott Phillip.

"The devil is worth saving?!!!!" the Abbott fumed, staring down at Bernadette in the manner that abusive fathers in the village looked at their own 'defective' offspring. "Is this what you are saying?"

“No,” the Duchess offered, taking Bernadette’s hand in ways which, to the eye of those who knew of such things, was very loving in ways not possible between men, as they were, and a women, as they were trained by men. “The devil has a Soul and since all Souls are created by God, the devil’s Soul is worth saving as well,” the ultimate power behind the Pulpit and the Throne smiled.

“And that Soul will be saved, as part of God’s plan, if we save this demon’s Soul above us,” Thomas offered as Roland’s voice from above the trap door to the world above became more hoarse, echoing and desperate.

“If we must, we must,” the Abbott grumbled, motioning to Thomas and his fellow monks to open the door to the ‘demon’ above, allowing him access to the tunnel and, ultimately, the Last Cathedral. Father Phillip said some more prayers, in Latin which he both mispronounced and most probably didn’t understand. The followers not involved with the rescue of the rescuable demon above knelt, said ‘Amen’s’ and ‘Heavenly Father Forgive Me’s’. Then, from above, lifted down, with eyes closed by the body bearers, at the orders of the Abbot which were not negotiable, not only one demon but two.

The first was Roland, his eyes ripped out, the sockets blackened with tar. His still-breathing chest penetrated with a Pagan spear bearing the likeness of gods no one, even Thomas or the Duchess, recognized. “If your eyes see evil, pluck them out,” came from the second eyeless ‘demon’ body, a Viking with a wooden cross around his neck. Still holding onto his sword and the last breaths of life himself. “Is this the gateway to Heaven?” He asked in a voice that sounded more boyish than that of a man, or demon beast.

“It is the tunnel to Valhalla,” the Duchess assured him, taking hold of his blood-soaked arms with her warm, slender fingers, only to have them pulled away by the Abbott.

The blind Nordic invader wielded his sword against an enemy he couldn’t see, then lost grip on it, reaching out with his blood soaked hand with every ounce of desperation left in him for that extension of himself and connection to his Ancient Soul. To Thomas’ eyes, the Viking’s face seemed very human, but his helmet had horns on it, strangely.

“The Devil’s horns!” Abbott Phillip proclaimed. “Around a demon’s face!” he continued, putting a rag over the eyes of the dying man, demon or, more practically, Nordic visitor who came from a people who brought nothing but terror to St. Pierre for two, terrorized generations.

“I firrounddd tthheemmm innn the thee...woods?” stuttered exhausted hunchbacked messenger Peter, who somehow had managed to carry both of the almost dead corpses in.

“The North Woods, Peter?” Thomas asked the Village Idiot who everyone loved, but few really liked, or respected. Why Peter was left behind in the evacuation was no mystery. How he found Roland and the Christianized Viking was another matter. Perhaps God really did protect drunks and fools.

Bernadette tore off a portion of her robes to dress the open wounds on Roland’s chest, most particularly the five stared Pentangle carvings on their chests. “You will be alright.”

“As will you,” the Duchess assured the Viking, placing the sword back into the hand of the dying Viking who seemed more human than invader.

“As soon as you tell me about where your ships are! And how many men you have!” Duke Lancelloteire insisted, stepping on the hand of dying Viking.

“And as soon as you tell me where you got this!” Abbott Phillip sneered, grabbing hold of the cross around the ‘pagan demons’ neck. “Where did you get this!!!?” he demanded.

The Viking pointed to the sky above the spider-covered stone ceiling.

“II...III thhiinkkkk heee...said...he...stole it?” Peter offered, in the way of a question. Everything he said was indeed a question, as he felt that he was always asking permission to speak.

“There are Vikings who have converted to Christianity,” Thomas said, noting the tools on the Viking which seemed more in keeping with a lone exploring pioneer than a marauder or scout. “And who have become farmers rather than raiders.”

“A Viking becoming a Christian is as believable as a Jew pledging allegiance to Christ,” Abbott Phillip barked back at Thomas. “And as for this animal begging for Christ’s mercy! Beg now for mercy!”

Phillip rammed the blind Viking’s crucifix into his neck, chocking the life out of him. It wasn’t unjustified. The Abbott had lost much wealth to the Vikings, and a few Sisters who had become more than just fellow clergy-persons. Even Thomas felt some kind of rage which must be avenged, Guenevere’s own kittens lost to mauraders who could have been of this Viking’s tribe. But it was the half-Pagan Duchess who represented Christ’s mercy most.

She stepped in, a whisper into her husband’s ear convincing him to back off. A discrete stroke of Abbott Philip’s cheek converting his anger for the Viking into very human grief. She placed the Norseman’s very European crucifix and his Sword in his now cold, white and shaking hand. He smiled, said a prayer to Odin and Jesus, then expired, his Soul going...somewhere else, the legacy of his life clearly evident in the handle of the sword...a likeness of a mother and two children on it, very human.

Meanwhile, life left Roland’s body, leaving a portrait of terror in his pale, white face. Over it, a childlike, apologetic Peter. “I’mmmm sorry?” he ‘asked’ again.

Blind William could see that the end was near, or that safety had to be obtained. He motioned with his stick to move the others into the inner Cathedral. Everyone followed. But hopefully not the demon, or demonic invaders, whoever they were, that seemed to be heralding the end of EVERYONE’S world in St. Pierre.

CHAPTER 2

The Last Cathedral was originally constructed to house offerings to Mars, Venus and Jupiter, the skeletal remains of their statues still on the walls behind the more lifeless frescos of Jesus and Mary. Thomas was envious of the skill and craftsmanship that went into its designs. How fortunate it was that famous Pagan Roman, or most likely clandestine agnostic Greek, Visionary engineers in Ancient Gaul had good builders and money at their disposal. Thomas had neither. As for building the new devises that could revolutionize the world himself, that was an even worse situation. He could hammer more nails into his palms while trying to ram them through wood than any Monk in the Monastery, even Blind William. A predicament which sent him to paper and ink, thinking ever faster than he could ever create, at least in a world that could be touched, felt and verified.

Enough food had been stored over the last ten years in anticipation of the end of the world and to be sure, extra portions of grain and gold had been imported by the Abbott from parishioners. All were given in good faith by common people to give to the gods, or God. Of course, the priests and their patrons outside the walls were entitled over the ages to their commission to keep away marauders, bandits, rats and demons. Five percent in Roman times, ten in these more ‘civilized’ days, which calculated out to five out of every ten units of whatever currency had been offered.

If put on the auction block in the secular world, the gold, silver and bronze adorned items would fetch a king, or even a duke's ransom. But the most special and best protected of the goods kept in the Last Cathedral for as long as anyone could remember was made of wood, now petrified and hard as rock. Bearing no likenesses of gods, God or any bigger than life people.

"Look at it!" Martha, virtuous wife to not-so-virtuous village carpenter Leonard said to the only two real accomplishments in her hard, uneventful life. "Look at that chalice, my children! Behold the Light around it!" she continued, kneeling in front of what was said to be the Holy Grail to Christopher and Christina, whose eyes were still open enough to somehow know that the chalice was just old, their eight year old minds already trained to see the world as it is rather than as it should be..

No one knew if the chalice was indeed drunk from by the Savior in the Holy Land, or a common mercenary fighting Germans in Ancient Gaul. Not even Blind William. Martha looked quite unintelligent kneeling in front of the chalice while everyone else, especially her husband, supervised re-enforcement of the underground walls of the Last Cathedral so it would not collapse on the large number of people it now house, and perhaps protected. Death meant nothing to her. She was sustained by the Light. A Light which Thomas tried to make real in the fictionalized stories he wrote, yet never was able to make his eyes see it, no matter how vividly the printed accounts of it felt or read. Martha's thoughts and speech moved as slowly as an old cow on a hot August afternoon, but because of that, did she see things that no other animal in the forest or scholar in the garden could?

Christopher and Christina smiled and said many 'yes mothers' to Martha's description of the Light around the chalice. On orders from their father, by the looks they exchanged, and the sorrowful words not spoken between them. Had they been born into a more prosperous family, the twins would have become scribes, writers and perhaps even scholars. On more than one occasion, Christopher had requested of Thomas to teach him how to read. Thomas did what he could, but to advance the lad's education in a way that was sustainable, Christopher would have to become a Monk, or learn to be a more clever thief than the Duke. The boys' sharp mind and inquisition spirit precluded ever entering the Clergy. He would be found out too quickly. His advanced intellect gave him the special knowledge that the highest form of intelligence is compassion, for which he would be 'found out' when dealing in the Duke's world of constant competition. No, Christopher was doomed to a life of isolation and loneliness. His sister understood some of this too, enough to be closer to him than brother and sister. But that was another taboo. So many taboos in 999AD. So many 'no' commandments and so few 'yes' mandates. But thankfully, and sadistically, survival was still a mandate everyone knew. And this required action rather than restraint.

Thomas did a count of the number of villagers in the Inner Cathedral. Many were missing, perhaps having fled to the 'far' villages of Leucerna, DeBlanc, or St. Sebastian. He didn't remember most of their names, but recalled their faces, imagining what had happened to them in the hands of the invaders outside. And there was the manner of bringing them into the Cathedral safely, through the secret trap doors and passageways leading away from the village to the place where the 'saved' would survive. In a way that the invading 'demons' up above couldn't find their way into the Cathedral, of course. The stench of burning huts and animal carcasses above could be smelled through the air-holes in the roof of the Cathedral. One nostril full of that pungent and putrid air painted a portrait of hell on earth, wrought by an invading Army that seemed invincible.

There seemed to be no reason why some of the villagers found their way to safety and others didn't. A complicated question, but one which Abbott Phillip had an answer to. Thomas approached the Abbott, whispering into his ear as he prepared the communion wine and wafers to hear the sins of his now very large congregation, their numbers seeming to please the embittered Priest.

"We have to send someone out there to get the others," Thomas whispered into the Abbott's hairy, elephant-like ears.

"It is God's Will that they perish at the hands of the Devil outside," he replied. Every answer to something the Abbott didn't understand or didn't want to deal with was "God's Will".

"It is Jesus' Commandment that we love others as we love ourselves," Thomas replied, angrily.

“See that my congregation lines up in an orderly manner,” the reply from a man who felt God-like in his new robes. Gifts from the Duke, silk with a cross embroidered on it in something metallic that was very valuable. “And if you don’t do as you are told, Brother Thomas, you will suffer in Eternal Damnation,” the stern warning as the Abbott turned around, lifted his head up with a sense of importance, and vulnerability.

“Will you give me absolution too, Father?” Thomas bowed his head.

The old man smiled, graciously, placing his cold hand on the recently shaved patch of skin on Thomas’ head. “Of course.”

“And Blind William?”

“Of course, my son.”

“And the other Monks and Brothers?”

“Yes, everyone will receive absolution tonight. The last night of nights for this world, my son. Without absolution, there is no gateway to Heaven.”

“And you, will you receive absolution, Father?” Thomas’ final reply.

“I do not need Absolution!” the only member in the Monastery officially allowed to give it to anyone in St. Pierre replied, proudly.

“And what of your son, Father?” Thomas’ answer, looking up to see his boss, and protector’s, reaction. “I recall that his name is--“

“---this accusation if blasphemy!” the old man shot back. “On what basis do you say this lie with the Devil’s tongue?”

“On not seeing Bartholemew and his mother, Olivia, amongst those God chose to save by delivering them to this Cathedral on the last night of nights, Father,” Thomas answered, humbly.

The Abbott froze, then stared into the thick, clammy air at ghosts which only he could see. “Who else knows about my accidental sin?”

“Illegitimate ‘SON’, Father. Your SON, and his mother, who still--“

“---You are sure that they are not in the Cathedral? Or the tunnel?”

“I was told that they ran away from the village with the others, but--“

The Abbott held his hand up, silencing his insolent yet well meaning scribe, who he chastised for more than one occasion for wasting paper, ink and the Monastery’s time on non-assigned ‘indulgences’. Or for making mistakes on assigned Scripture copying and having to discard the paper, said discarded paper never found, even by Blind William. But now, Abbott Phillip, the ‘Lion’ of the Monastery seemed more like a lamb, his iron fist shaking with fear.

“I can see what I can do to rescue them,” Thomas offered. “So that the Vikings will not kill Bartholemew, or do worse things to Olivia, Father.”

“Yes...this would be a Christian thing to do.”

“And the identity of his earthly father does remain, confidential, Father.”

“You mean unspoken about, Brother Thomas.”

“Aren’t they the same thing?” the Monk with his own secrets which he hoped remained hidden smiled back to the Abbott.

The rest of the conversation went unspoken, the nuances of the motivations and methodologies summarized in one final Commandment to Thomas. “Do what you can with whoever you need to save the others in our flock from the Devil’s Invasion up above us.”

“While we remain in a ‘heavenly’ place below hell ‘above,’” Thomas thought, logged in to a next line he would put into another book written on ‘lost’ or ‘spoiled’ paper. The scientific part of his mind, the one which had invented no less than a hundred ways men could appear to be wizards by manipulating matter, biology and human perception, said that this was yet another scare invented by someone, somewhere. There was no good reason to suspect or conclude that God would cause the world to end in the year 1000 AD, numbers and measurements of days being a measure invented by man, not created by God. But it did seem ironic, hell above and heaven below. Like the world really was turning upside down. After all, it was 999. And if a dawn was to come on January 1, 1000 AD, perhaps it would rise underground. Certainly the only safe location for those who sought Light and Life from the ravaging of the Invaders’ inferno above.

CHAPTER 3

Though it was Thomas’ idea to look for survivors above, it was Leonard’s ‘honor’ to lead the expedition. A mutual decision by the Abbot and the Duke, the arrangement allowing for forgiveness of the hard-working atheist’s sins against God and debts owed to earthly ‘royalty’. As for the party comprising the body of that expedition, it was the body and sometimes resident mind of Peter. He had the eyes that could see things in the distance that no one else could, and the lack of common sense to stay away from danger. And since God protected fools, Peter was invincible. After all, the village idiot whose brain seemed to be the only thing defective in him had seen the Viking hordes before anyone else did. Smelt them too. And there was another sense that Peter had, which he opened up after leading village thinker Thomas and village worker Leonard to the smoldering ashes and hot smoke outside what looked like it had been the village of St. Pierre a few hours ago.

“Deecemmoonss,” Peter warned, ‘hearing’ the earth with his feet, then confirming it with his fingers. “Deecommons that way, that way, that way and that wwaaaaay,” he continued, referring to each of the four directions.

“He’s crazzyyy” Leonard smirked, eyeing some of the Duke’s special treasures scattered in the woods, being dug up not by Vikings, but wild boars. “I’m going to get my rightful salary. You two listen for demons,” he continued. To the tune of Gregorian chant with very carnal lyrics of his own, Leonard strode into the now exposed treasure chest to acquire his just reward for so many back breaking labors done for the Duke, and so many other discredionary services for his wife, having boasted the latter in superficial details to Thomas, but never confessing them to the Abbot.

It all seemed strange to Thomas. Where were the Vikings? Why did they burn the village so quickly? And why would the treasures the Duke was hiding from the Abbot, the villagers or perhaps even his wife, be found by wild boars? Upon reaching no answers relating to this world, he sought explanations from others. “Are those boars that you heard with your feet and fingers demons?” he asked Peter.

“Yes!” the village idiot proclaimed. “Ddddemmonns everrrrywhere...Everywhere!” Peter gave out a sound which was half animal and half human. Boars approached from all sides of the village, from every corner of the thick woods. Some had tusks, most had remnants of what looked like flesh on their snouts, some of that flesh attached to what looked like jewelry--Christian jewelry. All were hungry for blood, or something else Peter had within his body or the sac which he never opened which remained with him at all times.

Peter shielded Thomas behind him, shaking off the beasts with a shake of an his ‘demon stick’, an old Druid walking cane upon which was mounted a cross made of iron, made to shine like it was silver. Common sense told Thomas that the ‘demon beasts’ fled because Peter knew how to shine the sun’s light from it like a mirror into the animal’s faces. A sense of human urgency told Thomas to find Leonard.

“Nooo.. Youuuu... stay here, Broootthherr Thomasss,” Peter stuttered as he pushed Thomas into a safe hiding place amidst what used to be the village blacksmith shop and ran into the woods to fetch the man who had always abused him most. Onward the village idiot ran towards Leonard, who was now being attacked from all sides by what seemed like possessed demon beasts.

Thomas tried to run after Peter but he was stuck. Something was holding him back, but it was not fear, a familiar ‘friend’ that nullified his courage so many times before, and all those many places ago before he fled to Saint Pierre. No, it was something real this time. A wooden plank, restraining his ankle but not breaking it, ‘miraculously’ from a fallen piece of burnt timber tipped over when Peter ran to save Leonard, in what used to be Leonard’s blacksmith hut, and personal castle.

No boars or Vikings attacked Thomas. Every manner of assailant seemed to be upon Leonard, and now Peter, their form, shape and identity hidden by a layer of black smoke by the village idiot who seemed to be smart enough to know what courage was, and to use it. Still, Peter stuttered with every word amidst the now black clouds that covered the woods. And still, Leonard called out for Peter in that demanding, condescending tone which was ‘just his way’, according his so often bruise-faced wife.

Thomas pulled as hard as he could to get loose, but to no avail. Then, an option found its way in front of his guilt ridden eyes. An axe, Viking in origin, capable of cutting off a useless ankle so the rest of the body could be of use, a leather strap to stop the bleeding. So that Thomas could be of some help to Leonard, Peter and whoever else from St. Pierre was hiding in the woods. Peter would have done it. Jesus probably would have. But would Plate or Aristostle have done so? No, ‘thinkers’ were too busy calculating the geometry of it all. But thankfully, that knowledge of geometry gave Thomas the idea to use the ax as a lever, pushing the plank upward, inch by inch, till he pulled his leg free. He hobbled as quickly as he could towards the black smoke and the screaming behind it, ax in hand and prepared to use it. But when Thomas arrived, it was too late. The boars were gone. As was Peter. As were the eyes and tongue from Leonard’s still breathing body. Those instruments of vision and speak lay on the treasure chest of the Duke, blood staining the gold and silver, making them all look like rust and rotted wood. Leonard pointed to his neck, begging Thomas to cut his throat.

“No...I ccaaan’ttt.,” Thomas found himself stuttering, worse than Peter ever did. “I caann’ttt...”

But Leonard was insistent. With the last ounce of strength in his partially eviscerated, but not dead body, he motioned for the executioner he could hear, but not see, to take his life. Then, the privately-confessed atheist crossed himself.

Thomas said a quick prayer, first a Christian one in Latin, to Jesus, which made Leonard nod with assurance. Then in another tongue which he dared not speak in front of anyone in St. Pierre, remembering noble acts his ancestors did in Masada to their loved ones when besieged by the Romans, which made him smile with an Inner Peace. Could Leonard also have secretly been a ‘Christ killers’, as Thomas was in his life before joining the monastery, and in every act he did in its service? Maybe so, or maybe not. Something which Thomas and Leonard

would discuss on the 'other side'. In heaven, perhaps, or perhaps in hell if necessary. But there was no winning in any case, as Jews didn't believe in heaven or hell.

Thomas' first cut against the neck muscles and into artery was firm, hard and effective. As his father had done countless times as a butcher in the village of 'Christ Killers' that disappeared from the face of the map when Christians rushed in to purify the population by exterminating most of it. On that night when Thomas was still unable to take human life, even in defense of humanity. Indeed, ever since he was a bookish lad in his father's shop, Thomas had avoided having to kill chickens, or wealth-seeking Christians, or anyone else. But here he was, blood on his hands. He had killed his first man. It was not evil. Just necessary. And in a way he feared most, killing Leonard was effortless, and frighteningly enjoyable.

Then, as if the Devil read Thomas' mind, more flames and smoke emerged, accompanied by eerie sounds emanated from what remained of the village, from voices that sounded more demonic than human. If there was such a thing as hell on earth, this was it. The sight of it all felt like a burning torch inside Thomas' eyes, even when closed.. Peter emerged from the smoke, beckoning Thomas to follow him. "Nnnnoowww" he said, covering Thomas' eyes with what felt like a silk cloth soaked in urine. "Thhiss wwaayyy", the studdering fool directed, listening to the earth with his now bare feet and blood-soaked fingers.

Like an injured rat, Thomas followed Peter's shadow back to the only source of light that seemed to be left in his world. An underground Pagan temple now crowded with doomed Christian sinners who hoped to become saved saints once the end of the inferno 'above' gave way to something...if indeed there was to be a 'something' by January 1, 1000 above to ground to come back to.

CHAPTER 4

Had Peter led Thomas around in circles? The smoke in his nostrils burnt his nose, face and eyes. Those ocular portholes were covered well enough to not see anything along the path leading to a now stinking hole in the ground. A fall into the depths of the earth that seemed to last forever. Down a hole stinking of rotting flesh, bat manure and fear. But the Cathedral was a safe place, the darkened walls of the frowning faces on the frescos a feast to Thomas' terrified eyes.

"What happened?" Blind William asked, a curious scar on his forehead.

"I don't know..." Thomas replied, noting the mark of the cross sketched into Blind William's forehead in fresh blood, coated by tar. No one else in the Cathedral seemed to have such a mark, except the Abbott, and the monks who still remained inside. Now only two of the fourteen who had originally entered. "What happened?" Thomas asked. "Where are all of the other brothers?"

"Buried in the earth," William's reply, pointing to a tunnel that had collapsed.

"Or buried in smoke on top of it," Thomas thought, and gave voice to in words.

"They were collected in prayer. A spiritual conference with the Abbott when---"

"--The books they were writing are---"

"---Safe," William smiled. "As are the ones you copied."

"And wrote?" Thomas dared to ask.

William nodded 'yes', but barely noticeably. His 'no' boss stood behind him, casting a shadow of death on Thomas' spirits and penetrating his face with a stare of condemnation. "The survivors above?" Abbott Phillip asked with a very fatherly concern in his voice for those Thomas was entrusted to save.

Thomas couldn't give the Abbot an answer. All he could do was defer to his guide, Peter, who had vanished. "He was...here a moment ago."

"Leonard." the Abbott snorted in the stagnant underground air through red hot nostrils. "The man who was supposed to bring back my---!"

"---entrusted member of your flock!" Thomas shot back. "Yes, I know. But I think we did see him." Indeed Thomas did know more about people than he thought he did. As long as the Abbott had personal reasons for sending search parties out, Thomas would be allowed to save whoever was still hiding in the woods above. And he would be allowed permission to bring them to safety from the invaders above, who seemed invisible and, thus far, invincible.

The Abbott went about his business of rationing food for those who still remained after the tunnel collapses which had been 'God's will', then making sure that the gifts brought in to the Church were safely in the cubicle behind the altar. A room to which he alone had the key. After all, it was his job to be sure that offerings to God were given to the Lord, so that those souls who gave them would be secured their place in Heaven after the Second Coming, which was about to come in less than a day, as measured by worldly time.

It was left to Thomas to explain the circumstances of Leonard's passing to his family. "He died bravely," were the words which found their way out of the still proudly scholastic monk's mouth. "In the manner of Hercules, Achilleus and Hector. In the defense of his comrades." He said to tearful wife Martha, terrified daughter Christine, and suspicious son Christopher. The rest of the story he related had to deal with how Leonard fought against Viking invaders as they tried to pursue villagers who found hiding places in the thick woods and inside hidden caves inside the cliff walls that kept St. Pierre 'safe' from strangers from the outside world...so far, anyway. But to Thomas' credit, and personal pride, he told of none of his own heroic efforts, or for that matter, any virtuous efforts, as Christopher and then the Duke pointed out.

Thomas retold the story, three times, being sure to repeat each lie, boast or hopeful speculation masquerading as fact accurately, as the remaining members of the 'to be saved' population of St. Pierre gathered around him. Now less than 20 in number, thanks to the exodus some tried to take against the Abbott's specific orders, having been 'taken' by an earthquake that collapsed the tunnels. Generated by the devil's 'elephants driven by Jewish minions on Christian souls who would never see the Second Coming', according to what the Abbott had said, and what most of the 20 still believed. Amongst them, at least in Thomas' accounting, was Bernadette, a Nun who never raised her eyes to look at men, or women, and who had not uttered a single word in the three years he had self-interned himself at the Monastery. At the opposite end of the room, the Duke's wife, whose coral green eyes shone like a wild deer's, in daylight or darkness, who always seemed to be looking right through you.

The Duchess stood by and watched as Thomas' integrity was challenged. No one knew her real name except the Duke, but most every man in the village knew her body very well, particularly when the Duke was away on business. Most of the women privately knew her reputation for turning their adequately-paid men into sinners, whether they wanted to be or not. A sinful arrangement and a dangerous one. But for even the most religious commoners, to let their children starve would have been even a greater transgression against the Lord.

"I told you the truth...as I know and feel it," Thomas said, as the temptress he had politely refused stared angrily at him, ready to extract her revenge.

"And saw it?" young Christopher offered, cynically.

"Yes, with closed eyes," the Duke added.

"Which were, as I am sure, wide open when you were up there," the Duchess offered, convincingly. She rose from her seat in the back of the room and took center stage, respectfully beautiful, refined and confident. "You

all know Brother Thomas as an admirable man. A man of knowledge, courage and virtue.” She approached Thomas, the appearance of her hand on her shoulder being that of a Noble woman to a scholarly man, though her touch felt on the scholar-monk’s now sweat-soaked, cold skin felt like the kind of woman who he would not, or could not, ever take to bed. “What Thomas said it true. We all must do what we can to find whoever is still up above this haven, and bring them home to their families, their loved ones, and their Maker safely.”

Thomas noted with interest that the still Pagan Duchess referred to the Deity as ‘Maker’ rather than ‘God’. He felt with fascination and terror that that a third leg started to sprout from inside his loincloth, its movements manipulated like a puppeteer by the soft and slender fingers of the Duchess on his shoulder. He saw with amazement that Peter indeed was alive, covered with mud, a spade in his hand, stuttering the words everyone needed to hear.

“IIII gggoott the ttunnellll dooooo fixxxeddd,” Peter stammered. “Real ggoodddd,” he smiled.

There was one man who wasn’t smiling. The Duke. The man who protected by means of force, delicate negotiations or secret bribes, the invasion of St. Pierre by other god fearing ‘Christian’ villages around it which fancied themselves as city-states with a Divine Destiny to expand their territory. He knew what the Duchess wanted, and what she would have.

“I think that the bravest and strongest and smartest men should go up to rescue the others,” the longhaired ‘Lordess Lancelotteire’ spoke to the congregation while their leader was away looking after ‘rations and religious matters’. “Yes,” she continued, as she inspected the men as she did so many times in the past when the Duke needed volunteers to go to war for ‘the public welfare’ of his village. “The bravest, strongest and smartest,” the Duchess said again and again, her stare ending up on the Duke himself this time.

“The strongest and bravest of us would be Peter,” Blind William said, voicing the thoughts in Thomas’ mind before they could come to his mouth.

“But not the smartest,” the Duchess retorted. Everyone in the room agreed, though Peter himself didn’t seem to have an opinion regarding the matter. “We need a man of reason here, who makes his own rules” she added, silently dictating her command to the Duke in a language that he always obeyed but seldom really understood. A language the Duchess spoke to the Duke every time she wanted him to go away on business. Thomas was always privileged to the intricacies of this one way communication. The Duchess wanted him this time, and she would not take ‘no’ for an answer.

The intelligent thing would have been to let the Duke and Peter go ‘up top’ and scout out the woods for survivors, which Thomas sensed were still there, and alive. The stories about the walls collapsing around the ‘sinners’ who tried to leave the Abbot’s benevolent domain didn’t make sense to him. Carrying the discourse in his head further, it led to a contradiction, once again. The answer to what was happening, or about to happen, down below in the safety of the Cathedral had something to do with what was going on up top. The answers to the entire riddle would have to be determined by someone with the brains, and balls, to go up top again. He was prepared for anything, he hoped. Perhaps, he prayed, the cruel and chronically-unjust world actually would come to an end after 999 AD was over, now less than a day away. And whatever God, the devil or the fates had lined up for the New Millennium had to be better than what was allowed to exist till now.

CHAPTEER 5

There was someone ahead of Peter on the way to the remaining escape route from the Cathedral. It was black, could leap like a bird, and crawl into holes better than any gofer. By its footprints it had claws that could rip apart a man's skin or a woman's private part with one swish of its paws. "Anotherrrr demon bbbbeast," the hunch-backed, master tunnel and bridge builder who thought himself master to nobody, even himself, stammered.

"Dinner," the Duke added, taking out his sword, slashing the sides of the cave at what he thought was the beasts advances, and actually drawing some blood on one of the blows. "How would you like your portion of demon beast, Brother Thomas?"

"Shared with whoever is still up above us, hiding, starving, or worse," Thomas replied, silently praying that the Duke would 'lead' the trio to Peter's original destination without a detour to kill the scholar-monk's feline companion Guenevere. By the looks of her, she knew where she was going, retracing her tracks, barely scratched by the Duke's blade, thankfully. In her mouth was a sparrow, freshly caught. The kind of bird that could not live underground. And by the trail Geunevere was taking, the bird had been caught in one of the tunnels that the Abbott said were impassable, collapsed so solidly that not even 'the most baby innocent baby angel' could pass through. So said Peter, who always repeated everything the Abbott told him, word for word. It was an easy way to live, obeying orders from one of the most corrupted 'men of God' the Creator still allowed to remain alive. And a safe way to enter Heaven, one could postulate.

Following Peter's nose and eyes, the Duke led the trio further on, to a hole leading to a wooden latched gate above. Petrified wood, by the looks of it, more rock than lumber. But it camouflaged the exit port well enough so that you couldn't see where you were when you got out.

Peter covered his face with mud, placing branches of fallen trees not yet burnt under his belt and around his head. Thomas did the same. The Duke smirked. "You both want to pretend you are trees, while I know I am a man!" he proclaimed, loudly, to the woods in all directions, smoke from unknown parties beyond their reach merging with an incoming winter fog. A whirling wind made the real trees 'talk' like they really did have banchies in their branches, or perhaps Vikings out for a feast of Christian, and Jewish, blood behind their trunks.

It seemed odd for the Duke to be so confident. Every man who went out with him on soldierly duties recalled that their 'fearless leader' wet his loincloth with fresh urine at the first sight of the enemy, blaming it afterwards on bad ale, or some kind of new spice the cook put into his breakfast. But here he was, unafraid, so it seemed. Walking into the woods alone, in front of his two 'treed' companions, calling out names of those lost

villagers he valued most. Most notably, Bartholemew, and his mother, luring them out by repeating “Papa Phillip loves you both, and will bring you to safety and salvation.”.

How did the Duke know that the most important ‘cargo’ of this expedition to bring back was the Abbott’s illegitimate son and his ‘widow’ mother, who never remarried? But then again, maybe everybody did, and Thomas was the last to know. As a scholar obsessed with discovering or creating new ideas, and ideals, the affairs of people actively meant nothing to him. The only purpose they served was as ‘carrier’ for the fictional stories he wrote to try to find some ideals within the human condition. And places where he could describe wizardry flying carpets, projects of ghost-like images into mid air, flame-blowing madmen, machines that turned clear blue sky into thick black fog with red rain, and all manners of how small twigs from real plants could make giants of midgets, or midgets into gods. As in the story about the ‘fictional’ character of ‘Bishop Geoffry’, whose daughter comes to him at confessional and gets him to confess to her HIS sins before she is herself burnt at the stake. And ‘Sultan Radasa’, a patron of the arts whose wife is sleeping with every man in the Alexandria except him, who has a library of books he has paid hard earned money for, but he can’t read because he is illiterate. And Sister Bernadette, whose dedication to serving God was distorted into making her think that she is the slave of everyone on the earth He created, a work of fact written by Thomas’ hand which at its ending of the tale has a wandering Jew take her hand in marriage and raise four wise AND happy children someplace where the world can never find them.

The sojourn through the woods yielded no survivors, but many footprints, all of which led to wagon wheel tracks which led to open pits with ashes that reeked of something that seemed odd to Thomas’s nose, and painfully familiar from the last search for the dead.

“Peppermint,” the Duke said. “Like my wife has the cook use in the cooking when she wants mutton to taste ‘sweet’ instead of as it is. Roasted sheep.” He smirked, sensing something moving in the trees, and NOT ducking for cover. “Do you think that’s what we are now, my bold and brave ‘treemen’? Roasted sheep?”

“Only if your wife, the Duchess, wants to tastes us,” Thomas smiled, feeling the spirit of levity overtake his smacking tongue. “She can eat wild anything more tastefully than anyone I know, but, as we both know, she sure can’t cook it.”

But the Duke was in no mood for levity. Thomas found a knife edged at his throat, the hand of a very jealous man holding it. “You insult my wife?”

“No...I respect and annnd...” Thomas stammered.

“Llllove her?” Peter offered, with his usual naïve smile, not knowing the real implication of what came out of his mouth.

“YOU love MY wife!” the Duke grunted, throwing Thomas on the ground, the edge of his knife ripping through the first layers of his cold, wet flesh. “I make it possible for you to write books, and even pay you for them, and you love my wife!!!”

Peter fled into the woods, but Thomas stood his ground. He had never accepted the Duchess’ numerous invitations to take her to bed, even though he knew that to honor her in this way could cost him the Duke’s patronage, or perhaps his own life. From a place in him that Thomas couldn’t identify, fear turned into rage, then into affirmation. Before he could think about it, he was on top of the Duke, threatening to end his pathetic and uniformed patron, yet blessed existence with his own blade. “I will NOT die for another man’s sins, or transgressions, or weaknesses, you pathetic, illiterate son of a...”

“...son of a what?” the Duke challenged with a demonic growl. Peter fled into the woods, reciting a prayer in Latin so that his ears would not hear what was to come next. “Son of a WHAT, you ungrateful piece of---!” the Duke grunted with what seemed like the devil’s own voice.

“Detritus?” Thomas smiled back, fully knowing that the Duke’s spoken vocabulary seldom went beyond words concerned with commerce, and that his wife referred to him by that term after Easter Mass. He had accepted

it then as a complimentary term, and seemed to understand it now with the same meaning. “Detritus who admits that you have more detritus between your ears than I have in any of the fingers in my writing hand, Sir.”

Thomas found himself letting the Duke go. The man who never let his ‘subjects’ let him see him sweat labored for at least a minute to catch his breath. He seemed human, and deserving of some Truth in his life. A gift from a God who just might exist after all, Thomas thought. Who sadistically required Thomas to be truthful about one question.

“One way or another, this may be our last day on Earth,” the Duke said to Thomas. “One or both of us will most probably be dead by tomorrow. And a man is entitled to be told the Truth at least once before he dies. As every man must tell the truth at least once before he dies, if he is a man. You agree, Brother Thomas?”

“Yes, Sir,” Thomas answered, finding himself respecting his patron and main source of private ridicule for the first time in a long, long time.

The Duke paced around Thomas three times, arms held behind his back, then turned around, kneeling at Thomas’ feet. “My wife...Does she love me?” he asked.

“I believe that she does,” Thomas answered. “In her own way. In ways that do not require a man and woman to lie together.”

“Thank you,” the Duke replied, in his Native tongue, Latin, then Hebrew.

Thomas’ neck tightened. How did his man know the origins of his birth which would get him killed? And why was he not dead already? And why did the arrow drenched in blood coming from one of the ‘banchies’ in the trees hit the Duke in the throat, and not Thomas in the chest?

Allowing the brains in his feet to take over, Thomas ran for cover behind what had been part of the Miller’s wagon as another barrage of arrows flung from the now somewhat demons in the trees. They wore horns, identical to the ones talked about around the village, and drawn by various children when asked to paint pictures of ‘Christ killers’. Escape to the East seemed logical, cover provided by what was left of the Duke’s stables. To the West lay the remains of the Monastery, everything in it now burnt, but thankfully not the books which Blind William, and perhaps the surviving monks still loyal to the Truth and not roasted in the ‘peppermint stew, had put in safe places underground. To the North, caves with protection, but too much open ground to reach it. To the South, muddy brush and torn clothing, caked with blood.

Guenevere meowed at her friend and, as he sometimes liked to call himself, master, beckoning Thomas to crawl through the thorny and blood soaked brush. It made sense. Perhaps there was another tunnel open where surviving members of the village had crawled to, their finest ‘going to Cathedral’ clothes ripped into rags as they saved their own skins, on the way in, or out of the Sanctuary below. As Thomas followed his ‘witch cat’ through the brush, some of the clothing looked familiar. Blue silk sewn to deer hide with white trimming, caked with fresh blood. Obtainable from no where else except the coat Abbott Phillip wore on his way to console Bartholemew and his mother for the loss of his stillborn sister on a frigid night of November 30 two years ago, returning back to the Monastery coatless the morning of December 2nd.

But what of the way back to the Sanctuary? This time, the ‘witch cat’ would have to be his guide, with his eyes, and ears, open. The trail of blood led to a rock-like floor under the mud. Thomas knocked, but no one answered as sun began setting behind the clouds. The last day on earth, for himself and Guenevere. A good place to die, perhaps. Perhaps there was a heaven for Jews who didn’t believe in Moses, Jesus or Jehovah, he pondered. Perhaps honest works created by men who dedicated themselves to those Works would last forever. After all, that was what it was all about, anyway. That, and a few good, trusted friends, such as Guenevere, and perhaps Blind William, and possibly, if he was still alive, Peter, the village idiot who understood nothing about Thomas’ mind but somehow what he was all about in his heart.

At that moment of realization, the Earth gave way, a hand from above guiding Thomas back into the ground, then into a tunnel. It indeed was Peter, scraped on every portion of his arms and legs. A miracle, Thomas

thought again, even if the scratches were made by Guenevere as she escaped Peter's grasp and made a getaway into one of the air-ducts. An even bigger miracle to find what Brother Thomas valued even more, in its own way. "My books!" he exclaimed, finding them under a pile of rocks he had accidentally moved with his stumbling feet. They were intact, all of them, his own and the classics copied by other monks, just as Blind William promised they would be.

"Alllll alrightttt?" Peter asked. "Wwweee are allllrright?"

"Our generation, perhaps not," Thomas replied, caressing the books, his legacy, which he valued more than the touch of any woman, real or imagined. "But for future generations, I think so." With that, Thomas took Peter's spade and dismissed the man who would die a boy, no matter how old he grew. Triangulating the way to the Cathedral and the markers outside, Thomas reburied the printed evidence of intellect, labor and love, taking the liberty to dedicate the first volume to be uncovered, some day, to the Duke of Lancelotier, and of course Lady Guenevere.

CHAPTER 6

It was no surprise that Peter could talk to the rats inside the Cathedral and talk them out of their holes to become gone. Or to become badly needed dinners for human consumption, now that the food supply guarded by the Abbott had mysteriously vanished. Perhaps some of it went into his Eminence's always full and always hidden stomach, or perhaps elsewhere.

Peter seemed to speak more words in rodent, rat and chipmunk than any human language, without a stammer. Indeed, if anyone in St. Pierre had lost their dog, Peter's eyes and ears were the most prized resource in re-obtaining them. And when the Duke's horses escaped the locked stable doors, Peter was right there bringing the beasts back home before their master returned home. The reward for such services was a few bitefuls of food and a pat on the 'lad-man's' head, even less when the Duke or Leonard were the recipients of the service. It was that way since the man was a boy, so everyone seemed to remember, or so Thomas was told three years ago when he arrived in St. Pierre, followed by a 'black ghost' who remained his silent and always well fed companion.

As for Genevere, she seemed to be too intelligent to speak with lower forms of life, such as humans. She probably understood Peter's meows and whines but didn't listen to his irresistible mating lures nor offerings of fresh meat, thankfully. Even when luring prey for slaughter, Peter was kind to the animals in question, but as for Genevere, he hated and feared her. Thomas thought about introducing them properly, so they could be friends, but ultimately Peter took orders from the Abbott and the Duke, and both of them believed that black cats were instruments of the devil, or some other kind of bad luck best eliminated than dealt with face to face.

It was a matter of darkness below and above now, nightfall having descended above. With five more villagers 'missing' from the Cathedral, their souls prayed for by the Abbott as he served Mass for all who remained. His Eminence asked special favors from the Creator for those who dared go up above and save 'the saintly' before the dawn that would sweep all human life off the surface of the earth and whisk them down to hell. A special prayer was offered for the Soul, or Souls, who would go face the Devil in person up above and de-posses him. An impossible task, so Thomas thought, until the Abbott's wandering eyes penetrated his when he stuck his head up from a bow, and gazed over at the Duchess, who clearly had designs on his body, and soul. Sister Bernadette was lost in prayer, the kind which dealt with sin rather than guilt. It seemed that she had taken on not only the still flirtatious Duchess' sins but everyone else's, including the Abbott who chastised her daily for praying too loudly. Martha held onto her now fatherless son and daughter's hands, but it was the mother who needed caring for now. As for the others, Brother Ignatius and Brother Norman, they remained silent in mind, voice and gesture, obedient to Abbott Phillip but thankfully still loyal to Blind William. Thomas had written once that there are three times when you know a man's soul. When he is about to die. When he is in prison. And when he is in prayer. Of course, the Duchess who never let anyone know her real name, the only command or request from her husband that she DID obey, would have added when a man is in bed with a woman to that list.

Perhaps it was true. The Duchess did know the soul of every man who she took to bed when the Duke was away defending her wealth and honor. It was just something she did. Or, Thomas speculated, maybe it was on orders of the Duke. What better way to know the secrets of the commoners below you who could be turned into formidable enemies by greed, opportunity or, most notably, the Abbott himself, than to get them to confess their sins, boast their accomplishments and reveal their most deviously clever plans than the oldest confessional in the world...the arms of a woman who a man thinks loves her. But even if such were the case, the Duchess was the victim of her own trap. She loved being loved by men, as many men as possible. The only adult prey the huntress had not lured, snared and nurtured in her loving arms were the Abbott, Thomas and, of course, Blind William, the only man who really saw through the crap and detritus which was in everyone, especially Thomas.

After the mass, the Duchess was sure to say her final 'Amen's' louder and more sensually than any other member of the congregation. "I invite all of you to a feast, a celebration of life and transformation to the Earth Mother's New life, in my private quarters," she announced with a welcoming tone worth of the Earth Goddess Herself, ordering her servants to lurk into caverns not known to anyone, even William, and retrieve the finest food any of them had seen, or smelt.

Every member of the Abbott's flock, excepting William, Sister Bernadette and Thomas, raced to the feast table set up in a private Chamber of the Cathedral which had previously been reserved for the Duke. Laden with food which had apparently NOT been stolen from the Abbott.

"I hope that there is no peppermint flavoring in the mutton stew or plum pudding," Thomas commented.

"Interesting that you say this," the Abbott replied.

"A 'joke'," Thomas mused, smelling something suspicious in the Abbott's sweat, and the odor of peppermint on his robes, reminiscent of every dead body or pile of burnt flesh above.

"You are not laughing," William noted.

"Hell can smell like heaven," Bernadette said, bowing her head before saying the words as she had always done in all manners of conversation.

The Duchess' private feast of love now gave voice to music and dance. Even Martha joined in the singing childhood songs to Mother Earth in an ancient tongue which only the Duchess seemed to understand.

"She is singing the Devil's songs?" Bernadette asked the Abbott, to Thomas' disappointment.

"Not in MY village," Phillip snarled.

"You mean your Monastery, Sir," Thomas asserted. "We own the monastery, the people own the village, and naturally, with the Duke gone, the Duchess has domain over--"

"--You should go over to them, eat and pretend to make merry," Abbott Phillip grumbled through gritted teeth to Blind William.

"No," the old Sag sighed. "She wants Brother Thomas, or if she can't have him, Sister Bernadette for her next private celebration."

Though Blind William could hardly see five feet in front of him, he did feel the Duchess' bright eyes and wide smile shining on Thomas. The scholar whose mistress was his intellect, possessed by a carnally-detached mind with which to express it on 'marks on paper' that only Blind William, and Guenevere, had read felt touched. Bernadette seemed tempted by her now scantily-clothed flesh and fresh vitality. The Abbott seemed angry, then stroked his chin, taken over by an unexpected rash of reason. "You may have something there," he said regarding Blind William's suggestion to send Thomas over to the Duchess' Pagan Feast. "Come with me, Brother Thomas"

Thomas could not smell any peppermint or fresh human blood on the Pagan feast in the Duchess' private chambers. The PRO-life music celebration got his feet tapping, but his feet followed the Abbott down a dark back corridor to the small room behind the altar. Guenevere tried to follow, but Thomas stood her away, then when she was insistent on remaining around, put her into a hole in the walls made recently, by a very human hand rather than a Divinely sent earthquake. Meanwhile, the Abbott reached inside his robes, which seemed to jingle with something other than rocks, and unlocked the door. He offered the monk he hated and feared most to sit down at his table. It was solid oak, carved with likenesses of the Saints, the sockets of the poverty-promoting souls' eyes laden with gems. The dishes were plated with something metallic and valuable. But the cupboard was emptied, the sacs which contained food and other offerings from the villagers now laying on the moldy rock-hard floor, empty.

“We have a thief in our midst?” Thomas asked, snidely gazing at to the booty still left in the room for ‘safe keeping’.

The Abbott remained silent, took out two very plain wooden chalices, poured the last of the sacrificial wine into them, then said a prayer over the last of the Sacrificial wine.

“The Duke and I had an arrangement,” the Abbott confessed, offering the larger cup to Thomas. Such was a first, the Abbott always giving the smaller portion of food, drink and clothing to his subordinates so that they could acquire the greater portion of Salvation. “I feed men’s Souls, the Duke takes, or rather took, care of their bodies.”

“And the Duchess takes care of their ‘needs,’” Thomas offered, as respectfully as he could.

“Yes,” the Abbott confessed, apparently with a very private agenda behind that admission.

“She is a temptress,” Thomas said, taking a small sip of wine after noting that his host, an ardent opponent of suicide, did the same. “With many charms.”

“Yes, many charms,” the Abbott smiled, seeming to remember happier times. “Who seems to not be afraid to die.”

“Or live,” Thomas blasted back gently, hitting the Abbott where he hurt most.

“Yes... We all shall live, if we defeat the Devil tonight, Brother Thomas.”

“Or defeat death, Sir?”

The Abbott’s face turned beet red, rage possessing his bloodshot eyes, in part because of Thomas’ insistence on calling him ‘Sir’ rather than a title of more Clerical acknowledgement and respect. But also for something and someone else. “Use the fires of hell to kill the Devil,” the Abbott blasted out to the demons above the spider-web covered rock ceiling. The same words that Thomas had written in one of his books. “With the Fire of Abraham,” he continued, referring, perhaps, to Thomas’ genetic roots, or perhaps something one of his characters said in one of the books which he thought the Abbott could not read. “And an Angel who is more Woman than coward, fool or incompetent,” he continued, paraphrasing another character in one of Thomas’ books, and life.

“The Duchess,” Thomas concluded.

“She and her Pagan guards can use the Earth Spirits to help us fight the devil, Brother Thomas,” Abbott Phillip said, stroking the blood soaked cloth of what he hoped would be a still-alive son of his own in the ‘hell’ above his head.

“You mean the Duchess and her personal servants can stop the killing up above, and bring anyone who is still alive here to safety, Sir,” Thomas respectfully replied.

“Yes, that is what I said!” the Abbott screamed back. “Do I have to repeat myself!”

“To save the Sainly, and the lost daughters and sons of the Sainly, your Eminence.”

The Abbott nodded ‘yes’, tears of despair for a son of one ‘Sainly’ Soul who he prayed was still alive. To whatever Deity was listening, be it God, or Earth Goddess. Thomas remembered something Blind William had said once. “When you see tears coming down the face of that hard assed, brainless mule who God says we have to call our Boss, then you will know the end of the world is coming.” As always, Blind William seemed to have seen it all. It was now a matter of waiting for the Fates, or fighting against them.

The trio was equipped with the best of everything the Monastery still had on hand. The Abbott entrusted Thomas with a gold-plated Roman sword which he had been donated as tribute by the Duke to save the Soul of his wife, and ensure the cooperation of His Eminence. The insignias were both Pagan and Christian, insurance for the original owner that he would be looked after by whoever was really waiting for warriors after they had died serving their earthly servants in battle. The Duchess was offered, and took, the Viking sword obtained from the now dead invader who fell into the caverns at the inception of the invitation, the unfortunate human Nordic warrior wearing the horned helmet which was never seen on any traditional Viking raider that even the well-traveled Duchess and scholar-monk had ever known. As for the Duchess' private soldiers, the male citizenry of St. Pierre provided them with their best knives, slings and bows. Women offered them good luck hugs. Bernadette offered them all prayers, and to Thomas, a special request.

"Please do not go," she pleaded, her head bowed, holding 'Sir Thomas' hand as 'Squire' Christopher and his eight-year-old twin sister dressed him in armor which was swiftly constructed to be light, durable and bearing all manner of religious symbols for protection, except of course the Star of David. "You are weak in the ways the Devil will be very strong," Bernadette insisted.

"That is impossible," Thomas smiled, thinking back on the times when he could have had a career in the military, or maybe a happier life as a warrior who was permitted to kill others rather than a scholar-monk required to continually torture himself. "I don't believe in the Devil," he proposed, and hoped believed, withdrawing his hand from the Sister who cared about him more than any Brother in the Monastery.

"Do you believe in God?" Bernadette inquired, this time looking him straight in the eye.

Thomas didn't know what to do. How to answer, or IF he should answer. It was the first time that Bernadette looked him face to face, soul to soul, and, as he feared, man to woman.

"Well, do you believe in God?" she pressed, dismissing the children.

"I suppose I have to," Thomas offered, and confessed. It was the best answer he could give, but not one which satisfied Bernadette. It did please the Duchess, however. She raised her Viking sword to him in tribute. Seeing what was about to happen next, Bernadette turned around and walked down the dark hallway, praying to the Heavenly Light for the safety and success of the Mission.

Thomas made the rounds with his other comrades, villagers who had never seen him in soldier gear. He asked them where their friends and relatives may be hiding, noting all of them on a map he placed inside his breast pocket. To each of the places, Peter called out "IIII knnoowww wwhheerree thhattt is," to which the faster speaking, non stammering providers of the information spat back all matters of insults back at the village idiot. Even Blind William couldn't resist the chance to shoot back clever and humorous quips back to the Peter at the village idiot's expense, as this was the only time when the spirit of humor, dark and potentially abusive as that Sacrament is, was accessible to all. But Peter didn't seem to care if he was the butt of everyone's jokes, spoken or private. The pain was something he had to endure, his 'job', as he seemed to see it, yet again.

When it came time for Thomas to ask Martha where her husband may have hid weapons, wealth or if he dug hiding places of his own for his own family, as most others had done, Peter grabbed hold of Thomas' now armor plated arms.

"Pllllease let mmmme go wwwwith you!" he pleaded.

"Your wounds," Thomas noted of the cuts from the 'witch cat' in Peter's arm, which began to become odorous. As with his other wounds from his exploits with 'real' demons above the Cathedral. All were now under the care of Martha, who knew all too well how to treat wounds inflicted by angry demons, or men, on innocent flesh.

"But wwwwhyyy cccann'tt I gggooo and ffigght the Devil for you, and yourrr children, and everybbodyies children?" he pleaded to the now THANKFULLY husbandless Martha. Her fingers seemed to have a magic touch for healing bordering on sorcery. "Wwwhy ccann't I gooo fight the Deevvill with you!" Peter demanded of Thomas.

“Becccause wwwwe need to use innnteelligeencceeee to kill the Ddddevil,” the Abbott smirked at Pater, lapsing back into his all too familiar habit of rewarding sincerity with abuse, so that it ‘builds moral Christian character’.

Thomas was too tired, and scared, to argue. Peter grabbed hold of Thomas’ arm and stared into his wandering eyes, but to no avail.

“I am sorry, Peter,” Thomas said to the man who would die as a boy, God help and bless him. “You stay here, I go up there,” he commanded with as gentle a tone as he could. As always, when Peter was given a command, he obeyed. But this time, it was not with a smile on his face, no matter how much Martha massaged his aching bones, or tried to sing the happiness back into his dejected spirit.

The route up to the surface was slow, laborious and dangerous. Thomas led the way, following what he said was a map, with his eyes fixed on Guenevere. Each time she made herself known, Thomas yelled behind him that bats afoot, rocks were falling, or a tongue in cheek ‘the Devil is shitting on us again’, a remark that always made the Duchess’ three six-foot tall guards cower like foot high rabbits.

“She is an interesting creature,” the Duchess commented, having caught a glimpse of the most beloved female in Thomas’ life when she was not supposed to be looking.

“Yes, she is,” Thomas replied.

“As are you...” the Duchess smiled, stroking his cheek. Her touch now penetrated through the scholar, now soldier-monk’s body AND Soul, now liberated from the ‘thou shalt not’ commandments, having killed his first man, and now feeling the opportunity to love his first woman. “Yes, you are very interesting,” the Duchess continued as Thomas looked at the escape route up to the now colder air above. The Earth Mother Priestess’ still-Christian guards still struggled to fight off ‘demon manure’ below them which she and Thomas knew all too well as merely bat dung. The Duchess gazed at jokester, leader and perhaps future Duke Thomas’, “very interesting,” her comment on it all.

“Not in the ways you would appreciate,” rang out from above. The voice came from a light coming in from another tunnel. The angel clad in a flowing, bright robes carrying a blinding torch, and very human.

“Bernadette!” Thomas exclaimed.

“Sister?” the Duchess added, surprised that the always subservient Nun had rebelliously traded her Clerical black robes into something very white, virgin and, by the way the undersized garment fit around her chest, secular.

“I will accompany you, bless you, and protect you,” she assured Thomas.

“And help us?” the Duchess smirked, rolling her eyes with a superior smile.

“We are on a very dangerous Mission, Sister,” Thomas said, taking her hand and pulling her into the main tunnel before the one she snuck into, apparently in Martha’s attire, collapsed.

“Bernadette,” the Duchess added. “It seems that she wants to be Bernadette now,” she smiled. “It is a beautiful name. Just as she is, now.” With that the Duchess extended her hand to the hood covering the Good Sister’s head, putting it back, with no resistance from the now defiant Servant of God, perhaps Man, or possibly lover of Woman.

“It’s not as long as yours,” Bernadette smiles back, sadly, running her shaking finger through the inch long ‘mane’ which before her entry into the monastery once flowed down to below her waist.

“But more beautiful,” the Duchess smiled.

By the look in Bernadette’s regretful eyes, the shearing was something she did herself. Perhaps as an offering to God. Or perhaps something she did to prevent herself from becoming desirable to the Abbott, his special visitors, or the other Brothers in the Monastery, or perhaps to Thomas himself. It was not Thomas’ business to know what Nuns were hiding or had sacrificed under their habits, and this was the first time he had seen any of them undressed in this way.

But affairs of the heart would have to come after affairs of Earthly and Spiritual survival. Guenevere meowed, beckoning the ‘lower’ human life forms in her party to follow her out of the tunnel and into the a night which was bright as day, thanks to a full moon which made all under it seem crystal clear.

“A full moon,” the Duchess smiled as the party gazed upon a clear night above, brighter than any of the fog and smoke filled days which marked the darkest December Thomas could remember, from anywhere. “A good omen, Thomas.”

“A time when the human heart is darkest, and the emotions most irrational, ‘My Lady’, whose name is evil, and deception” Sister Bernadette sneered, crossing herself.

“Or pomposity?” Thomas offered.

“I will tell all of you my name at the time of rebirth,” the Warrior Duchess announced, shining her sword on her undergarments with glee and abandonment.

“Or dying,” Bernadette countered.

Guenevere silenced what was to be Thomas’ retort, or ‘compromise’ answer between the two women who seemed to love him for different reasons, and in different ways. Something very large was moving in the North woods, a wind blowing through the trees on what was, thus far, a quiet, windless night. Be it God, or Devil, or a human caught in between, Thomas was through running. “Forward”, he whispered, and meant, in every ounce of his shaking yet never more alive body.

CHAPTER 8

Several postulates seemed to be hard fact. First, by the blood trails of the wagon wheels and footprints that stopped in a pile of ashes, any survivors of the ‘Apocalypse’ were at least a mile away. Second, there was half a mile of thick brush between Thomas and his army of ‘Saviors’ with no shortage of trees to hide all manner of Viking invaders, hellish demons, or earthly creatures who no doubt would enjoy a meal of freshly killed human crusader. Thirdly, the ‘talk’ amongst and within the branches seemed to be some or all of the above. No matter how hard he tried to hide his tracks or take a circuitous route around the straight one offered by Guenevere, the ‘demon voices’ from the woodlands followed Thomas, Sister Bernadette, the Duchess and her ‘army’ of three now very scared, overly muscled boys who had passed everywhere for invincible men only a day ago.

“Listen to me, not them,” Bernadette whispered to the soldier-servants between praises to Jesus and the Virgin Mary she shouted up at the trees.

“If she keeps shouting like that, whoever is up there in the trees and in the brush between them will find us and kill us for sure,” the Duchess whispered to Thomas, hiding her head under the brush but keeping her eyes peeled up toward the sky. “Both of us have seen what Vikings or wolves do to people who wander into territory they have claimed as their own. Shouting prayers to God so that He gets rid of ‘demons’ here on earth for us will tell them that we are weak.”

“Or they will think we are crazy,” Thomas replied. “The Heavenly Father protects fools from being harmed by wicked men. As the Earth Mother probably protects foolish animals, or sorceresses, from being eaten by wolves.”

“They do seem to be allowing us to proceed forward,” the Duchess noted, hearing footsteps in the woods running away, leaving animal hair, demonically decorated shields and Nordic swords in their wake.

“A gift from the Heavenly Father, and the Earth Mother,” Thomas smiled.

“Or a trap to let us think we are----“ the Duchess speculated as the woods turned silent, turning her quiet, and fearful.

“We are what?” Thomas asked.

Bernadette stopped her incantations, smiled, then crossed herself, and muttered. “Thank you, Lord for delivering the demons from our way.”

Beyond the brush a campfire was lit. A single profile emerged from it, an angel delivered by Mother Earth and Father in Heaven, by the looks of the silhouette and the innocent love in the song he sung. “Michael the ark angel!” Sister Bernadette proclaimed, kneeling in thanks.

“Or, perhaps Hemtha, the Guardian of Mother Earth?” Thomas offered to the Duchess, who seemed just as grateful, offering her prayer of thanks in an uninterpretable whisper to the Earth Goddess. Then a kiss of gratitude on the cheek of the scholar monk who has gone to the trouble of finding out about her clandestine religion and giving it credence. “Thank you,” she said to the Goddess, and Thomas.

But the angel behind the campfire was angered at both of the Duchess’ offerings of thanks. It shed off its long hair, then its flowing robes, and growled like a mad beast, or more frighteningly, a mad man, who had the Duke’s face, and his voice. The ‘Duke’ throw a handful of rocks into the fire, illuminating the sky with a sustained white light that revealed all of his real features. His body was clad as a Nordic warrior, the horns on his helmet sharp and bloody. The sky above him had turned into a black cloud, blood red rain sprinkling down upon him. Exactly as Thomas had seen before in his mind before creating by putting to pen the character of ‘Lord Geoffry’, the exact manner with which the rain making machine worked described in mirror writing in another book for safe keeping. Thomas got his wish...someone, or something, clearly not of the world he imagined only possible in the imagination, had actually created what he had invented to save crops, perverting it into something else entirely.

“You ALL betrayed me! And now I will destroy you! Starting with you, my disloyal whore!” the Duke’s ghost growled, his voice given human dimension by fire breathing from his mouth. His hand holding up a sword continuing bright red blood that shed a blinding bright light upon himself, then those who dared gaze at his vengeful, animal-like eyes.

Thomas had never seen the Duchess terrified. Indeed, perhaps no one in St. Pierre had. She dropped her weapons and ran, straight into a stumble which led her into the arms of Bernadette, then began to pray, this time a Christian prayer asking for forgiveness. The soldiers fled into the woods from the ghost of their former patron, provider and master. Guenevere also fled from the Duke’s ghost, perhaps out of fear, perhaps out of a more noble reflex, or something it ‘meowed’ in Geunevere’s own language.

But whatever the Duke-ghost was, it had been a man. It could reason, or failing that, stand up to a fight. Seeing that the Duchess and Bernadette were in good hands with each other, Thomas ventured forward to meet the 'demon' Duke head on, just as his alter ego had done in one of his fictionalized stories. Is this how life worked out? You envisioned or imagined it, gave the visualization your focus, and it would materialize in the 'real' world? Apparently so. Or if not, man would win over demon and ghost.

As a man of reason and intellect, Thomas had no choice but to face the apparition straight on. Perhaps it was no apparition at all. An illusion from a nearby wizard, or a man who called himself such, who possessed scientific knowledge beyond his time. As did Mechanos in Ancient Alexandria when he used pulleys, water pumps and mirrors to make the 'gods' appear to the masses in the temple and tell the people what to do for his patron, the Priests. As perhaps did Merlin, the wizard, or 'Mechanos' behind the victories of the 'divinely blessed' King Arthur. But one rule applied to the world of man and ghost alike. He who surrenders to his fear will always be vanquished.

"Come here and face me!" Thomas challenged the 'Duke' as he emerged. "Man to whatever you are, or have become," he continued, sword drawn, the put back into its sheath. "Let us...reason about all of this," he continued in a tone that was calm, and respectful of his 'opponent'. "You know who I am...I want to know who you are."

The 'Duke' stopped, threw down his sword, then pointed to Thomas, asking him alone to come forward to meet him.

"I'll talk to 'His Majesty' myself!" the Duchess blasted out, gathering what she could of her courage.

"No...!" Bernadette said. "It is...He is."

"Maybe a demon, maybe a ghost or maybe just a Duke playing like he's a Viking," Thomas mused.

"Because he never had the balls to fight his OWN battles in real life," the Duchess laughed back, fueling the ghost's rage, his voice breathing fire into the thorned, already scorched brush around the trio's heads.

"The Duke stood up for you, me, and everyone else when it counted, a few hours ago," Thomas blasted back at the Duchess.

"And men always become angrier when they are ridiculed," Bernadette reminded her newly found womanly friend, hiding from the flames of fire bolted out by the ghost. "Men always become more angry and destructive when they are ridiculed," she reminded the 'widowed' and still vengeful Duchess.

"And become less reasonable...and since we all want to be reasonable," Thomas proclaimed, laying down his sword and offering his hand in friendship to the ghost. "I know what you did today when you were still a man. And that you were a brave man. Which I will write about in more books I will write about, and for you. So that everyone in this world, and the next, knows how much of a man you really were."

The 'Duke' requested Thomas to proceed forward in the aristocratic manner he did when he was in human form. He sat on a tree stump, inviting Thomas to sit in front of him. He retrieved two chalices from his coat, both of which had been stolen from the 'safe keeping' box in the Cathedral which was emptied during the second unauthorized escape of villagers. He cut off one his gloved hands at the wrist, and poured Thomas a drink of blood red 'wine' from his severed arm.

"Peppermint," Thomas noted of the brew. "Very...interesting. Such as perhaps where any other men, women, or ghosts were who left the Cathedral with these chalices, without the Abbott's permission, or yours."

"We drink, then we talk," the Duke said in a now echoless voice that sounded very much like his own when his 'body' was less spectacular, but more solid.

It was an offer of hospitality that Thomas could not refuse, and didn't. The brew was wine. Very good wine. Reminiscent of the special sacrificial wine that he imbibed when brought into a private audience with His Eminence, whose build was, interestingly, much like that of 'His Majesty' the Duke. Out of the corner of his eye, Thomas heard 'girltalk' whispered by Sister Bernadette and the Duchess, each voice sounding just like the other. "Shhh" he commanded them both. "We are having a man to ghost conversation here, Sister Bernadette and Duchess Lancelotteere."

"Sarah," the Duchess confessed. "My name is Sarah."

"A strange name for a Duchess," Thomas noted. "That was my mother's name."

"A common one for a Jewess," Bernadette offered, in a voice that seemed to reveal everything.

Once again, Thomas felt 'found out', on a night when he knew that the only way to survive into the next Millenium was to 'find out' faster than being 'found out'. "How did you know?" he said to both of the women.

"You speak very fondly of your family in your sleep," smiled the Duchess who never took Thomas to bed, or who perhaps took to his on one of those nights when he noticed the door open in the morning.

But more important secrets had to be found out, and fast. Thomas turned to the ghost who would not let him touch his body, and who kept his face in the shadows when speaking 'man to spirit'. "How many of you are they?" Thomas asked.

"A very astute question," the answer, with a congratulatory chuckle.

"And how many of US are there," Thomas continued, referring to his two ladies, and friends.

The ghost put his remaining hand to his chin and stroked it.

"How many of us, the living, are there? And where are they!" Thomas demanded, pulling out his sword.

"You can't kill me," the ghost laughed.

"Where are my LIVING friends, and your! You pathetic, sadistic, arrogant, stupid..."

"---Stupid?" the ghost interrupted, his laughter turning to rage. "You called me stupid! No one calls me stupid!" he ranted, punctuating his claim by a blast of exploding powder from his handleless arm which blinded Thomas. He stumbled around what his hands still confirmed as the scorched woods. Crawled his way back through a fog of freshly-emitted dark-red smoke to where Sister Bernadette and Duchess Sarah had been hiding. Reaching out just in time to hear them being pulled away. Screaming under their gags. Thomas followed the desperate screams, leading him to a stream of water, then... silence. He slashed the liquid which he hoped was water and not mind-altering sulfuric acid onto his eyes, and opened them.

He wished to all that was holy, real, or reason-derived that he hadn't.

CHAPTER 9

The bodies had no identities left on them, skin peeled off the arms and legs in chunks, evidence of their gender while alive notably missing. The scalps had been removed by what seemed to be rusty knives and axes bearing the likeness of gods and devils which Thomas had never seen. The faces on the corpses had been removed with perfect precision by the hand of someone, or something which was very Evil. The air smelled of death, or worse than death. The soot sky around Thomas in every direction was red, the smoke smelling of sulfur. Indeed this was hell on earth.

But which way home? Which way back to the Sanctuary of the Underground Cathedral? It was pointed out very clearly by the direction the fingertips of the corpses lay on the blood-soaked ground. The only life which remained was animal, pigs, goats and chickens which had formerly been the dominion of man now feeding on the flesh of their now dead masters. Even the sheep seemed to be enjoying the reversal of order, helping themselves to all manner of crops which had been grown to feed human children, the fences around them trampled into the blood soaked ground.

“What have we done! What have I done!” Thomas screamed at himself, then to Jehovah, then to Jesus. “What have we done! What have I done!” he ranted on in agonizing repentance all the way back to the tunnel, the only living thing within his sight, or within his own person being Guenevere, who perhaps was, he pondered, a ‘witch cat’, sent by forces other than Nature or Luck to take care of him. “Bernadette! Duchess! Countess!” he cried out, but to no avail.

“Thomas!” a voice rang out from the underground side of the moonlit ground. “Come, quickly!”

Guenevere had apparently found her own way back through a tunnel of her own while a human hand reached up to grab Thomas. It was more char than flesh, and with one finger missing on the right hand, at the level of the first knuckle. "William!" he exclaimed, never so grateful to see his old friend. He was the only living being amidst fire baked walls and charred remains of what had been human clothing, hair and flesh.

"The Vikings, I think. The kind that none of us have ever seen. And even you couldn't have imagined or invented," Blind William confessed, now fully living up to his name from the looks of things. "They cut open my good eye," he said to Thomas as he tried to see what was behind the blood soaked bandage for himself. "And when I asked why, one of them told me that it was because I had seen evil, and was tempted by it," the old man related with a horrific sense of calm and relief.

"If your eye sees evil and is tempted by it, cut it out," Thomas fumed, as he did what he could to patch up the bleeding socket that once held William's left eye, a porthole which was a mirror to anyone who looked into it. "Book of Mark, I think."

"...John," William smiled sadly. "As any Anti-Christ Viking should know. But there was something about these Vikings. They could speak our language, very, very well. And looked very much like us, close up."

"What did you see before they did this?" Thomas asked.

"It was what I saw after they cut out my good eye that we have to concern ourselves with now, my Brother. Something I saw with my bad eye." William winked with his left eye, the one which, by all accounts of his telling, was totally blind. Apparently, it wasn't.

Yet another human truth the Absolute Truth seeking Thomas had not known about. But the reality of the world as it was took precedence here. The reality that the Cathedral and all of its underground passages were now vacated, yet again. "Where is everybody else?" Thomas asked.

"I am everybody else," William related with sadness in his broken heart. "And someone else who we always suspected could be behind all of this." William pointed Thomas to a cloaked figure in the distance making his way to the Cathedral entrance, carrying a large bag behind him, walking on tip toes.

"He thinks I can't see him," William whispered to Thomas. "And he thinks he is hiding that necklace under his hood. I can see its impressions clear as day."

Apparently William could, but Thomas couldn't. All Thomas could see was a man cloaked in black, taking what he could from what had been left behind, placing them in what looked like a sac.

"Burlap, I think," Thomas noted.

"Wool, or perhaps cotton, made to look like burlap," William whispered. "Can't you tell by the seams?"

"I can't see any seams at all," Thomas thought, but did not say. His suspicious mind go the better of him. Why had Blind William not shared the secret that he could see with his 'bad' eye when life was brutish and short, rather than now when it was terrifying and final. And why was his arm covered with ash rather than burnt to the bone? And most of that ash smelled of tar, with a tinge of peppermint within its various odors.

"You go follow him," William commanded. "I'll follow him from here."

With that Blind William took up the cane and 'felt' his way down the caverns, muttering out a prayer for the dead, and the dying, leaving Thomas to deal with the only other live man, or other form of 'life', still alive in the cavernous haven which now smelled like a coffin.

The black ghost headed with his bag of booty to the Alter. He knelt, crossed himself, then entered into the chamber behind it. The door was unlocked. The room was packed with all manner of goods which could be used

to buy wealth in this world, or perhaps indulgence for sins for the next. When the man turned around, its face was all too familiar. Thomas doubts were confirmed.

“Abbott Phillip!” he spoke loud enough to be heard, still not knowing it he was speaking to a man, ghost, or something in between.

“So...you finally return to us,” the Abbott said. “After you helped how many others of my flock escape to the surface and be demolished by the Devil, or his minions.” He took off his hood, then his cloak. The skin had been burned, to the bone. The slashes on his torso were fresh, and deep. “Tell me, how much did your friends outside of this sanctuary pay you to betray us?”

“I don’t understand,” Thomas replied.

“I DO! Now! Abbott Phillip blasted back, his breathing becoming a deafening death rattle. “You are the Anti-Christ! Every time YOU go out to save five souls, another fifty die here, or flee to places where...” The Abbott coughed up a handful of blood, containing some flesh, tinged with peppermint. “You have saved no one but yourself in all of this,” he continued. “And in the last moments I have, I must place these offerings my flock entrusted to me, and give them to the Lord, to save them.”

With that, the Abbott turned around and placed each of the items of wealth or sacrifice in appropriate piles, each bearing the name of a family of villagers, or the name of those who had no families. Every one of the Nuns, and all of the Brothers, excepting, of course Thomas, whose pile of offerings were empty. “You thought I would keep them for myself, didn’t you?” the embittered, and now old, and dying man said.

“I did,” Thomas confessed, offering his hand to help the Abbott, only to have it pushed aside.

“I send you up to save my son, and other people’s sons, and daughters, and you only serve your ‘father’, Satan himself, you ungrateful Christ killer.”

Thomas wondered if ‘Christ killer’ was a reference to his perceived present activities, or his Jewish heritage. Either way, it didn’t matter much now. The Abbott was as much a victim of all of this as anyone he had gathered into the Sanctuary he thought would save them.

“Contrary to what you and the others may have thought, the world will come to an end by dawn. And the Second Coming will send the saintly to heaven, and the sinners to hell. It is a truth that I do believe...now.” The Abbott collapsed in Thomas’ arms. His last blessing was to the Soul of Bartholomew. “Go to God, my very worthy son.” And a final request of Thomas. “Go to hell, my once trusted and only learned friend.”

There Thomas stood, and wept, for the man who could have had him crucified for heresy so many, many times. The man who was, so he thought, a barely literate ‘master’ whose aspirations were to use his spiritual office to acquire worldly gain. The man who, so he thought, would have been on the other side of the cliff-surrounded valley of St. Pierre into the feared villages of Luceina, DeBlanc or St. Sebastian, by noon, or into the completely unknown world beyond them by the next day with offering that ‘the Lord’ had accepted and brought to Heaven. The man who, so Thomas thought, would have left a note for the others in the Monastery that his Soul had resurrected to Heaven along with the offerings entrusted to him. The man who now believed the Apocalyptic myth he invented, embellished or wanted to really believe about the world ending by dawn after the Devil had his way on this most horrible of nights, December 31, 999 AD.

By now Thomas had expected the worst. Of course, Blind William was missing. Of course Thomas was left alone in the underground caverns with the suspicion and hope that some of the living were still up above, or somewhere, in need of being rescued and brought to a Sanctuary that could be trusted. But an even more frightening forecast became fact. Guenevere was nowhere to be found. Thomas was now alone, excepting for, of

course, the Devil, the now French speaking Vikings, or God up above. He didn't know who he should fear most, or who he could really trust.

Food, air and protection from the elements outside were amply provided now in the Cathedral underground. When perusing what had been left behind by the last 'demon invasion', he found something else which he never expected. Paper and fresh ink. Enough to write whatever he wanted, or needed, to, for the rest of his life. "For...eternity," he sighed, his terror leading to resignation, then mad laughter. "For eternity!" he laughed out to the surface-dwelling demons above, the buried 'Saints' below, or whoever in the middle might be listening or care. And those who he thought he had given up caring for. "Look, my father, mother and three now probably dead Jewish brothers in Spain!" he continued. "The rabbi was wrong! There is a Heaven for us Jews, and I am in it! I am in heaven! All the food I need to eat! All the paper I can use to write! And..." Another mitsfa came from down the corridor. She announced herself loudly and came running, jumping straight into Thomas' shaking, but need-to-love-someone arms. "I am Adam and this lovely woman is my Eve!" he proclaimed, showing off Guenevere to the saints, demons, ancestors and finally the rats, who perhaps were incarnated souls of morally-good 'Christ Killers' who now would have an infinite supply of food, and a cat to look after them who, in truth, never tasted rodent flesh in her entire life, unless it was dead first.

"I am so happy!" Thomas cried. "The Second Coming has come, and I am alive for the Messiah to take to...take to..." He looked to Guenevere for an answer. "Here?" he asked. "It is as good a place as any."

But Guenevere had other ideas. Something drew her attention to Cavern III, perhaps a bat, or something walking on two legs. She ran towards what seemed to be a light which was white, then red, then blue, then a strange sort of 'black', as the Inner Eye could see it. Thomas followed her, taking him to a very special place, and a hole in the wall which had been opened by something or someone who left behind red blood tinged with blood, with what seemed like chicken meat inside, NOT peppermint tinged. Inside, thankfully, the contents were still intact. Guenevere helped herself to a feast of her favorite meal, the kind Thomas would give to her on special occasions, while he dared to open up the leather coverings surrounding what he valued more than anything else, except perhaps Guenevere.

"My books!" Thomas exclaimed with gratitude to every Deity he knew or imagined possible. "Intact! All of them!"

He helped himself to a read of them, an indulgence he seldom afforded himself while the world was still 'in existence'. It had been easy to go back and feel himself to be a god by noting what the Human Spirit Inside of him had channeled onto paper. It was harder to just keep going, writing as hard as he could for a God he hoped exist, or perhaps could awaken if he worked hard enough and wrote intensely enough. But as it was the end of the world now, it was time for the books to be read, by someone other than Monks who could copy letters but not read words. And eyes that could read and FEEL between the lines.

Some of the passages he read to Guenevere, some to himself. Most he didn't recognize, asking 'who wrote this?' of his feline companion. "It had to have been us," he would repeat. "Or Something bigger than us using us," he allowed himself to speculate, many times.

Then, the fear of all scientists, scholars and investigators of the human condition who burned the midnight oil while everyone else in the world was asleep. The hard light of day, dawn to be exact, penetrating through the cracks in the 'escape hatch' above, and, so it seemed, every part of the cathedral. And following that, the earth shook. "Light turning into thunder!" he explained as the earth around him shook, the stones above him crumbling like rocks. "Just like we wrote in...what was that story?" Thomas couldn't remember the name or the story, nor the exact details of the 'village idiot' girl who invented an earthquake machine powered by the sun. All he knew was that, by crude calculation, the Cathedral Sanctuary would be an earth filled tomb in a matter of hours, perhaps minutes.

"Ulimtoa." Thomas remembered. "That was the name or the girl in our story. Based on...perhaps someone we know, or knew, and should have known better, Guenevere. Her Spirit is calling us...Upward."

It was a better direction than downward, and the only one left.

CHAPTER 10

Thomas emerged from the Sanctuary with one bag only, its contents all literary. Some of the books were classics copied by others, some his own, some copies of his own works transcribed and, possibly read, by his once most trusted, now missing, friend, Blind William. Thomas also included in the 'must be saved' treasures for the New Millennium the Scriptures which the Abbott had kept in his most private of private rooms.

Dawn brought a surprisingly warm wind from the South, and a clear sky. All the better to see that what was left of St. Pierre had now been completely looted, as was the Monastery 'fortress'. The invaders left no trace of who they were, or what they specifically wanted, besides 'everything' and, perhaps everyone. Even the animals were gone from the surface of the earth now, for as far as Thomas' bloodshot eyes could see. At least any domestic animals. Perhaps they had been brought up to heaven, innocent souls which they were. Tracks of fleeing people too led in all four directions, but only one track smelled of the brand of death that was afoot most strongly.

The trail of peppermint scented blood was not the reddest, but it felt like the most important one. Reminiscent of something Thomas had seen before, in his mind before writing the stories about an Earth Healer whose use of the herb was both feared and loved by the villagers who eventually put her to death for witchcraft. Whatever or whoever was behind the Apocalypse had been well read in the classics and, so it seemed Thomas own mind. Every image and reality of this Apocalypse seemed to be a manifestation of his darkest imaginations, which he tried to use in the service of Light. Perhaps that Light would lead him now to the end of the latest peppermint-blood trail.

With each step through the charred weedlands which had been fertile farm fields barely a day ago, he felt something more alive under the ground, and more dead on top of it. As if he was walking on the territory of departed spirits. Even Guenevere's gait was light and cautious, as if she felt something beneath her feet other than dirt, pebbles and the ranting about of field mice in their own tunnels of, perhaps, sanctuary. Yes, this looked and smelled very familiar. A trail Thomas had been on before, but without Light to guide him, and with his eyes closed, pulled by a guide he never saw. At a fork in the path, the blood went to the left, the peppermint to the right. Working with a gut feeling which he hoped wasn't his usually empty stomach growling with toxic food he ate at the Duchess Pagan feast a few hours back, he proceeded down the herb-tainted trail. It led to a pair of fresh wagon tracks that ended in a pile of ash which reeked of peppermint. Below, Thomas seemed to hear the sounds of restless agony, muffled, but was it real? Each time he tried to confirm and triangulate the nature and source of the sound, another auditory ghostlike voice from the trees seemed to call his attention above ground, and scare him into running back 'home'. The most logical solution was his ears were playing tricks on him, the natural echo in that portion of

the brush bordering the Southern cliffs doing the rest. The mystical had become very real, both in what could be touched, and felt.

But this time, Thomas remained at the site, thinking not about portholes to hell below, or heaven above, but perhaps some kind of man-made device that could have lifted the Souls, or their caretakers, to more earthly destinations. It certainly was scientifically possible, made plausible in Thomas' mind by his various drawing of flying or catapult machines which, if he had the hands to put them together, could have worked.

"If I only didn't hammer more nails into my hands than into the boards when I tried to build it, Gwen" Thomas said the cat who owned him more than he owned her. "Or if we had money to hire people who could build it, and other machines of wonderment. To use in the service of man, woman, and if He is ever Coming to this world we screwed up, Jesus."

"Yes," an apparition from behind Thomas answered. Blue eyes, brown-blond hair flowing down his shoulders, a white robe and a long beard, complimenting very white angelic skin. Erect, alert and the humorless autocracy of an earthly King in every one of his mannerisms. A perfect likeness of what Northern European artists painted about the Middle Eastern man, prophet, or perhaps God in human form. "Yes, it is me," he and/or He continued in a kind voice.

"So you say, Peter. But, according to reason and the laws of Nature, Jesus had dark skin, brown eyes, shorter hair and beard, and his robes were never so... White," Thomas answered, recognizing the now non-stammering voice behind the Vision, or illusion, which he tried to touch. Peter pulled away, but Guenevere needed to settle scores. She jumped on the 'Messiah's' shoulder, scratching him. Blood came from the body within the halo, an arm of very human rage reaching out to strangle the cat, obtaining nothing except a clenched fist full of hair, thank God, and the Real Jesus.

Guenevere sought shelter in the arms of Thomas, hissing at the still smiling Peter

Thomas smiled back, allowing the grin to become a laugh.

"Nnnnoo oneee laughs at me!" 'Jesus' said, making 'His' Point by a burst of fire emanating from his under his robes, identical in deliver and scent to that manufactured under the Duke's Ghost.

Guenevere fled into the woods, then up a small tunnel in a tree to a heavily leaved high branch that non of Thomas' 'imaginary' devices could destroy, or illuminate. Former, and perhaps reborn Jew, Thomas remained facing 'Jesus', noting two large boxes of very familiar home made machine parts behind him in the bush.

"The tools which my various fictional wizards, and common people, used in their various adventures and struggles," Thomas said. "You must have read all of my books," Thomas continued, grateful that he had kept the originals buried.

"I copied them mmmmyself," 'Savior' Peter replied with a residual studder. "After I read them many many times though a mirrrrrrr." He hit himself, repeating 'mirror' several times until the stammer came out clear, clean and elegantly.

"Pebbles. You should try pebbles. As Demostacles did in Ancient Greece," Thomas said, with something that felt like kindness emanating from the Inside. "He was the smartest orator in Greece, who spoke with a stammer. He stopped stammering by trying to talk with pebbles in his mouth."

Thomas crouching down and grabbing a fist full of pebbles from the charred blood-tinged dirt under his feet, but didn't put them into his mouth after smelling them. "Peppermint....The smell of death," he noted of the ashes over the tomb below.

"Sleep," Peter answered. "The potion that Yobimbina gave to her children so that they would go into a deep sleep. One part belladonna, one part foxglove, and one part this..." He held out a fig that looked like an olive branch. "Remember?"

“The herb their mother gave them so the Surgeon could come and take poison arrows out of their body.”

“An herb which hasn’t been tested.” Thomas said with shiver in his voice. “No in enough people, or animals.”

“The rats in your monastery ddddid fine, assss will the goodddd people hherree in Saiinnt Pierree when I give them this...” Peter pulled something out of his other hand. A bag of rust-colored leaves which smelled like something from Thomas’ home country, ungrowable in St. Pierre, or anywhere else. “With this herb that your people have a Hebrew name for, which you didn’t spell correctly, and a touch of my hand, with the Blessings of God, we will resurrect everyone.”

Thomas looked at the sac of anti-sleeping potion, and did some more calculations in his mind. “One sac of that works for ten people.”

“It worked for a hundred when Yobimbina used it, my Son.” Peter continued, his human speech ominously losing the stammer as he became he become more ‘godlike’.

“And you have a ten more bags or that antidote someplace!”

“Have faith, my son,” Peter smiled back. “I will resurrect the sleeping.”

“And the dead!” Thomas blasted back. “The ones YOU killed, or had killed by...someone else. Maybe Pagan Vikings from the Norse Country. Or French speaking Norsemen from the nearby villages of St. Sebastian, LeBlanc or Lucerna? Who have been wanting to take over our village for three generations? Who have looked at our relatively good fortune when THEY had plagues that wiped out their crops, animals and many of their people. Who wore helmets that had the kind of animal horns on them that, according to the Abbot, grow on the heads demons and ‘Jews’?”

“Who knnooww thattt I’mmm not an iddiioottt!” ‘Jesus’ screamed back in rage from a very human place. “Whooo.....Whooo Whoooo” Peter tried to continue, attempting to whip the stutter out of his mouth with a stick on the wrist till his flesh bled.

“And who don’t laugh at you?” Thomas offered, gently taking hold of Peter’s whipping hand, doing his best to wipe the blood off the whipped one. “I know that we all laughed at you.”

“You didn’t, my Son.” Peter said, with a Devine lovingness that was sincere and felt very, very real. “As when I came out of the desert and saw Martha and she fed me, not knowing who I was. Or the Blessings from the Heavenly father I could bestow upon her. And the blessings I now bestow upon you, My Son.”

“What kind of blessings, My Lord?” Thomas asked, but felt like blasting.

“Your books will be the Bible of my New Millenium! Your science will feel my new flock. And you, the new prophet.”

“A flock which is DEAD,” Thomas answered, Guenevere fleeing back to the Cathedral so she would not become one of them.

“Sleeping,” Peter answered with a gentle smile, kissing Thomas on forehead, then delivering a prayer. “Open the door to your minds, and you will discover your Souls, and Me to greet you there”. Word for word from one Thomas’ ‘what if’ stories about Jesus coming to St. Pierre to save Christopher and Christine from being burnt at the stake for concocting a magic potion in the woods that saved their parents, the Abbot and the Duke from the plague.

“Where are they sleeping?” Thomas inquired, putting aside his grief at having lost so many commoners and lesser minds of St. Pierre who he now valued as friends. Putting aside the shame that it was his ‘genius’ as a

scientist that made Peter's being 'Jesus' and 'The Devil' possible. "Where, My Lord, is our flock?" he asked. It was one of those questions which should never have been asked, or answered.

CHAPTER 11

The heavily wooded route to the 'sleeping flock of sheep awaiting to be awoken as lions in heaven' was cluttered with things very familiar to Thomas. While "Lord Peter" babbled to his 'Father in Heaven' in tongues even the well-traveled Thomas didn't recognize, the former wandering Jew noticed many things in the now woods made visible by a fogless, day-lit sky. Wind generating machines built exactly as he described in his texts, embellished in design and efficiency from those he had read about in the Islamic owned Interfaith libraries in Spain. Along with devices that could turn the sunlight or moonlight into illusions which could look like very real images to terrified onlookers. Catapult and flying contraptions which could take man, beast or demon from one place to another without being spotted. And all manners of fog generating machines, some of which were improvements on his own designs.

Wild animals previously afraid to leave the forest and domestic ones which had been terrified of leaving the village now abounded everywhere. 'Lord Peter' blessed them all and preaching to them in their own language, turning even wild animals feasting on human flesh into subservient disciples of their new human 'Savior'.

It stood to reason that Peter, the master 'talker to animals' could have turned half-domesticated boars into wild demon beasts who preferred to eat human flesh to peas, beans and wheat. It also stood to reason that Peter, the fixer of broken roofs, wagons and, more recently, tunnels, knew every way in or out of the Underground Cathedral. Though he could not speak in his own voice without stammering and stuttering, he could imitate others with impeccable accuracy.

"Tell me about Roland, my Lord?" Thomas inquired of 'Savior Peter' led him through a patch of woods with bloody remains of what had been people once. "The first man to spot the Devil's invaders."

"A very distinguished and important miller, my son. Who knows wheat. And barley," Peter answered in a voice identical to that of the deceased. "So well do I know grains that I had my brain taken out and put a loaf of bread between my ears myself," he continued, imitating Leonard's proud rooster stride, then falling to the ground. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm just a bread brain," 'Lord Peter' continued, inviting Thomas to share in the 'witty' insult to one of the men who had abused and ridiculed Peter the most, when he was Peter.

"A bread brain, indeed, my Lord," Thomas chuckled through a cautious grin. "An intelligently constructed expression of humor, 'bread brain,' my Lord."

The 'Savior' autocratically accepted Thomas' compliment. Peter, if he was still alive inside himself, seemed to be genuinely grateful.

"And the Duke?" Thomas continued. "What does he have to say about you?"

"Only what I have read in the books, as I am a rich man," he continued, as the Duke, impeccably imitating his voice and his 'always thinking' manner of scratching his chin while walking.

“And an illiterate one, Sir?” Thomas asked.

“Yes, or course! I pay people to read for me! Which makes me an even smarter one!” ‘Duke’ Peter replied.

Scholar-writer Thomas chuckled along with the joke about his illiterate patron who boasted to everyone about his book collection, but remembered that this was no laughing matter. “What does the Duchess have to say about all of this?” he asked, testing Savior Peter’s ability to have been their voices as well.

“Hmmm,” Peter answered in as high pitched voice as possible.

“What would say about the Duke, or you, if she wrote a song of her own?” Thomas asked.

Peter thought about it, then came up with a falsetto Pagan tune sung seductively, accompanied by a wiggling of his hips, his arms taking on the unrestrained fluidity of the Duchess. But the song had no words.

“Worshipping you with joy,” Thomas smiled.

“Yes, my son,” Peter replied as a very male, austere and lonely, Jesus.

“Sister Bernadette?” Thomas asked.

Peter bowed his head, put his hands in front of his mouth and whispered Latin Prayers faster and more sorrowfully than Sister Bernadette ever did.

“Worshipping you with her pain,” Thomas said, silently praying to whatever God might still be listening that Bernadette, as Sister or liberated woman was still alive, somewhere.

Thomas then noted something that was not on Peter’s arms. As stammering Peter, he had received many scrapes, lacerations and what had to be very painful bruises since ‘the Devil’ sent his ‘Viking’ invasion. Yet they all seemed healed, perhaps by some miracle medical lotion. One which did indeed smell like cinnamon, the ‘flavorful’ component of the lotion Thomas had described in his various fictional tales with enough facts, if collected, about the remedy so that astute readers would reformulate it for themselves. The Arabian-formulated lotion had indeed become standard medical practice for physicians of all Faiths in Cordoba, but since it called for mushroom and tomatoes in its composition, it was considered Devil’s lotion in Christian Spain, France and Italy. And its familiar odor and color was now very noticeably on Peter’s arms and legs, over wounds now seemed ‘miraculously’ by another woman Thomas felt that he should ask ‘the Lord’ about.

“Martha,” Thomas asked. “Martha of St. Pierre, I mean.”

“A good woman, a kind mother,” Peter answered, as a grateful Savior.

“With an abusive husband, Leonard. And an abusive boss. Who died. Because he deserved to,” Thomas offered, trying to figure out if Leonard being chosen to have his tongue and eyes cut out as the third victim of the ‘demon Vikings’ was because of Peter’s hatred for what Leonard had done to him at work, or his wife at home.

“Leonard died because YOU killed him,” Lord Peter calmly told Thomas.

“His eyes were cut out! His tongue ripped out of his mouth!” Thomas blasted back.

“Vengeance is MINE!” said ‘The Lord’, halting his walk, turning to Thomas with fire in his own eyes. “It was YOUR decision to kill him! Beg for forgiveness, if you truly love Me, or My Father, or the sleeping souls in our flock!!!” Peter continued with an accusing finger pointing out of his robe, something behind it that looked like it could be a torch if Thomas did not heed the warning.

“I did what I had to do,” Thomas said, standing erect. “It was my duty, my Lord.”

“Which you enjoyed carrying out, my Son,” Lord Peter answered, offering the still standing Thomas a hug of forgiveness.

How did Peter know about Thomas’ innermost emotions when he slit blind, mute and probably internally mutilated Leonard’s throat? How did the village idiot know so much about his innermost thoughts? It had not been written in any of his books. Nor confessed to anyone, even Guenevere.

“How did you...?” Thomas asked, tears of grief coming down his face.

“Because I am who I have become, and you are who you have become, my Son,” Lord Peter said in with Fatherly Love that Thomas never felt from anyone. Not his own father. Not even Blind William. And certainly not from Father Abbott Phillip, even when the Monastic ‘Monarch’ became human during the last moments of his probably very tortured life.

The sun had risen to a mid point in the sky, and Thomas looked at where he had been led by his Savior, and former friend, who he perhaps should have been more of a Comrade to while he was still himself. The road to the sleeping Souls seemed to be leading him in a wide circle. And time was running out. If indeed, the sleeping potion Thomas had described in his technical and literary books was to be reversed, it would have to be done soon. Memory served Thomas well enough to know what herbs to gather as an antidote, but the elixer which simulated death delivered the real thing if not reversed within a day’s worth of hours. Such was the manner of awakening the living. But as the human instruments of everything around him, Peter had to have an accomplice. “Jesus would have never been heard by anyone had it not been for twelve damn good Jewish road managers and agents,” Thomas mused to himself, silently, eyes hidden from his ‘Lord’ so that he/He could not see through them again into his still suspicious mind, and terrified soul.

“How many of your flock came to join you from DeBlanc, Lucerna and St. Sebastian?” Thomas inquired once again, as he blessed the animals that were helping themselves to faceless human corpses who had come to worship their new Master.

Three times Thomas asked, and three times Peter answered. Clearly, distinctly and with absolute certainty. But with three different sets of numbers. The answer to the fourth inquiry regarding how many ‘French Vikings’ from the rival and enemy villages around St. Pierre were employed as disciples brought gentle laughter from Peter, the answer being “Enough, my Son.”

“And how many died in Your service, My Lord,” Thomas gently inquired.

Lord Peter stopped feeding a large red communion wafer from the brush to a wolf-like dog. Thomas picked up the ‘communion’ wafer, noting that it was a crushed human hand, perhaps by the ring still on its finger, the canine’s owner.

“How many died in Your service, My Lord?” Thomas pressed, showing ‘His Lord’ the human hand.

Lord Peter closed his eyes and blessed the hand.

“How many Disciples died in Your service, My Lord, Goddamn you!” Thomas blasted at Peter, pulling his head around to see the faceless bodies which now seemed like they belonged to villagers as well as Vikings by the very real tatoos, sellable jewelry and more personally valued bracelets still attached to them. “How many died for You!!!” Thomas demanded.

“Too many,” Lord Peter confessed, again and again. Tears rolled down his face as he walked up to the highest point in St. Pierre, up a goat trail that, like Sinai, easily negotiable by Prophets such as ‘Himself’, but not by humans such as Thomas, who slipped three steps down for every one he struggled to go up. Peter advanced, ‘miraculously’, upward. To the boundary of the world for most citizens of St. Pierre. Just below the cliff of the Western Mountain that made the sun set on Saint Pierre an hour earlier than it did anywhere else. To the rock that

overlooked the now empty Monastery and the all but completely burnt and sacked village. “Too many have ddddddied for mmmmeeee’, Lord Peter started to stammer out as Peter. “Ttttoooo mmmmannyyy,” the Lord, now man again, confessed, crossing himself, whipping off his long blonde scalped wig and beard, revealing a tarred head which looked recently shorn. “Tooo mmmannnyyy dddiceedd for...” he said as his final words, on the leap to his own Salvation three hundred feet below.

Thomas watched Peter breath his last, his body pierced by the cross on the Monastery roof. A cold wind whipped out of the North, this time manipulated by the Fates, or perhaps God, or the Devil. By the appearance of things, it seemed that, at least for mankind, the world had ended. It was now officially 1000 AD, and the only man was one who was spared, for his kindness to a Village Idiot. Perhaps others who could be awakened from their sleep before death took them over too. And, as Thomas now knew, a man, or woman, who orchestrated it all, who seemed more powerful than any demon or deity. Perhaps the answer lay on the other side of the mountains that isolated St. Pierre from the rest of the world, perhaps in the villages of DeBlanc, Lucerna, and/or St. Sebastian. Or perhaps right in front of his terrified eyes.

CHAPTER 12

Logic said to go back to the charred pit where the wagon wheels ended. Where Thomas had heard restless groans of 'slumber' from someplace around or beneath him, where his doubting eyes first set sight on the 'Savior' who had spared his life and offered him a chance to be king of a New Millennium where the 'Imagination of Thomas' was the new Reality. When he returned to the site, it was silent, both above and below ground. How he yearned to hear SOMETHING above or below ground from ANYone, even the 'devil'. But the 'empty' under the ground as still there. An echo under what was an impenetrable ceiling of stone, then a part human and part animal cry from behind him that sounded like it came from both a newborn baby and an old man. Frightening down to the bone.

"There you are!" Thomas said to Guenevere, when he turned around and saw it was her. Alive, confident, and carrying something in her mouth to him. A dead mouse, curled around what looked like blood mixed with parchment. An examination of it revealed part of a map, the numbers and letters written in mirror script, and not by Thomas' hand.

"Where did you get this?" Thomas asked as he grabbed hold of the mouse, noting with alarm that its fur was tainted with peppermint and cinammon, ingredients of the sleeping and resurrection potion, respectively. "Where did you get this!!!"

Guenevere scurried off to hide under hollowed tree trunk. Upon finding her, a somewhat calmed down Thomas a pile of digging tools and chemical-containing excavation devices containing Chinese writing. All of them a century ahead of anything in Moorish Cordoba, another Millennium more advanced than anything in Christian Europe. And maps. Outlining tunnels to and around the Underground Cathedral. Some of the tunnels were crossed out, corresponding to those that Thomas surmised had 'collapsed' when 'Satan's elephants' had trampled on the earth on one of the 'escapes' of the Unfaithful from the Underground Cathedral. Most likely routes for invasion of the tunnel by someone from the outside, and undoubtedly an escape route taken by so many from the inside. But one chamber remained open, the terminal point of it most likely the hollow box under Thomas' feet. Hopefully it was not a coffin now.

Guenevere decided to come down from the tree branches to rest in the arms of Thomas. She seemed tired, and in need of a nap. Her snoring purr peaceful, here face restful---TOO restful. The need to awaken the sleeping so they would not be dead had now become not only dutiful, but extremely personal.

Was it three parts wild onion root and one part bracken fern, or three of bracken fern and one of onion? Thomas' memory for numbers was always poor, but if the formulation for the 'resurrection' potion was to work, it had to be accurate, and the bag of the final mixture had been carried off into the wind as Peter's soul was being whisked off to...someplace, perhaps. Reason said to go back to the books Thomas had written, buried in the newly dug hiding place he had created before emerging to the surface once again on this dawn that marked the end of life as he knew it. How he wished Guenevere would have run home, or someplace other than the hollowed tree trunk which had been Peter's storage closet. How he prayed and bargained with Jehovah that Guen's breathing in her 'bedchamber' thrown around his back would not stop, and that the elixer she needed would be found before she was whisked off to her final reward.

Thankfully, the raw ingredients for the multi-herbed 'elixir of awakening' were still in plentiful supply. Thomas beat the Duke's sword into a knife and plowshare, collecting what he needed, placing it into eight purses, gathered from the innumerable number of victims and now-slain invaders, all of whose identity were now known only to Jesus in Heaven, or Odin in Valhalla. Some of their faces and scalps had been peeled off, others merely charred to the bone. By the way some of the empty Viking purses were hemmed and adorned under the coating of paint, some were undoubtedly crafted from St. Sebastian. But others were from places further away. Authentic Celtic calligraphy with real Nordic Runes between the designs, but it was the horned headgear didn't seem right. Or maybe the now-slain Vikings had decided to put horns on their helmets to make themselves seem even more

fearsome for this apparently well-funded invasion that involved clearly more than a scorned Village Idiot who was a closet technical genius with Messianic delusions.

But that was for later. For now, it was about numbers. How many sleeping Souls were awakable? How much 'resurrection' elixer would Thomas have to make to save them? And how long would it take for him to find, dig or claw his way into the 'chambers' where they were now slumbering?

Thomas, now the last man on earth, as he saw and felt it, put his mind into accelerated speed. Never had he worked so hard, and effectively, to gather what had to be obtained from the earth's garden. Thankfully, the scorching of St. Pierre left enough of the wild botanicals he needed still alive, and thankfully more accessible. Never before did he feel more effective. And never before did the sun rise to the top of the Winter sky so quickly.

"I need more time!!!" he yelled up to the sky. "Please!"

But the sky didn't listen. The survival of whoever was still Alive in the 'Lord's' sleeping chambers, and the feline life Thomas valued more than he could ever imagine depended on human delivery, not heavenly intervention. On the way back to the tunnel entrance where he had re-buried the books, he kept singing Geuenevere sacred Hebrew psalms, Arabian sonnets and vulgar-lyriced Latin 'Gregorian' chants to keep her from going into an even deeper sleep.

Peter's spark-emitting pick and flame throwing spade had worked when he tested them at the hollowed tree stump, but their 'magic' was gone now. With whatever metal they still had at their tips, Thomas dug his way through a thin covering of rock hard dirt that now seemed to be glued to the tunnel entrance from which he had most recently emerged. The earth gave way, in one shot. He crawled inside and found his way to the hiding place for the books. All were intact. A quick read very aloud to the still breathing but deep sleeping Guenevere of the appropriate volumes confirmed to Thomas the formulation of the resurrection potion. He had remembered it incorrectly, but thankfully just the numbers, not the components. They all were here.

A quick run to what had been the kitchen provided Thomas with all the grinders, goblets and measuring cups to formulate the cinammen-containing powder which, in all of his books, and in limited real people, reversed the peppermint-flavored sleeping elixer. Which of the ingredients were active and which were there to the patient would take them was known to Hippocrates et al. Every herb had been collected except cinammen, an ingredient which, according to the ancient Greek texts, was added to encourage patients to swallow the bitter and sometimes vomiting-inducing power. A fact Thomas never put into print by his own hand. If it worked was a still more a matter of Faith than proven science, as even the latter could have been embellished by medical investigators who wanted, and needed, to give their patrons cures that looked good in print, so they could keep their own medical practices and personal lives.

There was another matter as well. "Cats feel and process the world differently than we do," Thomas recalled from an Arabic-speaking Greek scholar who he met in Spain. "Their bodies are different than ours, and the way they convert the humors from one to another is not always the same as ours." Though Thomas believed in a more complicated brand of medicine than the Aristotilian 'four humors rule all' theories, he did recall that a pinch of herbs which did nothing for people, dogs or horses elicited enormous changes in cat behavior and biology, sometimes killing them. To Thomas' knowledge, resurrection potion had not been tested in cats. No one needed to know, until now. There was no time to see if the rodents scurrying around the kitchen would be awakened by the recently-resurrected Ancient Greek formulary, even if they could be caught. Guenevere had to be the test subject.

Thomas tried to shake Guenevere awake, but she remained very asleep, her red gums now becoming pale, her breathing shallow. Holding her in his arms, he put an eighth of a spoonful of the potion into her mouth, then a quarter, then a half. The breath going in and out of her lungs became even less, her purr turning into a death rattle, her pulse weak and becoming irregular. Then, shakes, Guenvere's eye rotating inside the sockets as she elicited a horrifying scream. Either the peppermint sleeping potion put cats to sleep faster than it did people, or the cure for it was more deadly than therapeutic in human doses. Thomas poured two full spoonfuls of the elixer into a cup, remembering that the 'shaking disease' was a prelude to either recovery or death, and could go on indefinitely if a choice had not been made. Thomas awaited instructions, from SOMEone, God, the devil, his own mind. Anything to tell him what to do.

“She is very human,” a voice rang out from behind Thomas. “She should get a human’s dose.”

In front of Thomas stood Blind William, his cut up eye covered with a thin rag, his ‘bad’ eye which he showed off to the world winking an affirmative ‘yes’ to Thomas.

“Who else is alive?” Thomas asked, shocked.

“The three of us, for certain, only you and me if you don’t have the strength of your convictions.”

Thomas nodded ‘yes’. Blind William held on to Guenevere while Thomas poured one spoonful resurrection elixer down Guenevere’s throat. Her eyes stopped rotating, the shakes diminished, but not gone. Her scream of pain an agonizing moan, as Thomas heard from below the ground, or thought he did, from Lord Peter’s sleeping chambers.

“Now, the next one,” Blind William said, but as an order more than a request.

“You are ordering me to have faith in this medicine?” Thomas said.

“In yourself,” Blind William smiled with a strange kind of Father-to-Son pride. “You are the doctor.”

With that assurance, Thomas carried on, taking that command to more levels than Blind William perhaps intended. ‘Doctor’ Thomas moved the second spoonful of Resurrection Powder towards Guenevere’s now half-awake mouth. “She needs something to keep it down with, and to encourage her to swallow it,” Thomas said.

Blind William sniffed the potion, his nose turning up.

“Very bitter,” Thomas commented as Guenevere spit the powder out of her mouth, along with at least half of her stomach contents.

“I think I know just the thing for our little Gwen,” Blind William noted, very professionally. He reached into his pocket and retrieved a small twig, cut a small piece off of it, and grinded it into two heaping spoonfuls of fresh ‘resurrection’ powder.

“Cinammen, Doctor William,” Thomas said as he let William give the cat which he loved almost as much as he did. It stopped Guenevere’s shakes, converted her loud death rattle to a gentle purr and, by the feel of the pulse in her back leg, restored her ever-giving heart to a pumping organ that delivered life to her eyes again.

Blind William huddled the cat in his arms, smiling with delight, the tone of the Vulgar lyriced Gregorian chant from his mouth feeling very liberated, and in control...Perhaps too much control.

“Good work,” Thomas said. He kept to himself the observation that he never wrote or spoke about cinammen as an essential ingredient for taste only in the Resurrection elixer, yet William knew just what ‘Little Guen’ needed for her medicine to work, and how much to use. He remembered that at no time during the twindling days and hours of 999 AD did William appear fearful, or repentant. He was solid, like a rock. Peter the ‘Rock’ whose vulture-eaten body probably now lay scattered like pebbles along the Monastery walls.

“So, we are the only ones left?” Thomas asked. “You, me, and Guenevere.”

“And books, that we have to preserve. Yours and others,” William replied. “If four Souls were to survive an Apocalypse which delivered the tortured souls St. Pierre to their just and invited end, better it be ours than theirs,” he continued, affirmatively NON-delusional and very secularly measuring the number of spoonfuls of resurrection elixer in the caldron on the center of the kitchen table, rapidly whispering other numbers to himself.

“Four souls which survived?” Thomas asked, catching William in mid count.

“Yes,” William smiled, uneasily. “You, me, Guenevere and...those, behind the colander and in front of the kettle.” He pointed to books Thomas had laid on storage chest, against a featureless wall between a colander and kettle. Their location relative to each other only visible to a man with TWO good eyes.

“Yes, the books,” Thomas grinned back to Blind William, noting something very normal about the ‘Viking enucleated’ eye that seemed to be very intact behind the blood tinged rag. “Perhaps now we will have a literate world, a new start, with whoever is left,” Thomas muttered with irony, William’s inner rhythm still uninterrupted.

“We will do right by the dead, and the living,” Blind William smiled at Thomas. “Here on earth.”

“Yes, the five of us,” Thomas replied, shooing Guenevere away, sending her on her way through the corridors of the Cathedral taverns. He took the spoon from William’s perplexed hand, smelling peppermint-tinged bloody powder caked under his fingernails, the cuts on his hand and wrist looking very much like human bite marks. “You, me, Gwen, the books.”

“YOUR books among them,” William sneered.

“Yes, the books, and Your Savior,” Thomas sighed. “Who by my last recollection, left me instructions to save his Flock. From cold, disease, or perhaps the hand of a very human devil who hired French mercenaries from nearby villages that did not believe that 1000AD would bring the end of the world to become demonic Vikings, invade his village, steal everything in the village, kill or silence all the witnesses, and very cleverly do it by turning an abused Village Idiot’s anger into delusional Fire and Brimstone in the ultimate service of---“

“---Us...And Truth, Learning, which needs money to be spread...for you!” William grunted, grasping the handle of what had been the Duke’s favorite saber.

“Which is why you are holding that sword to my chest?” Thomas smiled back. “With a hand caked with ‘Slumber sickness’ powder which is already making your wrists shake. Perhaps working its way up hands.”

“You are a writer, a scribe, a teller of tales and scientific speculations, not a wizard or a---“

“You DO know that an hour after the kind of exposure you had to that peppermint poison potion, and the way all those ‘willing subjects’ whose throats you pushed it down.“

“This is nonsense, Thomas. You are bluffing. And will soon be...”

“---Dead? Better by that sword than the elixer that is working its way into your racing heart, and pounding eyes, as we....”

William grabbed hold of a ladle with his free and very shaking hand, and loaded it up Thomas’ curative powder. He elevated it up to his quivering lips.

“You forgot the special ingredient,” Thomas said, pointing to William’s pocket. “If you think it will help at this stage of the disease.”

“What disease?” William rested the caldron on the ladle with the bitter medical powder onto the caldron, retrieving a twig of cinnamon from it.

“Cat scratch fever?” Thomas offered, letting out a yelp he had heard from Peter when attracting feline-like animals in the woods. Before Blind William could see what was happening with either of his very good eyes, Guenevere was all over him, clawing like a rabid banchie.

“Get off me, you bitch!!!” he screamed, pulling out his dagger to stab the animal. But Gwen’s claws were faster than William’s humanly-bit, poison-exposed fingers. On her way to the hiding places she kept from everyone except Thomas, she left her mark on her beloved ‘Uncle Blind William’, two deep scratches which made real blood pour out of his eyes.

Thomas grabbed hold of William's sword, and the caldrin of curative powder. He ran down the only cavern tunnel left, then down caverns which seemed like they matched Peter's map to the underground 'sleeping' place for Peter's 'flock'. The echoing caverns amplified the moans of the half-dead inhabitants. Carrying the antidote that was their last hope, Thomas followed his sense of triangulation and pounding heart as fast as he could. To the best of her defensive and offense abilities, Gwen guarded her 'master' against a now arrow-shooting. "We can't wake them up now. It's not part of the plan anymore!" William repeated again and again.

"MY Savior wanted them alive!" Thomas screamed between ducks and stones he could throw back during reloads.

"Peter was an idiot, and Jesus was a fool, Thomas. Both expendable. As you will be if you don't listen to me, you idiot," William ranted. "Don't make me make you to one of the expendable ones!"

What was the plan for the 'sleeping flock' anyway? Relocation to another village they never knew about and could hardly recognize? Slavery in the Norse lands? Or perhaps servitude in places less civilized in the Christian world, under the command of 'Lord William'. Flash-seconds of retrospective visualizations of William raced through Thomas' mind. Only now, could he see that Blind William was always more secular than clerical, more interested in the workings of worldly power than the mystery of the Spirit. And now, he was a man who sought to make Thomas a key figure his new Enlightened Empire.

William got closer, one of his arrows piercing through Thomas' shoulder, the other nearly nailing Gwen's torso to the blood stained, bat-manure lined walls. Behind them, from places that could be felt but not seen or triangulated, even more half-dead souls moaning with death rattles. Nothing but dead end lay ahead, a flame torch from William's staff behind. Seeing 'forward' as his only hope, Thomas grabbed hold of one of the ropes on the wooden beams above him, just where Peter's map said it would be, labeled by 'Savior Peter' as 'Final Gateway to A New Heaven' in 'Thomasian' mirror script.

True to his/His word, 'Lord Peter' was right. Everything behind it collapsing. William's scream was loud, and vengeful, then silenced. Ahead lay a tunnel, and a Light which became brighter the closer you got to it. Brighter than the sun itself, but clearly not underground. Thomas edges forward into the blinding light, with Gwen, his 'witch' caldrin of curative potion, and the hope that there was a way out to the ground above. But, first things first. Behind the flash of lights that were half real flame and half Euclidian trickery, lay a door, behind the door, moans of real people, in real pain, in need of a miracle.

CHAPTER 14

Some were dead already, others were sleeping, others were in the dangerous zone in between. At first calculation, too many for the number of spoonfuls of curative that Thomas was able to keep on his run from Blind William, the most trusted father that the now very-orphaned scholar-monk-soldier-human savior had ever had.

As to the 'who' behind the numbers, the clothes still left on the male bodies told the story. Without exception the citizens, with torn out pockets, were all from Saint Pierre. The 'Vikings' and assorted other 'demons', with emptied pockets were from St. Sebastian and DeBlanc. Yes, Blind William was a man of Vision, an efficient General in the cause of evil. All wore masks of mud, clouding the ability to recognize them. To advance the process, the women's and girl's hair was cropped in the manner of Nuns preparing for marriage to God, their

clothing removed and replaced with plain, white robes. The men and boys, mostly still clad in their earthly garments, had the crown of their heads shaved in the manner of Brothers entering a life of Monastic service.

Thomas first looked for Sister Bernadette, the purest of Souls and the one who seemed to care about him more than the others. He searched for her face in the dimly lit room of sleeping corpses and slumberers about to become corpses, but to no avail. Others on his list of most important patients to be saved included Duchess 'Sarah', as she may have had information about the Duke's involvement in all of this, or perhaps knowledge of how the nobility in Saint Sebastian and DeBlanc could have been or was still involved in William's grand plan. Then there was Martha, healer of Peter's wounds, who also seemed to be either unfindable or made to be so. And two special children amongst the smaller framed reclined bodies whose faces were covered with caked mud and tar, Christopher and Christina.

One face was recognizable, by the uncut mane, large still breathing nostriled nose and gold crucifix around his neck. "Bartholemew," Thomas sighed to himself. "Your father the Abbott send me to find you to the surface of Earth when it became hell. And now I find you amongst the 'saved', or to be saved." Why Bartholemew was left in his earthly 'form' while others had been prepared more completely for 'resurrection' in the New Millennium was a mystery. But one thing was certain. "You I recognize, and for the sake of your father, who became a man at the time of his death, you should be the first."

With that, Thomas pushed a spoonful of 'resurrection powder' down the Phillip Abbott's son's parched throat, taking care that he swallowed it. Being at the early stages of the poison's effects, perhaps he would not require any more. One spoonful not being enough to bring him back, Thomas tried a second. Miraculously, it worked. "Where am I?" Bartholomew asked, confounded.

"Hell, some say purgatory, or if we work fast enough, a creation of our own," Thomas answered.

"Where's my mother?" he asked.

"Maybe here, or maybe with your father, or maybe if she had legs that ran fast enough over the mountains or into..."

"She didn't," Bartholomew lamented. "They chased us, then found us both."

"Then it's time for both of us to get to work," Thomas smiled.

Not knowing who was who made the decision easier. A medical criteria was chosen to identify who was most savable and who was beyond saving. Those with irregular, weak pulses and unchangable dilated pupils were deemed unsavable. Those who were breathing a 'quiet' sleep, one spoonful each. Those with rattles from the chest, two spoonfuls. Those with rattles and shakes, and rotating pupils three spoonfuls. As each member of the group awoke, and was explained what they needed to know about their present appearance, location and medical condition, they helped the others if they were citizens of St. Pierre. If they were pillagers from the world outside, they were tied to pillars so that they could confess or relate the terms of their employment. Unfortunately, none of the invaders in Viking's clothing survived Thomas' treatment, nor the villagers' interrogation process. No matter how assertively or logically Thomas tried to convince them that obtaining information about the living was more important than avenging the dead.

How he wished that Bernadette or the Duchess were amongst the first to be awakened, or amongst them at all. The sleeping chamber was running out of light and air, more pressing needs than finding loved ones in Thomas' mind. As the second half of the still living, and still unidentifiable, were being awakened, Thomas' most important job was not as doctor, but scout, charged with the task of finding a way out of the network of the slowly collapsing tunnels with his four legged 'see through walls' eyes, Guenevere.

"You are sure this is the way out?" he asked her again and again as she led him into even more remote caverns that weren't supposed to be there, according to Peter's map. "Peter was delusional, but not vicious. He knew he had to take those he deemed worthy of saving, or William said were useful, up into the real world where there was..."

Guenevere disappeared ahead of Thomas, rushing into a bright light that shone from an upward place that closed as quickly as it opened. A cloud of thick black dust fell on Thomas from the now broken wooden planked 'ceiling' above choking his throat and blinding his eyes. He took cover, dirt and rocks falling onto his back, as he felt the earth tremble like he never had before. It seemed final this time. For him, and every other human perhaps still alive in the valley that had become his world, or perhaps, for all he knew, the entire world. Perhaps God was not a sadist, but a masochist, burying humanity, His most beloved creation. Perhaps better that the animals have dominion over the world. Now that Guenevere was amongst the animals, it was okay. She was safe, as were Thomas' books, findable when the animals above learned how to read, or found a need to do so. All those many words which had to be spoken and written between men to have their meanings known, whereas animals knew at a glance what was being spoken and said.

"Yes, a New Millennium with no people!" Thomas proclaimed with what was left of his breath. "Thank you for that, Lord Whoever you are! To You, I commend my...Everything, if it is worth anything."

Thomas' eyes saw nothing but black. His mind went blank. His tortured soul finally merged with....

CHAPTER 15

Thomas woke up on his back, naked under a blanket which was coarse, flesh-cutting burlap on top, soft wool on the bottom. In front of his eyes, the sun, shining brightly outside a window on what appeared to be a sunny, warm day, the leaves in full bloom. On the shaved crown of his head no sprouted hair, a fistful of it, exactly as it had been in his youth.

"What happened?" he asked an angelic figure who wiped his forehead with wet rag.

"We are alive," the voice said, confirmed to be real by the touch her hand, and the warmth of her smile, the sound of her laugh.

"Bernadette?" Thomas said. "Is that you?" He squinted, startled by a loud musical rucous outside which frightened him by its unbridled jubilation.

"Us..." she smiled, kissing her "It is us."

Bernadette, her habit off, her dress that of a well off villager, her hair now grown in to below her ears, propped Thomas head up so he could take a look for himself. There they were, well, happy, and most importantly Alive in ways most natural to them all. Farmers in the fields, collecting the early Spring harvest. Minstrels and monks sharing all manners of jovial stories around a feast that celebrated everyone's Vision of a Deity. The Duchess was now a Bride of Christ clad in Bernadette's old robes, feeding the people her husband had nearly starved to death with land taxes. Now she was their servant, bringing to the table food, drink, a special smile that was still her own. The honored guests included Martha, now in the arms of a man worthy of her virtue and intelligence. Son Christopher discoursing philosophy with the Brothers. And former ugly duckling, now beautiful, daughter Christina being sought by every boy in the village. Guenevere jumped on top of Thomas, licking the caked sweat and blood off his forehead and now completely open eyes.

"It is Easter," Bernadette said. "And there have been some changes here while you were asleep."

Bernadette explained how the Duchess decided to be as generous with her money as she had been with her sexual 'favors' that love of Soul was more sustaining than love of body. That the Monastery was taken over by the people it was supposed to serve, battles with Rome to come whenever or if ever the Pope decided St. Pierre was important enough to chastise. That being chased from their homes or the Cathedral by 'Viking's' and 'demons' got many villagers to the other side of the mountains surrounding their self-isolated 'safe' town. And that upon return, they their sacked and burnt home with new eyes, and fresh perspectives. And that there would be a special building constructed in the middle of the village where all children would be taught to read.

"And think?" Thomas asked.

"Of course." Bernadette answered, kissing Thomas on his now heavily bearded cheek, Guenevere kindly moving aside without having to be asked.

"And you think you and me could..." Thomas asked, fearing most that Bernadette would say 'no'.

"For a year and a day?...Yes, of course."

Thomas widened his lips in something his face had never quite experienced at having Bernadette propose the Celtic for of marriage, in a way that reeked of vitality and wisdom.

"They call it a smile," she said by way of explanation. "Which I am sure we both will have time to write about."

Would Thomas ever write again? Dare he, given what was done with what he had written. Such questions would be answered in the 'year and a day' of his new life, and that of a new Millennium he had helped make possible.