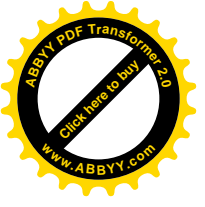




# MAGNIFICAT



# MAGNIFICAT

a novel of the millennium

by

**Chelsea Quinn Yarbro**

HIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

1999



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of this edition

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A somewhat different version of Chapter One appeared in *Gauntlet Magazine*, No. 6 (November 1993)

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The Canticle of the Virgin Mary

called *The Magnificat*, Luke 1:46-55

*Magnificat anima mea Dominum*

*Et exultavit meus in Deo salutari meo.*

*Quia respexit humilitatem ancillae Suae;*

*Ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent omnes generationes.*

*Quia fecit mihi magna Qui potens est,*

*Et sanctum nomen Eius.*

*Et misericordia a progenie in progenies timentibus Eum.*

*Fecit potentiam in brachio Suo, dispersit superbos mente cordis sui.*

*Desposuit potentes in sede in exaltavit humiles.*

*Esurientes implevit vonis et divites dimisit inanes.*

*Suscepit Israel puerem Suum recordatus misericordiae Suae.*

*Sicut locutus est et Patres nostros, Abraham et semini eius in saecula.*

My being extols the greatness of the Lord,

My soul rejoices in God my savior,

For He has looked upon His servant in her humility;

All ages to come will call me most fortunate.

God Who is mighty has done great things for me,

Holy is His name.

His mercy is from age to age for those who fear Him.

He has shown might with His arm;

He has confounded the proud in their deliberations.



He has deposed the great from their thrones

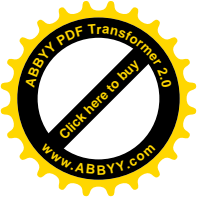
And raised the lowly on high.

The hungry He has fed to repletion,

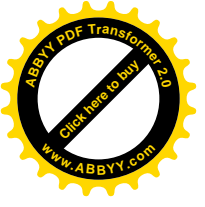
While the greedy He has sent away with nothing.

He has upheld Israel His servant, always cognizant of His mercy,

Even as He promised our father Abraham and his descendants for all time.



This is for  
my step-brother  
Jack Patrick  
who is Roman Catholic  
and my friend  
Robert R. McCammon  
who isn't

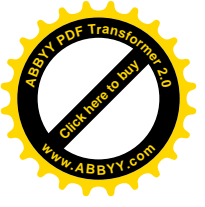


This is a work of fiction; I made it up.

But the premise is consistent

with Roman Catholic dogma

doctrine and theology.



# MAGNIFICAT





# **Part I:**

## ELECTION



# Chapter 1

As he set the nib of his pen on the vellum, Ottone, Cardinal Folgar, was possessed by a strange dizziness; there was a whiteness behind his eyes, light that was more than light, a fluttering of breath, a sense that something hovered over him, a moment that was suspended in eternity. Then it was gone and he passed a shaking hand across his brow, murmuring thanks to God that He had chosen to leave him on earth a little longer. How ironic, he thought in the next instant as he touched the crucifix that hung on his breast, if he died now, while the Cardinals were gathered in conclave to choose a new Pope: a new Pope for the second time in three years, and with the millennium fast approaching, bringing with it a religious fervor Cardinal Folgar had not encountered before in his lifetime.

From inclination as much as habit the Cardinal still prayed in Latin, relishing the tolling cadences he had mastered as a child. Now the familiar liturgy took his mind off the peculiar, brief episode that might presage disaster. His brother had died of a stroke, just three years ago. Perhaps this was how it had begun. He continued his thanks to God, shutting out the arthritic ache in his knees as well as his growing irritation with his fellow-Princes of the Church, who, like him, were about to submit their ballots to be counted. He set aside the old-fashioned crow-quill pen.

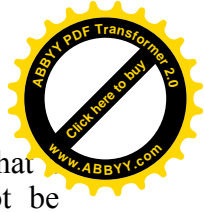
Then he glanced down at the vellum and shook his head. He had been instructed to disguise his handwriting, and had certainly succeeded in doing so. Would it be possible to read the name of Sylvestre, Cardinal Jung in that disjointed scrawl? That was not supposed to be his concern. He crossed himself and got up from his knees, impatient to be done. There was another long week of maneuvering, he was convinced, before his own conservative faction and Marc-Luc, Cardinal Gemme's radicals would come to terms. Both sides would probably compromise, either with the popular Vitale, Cardinal Cadini, or the Canadian, Dominique, Cardinal Hetre. For the time being, there was a ritual to the politics of the conclave as there was to everything in the Church—hence his temporary support of Cardinal Jung, though he did not want the pompous Swiss to be elected.

He put his vellum into a foil-lined envelope and began to heat sealing wax over a match. This was one reform of John-Paul II's he could approve, this simplifying of the presentation of ballots; as he pressed his Cardinal's ring into the dollop of hot wax, he thought he felt a distant, fleeting echo of his earlier disorientation. He blew out the match and resumed his prayers.

\* \* \*

Not far from Cardinal Folgar's conclave cell, Jivin, Cardinal Tayibha completed his prayers without finding the peace he sought. He had heard that the conclaves were more politics than religion, but he had not anticipated how extreme it would be, with the liberal and conservative elements of the Church so acrimoniously divided. He had attempted to conceal his shock and dismay but knew he had failed. As the newest Cardinal, he was the least prepared for what he encountered here; he almost regretted the knowledge he had acquired in the last thirteen days as the Cardinals feinted and riposted for advantage. How far he had come from the simple faith of his youth, the trust of his ordination. At fifty-one he was becoming a skeptic.

It was time to vote, he knew, and he could not think of any name to put on the vellum. The last time



he had voted for Felipe, Cardinal Pingari, as a gesture of support for the Filipino, but knew that second such endorsement would be wasted: Cardinal Pingari himself had asked that he not be considered. He admired Vincent, Cardinal Walgren of Los Angeles, who had accomplished such wonders with youth gangs and drug dealers. But was that acumen enough to recommend him for the Papacy? And how would the world respond to an American Pope?

He was not aware that he had taken his pen in hand and marked the vellum. It must be the fatigue, he decided as he peered at the scratchings. He had been staying up nights for meditation and prayers; during the day he fasted. Now those disciplines were taking their toll. The writing looked like doodles, he thought, or Chinese. He reached for his foil-lined envelope and prepared to seal his vote, wondering distantly whose name he had written.

\* \* \*

When Marc-Luc, Cardinal Gemme handed over his sealed ballot, he left his cell for Vespers, ready to hear the tally of the votes as soon as the service was concluded. He could not conceal the aggravation that consumed him as he walked down the Sistine Chapel, ignoring Michelangelo's splendor overhead. If only Urban IX had lived another year! There would have been time to organize the Church liberals against the forces of conservatism which were gaining strength in the Church as the Third Millennium approached. It was hard to believe. In just three years the Third Millennium would begin, and the Church was in as much disarray as the rest of Christianity in anticipating 2001 A.D. Every extremist group was preaching chaos and the Second Coming, and the conservatives in the Church sympathized with this madness. Without the sweeping changes of John-Paul II in the last decade, the Church would be even more hampered than it had become; at least there was a mechanism for change and reform, little as it was used. Inwardly he was afraid that it was too late, for the Cardinals with Cardinal Folgar were entrenched and prepared to resist to the last. As it was, he had tried to rally the Europeans along with the Third-world Cardinals to stand against the reactionaries. The longer it took to elect the Pope, the more he feared the outcome of the conclave.

His own vote puzzled him, for he had been distracted when he wrote the name of his candidate. It was an effort to make sense of the marks on the vellum, but he supposed that the secretaries were used to that and would make allowances for his attempts to disguise his hand. He stopped walking as he chided himself for his worldliness; the Apostolic Succession, he reminded himself sternly, was the result of the visitation of the Holy Spirit, not the result of Vatican skulduggery. That, above all, must be maintained or the whole fabric of Catholicism unraveled. Very carefully he crossed himself and tried to turn his thoughts to more spiritual paths. As he strove to keep his mind away from politics, he heard the opening words of Vespers—today in German—and he hastened to join the other Cardinals in worship.

\* \* \*

It was Vitale, Cardinal Cadini who spoke for all of them when the secretary presented himself to them fully two hours after he was expected. "What is the trouble, Father?" He broke with tradition in asking the question, but Cardinal Cadini had made a career of breaking tradition since as a young Monsignor he had been an aide to John XXIII, and no one was shocked by him now. "Tell us."

The secretary, grown old at the Vatican, and seeming to be made of the same parchment as were many of the documents he tended, offered a gesture of apology. "Yes, Eminences," he said, his voice almost breaking. "I fear there may be a...a problem."

"Well, what is it?" demanded Sylvestre, Cardinal Jung, his corpulent, satin-clad body as polished as a



Dresden figurine. "Tell us at once."

Father McEllton blinked in helplessness. "It is not my sin, Eminences. I am not in error. I thought at first I was, but when all the ballots were examined... I have done nothing to be ashamed of, but I must ask you to pardon me."

"Certainly," said Cardinal Cadini, his raisin eyes twinkling. "We will all pardon you, every one of us, Father McEllton, if only you will tell us what is wrong."

There was a murmur of consent from the eighty-nine Cardinals, and one or two mutters at the delay.

"Have we a Pope or not?" Cardinal Folgar asked emphatically.

"Eminences, we have... consensus." He turned pale. "You have all written the same name."

"All of us?" Cardinal Folgar was dumbfounded that all the Cardinals would support Cardinal Jung.

A susurrus passed through the men gathered around Father McEllton, and one or two of the Princes of the Church crossed themselves.

"How is that possible?" asked Cardinal Pingari with a polite nod to the cadaverous Cardinal Lepescu at his side. Both men wore dignity more prominently than their red cassocks.

"If we truly have consensus," said the doubtful Dominique, Cardinal Hetre, "then why have we not followed procedure?" He was a stickler for procedure, always.

Once again Father McEllton dithered. "You see, I didn't understand at first. I did not see. How could I? What would lead me to think... I thought it was the handwriting." He wrung his fingers as if to force the offending words out of them. "I ask your pardon, Eminences. I mean no disrespect. If Father Zirhendakru had not been... As it was, he identified the...the name."

"Surely our handwriting was not that bad," suggested the older Polish Cardinal, his eyes hard and bright in his wrinkled face. He had supported the controversial Tokuyu, Cardinal Tsukamara, and flatly refused to suppose that all the rest of the College of Cardinals did as well. If only he had paid more attention to how he wrote the name on his ballot; but he had been momentarily distracted when he put his pen to the vellum, an inexcusable lapse.

"It was...it was all the same," said Father McEllton at last. "All the same name."

"And who is it?" the senior Cardinal from Brazil asked bluntly, glowering at Father McEllton. "What is it that distresses you?" Beside him, Jaime, Cardinal O'Higgins of Mexico City scowled portentously, the expression incongruous in his impish face.

"We ought not to receive the information you have for us this way, no matter what the awkwardness of it may be," said Cardinal Tayibha. "There is ritual—"

"It is not the name of anyone here," blurted out Father McEllton. Now that he had spoken the dreadful news, he felt suddenly, maddeningly calm. Nothing else would be as appalling as telling them that.

"What do you mean, it isn't the name of anyone here?" Cardinal Folgar said in disbelieving



indignation. Which of the three celebrated Archbishops had been able to gain the Papacy when the had not yet achieved their red hats? How could there be unanimity, when he himself had not supported any of the Archbishops? Cardinal Folgar began to review all those Cardinals who might be expected to show support for one of the three famous Archbishops, but could not fathom how such a thing could happen, certainly not unanimously. “There has been a mistake,” he said, and saw that most of the Cardinals agreed with him.

“Yes, precisely. It is a mistake, one that requires correction. The name...it is...it is the name of a foreigner.” Father McEllton folded his hands. “It is not a name I recognize, nor does the computer.” He stared straight ahead. “We have gone through all the registers and we have not found the name.”

This time a third of the Cardinals crossed themselves and the words that were whispered among them were less indignant than before. One or two of the Cardinals appeared almost frightened.

“But you say Father Zirhendakru recognized it,” prompted Cardinal Hetre, as much to stave off further distress as to obtain the offending name. These delays were making his headache worse.

“Not precisely. He knew the language, and he translated it.” Father McEllton had turned bright red, his fair skin taking his blush like a stain.

“Tell us, Father,” said Cardinal Cadini with his world-famous smile. “What is the name. Who have we all endorsed?” The smile grew broader, so that everyone would be certain he was joking, not commanding.

“It...” He took a deep breath, feeling his heart slamming in his chest. If only Our Lady would protect him through this ordeal, he would retire from Vatican service for the rest of his life and devote it to study and assisting the poor, he vowed. “It is Zhu...Zhuang Renxin, or so father Zirhendakru tells me.” He stumbled over the word, unable to pronounce the inflections.

The Cardinals were silent.

Then Cardinal Folgar spoke for all of them, shaking with the intensity of his emotions. “What nonsense is this?”

Immediately the other Cardinals added their questions and demands. The noise grew tremendous.

“That is what Father Zirhendakru says,” Father McEllton repeated several times, unable to think of anything else to offer them. He had no explanation at all.

Finally Cardinal Hetre managed to make himself heard over the rest of them. “It is obviously a prank,” he said, choosing the least inflammatory word he could think of. “Someone is trying to influence the conclave or make mock of it without direct interference.”

This brought nods of agreement and a few condemning outbursts, including one staunch defense of Vatican Security. The growing awe that had possessed the Cardinals now vanished and was replaced by outrage.

“It had to be the Communists,” said Cardinal Jung at once, certain that they would want to sow dissension in the ranks; and if the name on the ballot was Chinese, it only served to prove his point. “They want to destroy the Church, and they want to promote their godless cause in the eyes of the



world. What better way than this?"

"It has to be the Separatists," corrected Michon, Cardinal Belleau, referring to the group of excommunicated priests and nuns who had splintered from the Church and now had established their own Vatican and Pope on the other side of Rome near Settecamini, acting in open defiance of the Holy See.

"Incredible," murmured Cardinal Cadini, for once unable to come up with a single witty remark.

"It is obvious that we are being duped," said Ectore, Cardinal Fiorivi, the most respected legal mind in the highest ranks of the Church and currently Vatican Secretary of State. "Someone, and it does not matter who, is attempting to impugn our credibility, to cast doubt on any Pope we elect. It is up to us to use our best judgment now and not permit this incident to interfere with our task here." His voice, resonant and deep as a fine bell, quieted the gathering. "It behooves us to withdraw for meditation and prayer tonight, and in the morning we will have to discuss what we wish to do with these ballots. We will have to find a way to keep this information from reaching the public; it will be difficult, because whoever is responsible will certainly do their best to inform all the news media of what has happened, if only to put forward embarrassing questions. We must not permit this to occur, and we will need to counteract the rumors as soon as possible. In the meantime, you, Father McEllton, will announce that we have given the day to discussion and prayer and have not cast votes this evening, to forestall another dead-lock. Perhaps our reticence will cause the ones responsible to show themselves."

There were a few words of agreement at Cardinal Fiorivi's proposals, but Cardinal Tayibha could not go along with the others.

"Eminences," he said, his voice cracking, "we are here to invite the Holy Spirit to make itself known to us. We have all written a name, the same name. Might not this be a manifestation of the Holy Spirit? It is said that the Holy Spirit could inspire us to elect any living soul on the earth to occupy the Throne of Saint Peter. Dare we presume to declare ourselves above the visitation of the Holy Spirit, and the true Will of God if that is what has actually occurred?"

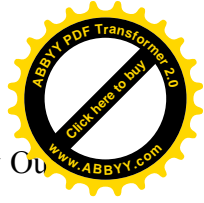
"The Holy Spirit would not be recommending a Chinese to be Pope," announced Cardinal Folgar. "It's absurd to think otherwise. We know the dogma, but we know the Church, as well." His smile was condescending as he went on to the soft-spoken Cardinal from Madras. "It is your first time in conclave, and you are still learning your way. Your piety does you credit, of course, but in circumstances like this, it is essential that we do not permit ourselves to be deceived. So many Catholics are gullible and can be taken in by any number of ruses, and never more so than when we are in conclave." He looked around and saw favorable responses in the eyes of many of the Cardinals. "We have been the victims of a clever, evil joke, and we must be at pains to guard against similar incidents."

Again there were gestures of support, a few quite emphatic.

But Hunfredo, Cardinal Montebranco was not convinced. "How can you assume that we have been deceived? Is it impossible that the Holy Spirit would touch each of us, if God wished it?"

"We pray that we will receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit," said Cardinal Jung at once, "but Folgar is right; it is not credible that the Holy Spirit would offer the name of a Chinese." He had a deep, plummy laugh. "How could such a thing happen?"

"If it is the Will of God," said the venerable Cardinal Montebranco, "it would require only to exist;



credibility is for fallible humans.” He crossed himself. “I pray that we are not like Peter, to deny Our Lord when He is present.”

“Do you seriously suppose that the Holy Spirit would offer the name of a Chinese? A non-Catholic? A Communist?” demanded Cardinal Jung, his voice rising in pitch with each question.

“No,” said Cardinal O’Higgins in a thoughtful voice. “No, but that does not mean anything when dealing with matters of God. What we suppose is as nothing.” He glanced nervously over his shoulder. “It would be easier to turn away if only a few had written the name, but as we all did, it is...”

“Proof that the saboteurs have agents in the Vatican, as we have long suspected,” said Cardinal Folgar promptly. “This is the result of careful planning, that may have taken years to put into action. Whatever their goals and whoever they are, they have overstepped themselves here. That shows pride, and their error. Had they given the...vision to half our number, it would appear odd but reasonable, but they become greedy, and that was the source of their failure.” He motioned to Father McEllton. “You have done well by coming to us in this way. If you had spoken officially we would have had to make a statement and we can say nothing official about this. When we reveal tomorrow that we have not yet reached a decision, we will know our enemies by their responses.” He crossed himself and folded his hands, looking very placid. “It might be best if we retire at once, so that we can explore our thoughts in privacy; we will give nothing away to our enemies if we are silent.”

Cardinal Shumwoe nodded gravely, his densely black skin making him look like a walking shadow. “In the morning we must discuss our experiences. Until then, I am convinced Cardinal Folgar is right—the less we are together the less chance there is that we will weaken our position.” To provide an example he turned away and started toward his temporary cell.

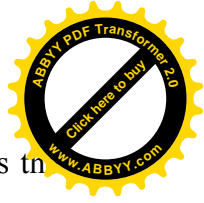
“It is well-advised,” said Cardinal Hetre, indicating the other Canadian Cardinal, Victor, Cardinal Mnientek. “Come, Eminence.”

“For Canada?” asked Cardinal Mnientek with a lift to his brows; the mischief in his eyes was at odds with his angular Polish features.

“For the memory of Urban IX, and for the benefit of the Church,” said Cardinal Hetre. “We owe that much to his reign, surely; we all do,” he added pointedly.

Several Cardinals agreed, a few of them moving away with the two Canadians; others were confused by this failure of protocol and uncertain of what was best to do.

Charles, Cardinal Mendosa took up the case, standing as if he were about to get on a half-broke horse. “The less we say about this, the better. I’m not suggesting we should ignore it—nothing like that. But we need to have our priorities straight. After we have a Pope, then we can set about finding out what this thing was and who was behind it. In the meantime, I thought we better get a new kitchen staff while we’re in here. Something got hold of us, and if it wasn’t the Holy Spirit, it was probably in the air or the food. Those are the two things we all share. So we’ll start with the food: it’s easier.” He had one hand on his hip as if there might be a phantom six-gun under his fingers. “And when we find out who’s doing this, we’d best deal with them quickly and quietly. We don’t want any publicity getting out about this. You know the press would be all over us, and they’re bad enough as it is with every Bible-thumping preacher from one end of the world to the other talking about the Second Coming and the Antichrist.” He crossed himself. “God is better served without a lot of glitz and glamour.”



It galled Cardinal Folgar to agree with the tall, rangy Texan from Houston, but he knew it was the wisest course. “We are all aware it would be ill-advised for the world to learn of this.”

“Might give them ideas,” added Cardinal Mendosa. “They could take a notion to question everything, to think it’s all conspiracies. It’s bad enough watching the loonies on TV talking about the Second Coming as if it were a rock concert. I see a lot of that back home.”

Cardinal Folgar stifled the retort he longed to give about Americans in general and Texans in particular; instead he said, “We must think of the Church, how it is to endure the next three years, until we are safely launched on the new millennium.”

Cardinal van Hooven peered out through the pebble-thick lenses of his steel-rimmed spectacles. “Silence, Eminences. Silence first. Leave a little time for the soul to speak. We’ve already said too much, and confounded our minds. We must quiet the disorder within ourselves and turn our thoughts to the inner light where God is found.” He leaned on his cane as he made his way toward his temporary cell, saying as he went, “I will retire for the evening. You may concoct whatever tale you wish to placate the press.”

“He has the right idea,” said Cardinal Mendosa. “Let’s just make sure that Father McElton doesn’t end up with egg on his face, all right?” He looked around. “Okay. You: Gemme. You’re the one the press likes best. You can work out the right way to explain what’s going on in here, without telling them much. Make sure the reporters don’t spook you.” He touched his pectoral crucifix and his weathered face softened. “We owe it to the Church, Gemme.”

“Of course,” said Cardinal Gemme harshly.

“We’re depending on you.” Cardinal Mendosa grinned at Cardinal Gemme. “I’ll make special mention of you in my prayers, Eminence.”

Cardinal Gemme swung around and stalked away from the small remaining knot of Cardinals.

\* \* \*

It was well into the night when Jivin, Cardinal Tayibha finally ceased his meditations. For the last two hours he had permitted himself to hope that the disastrous ballots were an isolated incident, something they had faced and defeated; now he wanted a little rest before the Cardinals met again. He thought of God, the mystery of Him, and for once was chilled instead of comforted. He rose from his knees and prepared himself for bed, hoping that the fragile serenity he had found for himself would sustain him into the morning when he would need it most.

As he slipped between the sheets, he had one last frisson of doubt: what if they were opposing the Will of God? What if that Chinese name was truly the mandate of the Holy Spirit, and not some clever psychological manipulation on the part of those seeking to sabotage the conclave and the Church? He recalled that anyone elected twice by the College of Cardinals could not refuse the Papacy; the Cardinals could not elect another Pope until the one elected twice had served. He shuddered as he closed his eyes.

With an effort he forced these unwelcome thoughts from his mind, unwilling to sleep with such questions for company, for he knew it led to the turbulence of the soul which the Cardinal could not endure.





\* \* \*

From time to time Cardinal Hetre was plagued with nightmares, and never more than on this night. He tossed on his narrow bed, wishing he were back in Quebec instead of trapped here in Rome, a prisoner of the conclave. Sweat stood out on his brow; his arms thrashed against the sheets as if they were the most formidable bonds. In his dream he screamed and howled, but all that escaped his lips was a soft, pitiful moan.

Something pursued him, something he could not bring himself to face, something that had long ago sent him into the Church for safety, a personal Nemesis more terrible than the promise of Hell for those who sinned. He did not know why he was sought, and had no desire to find out. He wanted only to get away from the terrible thing, and that was the one wish he seemed destined not to be granted.

He sat up in bed and started to pray, quiet, personal petitions to the Virgin and to God for the peace that is not of this world, which had eluded him for so long.

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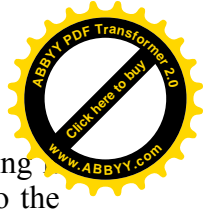
Before the first bells of morning, Charles, Cardinal Mendosa awoke. He lay still, staring at the ceiling, wanting to be back in Houston: he hated Rome. Horrible thing for a Catholic to feel, let alone a Cardinal. Rome brought out the worst in him. It was nothing but a monument to its own swollen self-importance, and it colored the Church with grandiose traditions that still made him squirm. He was never more Texan than when he was in Rome.

A month before the conclave, he had received a delegation from the followers of the Reverend Robert Williamson, the most popular of the Fundamentalists preaching the Second Coming on television. The six men were successful and confident, trying to sway the Cardinal to their position in anticipation of the death of Pope Urban IX, who was lying in a coma at the Vatican. They presented their statistics and quoted Scripture, making it apparent they expected his cooperation. At the time he had been polite to mask his ire; now he was afraid that those followers of Reverend Williamson might have more strength than he first supposed. They had been so polished. They had told him—very discreetly, of course—that the Church was falling apart and that Reverend Williamson was looking to save the souls of all Christians.

These were not the Protestants Cardinal Mendosa was used to. These men were there to deliver a threat, to put him on notice that they were going to damage him and the Church as much and whenever possible. Never before had Cardinal Mendosa experienced such subtle malice from any Protestants, no matter how angry some of them might have been. Until that interview he had assumed that difficult though it occasionally was, Catholics and Protestants would find some way to rattle along together, their Christianity giving them common ground. After the Reverend Williamson's men visited him, he was no longer certain of it.

Every day the conclave continued gave those slick, dangerous men—and those like them—more power and credibility. Cardinal Mendosa could feel it in the air, even here in Rome. And the dreams had come back. For the first time in almost a decade, he was having those eerie dreams that had brought him into the Church so long ago.

“We’re going to have to agree today,” he said softly to the darkness. “We don’t agree today and this thing’s gonna bust wide open.” He was not sure he was speaking to anyone other than himself. “If it



busts wide open, then it's all over. We'll never get another Pope that everyone can accept." Saying aloud made him more convinced he was right, casting his thoughts back more than forty years, to the first dreams he had had that had disturbed Father Aloysius, the dearly flawed Irishman who had been his parish priest.

Cardinal Mendosa turned on his side and determinedly closed his eyes, wanting to be rid of the memory. "This is different," he whispered, and saw the dreams again as clearly as he had at nine when he had been examined by Father Aloysius and then Bishop Parker, both men questioning him for hours about what he had seen in his dreams. They had finally dismissed them as the result of the boy's vivid imagination, his vision of a Catholic President shot in Texas while riding in an open car surrounded by police.

And eight years later it happened, exactly as he had dreamed it. Cardinal Mendosa put his hand to his eyes as if that would block what he remembered. The new dreams were as unsettling and as unanswerable, and he found them as hard to turn from now as he had when he was a boy.

"We have to agree. Today," he muttered, shivering in the bed. The new vision dismayed him, and he wanted to be free of it: a Pope who was not Catholic was unthinkable, no matter how theoretically and theologically possible. The Cardinals would have to agree today, or it would be too late.

The first deep bell of Saint Peter's began to toll, a low E that shuddered on the pre-dawn air. Cardinal Mendosa heard it with relief as he threw back the covers and began his first prayers of the morning.



## Chapter 2

*“Habemus Papam!”* came the glorious announcement to the assembled faithful in the oval-shaped plaza below. An answering cheer went up, and the thousands flocked more tightly toward the balcony where the news was given.

In the splendid Latin phrases—one of the few remaining rituals in the ancient tongue—it was proclaimed to the world that Ottone, Cardinal Folgar of Verona would reign as Celestine VI.

Again there were cheers, interspersed with a few derisive whistles, for Cardinal Folgar was an outspoken and staunch conservative who was not as popular as some of the Cardinals. In general the new Pope was greeted enthusiastically, for he had always stood firm against the radical elements in the Church, and for the traditional values of family and Catholicism.

“I sure hope we know what we’re doing,” Cardinal Mendosa whispered as the international press closed in for the story. He had dreamed again that night and what he had seen still troubled him.

“What do you think about the new Pope, Eminence?” asked a reporter with a strong Midwestern accent. “You being from Texas and all, does this Folgar seem like a good choice to you? Good for Americans as well as Italians, I mean?”

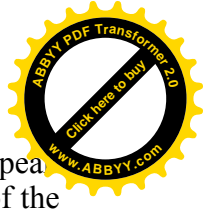
Cardinal Mendosa looked at the brash young man. “The word Catholic means universal. The election of the Pope is not the same popularity contest that most elections are. It is the Will of the Holy Spirit that determines who will wear the tiara.” He knew he sounded inexcusably stuffy, but he was in no mood to accommodate the newspeople who flocked around; the bargain the Cardinals had struck continued to rankle with him.

“Aw, come on, Cardinal,” the young man persisted. “You can’t tell me that popularity doesn’t enter into the Papacy. Everyone know that the Popes are as much political as religious. You said that yourself last year in Chicago. I can quote the lecture, if you like.” His smile was two notches off being a smirk.

“All right, I concede there is a political component to the Papal elections, as there are to all elections, I suspect. But we are subject to the rule of the Holy Spirit, and that must be the central concern of every conclave, to strive for the presence and to act on the Will of the Holy Spirit.” He thought of the identical Chinese name on all their ballots, ballots which they had destroyed.

“Is that what happened?” the reporter asked, and without waiting for an answer, continued. “What about what Reverend Williamson said last night? Do you want to comment about that?”

It took all of Cardinal Mendosa’s self-discipline not to give a sharp retort. He drew a deep breath. “Since I don’t know what Reverend Williamson said last night, I’m in no position to comment, and since Reverend Williamson is not Catholic, it would not be appropriate in any case.” He saw that his answer had not deterred the young reporter. On impulse he tried a new ploy. “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to excuse me. I have said I will give an interview to Mister Foot, and I notice he’s waiting for me. You might try Cardinal Walgren.”



“Going with the big shots?” the young reporter demanded, unimpressed by the suggestion to speak with the charismatic Cardinal from Los Angeles. “Too bad I’m not the anchorman for INS or one of the other satellite networks; I might have a little pull. All Walgren ever talks about is Hispanic gangs and drug dealers.”

Cardinal Mendosa moved away from the young man, making his way along the velvet rope separating the Cardinals from the press toward the tall, lanky Brit in the silk sportcoat. As he went he comforted himself with the thought that he had not lied to the impertinent young reporter—he had a standing agreement with Fitzwilliam Foot to give him an interview any time it was requested, with the understanding that he would not be asked any seriously embarrassing questions. At a time like this, he thought, that was a rare consolation.

\* \* \*

Marc-Luc, Cardinal Gemme faced the bright studio lights with the aplomb of experience. He was dressed in an expensive business suit, in keeping with the reforms of Urban IX, who had encouraged the adoption of secular dress; only the three pins on his lapel revealed his position and title in the Church.

“They’re saying that Celestine is another compromise, essentially another Urban.” The interviewer was smiling, feeding the Cardinal the arranged text. He nodded once, prepared to listen to what Cardinal Gemme had to say. The program, originating in Paris, was being sent all over the world via the INS satellite network. The Cardinal’s appearance on the program was his fifth in three years.

Cardinal Gemme lowered his handsome head, his features serious. “As I am sure everyone is aware, the obligations of the conclave are such that all we do there is, and must remain, secret. If the deliberations were not kept absolutely private, there would be opportunity for influence and manipulation from...oh, many groups, and that would impugn the credibility of the election, which is the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. That is the basis for belief in the Apostolic Succession. However, we are accountable to the Church and to God for the Pope we elect, and it is only fitting that we offer some observations on the new Pontiff. I think that most Catholics know something of Cardinal Folgar’s record, and are waiting to see how he will deal with the more pressing problems that confront the Church, given his previous position on such issues as women priests and family planning.” He folded his hands in his lap. “It is of paramount importance for Catholics the world over to support the Pope, for he is our intermediary to God on earth. We cannot limit our vision to Catholics alone if we are to do the work God has set for us in the world: it is also necessary for people of good will, Catholics or any other faith, to concern themselves with the welfare of their fellow-human beings. Charity is listed as the greatest virtue, no matter in what religious context it is offered. Jesus commanded us to love one another, for if we cannot do that, we cannot love God. He also said that what we do for the least of His people we do for Him as well.”

The interviewer cocked his head, as if the notion were brand new instead of part of their agreed-upon script. “You are known as a liberal, Your Eminence. The general consensus is that with a conservative in charge, Catholicism will continue to lag behind in necessary reforms, which you appear to advocate.”

This was the part that Gemme had been waiting for, his chance to begin to build his own support-base with the public. “I pray every morning that the Church will open her heart to the plight of the poor throughout the world and modify her stances on many social issues. I am a true son of the Church, but I am also a citizen of the world, at the end of the twentieth century. In good conscience, I can do no less than support changes, though some of my fellow-Cardinals do not agree with me. There are those who say that it is for the Church to look after the spiritual needs of Catholics before all other issues. Yet for



many Catholics, the spiritual and the mundane are one in the same. A poor mother in Guatemala or Rome or Java faces the same problems, and the Church has failed to address them realistically, though we have sufficient evidence to indicate that if such genuine grievances are neglected, it leads to a loss of faith and social upheaval, sometimes to violent revolution.” He looked directly into the lens of the camera, his dark-blue eyes so fixed that it seemed he was truly looking at all those watching the interview instead of the camera. “Catholics have a right to expect their Church to aid them in need, to give them hope and comfort, and to show them the glory that God has prepared for all of us.”

The interviewer ran his finger under his neat moustache. “Strong sentiments, Cardinal Gemme.”

“Yes,” he said, as modestly as possible.

\* \* \*

“Did you see that idiot Gemme on television last night?” demanded Cardinal Jung as he stormed into the small reception room where the Pope had requested an informal discussion with his Cardinals that evening, to be followed by a dinner. He signaled for a servant and ordered a brandy, then went on. “He wasn’t content to wait! Celestine has been Pope for less than a week, and already Gemme is sniping at him! I’m only sorry we cannot try him for heresy, given what he has done. There is no telling what he will do next.” He stared hard at Cardinal Tayibha. “I wonder what they thought of him in India?”

“I have heard nothing yet; it is too soon to tell.” The Indian Cardinal shrugged, wanting desperately to avoid the whole issue. He wished Cardinal Cadini had come early, for the benign Genoese had no difficulty in handling Cardinal Jung, or anyone else, for that matter.

Cardinal Pingari looked up from the magazine he had been reading. “In Manila they liked what he said but not how he said it. My secretary called an hour ago to tell me.”

“The coronation is barely over, and Gemme is trying to worm his way into the position of heir apparent,” said Cardinal Jung with abhorrence. “He is blatant in his plan.”

“Meaning he stole the march on you?” suggested Cardinal Belleau.

“He who enters the conclave a Pope comes out a Cardinal,” quoted Cardinal van Hooven, his smile behind his thick lenses making him look more like an owl than he usually did.

“There is no saying what he might arrange,” said Cardinal Jung, but with less bluster. “He knows that we cannot afford to ignore public sentiment. He is exploiting our weakness, hoping to use this millennial hysteria to sway Catholics to his support. And we may have to answer him with the same techniques. May God forgive us, but if that were not the case, if the laity were not so torn, we might not have had to destroy those ballots, but could have revealed them for the fraud they were.” He looked around as the servant brought his brandy on a silver tray. Cardinal Jung took the crystal snifter and dismissed the servant with a wave of his hand.

“Where is Celestine?” asked Cardinal Montebranco, who looked as if he had just awakened from a nap. “An odd choice in names, Celestine. We haven’t had a Celestine in centuries.”

“We hadn’t had an Urban, either,” Cardinal Tayibha pointed out. “It is a worthy name, with a good heritage. Neither Urban nor Celestine are tainted by recent events, as some others are.”



“His Holiness will be here shortly, I trust. It is almost the hour he designated,” said Cardinal O’Higgins, setting aside the Spanish-language newspaper he had been skimming. “I don’t like the way the European banks have been reacting to our new Pope. They seem to think the Church and Vatican bank will withdraw its support of European currency.” He stood up; unlike most of the others he was in a suit and tie instead of red or black cassocks. “I spoke with him this afternoon. He called to ask about the rumors of a coup in Honduras.”

Cardinal Jung put his snifter down. “Is Gemme going to be here this evening? Will we have to see him?”

“I think he is still in Paris,” said Cardinal Montebranco. “There’s no reason for him to be here in any case. In fact, it would be tactless, given his recent remarks.”

There were fourteen Cardinals to dine that night, all those remaining in Rome after the coronation of Celestine VI, with the exception of Rafaele, Cardinal Tondocello of Palermo, who was confined to his bed at the Vatican with kidney trouble. Within half an hour of the stated time, all fourteen were gathered in the reception room awaiting the arrival of Celestine VI. Conversation remained desultory; no one wanted to appear inattentive when the Pope joined them.

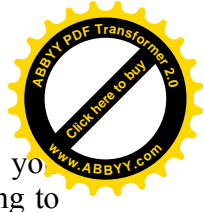
At last Father McElton opened the door and bowed to the assembled Cardinals. “If you will be good enough to accompany me, Eminences?” He indicated the hallway. “His Holiness is ready to receive you.”

An unpromising sign, thought Cardinal Tayibha. Ottone Folgar had been Pope less than a week and already he was putting distance between himself and the Cardinals. He feared that Celestine had forgot how vulnerable he could be as Pope. The Indian Cardinal rose with the others and permitted himself to be led to the private dining room, knowing that it was a show of favor to dine there and knowing also that he felt slighted by the honor.

Celestine VI was wearing a white satin cassock and an antique pectoral crucifix glittering with gold and gems. His smile was as reserved and self-satisfied as a cat’s. He blessed his Cardinals as they came into the room and gave a formal opening prayer before he indicated where his guests should sit at table. “Come. It is fitting that we dine together, as Our Lord did with His disciples.”

The service, Cardinal Tayibha noticed, was fine, gold-trimmed porcelain, the utensils heavy baroque silver, the napery damask linen, the complement of four wine-glasses, per setting, of delicate crystal. He doubted that Jesus would recognize such luxury as being in keeping with His standard of entertainment, and quashed the thought even as it formed in his mind. He took his place between Cardinal Pingari and Cardinal Fiorivi, and was momentarily sorry that Cardinal Mendosa had already left for the United States, along with the other six U.S. Cardinals. He bowed his head before Celestine spoke the blessing of their meal.

The trout had been removed and replaced with collops of spring lamb cooked with a puree of pomegranate and garlic, when Pope Celestine finally began to address the Cardinals. “I have been informed that there is a movement in Latin America to add new Voodoo-like elements to the Mass, as a means of bringing more of the people back to the Church. Now, that smacks of heresy to me. Oh, I know we’re not to use so unpopular a word as heresy in these times, but we must not flinch from our duty. I have informed the Cardinals, Archbishops, and Bishops of Latin America that any such additions or interpolations can be grounds for excommunication.”



Cardinal O'Higgins made a respectful gesture toward the Pope. "Your Holiness, I believe that you would lose a quarter of the priests in Latin America if you require such restrictions. They are trying to work with the people, in ways the people can understand. This is a difficult time for Latin America, and it will not get easier, not for some years, possibly decades, to come. It was not so long ago that the people of Latin America were little more than slaves to European masters and the Church. It is fitting that we show our—"

"Are you telling me that there is no way to bring them into the Church except to permit them to pervert their worship with worship of Satan?" Celestine asked, his voice dangerously low. "Can it be that you sympathize with these elements in the Church, my son?"

The Mexican Cardinal winced but went doggedly on. "No, Your Holiness, I do not sympathize with their philosophy, or their theology, but I do sympathize with their plight. These priests are not attempting to change the Church, believe me, or to pervert the Word of God; they are trying to bring God to their people in the only way people will accept Him."

A sudden quiet settled over the table. "I suppose you have given the matter some thought? It would seem that you have formed an opinion, haven't you?" Celestine inquired politely. "Perhaps you have tolerated it. You deny it, but it may be that in your heart you see no harm in what is being done?"

Now Cardinal O'Higgins' impish face froze. "No, that's not what I meant, Holiness—"

He was not to be allowed to finish. "Perhaps you are satisfied with Satan being let into the house of God, but I am not." The Pope was speaking with determination now, and his eyes were as harsh as his voice. "I am a more vigilant warder than you are, my son. I see you have permitted yourself to be misled in this matter. No doubt it is merely from lack of appreciation of the gravity of the situation. I am certain that after a week's reflection in a proper retreat, you will come to see the wisdom of our decisions; for we have decided to speak officially on this issue, and promptly, before the wickedness becomes more ingrained in the souls of the Latin Americans than it already is." He gestured to Cardinal O'Higgins. "You have our permission to depart at once, my son. Your retreat will be arranged tonight, when this dinner is concluded. There will be time for your confession and the assignment of penance before you leave. *Pax vobiscum.*"

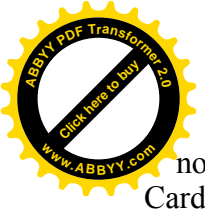
Several of the Cardinals exchanged worried glances as Cardinal O'Higgins rose obediently from the table, went to the Pope to kneel and kiss his ring, then turned away toward the door.

When Cardinal O'Higgins was gone, Celestine went on. "I was not pleased to read what Cardinal Gemme said at his interview. He has exceeded his authority as a Prince of the Church, and is preaching open sedition. He may not believe that we are aware of this, but he will not continue in this way. We have decided that he must learn humility, and we will set him a task that will develop it, improving his soul."

A few of the Cardinals expressed their approval, but most were guarded. Cardinal van Hooven shook his head. "You're letting the weight of the tiara addle your brain, Ottone," he said, with the privilege of forty years' friendship. "You are becoming trapped in the office you occupy."

"It is not an office," said Celestine stiffly.

"Of course it is—the Papacy is the most rigorously administrative office in the world. You are fascinated by the authority it has given you, but that means nothing if the machinery of the Church does



not operate well. They say that Popes come and go, but the Curia is eternal. So is the College of Cardinals. If you do not cooperate with the Curia and the College, the operation of the Church will falter. It has happened before.” This last warning was delivered with a wise nod. “And I will save you the trouble of dismissing me. I know I have overstepped my authority, and my welcome.” He was on his feet, reaching for the cane he had slipped over the back of the chair. He made his way to the head of the table to kneel and kiss Celestine’s ring. “Think about what I’ve said, Ottone. We are in perilous times and we must have a steady hand on the tiller if we are to win through the millennium.” He got to his feet with difficulty and tottered toward the door.

“Piet—” the Pope began, then gave him a sharp gesture of dismissal. He looked at the remainder of the diners, forcing them to return his gaze. “We wish to discuss,” he said in a tone that would accept no opposition, “the matter of the Protestant Fundamentalists who are preaching the Second Coming. They are finding support among many Catholics, which is most distressing. Even the Separatists with their travesty of the Vatican are saying that Our Lord will return before the year 2001, and the world will be restored to God.”

“Yes?” said Cardinal Pingari. “What do you wish us to do about it?”

Celestine cut himself a morsel of lamb. “We must put an end to this absurd claim. It is not fitting that we surrender to the same frenzy that has taken hold in so much of the Protestant community.” He looked directly at Bruno, Cardinal Hauptburger of Salzburg. “You have direct experience with these foolish people, don’t you? What do you recommend?”

The Austrian Cardinal stopped eating and stared at the Pope. “Nothing I have tried thus far has stopped the madness.”

“So. We will have to adopt stringent methods.” There was dismay in many of the Cardinals’ faces but Celestine decided to ignore this silent warning. “The millennium is to be set aside for a Jubilee, for the triumph of the Church. That will bring our flocks back, I am sure.”

“Of course,” said Cardinal Cadini with all his reputed tact, but it was plain that neither he nor most of the rest believed the Pope.

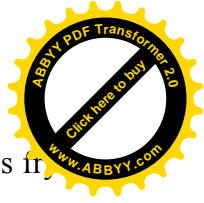
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In the VIP lounge at Dulles Airport, Charles, Cardinal Mendosa sat with Alexander, Cardinal Bradeston of Boston, both of them on the last leg of their respective journeys home. Each of them was tired after the conclave, the coronation and then four days in Washington D.C. making the rounds of governmental and diplomatic functions in answer to the endless questions about the new Pontiff. Now, with sour-tasting coffee in their cups, they were content to stare at the television screen on the far side of the room where a celebrated black athlete and a famous Russian ballet dancer discussed their training routines.

“Must be a slow day for news,” said Cardinal Bradeston. “If this is the best they can come up with at nine-thirty....” He laughed a bit.

“Daytime television,” Cardinal Mendosa summed up. “At least it isn’t about the Pope.” He had been up half the night in the wake of another visionary dream; he was having trouble concentrating thanks to his lack of sleep and the faint, ill-defined persistence of what he had seen. “Listen to them, arguing about chicken.”





Once again Cardinal Bradeston laughed. "I hope the housekeeper is listening. All she ever does is in it." He drank more of the dreadful coffee.

The interviewer, a young woman dressed in expensive running gear, was in the middle of a long question about health routines when the show was interrupted. The dignified anchorman of INS appeared, neat but flustered. In the background was the dome of Saint Peter's.

Cardinal Bradeston groaned. "Now what's Ottone done?"

"Probably wants to bring back fasting," said Cardinal Mendosa flippantly, reaching to turn up the sound. "Just in case."

"—have pronounced him dead, only nine days after his coronation."

Cardinal Mendosa was on his feet, overturning his coffee. "Bloody hell!"

"What..." Cardinal Bradeston said, crossing himself automatically. "Who's dead?"

"—had taken the name Celestine VI, was regarded as—"

"Was?" Cardinal Bradeston echoed.

"That's what he said," Cardinal Mendosa observed grimly, thinking that he would have to return to Rome.

"—and it was assumed by many that the division between conservatives and liberals within the Church would not be healed during his reign. Death appears to have been the result of a massive stroke. The Vatican has ordered a full autopsy at once, promising a complete disclosure of results, and engaged Interpol and the EECPA to investigate if there is any trace of wrongdoing."

Father McEllton's haggard face appeared on the screen, his name and position beneath him in three languages. "It was so sudden," he said in a shaken voice. "He was celebrating Mass; he often preferred to wait until midmorning to celebrate Mass, so that more of the congregation could...could..." He put his hand to his face. "He was about to elevate the Host. He trembled, spilled the wine, and then he fell."

Stephen Goldman's face filled the screen once again. "To repeat: Celestine VI, newly elected Pope of the Roman Catholic Church died minutes ago in Rome, believed to be the victim of a stroke. He succeeded Urban IX, who reigned for twenty-seven months following the death of John-Paul II. INS will continue to keep you up to date as developments occur." He gave his famous one-sided smile, and the athletes came back on, the young woman looking terribly shocked.

Cardinal Bradeston turned off the television and dropped to his knees to pray; a moment later Cardinal Mendosa knelt beside him.

\* \* \*

On the plane from Montreal, Dominique, Cardinal Hetre fell into an uneasy sleep, his soul in unadmitted turmoil. Only when he cried out did he realize the dread that had all but consumed him was part of his dream.



“Are you all right, Cardinal Hetre?” The senior steward was in his thirties, a good-looking man who obviously took his passengers’ care to heart. He bent over the Cardinal, solicitous and wary. “Is something wrong? You were...dreaming.”

Cardinal Hetre shook his head. “It’s nothing. All the coming and going. My body doesn’t know what time zone it’s in. I find it very upsetting. I’m sorry if I’ve disturbed the other passengers. With Celestine and all...we’re shocked.” He thought he was babbling but could not stop himself.

“Can I get you anything? A cognac, perhaps?” On his first-class information sheet he had a record of the Cardinal’s preferred label, which he had made an effort to stock for the flight.

“Cognac?” repeated Cardinal Hetre as if he was not certain of the meaning of the word.

“To calm you.” The steward’s manner was as soothing as the drink he offered, his manner sincere. “The galley is busy right now. We’ll have dinner served in half an hour. In the meantime....” The offer hung between them.

“Yes. Cognac, if you please.” He made himself sit straighter, sorry now that he had worn his cassock; in a business suit he would have been less conspicuous. What was it about his dreams that terrified him so? He could not bring himself to ask the steward if he had said anything, though he wanted to know what, if anything, he had revealed.

“Coming right up, Your Eminence.”

\* \* \*

Not even Vitale, Cardinal Cadini could lighten the oppressive mood of the conclave. Cardinal Shumwoe spoke for all when he said, “This time we must not be hasty.”

“No, we must not,” agreed Cardinal Fiorivi. “I fear we may have erred before, in our zeal.” He looked at the others, his strong Latin features filled with purpose. “This time we must be...more attentive.”

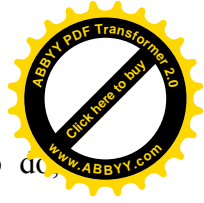
Cardinal van Hooven, peering out of his glasses at the rest, added, “The Church is a worldly enterprise, Eminences, but for spiritual reasons. Let us not lose track of that; our goals are spiritual, not worldly. Our worldly power is only the means to our spiritual ends.”

“But it is the worldly power that demands more attention,” said Cardinal Cadini. “We must remember the world, for it watches us day and night.”

“Speaking of the world, Willie Foot was waiting for me at the airport,” said Cardinal Sinclair of Dublin. “He requested an interview at the conclusion of the conclave.”

Several of the other Cardinals nodded in response, and the ferocious, aged Andrew, Cardinal Aquilino of Chicago said with disgust, “We might as well give him some kind of pass to cover the conclave. He’ll manage to do it after the fact.”

Cardinal Pingari winced. “Please,” he said. “This must not be for the newsmedia or the entertainment of the world; we must do as we are commanded to do, and open our hearts to the Holy Spirit.” He saw Sylvestre, Cardinal Jung, raise his hand as if to shield his face; the last few days had been difficult for the outspoken and conservative Swiss. “Each of us must search his heart and soul.”



Hunfredo, Cardinal Montebianco raised an admonitory finger. “We know what we are to do, Eminence. We recognize the consequences of our acts here. You need not lecture us.”

“Are we agreed that the first two days will be days of silence?” asked Michon, Cardinal Belleau, who had been given the task of serving as conclave monitor, a function reestablished and redefined by John-Paul II. “And we accept Father Delvecchio in Father McEllton’s place.” He stepped up to affix his signature and seal to the document of conclave terms. “I didn’t always go along with John-Paul, but these reforms were a very good idea.”

Cardinal O’Higgins came after him. “I pray that after this conclave we will not need them again for a while.”

His prayer was endorsed by the rest.

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Cardinal Mendosa rubbed his eyes and reluctantly looked at the vellum strip, anticipating what he would see there. Only a moment before he had cast his first vote, and for an instant he felt that other-worldliness he had experienced at the last conclave. Some of the sensation still lingered, a fuzziness at the edge of his sight, an unsteadiness of ground beneath him. His hand trembled as he set the crow-quill pen aside.

He stared down at the marks as a grue fizzed along his spine. There they were, the same characters as before. Very slowly he put the vellum in the foil-lined envelope and began to heat the stick of wax to seal it.

They had vowed not to speak, but most of the Cardinals could hardly contain themselves when Father Delvecchio came to them, much shocked, to stammer an apology about their ballots.

“Father Zirhendakru s-said the name—”

Cardinal Belleau gave a fatalistic shrug. “Is Chinese,” he finished for the horrified priest. “Yes. We know.”



## Chapter 3

Over his morning coffee Fitzwilliam Ellery Jocelin Foot reviewed the notes he had made during the last few days. He had not yet shaved and his robe was knotted loosely over his pyjama-bottoms. The sunlight coming in through the tall windows made his dining table glisten where it was not strewn with papers. Beyond his small balcony Rome was warming up in heat and noise.

When the phone rang he retrieved it from the alcove and sat down once more. "Pronto," he said as he answered.

"Willie," said Cardinal Mendosa, his Texas accent at its strongest. "Are you going to be in for a while?"

"I can be," Willie Foot answered, trying not to reveal the excitement he felt from the call. "I have to go out around eleven-thirty."

"I'll be there before then," said Cardinal Mendosa. "I won't keep you long. Promise."

"Is this about the recessing of the conclave?" Willie inquired as innocently as he could; every journalist in the world was trying to get a story on the astonishing announcement that the Cardinals had elected to suspend the conclave for thirty days, and would resume their deliberations at that time.

Cardinal Mendosa answered indirectly. "There's something we have to discuss. It's urgent and confidential."

Willie was glad he did not have one of the new videophones, for Cardinal Mendosa might be put off by his enormous grin. "I'm looking forward to seeing you."

"I'll be there within the hour," said Cardinal Mendosa, and hung up.

Now that it was no longer necessary to contain his satisfaction, Willie gave a long, loud whistle. He put the phone back in the alcove and went to the kitchen to get the rest of his thick, dark coffee. As he sat down once more, he pulled up one of his many writing pads and began to make more notes to himself. He wished now that his laptop computer was not being repaired; he wanted to review the files he had on Charles, Cardinal Mendosa of Houston, Texas.

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After a short hesitation, Cardinal van Hooven looked at Cardinal Jung, his expression filled with dismay. "I am an old man, and I fear I do not hear as well as I used to, Eminence."

"You heard me well enough," said Cardinal Jung as he came to the side of the Dutchman. "We must take advantage of this adjournment to agree on how we are to arrange matters for the Church." He folded his hands piously. "We have an obligation."



“We certainly do,” said Cardinal van Hooven. “We are obliged to carry out the Will of God. We have chosen the same Pope twice.” He leaned back in his chair and peered up through his thick lenses at his Swiss colleague. “Surely there is no reason for me to remind you of that, is there?”

“You’re confused,” Jung stated, his face darkening. “It has overtaken us all—the result of shock, no doubt. We have had much to contend with, and we have lost sight of our task.” He chose the largest chair in the room and turned it so that it faced Cardinal van Hooven.

“Which is to carry out the Will of God,” said Cardinal van Hooven, his mildness unable to disguise his tenacity.

“Certainly that is what we must do. We cannot allow fantasy and caprice to turn us from that task.” He sat down, smoothing the satin of his cassock and crossing his legs at the ankle. “There are many among us capable of filling the Throne of Saint Peter. We must decide quickly which of us it will be.”

“It will be the one nominated by the Holy Spirit,” said Cardinal van Hooven. “That has become obvious, I should have thought. We must not assume we have greater understanding than the God we serve.” He permitted himself a slight, pixie smile. “Or do you want to vote again, so that we may practice our Chinese calligraphy once more?”

“Don’t make light of our predicament,” Cardinal Jung warned. “This is a crisis for the Church and we are failing her in her hour of need.”

“We certainly will be if we do not find this Chinese man.” Cardinal van Hooven removed his glasses and busied himself polishing them. “Of course we can repeat the travesty, if you insist, but we know already what will happen, don’t we? We will elevate another of our members and in a week or two or three there will be another conclave; the characters will remind us of our duty.”

“There are millions upon millions of Chinese. Very few of them are Catholic.” For Cardinal Jung, this was sufficient to dismiss the whole question. “It is ridiculous to mount a search when it is clear to everyone that the most capable men are here, ready and prepared for the task. No matter how devout this Chinese may be, he cannot be able to fulfill the office of Pope.”

“The Holy Spirit seems to think otherwise. Forgive me, Eminence,” said Cardinal van Hooven as he donned his glasses once more. “I must tell you what I observe: you hunger to be Pope and you are determined to have the Throne for yourself. I am sorry for it, because it blinds you to what we must do.” He rose, tucking his folded newspaper under his arm.

Cardinal Jung was rigid in the massive chair. “You do not intend to support those fools who have said we must find a way to locate this Chinese. Surely you’re more realistic. You are not a credulous simpleton from an impoverished country of superstitious people, you are—”

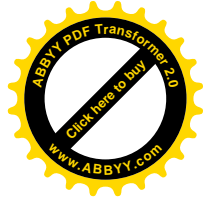
“A psychiatrist from Antwerp,” said Cardinal van Hooven with a gentle sigh. “Shocking, isn’t it, that I would want to accept the Will of God so readily.” His eyes twinkled hugely behind the lenses.

“It makes no sense!” Cardinal Jung burst out.

“If I were as ambitious as you are, I would probably think so, because I would see my chance to rule being snatched away from me, and by something so unacceptable as an unknown Chinese.” He rose. “You must pardon me, Eminence, but I am bidden to supper at the Russian embassy; it would not do for



me to be late.”



“Russians!” Cardinal Jung scoffed. “They’re conciliating now that they have lost control of so many of their buffer countries. Remember that they are just like the bears that are their symbol: they can be taught to dance after a fashion, but that doesn’t get rid of their claws and teeth. And size.” His mouth turned down at the corners.

“As I understand it, Metropolitan Gosteshenko wishes to pay an official visit to us, and apparently this is going to be the first round of questions about it.” He saw the surprise in Cardinal Jung’s face. “I’ve met Metropolitan Gosteshenko twice before. I suppose that is why they chose to speak to me; with no Pope the protocol is less formal, but less certain. My Russian is not expert, but I can manage to converse.” His smile was more benign than ever.

Many things annoyed Cardinal Jung—rock music, Neo-German restaurants within sight of Saint Peter’s, European women’s fashions, television programs about birth control, the decline of academic standards in Catholic schools, abstract crucifixes, Protestant Christmas carols, Church officials in secular dress—but nothing irritated him as much as having someone leave his company before he dismissed him. He glared at Cardinal van Hooven. “If it is necessary, or if you must go, then go” he said grudgingly.

“Probably not in the same way food and shelter are, but—” Whatever else he was going to say was lost; Cardinal van Hooven slipped out the door, closing it softly behind him.

\* \* \*

Out of his Cardinal’s finery, Charles Mendosa looked like a rich American tourist: his suit was a conservatively cut, understatedly expensive charcoal wool; his shirt was not white but ecru, of silk broadcloth; his tie, a heavy dull-red damask silk, was just the right width. At first glance he appeared to be wearing black shoes, but a closer look revealed black-on-black cowboy boots. Only his lapel pin proclaimed his position.

“So to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?” Willie Foot was (as he described himself) weedy, reedy, and tweedy. Their table at the restaurant was secluded enough to ensure their privacy, but Willie was savvy about such interviews and allowed the Cardinal to sit with his back to the room. They spoke quietly, and in English.

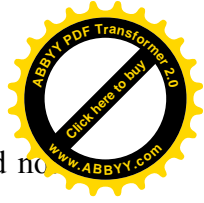
“It’s difficult,” said Cardinal Mendosa.

“Difficult how?” Willie inquired in the same tone he might have used to ask the waiter if the rolls were fresh-baked.

“Difficult internationally,” said Cardinal Mendosa, then sighed. “We have to get into the People’s Republic.”

“China?” asked Willie, continuing, “Get into how literally?” He knew better than to make notes, but he activated his palm-sized tape recorder.

Cardinal Mendosa smiled at once. “I’m not going there myself or I don’t think I am.” He glanced up as the waiter approached and ordered a fruit-and-cheese platter and a bottle of Lacrima Christi in excellent Italian. “This one is on me. And I mean me, Charles Ruy Mendosa, not my Eminence.” His



gentle self-mockery was familiar to Willie Foot, who suspected that many of the Cardinals did not understand the Texan's humor.

"Thanks. And you're scaring the shit out of me." He said it as a joke but he was concerned.

"I don't mean to," Mendosa answered, frowning at the top of the table. "No offence, Willie, but will you turn off that damned machine of yours?"

Willie Foot was experienced enough to conceal his surprise. "All right, if you'll give me your word that you'll let me have a proper interview as soon as it's possible."

"Done," said Mendosa, relief obvious on his rugged face. "Thanks. You'll get your interview."

Willie thumbed off the tape recorder. "What is it, then?"

Mendosa did not answer at once. When he did, he pitched his voice even lower. "There is someone in Szechwan Province, near the town of Hongya, someone named Zhuang Renxin. We have to find him." Unbidden, a face from his dreams filled his mind, and he made himself shut it away.

"What are we talking about?" Willie saw the waiter coming back with their order and signaled Mendosa to silence. As the platter was laid in front of them, he filled their glasses and repeated the question.

"The Church," said Mendosa bluntly. "This is for the Church."

"Really." Willie was skeptical but not impolite.

"Yes," said Mendosa. He picked up his glass but did not drink. "We're at a disadvantage here. We have records of three priests still in rural China, but not one of them is in Szechwan Province. And we're not sure how reliable these priests are. They've been isolated and one of them was in prison for five years." He put his glass down untasted. "It would be as difficult to reach those three men as it would be to reach this Zhuang Renxin, I suspect."

"Is this urgent? contacting Zhuang?" Willie asked, fascinated by Mendosa's predicament; he resisted speculating beyond the minimum.

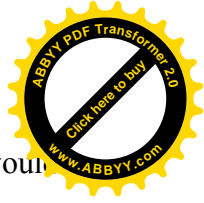
"Very urgent, I'm afraid." This time when he picked up his glass he drank, not much, but as if the wine were vital as water.

Willie resisted his inclination to demand more information. He pondered the matter. "Does this need to be public or private?"

"It will be public, eventually, one way or another, and there's nothing we can do about it," said Mendosa grimly. "If we can keep it private for a while longer, I'd appreciate it."

"I see." In fact, Willie was more baffled than ever. "Am I the only person working on this? Other than you?"

"No," said Mendosa. "There are five others, but frankly, I think you're the best bet, or I wouldn't be here." He broke a small crusty roll in half and reached for the cheese knife.



“I don’t suppose you’d tell me who else is involved?” He knew before he asked that Mendosa would refuse.

“I’m sorry; the matter is very confidential. Very delicate.” Mendosa sniffed the soft, blue-veined cheese he had spread. “Wonderful.”

“Someone in Szechwan Province—that’s the central part of the People’s Republic, isn’t it?” Willie knew China well; he wanted to test Mendosa’s knowledge of the country.

“Hongya is almost due east of Chongqing,” said Mendosa. “That’s according to the most recent map. Hongya seems to be in the foothills of the Tibetan plateau.” He took a generous bite from his roll.

“You’ve been doing some research,” Willie observed.

“We’ve all been,” said Mendosa around the roll.

“Yeah.” Willie lowered his head so that Mendosa could not see his face. There were dozens of questions he wanted to ask, but knew better than to press the lanky Texan. “All right, why do you want to find this guy? What’s so important about him?” When he realized that Mendosa was having trouble framing an answer he added, “One of your pals have a Chinese skeleton in the closet?”

“I don’t think so,” said Mendosa slowly. “Not the way you mean. Not either way, come to think of it.” He finished his wine suddenly, impulsively, and refilled his glass. “But during this...recess of the conclave, it is important we find Zhuang Renxin.”

“Meaning you aren’t going to tell me any more,” said Willie, cutting himself a slice of melon. “Doesn’t make my job easier if you take that tack with me, Eminence.”

“I apologize,” said Mendosa, frowning at the use of his title.

Willie went on as if he had not noticed Mendosa’s displeasure. “If it were possible to use public means, I’d call Dame Leonie Purcell, just to see what she might be able to arrange. She’s officially British Ambassador to Hong Kong now; she’s in a good place to help out. Unofficially, if that’s your preference,” he added as an afterthought.

“I’m not certain we want to be so...visible,” said Mendosa. He devoured the rest of his cheese-spread roll.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” said Willie, and had another sip of wine. “How very mysterious you are.”

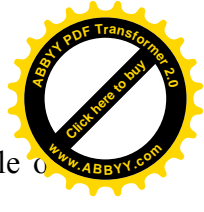
“I’m sorry it has to be this way,” said Mendosa with an expression of distaste. “Despite the reputation of the Church, I dislike having to use these methods.”

Willie shrugged. “Well, if you’re convinced that it does need to be this way, then what am I to do?” He cocked his head to the side, taking stock of the Cardinal from Houston. “I respect you, Eminence. I assume that your problem is not trivial and that you are under pressure. Am I correct thus far?”

“Pretty much,” said Mendosa, his drawl on full.

“Fine.” He leaned back in his chair and glanced around the restaurant, noting that the party three





tables away was dawdling over cordials. “Locate a Zhuang Renxin near Hongya in the middle of China. Right you are. Is that all, or do you want something more.”

Mendosa caught a sliver of melon on the tines of his fork. “Finding Zhuang Renxin is more than enough, Willie. If you can succeed in locating him and making it possible for someone from the Vatican to...contact him, I will remember you in my prayers from now until the day I die, and always with gratitude.”

“Gracious,” said Willie in mock astonishment. “I’ll get right on it, Eminence. I can probably use all the prayers I can get.” He helped himself to wine and refilled the Cardinal’s glass. “When do you want this information?”

“Immediately,” said Mendosa. “But I’ll call you tomorrow evening, and every evening thereafter until you have some news for me.”

Willie nodded. “And if one of the other Cardinals turns up this fellow for you, what then?”

“Then I will give you the interview as promised and remember you in my prayers no matter what.” He signaled the waiter and ordered a double espresso, indicating that Willie would order for himself. “I’m counting on your discretion, Willie. I don’t want this leaking to half the press in Europe by tomorrow night. Or next week. Or any time before we authorize it.”

“I can’t guarantee what any of the rest will do. You say I’m not the only one being contacted about this Chinese guy; well, who’s to say if they’ll keep their mouths shut? A secret is something only one man knows. Otherwise....” He was not enjoying himself as much as he thought he would, for the prospect of trying to locate an unknown person in central China weighed on him.

“They may not. But you’re the only newsman, and if the others leak the story we’ll be able to trace them.” He took another bit of wine but did not finish the glass. “Prudence, Willie. Prudence.”

“Sounds worse and worse,” said Willie, then nodded twice. “I’ll keep it quiet as long as possible, but once the story breaks, I’ve got to get on top of it.”

“I’m not asking you to compromise your professionalism, only to recognize mine,” said Mendosa.

“Aren’t you?” Willie countered. “Well, you might not be at that, not by your lights, old son.”

“Thank you,” said Mendosa gravely.

Willie saw the waiter approaching. “Here comes your coffee.”

\* \* \*

Cardinal van Hooven strolled beside the formidable bulk of the Metropolitan Pavel Gosteshenko, pointing out Castel’ Sant’ Angelo on the far side of the bridge. It was warm though the sun was hanging low in the west, and the two men did not press their pace, for heat as much as fatigue and age. Cardinal van Hooven had met the Metropolitan’s plane three hours earlier and had promised his guest a lavish Italian dinner in an hour or so; they were killing time.

“A fine statue,” said Metropolitan Gosteshenko in Russian.



He was answered in the same tongue. “They repaired it a few years ago. There was metal fatigue involved. Some local engineers were afraid it was no longer securely balanced and might fall.” Cardinal van Hooven indicated the scaffolding around the feet of the angel. “As you see, they are not entirely finished yet.”

“Still, a fine statue. Not a subject we see often in Russia any more, unfortunately.” He stopped. “That statue must have the best view of the city.”

“One of them, certainly,” said Cardinal van Hooven.

“A fine place, Rome, but decadent. It is the very heart of the decadence of the West.” He touched the pectoral crucifix that lay just below his beard.

“And the East has never been decadent? How badly we in the West have been misinformed,” said Cardinal van Hooven quietly.

“Ah, that is another matter,” said Metropolitan Gosteshenko. “The West has never understood luxury, and indulgence instead of excess. A fine line, I admit. Still, the East knows luxury for what it is.” He laughed suddenly, explosively. “And what do I know of it? As a man of God I turned away from such things before I truly knew what they were.”

“Does that sadden you?” Cardinal van Hooven asked as he resumed walking.

“Occasionally. I am a man, and at sixty, I cannot help but reflect on my life. I see others who have committed many sins and who have nonetheless prospered. I see others who have tried to live virtuously who have been cast down. My wife used to say that God punished too much virtue just as He punished too much vice.” He indicated the traffic hurtling down the street. “This is not a luxury, but it is certainly an excess.”

Cardinal van Hooven smiled. He was dressed in a plain cassock, very little differently than any other priest in Rome, though his lapel pin was indication enough of his rank to anyone who recognized it. “In your view, is it wise for the clergy to marry?”

Metropolitan Gosteshenko hedged expertly. “Your Church does not think so; my Church does not agree.”

“And you, Pavel, what do you think?” Cardinal van Hooven waited expectantly as they continued along the street where modern glass-and-steel vied with the Baroque for supremacy.

“I know I have been a better priest and a better Metropolitan because I had a wife for most of my sixty years. But it may be that I was fortunate in my wife—I am very sure I was—and I may be a poor judge because God sent me Marina.” He looked down into the Dutch Cardinal’s face. “Is that a more acceptable answer?”

“Oh, there is no question about acceptance,” said Cardinal van Hooven, appearing a little baffled by the challenge. “I am curious, that’s all.”

“Is it?” the massive Russian asked. His beard was brushed to a high shine and his cheeks were rosy. There was sweat along the band of his hat but he did not seem uncomfortable in spite of his engulfing vestments. “Is there somewhere we can purchase gelato? With national borders opening and closing and



changing as they have been doing, who knows when I will have such an opportunity again?"

Cardinal van Hooven smiled once more. "Halfway down the next block. The raspberry is especially good."

After they had purchased their cones and found a marble bench to sit on, the Metropolitan finished half his raspberry-and-bittersweet-chocolate gelato before he said, "What is this all about, my friend?"

"Your embassy—" Cardinal van Hooven began.

"What do you want?" Metropolitan Gosteshenko cut in, not rudely. "If we keep up this dance it will be the middle of next year before you or I will know what is going on." He looked at the remainder of his cone. "Perhaps the West has a little understanding of luxury, after all."

It was more than two minutes before Cardinal van Hooven said, "Do you have any useful connections in the People's Republic?"

Whatever Metropolitan Gosteshenko was expecting, it was not this. "China? What can you want with China?" He shook his head slowly. "That is one border that has remained closed, at least to us. The British might be more helpful, through Hong Kong."

While it did not take Cardinal van Hooven as long to reply this time, he still required a short while to formulate his reply. "We are looking for a person there."

"We. The Church? One of your missing priests," said Metropolitan Gosteshenko. "It is related to this...this unusual suspension of the conclave, I would guess? The missing priest—"

"There is a connection between the recessing of the conclave and the person in China," said Cardinal van Hooven.

Metropolitan Gosteshenko ate the rest of his gelato. "Our connections with China are not very good, not even for such benign tasks. We have our adherents there, of course, but they are not many and most are in the north-west. With the political situation so explosive, we must be careful. But I suppose that I might be able to find some assistance if I demanded it. You know how things are for Christians in Russia, though they have improved a little. Christians are worse off in China, Catholic or Orthodox. So..." He showed the palms of his hands.

"I feared so," said Cardinal van Hooven. "Well, I did not suppose it would be possible, but I needed to speak with you, in case. And it was an excellent excuse for a walk through this part of the city...and to have gelato."

\* \* \*

Vitale, Cardinal Cadini was dressed very much as the other professors were: dark slacks, neat polo-style shirt in pale blue, a conservative dark blazer, and dark shoes. He had left his Cardinal's lapel pins back at the Vatican.

The man facing him was handsome and fit; he wore an expensive, flashier version of the outfit Cardinal Cadini had on. He was officially on the faculty at Stanford, but he had been in Rome for three years, and before that he had spent two years in China. By birth he was Hungarian, by citizenship,



American. He was one of the world's foremost experts on authenticating European antiquities. His office was crowded with books, and he had to move a stack of them from one of the two visitors' chairs to give Cardinal Cadini a place to sit.

"So, Cardinal Cadini," said the man who now called himself Martin Bell. "This is an—"

"An unexpected pleasure?" the old Cardinal asked with mischief in his bright little eyes, which he now opened very wide, giving him the look of a sagacious baby.

"Something like that. With your current debates, I would have thought you'd have no time for academics." He smiled easily as if he were facing an undergraduate in California instead of a Cardinal in Rome.

"I do have a doctorate," said Cardinal Cadini with equal ease. "It's a trifle rusty, but it looks well on my wall."

Bell's curiosity had risen higher than when the Cardinal's office had called to ask for this appointment. "In anthropology, if memory serves. You placed high in your class, as I recall reading."

"Fourth," said Cardinal Cadini.

"Impressive," said Bell, waiting for the reason for this visit.

Cardinal Cadini gave him the full weight of his smile: it was a smile that had melted the hearts of Communists and Arab leaders as well as Europeans and American—North and South—politicians. "I was hoping you might be willing to help us out. We're having a problem locating someone. I thought you would have contacts in the People's Republic of China—"

"The PRC?" Bell asked, startled by the question, though he recovered quickly. "I suppose I might have—I can reach faculty in most universities."

"And what about...oh, ordinary people?" Cardinal Cadini asked.

Bell shrugged eloquently. "Possibly, if they are living near one of the sites I have visited, or something along those lines. I have friends in Beijing who are more current in their—"

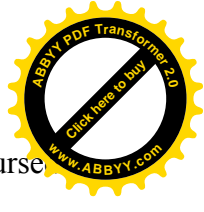
"This person lives in Szechwan Province, or so we believe." Cardinal Cadini said it as if he were asking for nothing more unusual than the address of an associate.

"Szechwan Province," Martin Bell repeated, so nonplused that he could think of nothing else to say.

"The name of the town nearest is Hongya."

"A missing priest?" Bell asked, regaining his sense of control. "Why would the conclave adjourn for a missing priest?"

"This is not a missing priest," said Cardinal Cadini promptly. "Aside from the location and the name, we know nothing about this man. But it appears that he may have information we need." It was the most he was willing to reveal, and he spoke hesitantly, his eyes directly on Bell. "I will be pleased to explain it all to you once this person is located and we have learned...what we need to know."



“Well.” Martin Bell sat back, his face almost blank. “I don’t know what to say, Eminence.” He pursed his mouth as he considered. “Really, I don’t know.”

“Can you help us?” Cardinal Cadini asked with another display of his engaging smile.

Bell pondered, heavier lines settling into his face. “I don’t know. I doubt it. I wish it weren’t the case, but... If the politics there were more settled, I might be able to find a way, but just at present, with Zuo only now coming into power, no one knows what to expect.”

“Of course,” said Cardinal Cadini. “Zuo Nangkao must be taken into account.”

“In six or eight months I’ll have a better idea how things are, and I may be in a position to assist you then.” He did his best to be encouraging but there was something in his eyes that warned Cardinal Cadini that Professor Bell wanted no part of this search. “If you have not located this man by then, come to me and I’ll do whatever I can for you.”

Cardinal Cadini had been serving the Church in diplomatic posts for too long not to recognize what Martin Bell was telling him. He got to his feet and sketched a blessing in Bell’s direction. “Thank you for all you have done already, my son. I will try not to compromise your work by making any more embarrassing requests of you.”

“Your Eminence,” Bell protested without conviction, “I didn’t mean to imply—”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Cardinal Cadini, his expression candid as a baby’s. “I am grateful to you for listening to me. I know I can depend on your confidence regarding our...missing person.”

Martin Bell was more distressed. “Please. As soon as six months have passed, I will be able to do something, I’m certain of it.”

“I am relieved to hear it,” said Cardinal Cadini as he left Professor Bell alone in his office.

\* \* \*

From the window of his Milan office, Cyril Obata could see most of the city. At the moment he was watching the traffic jam building up between the train station and the Cathedral. He glanced at his watch and allowed his visitor five minutes’ leeway for his appointment. Ordinarily he demanded absolute promptness of those who claimed his valuable time—and at sixty he thought he was old enough to watch time closely—but with the mess on the street, he supposed that Dominique, Cardinal Hetre, would be late.

He was wrong: four minutes later Obata’s appointments secretary announced the arrival of the French-Canadian Prince of the Church, three minutes early.

Cyril Obata bowed as Cardinal Hetre entered the room. He was disappointed to see that the Cardinal had not worn his scarlet vestments. “Your Eminence.” He held out his hand just as Cardinal Hetre offered a slight bow.

In a black silk twill cassock piped in red, Cardinal Hetre was not as grand as Obata would have liked him to be, but no one could mistake him for a parish priest. He had been extending his hand so that Obata could kneel and kiss his ring, but turned the gesture so that he shook the Japanese-Canadian



industrialist's hand. "Thank you for seeing me, Mister Obata," said the Cardinal in English.

"It is an honor to have you here," Obata answered, his accent that of his native Ottawa. "What have we two Canadians to do here, Your Eminence?" He indicated the conversation area of his office, and the two matched sofas upholstered in pale leather. "Please. Let us be comfortable while we talk."

"Thank you," said Cardinal Hetre. He chose the sofa with the tall window behind him; he disliked heights, he had the start of a headache, and offices like this one made him queasy.

Obata saw his choice as a courtesy, a gesture that indicated their conversation was more important than anything going on beyond them. He took the other sofa and signaled for his personal assistant while he waited for Cardinal Hetre to speak.

"Both of us were born in Canada, and both so far away," Cardinal Hetre began just as Obata's personal assistant approached. "Do you miss it?"

"Canada?" Obata guessed correctly. "Sometimes, yes. But it was not an easy thing to be Japanese in Canada, not while I was a boy. I haven't much nostalgia. And a man in my position cannot afford nostalgia, so it's just as well. Italy is a beautiful place, Osaka is a beautiful place, Montevideo is a beautiful place, Amsterdam is a beautiful place, Perth is a beautiful place...." He shrugged. "What may I do to serve you?"

Cardinal Hetre did not seem to hear the question. "But not like Canada. There is something remarkable about Canada." He looked up suddenly, as if he had only just realized where he was. "Pardon me—what did you say?"

"I said," Obata responded patiently, "that my assistant will bring you whatever you wish. We have coffees and teas from all over the world, the best wines, whatever you might wish to drink, and if you would like a meal, you may order whatever—"

"A Cotes Sauvages, eight years old at least, if you will, and strong coffee afterward," said Cardinal Hetre, as if he were putting an unpleasant necessity behind him. "I thank you for your hospitality."

Cyril Obata had been told that Cardinal Hetre could be an abrupt man, but he had not anticipated quite this degree of curtness. He said to his assistant, "A very good notion. I will have the same," dismissing him with a wave when he was done.

Cardinal Hetre folded his long, knob-knuckled hands and stared at the ancient Balinese sculpture at the end of the sofa. "Primitive, but with some power."

"It is the old storm god," said Obata. "Obata-MacMillian have offices there, in Bali. We supply ships to the government of India from there, and for New Zealand as well." He studied the Cardinal to see what response this information might bring.

"You have offices all over the world," said Cardinal Hetre, making it an accusation.

"Yes. Our freighters are becoming the major design now." He made no attempt to conceal his pride. "When we began, everyone said sailing ships could never compete with standard freighters, but"—he gestured to his office—"we are in thirty-four countries around the world and we have a two-year backlog on orders." He beamed at Cardinal Hetre. Perhaps the Vatican was interested in shipping, or in



financing a venture that required their ships.

“And you have offices in China—the People’s Republic of China?” This slip annoyed him and his face soured.

“We have ship-building facilities at Qingdao, a central office in Beijing, as required by law, with a repair center in Hong Kong.” He recited this as if the facts could not be learned elsewhere.

“Yes,” said Cardinal Hetre. “I suppose you employ many people?” He could feel his headache gathering at the back of his eyes; he resisted it, unwilling to have it ruin his interview with Obata.

“I could have the precise figures, if you require them, Your Eminence,” Obata offered gracefully.

Cardinal Hetre shook his head twice. “No. No, that’s all right,” he said. “I don’t think that would...” He shifted his position so that he was facing Obata squarely. “It is a very awkward thing,” he confided at last.

“What is, Your Eminence?” asked Cyril Obata.

“This predicament.” He shook his head once more. “You see, it has become necessary for the Church to locate a man in China, and to do it without attempting the usual diplomatic rigmarole that often develops when the Church has to deal with countries...not affiliated to her. You know how the People’s Republic views the Vatican.” He put his hand to his forehead, then lowered it, staring at his fingers. “As we are both Canadians, I hoped you might be willing to provide us with a little discreet assistance, unofficially of course.”

Of the many things Cyril Obata had anticipated, this hedging request was not among them. “What do you need me to do?” he asked, thoroughly puzzled.

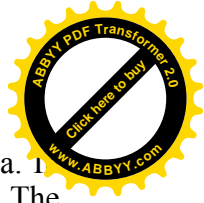
“We wish to find someone in the People’s Republic.” It was humiliating to admit it so baldly, and he hurried on to rid himself of the chagrin he felt. “It must be done in complete confidence. I have to impress on you the need for acting in such a way that your inquiries attract little or no attention, certainly no more than is required for us to accomplish our goal.” Cardinal Hetre was about to continue when the door opened and Obata’s personal assistant approached with a tray. He looked away from his host. “It is a rare occasion when the Church finds herself in this situation. We could not anticipate these developments, or establish our own direct contacts. You must understand.”

Obata’s personal assistant opened the wine and poured a sample for Cardinal Hetre, who approved it with the most cursory of tastes. “Mister Obata?” the young man asked when he had poured the wine and set down the heavy silver coffee service and Spode cups and saucers.

“That will be all, Winston. Thank you.” He paid no more attention to his assistant, preferring instead to concentrate on Cardinal Hetre. As the door closed he said, “Please continue, Your Eminence.”

“Is your assistant trustworthy?” Cardinal Hetre demanded, suddenly wary of what the young man might have overheard.

“He is my assistant and has been for four years. If he were not trustworthy, he would not be in my employ.” He was short with the Cardinal, although he knew it was rude, for he was outraged at the implication that he would have unreliable men working close to him.



“Of course, of course,” said Cardinal Hetre. “Well, I didn’t intend to give offence, Mister Obata. In the Church we have learned caution over the centuries, and the circumstances now are...unusual. The last weeks have been difficult, and the necessity to keep this confidential...” He let his words fade to nothing. There was a hotness behind his eyes that made his headache worse.

“Why do you want to find this man in China?” Cyril Obata made his inquiry as to-the-point as possible.

“It...it has to do with the conclave and...the election of the next Pope.” He lifted his wineglass, noticing that the crystal was of the first quality. The shine of the glass was almost painful in its clarity. “To have so many changes so quickly—”

“Will finding this man make it easier for the Cardinals to select who the next Pope will be? Some crucial information is required by the College of Cardinals that this Chinese possesses? Is that what you’re implying?” Obata asked, more bewildered than ever that Cardinal Hetre should be speaking to him. “I doubt there’s much I can do, though I am naturally willing to help. Why do you need to see this man in China?”

“I wish I knew,” said Cardinal Hetre, his eyes bright with an emotion that was not quite shame.

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