

The Brujo

By

Robert Cantrell

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Umberto Magnifico

In the year of 1542, the Holy Roman Emperor, the Spaniard Charles the Fifth, was involved in certain delicate negotiations involving the acquisition of a small German state. The country and its people meant nothing to His Highness, except as an excellent thoroughfare for his various armies amid the bloody wars of central Europe.

There was a nobleman of the region, one Andreas Von Zilbiggur, Baron of Clauch, who was opposed to the machinations of this Spanish Emperor.

Von Zilbiggur had been speaking most vigorously to his friends in opposition to the Imperial will. The Emperor had consulted with his councilors of state about this inflammatory opponent. He couldn't forcibly conquer the state of Clauch, for to do so by force of arms would scare away the bigger state for which he was so carefully angling. Even to send an assassin against the man would be dangerous, because it would make his client states "nervous."

A courtier, Ganado, a ferret of a man who dressed like a peacock and who was reputed to be knowledgeable about delicate matters, suggested discreetly that His Majesty might profit by the services of one Umberto of Ugarte, a member of the circle of sorcerers and poisoners loosely attached to the Emperor's service and quietly referred to as the "Shadow Court." The Emperor was not surprised that the Umberto in question was already attached to the Imperial retinue in the publicly announced office of alchemist, the patron of his employment having been the Lord Ganado.

Preceded immediately by a royal diatribe on the villainy of Andreas Von Zilbiggur, a significant nod went to Ganado. His Majesty was aware that the Diet, the loose collection of

nobles who ran that part of the German federation, would meet soon, and unified opposition to his goal might be mobilized there, which even he could not overcome.

It was especially important that Von Zilbiggur, Lord of Clauch, should not be allowed to reach the floor and speak. The Emperor knew of and feared the man's oratorical ability; indeed, he envied it as well, for the Imperial speech was impeded with a stammer and a lisp.

He had voiced all this in Privy Council with Ganado and a few others of the court. That, plus the nod, sent Ganado, in the small hours of the night, to the easternmost tower of the Imperial palace in Madrid. He knocked until he woke the heavy, flaccid-looking man who was now Imperial "Alchemist." He was one of several alchemists, others of whom sometimes received dead-of-night visitors in notably fine clothing on matters such as divination and the nature of "the star's" effect upon the lives and health of other players in the murky arenas of Hapsburg political power. The Emperor's will was made known to him, a small sum of money left and a larger sum promised, and then his Lordship was gone and Umberto was back in his opium dreams of female flesh.

The date for the Diet to convene approached, and the Emperor watched with great interest. No reports of Zilbiggur's death reached him; indeed, that worthy was reported to be well and tending to his estates. At the last minute, the Imperial anxiety was converted to satisfaction when the Lord of Clauch was present at the Diet, but suffering from a case of profound laryngitis.

The debate was an emotional one, indeed, uncharacteristically so, for these normally taciturn German princelings. It was emotion that swayed the day, as the Emperor had predicted, but Von Zilbiggur's broadside, which was to be the fiery keystone of the opposition, read for him by another speaker, was not the same as Von Zilbiggur himself. The bluff and pomp of the

Emperor's bought allies carried the argument. The Empire grew by a state. Ganado mentioned D'Ugarte to the Emperor again, in whispered privacy, to say the sorcerer had been paid.

There was some question between D'Ugarte and Ganado concerning the payment, since the man wasn't dead. D'Ugarte pointed out that his instructions from Ganado's own mouth had been only to see to it that the man didn't talk at the damned meeting, and spoken he had not. Ganado hedged, saying he would pay, but he wanted to know the secret of the spell. D'Ugarte, eager to be paid, grudgingly consented, but admonished Ganado to remember what had happened to Von Zilbiggur for talking and to believe it would be no trouble to increase the severity of a spell.

He took Ganado down a winding stairway outside his tower. They came to a gate at the foot of the stairs, which led through the wall, and out into the countryside of the park around the palace. They came to a small house with a shed and pens nearby. In the pens, Ganado noticed goats and a few sheep. On the roof of the small, ill-kept house, there were a set of light wooden cages with small openings into the loft inside. Ganado saw several pigeons milling about in the cages. As if from nowhere, another pigeon, which seemed to have a collar or harness of some type, fluttered down to a stop on the doorway to one of the cages and pushed its way through the tiny swinging door and disappeared into the loft with many more that could not be seen. Their melancholy cooing was the only sound in the stagnant air of the forest floor.

They went into the house and, when D'Ugarte lit a candle, they saw there were dozens of birds of different kinds in cages in the room. As they passed into the only other room of the house, Ganado could see the end of the room was bisected by a low wall, perhaps as high as his thigh. The sorcerer showed him about, and he found that, in part of the room, behind the low wall, lay twelve snakes, six pairs of different kinds. D'Ugarte assured him all were poisonous.

They went back into the front room with the now-sleeping birds. D'Ugarte invited Ganado to examine them closely. Ganado peered closely in through the gilded iron and the woven wood of the cages. A few of the birds awoke, a few of them squawked, but, basically, they were just birds.

"So, what am I supposed to see?" demanded Ganado.

"It was the birds that laid Herr Von Zilbiggur low," answered D'Ugarte.

"The birds? How?" he snapped.

"You will notice a similarity of shape of all of these birds, no matter what type, tiny parakeets from the islands or parrots from Africa; they are all basically shaped the same. They are also alike in another way. Birds that have this common shape can all carry a curse that makes a man a little sick and which will almost surely cause him to lose his voice for a few days. It is written that, in exactly one half the cycle of the moon, a man who, for the first time, lays eyes on one of these birds will fall under the spell."

D'Ugarte had had one of the prettiest of the birds delivered anonymously, as a present for the Baron's youngest daughter. The Baron doted on the girl and, in fact, it had not been difficult to find out that he religiously went to the nursery every evening and stayed there for quite some time, telling his daughter her favorite stories in his clear, rich voice. He had laughed to see how excited she was by the new pet, which he assumed had been sent by a friend, and how she kept it on the shelf over her bed next to her head (and his) as he sat in the chair beside her.

"The spell will wear away by the turning of the moon at the next quarter. The spell doesn't work but once on any one person, and it doesn't work on men who have been in the islands or who have lived among the Moors in Africa. But for men from the north, the spell works very well. It worked on Von Zilbiggur, so pay me." He ended his dissertation.

The Lord Ganado had paid the fee, partly out of what sense of honor he had left after years of being an Imperial operative and, partly, no doubt, to allay the recurring feeling of dread he felt when he remembered the snakes in D'Ugarte's forest cottage.

Several months later, the court called once again upon Master D'Ugarte. He was called to the deepest part of the dungeons of the military fortress near the palace. There he found an interrogation in progress, which had, thus far, proved fruitless. There was a face, nameless to D'Ugarte, caught up in the spider web of Hapsburg politics, no doubt.

A name and a date were required of this prisoner. Of what significance they were, D'Ugarte neither knew nor particularly cared. He told the guards to cut the man down from the beam where he had been hanging by his wrists. The soldiers followed D'Ugarte, dragging the semiconscious man with them through corridors to another part of the dungeon regularly used by D'Ugarte. The court sorcerer produced a prodigious ring of keys from which he selected a large one with an ornate, round head. With it, he opened a door and bid the soldiers bring the prisoner in. In the room, there was a set of bars enclosing one whole quarter of the room. The door in these bars was opened and the prisoner flung to the straw on the floor. The soldiers retreated and closed the door of the cell. The prisoner was rapidly regaining consciousness, and heart as well, so glad was he to get down off the God-cursed beam.

Then he heard a small noise not far from his head and, looking up, noticed a square object, perhaps the size of a table, covered with crude burlap cloth. Something moved inside. He could now see, in the torch light, the leering faces of the soldiers, as well as the puffy, pallid face of the man in long, black robes, like the gown of a professor, but ill-kept and in need of patching. The man in the robes had his hands on two ropes and these ran up to the ceiling to pulleys and down again to the object in the cell with him.

The first rope was pulled and, as it pulled away the outer cover, the prisoner was heard to let out a little whimper. Inside, there was a huge, evil-looking mastiff dog, an obvious candidate for the Emperor's hunting pack in size, but he did not look right. The dog's movements were strange and jerky, and then the prisoner could clearly see the saliva dripping from the bared fangs as the dog snarled and snapped at him in the torch light through the bars of its own small cage. The second rope the sorcerer held came down to the dog's cage, obviously there to raise the door.

"Rabia! No!" cried the prisoner.

Coldly and quietly, D'Ugarte began to talk about rabies, about what it did to a man, assuming the man lived through the attack by wolf or dog wherein he was infected. As he talked quietly, he would, from time to time, lift the cage door just an inch or two. Each time he did so, the dog snarled and tried with all its uncoordinated might to get its nose through to get out and get at the prisoner, now groveling in fear in a corner nearest the torch light. D'Ugarte bent down close to the man through the bars and, with his robes, it looked for all the world like a confession being heard.

In a moment, D'Ugarte arose and went to the captain of the guards and said simply, *"Cavigliari, the twentieth of this month."* Then, leaving the captain to do what he wished with the man for good or ill and to lock up behind him, D'Ugarte returned to his chambers to resume the opium-induced sexual fantasies he was too dissipated and slothful to achieve in any way in real life.

He had gained much favor with the powers of the court when the name and the date were of value to them in their intrigues. More such commissions came his way, and payments. He once even exchanged gifts with the Emperor himself, though with complete discretion, of course.

He continued to thrive modestly in the trade of spells. The times certainly presented work for his craft. Eventually, only five of the twelve snakes were left in the pit. Times changed and, as the Emperor grew older and more spiteful, there was often need of the reptiles and other spells, even though his counselors tried to acclimate themselves to His Majesty's increasingly bizarre invective to interpret his deadly commands with softer execution.

One day, the Emperor, muttering in his soup, began to seethe about a slight, imagined or real, that he felt had been done him by one Duke D'Esteragon.

"I'll have his damned head is what. That's what! See if I don't," he croaked to no one in particular.

He began to call for counselors, who, while trying to remain unnoticed by His Majesty, nevertheless had an obligation to stay near his person. He finally called up Ganado and, immediately grabbing him by the scruff of his coat, spat saliva in his rage, shouting, "Damn it, I'm serious. I want him dead!" The privy counselor was shocked at the lack of discretion in language the monarch was now showing, but avoiding being seen or summoned, hanging about in the opulent shadows, wasn't the same as disobeying a direct order from the Emperor of the Holy Romans himself. There were still four guards at strictest attention in the four doorways.

"I want him dead!" he hissed again.

"But, Your Maj—"

"Dead!" There was silence. "Put a pox on him. A pox. Let him rot."

"Could we..." stammered the counselor Ganado.

"No!" barked the old man. "I want him poxed. We can do it. Tell Don Umberto, our friend. Tell him he must arrange it. Make it happen by the end of the year or it's both your lives, yours and D'Ugarte's. Do you understand?"

“Yes, Sire,” Ganado squeaked.

That had ended the audience, so now the two functionaries, Ganado and Umberto, had to pox a man for the Emperor or die themselves.

The Emperor had gloated, “we can do it!” but Ganado wasn’t so sure. He rarely participated in the actual “casting” of the spells, but he counted on the fact that Umberto would know such details.

“Of course. Couldn’t be simpler,” said Umberto, as casually as if they had been discussing how to obtain a halibut for their dinner. “We send him a poxed whore.”

“D’Esteragon stays away from whores, particularly because he is terrified of catching the French pox. He is known for his preference for virgins.”

“Then we send him a poxed virgin.”

“What?”

“A poxed virgin, or at least a version of one,” said Umberto. “Any very young girl will do, if we get the man drugged or drunk enough. She just needs to deliver the spell.”

So it was decided they would find a young girl of no family and pox her to use in the spell. Umberto felt that was more certain than if they tried to find a young enough girl who would have the right stage of the disease somewhere out in the city or the countryside. Besides, this way they could do everything within the precincts of the dungeon. The last contact they would need to have with the public would be the removal of the girl to the dungeon by sale or by simple Imperial kidnap. The two set off on respective tasks, one to find the emperor’s deadly and contagious message to Esteragon, the other to find the right messenger.

Umberto went through all the male prisoners in the upper levels of the cells. He had them stripped and standing as he passed in review with the jailer. They passed down the line until they

came to a brutish looking man with hair on his back and several syphilitic sores, open and running, on his body.

“What did he do?” Umberto asked.

“That’s Pig. Murder and rape. Several of each.”

Umberto motioned at the man and left. The Pig was singled out, put in leg irons and taken out of the upper cells to another part of the dungeon. Umberto and Ganado met, back from their respective trips, one to find a poxed man, the other to find something close to a virgin.

“Did you find your man?” Ganado asked.

“Yes,” said Umberto.

“I found my part of the spell, succulent, that’s the best word. Do you want to see her?”

Ganado smirked.

“No, let’s just have done and get paid.”

“There is no logic in it...I mean, she can’t get poxed and still get to Esteragon an absolutely fresh loaf, now can she? And if that’s the case, then who cares who actually cuts the first slice off, right?” said Ganado, turning to leave.

“Stop,” said Umberto. As Ganado turned around, Umberto tossed him a large, square-handled key. “The man is in the small cell. He’s condemned to die and he’s been told he’ll still be condemned to die, but at least he has the choice of this and a quick death, or not and a slow, painful one. We told him, if he doesn’t cooperate, we would just keep him alive to let him rot from his pox. He chose the girl and the garrote. Will you take care of that afterwards for me on the Emperor’s warrant?”

“Certainly, Don Umberto.”

“A million thanks, Lord Ganado. *Su merced.*”

* * *

The night passed with the usual kinds of sounds in the torture dungeons of the Hapsburg Emperor. Had Umberto been listening, he would have heard the door of the small cell grind open and close, several pairs of footsteps recede to the other end of the gallery where another door was heard to open and the faint cries of a thin voice echoed off the stone.

Umberto mixed the sounds with dreams through all of it. He was deep in opium sleep. Though the drug had been known to the physicians of Europe for centuries, it was still a rare and precious commodity, not to be used for the relief of the terrible sufferings of the common man or in the crude surgery practiced on the mass of terrible wounds brought about in the imperial wars that had raged throughout the continent for decades. What little there was came along with the other “exotic” spices from the East on the trading ships of Spain and Portugal. It had not yet been discovered as a medium of the trade, which would, three centuries hence, bring about the physical downfall of one great empire and the moral degradation of another. As a functionary of the court, however, and a favored one at that, it was available to D’Ugarte. He took more and more of it as the years passed, especially on nights when he was worrying about whether some spell was working out in the field or not. At least that was the story he had taken to giving himself as he had spent more and more of the admittedly empty days between commissions in his room with the door locked. Now, he rarely saw anyone except the tower warden and Ganado.

To be sure, he was master of his craft. No prince in Europe had available such power of spells as his sovereign did in him. But he spent more and more time under the sinuous clouds. The fleshiness had worn away as he more and more often forgot to eat, but the look of flaccidity and pastiness that shrouded him was more and more evident as time passed.

He awoke at midmorning and drank deeply from a ewer of water that the warden had set by his door. He wanted to get out of the tower, to feel fresh air at least once again before he died, and he started to put on his gown when he remembered there was something he must do today. His memory was worse with the smoke, and he had to rely more and more on the leather-bound book of parchment in which he had once written all the spells he could think of in his own hand in court Latin.

He must talk with the girl and give her instructions. He rubbed his eyes with water and staggered down the corridor to the guard's station.

"Where is Lord Ganado's prisoner?" he demanded.

He was led to a small door not far from the station and handed a key. The guard retreated, genuinely frightened of the old man.

The key scratched in the lock and the door scraped upon the stones and then he looked at her, the woman, or rather the girl, there in the cell. She was just another girl born in the country whose parents had both died. But she was striking, at least for the moment. D'Ugarte reflected upon the sheer power of simple youth. It was almost difficult *not* to be attractive at her age. Perhaps it was all the years Umberto had spent buried under this pile of dirty rock in a world away from real women. He had seen one in his dreams for a long, long time now. And now here she was in front of him, huddled on the bed against the wall, looking up at him and being very still. He stared. She was like a small animal paralyzed by a snake. The room was silent as a grave.

Then he pulled himself from within her depths and back to the hard rock walls around them.

"Girl," his voice quavered and then struck full. "Do you know what has happened?"

“Those men took me, sir. The one with the fine clothes and then the ugly hairy one. They said they would cut my throat if I didn’t let them,” she said levelly.

“Do you know why this happened, why they did what they did?” he asked.

“Because that’s what men do, sir. Is that what you want?”

“No,” he answered, still staring at her. She had begun to look around the room, which, admittedly, didn’t take long. “May I have something to eat, sir?”

“Yes, in a moment. But you must listen to me now.” Again, his voice quavered as he started to let her turn the rest of the room into one of his dreams with her in it, as usual. He had held her a thousand ways and nearly stopped his heart several times to have her to his satisfaction in a dream. Indeed, the closer he was to her in his dreams, the more his heart beat wildly with long, breathtaking pauses. He would risk it stopping like that for a dream of her body. Indeed, he had begun to secretly hope that would be the means of his death. Perhaps that, with a bit too much opium, and he need never be bored again.

Now, here she was, the very girl, crouching in front of him, and he must tell her of the spell she was part of now.

“The big man,” he began. “The second one...”

“He hurt me,” she said.

“Quiet,” he commanded, not wanting to hear any more of the girl’s soft chatter.

“The man was poxed and now you are, too,” he said.

She didn’t say anything as he went on, but her face looked suddenly pinched and her eyes widened in fear. Tears welled up in them.

“You have the pox. If you will do as I say, I can cure you. If you will not do as I say, you can rot here. And I may let the rats in to get you.” The girl looked wildly around her and whimpered. “Will you do as I say?” Umberto asked, now in a kindly tone.

“Yes, sir,” said the girl.

“Good. What is your name, girl?” he asked. He noticed it was the first thing he could remember for a long time in which he was truly interested.

“Lucia, sir,” she said, looking at Umberto now as she talked to him.

“Lucia, you know what it is to have a man now?” She was silent and looked at the floor. “You must have one more man and then I will cure you.”

“I’m to pass the pox to someone else?”

The sorcerer noted the quickness of her mind, but he never knew any mind in his dreams, only her slender body; it was all his own mind, no resistance to any wish. He didn’t feel well and, so, steeled himself to his task to be finished.

“In a week, a man will come to get you and you will go with him. He will take you to a house, and there, you will find spices and perfumes and silk. You will put on the clothes and the perfume and go with the man to a lodge in the country near there. The man will then take you to a gentleman’s room and you must do there what was done last night.”

“Will the gentleman hurt me?” she asked uncertainly.

“No, girl, in fact, the most difficult part of your work might be rousing him, though I hope he will just be rather sleepy and gentle. You are to go into his room and do anything you must to rouse him from sleep to mount you like the men did last night.”

“But how, if he is sleeping...”

“You are female, that is enough. You have powers over a man. Your own scent, from anything under the length of your arm would wake him by itself eventually. The warmth of your body under the covers with him and, if that is not enough, you have only to touch his organ.”

““That the men...put in me last night?”

“That’s right. Even if he is asleep, if you stroke him enough, it will become hard like they were and then you must have him inside you like the men last night.”

“Must he be so rough and go on for so long?”

“Whatever it takes to get him inside of you. And one more thing, you must cut him. On his organ, you must open the skin just a little, before he gets inside you.”

He handed her a tiny piece of broken glass with a razor-sharp edge. “No more a cut than bleeds five drops, no more. Before he is inside of you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” she answered.

“Keep him inside of you as long as it takes to sing a verse of Friar John. Do all of that, just as I’ve told you, then come back here with the man who escorted you there...and I’ll cure you. You want that, don’t you?” he asked, again solicitous.

“Yes, please, sir. My sister, Roxanne, took the pox and died, and I don’t want that to happen to me, sir. I’ll do as you say and cut the gentleman.”

Ganado had all the arrangements made and the plans laid against the unsuspecting D’Esteragon. After all, why should Esteragon worry? He was a true son of the Church was he not, and the Holy saints watched over him and all his enterprises. He had done no evil to any other man that he knew of, being a convivial sort.

Indeed, when he had been invited to one of the Imperial lodges for hunting, he had accepted with relish. The banquet in the evening went on and on and Ganado saw to it just the right amount of D'Ugarte's special potion was mixed with the good Duke's wine.

The night wore on and the Duke retired to his chamber. His valet undressed him and then slipped downstairs to join the rest of the servants in the leavings of the party.

At that point, Ganado signaled a figure waiting in the shadows outside, and soon, the girl found herself standing in front of a large door in a long hallway. She hesitated for just a moment with her hand on the latch, then opened it slowly and uncertainly peered inside.

She saw a fire in the fireplace burning low, leaving the air cold enough here in the mountains that she could see her breath. She could see the bed with the mass piled in the center that would be the man. She walked quietly over to him, glad of the warmth that the fire gave as she passed it. She held her wrist under his sleeping nose. The shadow man had put a perfume there and told her to use it this way. The Duke stirred in his sleep. She slowly pulled back the covers and gingerly crawled into the bed next to the man who was in his nightgown and cap.

She pulled the bottom of the nightgown up over his waist and her own loose shift up on her body. She rubbed his chest under the gown with her hand. He muttered in his drugged state and roused enough to look blearily at her, paused a second and then reached unsteadily out and touched her bared breast. He smiled crookedly, laughed, and said incomprehensible things. In spite of his stuporous state, she found she had no need to figure out how to arouse him. For the third time in her life, she was sure, from the response of his organ, that she was about to feel a man inside of her.

She remembered that she must cut him, only enough to bleed five drops. But he was already fumbling drunkenly to push her back onto the bed and his knees were between her knees and trying to spread them apart.

She did the only thing she knew to do, fought the only way she knew how. She tickled him. He jerked for a second, and then began the stupid, drugged laughter again as he crumbled to one side of her on the bed, still pawing her breasts and licking her neck and muttering to himself. She began to push away, but he would have none of it. Even with his eyes still closed in zombie-like half sleep, he was so much stronger than she that she could barely move.

She moved her head close to his breast, as if to nestle there. Just as he was giving a contented sigh, she pulled up his nightgown and bent her neck as far down as it would go, to the skin of his chest just by a nipple. He gasped a little and she licked lower on his ribs. He let go his crushing hold on her and began to push her downward on his body, holding her roughly by the neck and the back of her head. The girl went along with the play, kissing slowly lower while her right hand was busily fetching the sliver of glass from her soft collar, now torn open and to the side by the Duke's big hands.

She got a grasp on the glass sliver as the Duke was laying back and beginning to relax. She stroked his semi-erect organ with her left hand and the man groaned with pleasure and relaxed more, expecting to feel next the velvet touch of her lips in his foggy dream.

Just at that moment, when he was relaxed and least ready, he felt a shock of pain that brought him arching up out of the bed. For a split second, he was in the real world of cold and heat and hardness and pain, but, before he was fully aware of what was happening, the drugged wine had washed over everything cold and hard with warm oil and he was floating again. As his eyelids fluttered, he saw a young virginal girl, now naked and hovering over him.

She raised one thigh over his waist and straddled him. As she came down on him, though he had not really felt it was cold before, he knew it must be so, because of the fiery warmth she gave off as she slid tightly down over his throbbing member. He had served the Emperor as an emissary to the Porte of the Sultan at Constantinople and knew he must be in the Turk's heaven and this was one of the Houris there to please him.

The next morning, for some reason, the country song Friar John was in his head, and he had a small nick on his penis. He remembered nothing but a dream in which he had been in ecstasy for a moment, only to hear this song faintly, and then he remembered nothing else.

He jokingly mentioned to one of his hunting companions that a succubus had visited him in the night. Later, he would go to his death of the pox, babbling in his syphilitic insanity, that it was indeed what had happened. He maintained she had come shaped as a woman and turned into a snake long enough to bite him and give him the pox poison, which killed him.

By that time, the Emperor had forgotten all about his grudge and his command and wept at the gentleman's funeral, lamenting how rapidly all of the friends of his youth were dying, leaving him more and more alone, sinking in his palace, surrounded, he declared, by only spies and assassins.

The girl had returned from the Duke in the mists of the early morning. D'Ugarte watched her from the battlements of the tower as she was brought back, just as D'Ugarte had ordered. He had had to tell the guards' officer who had taken her to the lodge not to kill her on the way back as was the normal practice.

It wasn't out of any sense of gratitude to her for having carried out her part of the spell. By now, he didn't care if the Emperor had him flayed. Besides, he knew enough spells to use to end his life in more comfort than that, if it came to it, or who was to say if the Great Umberto

could not end the life of an Emperor. As far as the man blissfully sleeping with his dose of death already working there in the lodge, D'Ugarte couldn't even remember his name by now.

It was the girl he watched as she hurried along the gravel coach way below the tower. He had stood out on the battlements waiting since the rising of the moon two hours before. It had been months since he had been outside for so long at one time. Having used so much opium, it had become almost as air to him, and the fresh air acted almost as a drug. He was intoxicated by the moon and the stars in the crisp air. He saw the girl go through the tower door from the night into the warmth, and his heart turned to cold stone and sank as he remembered the spell and the Imperial mission and her pox.

He did not see her the next day or the next. He told himself he just didn't want to deal with the problem of her, so he retreated behind the cloud. When finally he went to her cell and looked through the little window, she immediately jumped up and ran to the bars, saying, "are you here for my cure? Is it time now?"

He could say nothing to her, but slowly shut the little window in her face and went back to his room. More and more thoughts of her, of her face and her body, crowded out the few things that remained in his head.

* * *

It was 1557 now and the Emperor was finally too senile to issue commands coherently. This was good, for it brought to an end a reign of random Imperial punishments such as that of the late, lamented Esteragon. Now, the courtiers managed to arrange an occasional "spell" using the power of the Imperial seal, but without the signature of the Emperor himself, as in the days of his manhood, the great sorcerers were loath to open fully their arts and their terrible consequences upon the lives of men. Both a courtier and the paid sorcerer who would denounce

him might still face an *Auto de Fe* for “trafficking in the dark and diabolical arts.” There would be fewer spells, at least until there was a new Emperor—but who knew when that might be.

Umberto D’Ugarte passed his days alone in his room thinking about his life and about the girl in the little room at the end of the gallery. As he had stood outside her door in the middle of the night, the next time he tried to brave actually seeing her, he had gotten only close enough to hear the girl moving around inside the room, and it had frozen him in his tracks as surely as one of his own spells. He thought he heard the light tread of her foot, as though she was pacing the floor.

A resolve began to build in him. He hurried back to his work benches in the upper tower, where he had not practiced his craft in so long. Then he lit tapers and rummaged frantically, until he found a large gray-backed book. Greedily, he opened it and began to pour over the Latin text set down there in his own hand many years and many bowls of opium ago.

By morning, he had made his plans and had given orders to the tower warden for the things he would need. That evening, he went to Lucia again, inquired haltingly as to her condition and, in response to her pleas, told her he would indeed cure her.

He told her also that, when he cured her, she must stay there in the tower with him. The girl reacted with silence. D’Ugarte told her she could rot, if she did not promise. Quietly, after a moment, she said, “Yes, Sir, of course, if you wish it. What must I do for the cure?” She had lifted her robe, which had inflamed the sorcerer, but it had not been to entice him, but rather to show him the latest of the effects of the illness, a small, open sore on the perfect flesh between her thighs.

True to his side of the bargain, the next day, the old man had the girl moved to another cell, one that had an opening into yet another adjoining cell. Into this second cell, he had

commanded the warden to place three women, who all had the ague fevers of malaria. It had not been hard for the tower captain to find them in a fetid swamp in the south and have them brought to the palace. Also, into the two rooms, Umberto released the insects the gray book's spell had called for: spiders from a crypt, flies from a dead man, mosquitoes caught alive, feeding at dusk, and a few bed bugs from his own bed.

Days passed and, when he would go to the girl's cell, if she saw his eyeball peering in, she would throw herself on the floor at the door and beg him to stop the tide of rot that was engulfing her.

Then, two weeks after he cast the spell, the girl came down with the same fever as the country women in the adjoining cell. That was the whole point of the spell. She shivered and she shook and she sweated for days and the sorcerer tended to her in her delirium. In her inflamed brain, she knew D'Ugarte had not kept his part of the bargain, but had nakedly sold her to Satan, and that explained the oven like heat in which her deliria danced. Finally, she broke out of the fever and the malarious dreams and, when she looked, she could see the sores she had had were gone.

For the first time, she smiled at the old man and said, "Oh, thank you, sir."

D'Ugarte said nothing to her, but he spent the entire afternoon in his tower ruminating over the strange feeling it gave him. No matter what other feelings had stirred in him before, they blew away, the abiding thoughts he had about her were simply lustful fantasies. He watched her and, when she was feeling stronger, she asked if she might leave, but the old man quickly reminded her that she had promised to stay, if he cured her. As she resigned herself to the realities of her life, she reflected that she really had no other place to go. But she knew, even with her small store of experience, that staying meant it would not be long before her door would

open and she must have yet a third man for whom she had not bargained. But then the sores were gone, just as he had said, and life here, no matter how dreary, was better than what her sister had gone through, as she had all but melted before their eyes from the buxom young woman who had been the prettiest whore on the waterfront, into a sobbing, gibbering mass of sores and rot.

The old man was torn between what he knew and what he wanted to believe. He knew there was no reliable cure for the pox. The fever spell he had learned from desperate men. The French pox was a horrendous new disease, which seemed to have come from the new world, or at least it appeared immediately after the first soldiers began coming home from colonial service. In some cases, it could kill in a year. In some, it might go away and never come back. Most patients lingered and rotted.

Though D'Ugarte once muttered to Ganado that he had long ago "been finished with any business here" and "quite ready to get death over to see what is next," slow death by the pox was not part of that bargain as far as he was concerned. He was afraid of the girl, but he had cured her with the fever spell. The sores had all gone away with the spell and, so far, there were no signs of new ones. He knew she was grateful and she owed him a debt.

In spite of his nagging doubts, over the following days, the more he thought about her, the more he wanted her. It wasn't love or caring, it was wanting to do with her in the flesh all the things he'd done with her in his opium dreams.

Finally, one night, as her image writhed slowly in his smoke, he forgot to be afraid of the curse or the pox or the devil himself. He could stand his self-imposed exile no longer. He pulled himself off his dirty cot and dragged himself against the wall of the corridor all the way to her room.

He opened her door slowly and went into her cell. He said nothing, just looked at her. She knew what he wanted and walked slowly to the bed and lay down. He took off his greasy clothes and, keeping his eye upon her now-exposed hips, walked toward where she lay waiting. The cold air caused his skin to bump up like a plucked chicken. He was an old man and was dissipated with the years of the drug.

The cold of the room also made his limp erection subside. At first, he was not worried, as he thought the warmth he would take from the girl's body would bring him to life again. He rolled himself directly on top of Lucia and, with his knees, made it clear to her that she was to spread her legs and open herself up to him. She did this, as she slowly turned her head to the side to look away from his reptilian face. It didn't matter, since he had not really even looked at her face. When he tried to make the dreams come to life, he found he could not. He could not again make himself hard enough to enter her. Even though she was certainly not a virgin anymore, she was still a young, unused girl. He bucked between her legs. She didn't resist, knowing she had no other real choice, but neither did she encourage him. He groped and pawed her body, roughly pulling her arms above her head. He fed hungrily on her breasts, sucking and licking and filling his mouth with the soft, smooth flesh. She winced in pain as his few yellow, broken teeth closed hard on her nipple. Still, he could not make himself hard enough. Still, without ever particularly noticing her face, he turned away. With eyes closed, he moved abruptly and began to claw at her between her thighs as though trying to make the opening capable of taking in his flaccid length. Even after he had pried and stretched her, he was still not erect enough to drive himself into her. Now, he felt himself welling weakly up inside and thought, in terror, that he would not be able to enter her before he expended the thin and scant seed inside his loins. He mounted her again and, in desperation, commanded her to put him inside her with her hands. He felt her hands on him

and could feel the warm slipperiness of her lips for just an instant before he felt himself spew forth and felt her quickly pull her hands away. He lay for a moment in his rage and frustration and then got up. He stood for a second looking down at her. He could see the glistening stream of his seed amid the dark hair between her legs. His frustration at not having been able to push open those soft doors welled up in him, and he leaned over and struck her full across the mouth with his fist. Her silent look, without expression of either pleasure or pain, finally defeated him. He picked up his clothes and turned to go. She smoothed her gown and was staring at the wall, relieved, as he turned with his hand upon the door latch.

“You are my property,” he said. “I’ll be back. Next time, you must help.” She knew he meant it and was resigned to her fate.

He realized he could either have her in the dreams or he could have her in the real world, but the effect of the drug was such that he couldn’t have both. He stopped the pipe and waited for the poison to clear his system. Many days he spent alone in his room, now facing the hard, solid walls, rather than the gauzy curtain of smoke. He thought of the long series of terrors perpetrated on other people that made up as much of his life as he remembered, or cared to remember. There were no human ties for him and really never had been. He certainly didn’t love or care for this girl, she was simply a way for him to finally give himself the full gift of his lust.

He began, at the same time, to dwell at a deep level on a need to create his heir. Again, the desire had nothing to do with any personality or sense of connection with the girl; she was simply a vessel in which he could cook this new batch of witch’s brew. His feeling about an heir was almost the scream from an insensate mind telling the universe that it did have the right to exist and, whether anyone liked it or not, it would leave behind an image of itself. He cared little

about how such a child would do in life; that would be life's problem. It was almost a reptilian need to spawn—that and his driving lust.

It had, perhaps, been to relieve the pain of not having any trace of existence that was not simply an extension of the work of the Shadow Court that had led him to begin having the opium. Now, as he quit the drug in order to possess her, his mind turned more and more to the girl, to relieve the pain of not having the smoke. He was consumed with her, obsessed. His thoughts of her body, of the feel of her smooth skin and the soft warmth into which he so desperately wanted to sink began to be, for him, the more powerful addiction, as he would spend hours in his room, rubbing his hands over his lifeless organ and conjuring up visions of her to move for him, trying to bring himself to life so he might enter her cell and her body in reality.

The sergeant of the tower guard was the only person to come to Umberto's tower and the dungeons below it. That was only twice and, then, eventually, once a day, to bring the sorcerer and the prisoner in the cell their food. More and more, he noticed Umberto's food would go untouched for one or even two days and, on one occasion, he saw through the door Umberto had left open into his room. The sergeant saw only the back of the dirty cloak, which Umberto wore for warmth in the cold rooms, sitting silently and very still facing the empty wall. If he had been able to see the stony face, it would have been set in a look of rapt attention as though watching something the sergeant could not see. The sergeant retreated and began to come down to that level even less than before, leaving it almost completely deserted.

Finally, one night after almost a month off the drug, Umberto's conjuring and dreams brought his manhood to full life and he knew he was ready to have her. By now, he was strong enough to walk steadily the length of the dungeon hall. Again, he pushed her door back meaningfully. Again, but this time a little doubtfully, Lucia silently lifted her shift over her head.

As she pulled it over her head, it became tangled in her hair for a second. Before she had untangled it and drew it the rest of the way off her face, D'Ugarte was on her. Grasping her breasts roughly with both hands and, licking her neck and shoulders, he pushed her toward the bed.

This time, there was no problem with his potency. He began going to her cell every night. Then, as time passed, he visited her during the day as well. He never talked to her; he didn't want conversation with her or with anyone else. He went to quench this fever his body felt in reality for the first time in years.

Lucia herself became more lifeless and silent with dark circles under her eyes from not knowing when the sorcerer might open her cell to use her. Night or day, he might appear and demand her body, sometimes several times a day and never very gently.

Time passed, and it became clear the girl was pregnant. D'Ugarte took a kind of perverse pride in her pregnancy. Occasionally, D'Ugarte actually let her out of her cell and took her to the top of the tower to look at the sky for a few minutes. By now, she was past caring. But, as they passed through his work room with the great books of spells lying open, she raised her head just long enough to sweep the room with her eyes, and he roughly pushed her on through the door.

As the weather turned colder and she swelled about the middle, the old man thought to himself, with some satisfaction, that his life was not totally without pleasures.

Then, the very night he had been thinking those smug thoughts, the empty dungeon echoed with the screams that came from his room, as he undressed and looked down to see, to his horror, that he was now poxed with the beginnings of an unmistakable sore on his wrinkled skin. He knew, too, that meant the girl was still poxed and that his heir would be as well.

The girl heard him coming down the hallway and prepared to drag her swollen body over to the bed again for his pleasure. Since she had come nearer her time, her breasts had swollen and stood out more and, under the handling and irritation done to them by D'Ugarte's rough hands and teeth, she had begun to leak a little milk. This had inflamed the sorcerer so much that, at times, he would not even mount her, but would push her down on the cot on her back, rip the clothes off her breasts and begin to suckle her roughly and noisily, apparently drinking with satisfaction the warm, sweet liquid he sucked from her body. She would lie as he fed from her, trying to think of other places and other things.

This time, though, the lock in the door clicked to the key, the footsteps receded back the way they had come. She waited, not knowing what to do. She cowered on the bed for an hour and, then, when she had heard nothing but her heartbeat that whole time, she got up and cautiously peeked out the window in the door. No one was about. She pushed and the door swung open. She was alone out in the corridor. She walked quietly down the gallery toward the door that lead to the outside of the tower.

As she passed the door of the old man's private apartment, she could smell the sickly sweet odor of his opium pipe, as she had smelled it so many times before. This time, though, she could see the door was open and she looked carefully around the doorpost into the old man's now silent room.

She saw him lying on his bed, the pipe nearby and his mouth open and lifeless, a fly crawling over his dimming eye. There was a small green glass vial in his limp left hand.

She paused not a second to be sorry, but immediately turned to leave. She was free of him. True, she was with child, his child, and she had no place to go, but the joy of her freedom overwhelmed her and she shed tears of joy. She went back to her own cell, which, even over all

the months, she had never come to think of as “hers.” D’Ugarte had never thought about relieving the monotony of her life between the terror and discomforts of his visits with so much as a thread of color nor any look at the natural sky, except the time earlier in her pregnancy. And her body was as open to his penetration as the lock on her door was to the mechanical insertion of the key he always carried with him. Once again, she went into that room to get what little she had by way of clothing and a small store of food she had kept cached away, always hoping for this day.

She stopped at the foot of the tower stairs to think. She went up the stairs, but, still seeing no one else about, bypassed the door to the grounds outside and continued on up the staircase until she reached D’Ugarte’s work room. She looked about, stuffed a few valuable-looking objects into a bag she found there and, though she couldn’t fit the gray book into the pouch, she found another volume, bound in brown leather, hand-copied in Latin, and stuffed it in with her booty. Downstairs, the old man’s eyes were completely glazed over by now, though truth be told, they really looked not all that different than they had while he was alive.

Lucia looked about her, went out onto the roof for just a moment to get her bearings as to where the roads lay roundabout. It was difficult to see in the cold foggy darkness. Then, she went back down the stairs and, like a ghost, disappeared through the door to the road, carrying her various baggages into the world outside.

The Windows of Life

The decades rolled on, but the Hapsburg dynasty was still busily splattering the entire map of Europe with blood; from the Baltic to the Bosphorus, from the Danube to the English Channel. European monarchs' widespread dynastic interests demanded that they have recourse to many kinds of talents and knowledge of many kinds of peoples. Princes were often such polyglots that one earlier monarch had informed a biographer, "I speak Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to my horse."

Nowhere, however, in this continental maelstrom of political intrigue, religious persecution, torture, and open warfare, was there a more hotly contested region than The Low Countries that we now know as Belgium and Holland. While the world recoils at the thought that much of the German plain and Central Europe engaged in a so-called Thirty Years War around the same time, the independent minded burghers of Antwerp and Amsterdam, of Lieden and Bruges, suffered under, united against, and continually resisted the mightiest imperial force of the time over a scorched and bloody epoch of more than eight decades.

Along with the traditional motives of freedom and control, trade and power, was mixed a large and bitter dose of religious fanaticism, especially on the part of the latest Spanish Emperor, Philip II. This Philip was he of Armada fame and Inquisition infamy. He was the son of Charles the Fifth, who had died mad, and who in life had first employed the sorcerers of the Shadow Court, including Umberto D'Ugarte, as an arm of his power.

Royal Philip still secretly employed these dark councilors, though it was obvious that such a publicly devout Defender of the Faith and crusader against heresy could not even appear

to know such sinister people openly. The great wit Voltaire, safe from later depredations from such as these in his prudent border house at Ferney, noted with generally applicable cynicism that, “The princes who have established, protected, or changed religions have very rarely had any of their own.” Only God, and perhaps a confessor, knew the true depth of Philip’s Catholic faith, but thousands came to know the extent of its public zealotry through the rack, the boot, the gibbet, and the grill. Obviously, if one chose to resist such a power as did the Dutch, one literally risked limb and life on the successful outcome of such a fight.

In the summer of 1591, the fortified city of Estraach had been engaged in such a struggle for close to four months. The besieging troops, composed of several different mercenary companies and conscripted Spanish Imperial troops, were camped under the shadow of the town’s sixteen-foot-thick walls.

The defenders on the ramparts fifty feet above were a cohesive mix of free men from the United Provinces of the low countries, their German cousins, and a stiff leavening of French professional soldiers, who were there as much to pursue their longstanding rivalry with the Spaniards as for any noble work of establishing liberty.

Overall command of the besieged troops inside the city was in the hands of a French veteran named Armand Dupuys. Though still a relatively young man, his reputation as a commander in both open terrain and in siege operations was well known.

As Captain Dupuys came to the wall in the earliest light of the ninety-second day of the siege, he had the luxury of time to sit and scratch his unhelmeted head, to walk slowly down the rampart, observing the condition of the men and arms there, and casting an unhurried eye across the moat below. On the surrounding flats the motley of his enemies, under the overall command

of the mercenary captain D'Ugarte, had pitched their several thousand rough tents. This day, only placid smoke from hundreds of peaceful cooking fires arose into a clear and gentle sky.

Dupuys silently considered the entire scene for a moment. "Well," he said to Van Maartens, the adjutant walking at his side, "it looks like there won't be too much to do here today. The men can stand down in quarter watches. Have them pay some attention to weapons, but mainly let them have a bit of sleep and a ration down off this cursed wall."

"Yes, Sir." The adjutant was as good at his job of executing orders as Dupuys was at giving them. Both were experienced enough to know that none of this largess meant that they slacken the discipline of their vigil by so much as one inch. One inch would permit the sudden thrust of a blade, to be followed by the stroke of a hammer. They both also realized, however, that their forces were finite, and also that they were human and not machine. The relaxation they granted was not from the heart, but purely from the head, useful in keeping the greatest possible number of troops in the best fighting condition over the longest time.

This even and rational style of marshalling was one of the reasons that the city had held out thus far in the face of a force that was embarrassed more and more each day by its inability to carry the siege over the walls, despite its much greater numbers and its wealth of supplies, mostly raped from the surrounding countryside.

Though "The Bloody Captain," Horacio D'Ugarte was counted one of the most feared and successful mercenaries of that fearful age, his impetuosity and irrational fits of rage sometimes worked to his disadvantage in situations where he could not get to an opponent in a short time. The country around was growing every bit as thinly supplied as the storehouses of the beleaguered city, and the besieging army existed in a tenuous balance between each day's gain of new conscripts, levied by Imperial edict, and the losses in defecting mercenary troops, who,

fearful as much of the barbaric disciplinary measures of their own commander as of the city walls, drifted away in tens and twenties every night in the darkness and the mists by the river nearby.

Many of these hardy types simply went a few days walk to the East to enlist for the bonus under yet another mercenary banner in the perennial petty wars in Germany and Bohemia. But more and more were heading West, following the river a short way, making their way individually or in small groups to the Channel ports, where, if a man had only a little of the spoils of wars of bleeding Europe, he was asked few questions about a new name, and he could book passage on one of the increasing number of ships headed for the New World. If one wanted more in the way of peace and order, and spoke the language, he might go to the Dutch- or English-controlled ports and eventually land in the colder, more phlegmatic colonies of the eastern part of the new continent such as New Amsterdam or Virginia.

For those who went, not to seek peace, but simply a wider canvas for their ambition and rapaciousness, the ports of Spain and Portugal were still aggressively shipping adventurous souls to, and receiving loot from, the continuation of the conquest of New Spain and South America, This activity in its savagery and its exploitation, in its opportunities and its hypocrisy, also clearly bore the Hapsburg stamp. In the Spanish new world of the sixteenth century, however, a man's past was generally his own. So too was his future, so long as he had the nerve to grasp it.

Now from away to the East, from the direction of the brilliant rising sun, Dupuys heard a dull boom and then another. Even a few weeks ago, this cannonade would have brought every man in the town rushing to the ramparts with his arquebus or pike in his hand and his heart in his throat, expecting a rush of attackers being whipped on by the swords of the Bloody Captain's officers stationed behind them to prevent retreat. Now the quarter of the watch that was coming

down off the wall didn't even break their stride. They knew by now that the whole situation, the weather, the time of day, the time since the last attack, didn't bode for an assault of any kind, but rather the beginning of yet another day's efforts by the Spanish artillery to batter down the old walls, foot by foot, stone by stone.

One of the basic strategies of such siege warfare devolved down to this; if you could knock down a wall faster than the total ability of the defender to reinforce it, eventually you created a breach, and the siege could be carried. If the defenders, through numbers, engineering genius, or sheer main strength could outpace the artillery, it was, as now, an exercise in noise and smoke and the gratuitous burning of powder. The other options were starvation, disease, and eventual repulse, or else climbing the full height of the walls on rickety ladders under the most murderously concentrated defensive fire in a "full scale" assault.

Dupuys' mind wandered back a week to the last moonless night. The cannonade then had not merely been a desultory drizzle of a few single balls bouncing off the thick part of the wall to probe for weaknesses in the old structure. It had not been intermittent rounds fired during the daylight and directed by a bunch of engineers with telescopes and drafting crayon in hand, huddled over diagrams on a movable writing desk, clucking like hens. That night, it had begun just as the last light of day had fled the sky, leaving a background of sooty blackness, against which the cannons would paint their hellish scenes. The guns had been massed and charged with double loads of terrible grape shot. Their barking muzzles had been shifted upwards so that the thousands of deadly finger-sized chunks of lead they spewed out swept the tops of the wall to keep the defenders' heads down, removing no few of them with the first volley.

Dupuys had known immediately on that evening, simply by the timing and the sound of the shot, what was coming. He had walked quickly but calmly to his habitual station on one of the corner towers of the wall.

“Sieur Van Maartens,” Dupuys French pronunciation and idioms sometimes fell strangely on the ears of the Dutch, but for all that they trusted him and were prepared to follow his orders briskly and explicitly. “Be so kind as to ask Captain Von Trompen to send a half-watch to the western wall. And be prepared with grape for the lull.” They had watched the darkness as a dozen, then a hundred, and then thousands of figures could be seen sweeping toward the wall under them. They could see only the tiniest glimmer of light off the armor of each of the attackers, but in sum it looked like a lake with the moon shining down upon it, reflecting off the ripples. The air was already thick with the smell of gunpowder, and a few of the Dutch were already writhing on the flagstones behind the parapets, where they had been too slow in getting down when the first shelling started. There were small pools of blood about these few, and each was the center of a small knot of those trying to give them succor. Soon there would be no one with the time to take care of the wounded, and they would lay where they fell until the issue of the wall had been decided again, or, at best, they might expect to be dragged summarily off to be piled against an inner wall, until time could be found for them. Buckets of sand stood to hand to throw on the slippery pooled blood to prevent those remaining from plunging thirty feet off the unrailed inner aspect of the wall.

As he watched the wave of fury wash up, Dupuys remembered briefly a battle in another town like this, in Moldavia, against the Turks. The question had been in such fine balance for the terrible final hour that the Turks had used the piles of wounded to stanch the breaches that Christian cannon had made in their walls. It had been of no avail to them in the end, however,

and none of the defenders had been left alive after the battle. Dupuys tore his mind away from that offensive victory to keep it from undermining his nerve now. There was, as yet, no breach in the walls of Estraach.

The air clearly carried the sound of the attackers' shouts now and the whine, and screech of the enemy's shelling stopped abruptly. It was for this moment that they had been waiting up on the wall. It was now, when the besieging cannon had to cease firing to avoid hitting their own troops, that the defenders could get in their own heaviest blows. The strength of this initial defense could make the difference in whether the assault carried or failed and was thrown back.

"Now." Dupuys' voice was loud and clear, but calm. "Now Monsieur Van Maartens. Now is your time." The sinewy adjutant turned and nodded to the waiting officers, and the order was instantly relayed down the wall. The Dutch guns boomed, and with an almost astonishing speed belched their fire again. The natural discipline of the Dutch, coupled with their methodical drill, and the relatively good physical condition that they had managed to maintain in spite of the scarcity of provisions was immediately evident in the excellent rate of fire they sustained. Even before the first ladders were against the side of the wall, there was a clear effect on the assault wave. The men below were already having to skirt small groups of the dead and dying, and in some cases, having to skirt around the growing groups of those who were milling back, sheltering under the moat wall trying to measure if it was worse to go on and face Dupuys' guns in front, or to turn around and risk D'Ugarte's wrath behind.

Some ladders, however, were thrown against the palisade. The defenders pushed them back, using long poles with forked ends, men falling in a great arc of nearly fifty feet through the air, their screams following them like swaths of ugly color on the blind canvas of the darkness.

There was now furious fighting on the wall itself as defenders fired down through the crenellations and took fire from below in return. Though the harquebus was difficult to carry and to load, and not accurate at long ranges, at these fifty-foot distances, the half-inch balls did terrific damage when they struck, leaving a man suddenly without a hand or an arm, or spilling a bucketful of his guts rudely at his own feet.

Dupuys saw the helmets of the first of the enemy to get to the top of their ladders, and the fighting became hand to hand, sword and ax work. It was this instant, when death suddenly had a face, that one's nerve was most likely to crack, when any weakness hidden inside waited to spring out and plead with a man to turn and blindly flee.

"Sir, the south wall reports an attack there." Van Maartens had to shout and to speak each word distinctly to make himself heard about the cacophony of screams and explosions centered no more than a hundred feet to their right. "Shall we reinforce?"

Dupuys stood without speaking. Van Maartens had seen military commanders who simply froze at the height of an engagement, and he knew that this was usually the prelude to a total rout. Now, however, watching Dupuys, he remained calm, because he knew what would come. In no more than ten seconds, still just as calm as before, Dupuys turned and grasped him deliberately by the shoulder, drawing him closer where there would be no problem with hearing. Leaning his head close to Van Maarten's ear he shouted, "No. This is the main attack. If we hold here the rest won't matter...it's just a feint." Van Maarten was the only one to whom Dupuys explained his tactical instructions in such depth. The Dutch, Dupuys knew, were more cohesive and trusting of one another than the Spaniards, or even his own French troops, and followed instructions more crisply. "You can tell Monsieur Von Tromppen he may release a quarter watch, no more, to reinforce there, in case I am wrong." Van Maarten knew he wasn't wrong, but

he recognized the tremendous ability of his commander, being able to not only control the tactical situation at their feet, but to cover the next possibility in order as well. It was this ability to stay one move, or two, ahead of his opponents in tactical situations, combined with clear headed staff work, and efficiently moving supplies, that had given Dupuys his well-deserved reputation.

The Frenchman had learned early that while the image of a commander dashing about hither and yon like a young Alexander, might give some sort of inspiration to less well trained troops, the most effective and heartening thing he could do, once a battle was well and truly joined, was to take a stand in one place so that information could be sent easily to him. It did no good to hold the high ground if the regimental gallopers had to spend precious minutes hunting down the staff from one part of the field to another with information requiring immediate action to exploit a position, only to find them gone away to yet another advantageous position, but unable to give needed orders.

Early in his own career Dupuys had served in the line in several bloody engagements, sustaining his share of wounds, including two which nearly killed him. Then he had been a staff dispatch messenger himself, racing along God-forsaken ridgelines through shot and shell that killed a total of five horses out from under him, chasing command centers, sometime in vain, while the battles evolved about him. Now, as commander himself, he took station and cleared his mind, simply hearing the information coming in, and issuing crisp clear orders in response. If he stood still there was a greater total benefit from his command than if he wandered frantically about.

In the beginning of a large battle, or in a limited engagement, such as that recent night attack on the walls of Estraach, his powers of concentration were not even tested fully. But he,

and all the professional soldiers around him like Van Maarten, knew that to command troops in a pitched battle, sometimes numbering in the tens of thousands, over miles of ground, in all kinds of weather, required a myriad of individual decisions to be made. Dupuys was superb in that, as the action heated and decisions came faster and faster, he could keep up with the flow and not become distracted.

Sometimes, if there were two truly great captains on the opposite sides of the battlefield, the issue might come down to a single decision, either way, among a stream of a thousand decisions in a day. Concentration and attention to supply and detail, won battles from the hill, just as unthinking bravery and raw nerve won them in the lines. The most successful armies knew this, and like the Dutch, combined both aspects. The sorriest armies, in the end, were those who reversed the equation. Dupuys had not even drawn his own sword from its scabbard in his last several campaigns, yet each had ended as a brilliant victory.

The firing had begun to die down below them and there were no more ladders to be seen on the wall. The artillery continued a few more minutes of showering indiscriminate carnage upon the retreating masses below, before the staff on the other side deigned to order their own cannon to resume flinging the deadly grapeshot back over the walls, causing the defenders to finally lower their heads and run in their guns, satisfied with their bag for the evening, perhaps twelve or fifteen hundred corpses and shattered wounded wailing at the base of the wall. The Dutch had lost perhaps fifty or sixty defenders wounded and twenty more dead outright, mostly in the opening seconds of the fray. It had not been much of a battle, and Dupuys accepted the acknowledgement and cheers of his troops with a full understanding that they had not really even needed him at all, this time. He certainly understood that there was something about the successful commander that instilled confidence necessary to troops to simply stand their ground

and stay together in massed formation, something which in itself won most battles. Alexander had inspired with courage and his thousands had conquered an empire of millions. More recently, Cortez had inspired the admiration of every European soldier for his ice-water behavior and for his ability to keep his few troops together in the face of an enemy force many times their own number. Dupuys' troops had cheered him, their Captain, after they had risked their own necks and after they had won the engagement with their own blood and sweat. Such was war.

Perhaps the strongest inspirational force of the age, apart from the fear instilled by such Spanish commanders as D'Ugarte and the Duke of Alva, was exemplified by the solid confidence that Dutch troops always showed in their greatest leader, William of Orange, known to history as "The Silent" for his taciturn sagacity.

Though not really blessed with anything like the tactical skills of a soldier such as Dupuys, William was nonetheless, for many years, the backbone of the larger rebellion.

It was a strange irony that in the same way that this noble soul's ability to win victories was mainly based upon his personal magnetism and not on great martial abilities, his death had been the result of an almost personal vendetta, rather than on the open field of battle. Though early in his career he had actually served Philip in a diplomatic post, since the issue of Dutch freedom had become paramount, he had been the enemy of Philip and of the Empire; indeed its chief thorn. Throughout the early 1580s William had survived attempts by no less than four assassins, one of which came so close as to be able to shoot him in the head from close range.

William had been coming out of a small inn near Amsterdam where he had consulted with other members of the landstraad, or Dutch parliament, about funding for troop provisions. He was in a good humor, the request for funds having been well received by a grateful provisional government, and they being able to comply with his requests most generously since

one of their privateer captains had just intercepted and captured a Spanish treasure fleet coming from New Spain.

As he was about to enter his carriage, a small figure of a man walked with almost mechanically steady steps up to the door of the coach. Being far from any field of battle, and far inside what was considered “Dutch” territory, there was laxity in his guard. William turned to see what the fellow wanted, only to find himself staring down the barrel of a cocked pistol. The impact of the ball knocked him into the floor of the carriage, unconscious. The ball had entered under and behind his right ear and torn through his palate, exiting through his other cheek, strewing the floor of the coach with bone, teeth and blood.

The young man who had pulled the trigger, a man named Juareguy, was immediately apprehended. He seemed in a strange daze throughout the questioning that preceded his summary execution. He denied knowing what had happened, and he truly seemed not to know where he was, like a man who had just been rudely awakened from sleep.

Miraculously however, William survived this attack and resumed command of the rebellion several months later. While nursing him back to health, however, his wife had taken it upon herself to test all his food, after receiving a clandestine warning, and just after it seemed clear that William would live, she died one day, in great agony, after tasting his porridge.

There were two other outright attempts at assassination over the next two years, one by another close pistol shot, which missed, and the other by a man, never identified, who boldly walked within twenty feet of William with a lighted iron bomb in his hand. The timing had apparently been wrong, for the bomb exploded, and the man fairly disintegrated, splattering William and his party with a fine red sludge, but causing no other damage.

Realizing their leader was in constant danger, the Dutch redoubled their efforts at protection. Even they realized that, for a man who had to go about doing public business, there was always vulnerability. They knew that they could not indefinitely stop assassins who, like their original hashisheen namesakes, seemed under a spell of self-sacrifice and martyrdom.

Finally, in 1584, the Emperor had promulgated an open public decree promising to reward and ennoble anyone capable of ridding him of his taciturn Dutch adversary, another young man, a Frenchman, this time armed with two pistols, succeeded in killing William, as the bodyguard responded too slowly. Once again, the assassin was noted to be “enraptured.” This was held by the Protestant Dutch to the discredit of the more emotional Catholics; that they could so inflame a man with perverted love of Jesus to cause him to become warped and violent in the name of God.

Far to the south, however, in the dim halls of the Escorial Palace, the assassin was quickly forgotten. When his family approached Philip’s throne for fulfillment of the promised reward, they were summarily pensioned off and told to hold their tongues, or else lose them and face the chains of the galley fleet as well.

At about the same time though, there was a quiet audience with the Emperor, wherein one Eusebio De la Fontana was made Duke of Maroja in a private ceremony. Heretofore, his only public title had been “simple court apothecary,” the same title that had been held by Umberto D’Ugarte in the previous generation. Don Eusebio was, in fact well known to Philip as one of the most powerful of the members of the loose fellowship of sorcerers of the Shadow Court, and the dukedom was not simply for his success in this particular plot, but also as a reward for the perseverance he had shown in the scheme, which had finally succeeded.

For many years, Don Eusebio had been studying an effect that had first been shown him by an Italian of ill repute who was hanged for multiple seductions of young girls in his home district. The “court apothecary” had been in the town where the man had been sentenced to be executed, most slowly and painfully, beginning with a crude emasculation in the public square the following morning.

Using a private royal warrant and a small bribe of gold, Don Eusebio had gained entry into the condemned man’s cell to question him. The sorcerer had been fascinated to learn how the unassuming, and actually ugly little man, had gained such powerful control over so many young women. Every one of the girls had denied, on Holy Oath, knowing anything about what had happened to her, though examination by matrons had shown clearly that they had been deflowered. The condemned man, a small time, local, would-be sorcerer had made the mistake of keeping certain intimate articles of their apparel. He had made the further mistake of being taken in flagrante delicto with the thirteen-year-old daughter of the town mayor, home for vacation from convent school.

In the miscreant’s cell, Don Eusebio had learned that it was possible to cast a peculiar kind of spell on nearly anyone, if only they could first be induced to stare into a crystal, held from a swinging chain. It was as a seller of pretty baubles, just the thing to first attract the unsuspecting girls, that the man had met his victims and cast his seduction spell.

In return for this information, Don Eusebio had promised to cast the spell on the man himself, so that he would not feel the pangs of his execution. He had listened to the fellow’s instructions, and then followed them, using a candle flame, which the man had said he had heard would work as well. The next day, he had been impressed with the degree of calm the man showed, and how he had seemed, at least, to die with little pain and no struggle. Here, he thought

to himself, was a powerful spell, and he had experimented with it for many years, using it for many different purposes, not the least frequent being its original one, which had gained his less influential and immune teacher a gelding and the gibbet.

But Don Eusebio was not a simple lecher. He was a member of the Shadow Court, and he knew that, one day, such a spell might be useful in a more strategic way. When the “problem” of Orange had begun to gnaw at the Emperor’s peace of mind, he had let it be known discretely that his sovereign might call upon his services. Philip, being aware of Don Eusebio’s reputation in many kinds of sorcery, had responded. It had required several of these spells, cast over several potential assassins, however, to finally accomplish the task. Though the final instrument of the spell was human, there were always minor uncertainties of ballistics and detonation to be taken into account.

Over and above his own reward, Don Eusebio had asked only that the Imperial decree soliciting the “execution” be promulgated publicly and prominently, including a reference to complete absolution from the Church for any assassin, so that the Dutch might never suspect the real source of the power that had done the deed. Such was the custom of the secret guild of sorcerers and poisoners; to arrange to accomplish their aims in such a way as never to leave even a trace of their existence. If God must be made to take the blame, thought Don Eusebio, as he looked over his new Dukedom, well, he had been left with the blame for much worse before.

Some years before this, just before the turn of the fifteenth century, there had arisen a completely new and terrible scourge, which had swept across the face of Europe. It had first been officially reported in 1493 in Barcelona, causing horrible running chancres and ulcerous eruptions in otherwise healthy young men and women. It also infected their brains, leading to greater or lesser degrees of madness, in some cases manifested mainly by a curious instability

and fits of rage. Within a very few years, it had been carried into Italy, again by an army, this time besieging Naples, and soon all of the peninsula was affected by this curse from the Almighty. By 1496, the cities of Bologna and Ferrara expelled all courtesans on the ground that they had “a secret kind of pox” called the Leprosy of Job. What was first called the “morbus Gallicus” or French Disease by the Italians, and the Italian Disease by the French, was later named syphilis.

Such, at least, was the summary of the problem given in the mid 1500s by the physician and poet Fracastorius, lending credence to the common assumption that the disease had been brought back from the New World by Columbus’ sailors, from their first contacts with the savages of Hayti, and Hispanola. Whether these heretofore godless savages were the source of the scourge, or whether it was a more direct punishment from God himself, for the wonderings and wanderings of men’s minds in what came to be called the Renaissance, was hotly debated in learned circles for centuries. Never once was it considered that the real source of the disease was simply a new spell, cast by the Shadow Court, and gone hideously awry.

In its experiments with ancient knowledge gleaned from refugees from the downfall of Constantinople in the 1450s, some of the court had attempted a powerful Byzantine spell. It involved the forced cross-matings of an ape, a goat, and a human female, which was supposed to yield a new and powerful type of creature, which it was conceived might be used either in open warfare or else in terror campaigns in the night. Instead, it led only to the development of strange sores upon the bodies of the women, some of which healed within weeks, one of the classical features of the spell. But when their jailers then clandestinely coupled with them and themselves coupled with women outside the dungeons, the spell escaped the control of the Court.

They hunted down and killed every one of the jailers, and eventually hundreds of others, in a web of those who had known each other, but it was ultimately to no avail, and already beyond them. The sorcerers simply had to acknowledge that it was some strange new plague. Once again, the Court played upon the ignorance and superstition of the masses to cover their own culpability, adding to the general confusion of the rancorous debate in which they hid by quietly encouraging the opinion that it was God himself, and not Columbus, who was responsible. Ironically, half a century later, it was this same spell, still echoing through Spain, which had led indirectly to the death of Umberto D'Ugarte el Magnifico, and had led to his first using, and then impregnating a young girl named Lucia with the child, a son, who had now grown up to be none other than the Bloody Captain, Horacio D'Ugarte, the very same who was camped under the walls of Estrach seeking to cool his sword in the blood of Monsieur le Capitan Dupuys.

"Sir, wake up, Sir." It was the quiet voice of Van Maarten, which aroused Dupuys in the candlelight of his small room off the tower. It took Dupuys a moment to fully clear his head, probably because Van Maarten's less than urgent tone told him it would be alright to take the time. He sat up, still in his trousers and loosely tied shirt, seeing the furniture in the Spartan room. He had seen such things all his life; two hard chairs at a table now littered with charts and maps, and a stand of his own personal arms against a wall, with swords and pikes and arquebuses long unused but still bright and well maintained. There was a small chest with his few personal belongings by the cot. Dupuys was by no means a poor man, however, with gold on account in the banking houses of Paris and Amsterdam. He even owned land away in the warmer southern part of France, where a much younger brother whom he had hardly known acted as seneschal. More and more often he dreamed of the quiet dappled light under the trees there.

But now, he sighed deeply and shook himself to come to whatever Van Maarten had in hand. “Sir, I think you should come. There are strange sounds coming from under the east wall.” They both knew what this meant. When they arrived, Dupuys was escorted by several brawny Germans to a spot in a storeroom under the thick city wall.

“There Captain, d’ye hear’t?” The big men spoke in whispers as they concentrated on the sound, one or two of them with ears to the wall, and yet another simply holding his outstretched fingertips to the stone. “There! Again. Certain they’re coming this way. It’s a tunnel.”

“Can you tell anything more about it?” asked Dupuys. He knew that these men had been nurtured in the mines of the Harz Mountains and the coalfields of Bohemia. Unlike the silver mines of New Spain, a man might actually one day come out of these northern-European mines alive and healthy enough to pursue some other life. Even if it meant to be only a common mercenary soldier, it meant a man saw the sun and felt the wind once in a while. The mortality rate was also considerably lower, even in the line of fire, above the ground.

“It’s a big one. Probably as wide as this room...maybe bigger,” whispered the man with fingers to the wall, slowly stretching his hands out along its surface, feeling the vibrations of sounds and small blows. The others, listening at the stone face, nodded in agreement. The silence in the little room continued as they all heard, occasionally and apparently still at some distance, the chink and scrabble of the invisible force headed toward them. “Still quite some ways out, your Honor, “ one of them said over his shoulder to Dupuys. “Perhaps...half a furlong, maybe a bit closer. In this soil, shouldn’t take them long to reach the wall. Maybe a week, maybe a bit less.”

The tactic of undermining a wall was a well known one, having been used by the armies of the later Eastern Roman Empire in their wars against the great Persian cities of Asia Minor

even before the lost and dark ages closed in on Europe. In those times, the object was simply to undermine the walls, either causing collapse of a section to allow surface attackers through a resulting breach, or even, in some cases, allowing fighting troops to tunnel all the way into a city before discovery, to spring out suddenly on the inside to open gates and to spread destruction inside the defense.

In the 1400s, the use of gunpowder was added to these tactics, allowing a besieging army to dig a tunnel, out of the sight of defending gunfire, and place an explosive charge, or mine, under a section of wall, blowing it up suddenly and creating a perfect opportunity to assault the abruptly disrupted section of the defenses.

Dupuys and Van Maarten had been expecting such an attempt at some point when it had become clear that the fortress could hold out otherwise. They knew the strategic importance of the place, set as it was upon the potential supply lines of any Imperial army striking farther north. They could well imagine the expressions of impatience that D'Ugarte must be receiving daily from his master in Madrid. It was well known that his Most Catholic Majesty of Spain did not brook frustration and impatience especially well.

They could hear the muffled sounds coming as though from some infernal region below, knowing that the demons were coming an inch closer every minute, perhaps a few feet every hour.

"Monsieur Van Maarten?" asked Dupuys, looking around at the expectant faces of the Germans with just a touch of obvious good humor. "How many men do we have with any experience in mining?" There were nods and winks and grins from the large, tough men, long cooped up in the city as they had been on the defensive.

“Sir,” replied Van Maarten, just as theatrically, “I have the pleasure to report a very large contingent of very capable men in the company.” Dupuys let the moment hang for an instant for effect. Then with a small grin, he said quietly, “Well, it wouldn’t be quite polite if we didn’t go out and meet our visitors, no?” Many voices muttered in approval. “Gather the appropriate engineering personnel for a staff meeting in, say, half an hour.” Then he turned and left the storeroom to allow the Germans’ aggressiveness to peak as they began to whisper their own excited speculations about how the counter-mine would be accomplished.

Just as the key to a mining operation in a siege is surprise, doubly so must be the object of a counter-mine. While the defenders therefore had to be exquisitely careful to mask the sound of their own digging, they realized that in intercepting the enemy outside the walls, they did set the odds somewhat in their own favor.

While one crew began the actual process of digging the new shaft, another went to work preparing the nearest end of the tunnel to be a deathtrap should any of the enemy manage to push them back when the actual struggle was joined. Another crew was busy carrying more than a hundred small casks of powder from the city magazine to be lashed together and placed on a skid for finally searing the underground artery closed with an explosion of their own, well outside the walls.

The Germans worked steadily, quietly, and without pause for the next seventy-two hours, until in the mid-watches of the night, Dupuys was once again summoned. This time, along with the dirty, bare-chested engineers, there was a company of nearly a hundred lightly armored fighting men, armed with pistols, axes, and long thrusting daggers stuck through their belts. Heavy armor here would both be too noisy to begin, and too cumbersome once the fight began in the cramped passageways.

“It’s done, Your Excellency.. It’s all ready for you to give the word,” whispered the head engineer. As per the plans, they had dug a tunnel parallel to the side of the main Spanish passageway, coming as near as their silent skill could bring them. They reckoned that the end of the smaller defensive tunnel was now perhaps a hundred feet beyond the working face of the larger one, and if they were right, no more than three or four feet of earth separated the two galleries’ side walls at their closest point.

Dupuys, who would supervise the operation from there in the small store room under the wall where they had begun, nodded to the German officer, “Excellent work, Monsieur Engineer.” Then he turned to Van Maarten and nodded again, which signaled the beginning of the actual assault.

In the larger cavern of the Spaniards, the days of work in the stifling shadows under the earth, gouging out the bucketfuls of bland gray soil, keeping the dampness pumped away, had dulled the alertness of the workers there. As expected by the Germans, they had laid most of their weapons aside, or left them farther back in the tunnel, not expecting to need them for some days yet, until they had finished the excavation and come to the roots of the wall. There were many of them at the working face end of the tunnel, and there were some far back, pulling on the ropes to drag the buckets and skids of earth out and send the reinforcing timbers back in. When the earth crumbled in the darker part of the gallery between, no one saw the first German struggle from the hole, like a huge bearded babe being born from the pudenda of the Earth Mother herself. He shouldered his way through the last blockage and scrambled through to quickly let thirty more of his companions in behind him. These turned toward the far end of the tunnel and set to work creating another potential death trap of sabotaged timbers and softened walls.

The rest of the assault company was now through into the subterranean passageway, fully fifteen feet below the surface of the ground. They hurried back along the ten-foot-wide tunnel the short distance to the working face, and the Spaniards there barely had time to cry out before they were hacked to death by these grimy apparitions that came suddenly out of the darkness and the wavering red torches in the walls. One of the dying Spaniards actually thought that they had delved too deeply and that they had unleashed demons, come to drag them down to hell.

Their cries were heard, but in the tunnels, everything is indistinct. When the sleds stopped and the cries came, the Spaniards at the open end of the tunnel assumed that the most likely calamity, a cave-in, had occurred. In fact, the rather inept engineer in charge had just been standing directly by the tunnel opening, chewing his long moustaches with anxiety at the fact that the project seemed to be going so well, when the alarm came.

“Jesu Christi! Madre del Inferno!” he ejaculated in disgust and disappointment, knowing that his worst fears were realized and that he would now have to face D’Ugarte with bad news. He had just turned back nervously toward where the commander’s tent was pitched in the darkness of the camp, when he heard a slight whistling sound from behind him at the tunnel mouth. He was suddenly relieved of both that responsibility and his head, simultaneously, as the first of the Germans burst out, swinging a razor sharp battle ax.

The Spanish engineers scattered like a covey of quail and raised the alarm throughout their camp. The German troops could tell that they had not only caught the miners off guard, but that they had come up in the middle of a sleeping camp and that there was a chance therefore to do some real damage on the offensive while they were about it. They quickly spread out from the mouth of the tunnel, which they left to be defended by twenty of their stoutest comrades. One of

the German officers, knowing what the Spaniards would have to be stockpiling, called five of the assault troops to rally around him in the confusion and the darkness.

“Come along!” he shouted, “There must be a magazine somewhere close by. They probably already have the mine put together, so let’s go give them a little surprise, eh?” They started off circling close to the mouth of the tunnel as the camp began to rouse itself from the stupor of sleep and amazement. Some of the Germans were now among the tents throwing torches from the campfires indiscriminately about, further adding to the confusion, as smoke boiled among the billets, and men burst from the burning structures just pulling on boots and trousers, some pulling off clothing already on fire. Many of these were quickly waylaid by the German axes and daggers.

The lieutenant suddenly held up a fist to stop his pack and pointed to a low shed of rough timbers not far from the excavation site.

“There! That’ll be it!” He detailed his men onward. There were two guards, one of whom was quickly felled with a pistol shot. The other fled into the obscurity beyond. In only a second, the door was forced and, by the light of a flaming brand from a sentinel fire, they could see the huge sledge, loaded with perhaps ten times the powder of their own bomb. The lieutenant whistled in awe at what was far and away the largest single piece of ordinance that he, or for that matter, any of them had ever seen; a truly diabolical machine.

“Careful with the torch there. When this thing goes up it will take the whole side of this hill with it.” He considered the size of the thing and the dozens of ropes that were tied on it to haul it, and there was no doubt whatsoever in his mind that it would be sufficient to open a huge breach in the walls of Estraach if applied even close to the base. The hair on the back of his neck stood up as he approached the massive pile, and with one of the trooper’s axes broached a large

keg on the side, spilling a great mound of powder there. "Alright! Back to the tunnel, careful now! Give me time to get a trail laid just right." He worked methodically, carrying another smaller cask and spilling a clear and generous path of the black powder as he retreated to the tunnel mouth. It was a good thing, he considered, that they would be underground when this monster was set off. He worried about the effect of the blast on the trap where the two tunnels connected. His men must be back on the right side because it would probably come down around their heads. They would have to deal with that when the time came.

Meanwhile in the camp, one of the marauding Germans flung back the tent flap of the largest tent he could find. He leapt across the threshold of the twenty-by-twenty-foot structure, ax at the ready, only to find it empty, except for a frail looking old woman whom he had nearly knocked down in his rush. Seeing only the old crone crouching in the shadows, he lowered his ax, even reaching down to help her back up. As his hand closed on the bony old arm, however, he felt the tiniest scratch. With the heat of battle, and having already sustained three or four minor wounds all much worse than this tiny prick, he didn't consider it anything more than his wrist having caught on some pin in the old woman's robes. Suddenly though, the arm was dead, hanging limp as a sheep's carcass, and before he could do anything to strike at the old woman's laughing face, he could feel the rest of his body, including the muscles of breathing, go dead as well. His legs failed him, and the last thing he saw before he passed out in the terror of suffocation was the old hag's malevolent, wolfen eyes and her nearly toothless grin as she hissed in his face from six inches away.

Two of his comrades burst into the tent in time to see the situation. They started toward the woman, axes raised to strike her balding vulture's pate off the old crouched shoulders. But as they got within arm's reach, as quick as a snake she had whirled around from them, and in so

doing, had flung a handful of powder of some kind into their sweating faces. Instantly, they both fell to their knees, frantically clawing at their eyes, which felt full of glass shards and fire. Again, the old crone laughed at them and they knew in their blind darkness that they had met their match and their doom. One of them, in his blindness, only heard the other's breathing suddenly become wet and gurgling, as the old woman drew a small knife, with what might have been the sharpest blade of any instrument in Europe, across the man's throat from behind. Then he heard the sound of many feet as men in armor entered the tent. He knew that they must be the enemy because his own men had worn no plate or mail.

"Well!," he heard the old woman's scolding voice, "A fine son you are! I could have been killed!" The newcomers laughed roughly at the obvious irony of the complaint. "Or worse! These ruffians might have raped me!" Now her voice was at a shriek pitch. Again however, the ironic laughter, now much louder, as the confusion in the background died away somewhat.

"Mother," the German heard a deep Spanish voice say, "If only we could get them all to try to rape you, we would have this place won in a night!" This was followed by a gale of men's crude laughter and asides.

Again the woman's voice, "I will not have it! Do you hear? I will not tolerate this insult by that, that, that....Frenchman! How dare he?" But now her voice became almost tender, the moans of the German as he writhed apparently unnoticed on the floor nearly drowning her out. "Horacio, mijo," she said, "Now will you listen to me? We are not going to knock these walls down. Not in a week, not in a year."

The last thing the German trooper heard before someone put him out of his misery was the old woman saying, very reasonably, as though discussing the purchase of a household cow,

“Horacio, it is time we call upon Don Eusebio.” Then someone fired a pistol ball between the German’s ruined eyes and his pain ended.

Out in the darkness where the fight was dying down, the German lieutenant was just reaching the mouth of the tunnel again with the cask of powder leaving a trail behind him. “Everyone back!” he shouted to the rest of his men, “Back into the tunnel. Get back to the walls, quickly, all of you. Don’t stop! Don’t stop!” He waved them on into the opening as he himself took a moment for a last backward look to judge the distance and gauge the time he would have. There was a small torch burning merrily in the tunnel wall near at hand.

There he sat, his heart pounding, waiting for the pursuit he knew would come. As he had hoped, the Spaniards had not come after them piecemeal, but had taken a moment to form up a good sized force, in full battle gear, to follow them into the tunnel and try to use it as a way to get into the city.

The Spanish commander was puzzled when he saw one solitary shadow in the excavation, thinking perhaps it was a wounded man left behind by the retreating raiders. But as he passed a small pile of rubble on his left, he saw the figure move, sweeping a torch downward. The German lieutenant had been using this pile of loose stones as a marker for distance. The column commander froze as he saw the sparkle of the gunpowder trail, and stood still as it went away from them, off to the side, headed like a brilliant road off into the empty darkness. There was just enough time for it to register on his brain that the magazine was not far off in that direction. He just glanced back to see that the solitary figure was no longer there in the tunnel works when he, all of his men, and a sizable chunk of the Dutch earth around them, were all blown into tiny pieces a half-mile into the sky above, to rain down for some minutes as fine red grit.

Fifty yards inside the tunnel, the lieutenant was thrown to his face in the dirt, and the tremendous concussion snuffed out all the remaining torches. He covered his head with his arms and felt sizable chunks of rock and earth pummeling him as they fell from the roof. When the worst of it was over, he found himself partially buried, but he found he could still breathe in spite of the choking dust. He could still move to extricate himself from this partial cave in, and he could still find his way in the darkness by following the walls of the tunnel. As he worked his way back towards his own lines, he tripped several times over the chunks of loosened earth and rock, and more than once over dead bodies, unable to tell in the dark if they had been friend or foe.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, he saw a dim light and then heard the voices of his men up ahead. "There he is! Damn it I told you!" he heard excited voices, "I told you he'd make it back!" Whoever belonged to that voice, he vowed, would get a promotion if he had anything to say about it, and he was sure, after this exploit, that he would have the ear of the higher ups, at least for the time being. At least until the next young fool with a forlorn hope of advancement outdid him in some way.

Many strong hands reached through the opening and pulled him back into the smaller counter-mine tunnel. It smelled of sweat and burned powder like the devil's own lake. As they sprinted back, stooped over, through the small passage, back to the city and up out of the hole in the floor of the store room, they could hear the pursuit, renewed and coming from far behind, the Spaniards shouting, churning through the debris, re-opening their tunnel in haste to get into the city. The smaller bomb on its own sledge was pulled back to the middle of their own tunnel, so that it was about even with the maximum extent of the Spanish excavations over in the larger tunnel, separated only by the few feet of earth between them. Then a fast fuse was set and

everyone cleared out of the tunnel. As the last man cleared the opening back into the city, and a stout wooden flat was placed across it and braced up, there was another tremendous roar deep in the ground. There had been nearly two hundred Spaniards in the big tunnel when the bomb went off. They had been packed into their own tunnel to its end, and had just started to come through into the new German counter tunnel when the explosion ripped many apart, and shook the weakened timbers so that the whole thing caved in, becoming a living tomb for the rest. It was said that for days afterwards, even from the top of the walls of Estraach, dim voices could be heard wailing from under the ground, like unquiet spirits calling out curses or warnings, or perhaps invitations, from the grave.

* * *

In the ducal palace of Maroja, set high in a craggy niche in the dark mountains of the Sierra Morena, Don Eusebio de Fontana, Duke of Maroja, received a visitor.

“Don Eusebio, how good of you to see me,” said the old woman, wrapped in black velvet shadows.

“Dona Lucia, how good of you to come.” Their eyes met for an instant. Neither could discern the tiniest bit of weakness or change since their last meeting.

The old woman was an anomaly, an affront to the otherwise exclusively all-male Court of the Shadows. In a way, however, the old dark men like Don Eusebio knew that they had brought the curse that was Dona Lucia down upon themselves, or at least one of their number, Don Umberto, had done so through his weakness and lack of discipline.

After Umberto had died, there had actually been considerable relief among the members of the Court. However, when it had come time to inventory his things, they had been alarmed about the absence of one of his books of spells. The bearer of such a book, they knew, if he could

but decipher its meaning, could become a powerful magus in his own right. They had forgotten about the then young girl whom Umberto had been using in his spells. They had never thought about the magus being a woman, maga, and one who had the steel to become powerful in her own right.

In a way, however, even that was not quite what truly happened. Lucia had been prudent in her vengeance. There had been a lapse of nearly thirty years with no hint of the book's existence. Even then, its existence was only slowly grasped as the Court watched, among the mounds of carnage that was European warfare, the meteoric rise of a certain young and ruthless mercenary who called himself Horacio D'Ugarte.

He had an extraordinary career, never losing a campaign in over five years. Even the greatest captains had setbacks, lost occasionally, but not Horacio. His inordinate ferocity in suppressing his conquered enemies soon led to his appellation, "The Bloody Captain."

It was of course, the Shadow Court that had first grasped the reality of the situation. Certainly his use of the D'Ugarte name had drawn their attention, but it was they who first discerned the means by which he was so successful. Time after time it seemed that his cause was aided by mysterious and timely deaths of specific individual enemies, a particularly good quartermaster or staff officer, or perhaps a key cavalry commander there, whose bereft and temporarily confused regiment was sure to be singled out and exploited tactically as the focus of D'Ugarte's attack the next day in battle.

Or perhaps it was a coincidental epidemic, sweeping through an opposing army just before he swept them from the field. In one great battle, fought over three days on a hot, dry plain near a small lake, it was said that out of an opposing army of fifteen thousand, not a man

went to his death with control of his bowels. And yet none of D'Ugarte's forces, taking water from another supply some distance away, was thus affected.

Though the common world was merely amazed at D'Ugarte's apparent good luck, the Shadow Court most clearly discerned the nature and power of the supplemental spells he was using as a part of his strategy. When rumor reached them that this terrifying soldier constantly traveled with his mother, it dawned on them that Lucia was alive and that it was she who had taken the book of Don Umberto so many years ago.

So great became the combination of the terror of Horacio's military force, and the shadowy power of the woman, now universally addressed as Dona Lucia, that she was able to take a de facto seat in the nebulous councils of the Shadow Court.

There was no formal election to this body; there was only display of sufficient power. There was no expulsion, only death from age, or as in Don Umberto's case madness and one's own hand, or, in a very few cases, through assassination. But when assassins might try to kill master assassins, the plot could become so complex, the methods so subtle, the opponents so vigilant, and retribution so destructive, that this very rarely occurred. Instead, there was a constant tension, an uneasy peace and a balance of power amongst those who would manipulate the Imperial throne to their own ends. It was as if too many people were standing on some ice flow in an ocean of pain. Imperial power required that the court be at least civil within itself so that it could be available for its work on behalf of the political engine.

At times, members were functionally pensioned off, as Don Eusebio had been, in order to placate or defuse their ambitions. But the bribes had to be very great, as their continuing, active power and influence was very great. Eusebio had required a dukedom. Others were given the rights to hugely lucrative trade routes, or mines of gold or diamonds, and usually these

opportunities were far away: Africa or Araby or the fabulous Orient. The farther the better if the tensions built too high among these sorcerers. This was necessary lest their internal struggles lay Europe more thoroughly wasted than the open warfare of the princes. Thus, the combination of a first-rate soldier, backed by a powerful sorceress, was surely something with which to be reckoned in the counsels of the great and mighty.

Don Eusebio was therefore somewhat surprised when Dona Lucia had asked for his assistance. Certainly everyone at the brilliant Royal Court at Madrid had heard about the trouble Horacio was having in reducing the fortress at Estraach, and everyone there was terribly put off by the effect it was having on their patron, King Philip. He was continually choleric, making the number of banquets, masques, and hunting parties that season pitifully small. He spent much time in a dark muttering funk about Estraach, making the balls and hawking parties extremely tense. Political and carnal maneuvering in the Escorial and the palace in Madrid often required exquisitely subtle timing and finesse, and if the King suddenly decided to leave a levy just as one were about to obtain an appointment, secure business, or finalize arrangements for a love conquest, the ceremony of the royal exit, with its damping of spirits, could just throw everything into a positive dither amongst the starched and perfumed courtiers. Something, it was clear, had to be done about Estraach. And to Dona Lucia and her frustrated son, this meant that something had to be done about Dupuys.

“Don Eusebio, I have come to ask for your help.” His eyes widened a bit, somewhat dramatically thought Lucia, but she was a patient woman, and she was, after all, the petitioner here.

“You? You need my help? Why, Dona Lucia, this is such...an honor.” He groped for the words, again Lucia thought, a bit theatrically. But she didn’t need a play, she needed a spell. She

needed a specific spell with which the new duke had shown himself so adept. While all of those in the Shadow Court were masters of their craft generally, and any of them might have provided twenty powerful and deadly spells of one kind or another, ever since Dona Lucia had heard the details of the death of William of Orange, she too had realized the potential of this whole new type of spell. She had had it in her mind from the beginning of the siege of Estraach, because she had envisioned its usefulness in siege operations long ago. It was only coincidental that the city besieged was Estraach and that the human obstruction was Dupuys.

Don Eusebio, for all of his coyness, knew all of these basics, and Lucia knew he knew, and he knew she knew he knew. Little got beyond these people in the way of intelligence, and they usually knew very closely how a given conversation with one of their fellows would go before it ever took place. It was a deadly game where even the tiniest lapse of attention of concentration might prove costly in some unforeseen way, coming back to haunt one's future. The most important information often lay in what was left out or added to such a conversation, rather than the actual substance itself. Eusebio sensed no attempt at a gambit here, but rather just what the old woman asked. He took a satisfying moment to consider that she needed an arcane skill at which he, Don Eusebio de Fontana, Duke of Maroja, and now Apothecary Extraordinary to His Most Catholic Majesty King Philip of Spain, was demonstrably the best in the known world.

Lucia could fairly hear the man rolling his title around in his empty skull as he kept her standing on the hard cold floor. It was a test of even her well known patience to maintain her diplomacy while he practiced this masturbation of his ego, but she knew for all his vanity, he was still a powerful sorcerer, and she needed his instruction.

“Dona Lucia, sister, if I may be so bold as to call you that, you know that if there is any way, any way at all in which I can possibly be of service to you, you have only to command me.” The old woman was now experienced at the obtuse language of court negotiations, and she was mildly shocked that he had gotten around so quickly and so blatantly to the matter of his fee. Dona Lucia, however, was not one to blush at such gross pressure.

“Don Eusebio, your gallantry is overwhelming.” She said this without the least trace of irony. Irony was out of place where one’s life could end in the next second in any of a hundred awkward and painful ways. She continued, “My son Horacio sends his greetings to you, his uncle, if we may. His greetings and a kiss.” Thus she reminded him that striking at her would be fatal to himself, if he were for any reason, considering it. She also held out the promise of a military power at his disposal and for his discretionary use. This resource, in those times, could often be translated into a significant advantage.

“Horacio is such a fine young man,” the old man said, smiling his most avuncular smile. So the price had been offered and accepted that quickly; Don Eusebio would cooperate by teaching Lucia about the assassin’s spell, in return for the use of Horacio’s mercenary force for some as yet unspecified mission at discretion, after Estraach had fallen, of course. It was not for Lucia to question the nature of the use to which the army would be put. It could be a direct, all-out assault on the Vatican, for all she knew, but Eusebio was a subtle man, and aside from his vanity, he had no weaknesses such as gross stupidity. So the deal was struck and that was that. It remained for Lucia to receive her end of the bargain first.

“Then perhaps we might begin?”

Eusebio was expansive. “Plenty of time. Plenty of time. First, lunch.” Dona Lucia held up a finger to signify a gentle objection. “But I couldn’t impose.” She carried her own food and

drink and she knew he knew it. It was just a test, to see if perhaps she was going senile. The less one ate and drank in a place like this, the better one's digestion, and the longer one's life. "The spell?" she prompted.

"Certainly, my dear," he acquiesced, causing no ripple in the taut fabric of their conversation. Soon, he had a carriage called around and the two of them took a very short ride down from the castle to another isolated, rocky spur of the high mountain where sat the charming little convent of Santa Inez de Guadalquivier. This establishment was closely tied to the ducal patronage and was in fact one of the new duke's most cherished charities. They were met at the front gate by the head of the house, a nun in a rather stylish habit of dark blue silk and a cloak tied with dark ermine. This Mother Superior bowed deeply to Don Eusebio and to his guest. "I trust that Madame had a comfortable journey? We were concerned. These mountains can be inconvenient."

"I was quite comfortable, thank you." Lucia realized that everything about her visit had been anticipated.

"Come this way, if you please." Don Eusebio offered his arm and escorted her into the main courtyard. There she saw two or three nuns, in the same type of sumptuous habits, vaguely watching over a group of girls who were laughing and running about, busily playing a game of ball. These girls all appeared to be about fifteen or sixteen, and Lucia was struck with the uniform and absolute beauty of the whole clutch of them.

"Ah," she thought to herself, "So this is Eusebio's playhouse. The old goat." Looking at the young girls, she remembered vaguely the time when she was young and, dare she say it, innocent. Though Don Umberto had given her Horacio, and though through no design of his, as much power as any queen on the Continent, she still shuddered when she remembered his heavy

lidded eyes and his disgusting and sometimes violent assaults upon her body, a thing which he considered simple property. She had paid the full price for her power, though she had had no part in striking the bargain.

“Some little peacock courtier,” she delved back in the cold and stony shelves of her memory, “What was his name? Ganado? That was it, Ganado.” He had been the one to take her away from her sisters and her home. True, it had not been much of a home, but then neither had Ganado been much of a man. He had been the first to violate her. He had been the one who tore her off the road of normal dreams of family and friends and love and had set her down as a pawn on the cold board of the game of power.

It had been for Umberto’s use, however, and it had been he who actually moved the pawn, using her in some God forsaken spell, the details of which she had only fully pieced together over the years. She had only known then that they had had a dirty, brutish man in a dirty dungeon cell take her again, and after that, Umberto had sent her to couple with a drunken lord in the middle of the night in a dim room in a forgotten house somewhere.

She had not understood the spells then, had not understood that the pox that had blossomed on her body and had then dried up had stayed with her, eating away at her insides over the years. She had thought it was a special kind of justice almost, perhaps the only kind of justice that there could have been, that Don Umberto had fallen in what for him passed as love. He had fallen in love, or at least obsession, with her. She had been amazed to see the power her body seemed to have over the wheezing, drooling old man. She had, after all, been chosen for her looks. She had once looked like these young girls in the convent, who now possessed power over Don Eusebio, but that was an age ago. The justice of it was that finally Umberto had killed

himself, sparing her the task, and she knew that at some level he had done so because of something about that power. It had been a lesson she did not forget

She had had months in a dreary cell, waiting with dread for the sound of his heavy footsteps and the smell of his fetid breath upon her. Then after he died and she escaped, she had had the terrible days of her confinement with the eventual birth of the cursed child, alone, huddled in a deserted shepherd's hut in the hills outside of Madrid. In the first days, she had resolved to throw the child of the old devil out on a hillside for the crows to devour, such was her rage. Indeed, she left the boy exposed on a hillside all one night. She had been unable to stay away, however, and the next morning, more from curiosity than anything else she told herself, she went back to the spot, carrying a large stone in her hand. She found him again, his eyes open, looking about without whimpering or crying, a strangely powerful look, even at that age. She sat on a rock, just looking at him, lying there on the stony path, her breasts throbbing, dried blood caked on her thighs, and her mind casting far ahead.

Something happened in that moment, and it was as though his being had floated up and truly blended with hers. For the first time, she felt like they were parts of the same thing. It was not exactly the same feeling that other mothers would know, however, not a sense of oneness of flesh or gentle spirit; rather it was a sense of a kind of partnership.

Lucia knew that she was helpless in the world alone, and that she would likely never find a man who would both be faithful to her and who would still amount to a pile of warm dung in the larger world. But here in front of her lay the answer. It needed her, and through it she could find her own way. She picked up the boy and gave him her breast, and his life. It had been a long time until she had been able to get the image of the old man, feeding from her body like some

vulture picking at carrion, out of her mind when the child nursed. It was as though she was some tavern, and each meal he took, she kept on a kind of bill in her mind.

She carried her rage, and she studied the book, having paid a lecherous scholar with her body, still her only coin, for many months, while she learned sufficient Latin. He had always been puzzled by the desire of this “stupid wench” to learn Latin, but as long as she stayed after the lesson, the skinny, pompous man, with his jug ears and his thatch of frizzy hair had counted it a bargain. He never knew that his student was busily conjugating verbs in her head while he was writhing around on her body.

He was the first person Lucia had killed, using the knowledge of the book, when she could finally read. She hadn’t really disliked him that much, not like Umberto. It was just that he was conveniently at hand for the experiment and, by that time, dulled and trusting when she gave him wine with her first spell in it. Besides, no one would miss another starving scholar more or less anyway. The poison was crudely mixed and it had taken him some time to die. She had observed coldly and learned quickly.

The second person she had killed was Lord Ganado. His death had been much more rapid, but by design, much more painful. With his death, she had felt herself somehow free. Free of the chain of mere fortune and chance that had led her from her home, to Ganado, to Umberto. From that point on, she had felt she was a free agent of her own, a force with which to be reckoned, armed with the knowledge of the great book, bought and paid for. And she had a pawn of her own, growing rapidly at her skirts.

Now she looked at these dainty young women with a kind of contempt and wondered if any of them would be strong enough to do what she had done and break their chains.

Looking slightly uncertain at the appearance of this new, older woman with the Duke, the mistress of the courtyard asked Eusebio diffidently, “Would your Lordship care to have one of the ladies recite for you?”

“Recite indeed,” thought Lucia, suppressing a toothless smile. “Your Lordship enjoys....verse?” Now she had, indeed, let herself slip into a touch of irony.

Eusebio paused for an instant only, again meeting her eye. “Very much. Yes, very much.” He now had a grim smile on his face, and Lucia knew she had made a mistake. There would certainly be no real danger; Horacio’s very existence fairly guaranteed that. But she had thrown down a glove of sorts, and there would now have to be at least some sort of silly, useless posturing on his part to show her who was in charge, at least here in his own dominion. She knew it would come, but not what, and also that she deserved it for deviating from the business at hand to chide his lasciviousness.

“Please,” he said to the young duenna, “Have one of the young ladies attend us. In my private apartments.”

“As your Lordship wishes.” The silken nun moved toward her charges as the two witches made their way into the building and on to a large, richly appointed chamber that apparently doubled as a laboratory and private quarters for Don Eusebio.

Soon the two were comfortably ensconced in a dim parlor, in which a small hearth gave the only heat. Three or four small, delicately-carved wall sconces shone down a soft light that gleamed subtly and almost expectantly on the dark wood paneling. A large man in livery brought a tiny glass of Shiraz wine for each of them. Lucia only smiled faintly at hers.

“Well, shall we get down to cases then? The spell.” Eusebio seemed for a moment to stop and ponder, as though to marshal the way in which he would teach. Lucia was certain he was

doing exactly that, making final decisions about what to tell, what to leave in and what to leave out. He looked at her again and smiled. This time she thought she noted just a trace of condescension. He tapped his fingers absently as he considered.

“Well...” he began, and he told her the story of the bauble seller, and how he had learned of the existence of the spell from him before the execution. “Of course the fool didn’t really have any idea of the power he possessed, as you and I do.” Again the pause, and again the tiniest trace of condescension. It would have been clearer to her if the wine had in fact been poisoned. “I have spent many years now, learning everything I could about this type of spell.” His voice became low and conspiratorial, though the only other person there was the dull looking young man who had brought the sherry and who was now standing at the other end of the room. Lucia assumed that such a servant would have been, or been made into, a deaf mute. “For one thing,” he leaned forward toward her, “it is not really all that secret a spell. It seems that many gypsies practice it, some more powerfully than I, even, though certainly not many. They are so closed mouthed you know. The first one of them from whom I heard their version died in her bed that very night. “It would have been unnecessary and wasteful hypocrisy for Lucia to have reacted to this with shock. “They try to keep such things among themselves, ‘within the tent’, as they say. They use the power to gull the peasants, all sorts of things you can do, all sorts of mischief along that line. Many of the old women among them use a piece of crystal as a focus. I assume you would like to learn that method?”

Lucia had forgotten exactly how distasteful Eusebio could be, but she reminded herself that no matter what stupid gaucheries he might launch at her, they were nothing compared to the utility of the spell, and the reduction of Estraach. She could tolerate his insults if it meant that it

would be that much sooner that she and Horacio could get out of the damnable mud under that cursed city's walls.

"Actually," she said, "I have something else in mind..." Eusebio arched an eyebrow, but she did not elaborate except to say, "I think I would concentrate more on the other methods you told me about, perhaps with the candle flame. That would keep the spell more mobile, more flexible, more supple you might say, no?"

"Of course, Dona Lucia. Whatever you wish." Eusebio turned and looked at the servant, making a small motion with two of his fingers tapping under his own pointed and grizzly chin, apparently as some kind of specific signal. For an instant, Lucia prepared to kill them both, if the signal was for the hulking servant to cut her throat, but her tension eased as he turned to leave the room. When he returned almost immediately with the nun, she realized that the motion must be the generic signal for indicating the sisters of the place, a stylized version of the wimple they wore under their chins.

The slender nun entered very much like the ladies that Lucia had seen at the Court Royal, curtsying to the master as she did, and giving him a cock of the head and a smile, which had certainly never been taught at any convent, unless, perhaps, this one.

"Ah, Sister Angelique. The girl?" Lucia shuddered as she heard the tiny hiss in his breathing as he spoke. The nun half turned and motioned back toward the door, through which came a young girl, perhaps fifteen or sixteen, with the classical features of the mixture of Moor and Medieval Spaniard. Her eyes were a dark violet, her hair shining black, and she wore it long and undressed as a little girl might. Her skin, from having been protected here under the watchful eyes of the sisters and Don Eusebio's patronage, showed not the slightest flaw, and was the color of cream and roses.

Lucia closed her eyes for an instant. She couldn't remember if her own sister had been so objectively beautiful before the pox had eaten away her face so many years before. She thought that she herself might have been so perfect of face and figure, perhaps for a day, even a week, but a thousand years before. She knew that Eusebio was not so stupid as he seemed. It still mattered, and she knew he knew it.

"Absolutely lovely, don't you think?" cooed Don Eusebio. "I think, looking at your own exquisite...bone structure, that she might even be your own granddaughter." Lucia smiled at the idea, but for an instant there was panic of uncertainty in her mind. Who could know? Horacio might have twenty children by now here and there. Had this Don Eusebio pandered a hostage, saved for just such a time as this? But no, she reassured herself. She didn't think that even Horacio had begun to sire his bastards long enough ago to make this little statue of ivory her own flesh and blood. She steeled herself and put it from her. The girl was nothing to her, and whatever Don Eusebio had in mind would have no effect upon Lucia herself.

"She is to be the...subject of the spell?" the old woman prompted.

"Exactly. I must have a subject upon whom to cast the spell. And of course you must have some proof of its power, no?"

"Of course," she said, trying to show no trace of discomfort or uncertainty.

"Come here, my dear." Don Eusebio motioned to the girl, and the nun prompted her gently from behind. She walked to within arm's reach of the old man and then stopped. She stood very straight and proper, Lucia noting that the tiny slippers just peeking out from under her gown were set at an almost balletic stance. The nuns here, eventually no doubt, taught all the graces.

“Do you know me?” Don Eusebio asked her, obviously now for the benefit of his student, as some preliminary part of the exhibition, like a carnival magician setting up a trick.

“Yes, your Excellency. You are the Duke of Maroja.” The voice was small and only the most subtle ear could detect the natural fear in it.

“Yes, yes, my child.” said Eusebio with much satisfaction, “But have I ever spoken to you before? Have we met?”

“Why no, your Lordship.” Lucia did not wonder greatly about the exact conditions under which a girl like this, in a place like this, might “meet” the lord of the manor. Her glance went for an instant to the rich hangings at the other end of the room, which separated this small sitting room from the private personal bedchamber there.

“Sit down, my dear,” the old man indicated the other empty chair at the table. He turned and made another signal, this time with a straightened finger, tapped on his eye. The manservant went to the mantle where there was a row of several candles in their holders, apparently awaiting use. The old man pointed to one on the end of the row and presently it was lit and placed on the table between him and the young girl, who had been watching everything as alertly as a discrete mannering would allow.

This was important to Lucia, because she intended the spell to overcome a man, strong and fearless, in his own fortress and on his highest guard against just such stratagems. To use a frightened young girl was different enough, but at least she did not appear from her pupils to have been drugged, and she had spoken quickly and well enough to bespeak intelligence. Lucia would just have to sit back and see what there was to learn.

The candle was made of a sort of dull black wax, probably simple beeswax mixed with soot as far as the old woman could tell, but because the candle itself was so dark and blended

with the background of the dim, in fact now almost lightless, room, it made the flame at its tip appear to be floating, without any source, like the apparition of some disembodied head floating in space. Lucia knew enough to realize that the instruction would consist of the act, and that she must remember every nuance and facet that she could.

“Now child, look at the candle, look at the flame. Forget everything else; we are all your friends here.” She seemed to relax just a bit, and she settled to her task. “Just look at the flame,” the old man’s voice was pitched low and modulated softly. “Just breathe deeply a time or two and relax. Keep looking at the flame. There is nothing but the flame. There is nothing but the flame.” Lucia saw the girl’s head actually drop slightly, and she could sense, as much as see, the slight slackness in her smooth, flawless jaw line. Lucia moved nothing but her eyes, which bounced from the girl to the candle to Don Eusebio and back. Eusebio slowly lifted the candle holder and held it directly between his eyes and the evening blue of the girl’s. He continued to speak, almost in a low rumble. “Breathe deeply and look at the flame. You will grow sleepy but you will not sleep.”

Eusebio now moved the candle very subtly, just an inch away and an inch toward the girl, in time with the rise and fall of the gauzy material of her bodice. Her head was still erect, a wisp of the black hair brushing her collarbone with each breath, but Lucia noticed that it didn’t seem to disturb her. She was staring fixedly at the flame now, her eyes not seeming to Lucia to be quite focused. The old woman’s still sharp eyes gazed deeply into the girl’s and she could see clearly that the pupils were wide open, like a cat’s in the dark, or like a victim of the *bella donna* spell. But unlike someone poisoned, the pupils still pulsed with each beat of the girl’s heart. Lucia could see the slight opening and closing of the colored irises in the reflected light.

“Can you hear me?” Don Eusebio spoke slowly, almost in cadence with the rhythm of the eyes he gazed into.

“Yes,” the girl said, and Lucia could no longer hear even the trace of tension that had been in her voice before.

“Good,” Eusebio was almost as transfixed by her as she by him and his candle. “You will now close your eyes and listen.” He paused to calm his own breathing, which had become quite heavy, and, as he tore his eyes off the girl, Lucia could see all the signs of yet another man in danger of falling under the oldest and simplest spell in the world. It was clear that the old man had to use effort not to allow himself to forget his guest and student.

So still was the girl that the only movement apparent from her was the soft pulse of the artery of her neck, just where her hair turned everything to shadow on her shoulder. The old man turned slightly, just enough to catch Lucia’s eye. Probably, she reasoned, to let her know that he was still in control. He kept the old woman’s gaze for a quarter of a minute in the silence. The candle flame could have been carved in solid, bright stone. There was not a stir, even of breath, to disturb it. Then very slowly and deliberately he nodded, his eyes narrowed and his lips pulled back into a smile. His eyes still fixed upon Lucia, without looking at the girl he resumed the instructions of the spell; “You will do as I say. Do you hear me?”

“Yes.” The girl’s voice was even and low. Her eyes were closed, their long dark lashes sparkling in the firelight.

“Stand up.” Slowly and gracefully she did so, her eyes still closed. Lucia felt an old discomfort as the man took a full minute to gaze at the girl’s profile, the light of the hearth behind showing through the light fabric of her dress. He stood and went round behind her, none of his movements seeming to disturb her in the least, her chest rising and falling regularly with

her deep steady breathing. The old man looked down over her shoulder, standing only an inch or two from her back. “You will feel nothing.”

“Nothing.” Lucia saw his hands going up around her shoulders and thought that perhaps he intended to strangle her. She reflected that if the spell overcame even that most deeply ingrained instinct, that of breath and of survival, that it was a powerful spell indeed. She would be most impressed if he could kill her without waking her from the trance. But his hands went on around to the front of her gown, and fumbled for a moment with three small ties there that held the garment closed. He lightly drew back the top of the dress and stood there, now apparently oblivious to Lucia’s presence as the girl herself. He ran his hands over her body very slowly, stopping as he cupped her breasts in his palms. Lucia could almost feel the shock as he pinched the soft, dark nipples, but the young girl did not stir at all. Lucia was sure the spell was profound because no discipline or acting she knew could have prevented her from flinching from that touch.

After he had fondled the girl’s slight body for a moment more, Eusebio turned back to Lucia, the smile returning to his lips. She thought she saw a touch of spittle glinting at the corner of his beard.

“But now, my dear Dona Lucia,” he spoke like a man barely able to contain his glee, “Now I want to show you how very profound the spell is, the degree of power it gives, over any simple, well...,” he said pointedly now, still with the smile, but challenging Lucia eye to eye, “over any simple young mind like...like this. The late Lord Umberto would have found this a most amusing spell, don’t you think?” Lucia did not waver her granite gaze an inch. She tried to keep her eyes from narrowing even so much as the width of a lash.

Don Eusebio turned to the man in livery, standing now in the shadows, and motioned him to approach. The sorcerer had him stand in front of the girl and perhaps a foot away from her. Though the man might be dull, and perhaps deaf and dumb, it was clear that he was not blind. Eusebio made him stand, in the radius of the heat of her body, the smell of her perfume, for perhaps a minute. He stood back himself to come to Lucia's side to observe the scene, as though he were inviting her to consider a painting. He cocked his head this way and that, considering. Then he spoke again to the girl.

"When you open your eyes you will be most blessed. Do you hear?"

"Blessed."

"An angel has come to you. He has been sent to make a new Messiah in your womb. God has sent him. The angel will show you all that you must do. You will go with him."

"Go with him."

"Yes, you are blessed. Now you may open your eyes and look upon the angel." She opened her eyes and looked up into the stupid face of Eusebio's thug, and a smile came to her face. Lucia was amazed to see her breathing become faster, but obviously from joy, not fear. She was enraptured. She stood and gazed up at her angel.

From behind her back, Eusebio made another set of motions, some obscene, to the man, and indicated the bedchamber nearby. The valet took the girl by the arm, not roughly, but none too gently either, and summarily herded his prize through the hangings into the small alcove. Lucia heard what she was sure was the sound of bodies settling onto a bed, and the occasional grunting and sounds of exertion and satisfaction in the man's low tones. But there was not so much as a whimper from the girl. It went on and on, the rhythm rising and falling, stopping perhaps for a moment, as the sound of bodies shifting, and being shifted, could be discerned.

“Well, what do you think of my little spell, hmmm?” Eusebio asked coyly.

“The spell may or may not be of use. The display is....sophomoric. Why not just have the little thing cut off her own hand for me, something less obnoxious?” Lucia couldn’t help it now, the powers were in opposition at their own level anyway, and she was weary of holding them apart. Eusebio was a pig, like Umberto had been a pig, and that was all there was to it. If she couldn’t keep them off her all those years ago any better than this little girl could keep them off her now, well that was in the past. But now was now, and she at least, was no little girl any more.

“Eusebio, you are a pig, like Umberto was a tired old ox, and Ganado, you remember Ganado?...like Ganado was a preening little peacock. Well, I killed both of them, she said, taking only a very slight liberty with the truth in Umberto’s case, and none at all in Ganado’s. “And if you don’t behave yourself in a more seemly manner, I might kill you, too.” Again their eyes met and locked, just a trace of uncertainty in Don Eusebio’s. It was enough, thought Dona Lucia. It was no repayment for the years of pain and humiliation, and finally for the years of condescension, but it was enough. “Or I might just turn you into a sewer rat and let you flop around in the shit where you belong.” In another instant, Eusebio broke off the stare, reverting now to his unctuous smile. Something seemed to have been settled between them, at least for the moment. Eusebio laughed as good naturedly as a parish priest who has just performed a baptism, or a joyous wedding. The sounds of the factotum rutting on the girl’s body in the next room continued, now almost animal in intensity and pace.

Eusebio listened, a beatific smile on his face. “It was necessary, Dona Lucia. Because I needed to illustrate two points. First, you yourself are quite welcome to go in and observe the actual reality of what is happening in the next room. I suppose you might wait and rely on the age old signs that have always signified a *primum noctis*. From the sound of things, there should

be little doubt. But I realize as long as people have been looking for the signs, there have been ways of counterfeiting them, no? A chicken or a cat perhaps, sacrificed for its blood. Once in a while necessary for the sake of discretion or honor? At least with the country folk.” Lucia was not amused.

“The other reason, my dear, is to illustrate a very subtle point.” Here he paused to let the old woman know that he was serious, irony behind, and that they were once again on the path of the business at hand. She nodded expectantly. “If,” he began, “I had picked up any young girl from the slums...” she thought for an instant she had misread him and that he was going to try to goad her with her own past again. He quickly realized this and quickly proceeded to let her know that this example was purely coincidental, “...any girl, it wouldn’t matter where she was from, what her background. The spell might have worked, or she might be lying there under Antone wailing and trying to scratch his eyes out.” Lucia’s look became questioning. “The difference is the preparation she has had, here with the sisters. Certainly she hasn’t been prepared for rape...” Lucia’s eyebrow shot up in an arch. It seemed only fair, she thought, but now Don Eusebio didn’t take it personally either. “At least not this kind of rape. If they had brought her to me and I had plied her with wine and locked the door...that sort of thing, that she might have expected, might have even submitted out of fear. But somewhere, down in her heart, after years of being told about the Holy Virgin and the angels and the stainlessness and all the rest of it...then, hey presto! Up jumps an angel sent from God to make her a holy mother, too. The girl really is, excuse me, was, a virgin. She wouldn’t know rape from a saint’s kiss...”

“Ha!” the old woman spit out the sound.

“Well, normally she certainly wouldn’t have put up with that without a struggle. A bit of screaming at least,” he concluded. Lucia could suddenly sense the disappointment that Eusebio

had experienced in the pacific nature of the seduction. “But the spell,” he went on, “in order to make it overcome any great natural resistance that your subject might have, it is necessary to play upon something that is already inside, some fantasy or great wish. That girl would say in the daylight that to even think of coupling with God would be a scorching sacrilege. But if she has the parts and the pieces of the fantasy there, that there are angels, that angels come to earth, that they make babies in women, and that...that is what makes women have babies,” here he motioned to the alcove with his chin as the room was suddenly very quiet, “then it is only a question of arranging for all those things to happen. Only a little help needed to form the spell.”

“You cannot get a cow to fly...but you can make it walk to the butcher’s.” she ventured.

“And perhaps even to get it to think it is a chicken while it is on the way.”

She nodded with the enlightenment of understanding the spell.

“Precisely, my dear Dona Lucia. The gypsies weave the spell with pictures of great piles of gold...and then rob the peasants blind. The little fellow who told me about the spell simply had these silly, vain girls believing they were Aphrodite and that he was merely the god Mars.” The sorcerer chuckled at the thought. “They simply followed their most fantastical desires, that’s all.”

“And the Dutchman?”

“Ah, our late friend of Orange.” Eusebio beamed at being able to expand on his greatest triumph. “Each of the young fellows who tried their hand against him was, or at least had been, in a seminary, studying for the priesthood. A seminary very near here, as a matter of fact.”

“These boys...also under your patronage?” Lucia asked it in such a tone as to allow all the possible interpretations of the question to remain hanging in the air.

“Well,” explained Don Eusebio very matter-of-factly, “some like meat and some like fish...I happen to like both. But importantly,” here he held up a finger to admonish any inattention, “in such places one occasionally finds a young man who has a...a particularly zealous vocation.”

“A madman.”

“If you like. But a real raving madman would not be any good for the spell either though, you see. First of all, they don’t seem to have the attention necessary to sustain the spell. Believe me, I’ve tried it. And besides, a madman looks like a madman, and that’s not conducive to keeping your quarry relaxed and off guard. Those square-headed Dutch bodyguards would never have let a real lunatic near their precious William. No, the madness had to be more subtle. I asked the teaching brothers to point out to me any young man who seemed...well, who seemed to actually have some personal grudge against Satan.”

“Eusebio.” Dona Lucia rolled her eyes as they both chuckled at the thought.

“I know, I know. But you’d be surprised. There are so many boys coming in from the country, and the village priests, may God bless their unwitting hearts,” here he stopped to cross himself, with no small irony, “The village priests have raised them on tales of battles in the sky, of St. Miguel and St. George and the dragon and all that. All the parts are there for them to begin to see themselves as holy agents.”

“And Orange was the Devil.”

“Precisely. Ah, and here is our angel.” The servant was emerging from the alcove, retying his belt, sweat running down his coarse, stupidly smiling face. Lucia noticed a scant trace of drying blood on his fingers. He looked to Don Eusebio, who nodded and motioned for him to leave. But Dona Lucia raised a hand, saying to Don Eusebio, “Wait.”

Eusebio motioned him back. "I would like to give him his proper reward." Eusebio paused for a moment, but then shrugging, motioned to the man to attend the lady. She in turn, reached into a small reticule that Don Eusebio only now noticed that she had been carrying. She removed a small gold coin and placed it on the open palm of Antone, Eusebio's dogsbody. Eusebio noted that she had been wearing a dainty pair of gloves throughout the interview.

She waved the servant away. He turned to go and made it as far as the door at the far end of the room, where he suddenly had what appeared to be a grand mal seizure and shortly died, making what, for all his muteness, certainly seemed to be screams of agony. Dona Lucia had not even bothered to follow him with her gaze, instead continuing to smile at Eusebio, who did seem just a bit put out. "My...that's a new one" he said, obviously impressed at the speed and strength of the "spell" she had conjured. He waited expectantly, but she remained silently smiling, finding no need to satisfy his curiosity by telling him about the rare toad from the Amazonas that sweat such powerful poison.

"I just thought someone ought to do something on the girl's behalf," she smiled benignly, as though she had made the contribution of the coin to the tithing basket.

"And would you care to speak to the new queen of heaven? I believe she'll receive us now."

"She really believes it?"

Don Eusebio shrugged. "Talk to her. I'll be as interested as you. One never really knows exactly what will happen. So much of it is...an art, you know. There is the background and the particular situation. I realize this was a bit crude, but you see, I was merely improvising a test for you, and also, I believe that it really is important to spend time reinforcing the spell. If you spend some time with the subject, cast the spell several times, and if you go about it with enough

subtlety, follow their own desires and all, as I've told you, it is quite possible to order them to awaken fully, act normally, go about like you or I, and then, strike suddenly. All from the spell having been planted deep within them. It was weeks from the time when I last saw...what was his name? Gerard, yes, Gerard. It was perhaps four weeks from the last time I cast the spell on young Gerard to the time when he finally killed William, achieved his martyrdom, and with it bought me this choice piece of property on which we now stand. My agent told me that he had seen the boy several times in the days before the actual assassination, and had marked nothing abnormal about him whatsoever."

"I have heard that he was almost in a trance."

"I have no doubt that when he was finally face to face with his objective, with the devil himself, and after he had killed Satan himself, yes, I would imagine anyone would be in a trance. Like suddenly being named king, I would suppose. But the Dutch doctors couldn't find any trace of a drug or potion, for there was none to find, of course. They don't like gypsies in the north, you see, not much contact with them, so I would imagine it most unlikely that any of them was even aware of the existence of this spell. So shall we see our new holy virgin?"

They went into the small alcove and found that the light was very dim. Don Eusebio lit a small candle in a wall holder, and Lucia could see the girl, sprawled across the bed, stripped totally naked. She was still lying on her back, and there were bruises already beginning to show on her shoulders and arms and thighs, as though the shadow of the man's hands still printed their shape on her smooth skin. There were unmistakable stains of blood on her thighs and darkly covering the sheets where her hips lay. Lucia closed her eyes and shook her head, partly to drive away all the images the scene brought back to her of the pain and shame and fear. But amazingly, the girl seemed quite at peace. Indeed she had a rapturous smile upon her face, and as

she sat up, without speaking, seemingly unaware of the couple's presence, she gently moved her hands across the flat of her belly, below her navel.

"Imelda, my dear, "Don Eusebio was quite gentle. "Imelda, can you hear me?"

"Yes I can hear you."

"What has happened to you?"

Her face beamed. "An angel came and he...touched me."

"Is that all?" asked Lucia, trying to determine the degree of her understanding of what had happened.

"He lay with me. God sent him, and he lay with me. I am with child. I can feel it, here." Again she indicated her naked and blood stained lower abdomen.

"Did the angel speak to you?" Again Lucia probed.

The girl paused, thinking, and then she slowly shook her head. Then the smile returned as wide and beaming as before. "No, not with words. He didn't have to. God spoke to me, I think."

Dona Lucia whispered aside to her co-conspirator. "Then God drinks too much, and he has a paunch." She poked him surreptitiously in the rather expansive stomach with her boney, gnarled old finger.

Ignoring the girl, Eusebio said with evident annoyance, "Don't you understand? Given the right situation here, and the right words, the spell can give you the very voice of God."

Eusebio was more serious now. Lucia noted this and she knew that her best course was not to contend with him any more, for he was apparently in a mood to take himself seriously again, and that, she knew, made him, or anyone else, dangerous according to their stature.

“So what will happen to her now?” Lucia asked. Eusebio looked at her, puzzled. “I mean she can’t be turned loose like this, can she. The spell. It is essential to keep the spell a secret. Would she go blathering it about?”

“Who knows? Oh,” he said blandly, “I suppose we might dump her into a house in Madrid or on the coast. There are always mad women having holy inspirations. The angels come off a ship or something. I suppose we should just keep her right here. No one would listen to her even if she did talk.” Don Eusebio’s voice was flat, and the old woman realized that it was probably a death knell for the girl, either immediately, or perhaps after he had had a session or two of “verse” with her himself. But it was clear she would never leave this place alive.

That however, was not Lucia’s concern. She now knew what she had come to find out, and later that same evening, having politely refused his offer of hospitality, she left Don Eusebio’s castle by coach, to return to the north. There was another stop that she needed to make, however, before she rejoined Horacio under the bloody walls of Estraach.

* * *

Horacio D’Ugarte slept fitfully. The rising mist off the surrounding marsh was no real relief from the suffocating warmth of the night. The buzz of insects and the slap and curse of men was all that was to be heard in the darkness. He rolled over on his cot, the padding sweated through. Horacio had always been subject to these seasons when he seemed to be in the grip of some tropical fever. These fits were the legacy left to him, ultimately by his father’s schemes, passed on to him through his mother. His body chafed in every part, and his mind was no more at peace.

“Damn this place,” he muttered. No one but the guard by the door heard, and the old ones had been with Horacio so long that they realized it did not mean anything. “Damn this place!”

He was sitting up now, flinging off the damp blankets with a snarl. Now the guards were more attentive, because, just as they had often heard Horacio mumble in his dark dreams, occasionally they had seen him wake from one of his nightmares, rightly enough in his body, but nonetheless to continue to grapple with whatever demon had slipped into his mind in his sleep.

“French son of a bitch!” They knew he could only be referring to Dupuys. “I want him dead! Guards, get your lazy asses in here, now!” Now he was in a perfect fury, literally foaming at the mouth as he spat out commands. “Get the captains here!”

“When, Sir?” The guard who asked was new, or he would not have asked, in spite of the precipitous and confusing turn of events. Horacio didn’t hesitate for so much as an instant. He drew the pistol from the belt he was strapping on and smoothly turned and fired point blank, splattering the man’s brains against the tent wall, the question hanging in the air with the smoke. No further questions were asked by the other guards, and the Captains of the Companies were assembled before the smell of smoke was out of the air, and only barely after the stupid victim’s body had been hauled out. They knew the next hour would be difficult. Horacio was in one of his “moods.”

“Everybody up! We go now.”

“Of course, sir,” said one of the officers, noting the distances to the opening of the tent, and from Horacio to the nearest weapon as he did so. Then after noting the response, very tentatively he continued, “Where?”

“Up there! Up There!” Horacio gesticulated wildly toward the walls of Estraach. “We go to kill Dupuys. I’ve figured it all out. We kill him and we can all go home. That’s it.” The captains were silent. Though perhaps in essence he was correct, they were each loath to be the one to begin the exploration of realities with their commander, who by now had reloaded his

pistol and added another to it in his large leather belt, from which also hung a small cutlass and a very large knife.

Horacio could be one of the most acute strategists on the Continent, but when his brain was fevered with the old poison of his father's disease, all wagers were off as to whether he could find his way to the latrine and not piss on his feet. Lucia was usually present to deal with him in this state. He would accept a draught of a potion from her that would calm him and make him sleep until it passed. But the old witch was away in the south, and none of them would have any more thought to ask Horacio to "take a little medicine" than they would have normally thought to fling a precipitous assault at a formidable objective like Estraach.

"Any man's company that is not ready in one half-hour will answer to me."

"And the guns? When would you like the preliminary bombardment to..."

"Damn the guns! It won't be a cannon ball that kills the bastard! We'll sneak up and drag him back here." The captains looked apprehensively at one another. This was the price they paid for their rank and commands. It was the middle watches of the night, usually taken to be too late to assemble an assault to launch before first light gave the defenders further advantage.

"You are aware of the time, sir?" It was a bold question, timidly asked, by the oldest of Horacio's captains.

"Yes, its time to kill Dupuys." Nothing else seemed forthcoming. They had to admit, if they had been so surprised, then perhaps the city would be surprised as well. It was all they could hope for.

The Dutch pickets who lay every night in the mud, waiting, watching, more than five hundred yards from the city walls, on the edge of the enemy camp, heard the clink of harness and

even the sleepy curses of the Spanish camp as it was aroused, and quickly sent silent runners back into the town.

“Orange and freedom,” came the whisper out of the darkness near a small postern gate.

“Alva’s mother,” came the night’s countersign from the fortifications, referring to the Duke of Alva, Spanish Captain General, and the butcher in overall charge of the Imperial forces here in the north, including Horacio’s force.

“Devil’s whore,” came the correct response, immediately.

“Pass friend.” The small postern gate quietly opened and closed in the gloom.

It seemed to Dupuys, who aroused almost instantly at this oddly timed summons, that he was doomed as a soldier to live by night. He longed for open space and daylight outside this cursed fort, as much perhaps as he knew Horacio wanted inside and to tear his heart from his chest still beating, his head from his shoulders.

“Well, Sieur Van Maarten, what do you think? Has General D’Ugarte finally gone totally mad?” Dupuys snapped his good Dutch spyglass closed after surveying the situation from the ramparts.

“If he thinks to catch us out like this he certainly has.”

“Please have some barrels of naphtha set,” said Dupuys, “Say, three hundred paces out. Are there good men on the guns?”

“Yes sir, three hundred paces should be no problem.”

“Good. Let them get well in if you can. The messenger said he saw no activity in the artillery park? Was he sure?”

“That sir, was the report.” Van Maarten was smiling. If there was anything at all about his adjutant that bothered Dupuys it was his positive glee at getting the upper hand in such a

fight. It was, Dupuys had finally decided, that at such times, Van Maartens' pale blue eyes took on an evil and excited look, which somehow sat oddly on the normally phlegmatic Dutch countenance. Dupuys certainly thanked the gods when they found themselves with an advantage, but it had always been more in the nature of business well done, rather than a game won or lost.

The walls of Estraach were fully manned, but no extra light had been allowed there to give the fact away. Again, the faint glinting of metal could be seen coming in a wave. The assault came deliberately and without a significant number of skirmishers as it usually would, testing the ground, drawing fire and generally serving to ease the forces into battle. Instead, this would be like a heavy man, running very fast, blind, directly into a stone wall. Worse though, it would be thousands of men, and the wall would erupt in fire when they hit it.

Still they came, the troops on the ground as quiet as moving men could be in armor, the troops on the wall as quiet as death itself. The first of the assailants could be seen just bringing their ladders out to the front of the mass of figures, fifty paces from the wall, when a quiet order was given, and six small swivel mounted guns suddenly cracked and flashed out into the darkness above them. These had been loaded with shot heated to a dull red glow, and aimed at forty barrels that had been quickly placed out in the plain.

Some of the assault troops had noticed the barrels, and some had even guessed what they held, but under the relentless drive of the assault from behind, they could not stop or do anything effective about them. The formation was too dense and had too much momentum in the dark to stop and deal with moving them, and to have cried out to halt the assault would have been death on the instant. A few of the barrels had been breached, but mostly the first ranks had simply passed them by, glad at least that they would be beyond them when the guns lashed out to touch them with their hot kiss.

The red hot shot was spewed out in clusters that could not help but find these bulky wooden targets even in the faint light. Suddenly, the night was dim no more. With a tremendous whooshing sound, each barrel erupted into a tower of flame that came raining down on troops for twenty yards around. The Greek fire stuck to those it touched, and soon leather jerkins and cotton tunics were smoldering. Metal armor became like a frying pan to the wearer. It was no longer quiet under the walls of Estrach. The shouts of the leading edge of the assault, still attempting to place their ladders against the walls, were mixed with the shrieks and screams of the men roasting to death behind. The division of the field by the line of the fires was such that the Dutch knew that the men who had made it beyond the flames would not be enough to sustain the assault, if only it was stoutly and calmly resisted. The light from the fires now made the field look like some kind of scene from a carnival in hell. It gave the gunners on the walls an amazing work, of which they would tell for years.

More naphtha was poured down upon the heads of the men on the ladders and the few whose heads appeared at the level of the battlements found themselves quoited around the shoulders with loops of rope soaked in the stuff and set alight. Van Maarten smiled and slapped the backs of the watching officers as the wave clearly began to waver and break up. Dupuys accepted the cheers of his men once again as the last of the Spaniards fled back through the dying flames in the distance.

A quarter of a mile away, Horacio D'Ugarte stood on a hillock and unloaded his brace of pistols indiscriminately into the dark mass of troops which swirled back around his feet like muddy water after a storm. He cursed at them as they swept around below him. Then he stopped, and after a moment, quietly, to himself amidst the roar and confusion both inside and outside his

brain, he said, “Well, perhaps Mother knows best,” and then turned back to his tent, and he was not seen again that night.

* * *

Given her history, it was not surprising that Dona Lucia did indeed know, perhaps better than any other person in Europe, the exact exchange value, in gold and in power, of human beauty. Though she had acted somewhat superciliously about Don Eusebio’s “menagerie,” as she referred to it at one point, they both knew that there was not a member of the Shadow Court who did not have a similar establishment for the breeding and cultivation of the various creatures, human and otherwise, that they required for the implementation of various plots and spells.

She had her own household, including both a “convent” and a “monastery” under her patronage, not far from the passes of the Pyrenees in Narvarre. Though it was as close as she or Horacio came to having a “home,” he had been there only a few times, between campaigns. This was quietly in line with her designs, because she recognized in her son an unstable force, which she certainly found useful, but which she did not want pawing and blundering over her delicate plans at inopportune moments, like a grubby child stuffing cake batter in its mouth before the cook was ready to begin creating a delicate pastry.

In a small tower room of Lucia’s great house itself, which had been their home for several years, two young sisters huddled together in their bed. The sky outside was full of the rumor of an approaching storm, lightening flashing to make the shadows in the room stand out, and the thunder growling as if in a warning.

The younger girl coughed in a racking spasm, as her sister held her close, supporting her as she tried to get her breath back. Bringing a small white handkerchief away from her lips, they

could both see, as the lightening flashed again, a tiny spot of crimson on its corner. The younger girl groaned. It was a pathetic sound, born more out of despair than of pain.

“It’s just like Momma.”

“Hush Terisita. It may not be like Momma. It may not.” But as she held her sister, the older girl remembered the slow painful death their mother had suffered, first taking on a pale, almost transparent beauty. Her sister was beginning to do so even now, in place of the normal robust flowering of health she had always known. But within a year, their mother’s ethereal beauty had faded and her slender figure had gradually become wraithlike, and the shining white skin had become bluish and finally an ashen gray. The coughing had finally consumed her totally, breaking her ribs and making every breath she took for months a torment. It had all seemed so futile, even to the sisters, who were then at the ages of ten and twelve. In spite of the prayers they both offered up for their mother every night, they knew she would die.

Finally, one terrible night, the older sister, Ana, held her mother, much as she was holding her younger sister now, as she finally coughed her life away in a gout of blood from her lungs. Ana had been fearful, but Teresa had almost gone insane with the terror of that night. It had haunted her ever since, and Ana could tell that, even now, she suffered from that terror more than the physical effects of the disease.

The one bright spot in their lives had been their “new momma,” Lucia. The old woman had come out of nowhere it seemed. Their father had abandoned the family so many years before that they had never really known him. So when the old woman had simply walked into their room in the dirty little inn where they were staying when their mother died, and had silently opened the shuttered windows to show them that it was new daylight outside, Ana had felt that she must’ve been sent by God. She had simply lain back on the bed beside her mother’s frail

little body and watched as the woman had gathered up their things and gently coaxed Teresa to her feet and out of the corner, where she had crouched whimpering all that night.

Lucia told them that she wanted to help them, that she wanted to have two little girls of her own. Ana was already old enough to understand the kind of work so many women, indeed her mother one of them, did to make a living. She had known girls younger than herself, sold and painted to sell their bodies. When Lucia had come, at first she had despaired that that was to be her fate and that of her sister. But instead, they were taken by coach to the grand house nearby, and there they were treated, if not exactly with warmth and kindness every day, at least with no punishments or degradation of any kind. Their lives had gone on, day by day, with little change. They were allowed to play in the grounds of the house, but never to go into any of the wings other than the servants' quarters, where they had the small but comfortable tower room, and to a sort of chapel that had frescos on the wall where the artist had portrayed the figures of Heaven and Hell in broad strokes and florid colors. The servants had spoken to them in both Spanish and in French, which in time they learned. They had a governess, who spoke but little, who wore a kind of habit, and who was apparently tasked by Dona Lucia to see to it that they were given at least basic education, including a sort of storybook version of religious instruction, and a sense of certainty that they could trust in their new "Mama." Lucia had looked in on them now and again, several months apart, would look them over like a proud grandma might, and apparently had been satisfied with how she found them, for she would soon leave, without a particular word about the future.

For Ana and Teresa, coming from the brink of disaster as they had, they were quite content to continue the peaceful life there at the big house without questions and without troubling their mysterious benefactress. Only once in a while, when she would go to the very

highest room in the attic of the house and look out a small window there around at the mountains, would Ana have a particular strange feeling. She felt at those times like some kind of doll, laid away in a box, waiting to be brought out to be made a part of the world.

The feeling would always pass however. She spoke of it once to Teresa, but the younger girl had been scarred too badly by the life they had led before, and terror of any other life than the calm peace of Dona Lucia's house. Ana let the images go and stayed happily with her sister as the years had passed, content to wait and see what the future might bring into their door.

Now she knew what the future would be, at least as far as Teresa was concerned. Sitting there with the girl, who was just on the edge of full womanhood, she knew that there would be no future for Teresa, no life beyond the slow decay. She trembled, and Teresa, thinking it was in fear of the storm outside, held her closer in return. At that very moment, she heard the clatter of hooves and the wheels of a heavy carriage approaching below. She sprang to the window in time to see that their patroness, the old woman they called Mama Lucia, was just arriving at her home.

"Teristia," she said, cautiously rather than excitedly. "It's Mama Lucia, or at least it's her big carriage."

"Oh, Ana, don't tell her about me. Don't tell her about the..." she motioned vaguely to where the stained handkerchief lay on the little table by the bed, the scarlet admonition clearly visible in the light of the tiny candle that sat there. "If we tell her, she might make us go away. She'll turn us out like they used to do with Momma. Please don't tell. Please. Promise you won't?"

"Quiet, mija, quiet. Shhh, shhh. I won't say anything, I promise." Ana enfolded the terrified girl again and rocked her in the dark shadow of the room. There they waited to see what would happen to them next.

The morning saw them asleep, still waiting for a knock or a footstep, but it was not until mid-day, when the sky had cleared of the last shreds of the storm and the wind was fresh in the window, that Dona Lucia finally called for them. This time she was especially cordial, and that, plus the fact that Teresa's cough had passed, made the meeting very pleasant. The old woman had them stand up and turn around as she looked at them, as a million grandmothers have assessed a million granddaughters after a long time apart. Lucia seemed as pleased with what she saw as any grandmother might. But her silence, her momentary consideration, as she looked at first one and then the other, made Ana uneasy. She actually thought that Lucia might discern the first signs of Teresa's illness in her sister's delicate beauty. But if she did, she said nothing. Finally, after being around the girls all afternoon and asking first one question and then another about their lives here, she seemed to have made some sort of decision.

"Ana, come to me tonight after you've had your supper. I have something to discuss with you."

"Through the afternoon, Ana fretted over the coming interview. She worried that it might somehow be connected with the feeling of coming out of the doll-box. She even blushed for a moment when she wondered to herself if Lucia had perhaps found a suitor for her. She was, after all, of marriageable age, and she could understand no reason for her to stay in Lucia's house any longer, except of course for Teresa. She daydreamed that Dona Lucia had found her a nice young man to marry who would be kind to her and who would let Teresa come and live with her until... She turned her mind away from Teresa's future and from her own. Near sunset she went to the small attic room. There she knelt at the window. As she looked out, she asked God to somehow be kind to her and to Teresa. She could think of no other way to help her sister now, as she hadn't been able to help her mother, only able to watch as she had died.

After dark, she went to Lucia's chambers. They were in the other wing of the house, where she had never been in all her years there. The servant who came for her was not familiar, and he guided her silently and directly down a great hall to a small room off the end. There she found the old woman, wrapped in a shawl against the slight chill of the highland evening.

"Come in my child," she said in a small soothing voice. "Are you and your sister comfortable here? Happy?"

"Oh yes, Madame. Very comfortable." Though there was nothing but kindness to be seen here, Ana's heart beat faster than its accustomed rhythm.

"Good. Good." Then she sat silently for a moment while Ana waited expectantly. Finally, she fixed the girl's gaze with a white rimmed old eye and said, "I need your help, my child."

"Me? You need my help, Madame?" The girl realized that her feeling of anxiety was actually lessened a bit somehow by the request, though she could not imagine what would be asked of her.

"Yes, Ana. You. There is a very important matter, and I think..." she covered her eyes with her delicately boned hand. "I think, Ana, that God has sent you to our aid." Ana waited for whatever was to follow. "How old were you when you came here?"

"I was not quite twelve, I think."

"Do you remember much about the world outside?"

"I remember my Momma. My other Momma that is. And I remember inns and taverns and, once in a while, I suppose, there was something else, but...no, there really wasn't all that much to remember."

"That is good," said Lucia with a deep sigh, "for the world outside has become a very bad place these years that you have been here. A very bad place indeed."

“What has happened, Mama Lucia?”

“The devil himself has come.”

“The devil?” The girl’s eyes were wide and her breath hung now waiting for the rest of the explanation.

“The devil rose from the ground within this last year and now he goes about from his fortress spreading evil and terror.”

“Is he near here?” Lucia was gratified to hear the loud swallow and the slight choke in Ana’s voice signifying true fear.

“No, my dear. No. We are quite safe here, I believe. At least for the present. The devil’s fortress is way up north, in a place called Holland. Have you heard of Holland?”

“No, Madame. Is it under the ground?”

“No, though it is sometimes under the water.”

“Under the water? Is it then a magical place, like Heaven?”

“In a way, in a way. Ana, can you read?”

“No Madame.” She did not bow her head because the idea that she would be able to read had been far beyond even her imagination in the world from which she came, and here, there had never been anyone who even thought about teaching her. Lucia had not only known this, it was she who had given strict orders to keep the situation that way. The question had only been a test to be sure there would be no surprises with the girl.

“It doesn’t matter, I think we can find some way...” Lucia thought she let this trail off at just the right amount.

“Find a way? Find a way for what?” The girl was excited now, as well as terrified.

“To let you become one of those who help God fight the devil.” Lucia knew the girl was hooked into the idea by the way she moved slightly forward in her chair. Had she leaned away, another tack would have been needed.

“To help God?” The girl’s breathing was close and hard now, her eyes bright. “Certainly! Certainly I will help. Oh, tell me what I must do. I’ll do anything.”

“Now, now. Calm yourself,” said Lucia reasonably, while actually hoping for anything but that.

“Oh, but yes, I would do anything, truly.” And perhaps, she thought, God might save Teresa in return. Whether Lucia knew, or cared, about this innermost motive, it wasn’t something that they delved into. It remained strong and deep within Ana’s heart though.

“Tonight we have only a little to do,” said Lucia, “There will be more later, but for tonight just a little. Are you ready then?”

“Oh, yes, Mama Lucia, yes.” The witch looked at the girl for a moment. This was exactly the fervor she wanted in her when the time came. It would be this that would make the final part of the spell achieve its end, and complete her most elegant triumph, in a way even greater than Don Eusebio’s.

“Well then, you must come close, and listen very carefully.” Lucia pulled a small crystal on a golden chain from her bosom. She held it near the candle that illuminated the table.

“It’s beautiful. Is it from God?” The girl spoke in awe as she was already focused on the flash of the facets of the small round sparkling globe.

“Yes, my child, yes,” whispered Lucia. It was already going better than she had hoped. “If you look very closely you will be able to see a piece of the sky as it looks in Heaven.” The girl was barely breathing, her concentration so intense. There was not a sound; there was not

even a murmur of the wind to disturb her as she fell deeper and deeper into the depths of the crystal.

Now Lucia began very softly to weave the spell. First she needed to create the world in which the girl would move. “Keep looking into the crystal. Keep looking into its depths. Can you hear me, Ana?”

“Yes.” The response did not alter her concentration on the stone. This had been one of the points that Don Eusebio had made; it was now that the point of the spell could be introduced, while all of her heart and mind were fixed to the front, through a small unguarded side door to the soul.

“You see the sky of Heaven. It sparkles and shines. The clouds are all the colors of the rainbow and among them walk many beautiful angels, some in pure white, and some in armor of dazzling silver. Can you see them?”

“Oh yes.” The girl’s voice was a whisper, as though she were afraid to be caught spying on these citizens of Heaven.

“It is quite alright, my child. They are very glad that you can see them. Look deeper.” Lucia kept gently rotating the fine chain upon which the crystal hung, causing the facets to flash and shimmer in the light of the candle upon the table. The tiny kaleidoscopic vision was infinitely different, yet never really changing. “Now we can begin to see the world as well. It’s alright, though you may see fearful things, God wants you to see these things so that you can help Him. Do you understand?”

“Yes, to help God.”

“Good, good. You will see a fortress, a mighty city. It sits on a hilltop and it has high walls all around it.” Estraach sat upon the highest point for miles around, otherwise the tunnels,

indeed the walls themselves, would have been subject to the drip and flow of the nearby lowlands of Holland. “On the walls, there are not men, no, not men, but demons of the devil himself. Their fires and armor and terrible infernal machines.”

“Oh.” The tiny gasp let Lucia know that the girl was seeing what she wanted her to see. As Lucia’s voice droned on, Ana was away flying above the walls of the dark city, and just below her she could see the horrible misshapen forms of the demonic guards on the towers. She could see the cauldrons of horrible sulphurous liquid, boiling and ready to be poured on the heads of any mortal soul who dared to assail the fastness. She could see the dim light off the blades of the cruel weapons. There were skeletons walking amongst them, giving orders and snapping whips this way and that and each whip was a thin strand of fire.

“It’s alright, Ana. Remember this: you are invisible to these demons unless you look them directly in the eye. Otherwise, they cannot see you. If you do not look into their eyes, they cannot see you and you may pass safely among them. Do you understand?”

“I’m invisible, they can’t see me. I must not look into their eyes.”

“Good, that’s right. Ana, in the fortress, there is one man, a particular man.”

“A man.” Lucia said nothing for a moment, for she wanted the heart of the girl to turn first to the idea before she filled in the mind with the details of the spell.

In the dark recesses of the grim stone below, Ana caught glimpses of red, coal-like eyes searching the sky. She was almost transfixed by these but at the last second she remembered that she must look away, like Lot looking away from the destruction of the Cities of the Plain. She was both terrified, and yet fascinated by the fortress, with its hideous and grotesque soldiery.

What had Lucia said? A man. Not a demon, a Man. Nothing she could see on the battlements looked human, so if there was a man, he must be in one of the rooms, or one of the

towers. Ana's spirit floated above the center of the town, where she saw pits full of sickening concoctions out of the sides of which the demons gathered to feed. She could hear the wail of anguished voices, and the screams of pain of people who were literally being cooked alive and eaten there, some on great spits and some struggling and flailing about in the horrible soup. She hoped the man for whom she searched was not among them, for there would be little she could do to help him. This thought filled her with more apprehension and she floated on, now coming lower, always avoiding the eyes of the guards of the city. She came to a doorway she knew would lead into the maze of galleries inside the walls. It yawned darkly, like death itself, and a cold sickly breeze, which was terror to the touch, came from it. Lucia could see the fine hair stand up on the girl's arms, and she could see her pupils dilate slightly. Now was the time, she thought.

"Ana, can you hear me?"

"Yes." She remained frozen, her gaze fixed upon the stone, however.

"Ana, that is far enough. You must come back now."

"But I think he is here."

"I know. But you must come back now. You will be sent back again, I promise. God promises it. You will go back to save him."

"Then he is a good man?" This was strange, thought Lucia, that the girl would question, even from within the spell. Eusebio had said nothing of this, so she had to think quickly.

"Yes, Ana. He is the only good man. The last good man in the fortress. He is held there by a demon that he will name "Duty." God wants you to save him, wants you to bring him back out of the fortress and lead him back to us. In paradise."

"Paradise. Lead him back to Heaven."

Lucia was ecstatic at this turn of things, and she did not wish to go further in this session.

“Ana, you must come back now. When I take the light away you will awaken and be back here with me. But you will remember.”

“I will remember.”

Lucia kept the crystal spinning, but with her calloused fingers, she snuffed out the candle, which gave its facets such light and depth. Ana remained frozen for an instant, and then frowned slightly in puzzlement. Then she blinked and was back in the little room with the old woman who smiled so benignly at her. She had already skipped far ahead of where she dared hope, simply following the heart and soul of the girl.

* * *

Just as darkness around the Spanish camp protected the Dutch scouts who nightly sallied out of the city to serve as spies and sentinels, so too, it hid many watching eyes and silent agents of D’Ugarte’s army. There were some, like the nightly horseback patrols that were obvious. These hulking, jangling clusters of men on their great war horses swept around the walls, just out of small arms range at regular intervals, day and night. Their mission was supposedly to hunt down any of Estraach’s ghostly skirmishers who came outside the walls. Usually, the Dutch could elude detection, however, through the simple expedient of lying perfectly still in the dark. Cloaked and painted in the dull colors of the field, these rangers were as safe as one could be in the killing ground between the two armies. Unless they had the great bad luck to find themselves directly in the crushing path of a patrol, as long as they maintained their nerve and did not look up at the passing troops, to be given away by the shape and whiteness that is singular to the human eye, they went about their business of gathering information, sabotage, and waging psychological warfare against the Spaniards.

The Spaniards on their part had similar skirmishers, some of who secretly lay, with almost reptilian patience, as close as a stone's throw from the walls of the city. In several of the waves of assaults, there had been special troops, whose duty it had been not even to attempt to scale the walls, but rather to dig shallow, coffin-sized pits in which to lay, covered completely with a pre-fashioned camouflage roof of grass and dirt built up on a light wooden frame. These few troops were swept in with the waves of clamor, and when the assaults were broken and thrown back, they were left, invisibly installed, after the dead had been dragged away. Perhaps eight or ten of them, scattered at irregular intervals, watched all the intimate activity up on the walls. They were invisible in their cocoon-like foxholes, covered from view as they slept all through the daylight hours, emerging after darkness fell to collect information and spread confusion where they could. Though their own patrols occasionally crashed through the roof of one of these flimsy emplacements, the almost continual presence of these horse patrols on the edge of the field made it almost impossible for the Dutch to come out and spend the time they would have needed to search out and extirpate all of these nests of spies.

One of the best of these "mud lizards," a small wiry man named Gironte, had been in such a position, undetected, within twenty yards of a small postern gate in the east wall for nearly two months. He only left the area entirely once a week or so, to refill a large skin of water he needed, and to drag it, and perhaps a slab of jerked beef, back down into the hole. This was always done in the middle of the darkest part of the night. The rest of the time, he lay silent, watching and listening as the rare clandestine traffic of the night occasionally came and went through the little door, no wider than would allow one man at a time. The door was thick and backed completely with iron strips, and had only a tiny hole at eye level to see out, and through

which to give and receive passwords. These changed every night. To give the wrong password or countersign could mean a swift death.

Though it was essential that there should be a way in and out for the Dutch rangers without having to open the great gates every time, Dupuys and the captains before him who had built the small gates had been sufficient students of military history to realize the risk that any such aperture posed. It was only because they slipped through a small defile above the main “hot gates” of Thermopylae that the Persians had been able to best Leonidas and his legendary Spartans.

Legend also had it that, in 1453, the Grand Turk had been on the very point of giving up the siege of Constantinople and accepting a frustrating defeat, when the existence of just that kind of small gate was betrayed to him. With that knowledge, and a well placed bribe, his Janissaries were able to spring upon the defenders within, leading to the final fall of the most heavily fortified place the world had ever seen, whose walls had protected her for a thousand unbroken years.

With these lessons in mind, the small gate at Estraach had been built with a special feature for its rapid blockade. Immediately above the gate, and much wider and higher than the opening itself, sat poised a great mass of masonry. These stones were positioned in a cradle such that, in spite of their bulk, cutting only a couple of stout rope would bring the whole mass down, totally and instantly obliterating the gate, and anyone who might be coming through it at the moment. Duty manning the wall required that one keep one’s ear to the door so to speak, and this post was, of necessity, directly under the precariously balanced potential avalanche. It was obviously not a popular duty. It was also isolated and tedious, watching hour after hour, on the

off chance that one of the skirmishers might come in with important news, as they had on the night of D'Ugarte's ill-fated attack of brain fever.

At least since Gironte had taken up station on the outside of the door, every third night the inside of the door was manned by a soldier named Smits. Gironte knew this because, sometimes having taken most of the night to crawl the twenty yards to put his ear to the door, he had learned much about matters that even the Dutch themselves would have passed off as trivial matters. Though he had many times been in range to throw his dagger in the darkness and kill one of the retuning rangers, this was not the basic nature of his mission. His chief skill lay in patience and sharp ears.

He had heard the guard change, and their names and even the pattern of the passwords as people used them to enter the door, even though he certainly did not have access to the new words each night. But he knew who was on guard each night, and he came to know the pattern of their moving about, and when they were most still, most likely nodding off in the dull silence behind the door. Though none of this information seemed especially important in itself, it was Gironte's job to pick up such scraps as he could.

Then one night, as Gironte had slithered back to the river and was filling his water bottle, a strong hand shot out of the darkness and clamped down on his shoulder. The small man tried to twist away reflexly, expecting his next breath to be his last taken through an intact windpipe, when he heard the familiar voice of a sergeant he knew.

"Whoa, Gironte, whoa! You must be slipping. I could have slit your scrawny throat."

"Phah!" Gironte spat in disgust. "Your jokes are not very funny. One day I might just slip up and kill you and see how you like that."

“I doubt I would like it very much, lizard,” the man laughed. “But come with me now. We’ve been waiting for you to come back to get water. You’re wanted.”

“Wanted? Wanted for what? By who?” It was as natural as a bird having wings for a man like Gironte to have suspicions of everything that happened, or might be going to happen.

“The big man himself,” said the sergeant, with no small touch of awe in his voice. Gironte cringed involuntarily. He would be happier, he was sure, if he could just crawl back down in his hole. “Don’t know what about. But it’ll be your flogging and mine if we don’t double time it over there right now. That’s the orders, ‘Soon as you were found.’”

Until he got among the bright lights of the torches illuminating the command tent, even Gironte didn’t know how truly filthy he was. He had crawled nearly everywhere he had gone in the last two months, and had had no bath of any kind in all that time. There had been several heavy rains that had left him soaking for hours in the warm mud that formed in his hole.

On more than one occasion, he had been caught out under the eyes of unsuspecting guards lounging not fifty yards away up on the top of the wall for so long that he had finally had to piss himself where he was rather than move and take a musket ball between the shoulder blades. In these cases, there had been little doubt about what he must do, for such operatives as he were considered spies, not properly soldiers at all. If he gave himself away by moving, and was taken, he could expect slow torture to serve as an example to others like him, before they finally cut off his head, or perhaps just pitched him off the walls with a short rope around his neck. For fellows like Gironte, a little dribbling of piss was no great violation of the social code.

Horacio D’Ugarte was the perfect commander for such a man. He didn’t even pause for a second to comment on the appearance, or even the smell. To Horacio there was nothing in front of him more or less than a weapon, a slender dagger that he might use for some thrust to the ribs

in the dark. The fouler and muddier the man, the more he appeared to be a piece of the earth, risen and having taken the parodied shape of a soldier of D'Ugarte's, the better the Bloody Captain liked it.

"Ah, sneak! Finally they've found you. I have an important job for you, sneak. Do it well, and I may let you walk around on the earth, instead of eating it. You might even get to own some of it. You'd like that, wouldn't you, sneak?"

"Yes my Captain." Gironte gibbered. He knew that this was his best chance in life. If there had been a point to all the years of soldiering as a piece of baggage, of lying about in the mud, gleaning the tiniest droppings of the enemy so that one day he might be just the mouse to scare the elephant, it was coming now, he could tell. But the Bloody Captain's gaze was terrifying. D'Ugarte could see the man's ferret-like eyes glittering underneath the crust of honest earth.

"Good, good," he purred, "I have a letter to get to someone inside the fortress, can it be done?"

"If in the open, certainly, my Captain," began Gironte, "If in secret, well, we'll have to see..." D'Ugarte's head snapped up, his jaw suddenly clenched, "...but I think I know how it might be done, my Captain," Gironte added quickly. He was now sweating so profusely that some of the clay on his face was dripping to the carpet-covered ground around his feet.

"It is to be in secret, sneak. And as far as your 'maybes', maybe I won't let you walk around on the ground after all, maybe I'll put you all the way under it, without benefit of even killing you first. How would you like that, sneak?" Horacio's voice was still calm, but those around him knew that he did not deal well with failure of his pet projects, or even being told of

potential complications. They could see a slight hint of sinister anger touch his eyes at the very thought.

“Of course, my Capitan. Of course, it will be done. You have only to command me.”

Gironte’s physical groveling carried over into his infrequent intercourse with people, especially his superiors. He knew he had only two alternatives now: either carry out what D’Ugarte charged him with, or make a clean and quiet escape as soon, and as far, as possible. But Gironte was no fool. He knew he now played a dangerous game, between death and riches.

D’Ugarte had sent the rest of his staff away, and in a half hour, if one had been watching very closely, they might have seen the faintest trace of Gironte’s passage out of the camp, a shadow passing among shadows back through the darkness toward his accustomed station near the postern gate.

Gironte, the secret sentinel, waited there silently, sleeping away much of the next two days, until old Smits was to be back on duty. He had fixed upon Smits as his target because, in his eavesdropping, he believed he had found the weakest link out of all the others. It was there, thought Gironte, in the tone of his voice. Smits was older than the others for one thing, and for another, carried a slight trace of the foreign about his speech. Perhaps he was Bohemian, thought Gironte, but certainly not one of the fanatical native-born Dutchmen, or even the usually stalwart Germans. Besides this, there was simply the fact that Smits’ voice reminded him of his own, as it wound on through his mind every third day and every third solitary night, his only company, and unknown to Smits at that. Gironte could imagine himself, or at least someone with “their” common voice, doing what he needed Smits to do, being just what Smits needed to be. On more and more frequent occasions when he listened after the guard commanders had gone away and left Smits alone, he had been able to discern the old man’s nasal voice, grumbling and grouching

in the dark behind the door. Smits muttered to himself, and unknowingly, to Gironte, about the ill treatment he had received, the bad assignments he was always stuck with, like the one “under this devil’s trap door.” But above all, he repeatedly moaned about how wretchedly poor he was. “Damned Dutchmen, let a fellow work hard enough for him, risk his neck, but damned if they pay him what he’s worth.”

Gironte waited until the deep watches of the next moonless night. Even then, he exercised more care in his approach to the door than he ever had before. It was not only his life at stake if he failed, but if he did his part well, he reasoned in his limited way, he might even finally be made a corporal.

Gironte could not read, so to open D’Ugarte’s small paper note himself would not have yielded him any particular advantage in information. Such things were above him anyway, he told himself, matters for high muckety mucks.

He knew nothing of the messengers who had been arriving at D’Ugarte’s tent with increasing frequency as the siege dragged itself out, messengers from an even higher muckety muck, the Emperor himself, back in his palace in Madrid. It might have gratified Gironte, “the sneak,” to hear Horacio called in his turn to nervously account for himself.

Though the sneak knew nothing of the other plans that “The Old Woman,” Lucia, was hatching herself even at that moment, away in the mountains, he certainly would have agreed with the logic of this message, her son’s most recent plan. Had he been consulted in the matter of Dupuys, Gironte would certainly long ago have suggested a straightforward Christian bribe or two.

Now he had made his stealthy way to the small gate, and listening for over an hour, convinced him that the heavy footfall he heard was Smits’, and that it was the only boot that trod

the post at that hour. From his belt, he pulled the small leather bag that D'Ugarte had also given him along with the parchment. He considered the weight of it and the satisfying texture in his hand. He was sorely tempted to simply put it back in his belt, discard the message, and silently decamp, north, south, east, or west. After all, men disappeared every night, some in the line of duty, others, not. But as he considered the promise that D'Ugarte had made him, not the one about promotion or reward, but the other one, about failure or treachery, his resolve was again firmly fixed for him. There were too many uncanny stories about the length of D'Ugarte's arm, and the highly unpleasant power of the hand at its end. This did not, however, stop the sneak from removing one coin from the purse, biting down on it to check the soft texture of gold, and sticking it into the depths of his own crusted tunic. Listening for a moment more, and unconsciously sniffing the slight breeze, Gironte approached the small opening of the door. He waited until he heard the footsteps coming closest again, and then softly he shook the pouch, jingling the coins in it. As that tiny sound rose clearly on the still air, the steps stopped abruptly.

"Hey!" whined the voice, "Who goes about there?" It was indeed Smits' thin voice, so Gironte knew that so far at least the plan was going well.

"Smits and riches," he whispered.

"Eh? What? Who goes there, I say? Stop fooling around. What's the right password?" Gironte was wrapped in the shadows as his heart pounded, expecting a musket ball to take his head off in the next instant. But softly and clearly, he gave his answer to the challenge, "Gold." At this, the tiny shutter of the peep-hole opened and Gironte could see only the questing eye of Smits filling it, as though it was the door itself that was a living thing, searching for him now.

Dupuys noticed the small piece of parchment on the floor as he opened the door of his quarters. As the entire city wall was manned, there was no specific guard at his own door, so

there was no one to tell him from whence it had come. He looked back down the short passageway, out toward the battlements, but saw no one waiting for a reply or a response to whatever the note might contain. Even before he had opened it, however, he had generally surmised what it represented. Even in a world where whole cities, indeed whole countries, were up for bid, the size of the bribe the Spanish were offering him was truly staggering. Quite literally, as Dupuys calculated, D'Ugarte's offer, in gold bullion and on the Emperor's holy oath of guarantee, was worth more than the whole town of Estraach and its contents, including the trade revenues for several years. The premium that D'Ugarte was willing to pay, Dupuys knew, was for the honor that taking the town would yield, and for the subsequent increase in D'Ugarte's reputation for consistent victory, whatever the objective, whatever the means. It was also for the chilling effect that the fall of Estraach, especially under such circumstances, would have on the supposedly solid allied front of the Dutch and the French in opposing Spain. Mostly however, Dupuys surmised, it was a desperate attempt to appease King Philip with a victory before the imperial wrath grew unmanageable.

Dupuys chuckled to himself as he took off his belt and his stiff leather tunic. He read the note again, as a woman might read an open declaration of desire from a man who wasn't quite whom she wanted. The chuckling, the shaking of the head were to cover over the natural appeal to vanity, necessary for the civilized man to stamp out the tiny spark of simple greed. Even a strong individual was not strong every minute, and danger lay in even stopping for a moment to consider. It was in moments such as that throughout time that history had been changed. This time, the moment quickly passed, however, and Dupuys pitched the paper carelessly in his own small chest of personal things.

He noted with satisfaction that, while the several bags of gold coin that he kept there in the small brassbound casket were not the thousandth part of the bribe, they would still represent a great fortune to any common soldier, or even, for that matter, all but a few of the better connected officers. As he picked up and read the bribe proposition again, his other hand holding the lid of the chest up for a moment, he considered happily that the gold he already had would not require trusting King Philip, or even more problematically, the honesty and honor of Horacio D'Ugarte.

Dupuys lay on his cot in the quiet summer night, his thoughts roaming as he sweated and tossed. The bribe did not seriously intrigue him, though any man would think about the aspects of such an offer, even if he didn't mean to take it. In fact, however, his thought would have been less restless if he had had anything as concrete as the bribe to focus them. Sleep was never peaceful repose for a man in his position, but nonetheless a necessity, like plain rations. He stared up at the darkened ceiling, like a hundred others at which he had looked, and he listened to the muffled sound out on the battlements with which, after so many years, he was deadly familiar.

His mind fluttered for some place to land, some niche in the cliffs of the darkness that seemed to rise all around him. He sensed a presence on all the ledges, cold reptilian eyes waiting for him to come to them. He felt he had wings, but now the more he flapped and fluttered, he only became more tired, with no place in sight to rest. In all directions, there were only the hard stone, lidless eyes, and the deep blackness. He felt the terror that keeps any bird, no matter how strong its wings, from flying blindly into the dark. The dream passed, and he was lucky that night. He had five hours of uninterrupted sleep and, when he woke, there was faint morning light

abroad in his windows, and the walls of his chamber were already cleansed of the black wash of night.

Three days passed and the routine of the besieged garrison went on. In spite of their success so far, rations were low, tempers tended to be high, and maintaining discipline a constant duty. After ordering a young Dutch soldier flogged for stealing a part of his mess mates' ration of bread, and supervising the punishment, Dupuys was pensive as he stood on the walls. It had been necessary, there had been no question, but he reflected that it was beginning to seem to him that the only thing worse in life than to be subject to command was to have to command others.

Perhaps, he thought, he could understand it better if it was his land, or his family, or anything he could hold on to after the issue between the warring sides had been settled. He was trapped between the two worlds; he no longer saw his duty as anything more than a professional requirement, debts which he owed only to his own self-respect. But he had accumulated those debts much like Gironte had accidentally and incidentally accumulated his coating of gray earth, slowly, with the passage of time in the natural course of his occupation, and they made a long and heavy ledger.

He considered that if the city fell, he would surely be dead and the questions pointless. But if, as it appeared possible, the city held and the siege was eventually broken, what then for Dupuys? Another foreign city somewhere to defend? Or would he be on the outside next time? Would he be the fretting surgeon, with some other anonymous city the patient, strapped down and pitiful? Would he look for a way to slip in the scalpel and lance yet another pustule on the face of old Europe?

He turned and went back into his quarters. There on the stone floor he found another of the tiny parchment notes, like the one that had carried the bribe of gold just days before. This one

offered a title of nobility, with a huge domain in the north of Spain. It, too, carried guarantees in the name of the Emperor. Dupuys thought of his own properties away in France and although his thoughts were wistful, he knew deep in his heart that in no more than a few months, the trodden, centuries-old routine there would surely become cloying to him. When he had been there in the past he had found that most of the work was done by long established custom and routine, very difficult to change, even if the times might call for it. Everyone had been friendly enough, but by now he was a stranger even to his brother, and all the rest of his family had died over the long years of his military works. He tossed the note on the table, where it lay without his notice for the rest of the day.

That night, he had another clear dream; it was not just a disconnected image of feeling, but as real and as colorful as any market town festival Mystery Play put on by some local wool merchant's guild. Dupuys was standing by a river, broad but shallow. It glittered like a golden fabric in the reflected sunlight as it surged over its rocky bed. Just as he started to wade in to make his way across, he heard a hissing voice call out to him to stop. There at the edge of the water was a snake, livid and poisonous, but the snake seemed to have the face of an old woman.

"Help me cross! Help me cross! I cannot cross the water without help, and I'll starve here," said the serpent most piteously.

"But if I touch you, you'll bite me," Dupuys heard himself protest.

"Oh no, Sir. I won't. No, I won't. I promise you I won't," assured the small coiled apparition with all sincerity in its voice. Watering down his caution with pity, Dupuys took up the reptile and waded on across the river. All was well as they were in the middle of the stream itself, but just as he set foot on dry land on the other side, the serpent struck like lightning,

sinking its dripping fangs into his neck. With his dying breath, Dupuys said, "But you promised you wouldn't bite me. You gave your word!"

"That's true enough," came the reply of the serpent, now grown huge and sliding toward him, "But then you knew I was a serpent when you picked me up." In his dream he lapsed into his final agony as the hissing sound of its voice and its laughter faded in his ears and its great maw opened to swallow him into darkness. When he awoke, it was early light and the night's prickling fever had passed. He went about his duties that day with no further thought of the Spanish bribes.

* * *

Still far to the south, Dona Lucia's coach was flying toward the embattled town again. She had brought Ana with her. The coach was large, with a soft bed inside for the girl, and with the sleeping draughts Lucia gave her, they avoided having to stop to rest or to eat at any of the common roadside inns for even a night. The horses were driven nearly to death and changed only at quiet country stations with few people about.

Lucia sat next to the one window in the big, closed traveling coach and gently, quietly, edited the views of the world that the girl had. The window always seemed to be shut when they went through a village, and the silent coachmen knew that their mistress wished to time their passage through areas of larger towns and cities either by routes around the towns themselves, or else, as in the case of Paris, in the dead of night, near three or four in the morning. That image, of a great jumbled pile of darkened and forbidding buildings, with empty, echoing, refuse piled streets and only the occasional drunkard or maniac abroad, simply reinforced the image in Ana's mind that "Satan had taken over."

Lucia had continued to reinforce the spell at the few stops where the horses were rested and the coach was still, usually on a desolate stretch of road. Again and again, she would have Ana stare into the small crystal in the light of a candle flame. She wove the spell slowly but inexorably toward its object.

“Can you hear me?” she asked, at the beginning of one of these later sessions.

“Yes.” The girl, now accustomed to the methodical prelude was quickly transfixed. Lucia took her on yet another inward journey in which she entered the satanic fortress of Estraach. Again, in her mind, she walked among the demons, ghouls, and the garrison of rotting, yet still writhing corpses, that manned the walls until she came again to the dark hallway she had seen before.

“Now, Ana, you must go in. You must find the man. You will know him when you find him.” Lucia had seen Dupuys from a closed sedan chair on the edge of the field of Estraach. She had had a large telescope, ironically one of the best Dutch models of the new invention, brought to her and set up there to watch Dupuys when he was on the walls. She had had a fat little court portrait painter brought from his safe, comfortable sinecure in Madrid to do a number of colored sketches of her enemy, and she had noted every feature of Dupuy’s face and carriage.

Now during these spells she had drilled the images of Dupuys into Ana’s deepest pockets of memory. She would know the man when she saw him like she would know a brother, though she would have no conscious idea of why she had such familiarity.

Finally, after a week of constant travel, they arrived at the siege works of Estraach. They approached the encampment with the window closed, and the coachmen pulled the large, jet-black lacquered vehicle up so that the door was almost directly against the opening of Lucia’s tent.

The bloodstains of the dead Germans had long ago been expunged, and if one didn't know better, upon seeing the inside of the tent, with its newly hung tapestries of saints and martyrs, with its crucifixes on each of the tent poles, and with its small niche with its new shrine to the Holy Virgin, one would have thought more of a convent than of the de facto command center of a mercenary army. The muffled sounds of the camp were strange to Ana as she went to sleep that night. All through the next day, while a female servant saw to her needs, two large, impassive guards made the door to the tent off limits to the girl. She nonetheless had the sense of something impending, as though the view of the outside world would have been filled with ominous roiling clouds, coming down on her like the storms that had raged the night her mother had died, and again when Lucia had come to take her away from her sister and bring her here. She thought about Teresa and hoped that she wasn't too frightened being alone. This was perhaps the only specific worry that she had. Only that and the sad concern about Teresa having to go through the long, slow death that Ana was sure awaited her, like their mother, unless she could still somehow bring about a miracle of God's mercy and save her.

Then, as the heat of the day broke and the guards lit the lamps inside the spacious tent, Lucia returned. Horacio was with her, wearing fine clothes, and his hair was at least somewhat combed, pulled back with a dark ribbon. Lucia introduced him only as her son. She had instructed Horacio that he must be as gentle as a lamb and every inch a Gentleman of the Holy Forces.

But Horacio, being Horacio, could not help but look over the girl in a way that Lucia knew was not in any way holy. She quickly finished the introduction and shunted Horacio over to the other side of the tent as she sat Ana down at a small camp table.

“It is now time for the last part of your training to help God.” They both took up their occasioned positions, except that this time, when Lucia held up the crystal, she had another, exactly the same size and shape, by its side.

“This, child, is your charm. It will help you to do what God wants you to do.” When Ana was deeply in the spell again, Lucia put the other crystal, with its own chain, in her hand and said, “Ana, now it is you who must cast the spell. You will use your own crystal, just as I have shown you. Do you understand how....exactly as I have shown you, exactly as we have done it these many times?”

“Yes, Mama Lucia.”

Dona Lucia was annoyed that Horacio could not contain his wolf-like gaze at the girl’s profile for even so long as these few minutes. In fact, his voice suddenly broke from the silence, like a mule braying at Mass. He asked with seeming impatience, “And Eusebio said the people are, what, out of touch, can’t hear, right?”

“My son,” said Lucia in a voice that was calm, but in which Horacio failed to detect the venomous significance, “He said it seemed so, but then, who is to say?”

Horacio did not take the hint, and bulled on, at least, however, dropping his voice to the level of a stage whisper. “But why do we think the spell will work on Dupuys? He is no weak-minded fool, or for that matter, what assurance do we have that she will even go to him? You have the sister, right? Perhaps if we told Ana that, if she doesn’t come back to us, with the Commander, her precious little sister dies a sudden death...?” Lucia’s eyes glared furiously at the indiscrete young man, but Ana continued her deep breathing and her gaze continued into the profound depths of the crystal. There was no blink of the eye, or wavering of attention.

“Ah, you see, Mother? Eusebio was right.” Then with a lascivious laugh he muttered, “Perhaps I could make something interesting of this, after she is through with our friend Dupuys? Something like Eusebio? He may be an old goat, but he’s no fool.” Again he chuckled under his breath and his eyes fixed upon the regular rise and fall of the soft flesh of Ana’s shoulders. This was too much for Lucia. “Ass!’ she hissed, “Do not, at this late hour, put a cross on this spell.” She regained her composure quickly and went on. “My son,” she said now, slowly, but with a voice full of steel under tension, “You must be quiet now. It is time for God himself to speak to Ana, to give her His will, that it should be done.” Horacio, from his corner, rolled his eyes and might have laughed out loud, but Lucia transfixed him with her basilisk stare and went on. “God alone knows what might happen to the sacrilegious man who might presume to interfere.”

Horacio was grudgingly silent.

Now Lucia spent many more minutes getting Ana much deeper into the spell than she had ever been, guiding her soul into the castle, describing what she had seen when she had studied Dupuys and again showing her the sketches she had had made.

“This is the man, Ana. The only Godly man left in the city. Your crystal will cast a spell upon him, as one has been cast upon you, to make him invisible to the demons. And then, Ana, using the crystal, you are to cast a spell upon him so that he will come back with you, out of the fortress, so that he will come back here...to Paradise.” Again, Horacio rolled his eyes, but remained silent. “That is what God wants. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” The spell was far heavier on the girl than it had ever been.

“You will awaken now, but you will remember.” She blew out the candle that caused the facets of the crystal to shimmer. Suddenly, Ana blinked her eyes and breathed deeply for the first time in minutes. She looked up to find Lucia and Horacio both smiling benignly at her.

Soon it was totally dark outside, and as Lucia walked from the tent, she could see only the occasional silhouette of a figure here and there among the tents of the camp. Lucia had had Horacio clear the area around for some distance, so that the girl would not see the common and profane nature of “God’s Army.” As they reached the edge of the field of Estraach, the great dark mass of the city became discernable in the gloom ahead.

“Oh!” gasped Ana, “It is the fortress I have seen.”

“Yes, my child, yes,” soothed Lucia, supporting the girl lest she should quail and flee now, under the very walls of this place which, in her mind, was a projection of Hell itself on Earth. “You will have a guide,” the old woman said.

“Mama Lucia, you will come with me?” Ana asked hopefully.

“No, my place is here where I will wait for you. Another will see you to the gate. You must not fear him. He is a friend.” The old witch kept the surface of the spell even and smooth by troweling on reassurances such as these. They were also to prepare Ana for the next apparition.

Suddenly, it seemed to Ana, but to Lucia simply on schedule, Gironte, the earth- man, in his casque of dried mud appeared, literally as from the ground itself. It was clear that even with Lucia’s preparation, Ana was quite taken aback, and she clung to the old woman’s arm at the miraculous sight.

“You will go with him,” Lucia’s voice was calm and soothing. “He will lead you to the wall.” Then she turned again to Ana and held up her crystal. “Do you have your own Holy Stone?”

“Yes,” the girl pulled the chain from between her breasts and matched Lucia’s stone. The two crystals caught the faint starlight and the tiny red dots of campfires away back in the camp.

In the profound darkness, while Gironte the mud man waited silently, Lucia gave the girl a final benediction and instruction.

“Look again into the crystal now. See the tiny lights, red and white, shining far inside. You will remember your mission for God and you will remember all I have told you about the fortress. Remember, you must never look the devil in the eye. As long as you don’t, you will be protected. Go now, and bring the Man to safety.”

Now it seemed to Ana that she was walking in a black void, without dimension of earth or sky, with the soldier of earth guiding her cautiously toward an even blacker shade ahead. Stopping and sitting quietly every few minutes with their cloaks wrapped about them, they took a long time to cross the few hundred yards of the field surrounding Estraach.

Finally, they approached a high wall, and she saw a tiny doorway in it, Gironte guided her to the side of the small archway. Putting his caked face to the small square opening in the center of the door, he quietly spoke the prearranged password, “Silver!.”

Ana heard a heavy tread and, in a moment, the small door swung slowly open. The door warden hidden in the darkness inside took some care to keep the squeaking of the hinges quiet. To Ana, however, the small sound it nonetheless made was the faraway cry of a damned and lost soul.

Gironte took her by the arm and pushed her through the door to the waiting Smits. To Ana, she had been placed in the hands of a great gross demon of Satan’s guard. She could see no face in the darkness, and it was her imagination and the spell’s effect that painted in the picture. She recoiled against the door until she heard the terrible fanged mouth say simply, “Come.” Her instinct was to look further in terrible fascination at this horrible being, beyond the scaly hands and the leathery hide, above the slavering jaws, to dare to look upon its face, but Lucia’s admonition came as though in her ear, and she avoided looking into the demon Smits’ eyes. She

followed the heels of his boots, her cloak over her head and her eyes on the ground in front of her.

Soon they passed into the proper town itself, she saw other shapes, some passing close by, some garishly illuminated by harsh firelight, but she found that as long as she followed Smits and did not look up into their eyes, she was not challenged; the spell indeed made her invisible.

As she walked down a long path, up a flight of stone stairs on the wall and onto the battlements, she had the vague sense of flying she had felt before with Lucia. As they passed, with her head kept down, she heard her demon guide speak to other soldiers, low guttural salutation and explanation, which she only sensed concerned her. These guards laughed lasciviously but did not bar their way.

From the height of the wall, without seeing directly into their glowing red eyes, she could observe a band of devils clustered and dancing around a fire below. What they had, skewered on a spit, she dared not guess. The smell of roasting flesh that drifted up to her was suddenly nauseating. She remembered her mission, however, and walked on, soon coming to the very hallway she had seen in her visions.

“Go!” hissed Smits, pointing into the darkness through the archway. “There.” At the end of the short corridor she saw another closed door. As she passed in from the battlements through the portal, she felt the air, which she knew must be hot, nonetheless chill her to the very center of her being. She approached the small door in the dimmest gloom, seeing nothing else, as if it were the only passage into, or perhaps out of, infinity. Hesitating for only the briefest moment to whisper a prayer to the Holy Virgin, she turned the iron handle and gingerly pushed the door open, slipping her slender frame through the merest crack, not daring to open it further. Inside, she quietly pulled the door shut and flattened against it with her back as she surveyed the

sparsely furnished room. At first, by the light of the one dim candle burning on the table she couldn't discern anyone else there. The room however, had a benign feel about it in spite of the implements of war that she saw piled in the corner.

Then she became aware of the presence, though muted, of another human being. Her heart leapt within her because it did feel human, not diabolic and grotesque as those wraiths and slaves of Satan outside had seemed. She knew she was in the right place; she was in the presence of the last godly man in the fortress, the only other human in the city.

She moved quietly to the table and picked up the candle holder. She walked with steps of silk to the side of the small cot, barely daring to breathe as she did so. The light shone down on Dupuys, his arm thrown in sleep across his brow, sweat glistening on his cheeks.

Ana watched him for several minutes, as Psyche must have watched Cupid sleeping, noting the gentle breathing, punctuated once or twice by a soft indiscernible sound that may have been a word or two. She noted the color of the hair, just touched with gray, the shape of his jaw, and the lines which the light and shadow painted on his skin. All of this resonated with some ideal that she felt but could not reason.

She took the crystal from her bosom and, in the almost liquid stillness of the room, the subtle motion of the air as she moved reached Dupuys, touched some guarding sense, and woke him. His eyes opened from yet another troubling dream, but it seemed this time only to have been replaced by another dream, this one beautiful rather than painful.

Often now, his dreams were strange and pointless, like being chained to a huge rock and suffered to simply wait there. Upon what, he never knew, but the power of the dreams lay in their power to actually make him feel, to the marrow of his bones and to the pit of his stomach, the ache and the pang of the long, slow, empty time he was chained.

Now, standing over him was a gentle face. In her hand there seemed to be a glimmering piece of a star. In her other hand, the girls held a candle, and but for this touch of the mundane, Dupuys would have thought her an angel.

Still quiet, lying upon his back, in the state between the waking world and the dreaming, the scintillations drew his mind. Ana saw this and remained silent a moment. Then, as Lucia had seemed to do, she gently twisted the fine chain to make the crystal turn. She caught the rhythm of his breathing with her soft speech. To Dupuys, her voice seemed to come from another place and time, from out of some different silence. “I’ve come to take you away from here,” she said, “You can leave now, with me. God wants you to come with me. He sent me to you.”

Dupuys didn’t move. Into the gently spreading cloud of image that had been growing in front of his eyes to surround the girl like an aura, the image of the loaded pistol under his pillow began to try to form in his mind. The alert, the warning, hung there for a moment, half formed and indistinct, another of those moments of decision, and then suddenly it seemed to him that no matter what, it would be better to let it dissolve away again, and to stay within the image in front of him. It is said that, eventually, the mind is ever the fool of the heart, and what we know ever the slave to what we desire.

He was free; he could feel his arms, his hands, even the lump of the pistol. He knew where he was and that anything out of the ordinary in a town besieged was under pain of immediate death to explain itself. This vision in front of him was certainly out of the ordinary.

Who was she? Not one of the ragged strumpets who had long ago abandoned the city garrison. Nor one of the Dutch officers’ wives or daughters. She spoke to him in French, heavily accented with Spanish. Surely she was an agent, yet so far she showed no sign of violence, and if she was there to kill him, he supposed that she could have done so as he lay sleeping.

So long as he focused on the star shining in her hand, his consciousness wavered, wanting only to fall deeper and deeper into the whole of the scene there before him, just as the edges of that picture had almost washed, silently, subtly to encompass his whole sight, his whole being, something in Dupuys' mind began to clutch for a handhold in reality. It was as though he were already on the slippery slope, however, sliding further and faster down, the spell winning over his will, any desperation in the attempt to save himself growing fainter rather than welling up.

There was one last effort left in him, an undirected try of faith, as he lay still on his back. Still silent, yet unmoved, and now near immobile, his eyes alone were able to travel the distance from the shimmer of the crystal to Ana's eyes. The spell under which Dupuys allowed himself to fall was not the one of Lucia's design. It had little to do with the flashy bauble the girl held in her hand. The spell that turned his heart from one beat to the next was all in her eyes.

For an instant, Ana was afraid to meet such a gaze as his directly, something inside her screaming to turn away. But then this was not a demon, no devil waiting to suck her soul away. This was the Man. Lucia had said nothing to her about avoiding the eyes of the Man. In that instant, there seemed to Ana to be not one pair of eyes, but many: Lucia's, the clay man looking up out of his mask, Horacio's wolf-like stare, Teresa's terrified eyes, the soft, sad eyes of her mother, with the lids draped down in death. It seemed that the whole of her life and history were there in those eyes, and those eyes were all contained in his.

For Dupuys, at the same moment, the girl's eyes, clear and dark, were like a lifeline thrown to a drowning man. So long as he held her gaze, he held his own against the slipping and sliding of the spell. In the moments that passed in the silence, his soul rested in her, and soon he

was able to begin, inch by inch it seemed, to begin to rise back out of the well of the crystal's spell, to make his way back to the reality of the night and the room and the intruder.

Once again, he suddenly became aware of the mass of the pistol beneath him, like some small boat floating blindly and suddenly bumping into a dark shore. He oriented himself to the table and the chair and the pile of arms glinting in the shadow beyond.

"Who are you?," he asked gently. In his voice, Ana found the sounds of the world, just as she found its sights in his eyes.

"My name is Ana."

"Why are you here?"

"I told you. I have been sent by God to lead you out of this place. It is full of demons."

Dupuys started to speak, to correct the girl, but there was an earnestness in her tone, an absolute conviction, which made him, just for an instant, stop and reflect. His memory combed back through everything he knew about the town. The images he could associate with it were all of blood and fire and death. Suddenly, Van Maarten's face, with its leering grin came to him, and he realized that he could not in honesty tell the girl that she was all that wrong. But that still left the girl herself; a mystery.

"Who sent you?"

"God sent me."

"Yes..." he was very careful and clear now, "I believe you. But was there not someone else?"

"Only Mama."

“Your mother sent you to me?” Dupuys was puzzled now. He certainly knew of women who sold or bargained for their daughters, sometimes sending them to great men hoping for a higher price, but this didn’t make sense now.

“Not my real mother, Mama Lucia.” The name startled Dupuys and this tiny reaction of his eyes widening puzzled Ana in turn. “Do you know Mama Lucia? She was very concerned for your sake.”

“I’m certain she was.” Though a part of him shouted to take up the pistol and straightaway put a ball through this young witch’s brain as quickly as possible, another part, the part that remembered how her eyes had saved him, whispered to stay his hand. “Tell me about...your...Mama. Your Mama Lucia, that is.”

“She is a messenger from God. She is helping him to fight Satan since he came and took everything.”

“Took everything?”

“The towns, the fields, the people, everything. He has this fortress, no?”

Again Dupuys gave a considered answer. “Satan is here, there is no doubt about that. But, Ana, no more than he always has been.”

“But I saw his demons from the wall. They are everywhere.”

“Listen to yourself,” he chided gently, “You saw the men of the garrison. They are close enough to the Devil, but still only men.”

“Oh no, they are corpses and demons. I saw them. Mama Lucia said I should be safe as long as I did not look anyone here in the eyes. Anyone but you, that is. Or rather...she didn’t tell me not to look into you eyes.”

“And I’m glad she didn’t.” Dupuys’ look was now a new one for Ana, for it somehow combined the look that she imagined that God himself might have, but oddly mixed with a touch of what she vaguely remembered from Horacio’s gaze. She blushed and stopped, for it was as though the spell, which before had encompassed everything, was no longer large enough. It was not so much that she doubted Lucia, the demons were real and the Man simply mistaken. The fortress was firmly in the hand of the devil, and they were trapped there inside, but suddenly she wasn’t quite sure about what to do next. Concentrating, she brought the spell back around her like a shawl in the cold air.

“We must hurry. Come with me and we can leave. The demons won’t see you if you are with me.”

“Where is it you propose to take me, Ana?”

“To Paradise, to Heaven.”

Again Dupuys considered, and again there was no trace of irony in his voice when he spoke. “No doubt. No doubt, Ana,” he said, now sitting up on the bedside. “But I can’t leave here.”

“But you can,” insisted the girl.

“Even if...,” he began, but then he paused, “Ana, I have my duty here...,” he protested rationally. She cut him off, however, her eyes lighting up as she heard him.

“This ‘Duty’ is only another demon, isn’t he?”

“What?” Dupuys was more and more puzzled by the girl, but he was now sure that there was no trace of guile in her. “Duty is...well...one’s duty is one’s duty.”

“Now listen to yourself,” she smiled as she chided him back. Her face, unlined by care or guilt, or duty, the eyes bright and full of hope, the smile, more real than the very stones around

him, was as eloquent as any battery of lawyers at a drumhead court. Her smile ignited his and for another moment he let himself fall back into her spell.

“Ana, sit down.” He sat up and moved over on the side of the cot, making a place for her.

Looking over her shoulder at the door, becoming conscious again of the faint, harsh noises outside, she protested, “We must go, now, while we can. Oh, please, please come with me now.”

Though Dupuys still didn’t know enough to put the whole of the situation together, certain things were clear; first of all, it was not Paradise, but Horacio’s dungeon that waited anyone outside the walls of Estraach. Second, he was stunned by her bravery. A young girl, apparently alone, had assaulted and won through to the heart of a heavily defended fortress under siege. Third, however it had been done, this girl had been sent on a mission in which she truly believed; there was no guile in her pleas.

Dupuys stood up and shook off the remaining lethargy of sleep. His mind raced now. It was not now, however, to meet a thousand different questions with an answer for each, but rather to weigh a thousand different answers to one question. His thoughts, the images, the knowledge and the experiences and the memories all crowded in upon him. They crowded in upon him, pulling at him in a thousand different directions, pricking him to turn this way and that, as though teasing him and baiting his weary soul. Among these imps were the memories of boon companions, memories of the feeling of power, even the memories of the pleasures of the flesh, which that power could bring. But the goads of these were mostly dull, with little power left in them to sting or cut or even draw his attention.

The strongest however, the one which seemed huge and loomed insurmountably in the path of his heart, was Duty. Ana called this “Duty” a demon, and in this he found that she had perhaps seen more clearly in her innocence than he ever had, or ever would, in his experience.

She had indeed been sent to him, he reasoned, perhaps as his last chance, to leave the fortress before his soul was lost irredeemably to Hell. If he could not leave now, he never could, and if he could ever leave, it was as well now as ever. Ana could see the struggle going on within him, but her innate wisdom was enough to leave him to grapple within himself. She merely stood by, having faithfully delivered her message, and trusting implicitly in its power.

Dupuys turned suddenly to her. Saying nothing, her eyes searched his for the answer and, as she found it, her face lit up again. Once again, her smile, stronger than the scintillations of the crystal, struck deeper than the spell Lucia had planned for him. There was now true, clear light by which he could fly. The wings of his mind now beat strongly upward and straight ahead with no bar or hindrance.

“Ana, I will come away.” Her smile redoubled. He came close to her, towering over her, but she felt no fear of his presence. “Ana, where are the demons?”

“They are all around us, here in the city. We must get back through the door and back to Mama Lucia.” Dupuys considered this silently for a moment.

“Ana, is your Mama Lucia in Paradise now? Did you see the face of God where she was?”

“I...I don’t know. I mean...,” the girl was puzzled, for Mama Lucia’s spell had not explained, only commanded. “No, I don’t think so. She spoke the words of God to me, but...” she had vague flashes of a face certainly not God’s, and words, something to do with her sister it seemed, somehow not like those she would expect to hear from the heavenly throne of mercy.

Neither the face nor the words were clear, but they engendered in her a feeling that brought a moment of doubt. Dupuys, looking into her soul as he closely searched her eyes, sensed this.

“We will go, Ana. We will leave now. And we will try to go directly to Paradise. Do you understand me, Ana? We mustn’t go back to your Mama Lucia, but we will go directly as God himself wills us.” The girl did not speak, her eyes outwardly seeing in front of her the face of Dupuys and feeling it fair, inwardly looking back over the whirl of faces behind her, feeling them somehow foul. Through the whirl of images now flooding her mind, she was suddenly aware of what the young man had said about Teresa and a swift death and was shocked. But as she considered it again, she realized that it might have been God speaking, even through the ugliness of a naked threat to answer the most secret prayers of both the sisters. This, Ana realized, was her last Earthly tie, and as it resolved itself, her mind, and her face, regained a kind of calm serenity. She looked back to Dupuys’ waiting eyes, “Yes, we will go to Paradise. We will go together.”

It took Dupuys only a few minutes to gather a small bundle of the things he thought he would need for a new life. He left such of the gold as would prove an encumbrance, taking enough for their needs and passages, enough to make a new start. He strapped his cuirass over his tunic, but pausing long enough to weigh his sword in his hand, he leaned the long weapon back against the wall, taking only the one pistol, which he stuck through his belt, and a sharp bladed knife. As a last thought, he took from the pile a short bell-mouthed blunderbuss, a primitive shotgun with which he could clear a path if necessary. A thin cloak of dark brown fabric, which he threw around his shoulders, concealed all these things. Ana’s cloak, he observed, with its deep hood, would serve her well.

As he stopped to look around the room one last time, he reckoned from the silence and the feel of the air that it must be the deepest part of the night, and that dawn was still two or three hours or so away yet. Looking at the table and noting his quill and inkstand there, he paused, setting down his burdens for a moment, and using the back of the parchment with the second of the Spanish bribes on it, he wrote;

My Dear Sieur Van Maarten,

Every man has his price, and I find that I have come too near mine. For your sake and mine, I leave, trusting fully that you will be a competent replacement, and that justice will prevail in this conflict.

Dupuys, commander no longer
of any but himself

He left the note leaning against the candle holder, and blowing out the light, he took Ana gently by the arm and guided her in the darkness to the door and out into the fresh air on the battlements.

As they passed back out into the open ways of the citadel, Dupuys could feel the girl trembling, but to her credit she did not hesitate or falter. Indeed, it was she who was leading him, apparently headed back to the small door through which she had entered. He noted that she kept her head completely down, glancing up only as often as she must to keep them on their path. They passed several troops, standing in groups or alone, and each time, Dupuys, whose hand rested lightly on her arm, felt her stiffen as though they offered a terrible threat. But as long as

the troops saw the small cloaked figure was with their commander, they simply followed the pair with their eyes, and in one case, even saluted smartly.

Even then, as Ana's vision showed her that demons' claw swing up out of her field of view, as though perhaps to strike them downward, feeling that the Man with her did not flinch or cower at the movement, she kept her courage up and her head down and hurried on past.

Finally, after what seemed to Ana an age, they came to the darker shadows near the small postern gate. Ana recognized the rough boots of the first devil who had originally guided her to the Man's quarters. Dupuys saw Smits lounging against the side of the door, apparently expecting someone. Smits was shocked to see that the girl, whom he had guided to his commander's quarters, not only hadn't been sent on a simple assassin's mission, but that now Dupuys himself was making as if to exit the gate with her.

Both Dupuys and Smits were aware of the same thing as their eyes met, that now each knew the other to be acting outside the bounds of acceptable military conduct. Therefore, each had a potentially deadly piece of information about the other. Smits knuckled his forehead to Dupuys, who did not make any acknowledgement of this, the last salute he would ever receive, except to say brusquely, "Open it up." He could feel Ana's shoulder tremble as the hinges cried out again faintly in the darkness. This was all terribly strange, even in that strange time and place. But Smits, like his outside counterpart in treachery, Gironte, was above all a survivor and an opportunist. He had received his payment from the Spanish, the coins in Gironte's sack, blind to the end result of his treason. Immediately, when he saw the enormity of that end, his mind raced and was pulled along by the matched pair of opportunity and greed.

The postern gate was set in the eastern wall of the city. As Smits ushered the couple out into the darkness at the base of the wall, Dupuys' first thought was to turn them on a course away

from the camp of the Spaniards, which he could see by its twinkling fires in the distance to their right, or to the south. That way lay the most open part of the battle plain, and the remains of the battle of the tunnels where a long stretch of the earth was sunken in like the surface of a huge grave when the wooden coffin finally rots and gives way underneath.

It was from this direction that Ana knew she had come, and she was suddenly reluctant and slow to follow when he turned his back to that field, heading for the north and the thinner points of the circling Spanish lines. She said nothing, but he could feel the question in the pressure of her hand in his. He took her by the shoulders and gently drew her down to the ground as he himself crouched to present as small a target as possible while they talked now in whispers.

“Ana, you must trust me.” Dupuys now spoke to Ana in her own Spanish. “That is not the way to Heaven.”

“But the light is there,” she pointed out.

“Yes, but it is not the way we must go.” He did not want to argue with her, not while they were still less than fifty yards from walls, which probably carried troops who had orders, his orders, to shoot to kill anything moving about in their field of fire. He held her close around her shoulders, not to overwhelm her, but to bring them close enough to be able to talk without being heard more than six feet away, and so that their combined shape presented something to confuse the eye of sentries accustomed to looking for the characteristic silhouette of one human body, or the signature glint of one pair of human eyes. They talked in the lowest of whispers, huddled together on the dew-dampened ground. It would be dawn soon and they had to make a decision and move upon it.

“Do you believe me, Ana?” Dupuys asked, “If we walk into those lights we will not find Paradise. We will find only your Mama Lucia and her son Horacio and they cannot take us to

God, no matter what she told you. But we can find God, and we can go to Paradise, ourselves.” Even so close that they could feel each other’s breath, in the darkness Ana could see no more of Dupuys than his eyes. These stayed steadily fixed on hers, without so much as a flicker of doubt in them. She took a deep sigh, and a decision, and was on the point of answering when they heard the unmistakable click of a pistol hammer being cocked. They heard Gironte’s voice no more than an arms’ length away where he had crawled up in the darkness.

“Don’t move, Commander. Or rather, move very slowly, to come with me. You have an appointment you cannot miss, yonder. If you try to run away, I think a bullet would make a very big hole in this pretty girl’s pretty back.” They saw Gironte rise again as if a part of the earth had simply welled up, and he moved around to put them between him and the camp, and himself between them and the fortress. Dupuys’ mind was racing to think of a way to deal with the threat. If he tried to pull his knife, the man might shoot Ana, and it was certain that in the silence he could not pull back the hammer of either pistol or blunderbuss without giving himself away. Even if he could manage to shoot or wrestle the mud man to the ground, the guns on the wall above would be alerted, indeed might have already been put on guard by the sound of Gironte’s pistol, and would surely put an end to flight in any direction.

Even if he managed to kill Gironte silently, what then? Go back? How could he explain his presence outside the walls accompanying a woman who spoke practically nothing but Spanish. Ana would not be able to make sufficient answer for herself, and he doubted that even he could answer for her to the suspicious Dutch now.

Suddenly, there was the sound of a blow, probably a knife thrust to the back by the sound of Gironte’s faint, shrill response to it. Then it was Smits’ voice that replaced that of the mud man, “Take that, sneak.”

But Dupuys joyous surprise at the reprieve was instantly quenched when he heard the man hiss, "That's right. Just keep going. I've got the lizard's pistol and he's right about the little girl's pretty back. Get on there. You can see the direction." On the walls, however, there was a sudden set of four or five flashes and Ana could hear a strange sound, which Dupuys knew to be bullets whipping the air around them.

"Now we're for it," said Smits, out loud, "On with you! Hey, out there!," he called into the darkness away from the walls where Dupuys knew the Spaniards must be lying in wait for Ana's, and if they were lucky, his, return. "Hey, ya Spanish buggers, d'ya hear me? Don't shoot, I'm bringing in a captive. A very important captive to trade!"

Dupuys damned the man in his mind. He still had enough of the vestiges of responsibility for his last command to think about the fact that not only was Smits betraying him to the Spaniards, but that the small door must therefore be open and unguarded. It would take but a moment's conversation with this Judas for the besiegers to force that first crack in the defenses of the city, and then Dupuys would truly be responsible for its fall, and for the slaughter of all its inhabitants, just as surely as if he had come out with the keys and placed them in Horacio's grasping hand. He had never meant for such a thing to happen, and along with Smits, he damned himself.

As they heard the first footsteps running toward them from out of the surrounding darkness, and heard the pickets shouting their alarms in Spanish, another volley of lead slugs fired from the wall tore into the ground around them, one snapping through the cloth of Ana's cloak, another just grazing Smits' arm. Dupuys heard the man react with a muttered curse. At that instant, Dupuys whipped around, bringing the butt of the blunderbuss across with a tremendous swing toward where he thought Smits' head would be. His aim was true enough. The

impact threw Smits off balance and the traitor reflexly jerked the trigger of the pistol he held. Dupuys was not struck by the bullet, but the flash, only inches from his face, blinded him for an instant. Smits was wearing one of the half-melon helmets affected by both the Spanish Conquistadors and the Dutch militia of the time, and though the butt of the blunderbuss fetched him up short, it did not knock him senseless as it surely would have without the steel casque.

Smits recovered instantly, and before Dupuys could bring his weapon to bear, he grabbed the Frenchman, trying simply to enfold him, hoping that the rapidly approaching Spaniards would reach them in the next few seconds and help restrain the captive. He hung on to Dupuys with a clumsy bear hug, and his object would certainly have been accomplished if not for the sudden blow that caught him in the back of the neck. Ana had picked up the fallen blunderbuss and, though it was too heavy in her hands for a well aimed blow, she had hefted it luckily in her passion and fear.

Smits let go his hold long enough for Dupuys to knock him to the ground and grab Ana's hand. The Spaniards were all but on them, the darkness suddenly revealing a group of at least four coming hard, straight for them. Dupuys let go of the girl's hand again and stooped to pick up the wide mouthed weapon where it had fallen, cocked the hammer, and praying that the charge had not been dislodged, pulled the trigger. He fired from the waist, there being no time to bring better aim to bear, but that was the purpose of the blunderbuss. A whole fist of lead fingers spewed out in the blast and the four Spaniards were all disabled at one stroke. Dupuys did not wait to see more specific results, but regained Ana's hand and ran as fast as legs would carry them back toward the fortress and the small door, many more Spaniards , as well as the traitor Smits, in hot pursuit.

Guns were now barking regularly off the walls above and they heard and felt a hail of lead slugs whizzing by them from both directions. By the sound of things, even before they reached the comparative safety of the door, Dupuys could tell that a spontaneous assault was developing. He imagined that just about now, someone would be rushing to his chamber, to waken him and, ironically, to tell him what was happening. They would find the note he had left, thus ending any chance he might have now of simply blending back in with the defenders, by saying perhaps that he had already been up and coincidentally near the small door.

And then there was the question of Ana. Even without the note, in order to act as though he had not been about anything unusual, he would have to abandon and deny her. She would almost certainly be hanged out of hand. There was no justice, in such a fate, for one who had come with only one thing in mind: to save him. He hadn't had to consider the whole course for long to understand his only course.

They sprinted back into the doorway and Dupuys was both overjoyed to find it deserted, yet terrified that it was therefore undefended. He pushed Ana on inside the passageway, stopped, and drew his knife. Only a step ahead of the massed pursuit, he turned, slashing through first the left and then the right rope, and leaped on after her.

Just as the door flew fully open behind them, kicked in by Smits, leading and being pushed onward by half a dozen Spaniards, the last fibers of the trap gave way and twelve tones of solid granite came down on them in one mass.

Ana turned back to Dupuys just in time to see the head and left shoulder of Smits, stretched beyond the stone, pinched off the rest of his struggling body. In her mind, such a demonic being was already dead, but as Dupuys tore her stunned gaze away, she was seeing the

claw still grasping after her, the mouth gouting bloody froth still snapping its fangs, and the eyes burning directly into hers, clearly stripping her, for the instant, of the spell of invisibility.

“Run, Ana, run!” Dupuys guided her away and along the base of the inside of the wall. The city was alerted now and the paths and corridors were full of armed and shouting men. Dupuys stopped in a small alcove in deepest shadow under the wall to give them a chance to breathe and to think. They were trapped, with no place outside, nor yet any place inside that was any longer safe for the two of them. Dupuys held Ana, not knowing what else to do, both their hearts pounding in fear and confusion.

“I am afraid we are both in the grave,” he said apologetically.

“No! Don’t say that. God won’t abandon us.” In spite of her terror at the pandemonium all about them, Ana was again calm and steady. “As long as we don’t look into their eyes, they will not see us. We can stay here.” Dupuys saw no need to argue with her, for the truth of the matter would become clear soon enough. There was nothing else he could think of for them to do except wait for discovery, and he hadn’t the heart to make that short time more terrifying for the girl who clung to him now. Indeed, her calm and courage were so admirable that it took his mind off the howling and increased firing that was picking up on the wall above them. The Spaniards on the outside were apparently being drawn in to the smell of blood. A cry had gone about their camp that the wall had been breached, and each man was frenzied by the idea of the plunder and rapine available to the first inside the city. Not understanding yet that the doorway was forever blocked to them, they were coming in disordered waves, crashing wildly in upon one another in chaotic turmoil like a giant insect swarm, increasing their own confusion and, at the same time, that of the Dutch defenders.

Dupuys thought he could faintly hear Van Maarten's voice, barking orders, from somewhere above them, and he thought he heard him demand to know where the Commander was at such a time.

"Give them a load of grapeshot! Rapid fire! Rapid fire! What do they think they are doing!?" Dupuys could hear the new commander giving orders that would maximize what by now must be the terrible and useless slaughter under the wall. "Where is Dupuys!?", he heard it asked and passed on around him in the milling confusion of the battle, "Where is Dupuys!?" He almost smiled to himself at the joke.

Van Maarten's voice rang out again. "Double shot your guns! The fools! What are they about?"

Another voice, probably the acting adjutant, spoke out to be heard by Van Maarten over the din. "Perhaps they are trying another mine and the tunnel fell short again!"

"You would think they would learn!," came Van Maarten's reply, and there was derisive laughter on the walls amid the boom of the guns. "Hey there. Watch for any ladders. Watch for'em."

Dupuys had not heard the end of the banter nor the admonition to watch for the ladders, which he knew weren't coming in any organized assault. His mind had frozen at the word, "tunnel."

"Ana, come with me, we can still get out!" Leading her by the hand, he stayed in the dark shadows near the base of the wall. The troops on the ramparts above were so occupied by the Spaniards outside that the pair passed behind and below them unnoticed. They ducked into a storeroom against the south wall. In the dimness, Dupuys found an old candle holder, and stepping back out to the nearest torch mount to light it, he returned in an instant and pushed the

door closed behind them. In the room was a jumble of tools, powder and shot, and scattered earth. There too was the large wooden platform covering the opening to the Dutch counter tunnel. Dupuys set the candle down and moved Ana to the side. Taking up a pick, he slammed it into the platform, again and again, until he had splintered a small section of it, revealing the opening of the old countermine tunnel. He didn't know how far out of the city it would still take them, but he knew it went at least all the way under the wall before the larger section had caved in.

"We have to go this way," he said, pointing into the absolute blackness of the yawning mouth of the pit. There arose out of it an unwholesome smell, not completely covered by the residual odor of sulfur from the huge explosion that had occurred now some weeks ago. Once again, Ana searched his eyes in the light of the candle and what she saw there gave her the courage to follow him as he dropped into the darkness.

Only a few steps in and they could see that, in many places, the walls had crumbled, leaving the passageway narrow and choked. They scrambled now on hands and knees, Dupuys guarding the precious candle flame from the tiny rock falls and slippages, which, every moment, threatened to bring down a fatal section upon their heads. He readjusted the short blunderbuss slung over his shoulder and wrapped his cloak around him. The hood of Ana's cloak protected her head somewhat from the many small blows of rock and soil falling in the darkness.

As they advanced, they could suddenly feel the earth around them shudder and tremble. "We must be under the wall itself here. Feel the shock of the guns through the stone," whispered Dupuys, not stopping his progress to lecture. Then the sounds were dimmer, as though they were drawing farther and farther from the world they were leaving behind.

The tiny light was fragile, intimate, but their own breathing reminded them of the potential tomb in which they labored, and the air was already becoming fetid and stifling. The malodor grew as their lungs cried for more air. Dupuys and Ana both used their hands to scoop away blocking earth and stones and to ward off constantly crumbling soil. Suddenly, behind them, they heard a soft crushing sound and, seconds later, the air became thick with dust. The opening of the passage had collapsed behind them. For good or evil, they were cut off now and cast out of the fortress of Estraach.

As they struggled on, Ana suddenly barked a short scream and clutched at Dupuys who was in the lead. He swung the candle around to be greeted with the leering face of a corpse, its rotting lips dragged back over broken teeth in pain or in mockery, one of the Spaniards who had been caught in the great explosion. Dupuys continued gingerly to scoop soft dirt out of the floor of the tunnel ahead, and he came more and more often to blasted parts and shredded pieces of the buried troops. He uncovered a short sword and took it from the grasp of a disembodied hand to use as a spade.

Though the passageway was still not totally blocked at that point, by now the air was poisonous and Dupuys knew that, however far they had come from the walls, they must soon reach air or die here silently among the corpses of their unlucky enemies.

“Ana, stay back a little. I’m going to start digging upward here.” Dupuys reckoned that there might be eight or ten feet of earth above them, and his greatest fear now was bringing it all down upon them at once. But, as he began to carefully dig, the earth continually slipped and dropped substantial loads downward; but they were never so great that the two were completely buried. The candle was quickly put out by the scatterfall, however, and the growing foulness of the air. They worked on in the dark, working too hard and having too little air left for much talk.

From time to time, Dupuys could feel Ana reach up and touch his leg, to feel his continued presence. He found this also gave him strength to face the sensation of being buried alive in the dark and so to go on. Dupuys dug above and Ana cleared away below, and like two insects in the substance of a tree they burrowed slowly and carefully on. To avoid pulling the walls of the shaft in, they used the dirt from ahead, once removed, to fill in the shaft behind. Thus they finally found themselves close together, grimed from head to toe to make even Gironte proud, drenched with sweat, crouching for a moment's rest in a pitch black cocoon, just large enough for the two of them. Their breathing was heavy and their heads pounded and they did not know how far they were from the surface. It mattered little at this point what they would find if they broke through. Either they must do so soon, or all their efforts would have been in vain. Dupuys shoved the sword blade up one more time, pushing blindly in between the ribs of the earth, and suddenly the resistance to its point seemed to give way. They were less than three feet from the surface. Dupuys struck again and again furiously, not minding the chunks that fell upon them now, and soon there was a hole above them a foot across which admitted sweet pure air from the world above. Dupuys could also see that there was the faintest trace of light in the sky, just the difference in the jet blackness of this long grave they had traversed, and the faint silver glow in a starry night sky.

After a bit, when their heads had cleared and their terrors subsided, Dupuys said quietly, "We must be careful. And we must hurry or the daylight will catch us out in the open. Just pray we haven't come up in the middle of a nest of cutthroat Spaniards."

"I am Spanish," Ana pointed out quietly, but without admonition. Dupuys paused for an instant, and then taking her hand he said decisively, "No, you're not. Nor am I a Frenchman." She made no objection to this. That settled, they both turned their faces upward to the small

opening into the world above them and carefully they began together to widen the opening. Ana had a mental image of the mud man, now lying with a knife in his ribs, somewhere on the east side of the plain, living in such a pit and raising his head this way every morning, perhaps catching the scents of the air on his tongue to gingerly test the world.

When the opening was large enough to admit a body, Dupuys gently touched her shoulder to tell her to remain still. He raised his head and spent some seconds looking around. Then he lowered himself back down and whispered, "There are horsemen not far away, I think. I can't see them in the darkness, but I can hear their bridles and armor. I can still hear the noise from the other side of the city, too. The fight must still be going on." He paused, considering, "If we stay here longer, we have to stay here all day, and we run the risk of someone seeing the hole, there's nothing to cover it with. We could be ridden over by cavalry, too"

"Let's go up, then," said Ana. She took Dupuys' hand and nodded firmly with assurance.

Dupuys no longer had any weapon but the sword, which would prove little help if they were caught out on foot, and the blunderbuss, which was still slung around his neck where he had put it while they were still inside the city. He had reloaded it while they were in the storeroom at the mouth of the tunnel, and it had been slung around his shoulder under his cloak since, so that he had hoped it might not have been filled with dirt. He hoped more fervently, though, that they would not need to find out. That, he knew, depended upon the horsemen out in the darkness and upon luck.

They had felt, as much as heard, the stepping of the horses vibrating through the ground from time to time. The horsemen were not moving, but rather keeping station for some reason in the middle of the field.

Finally, Dupuys knew they could delay no longer, or else risk being caught by the daylight. The air was still dark above them, though the ground around the mouth of the hole as they crawled forth was moist with dew that signaled dawn's near approach. Dupuys squeezed his larger frame through the opening first, and then reaching back down, took Ana by the wrists and lifted her carefully out of the earth. They had just gotten their feet under them when they heard the horsemen begin to move. Dupuys faced that direction, not breathing, as he waited to determine which direction the patrol was taking. As much as he tried to make it not be so in his mind, it seemed that the many trampling horses were coming closer at a lazy canter.

"Down!" he whispered frantically, pushing Ana's head down and flinging the hem of her cloak over her legs. He remained kneeling, cocked the blunderbuss and waited. If it was only a few of them, perhaps with a shot at long enough range to allow the many lead balls to spread out in flight, he might disable them all. But his only blessing, the cover of darkness, was his curse now. By the time the troopers closed sufficiently to see them at all, the shot pattern would be narrow, and chances of hitting more than one or two would be small. That would not be enough.

The hooves were thundering now, as the patrol apparently put spurs to their mounts. Dupuys couldn't tell if it was because they had spotted him and Ana, but as yet, no shots nor shouts had emanated from them. There was now no doubt however that in another few seconds, not long enough to get back into the hole, the horsemen would be upon them.

Ana's hand shot out and grabbed Dupuys, pulling him flat down beside her, "Don't look at their eyes! Don't look!," she said. The sound of her voice was now barely audible to Dupuys above the approaching thunder. The ground shook and Dupuys knew that if he had looked up, the faces of the cavalymen would have been clearly visible at this distance. He tensed his arm around Ana's body and steeled himself for a lance in the back or crushing hooves to the head.

The leader of the patrol came upon them now, looking down from the height of his great warhorse, sweeping the area for any signs of the cursed Dutch rangers. With all the confusion away on the other side of the wall, this was just the kind of time, he knew, that they might choose to do some mischief. In the remaining gloom of night, he looked, as he always did, unconsciously, for the subtle traces of the shape of a human hand or an eye.

With their dirty cloaks across their heads and their hands locked in each other's, the pair lay flattened against the pounding earth as the main body of the patrol, twelve strong, swept by on all sides. Ana thought that the horses must've sensed their presence and purposefully avoided stepping on them, but Dupuys knew from experience that these mounts were not bred for delicacy, indeed quite the opposite. It was the merest of blind luck that the iron shod hooves of the big horses came no closer than to tread on the edges of their cloaks, pin the very tip of Dupuys' boot for an instant, and splatter more mud on the two.

Dupuys began to raise his head as the last of the trembling left the ground, but Ana's hand again stayed him. In no more than a second, he heard the sound of the straggler now galloping to catch the patrol. He remained down, and the final thunder passed by. When they raised their heads, it was clearly in a different light; they had lain down at the very end of night, they rose now to the faint beginning of the day. They were still exposed in the middle of the field, not two hundred yards from the nearest Spanish pickets. They crouched as they ran, heading off the field at a tangent, now wanting to avoid only the thickest part of the Spanish camp.

Using such sparse cover as the ground afforded, in fifteen more minutes they had come to the edge of the Spanish ring of breastworks. By waiting their chance, and through their good luck at the sloppy soldiering of the enemy in changing his night pickets for day, they slipped through

together. They were finally beyond the immediate menace of the fortress and the siege of Estraach.

Ana and Dupuys walked all that first morning, until they finally came to an inn where they bought food and two horses. Early the next morning, clean and refreshed and with good mounts to take them wherever they would go, they continued. Dupuys noticed that Ana looked strangely at each of the new people with whom they had to deal, and would not meet any gaze but his own, nor did she speak to anyone else but him. But so long as he was near her, she kept heart and bore the journey well enough.

Soon they came to a quiet crossroads. Dupuys knew which direction he was going; to the sea, and then on to the Americas. But the intersection of these roads brought home a choice to him. They must decide now which port to go to for embarkation, Spanish or Dutch, and therefore, ultimately, at which colony they would arrive in the New World.

Dupuys considered. He would do well in any situation, for in his military career he had of necessity become familiar with several languages besides his native French. He could easily have taken them to French, English, or Dutch colonies in India or the East Indies, but technically he was now a traitor to the Dutch, and quite frankly, he felt that he and Ana would stand out as exotic in any English colony.

He made the decision then, based upon the decision that Ana was probably only really comfortable with Spanish, to turn southward to those port towns that sent their fleets to Mexico and the rest of New Spain.

In those uncertain times, it was not difficult to build a new life. Even as famous an individual as Dupuys would never have had an image of himself made, save the secret one that Lucia had made. And by the time the old witch realized that he was gone from Estraach, it would

have been far too late for her to circulate copies to all the port towns. Besides, with enough gold, which the couple had, they were assured the passage of their choice, with a minimum of prying questions. There was always any number of scandalously ruined noblemen taking their young mistresses, fleeing their old associations, seeking a new start.

There was much need in such cases for discretion on the part of all parties, so Dupuys' taciturn arrangements were not viewed as anything really unusual. The only reason that the jolly old captain of their vessel asked a name at all, was to salute them socially and invite them to share his otherwise lonely table on the long ocean voyage west to the port of Vera Cruz and to a new life.

When Ana was finally forced by the closeness of their accommodation to look at the old rogue, Dupuys noted that there was no longer fear, but rather a new smile on her face.

* * *

Several weeks later, through the effect of negotiations that took place around some delicate and immaculately appointed table a thousand miles away to the south, the siege was called off, and the bloodbath around Estraach was ruled, at the stroke of a pen, to have been futile.

Though Horacio never actually bested Van Maarten in the end, he could at least come away without the ignominy of a clear defeat, thus keeping his legend of savage and implacable victory intact, if faintly scorched. A sullied virtue no doubt, but with no actual bastard of defeat in issue to embarrass him.

Though Philip's patience with the mother and son D'Ugarte was clearly strained, the problem with such allies and minions was that one dared not cut them off summarily, lest one find one's wine suddenly tasting strange and one's stomach tuning to fire. Philip therefore

needed to find some delicate method of promoting Horacio “upward,” and at the same time, away from his own royal person.

At that time, there had been reports reaching Philip that certain of his potentially most productive holdings in the mountains of New Spain were absolutely infested with their bothersome native inhabitants, and that the wealth in these regions could not be properly and efficiently tapped until these domains had been subdued more thoroughly. His thought immediately turned to the particular talents of Dona Lucia and her son.

And so it was that, on a blustery day some six months after the departure of Ana and Dupuys, that Horacio D’Ugarte, heir of Umberto Magnifico, and newly created Imperial Agent Extraordinary and Count of Monte Cruzas, embarked with his horses, his armor, his weapons, his hundreds of veteran killers, and of course with his mother, to take ship for the same port of Vera Cruz, to begin the effective subjugation of eastern New Spain.

The Man Who Would Not Sleep

Two hundred years after the first Europeans landed in the New World, most of the continent was still wild and untroubled by the machinations of man. On the northern Atlantic coast, the few towns such as Boston and New York were just becoming worthy of the name “city,” with perhaps five and three thousand souls, respectively. In the desolate mountains of New Spain, however, there was no peace in the House of D’Ugarte. The Old Master had died and now it was time to decide the question of the sons. They were twin boys, born thirty years earlier in a carriage during their mother’s nighttime flight from an Indian raid on the main estancia of their father’s estates.

Their grandfather had been one of the bloodiest mercenary captains in Europe at a time when that was a thriving trade. It had eventually been deemed expedient by the Imperial Privy Councilors to solve a problem by “granting” him a huge holding of the viceroyalty of New Spain. It would simultaneously remove from the European melee one of the largest and most destructive of the many freestanding armies for hire along the periphery of the Hapsburg Empire and, at the same time, provide “sufficient authority” to assure the development, or at least the control, of a half a range of mountains in the Sierra Oriental and the resources that might be found in them.

That grandfather, Captain D’Ugarte, and his veterans had come from Spain and established not only tyrannical control, but immense profitability as well. This was partly due to the intrinsic natural wealth of the grant in timber and mineral products., but also to the particular ruthlessness with which the conquerors established themselves. Records, now vanished, would

have spoken of thousands of hangings and crucifixions of Indians, the latter usually head downward, but sometimes face down over fire or face up in the torrid sun. None of these depredations however came close to the affliction visited upon the indigenous population by the diseases brought from Europe, smallpox being the Captain of the Men of Death in that time and place. To be sure, the Family D'Ugarte exploited this natural ally most effectively.

Throughout the years of the conquest of the Oriental, the Captain kept Lucia, his crazed old crone of a mother, just behind him in the shadows. They muttered together over old books and especially over one particular leather-bound volume.

Only she and he knew it was his father's and that it would give great power to anyone who learned its contents, as she had struggled to do and as she made sure he did as soon as he was grown. With its aid, and hers, in carrying out the "spells," he had risen meteorically in the ranks of the brigands and thieves among whom he soldiered. His reputation for excessive bloodthirstiness was, perhaps, undeserved. Though this stock and trade was the same fire-and-blood hand-to-hand assault that was then used by all armies to carry their objectives, he found an efficient spy service supplied with spells from the book and from other such books he and his mother acquired could often subdue an entire enemy army through the selective death or disability of a relatively small number of people on the opposite side and none at all on his.

On more than one occasion, he had, for a fee, lifted a siege by decimating the attackers with a fever spell carried on through old Lucia's herd of bewitched goats, whose blood was poured into the besiegers' water supply.

The old woman tended her garden and her goats, sometimes studying or adding a new kind of animal or bird, if she found it helpful in using the book to the greatest extent possible.

An example, among the many “bribes” the Crown had used to coerce the captain to go to the New World had been a gift from one of the viceroy’s court sorcerers. It was a small animal, and he explained it came from “a short way” to the south of the intended fiefdom. It was as small as a closed fist and slow moving and, with two huge bulbous eyes and strong, little front paws to do nothing but hold onto anything they were placed upon, including a man’s shoulder. The animals, which the sorcerer called lemurs, were reputed to be able to see in the dark. Indeed, they would slowly, but invariably, turn their heads toward a person or other animal in the darkness no matter what the depth of the shadows surrounding it. If a tracer kept one of these tiny lemurs on his shoulder and paid attention to its reactions, it gave a huge tactical advantage in the dark. Old Lucia raised one breeding pair of them at a time. As soon as the single pair of the strongest of a new generation was established, she killed all the other animals and threw their carcasses on the fire. There was always profit to be made on meat, even cat or rodent at times, in the middle of a mercenary army.

Finally, after what seemed like a century, Lucia died babbling to herself. By the time she finally stopped abusing her spirit, and the world around her, and died, she was unable to feel her feet and had had to be carried about in a sedan chair by four Indians. These she whipped savagely for such a frail old woman and also kept generally terrified by her continued muttering incantations.

Then, in time, the bloody captain himself died, also raving, having almost completed the conquest. The mopping up was taken care of by his son, who, in his own old age, was finally called the Old Master and who in turn had left these twin sons to vie for the inheritance.

In both canonical and imperial law, the principle of primogeniture was dominant. The problem was that, in the hasty confusion of their precipitous birth in the seat of the careening

carriage, the only human who was able to tell which the first-born and which second was their mother's maid, who became their nurse. She had raised them. She had always maintained silence, because she could never countenance the thought of sending one of them up and the other one down in the world. And so they had grown, the old nurse keeping her silence and the Old Master himself dying silent on the subject of his choice.

His will, however, made reference to certain papers that would be found in the great iron safe in his study to resolve the issue. The papers were fetched straight away on his death and it was seen they carried the Imperial seal, but also a strange seal with a coiled snake on it. Long before, Don D'Ugarte had written to the court in Madrid to ask the legal opinion about his sons' claims when he died. He had written to the legal court, but also to the shadow court of sorcerers of which his grandmother, Lucia, had told him. Their answer had, as he expected, been oracular in design. It took its capital sentence from the Christian Bible. "He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep."

The codicil went on to read that to decide which of the sons should keep the inheritance it should be arranged that they should have a contest to see which of them was most vigilant. The contest would weigh which could stay awake for the longest time. This would be a test of will and brain and body to prove which brother could keep the land from the other anyway. For as soon as one closed his eyes for an instant, the other would slit his throat for the land, or at least that was the stuff of the kind of leader that the Shadow Court best understood.

The nurse had never been able to choose between the two and yet, in many ways, they were as different as moon and sun. In spite of their being twins, from their earliest years, they had grown like two totally different types of men. Rodolpho was like a powerful animal that crashed its way through the jungle around it. Basilio was quiet, coldly watchful. Their father, the

Old Master, had played them against one another through their younger years, implanting in them a fear and hatred of one another based on the fact that one of them would be the lord and one the servant.

When they were young, as the sons of the grandee, the question of riding came up early. Rodolpho crawled on a horse's back and kicked it in the ribs and was thrown. He got back on, kicked harder and was thrown again. This went on until Rodolpho prevailed and the horse died. He continued to be thrown often by his mounts. Basilio hadn't tried to get on horseback for more than a year after Rodolpho's attempts. Even then, at the age of six, though, he spent that year watching Rodolpho's ballistics and, when he did first sit a horse, he had known much more about what he was doing than Rodolpho had. He was never thrown. Rodolpho, however, had always been acknowledged the superior horseman in spite of this.

When they were older, under orders from the Old Master to subdue a particular Indian tribe and especially their leader, who was a standard of revolt among the Indians for miles around, Rodolpho and his hard-riding companeros had been most effective at cutting out the bulk of the problem through bravado and audacious cavalry tactics. But he had been unable to bring the chieftain himself to bay. The Old Master had eventually begun to mutter about bills for the horses' feed and the companeros' wine and began to lock himself up in his study with the old books of the Captain and grandfather Umberto.

In contrast to Rodolpho's months of sweeping exploits at breakneck speed, Basilio had spent one week in the mountains watching. He had spent another two nights torturing three Indians for information and then had walked with two harquebusiers across a particular, isolated, rope bridge in the mountains and crept up to the shadows of a fire where the chieftain and his people were camped. Between the two who fired the huge guns loaded with scrap metal, they

killed seven people, including the chief himself, who was at the center of the blast. Basilio shot from the underbrush at less than ten yards range to hit him squarely in the face and, in fact, had taken most of his head off. Then, the Spaniards retreated, as Basilio had planned, to the bridge, and a third blast had killed three of the pursuers. Across the bridge, which the Indians approached with trepidation, waited Basilio's lieutenants' horses and certain escape to their own stronghold. In the presence of the chagrined Rodolpho and his great retinue, Basilio presented their father with a bill for a mere sixty pesetas to cover the cost of powder, scrap metal, and food for one week, and then quietly walked out the door without even a smirk on his face.

The Old Master had smiled a cold, inward smile as he noted how much the brothers had come to hate one another. Indeed, they had always been together when they were small, but, as they grew up, they grew their different directions. The Old Master made sure they both learned about the books in his study. In fact, he had had them utilizing the spells for years in the subjugation of the Indians.

Their friends were different and they grew up to maintain separate establishments. The people around each of them represented a mix of those who had a long-standing relationship with the family and those who were getting their bets down early in the game of who would rise to the top when the Old Master died. The young men knew one day the question would have to be settled.

Most of Rodolpho's entourage consisted of his caballeros bravos and their hangers-on. Their headquarters, a grand, walled house not far from the Old Master's hacienda, always seem to be full of noise. Wild laughter or screams or gunshots or other noises seemed always to be coming from within the walls.

On the other hand, Basilio sat in a corner tower room of the great house in which they had grown up. Even before the Old Master had died, he had never felt the need to have his own house. His apartments were rich and his retinue was much quieter in their activities anyway. His most constant companion was a black dwarf named Muscat, who served as valet, jester, assistant, spymaster, and messenger. Basilio had a darkly beautiful mistress, who was rarely seen outside his tower. It was rumored she lived in terror of him, but she remained silent. No one knew the particulars and no one dared disturb the silence to ask.

It was a question whom the Indians feared most. Even though there was no question that Rodolpho had killed, tortured, and raped far more of them, Basilio was feared more by their elders, who talked about the Spanish scourges around small fires far up in the mountains. There were stories about how Rodolpho could, and had, cut off men's hands with a single stroke of his machete. But they whispered that Basilio could turn a man into stone with a look.

While Basilio lived in his tower with only his dark lady and the dwarf, Rodolpho drank more deeply of pleasures and flesh to quench his appetites. When he could, he preferred the blonde girls newly over from Spain. But the country was still wild outside Mexico City and Santa Fe and a few settlements on the coasts like Vera Cruz and Acapulco. Fair-haired girls of any family were still mostly to be found only in these "cities," and Spanish girls without family were rarer yet in the New World. So, Don Rodolpho developed a taste for the oriental eyes and cinnamon skins of the Indian women and girls.

He would simply ride into a pueblo of subdued Indians and point to one or two of the girls at work and they were taken away by his horsemen, with or without bloodshed. Some came back to their villages a few days or weeks or months later, often pregnant. Some never came back; they simply disappeared. Some had been chosen more than once, gone through it all once

at the “Big House,” come home, gotten over it as best they could and then, out of nowhere, came Rodolpho and his brigands and they would be pointed out again. Some of these had simply become camp followers around the fringes of Rodolpho’s compound. They cooked and flirted and mixed with the caballeros and kept the compound basically at the pitch of a fiesta or, more exactly, like an orgy night and day.

When their father had died, it had been rather suddenly. His valet told the sons the old man had mentioned to him he thought there was something very wrong with his health. The Old Master had told him he had found a large mass inside his own abdomen. Though no one else pursued the matter, the young men, of course, knew the actual cause of death had been an intentional overdose of a compound used in smaller doses by the Indians in the southern jungles to lose consciousness for a day or more. The Indians said that with this potion they might “talk to their dead.”

In fact, Basilio had prepared it exactly according to his father’s instructions. He had set Muscat to watch the slow distillation at the retort in his work chamber and, as soon as there was a sufficient amount of the sulfurously glowing liquid, about a cupful, they drew it off and took it straight-away to the old man in his tower in the other end of the house. The Old Master had closed the door on them, drunk the potion, and died. There was no wailing nor crying of women and no priests. Indeed, though the estancia officially carried a retinue of six priests on paper to satisfy their most Catholic Majesties in Spain, in fact, there were no priests within twenty days’ walk of the Old Master’s house and had not been since the beginning of the Conquest in the Captain’s time.

The last priest had left in the days of the Captain and Mother Lucia. He had apparently left after an argument with the old woman about astrology. She had successfully predicted the

occurrence of a total eclipse, based on the charts in a very old book she had ordered secretly from the Shadow Court in Spain. Indeed, the captain had used the event to his advantage in a meeting with the local tribes. The priest, not yet a reconstructed Copernican, had said it was diabolical, in the strict sense of the word, and she, in turn, had told him she didn't care a fig what he thought. He began, rightly, to sense he was *persona non grata* and feared the captain's enmity. He returned to Spain complaining of "the Fever."

Rodolpho had been away in the north looking at the newest diggings of a silver mine in the Sierra when the Old Master died. He had ridden hard to get back to the great house of the grant as quickly as possible. He had still been in his traveling clothes as they carefully cracked the strange seals on the parchment of the old man's will.

Certainly, Rodolpho felt confident when he found out what the contest between him and Basilio was to be. He was used to campaigning from the saddle for days at a time and, between drinking and gambling and women, to go many nights in a row without sleep. He had roared with laughter at the terms, whereas Basilio only smiled slightly, nodded in signal to Muscat and quietly left the room.

Both camps, with Basilio's still quietly occupying one tower wing of the main house, and Rodolpho's based at his compound, began to prepare for the contest. The conditions stipulated the contest would not begin until the rising of the full moon nearest the Day of the Dead. Though it nowhere in the codicil spoke of it, both Basilio and Rodolpho knew the Old Master had stipulated it be contested during that moon cycle, because he had cast his last and greatest spell, based upon an incantation that reached back into the mists of Saturnalian lore, and at the cost of one hundred Indian lives given in sacrifice, to win freedom to roam the Earth for a time each

Autumn and would be able to look down on the contest and, no doubt, cackle his silent laughter as they proceeded to tear each other apart.

The Day of the Dead was yet some months away, however. D'Ugarte *fi*ls began in their own different ways to prepare for the test. Both, however, retreated to the real strength they both possessed, the fact that they had been required, on pain of severest punishment, to learn the arts of the spells. They could both read Latin well, both had their own exotic menageries and mixed or directed the mixing of many poisons and other useful potions.

They had both decided to use the coffee arabica. It was usually reserved for a particular spell, as when Basilio spent the week wakefully watching for the Indian chief whose face he destroyed. He had brewed it nearly to a thick syrup and taken it regularly by the dram out of a small, thick glass bottle. Rodolpho used coffee often while on campaign or while feasting in his great chamber. He would roar at the cooks for great pots of the stuff and everyone would shoot dice and babble at one another for hours.

Basilio had also considered coca leaves. Rodolpho had used them as well on campaigns. They got them from traders out of the Viceroyalty of Peru. It was assumed that these would be at least a part of their respective strategy, but being thus equal, they still needed to use their wits to gain some unexpected advantage over the other.

Both brothers had begun to pore over old manuscripts looking for ways to increase their chances of staying awake longest. The strategies for the contest were basically as opposed as the adult personalities of the two champions.

To prepare, Rodolpho had ordered his women to attend him. He had been in bed for two days on and one day off ever since. He would eat and rut, which would send him to sleep and waken only long enough to rut again. His valet would come in straight away and shoo the girl

out of bed so Rodolpho would not be disturbed as he rolled over, back into the sleep he was soaking up like a sponge. A servant was summarily garroted when he dropped a large, glazed pot in the courtyard under Rodolpho's window. The men went without the jangling rowels on their spurs and the basic activity of Rodolpho's entourage was nervously trying to stay balanced between the state of readiness and a nice drunken stupor to pass the time waiting for their next ride, if and when Rodolpho might suddenly commanded it.

Basilio's court, on the other hand, was up to a veritable hum compared with its usual monasterial air. The dark lady sat with her pale skin and huge, frightened eyes framed by her flowing black hair. She didn't appear to be frightened like a beaten animal, as she usually did. Basilio had determined, after reading over some very old scrolls that he would do better in the contest by leaving flesh alone.

He would not want her body, but he required her presence anyway. When she tired, she would sleep on a couch there near him, as Basilio needed to see her sleep as part of the spells he would undertake to leave sleep behind himself.

He had delved into an old tract by a Father Kyraphos, who had been excommunicated by the church in the year 1116. He seemed to have had the distinction of being condemned to death by not only his own Eastern Church, but also by the ecclesiastical authorities of the Frankish Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem.

The document Basilio had was the original and probably only copy of the testimony taken down by the court's amanuensis from Father Kyraphos as he awaited execution, which was to be by fire and on the official charge of witchcraft. In the document, Kyraphos mounts a spirited, but realistically cynical, defense, but, in the end, his arguments were overridden by dogma and expediency.

The public charges stemmed from the peculiar fact about the father that, for several years, he had not been known by anyone around him to sleep. The charges stated he “willfully trafficked” with the devil, arranging to give his soul in return for magical powers of which his constant wakefulness was one.

His case had begun in 1095 in Europe, when Pope Urban II called for a “*cruzada*” force to go to the Holy Land and rescue the holy places from the hands of the Turks. The Pontiff was also concerned about the waning power of an emasculated Constantinople and hoped to establish a more secure bulwark for the West against the unknown heathen vastness of Asia.

This crusade swept up people of many different labors, including a young shepherd from the mountains of Anatolia named Kyraphos. As Geoffrey of Boulogne and his host passed by, the priests in the retinue stirred up the conscience and imagination of the crowds to get their cooperation in regards to money and fodder as well as to get new recruits from among those so hasty as to be swept away by the frenzy. The motley crowd grew in many directions with many callings, from professional cut-purses and murderers to ascetic flagellant priests.

Kyraphos found himself so driven by the extent of his fervor to be a part of this movement of God that he found himself a place in a community of penitent monks who lived in the most primitive and austere of surroundings. At the juncture of the Anatolian highlands and the dry coastal plains of the Levant lay the northern approaches to the Holy Land. There, in the midst of a great, flat wasteland, was a desolate country of strange towers formed over eons from crystallized salt and sandstone. Among these rough and barren towers, this community of monks had graven out their caves in the sandstone and salt itself, each monk carving out his own niche. Some were high up on the sides of the towers, hundreds of feet above the desert floor. Some were closer to the earth, each level with a meaning to its own builder. One man to a cave, to dig

and then to wait and fast and pray. The common vow of the community had been that, as their offering to God on behalf of the crusade, they would all remain watchful over the holy city far to the south.

The charter of the order mentioned the psalm about neither slumbering nor sleeping, just like the terms of the D'Ugarte will five hundred years later. It was this that had led Basilio to acquire and study the crumbling parchments.

These monks dug their galleries so all of them would be facing Jerusalem as they sat in the mouths of these caves. The brothers were always awake long before the sun rose. To be caught asleep by the sun would have been a grievous error and offense. They prayed quietly all day and were in those doorways until the sun set completely below the horizon. The monks made no light as they went about their many devotions, but saw only that which nature brought them by the sun or the moon.

Many of the more fervent of the order, including Kyraphos, deepened the vow to include not simply being awake for most of the night and day, but vowing to do without sleep altogether until either they had attained a state of grace or Duke Geoffrey had attained the temples of Jerusalem.

Kyraphos had been a shepherd, and watchfulness was no joking matter in that part of the world against the fierce and wild things that came down out of the high passes of Anatolia. The shepherd who fell asleep and lost an animal because of it was not pitied, but rather was ridiculed the first time and shunned thereafter as lazy and unmanly.

There were many charms and amulets against sleep in those mountains. Indeed, it was in that part of the world that the shepherds first noticed some of their flocks would spend certain nights on their migrations frisking and playing all night and never seem to settle down. Finally,

someone had noticed these were the nights when they would be camped near a certain kind of bush, and the sheep and goats stayed awake when they ate the beans of those particular plants. Coffee arabica was the name the shepherds had given the bitter-beaned trees and they began to eat the beans themselves to stay more wakeful.

As a shepherd, Kyraphos was known to have stayed awake for six days and nights in a row on one occasion when wolves had been particularly bold in their predations during a winter famine. Four different times, he had fought the slaving, snarling packs. Eventually, the wolves had come to realize that as long as the shepherd was awake, their attacks were futile, and they had left the flock of Kyraphos alone, unharmed.

As the ascetic community went day after day and night after night without sleep in keeping with their vow, many strange and miraculous things began to happen. Many visions were seen by the monks. These came now in place of the otherwise normal dreams they had “bought” before with the small deaths of the soul that worldly sleep brings.

During the long days, when the heat would cause the floor of the dirty, white furnace to dance with swirling towers of dust that rose to heights of thousands of feet, the visions faded in and out of the dull reality. One of the brethren one day rose to his feet in ecstasy with his arms stretched out to one of these dust clouds calling out the name of God, crying out to the others on their rocky ledges their long wait was surely over and the Lord Jehovah himself had come to take them away to the New Jerusalem and Heaven itself. He had been well over a week without sleep and he simply walked out to the edge of the high ledge upon which his cell was built and kept right on walking off the edge with his eyes focused in the depths of the dust devil. Ironically, just as his soul had been liberated from his emaciated body by the sharp rocks below, the dust cloud had swirled out of existence.

Kyraphos himself had begun to see the land change, the salt flats to buckle and sway and, eventually, after nine days, he saw the huge sandstone towers pull up their great feet and begin to dance around on the plains below. He would later swear at his trial that, at this time, he also saw the seraphim in the air above the desert in the night sky. They appeared to him as flaming wheels, which stayed aloft in the sky on golden wings. They sang to him, he said, and he heard the praise of the angels themselves for God upon his throne. They told him many things about the true nature of man and the world.

Eventually, his fellow anchorites had had to tie him to a steel ring they pounded in to the wall of rock on his ledge in order to save him from the fate of his brother monk who had walked, if ever so briefly, in the air trying to get to the dust cloud where God was standing within.

Still Kyraphos did not sleep, and the second week of his continuous vigil drew to a close. His eyes were wild, his face blotchy, pallid, yet burned through by the sun to the point of peeling away in great patches off his cheeks and nose.

Then, sometime after the second Sabbath of his vigil had passed and the monks were sure Brother Kyraphos was about to earn his martyrdom, hanging wide-eyed in his chains, he slowly raised his head and softly asked them to release him, saying he was better. He said the Lord had shown him many wonderful things and had spoken much wisdom to him.

One of the secrets the Lord's angel had told him was that man didn't need to sleep, that the small death was part of the punishment of many for his presumptions to immortality. God had allowed the Devil to place the idea in man that sleep was like air and an absolute necessity lest he should die.

In reality, sleep was not a necessity like air, but, rather, an addiction, like rich food or love of flesh, or drinking much wine. But more than this, sleep is the time the Devil can fight

with God over the soul of man, with man lying exposed and helpless while the struggle goes on in his dreams and his soul.

Many brothers, under the whips of a stringent vow, had overcome worldly addictions of all sorts, had given up those other weaknesses. Now Kyraphos, goaded by his vow, had gone through the physical and spiritual trial necessary to overcome the desire for sleep. Now, as the days and nights passed, he felt the falling away of the remaining chains of any feeling at all of the need for sleep. Not only did he not die, indeed, he grew stronger of body and more powerful of spirit as the days and nights passed.

During the short part of the night between the last of the monks' devotions in the small hours of the night and the beginning of their day's devotions long before the sun rose in the perennially cloudless sky, Brother Kyraphos wandered among the columns of sandstone in the bright glare of the moonlight reflecting off the salt flats. He walked like a ghost in the night among the bodies of the dead who lay in the graveyards of unconsciousness.

Kyraphos took seriously and as a holy trust the knowledge he had been given and was known for his increasing piety. He was known to use the New Hours in the quiet of the night to more fully comprehend the nature of the world through pious and devout meditation. Kyraphos at the door of a cell, framed by the moon low in the southeastern sky, blazing like a nether day. He would stand there and bid peace to his brother inside. They came to know that, at times, he just needed to feel himself a part of humanity during those hours of the night. He would often watch the regular breathing of one or another of the sleeping monks, so they began to stay awake with him on some nights. At least one of the brethren was always available to sit with him through the small hours to quietly discuss theology and the nature of God. Sometimes Kyraphos would simply sit silently with another monk, depending on which of the brethren it was.

There were others whose devotion in the order drove them to attempt to break the bonds of sleep as Kyraphos had done. Some died, but none had the constitution or the purity of purpose necessary to follow him all the way through to the other side of the swamp of dreams.

Then, finally, after years had worn by, the Most Christian and Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem was achieved. This was at the cost, among other things, of thousands of Moslem inhabitants who were slaughtered in the sack of the city by Godfrey of Bouillon and his sanctified knights after the Battle of Ascalon.

The community of monks was given an official charter and subsidy and was moved to the holy city to live in one of the shrine precincts as a reward for their vigilance. Soon, they were made the wardens of the Holy Sepulcher itself, being chosen over other orders who had petitioned actively for the position. This was done in deference to their particular history and vows, as there had been a papal bull issued on the conquest of the city commanding, among other things, that never again should man be found asleep at the door of The Tomb.

Brother Kyraphos was usually lucid enough to this world to be counted a great host by pilgrims to The Sepulcher, who could count upon his being ready to guide them through the Holy Grave at any hour of the night or day. His behavior, always most fervent and zealous, began to pass all understanding. He spoke to pilgrims who weren't there to the eyes of his fellow wardens as often as to those who were. He addressed all pilgrims with great reverence and deference, but sometimes the members of the order knew Kyraphos was speaking to a higher and holier order. These brothers, having been with Kyraphos from the beginning, took it all for granted and even pointed it out as a source of pride. It was ultimately this sin of theirs that led to his downfall.

In those days of the petty states that were set up by the marginal powers of rival princelings, the ecclesiastical arena was often wet with blood as well. One of the rival orders of monks, which had petitioned unsuccessfully for the office and subsidies of the Tomb denounced Kyraphos. They made their charges before the Bishop of Jerusalem, who had been put into his holy office by the local military state and bent to its will in all matters. In this case, the Abbott of the petitioning monks had family connections to the new King Baldwin's throne through his shrew-like queen. An almost laughable trial was held and a summary judgment was rendered by this assize against Kyraphos' life and he was sentenced to burn at the stake for the sins of pride and witchcraft.

According to the record, he was just as watchful through his last night as he had been during the rest of the nights and days since his "bewitchment." The court had offered him a chance to commute his sentence to quicker beheading, if he would simply go to sleep. Kyraphos, however, stood firm in his intention to follow the teachings of the angels, who had told him that, if he let himself once slip back into the arms of sleep, its seduction would cover his soul again, this time for eternity.

Kyraphos had spent the night talking to the court scribe and it was this testimony that Basilio had traced through one of his father's agents in Rome. He didn't care that the end of the manuscript, still in the hands of the court scribe, described the final agonies of the monk in the flames the next morning, nor did he especially care about the images of fiery angelic beings that had danced at Kyraphos' original ecstasy at having broken the bonds of sleep.

Basilio was confident he could outlast Rodolpho in staying awake and, thus, win the patrimony. He was equally sure only one of the two brothers could emerge from the situation alive, for, if he did win, with his brother still alive, when could he sleep? He knew Rodolpho

understood this problem as well. For either one, that sleep would be fatal, because the defeated and awakened brother would never hold any agreement sacred until death signed the pact. No matter how grand the Emperor's seals on the documents, the Emperor was in Spain. Even the dreadful strength of the representatives of the Shadow Court thousands of miles from its bases of power back in Europe couldn't hope to stay the wrath of whichever brother was victorious. Basilio and Rodolpho were the only real powers on the board here in these mountains.

There was to be an Imperial legation with representatives to be in the presence of each of the brothers at all times. It was quite clear these officers took seriously that their charge was nothing more or less than to certify they had observed their respective contestants continually and the candidate had not fallen asleep.

The real power in the cortege from Madrid lay in the old ones of the Shadow Court of sorcerers who served as the seeing eye and the poisoned fang of the Empire. Their power had grown greatly in the years since the deaths of the Great Umberto D'Ugarte and his Emperor. A certain amount of the credit for their increase had been due to the Captain and his mother, Old Lucia. It was they who kept alive the terrifying memory of Umberto and were rumored to cast spells from his own books. Each of the velvet-robed figures of this real court was a wealthy man as many of them had worked with and been rewarded by the family on down through the Old Master, and, on occasion, as when Basilio had sent to Europe for the Scroll of Kyraphos, by the sons that they had now come to this wilderness to judge. Indeed, they felt the Imperial notaries were but window dressing on what was to them essentially a matter for resolution within the family of the Shadow Court.

These men were much feared and very good at what they did. They did not, as they were so often accused of doing, worship the devil. Indeed, these men felt no more enamored of Satan

than of God. They well understood, however, that either could be used to their advantage, when the situation required. They were pragmatists and quite willing to share the “glory” of their professional successes with the spirits and, if they were very clever, to share the responsibilities as well, at least in the minds of their victims. Religious fervor, aimed in either direction, served as a cloak for their works. The best spells were the ones that no one ever knew had been cast, thinking Heaven or Hell had caused the result.

Now, they were present in their own individualistic robes in the retinue along with the pattern-matched Imperial notaries and now there was even a priest. That had to do with some backwater Imperial edict of generations ago concerning ecclesiastical “superintendence” of legal acts. This particularly lonely “superintendent” went immediately to his assigned quarters and appeared only at those times absolutely prescribed by his commission.

At the very first of those times, he was clearly terrified by one of Rodolpho’s lieutenants who had pinned his trailing red ecclesiastical gown to the wooden staircase from twenty feet with a knife as big as the trembling priest’s forearm. The troops in Rodolpho’s retinue had roared with laughter and none louder than “Don” Rodolpho, as his officers now addressed him. The humiliated and terrified prelate yanked himself clumsily loose to a second and greater rush of derision, now mixed with violent and even sexual threats. He rapidly finished his ascent of the stairway, escaping to the great double doors only to find himself in a different circle of the infernal regions. The first image to strike him in the dim light of the Great Hall he was entering was the face of a gargoyle sooted over with the smoke of the dull red fire in the great hearth, from which, as far as the frightened cleric could ascertain, it had just stepped. Then the gargoyle moved and he felt his heart almost explode in his chest. His scrabbling mind finally connected the face and the color and the statuette’s size to the name of Muscat. His rationality returned

briefly to try to remember what he had been told about the small black man. The papal legate in Mexico City had told him all that was known about the situation here, including a word about some of the personalities involved.

Muscat, it seems, had been brought as a young man to New Spain from his home in Africa. His dwarfish people lived not far inland from the Atlantic in a desert of scrubby brush farther south than the usual slave-producing country. His people had always been shrewd judges of character, superb trackers of animals or men, and the masters of many poisons, which they used in hunting and in war against larger enemies. Many times, Muscat was entrusted by Basilio, as he trusted no one else in the world, with carrying out some mission or other. Simple messages or supervising and reporting back from the garroting of a particularly rebellious Indian. Many times, he had walked among the Indians and had been as though invisible, because of the common belief among the Indians that what they were seeing was not solid reality, but some small black spirit or god come down among them.

It was Muscat who now seemed to disappear and then reappear at the foot of “Don” Basilio. Basilio stood with a great dark velvet cloak around his shoulders and with his back to the dying fire so all the priest saw was his jet black silhouette against the glowing coals. As the priest flinched and quickly drew back, he was engulfed in Basilio’s shadow cast by the fire on the wall above him. He felt, for an instant, that it was a nuisance that, just as his heart had begun to slow its wild uncontrolled gallop, now he thought he might lose control of his bladder. Later, in his quarters, after these necessary opening formalities of the contest, he would vomit repeatedly. He was quite certain his food and drink were fatally poisoned, an assertion both Basilio and Rodolpho would have renounced as a lie, as they both knew he was getting only

enough contaminated water to keep him indisposed. All his food was, more or less, safe, even if somewhat stale and scanty.

It was here the two principles had met to begin the trial. This opening ceremony was brief and *ad libitum*, owing to the priest's inability to pronounce even vestigial sanctifications on the proceedings.

The brothers met, as they always did, with a glance and a nod. For all their differences, they were too much alike and too closely rooted to need more formality than that. They looked one another over, however, on this special occasion, looking for the slightest waver of attention, the faintest sign of fatigue. They looked for the tiniest chink in the brick and stone they threw up to each other's retinue.

The less than well-groomed cavalry of Rodolpho, arrayed mostly in leather and furs, looked hungrily at the dark lady sitting on a soft hassock behind her lord. Such gaucherie did not go unnoticed. In return, Muscat not only looked at the brightly painted girls of Rodolpho's train, he crossed directly to the woman farthest inside the hall, grabbed her by the skirt and immediately began licking her leg on the inside of the thigh, as she tried to shoo him off to the laughter of the crowd.

One of the younger troopers, who had airs of style and, therefore, the stupidity of pride, crossed the room and laid his hands on the little man's shoulders meaning to pull him off the terrified girl. His hand had barely had time to close on the small scarlet tunic when he found Muscat had whirled and deftly laid his forearm open with a thin, sharp knife. The cut itself, to a member of Rodolpho's flying squad, was nothing, a scratch. It didn't even hurt, owing, he thought, to the extreme keenness of the blade. But, as the first second seemed to drift by, the thought it was strange that, even though he would certainly now kill the little black bastard, that

worthy already had his back turned to the trooper and his tongue and now his file-sharpened teeth as well on the girl again, now, by her screams, apparently much more in earnest than before. As the young horseman reached to his hip for his dagger, he noticed in that next second that he could not feel anything with the hand Muscat had scored. The third, fourth, and fifth seconds carried him through the realization that the blade was poisoned, through all the terror he would ever know again and into collapse and death. The screams of the girl, her legs now covered with blood, were the last sounds he heard.

“Dolpho,” said Basilio, holding his arms open wide when the girl’s screams had died at his nod to Muscat.

“Basilio,” said his brother, intentionally stepping over the body of the poisoned ensign as he crossed the room to return his brother’s challenge and greeting. There was silent observation of all this by the grave old men of the Shadow Court, who had been most deferentially seated at the high dais of the room. They exchanged glances at one another in the gloom, but said nothing.

The brothers sat together warily at the table in the middle of the room and talked. Rodolpho called for coffee, Basilio held up a finger in quiet refusal.

“And how are affairs in the Sierra Oriental?” asked Basilio solicitously.

“Back here, at the big house, you may all think the conquest is complete. I assure you, the land is still wild and needs a firm hand,” said Rodolpho, holding up a clenched fist in a large, black-leather glove. Not only did Basilio know the process of subjugation was still far from over, but, in terms of really useful pieces of information about the local situation in the rich range of mountains, it was possible Basilio knew even more than Rodolpho. He did have to admit, though, that Rodolpho was there, while no matter how good his webs of information, he himself was here. Here, where he had been to greet the Shadow Court in the name of his family. He, who

looked and acted more like the sorcerers, and he, who had given his sire the key to the doorway of death.

He would have these lands as his rightful possession, as he deserved. As he deserved and, what was more important, because he knew himself ultimately the stronger. The problem was that the unpredictable Rodolpho only needed to be stronger for the instant it would take to kill him to make all his plans go awry.

It soon became apparent to the watching Shadow Court that the styles of the two men, their methods of attack and parry in dealing with one another were vastly different.

They noted that Rodolpho was attracted to the flat plains of action. His successful military style was based on light, fast cavalry managing to run down small bands of men on foot when they caught them out in a long stretch of open country. He had been known to practice his direct brand of diplomacy by snatching a person to whom he wished to speak, be it a lady or a political intriguer. He would scoop them up into a large, closed carriage and, as it would rush swaying along to Rodolpho only knew where, he would sometimes figuratively and sometimes literally pin his guest to the back wall. His approach was to isolate his opponent where there were no wings to the stage of action into which they could escape; somewhere they would certainly have to deal with his assault.

Basilio, on the other hand, preferred to attack people at the edges, at the turning of moments, as in the leaving of a room. He dealt with them by giving them choices at times when they were off balance anyway. What his opponents never understood was that Basilio had rolled the dice of the odds of a particular person's possible responses a thousand times before in his mind as he sat in the tower and looked out the window. As his adversary fumblingly took his next step into the blind uncertainty of choice, he was waiting to pounce upon them with an

instantaneous response that would leave them just a little more mired, a little more confused and disoriented, and so on, until they simply disappeared, as Basilio's mistress, the dark lady, La Dona Sombra, as the servants called her, had stood in a hundred doorways, faced with the choices he used to intentionally drive her slowly mad. These choices were between alternatives she knew had been calculated to be almost equally sordid or terrifying to her, as this amused Basilio. For instance, she had a standing choice between Basilio and Muscat. Basilio had told her that, any time his demands might seem excessive, she could leave him and avail herself of the dwarf's odd services; the choice was always with her.

For the upcoming contest, Basilio had planned his strategy through the reading of the old books and through study of Kyraphos' scroll, along with an occasional word with Muscat. Basilio knew Kyraphos had sworn a life of chastity as a part of his calling and that he had reaffirmed that vow in his death cell testimony. For that reason, though the sorcerer couldn't be sure having a woman definitely would sap him of some of his alertness, he was reasonably certain the only "confirmed" case of someone who left sleep behind had almost certainly been celibate. It was Basilio's nature to take no chances. He meant to have this patrimony and to defend it. Kyraphos had had his wolves; when the time came, Basilio would have his brother. He followed the way of Kyraphos as an expediency to save his own life, which he knew now hung in the balance.

He would need, he felt, to watch a sleeping human, as Kyraphos had needed to watch his brethren. He would watch the lady. He had determined on his own that he could have nothing leading to an orgasm, for fear it, along with the many hours without sleep, might prove too much. His idea was to have the option of having her pose naked for him, if he felt that a timely surge of arousal unsatisfied might pull him through any lull in his watchfulness. This was simply

another of the spells, like the coffee arabica, and she shuddered slightly, thinking about the way he watched her when she was naked, like she was performing even if she sat unmoving.

The lady of the tower knew there would come a day, after Rodolpho was dead, when Basilio would demand her body again and she shuddered to think what kind of sexual “visions” he might have in that changed state.

Basilio had chosen her from a picture, among several she had been told, and had taken her from her home at fifteen in a part of an arrangement to keep her father solvent. La Dona had been growing up in a convent in Spain while Master Muscat had been leaping around a fire in the wild African night, and Basilio and his brother had been roasting people slowly to death to extract information and to serve as examples to any of their family and friends who might oppose the dominion of the D’Ugarte power. She had never heard Basilio and the dwarf utter so much as a syllable of Christian Spanish or French or even Latin to each other. They used only strange words that sometimes even included guttural grunts, clicks, and whistles. She could only imagine the devils in Hell speaking such a tongue. It made her shudder when Basilio and Muscat spoke their laconic messages to each other.

Now, the principles were all assembled in the great hall of the big house. After the girl’s blood and the cavalier’s body were summarily disposed of, there was the pleasant small talk, which was much like that repeated in other tongues at other levies throughout the “civilized” world when questions of power and place were to be decided by law, by force of arms, or by stealth.

The Imperial envoy extended the solemn condolences of the throne at the loss of The Old Master, a most trusted and power vassal in this hemisphere. He had a brief, even terse, message from the wife of the late lord, the mother of the two boys. Neither of them could remember the

lady, she having left to go back to Spain when they were not even weaned from their wet nurses. It seems she could not accept the way of life of her husband, the Old Master. Her family, though profiting by its association with the upstart clan of witch lords, remembered its roots of pride enough to petition the throne to give the girl assurances of protection from its trusted vassal. As it had turned out, the Old Master had cared little when she left. He cared only that he have a legal heir and, now, because of “that cow,” he had two heirs.

He had always believed that, if he had wanted to, he could have gotten the old nurse who delivered his wife of the twins to tell which was which, but those days had been turbulent and, by the time he and his wife were united after the birth and he found the primacy wasn’t known, weeks had passed. Then had come his wife’s sudden demand to leave, lest she “forfeit her mortal soul for staying one more minute in the house and the bed of one of the devil’s ministers on Earth.”

She took her women with her back to Spain and the old nurse lived in terror for years that one day, or worse, one night, there would come a knock at the door and the shadow court would want a word with her on behalf of her mistress’ husband.

At first, the Master had not worried, assuming that, one day, his agents would slowly tear the hide off the old woman until she told them exactly what he wanted to know: which was the elder son. But, as the years went by and the boys developed their own personalities, it amused him to not know the truth of the question himself. He had consciously bred hatred between them at every possible opportunity, punishing one for the other’s mistakes, preparing them for their eventual struggle. By the time of his death, he had intentionally suppressed any thought of which son was which. Indeed, the old nurse never knew how close she had really come to being killed, ironically, not to get the information, but, rather, to certify that the name would never be heard

by anyone. He had begun more and more to believe fate had sent the situation to set the stage for a decision that was foolproof, that proved its own validity, that couldn't be otherwise in its appearance than in its reality.

It was at this time he contacted the Masters of the Shadow with whom his grandfather, Umberto, his father, The Captain, and he himself had worked. He petitioned them to determine the perfect form for the test that chance and an old woman's silence had given them to see who deserved to sit upon the already hard and bloody seat of the D'Ugarte patrimony.

The brothers knew nothing of their mother. Hers was a name seldom spoken and little cared for, who had no face or voice to them.

"Our mother's note was short and to the point," said Rodolpho.

"I thought it fairly appropriate," defended Basilio. "I have always been rather proud that the woman who gave us birth had the common sense to leave this place. It makes me sure there will be no idiot children in the line."

"She damned him when she left and she damned him when she died," observed Rodolpho.

"She damned us as well when she left, did you know that?" asked Basilio.

"No. Well, then," said his brother, lifting his great goblet in salute to the woman whose face was not even present as a portrait in the whole of the house. "Damn her back!" Then he and Basilio broke into two different kinds of laughter.

As they had at supper, which, on the first night of the contest, was to be held in common in the great hall, Rodolpho drank great draughts of water. He had surmised this might keep the poisons that build up within more easily washed away so as not to build up to a level where he would sink into them in lethargy and sleep. He also imagined it would be harder to go to sleep if

one had to piss every quarter of an hour. He, like Basilio and all the members of the Shadow Court, drank water only after it had been subjected to the simple spell of boiling. Usually, this was problematic only on rare occasions, because most of the time the people of his court drank wine or brandy. People farther away from the powers drank *pulque* or they drank water unspelled and they died.

It was common sense that alcohol could do nothing but hurt the chances of the drinker in this trial, so neither of the major figures drank spirits. Now, Rodolpho drank from his water from a great golden cup that would have held half a melon. Basilio drank from the most bizarre vessel in the room. None of the others, save a few of the Shadow Court, had ever seen crystal so thin and perfectly shaped, without flaw and so clear the effect was of a man drinking water suspended in the air.

They talked quietly as the common banquet went on at the foot of the dais.

“So, are you sleepy yet, little brother?” asked Rodolpho with mock humor and heavy emphasis on the word “little.”

“Not at all, little brother,” rejoined Basilio with a smile. As a matter of fact, he had hoped to get the subject around to sleep. “Something I have been meaning to ask you since all this came up. Do you remember the first night you stayed awake all night, the first night you saw all the way through to the dawn?” As he planted the question, he was watching for the tiniest tract of the closing of an eye or of any line in the tan face across the table. This was nothing more than the sending out of the first pawn in the game, which Basilio knew would be a long one. Basilio and his brother had played chess all their lives, and one could see their different personalities echoed in their styles of play as well. Rodolpho would fling his line of pawns out recklessly, hoping to draw a commitment from his opponent, which he could then exploit. To Basilio, every

piece was precious and he never considered even the minor pieces totally without value, sacrificing them only when it brought him a clear advantage.

They talked now as they sat at the table.

“All I remember,” said Rodolpho, “was that it was during another of the attacks on the main house here. Back before your tower was built on. I remember father had some of the troopers take us up onto the roof. I watched arrows tipped with fire sail up through the night.” He mimicked the arc of the arrows with his goblet sloshing water onto the floor as he went on. “They were really pretty, like fireworks. Then, one of them hit one of the troopers squarely in the chest. Blood and fire and the man screaming as he lay there. Then, just after he stopped kicking, I looked around and noticed it had begun to grow light in those few moments. That was also the first time I saw a dead man. Then, before you knew it, it was broad daylight. I remember the Indians pulled out when the light came.”

Rodolpho respected Basilio’s abilities as a sorcerer and he felt he knew him too well to let his brother somehow get the better of him by casting a subtle spell to make his eyes heavy. He knew this was Basilio’s ground and that there was not a candle flame nor a shiny piece of mirror, not a trickling sound of water that had not been carefully considered by Basilio with regards to whether it could be used to grasp a second’s attention, just a small sticky place for the mind to drag over. After a week or two, they both knew, the difference between the energy of their minds might be nothing more than the amount of psychological sand Basilio was trying even now to load in tiny amounts into the shoes of Rodolpho’s attention and resolve. These small, even tiny, spells cast now might make the difference in the end. Basilio wanted Rodolpho to be used to talking about sleep. He began in a low tone, “I remember standing up on the roof because the moon was full. It had just risen that night at about the time we were to be in bed. I stayed awake

and watched the moon instead. It meant a great deal, because I remember that before that there had always been a part of time I knew nothing about. The part of the night you sleep through, one really can't know what goes on there. When you're a child, until you have sat through it for yourself, straight through, that is, you can't know that the night is not a thousand years long. How long is the time when you sleep? Until you've been through it awake, you really can't know how long a time you've slept. As long as you really can't say how long it is, you really can't know what goes on then, what kind of creatures might inhabit that deep hidden part of the night. Once you've stayed awake all night, you change. You have to. There is no more strange country out there that might be holding all the demons and the monsters. That's one of the places we pass on the road to knowledge."

"Is that so?" replied Rodolpho nonchalantly. He intended to sound disinterested as he feared his brother might attempt to lecture him into stupor and he needed none of it.

Dinner being over, many of the courtiers began, as usual, to drink. Some retired to other rooms to smoke opium, brought back by the Spanish Silver Fleets to Macao. The brothers, however, maintained total sobriety. Rodolpho switched from drinking great goblets of water to drinking great jugs of coffee. Basilio took coffee as well, except the liquid that was brought to him was as thick as syrup and served to him in a cup not much bigger than a thumb thimble. Basilio held up a hand to his personal server when he approached a second time. "I'll tell you when I want more," he instructed. And so the great first session went on until it dissolved far into the night and the respective camps settled into their own different headquarters for the long days and nights to follow.

To keep up his energy and alertness, Rodolpho had soon set up a large gambling pool. He and his courtiers bet on everything. Short course horse races, cock fights, the bloodier and more

excited the better. They finally began betting on knife fights. Some of these were between two Indians, which was rather passé for this jaded crowd. Some were Spaniard against Indian, which usually ended in a sort of burlesque by the well-armed and armored trooper to see with what “style” he could dispatch his opponent. Eventually, they began to fight Spaniard against Spaniard. Because these gave sides for the courtiers to divide into, they tended to be the noisiest and most exciting and much more money changed hands on these matches.

Rodolpho gambled, because, second only to sex, which he knew would ruin him now that the contest had started, and after fighting, which involved too much of his carefully husbanded energy, gambling gave him the biggest thrill and should keep him most awake. Others could expend the energy, he would sit quietly and place his bets and watch the horses run or the cocks fight.

A table of numbered chances was working on the far side of the great banqueting hall in Rodolpho’s house, carted in by ox-team and run by one of the great banking houses in Mexico City. From time to time, Rodolpho would become impatient between events and would direct a large bet to the wheel of numbers above it. His courtiers were in a gambling frenzy, because Rodolpho now wrote huge notes to cover his losses. In the event he became lord here, the man who held those notes and who was diplomatic enough to get even a portion of the payments they represented and managed to remain alive doing it might become wealthy in his own right.

It mattered little to Rodolpho, because he would either lose the contest with Basilio, in which case any outstanding notes would be a trifling compared to dealing with his victorious brother. On the other hand, if he won, while his largess was indeed of huge proportion, the lands over which victory would establish him as lord would be worth more than some of the provinces of Spain, so his debts meant little to him.

At the end of a week, he was screaming at beings in the air around him, but he was still awake and the only thing his men knew to do was to keep obeying his commands to keep giving him loaded pistols with which to shoot the ephemeral beings away. The fact that he fired at several of the soldiers as they handed the pistols to him made them begin to load at least some of them with powder only. Rodolpho was too experienced a man, however, and he could feel the difference in the recoil of the pieces within firing a shot or two.

“A pistol, damn you! Now!” he roared. The next man who handed him a pistol felt the vise grip of Rodolpho’s hand on his neck as he tried to crouch away and was confronted by bloodshot demon eyes. “Give me a dry loaded pistol, will you? Take this in your face, then!” Rodolpho swung the pistol until the barrel was poised six inches from the eyes of the terrified man. But Rodolpho was wrong about this pistol and the man was saved having his eyes destroyed by powder burns when the very real, very present lead ball instead tore away a large portion of the back of his skull as it exited. It splattered a thoroughly surprised Rodolpho with bloody gore.

“Now, that will wake you up!” he observed loudly after a stunned instant. As he swung his gaze around the room, the troopers began to laugh with him, nervously at first, but then with gusto, as he stood on the dais, the still-smoking gun in his hand and the dead courtier at his feet. He was awake and alert again.

At the end of that week, at the same time, in the tower room of the great house, Basilio sat in his chair by the open window looking out at yet another dawn while occasionally dipping his left hand into a silver ewer full of water in which floated chunks of ice. The ice had been brought by the fastest riders at post haste bringing it from the high mountains. There was a group of musicians there, playing a passable string quartet. Muscat stood by staring at his master. La

Sombra sat near the window seat on a couch covered in rich red velvet. She had a wrap of the same fabric around her otherwise naked shoulders.

“May I sleep, my Lord?” she asked, weariness deadening her voice.

“Certainly, my love,” he said, dripping into the ice again. She was silent, tense. She had now been awake for six of the seven days the contest had lasted thus far. Her eyes were sunken and enormous. She had had terrifying hallucinations for the last two days. Now, Basilio had chosen this time to divert himself with her, purely, she knew, to maximize his chances to the utmost in the trial.

Her question about sleep had not been a rhetorical one. The last time she had slept, days ago, she had awakened to the sight of Muscat standing a few feet away from her bed holding a strange looking stick that had a little bend in the end of it, like a tiny shepherd’s crook. Then she raised her head and heard a hideous buzzing sound very near by. She looked down and, lying there on the covers she had over her, were three rattlesnakes coiling and showing fangs. One of them actually struck the pillow she had pulled up in front of herself. In moving the pillow, however, she uncovered another of the scaly reptiles. Basilio sat quietly in a soft chair near, but not too near, the bed. She had sat in the bed, rigidly fearful, as the serpents coiled and crawled there in her lap and at her feet on the bed. Basilio looked at her and she could not open her mouth to speak. One of the vipers was poised facing her and it continued to sample the air between them with its neck cocked back, as tense as the terrified girl. She couldn’t decide if she should speak for fear it would bring the snake springing at her, but, in any case, she surmised her cry for help would be futile. Muscat stood impassively, occasionally herding one of the big snakes back closer to the center of the woman’s bed.

Basilio looked closely at her. There was a look of rapt attention on his face, as he would sometimes get when he was deep in the study of the old texts. But, now, there was a trace of a smile at the corners of his thin-lipped mouth. He was breathing heavily. The woman was familiar enough with these sorts of torments from him that she didn't fail to see the irony in the fact that his breathing was very much like hers at that moment. She became very aware of her breathing as the snake with the cocked head slowly began to crawl toward her. She fought to keep her movements tiny and shallow to avoid irritating the snake's sensitivities, if possible. She felt like she couldn't breathe, that her lungs were as large as they would expand and, yet, there wasn't enough air. In her terror, she had been breathing only inward for nearly two minutes, since she had awoken to the snakes. She had not breathed out, in subconscious fear that even her breath might cause the snake to strike. Basilio had made her look at the results of snakebites he had inflicted on Indians to get them to tell him things he wanted to know. Now, she faced the twin terrors of suffocation or the snakes. Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw Basilio's smile broaden just a touch and his eyes widen just a hair's breadth. The last thing she remembered, as she had passed out, was how much she hated him.

In the old book's discussions about spells for creating anger, the texts speak about the house of anger resting on the foundations of fear. Her hatred for him ran as deep as her fear of him. He consciously and intentionally kept her in fear most of the time. He fed off her fear in the same way she felt he fed from her body every time he had commanded her presence in his bed.

Being alone with Muscat in the most intimate circles in Basilio's life for some time now, she had been made to watch or to be an unwilling part to some of the methods of torture Basilio used on his opponents. She knew Muscat had first been acquired for his knowledge of poisons, knowledge the ensign in the hall had learned of too late. Muscat, along with two or three of

Basilio's larger troopers there to beat the victim into submission, would do things to people, both men and women, at Basilio's direction, that she could not have believed it possible for one human being to perpetrate upon another. Her Lord Basilio had made her watch. Occasionally, he would lay his hands on her back and murmur to her that these things could, and certainly would, happen to her if she should ever dare to defy him.

He always tested his food for poison and, to make certain La Sombra would not be among those who might try to cast a deadly spell upon him, he required her to taste all his food and drink first. She had often thought about poisoning the food and then tasting it boldly before Basilio. She dreamed of a poison that would kill her gently and, at the same time, tear Basilio to pieces in agony. She needed something that would kill her soon enough to take her out of the grasp of Muscat, who would surely wreak his master's vengeance upon her, but slow enough to allow her to be sure she had succeeded. It was a hopeless dream without hope of fruition, because Muscat and Basilio were masters of all poisons, both mixing them and detecting them, while she had never seen but a glimpse of the old texts and scrolls.

Basilio was a demanding and eccentric master at all times, and now they sat, he with no sleep for the past seven days and she with none since the incident of the snakes five or six nights ago. Her mind didn't work well anymore anyway. She had been long enough in this hellish place and had seen so many terrible things that she was now convinced Basilio could read her mind. She could not even hate him in the recesses of her mind, lest he know and punish her for the thinking.

Now, he watched her as her head hung and her eyes rolled in a desperate attempt to stay awake. He smiled quietly at her distress. He walked to her couch and, pulling the velvet drape from around her shoulders, leaving her once again exposed and naked before the retainers in the

room, he began to rub the piece of ice that had been in the ewer over her body. He tormented her by letting the water drip, a drop at a time, on the center of her smooth, bare back, each drop feeling like a pin driven into her skin.

“You don’t want to sleep now, do you?” Basilio asked. “So many things are beginning to happen. I saw the tree by the front gate walking. The walls of the house are glowing. Did you know? Not much, just enough that we are beginning to see it.” Lowering his voice, he added, “I think it is part of Kyraphos’ secret.”

Then, whirling on the Imperial witnesses, who were, of course, present, he hissed, “My brother has not slept? When have you last had word from his house?” These men knew well enough that Basilio knew everything that happened here before they did. They averted their eyes from the lady as she turned demurely away from them as far as she could, in spite of the fact that Basilio was holding her tightly by one arm and dropping ice water on her breasts.

“You can’t sleep now, my dear. Soon, but not now.”

Basilio knew he would soon need the part of the spell that involved her in order to break the final bonds and make him certain of victory over Rodolpho. The crisis had not yet come, he felt, but he was near the same time that Kyraphos had passed through the critical part of the process and had begun to recover from his ordeal with his new power intact. If he could break that bond, he could then stay awake as long as necessary and then, after disposing of his brother, he could once again sleep, or alternately, continue to follow the road of Kyraphos and cease to lose any time at all to sleep from then on. But he must not think of that now.

Basilio was truly amazed that his brother was still awake and, according to the Imperial messengers, seemed to be doing well, despite some delusional behavior earlier in the trial. It was far from the counselors to demean in any way any gentleman’s visions, especially this

gentleman, but it had become a broader issue when they watched him have a conversation with a statue in the hall. It was obvious Rodolpho was absolutely convinced the statue, that of a young woman, was very real and alive.

“I am Rodolpho, lord of these lands,” he said, taking the statue’s face between his hands and planting a long, passionate kiss on its marble lips. Before the scene was over, declarations of love had been spoken, only silent rebuff encountered in return and one pistol shot fired by Rodolpho that had exploded the head of the statue as if it had been packed with powder. This had all be reported back to Basilio, just as his behavior was noted for Rodolpho by the agents and camp followers, who still served the two branches of the house.

On the ninth day, it was reported to Basilio that Rodolpho had indulged in a woman. At a point when he was out of his normal mind, he broke his own prescription and seized one of the serving girls as she walked timidly across the great hall. When he started after her, she hurried away, but Rodolpho had caught her at the middle in the hall, stepped in front of her and, without saying a word, ripped open the front of her dress and pushed her to the floor. He attacked the girl there on the ground in the middle of the assembly. It was some of them who reported back to Basilio that, upon spending himself inside the girl, they had all expected to see him roll over and collapse. He was, after all, into his second week without sleep. But, instead, he raised his head, got to his feet and almost self-consciously began to button and buckle his clothing. He looked about, as if trying to remember something, then there came a look on his face as though he had remembered whatever it was. He spoke clearly and confidently to his lieutenants, giving orders and inquiring of the Imperial men as to his brother’s state.

His brother's state was, in fact, one of deep concern. Ever the cautious one, Basilio had not Brother Kyraphos' faith in providence. He believed a man must do everything to bring affairs to a proper conclusion and, so, he left no avenue of attack untested against Rodolpho.

It was known to Basilio that his brother walked on the wall surrounding his estate house several times each day to take the fresh air and to move about in the open. Two more days and nights went by with both brothers showing no sign of collapse and then, on the evening of the third day, Rodolpho was taking one of his walks on the wall when he looked down and, among the crowd of camp followers at the base of the wall, he saw a young girl with long blonde hair looking up at him. There, in the midst of the usual flurry of peasant activity, such as cooking and tending to equipment, she stood with a wrap she opened to Rodolpho's gaze. By this point, though, Rodolpho was outwardly still in control of his connections with reality, the effect of the nearly two weeks without sleep were the rocks in an uncharged sea. He could not tell where reality left off and hallucinations took over. She was naked beneath the cloak and she quickly closed it. Though she could only see Rodolpho alone on the walls, she knew his lieutenants and attendants would be nearby and she wished to avoid all notice, save Rodolpho's. As she slowly walked around the base of the walls, without turning back, she could tell he followed her around on the top. Then, she disappeared into the crowd.

Rodolpho was still thinking about her when he went back inside to take a light meal and drink more coffee. He had begun to chew the coca leaves, or at least to take the drug in a different form. Both the brothers knew this botanical spell would only have its most potent effects for a few days and, so, both individually felt it was best saved for the time when things got otherwise desperate. It was a sign of Rodolpho's increasing instability that he had felt prompted to turn to that spell. He knew he had far more moments of madness than of lucidity

and that meant less time to tell his crew to lash him to the next main mast against his increasingly deranged behavior. He worried it might be fatal, if Basilio found out how truly desperate he considered the situation, so the spell was given to him in the form of a few drops of coca wine, which were served discreetly mixed with his water or coffee. He was just finishing a cupful of the stuff when he looked up and noticed the girl who stood by to take the cup away was the girl under the wall. She looked him straight in the eye as she took the cup and his hand froze on hers as she reached for the goblet. Then, just as with the girl of the week before, he leaped upon his new cup bearer and ripped her cloak off. He crushed her body to him and she struggled to get her face, not away, but, indeed, closer to his. She wasn't fighting with him as the first girl had, but it was difficult for him in his current state to consider the matter clearly. She wasn't fighting him; she was guiding his lips to hers. His mouth crushed her lips. Her tongue shot into his mouth and he noted that her kiss tasted strangely bitter. Then, in that second, he knew. But, in the torpor of his sleepless mind, he could not guess exactly what kind of poison it was. It must not work too quickly, he thought, for the girl was still standing, just turning away. She had carried a small bubble made of a toad's bladder full of the stuff in her mouth.

As Basilio had instructed, she waited to bite down on it until just before she knew he would try to take her. The dark brother had played upon the girl's vanity and her ignorance. He had had his agents in Vera Cruz watching for this type for months, because he thought that, one day, it would be to his advantage to have such a tidbit of Rodolpho's favorite bait. Once she had been paid for and hustled fresh off the ship, she had been kept away from everyone, except those people Basilio had sent to take care of her. She had been kept in a smaller house miles from the main camps so she would not know the situation and, mainly, so she would not hear tales about Rodolpho and be afraid of him when the time came.

She was a young, pretty whore, fresh from Europe to make her way in the world, and Basilio had flattered her by telling her she could cast a spell to make any man do as she wished. He ensnared her by promising that, with his help, she could stay young and beautiful as she was forever. He had the isolated house made comfortable for her to wait until he might need her. There were Indian servants for her to order about in her tiny kingdom with the little strumpet acting the queen. She had graciously accepted soft isolation in lieu of hard intercourse.

For all of her stunning beauty, she was a simple girl who had come from the countryside in Spain, believing completely in witches and supernatural powers. She was a part of the vast flock the Shadow Court had herded about for years at will to its own ends and those of the Imperial throne through the use of superstition and rumor. She believed him when he told her it would be her kiss that would turn Rodolpho to stone. He had told her she would become invisible a few seconds after she bit down on the little bubble; the potion in her mouth, he said, was for her to get away from the angry crowd of Rodolpho's retainers.

Though Basilio did not require her professional services himself, which surprised her, he had her undress and had walked around her, admiring her flawless skin, her voluptuous figure, and her cascade of golden hair and had then made the lady of his tower undress and stand with this presumptuous newcomer. He looked first at one and then the other, smelling them with his eyes closed as he stood over their shoulders. La Sombra heard him shouting silently, "This! This is a woman!" The lady hated him completely, but, nonetheless, could not help but be wounded just a little more as Basilio's eyes swept contemptuously across her small-boned, almost boy-like, body.

The little whore had smiled kittenishly at Basilio, not really knowing who or what he was; he had encouraged her. He was, himself, practicing the most powerful of magic as he found

out more and more about what was at the shallow center of this girl's heart. He now knew the direction of her dreams, into which a human will more willingly fall than into anything else, even if they have only the wildest of reasons to believe the dream will come true. It was simple to accomplish with this vain, ignorant girl. His spell had consisted of finding out which way she wanted to leap and making the fall in some way useful to his own interests. She had pretensions of being a lady of means and Basilio fed that desire.

Now, as the bubble burst in her mouth and she felt Rodolpho's lips on hers, she gave her victim a taste of the potion. Basilio had been right! The girl began to draw away and, surely, he was still as stone. Only his eyes moved, she noted, as she could see them looking wildly about. She began to quietly turn to make her invisible way out the door when the statue leaped to life and was upon her in a heartbeat. She would die a beautiful woman with his hands around her throat before he passed out.

The toad's bladder had held no deadly poison, no venom, which would cause injury or, worse, any of the signs the Imperial representatives would be diligently searching for that would signal a death by poison. That might cloud the results of the trial. What the toad's bladder had held was an elixir made from the juices of a kind of grass that grew in a few spots in the plains to the north and which had already become a slight problem for some of the cattle-raising rancheros. It was commonly known as "sleepy grass" and, if a herd of cows began to feed on it, it would put them to sleep. It was difficult to get them awake and moving again after such fodder. Though the intoxication itself was not apparently harmful to the animals, it was a problem to drag them out of the pasture so they would not simply eat it again when they awoke and become mired in sleep in that one spot. There were patches of the grass, it was said, which could stop a full-grown cow with hoof in mid air. Basilio had begun to experiment with the stuff

long before, as soon as one of his foremen had told him about the interesting problem with the cattle. Basilio had told the man to bring him several bales of the green grass, to destroy nearly all the rest, if he wished, for the sake of the safety of the herds, and he had also told him to say nothing about it to anyone else there at the main house. The secret would stay isolated in the mountain canyons of the north and, in the spell books of Basilio, a secret to which even the Shadow Court was not yet privy.

The girl had actually suffocated on the toad's bladder, which she sucked into her throat with the first gasp of surprise as Rodolpho's fingers had closed around the back of her neck. It was the membranous bladder that had choked her, Rodolpho had merely crushed the bones of her throat. But there was nothing unusual for the Imperial counselors to see, in spite of Rodolpho's howls of poison. They saw only the last of a long line of bodies Rodolpho left behind him. He spun, looking about him as though expecting a blow from first one and then another direction. He felt his alertness crumbling and, as he passed from consciousness, he knew what it felt like to die.

When the progress of his plan was reported back to him, Basilio himself was just beginning to think about the use of the coca himself. Muscat had waved his hand in a quick, loose arc from his chest outward, a sign of general disgust in his native culture, when almost silently queried by Basilio for his opinion. Though he believed with his mind the crisis would come and pass for him in the use of Kyraphos' spell, that he would attain a state of continual wakefulness, in keeping with his native caution he was considering all potential sources of aid.

Having internally agreed with Muscat's judgment, Basilio's thought next turned to using what he knew about the spell. Kyraphos had made special mention in his testament of one of the things he had noticed during his ordeal of breaking the chains. He had found that, as he walked

among his sleeping brethren of the religious order, it was very much easier for him to stay awake, if he was watching one of his brothers when they were in the process of dreaming. As they mumbled and turned in their sleep, it was almost as if he could see and hear their dreams himself and, therefore, didn't have the need for dreaming his own. The scroll said the stronger the images seemed to the dreamer, the more awake Kyraphos felt. Before he would enter the time limited stream of the coca, there was yet that spell of Kyraphos, using the sleep of La Sombra. He would draw from her the alertness she left vulnerable in sleep. Indeed, he was aware of the truism that, while he was not able to augment, to make stronger her dreams of any pleasant sort, he was fairly certain he could bring about the very strongest dreams in the form of nightmares, the more terrible the better.

The lady herself wanted nothing more at this point than to be able to sink into the oblivion of sleep, come whatever good or evil dreams. But her pain cried out from inside to be able to let herself leave the waking world and to know someone would be left awake who would protect her from whatever evil might come upon her while she lay peacefully unaware. As besieged as she was, she felt she must have that at least once more before she died, which she felt long ago she was ready to do. Basilio had worked a day at the time to bring her to the point that, when he finally allowed her to sleep, her dreams would be filled with the most vivid images of screams and limbs being hacked off and giant, twisting serpents. She saw angels standing by her with their backs to her as she kept her eyes open.

She fairly collapsed on her couch when he gave her leave and had been deep in sleep in no time. Basilio sat and watched as she writhed on the bed in her sleep. He watched her face, her body, the rapid, shallow rise and fall of her breasts. He took a tiny wax taper that was glowing at one end and tapped it on the skin of her forearm. In her dreams, which were so deep not even the

smoldering wick could rouse her, the hissing rattler had sunk its fangs full in her arm. Basilio saw her break out into a sweat and turn even paler than normal there in her sleep. Now Basilio had come to feed on the dreams of this lady. She thrashed about and made small cries in her sleep. He brushed the inside of her naked thigh with a feather and frowned as she momentarily tensed her whole body. Then, he relaxed as he saw her relax and open herself slowly, almost as though it was against her will, even in the dream. So deep was her ingrained terror of him that she dared not defy him even there. He noticed a small spot of blood at the corner of her mouth where she had bitten her own lip. It riveted his attention. Then he noticed the pulsation of the great artery of her neck. He was aware of the blood washing through her body, of the organs, the lungs expanding, the intestines moving, the heart beating. He could see these things inside a faintly glowing ghost of La Sombra, could actually see the blood that filled her. He could see it as though it was whipping through her circulation floating in the air. Then, he saw it all pooled where she lay. He was beginning to rise from his chair, his eyes fixed on her, his hand reaching out, when there came a loud and importunate knocking at the door of the chamber. Muscat opened it, the messenger muttered a word and then left. Muscat walked across the floor to tell his master that Rodolpho was asleep in his house. His hand froze in the air with only a slight tremor marking the breath and heartbeat. Only his eyes moved as he spoke the words, "Bring him to me."

When Rodolpho awoke, he was amazed it wasn't in the middle of hell. He knew that would certainly come soon. The Shadow Court was gone, the Imperial counselors were gone, having certified his failure, and there was no court of redress now, except the winner of the trial with his official letters patent and the seal of the coiled rattlesnakes.

It took nine days for Basilio to expend his pent-up rage and madness on Rodolpho. He used every available minute of those nine days and nights to inflict pain upon his brother. He wrung pain from his body and his mind like the slow twisting of a wet cloth. And he did not sleep. The more Rodolpho suffered, the more alert and excited Basilio became. He was exhilarated by his brother's screams. They were a grotesque parody of the images which had spurred Kyrphos on five centuries before.

It ended on the ninth day with the final coup. Rodolpho's flayed and broken, but still living, remains were placed by Muscat purposefully in a small wooden box and slowly buried in the ground. He was away from all light until it was time to die, which, in the dark silence, broken only by his screams growing weaker, would come within a day or two at most.

La Dona Sombra slept deeply through most of the nine days of "*El Tormento*." When she awoke, she knew two things with certainty; that she would rather die than go on living in that world and that she was pregnant. She couldn't say exactly how she knew, but she knew. Not only that, she knew with equal certainty that she had been impregnated within the last week, in other words, as she lay sleeping. Which one of the horrible dreams it had been she didn't want to try to remember. One likely candidate rushed into the cavern of her stunned and empty consciousness. It was the dream she had had wherein she was standing alone on a vast white plain. In the sky, in the distance, just on the horizon, she can see a smudge of a cloud. Swiftly, the wind is bringing it across the empty sky toward her. It is boiling and swirling and growing bigger and darker by the moment. As it becomes large enough to block out half of the sky, she realizes in terror it is actually a great, scaly, sharp-clawed dragon racing through the upper air looking for her. There is nowhere to run, nowhere to hide from the huge writhing beast as it bears down on her, claws

extended and then ripping her apart and pushing on through the two halves with his entire horned, snakelike body, wings, claws, fangs, and all.

When Basilio came to her after she awoke, he was changed. He was very much awake, even agitated, as she had not seen him before. He still felt the desire for sleep, more now than ever in fact, but as the days and nights had passed and his time without sleep increased, he began to feel as if he could not go to sleep any longer, even if he had wished it. He had already tried more than once and, each time, the strangling grip of suffocation had taken hold of him, though even Muscat swore to him no one approached as he had slept. Nonetheless, each attempt had ended with him exploding into wakefulness as though he was just barely breaking the surface of water to escape drowning.

He knew now the secret of reviving his wakefulness on other people's sleeping bodies as they lay dreaming and he had surrounded himself with people who knew only nightmares. He knew he had destroyed his brother and swept him out of life and the world. He knew he was undisputed master in the mountains. But he also knew now he would never sleep again. For Kyraphos this spell had been rapturous, for Basilio it was purgatorial.

In spite of that sentence and in spite of the wavering of the walls of the real things around him, he could still gloat over his victory. He was staring at a small painted image he had commissioned from a local woodcarver. It was the relief, carved in moist, soft wood with remarkable verisimilitude of the last known look on his brother's face as Basilio had ordered Muscat, movement by movement, to seal him in the already legendary "hard box."

Though Muscat was as watchful as ever, Basilio no longer could tell real from hallucinations and, so, La Sombra was just a breath freer than usual. She used the slack to open a wall cabinet where she had seen Basilio store various things and quickly secreted a pistol she

found there in the folds of her gown, for, at that moment, she had determined life was no longer worth living and she would resolve her lot once and for all very soon now. She closed on Basilio and, in the silence, struck her deepest blow by saying softly and evenly, “All you have is that poor picture. Isn’t it a pity you can never know for certain what your brother looked like at the precise moment of his death?”

“Perhaps not him, Madam, but certainly you, if you open your mouth again before I command it.”

“I am certain you would do it,” she said. “And just that certainly I curse you with the reminder that, since you did not actually see your brother die, you can never really know he is dead. You know, after all the unspeakable tortures you inflicted upon him, his whole will would be directed toward revenge tenfold against you...”

“You are dead,” muttered Basilio, as though lecturing the statuette.

“...but then that would take a miracle, my Lord,” she said, referring to a resurrection of Rodolpho, bowing her head slightly, fixing her eyes on the floor between them.

“Be quiet. Now!” he hissed.

“But then you know all about miracles. You and the Shadow Court are adept at them. Just as you and the rest of them feel about the peasantry in Europe and the Indians here,” she went on. “How can you be sure there isn’t someone looking down on you like you were an insect on a rock?”

“Madame....” said Basilio in a quiet and sinister voice, now seemingly in control again.

“Now, they could give you a miracle. They could have been waiting at the bottom of the grave to steal Rodolpho away and send him back to you.”

“You will die painfully for this,” he said.

“Of course, I’m not saying that is what happened, Basilio,” she said, using his given name for perhaps the first time, and he blanched at its sound upon his lips. “I only show you hope in miracles.”

Basilio, already walking on the edge of insanity, stopped in mid-stride at the last sentence. Since he had passed the barrier of sleep, Basilio had a stretch of presence few people ever encounter in a lifetime, much less experience even for a few hours. Saints are usually described in their hagiologies as possessing a great deal of such presence. Such presence is indiscriminate, however, and can be of a good or an evil nature. Basilio, through his craft and thanks to Brother Kyraphos’ scroll, had taken a short and dirty cut to that circle of the elect of those who have such depth and clarity of vision. But that depth and that clarity are indiscriminate as well. In that moment, at the sound of *La Sombra*’s curse, that vision came finally to rest on the crystallized horror of his life. And he fixed the form of that crushing anxiety, the form of his mangled brother, as real as in life, crawling toward him, hate in his eye and a dagger in his hand.

Basilio froze for a moment and then turned and ran out the door of the room, attempting to flee the apparition, crashing into a table on the opposite side of the hall in his haste. Still came the bleeding form chasing him on. He fled down the hallway and through a door leading to the inner park of the mansion.

For the first time in her painful acquaintance with him, Muscat seemed to show at least a trace of awe for the lady for what he had just witnessed. He turned his head to watch his master, late of the coolest temperament, now screaming in an inner corridor.

As Muscat had turned to follow the scene, La Dona had drawn directly from the folds of her dress the pistol of Basilio’s, which she had brought to help her resolve her fate, in whatever office it might serve to help that cause. Her supposition had been that, in any confrontation with

Basilio, would most likely mean turning the pistol on herself at the last moment and praying it didn't misfire. In the actual event, it proved well primed and straightly loaded. In the instant the dwarf's eyes left her, she produced the pistol and straight-away shot him directly through the side of the head. To the large lead bullet, it had been as though his head wasn't even in the way. The force of it passing out the other side all but tacked him to the door frame, the look of awe now fixed forever. His gargoyle body writhed in a series of seizures before jerking to a stop and leaving the lady in the silent dark, save for the occasional ravings of Basilio in the distance.

It seemed an hour she stood, alone, holding the pistol and watching Muscat's blood spread on the polished wooden floor and slowly turn to a sticky jelly at her feet. She had heard nothing else stirring by the end of that time, except the flies that had begun to swarm there.

She began to move through the now darkening mansion to see who might be about. The light levels in that gloomy castle had always been low, but at least reliable through Basilio's previous habit of attending to the oil and candles in his service. Now, only the light of the rising moon shafted down into the courtyard, with shadows deepening to blackness in the recesses of the building. There in that place as though she was in some spiritual womb, it came to her that she might live after all. She stopped in an archway in the darkness and looked out across the courtyard. The air was thick and redolent with the aroma of the strange and exotic plants that grew there in shadows, a night bird cried out in the stillness, and nothing moved, save the wrack of clouds across the face of the moon. There was no one to be seen anywhere. Not a whisper or a light came from the whole house, the servants all having certainly run away in terror and for a chance at freedom. Basilio's men at arms had been few as befitted his methods and they had felt little bond with their employer, as at least some of Rodolpho's lieutenants had with him. They had felt little compunction about leaving at the first sign that their world was wobbling and there

was a great likelihood that they would no longer be paid due to the New Master's unstable condition.

The lady fancied she heard a small sound. She cocked her head to better be sure of it. A whimper, a moan in the darkness. She stood listening, unmoved, for another half an hour.

There may have been a time when she was tenderhearted as the Virgin toward the suffering. Now she knew she could easily stand to hear it for as long as it best took to get her away from that house. She had burned into her memory the image of every hateful face in that hateful house and she knew of none in that place to whom she might owe pity.

The unexplained sound was, after all, whimpering and not roaring, so she gathered up her courage and began to cross the moonlit patio, trying her best to stay away from the sound as she headed for the far archway that led to the outer gate of the house. But, as she got to the middle of the square, she could see around the side of the central fountain projecting out and thrashing on the stone flags, Basilio's boots. She inched forward. He was draped across the masonry and moved spasmodically as he muttered to himself. She paused and then approached him warily. He saw her, but didn't stir, emboldening her to move closer still. He turned his face full toward her and yet there seemed no sure recognition. He was pointing into the center of the square a few feet from where she stood. She moved closer still, relaxing, as she could see him more clearly. He was immobile with madness. In the pale light, she could see a thin stream of spittle and black-looking blood coming from the corner of his mouth.

He looked up at her, their shadowed eyes meeting in the blue moonlight. When he began to speak, she gave a small gasp as the sound startled her in the darkness, echoing off the walls of the courtyard.

“He says he will never let me alone for a moment for the rest of my life. He has stabbed me through the heart three times already and each time I feel the blade slicing between my ribs and the point of the dagger ripping my heart...then I bleed, and he laughs. All this and, yet, I do not die.” And Basilio, now The Magnificent, himself looked around him like a small child alone in a hoary and threatening forest at night.

“It is Rodolpho, it is him, he chokes me in my dreams, and strangles me in my sleep. The devil let him come to me at first only when I was asleep, but now he says he is here forever.

“He knows,” Basilio said, pointing again into the square. “He knows the future now. He’s dead, you know. And you were wrong, he told me. He told me himself that once that box was closed nothing of very much interest happened and then he died.”

There was a moment of the stillest of stillness and the quietest of silences, and then she said, “I see him, too, Basilio. He speaks to me, too, and he told me to tell you that it’s all true. About hell, about the flames and the tortures, and speaking as an expert on the subject he would have me tell you that what is waiting for you there makes the things you and the dwarf did look like a child’s part.”

The raving Basilio was now crouching against the wall of the courtyard fountain, her words seeming to strike him as hot bolts as she spoke.

“He’ll hunt me awake or he’ll kill me asleep,” he said, as if trying to make her understand.

“That, my lord, is a choice that you will have. And now, I too have a choice, for the first time.”

He fixed his gaze on the pistol that she still unconsciously carried clutched in her grip. He lunged for her, grabbing her around the shoulders with one arm and with an iron grip around her

right wrist. She dropped the gun and he immediately let her go to stoop for it where it fell. Without so much as a heartbeat's pause, he cocked the piece and turned to the spot out in the moonlight where his dead brother maintained the fatal and eternal watch. In another heartbeat, he pulled the trigger, but there was no rip of the air or leap of flame from the barrel in the dark. It was the pistol with which the lady had dispatched Muscat and it had not been reloaded since. Basilio stopped for only a second before he rushed into a work-shed nearby where ball and powder were always kept for the household troops.

"Him first," he said, nodding his head out into the moonlight. "Then you," he concluded perfunctorily. In spite of his recent agitated debility he was now working smoothly and quickly to get the pistol reloaded. Then he had it reloaded, primed, cocked and was aiming very exactly into the center of the courtyard moonlight. He carefully sighted and squeezed off his shot. It was well aimed and he knew the lead ball had flown truly.

There was silence as the smoke drifted upward like a ghost. His jaw was dropped and he froze in place as though turned into stone himself.

"I hit you! Hit you right between the eyes!" he shouted out into the patch of moonlight. "Stop! You're dead! Stop it!"

Then there was silence again for a few moments. Then he muttered again, "Oh, no." This last was filled with such genuine and pathetic terror that, for the briefest flicker of a moment, she began to feel just the faintest twinge of compassion. But she was forgetting, she said to herself, and she killed the seeds of that pity. She watched his face melt into a mask of terror as he shrieked again running to the shed where he began yet again to load the pistol, this time with little regard for measure or exactness. This time, as directly as it was loaded and cocked, he stuck the barrel to the side of his head. She could see his silhouette framed against the moonlight and

then the darkness exploded in a great flash of flame that seemed to bore into the side of his head. In that instant, she could see his face lit by the flame of the gunshot, eyes wide as in terror and in surprise.

In his haste, he had packed the powder poorly, so that, while the shot produced a great searing sheet of flame, the bullet was not at its full charge. The ball crashed through the outer table of Basilio's skull, but not all the way through the instantly vital areas in the middle of the brain. He was certainly going to die, and he knew it, but he was not dead yet and that was what filled him with terror. His wound was massive enough that the entire side of his body had collapsed like a rag doll. There was bleeding from the hole in his skull and he was bothered by the sensation of blood running down his neck. He was acutely aware of the lead ball in his brain; he felt its foreignness and wrongness there. Basilio could see the bright moon above the courtyard from where he lay. He could see La Sombra, nothing but a shadow, and then clearly present he could see his brother's mutilated body rising yet again from the dark shadows of the courtyard. The lady saw him hold his arm clumsily up as though to block a blow and shout, "No!" All she hoped for next was that the devil himself would come to drag this monster to the hottest part of hell. All she knew then was that Basilio had stopped breathing.

She stood for a minute and then, slowly retrieving the pistol, she took it herself to the troops' shed. It took her a little while to get the details, in the dark, but she had watched Basilio twice, once when he had done the procedure in a very orderly way. When she had the patch driven home and the primer pan filled, she walked over to his body and, putting the pistol to his right eye, she pulled the trigger. There was a much more damaging course for the ball this time before it exited the back of the skull, taking half the braincase with it.

She stood back, looking at the badly misshapen shadow on the ground, then, after a time, she straightened up and looked about to begin getting together things that she would need when she left. Within a short time, she had gathered such clothes as she could that would do in these high and lonely mountains. She had no clear idea of where she was going, just that it would be away from this dreary evil house. She had reloaded the pistol, yet again, considering herself rather adept at it by now. She also swagged the rest of the bag of powder and shot. Also, into a bag she carried upon her back, she packed three or four of the great books that happened to be lying on Basilio's huge table. She knew the story of Lucia, the woman of Umberto the Great, the ignorant, poked little wench who had eventually stood behind one of the most powerful men in the New World, the Captain, the grandfather of Rodolpho and Basilio. She took the books, because she knew there was power in them that, with time, she could put them to the service of herself and, if need be, the child she reminded herself that she still carried. She felt she had a right to that power as the price of her suffering. She also hoped that, in one of Basilio's books, there must be a spell to rid her of this thing she carried inside her.

She took her bundles and, without closing the doors or gates behind her, she walked through the farthest arch and into the strange moon brightness of the surrounding plain. She didn't know which way to go, so she picked a direction that didn't seem to have as many mountains, judging by the dim silhouettes and the faint glistening of snow in the moonlight.

She turned her back to the great shadowed walls and kept walking until any ghostly sentinel at the portals of that house of death following with his gaze would have eventually seen her fade completely out of sight in the darkness.

The Well of Madness

In the years when the new nation of the United States was being born, and the Liberté, Egalité, and Fraternité of the French was still gestating in the lower cells of the Bastille, the Viceroyalty of New Spain was more and more often being referred to as Mexico. This reflected the growing tide of national aspiration there. The difference was the gulf between the relative powers of the antagonists in the respective conflicts. While Jefferson spoke of the “works of death, desolation, and tyranny” of the King of England, and “the circumstances of cruelty and perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages,” it might have been termed hyperbole for the sake of advancing policy and galvanizing the support of the drawing rooms of Europe and the European part of America. Were Jefferson to have spent but a month in New Spain, he would have seen the realities of “barbarous cruelty” indeed in the mines and fields sufficient to have made even his peppery blood run cold. As the indigenous populations had gradually grown more restive and more able to represent their own interests, beginning with small steps to work toward their own eventual liberation, the power of the decadent Spanish crown and its vice-regal representatives felt no compunction toward the most egregious use of crushing force and the most gruesome torture at the first whisperings of nationalism. As to the Crown itself, the position of the court at Madrid was that the extracted wealth of the colonies, the Mexican silver and Caribbean sugar, was not only expected, it was paramount to propping up a crumbling and paranoid regime. Few questions were asked as to the methods employed.

These methods were founded first and foremost on a large and powerful system of internal espionage and intelligence. Not a word passed in public that was not vetted by the

administration for any whiff of opposition. Not a private conversation but was subject to finding itself turned up into a garish light by the operatives of the security forces. Not an intimate whispering of hope but was somehow recorded by the deep and shadowy bureaucracy of terror.

Eduardo Montanero was a lawyer in Mexico City. He was a man of moderation. He spoke circumspectly and with great discretion as a result of his professional habits. And more than this, having much more in common with his Castilian colleagues in the courtrooms than with the people of the countryside, notwithstanding the connection he had through the grandmother who had given the faintly olive cast to his complexion. He was a cynical and practical man who argued cases for their profit as much as their truth.

Ironic then that, on the basis of a simple slip of the tongue, some joking remark he had made in his cups in the apartments of a “friend” during a game of cards, he was himself hailed into a court, albeit a small and dimly lit one, in the middle of the night to stand to rump charges of “treason against the Majesty of the Spanish Crown.” His vigorous professions of support for the regime did little to impress the judge, who it appeared needed to write nothing upon the case record, as it was already completed before Montanero even arrived under guard, direct from having been pulled from his warm bed, still in his nightshirt and cap.

“To the Caracole with him,” was the laconic utterance of the judge, himself only one misstep from displeasing some faceless higher-up and risking making the same journey next. In those days, the Caracole was still the swampy southern edge of the city, and also the name of a feared prison that stood in those malarious precincts. Montanero heard the great doors swing open before and slam closed behind as he was dragged inside. Terror had already loosened his bowels in the courtroom, and his knees had given out on the short walk from the barred wagon of

transport and this great dark gaping maw that seemed to him as nothing so much as the very mouth of Hell.

“Oh ho! A fat one,” the gross and guttural guards laughed to each other. “Hey Panzon, you forgot your feather mattress!” They roared with the drunken laughter of Satan’s bodyguard. “It’s alright Panzon, we’ll give you a soft place to land!” With this, strong hands snatched him up under the armpits and jogged him down a descending hallway and around several corners until he found himself in the a very dimly lit room around so many turns that he had no idea any longer of which direction he might be facing or how far beneath the ground he might be. As befit its place in the marshy section of the city, indeed below the actual surface of the lake of Mexico City, the walls dripped actively. Not the clear water of a running spring, but the fetid oozing discharge of what was already one of the largest, and poorest, cities on the continent. This trickling seemed to fall away into a dark circular opening as a well. Not that any of what went into such a cistern would be wanted for drawing back again. Montanero noticed a low wall or really more a lip of stone around the twenty-foot circle of this well. Even a few feet down below that curb, the light failed so completely that it was as though the well might contain India ink rather than living air. Though one could hear the plash of the dripping inflow somewhere below, how far down it went was known only to the guards, and perhaps to God, but not to Montanero. His bladder now betrayed him as the guards began to hustle him not around, but toward this opening.

“No!” he whimpered. The guards only laughed.

“Give them all down there our best, Panzon. Don’t hit the rocks!” And with this, Montanero felt himself lifted bodily and pitched with no further ado over the stone lip of the well into the cold darkness.

The guards were roaring with laughter, he could hear it as he plummeted down. His own scream of terror almost, but did not quite, drown out the sound. His arms and legs flailed and he was more head down than up. Just as his breath was all but gone from the cry of his terror, he hit the surface of frigid waters. This would have been a blessing had the water been but a foot or so deeper. As it was, it was deep enough to break the worst of the fall. It wasn't rock, at least. But being only about four feet deep and Montanero being a large man, having fallen a considerable distance, he went to the bottom hard enough to give himself a knock on the head that all but stunned him.

The next thing he was aware of was standing, or struggling to stand up in the water, of sputtering and choking on what he had already swallowed of the foul stuff, and then his feet getting purchase on the slippery bottom. That was all he could claim as victory at that point. There was no light, none at all, except the tiniest glimmer from what must've been far above at the opening. He could not tell if the guards had somehow put a cover over the opening, or if they had simply taken the faint and smoky torches out of the chamber above.

"Hey! Hola! You up there!," he shouted, trying to at least establish some connection with another human, even if it was his tormentors. As he waited, the silence became complete as the waters stopped roiling from his fall into them. He waited and listened and heard not a sound from above. He concluded that he was indeed left alone, at the bottom of a lightless well, up to his chest in foul and frigid waters. He cursed his fate as he remembered that not more than a few hours ago he had been asleep in a soft warm bed, dreaming only of what delicacy to have for his breakfast in the morning. "Hey!," he shouted again, this time more at God or the saints or the demons or whoever there might be to hear. Stillness, silence.

He began to take stock of his surroundings in a more connected way. After all, he was a practical man, and this appeared to be his new home. As miserable as he was, he began to try to understand it to his advantage. He waved his arms about and, except for the greasy surface of the water, midway between his waist and his ribs; he could feel nothing in any direction. He took a tentative step, almost slipping on the slime of the smooth stone bottom. He had lost one of his bed slippers and now the other seemed of no use, so he let it slip away as well. He shivered with the cold, not to mention his fear, which came again, washing over him like waves of water on a beach.

As he progressed slowly forward, blindly, feeling in the darkness, he came in a few steps to a stone wall. He felt this and found it curved, as befitted a well, and with nothing of any consequence in the way of hand holds or cracks. He turned his back to this wall and leaned against it, coming once again to rest. His breath came in ragged gasps from the next wave of fear, so palpable as to almost nauseate him. The cold and that selfsame fear kept his chest so constricted that he could barely get his breath at all. He was altogether miserable, his shoulder and the side of his head ached where he had hit them on the bottom of the well. He looked up hopefully, wishing only to see some faint light that meant he wasn't really cast completely out of the world of man and of God. Nothing rewarded his hope.

As his own breathing subsided, he could hear the tiny splash of the water dripping from the walls above. He could hear the slap of the tiny waves that he himself set up as they echoed against the walls. He could hear his own breathing, and its echo.

Then it came to him in another rush of terror that it was not the echo of his breathing that he heard; it was the breathing of someone else there in the well. For just as the First Estate of the Imperial dignity had been aggressive and humorless in seizing and breaking any potential

worldly opponent, even one as foolish and insubstantial as poor misunderstood Montenero, that other great Estate, Holy Catholic Church had also turned a lidless and inquisitorial eye to the task of harrowing any heretical behavior from the spiritual body of New Spain. Over time, its vigilant offices had caught and sequestered many sinners whose transgressions ranged from the merely venal to the truly black-hearted and irredeemably wicked.

“Hello...Hello! Is there someone there?” Montenero was pulled between elation at the prospect that he was not after all alone, but also a terrible feeling that no one who could be there, and who had not yet spoken could be much in the way of a comrade. “You, Speak! for the love of God. If you are here, speak out! Say something. Please!” Then Montenero thought he could hear, from away to his left along the wall, a soft wheezing laugh. It was more a spine-chilling gurgle than fresh true laughter. He started to turn and move toward the sound. There came a louder sound, almost a growl; clearly a warning. Montenero stopped, backing against his space on the wall. “Who are you? Why will you not speak?” Silence. Then with another wave of fear came the thought that he could not be quite sure that whoever, or more importantly, whatever, was making the noise was fully human. The first sound had approximated a laugh sufficiently to have made him assume it was a fellow human. What, he wondered, might be down here with him? Terror washed over him again, so profound this time that he heaved and emptied his stomach into the water around him. What to do? His mind scrabbled, trying to find a grasp on some kind of reality, but like his fingers had felt no finger holds in the hard cold stone of the well, his mind could gain no purchase on the situation.

The fear receded enough over many minutes to permit him to think again. He was suddenly very tired and he felt his knees would buckle soon. And it came to him that this was part of the pitiless torture to which he was subject; there was no way to sit or rest, the water

being so high would not permit it. But the other person? Being? Thing? In the well must've found a perch unless it had only been there a trifle longer than he. He knew he must come to some sort of terms with the other. He was not by nature a bold man, and so he hung back and clung to his "safe" stretch of the wall for what seemed like hours longer before he could screw his courage up to advance again. Again the low growling and spitting sounds. There was no help for it, thought Montenero, he had no place else to go. He slowly continued around, feeling the wall on his left and making his way carefully along the slippery floor. His foot touched occasional pieces of some soft, mushy substance. He continued, and it seemed that there were more such pieces of matter, almost the beginning of a pile which he was approaching. The snarling was clearly in front of him now. The Other was stirring in the water, the sound making Montenero think that it was circling to his right, out in the center of the absolute, blind darkness. Montenero faced out in that direction, but continued his slide around the wall.

He could now clearly feel that there was indeed a large pile of the soft greasy mass where the Other had been. Then his foot hit a harder object and his hand sank into the pile to feel several such hard objects. It took a moment for his mind to apprehend what he was feeling, and another to believe it. He was feeling what must be bones, and that meant that the pile of soft mushy goo could only be made of the decomposing flesh of corpses.

The Other snarled louder now, its perch disturbed. He realized how prized a place it had...had created? By killing any prisoners, or simply outlasting them, then appropriating their bodies as its bed, its throne. And, perhaps, realized Montenero with another wave of nausea, its food. He felt the surge of the water as it approached him from out in the darkness, and he waved his arms wildly to protect himself from the attack he knew was coming. He felt a cold and clammy hand on his wrist, and then having discovered him, the Other grabbed him by the arm

with its left hand and clutched for his throat with its right. Montenero fought back as well as he knew how, pushing the thing away from his neck, swinging out wildly, he caught his attacker a lucky blow somewhere about the face. It backed off, snarling, perhaps not used to true attack, depending more on sneak attack on weakened or wounded opponents.

Something in Montenero seemed to focus with the blow he landed. His will to live was suddenly kindled and his knees stopped shaking so badly. His eyes sought any trace of his antagonist in the darkness, his ears strained for any trace of sound. But it had apparently retreated. This, realized Montenero, left him in possession of the "field." Never had there been a more melancholy victory. He could not bring himself to mount to the top of the pile, as tired as he was. "No," he thought, "I'll die before I'll sit upon that throne." And simultaneously, his gorge rose yet again, though now empty, at the thought of the potential feast that his victory had won. How long had this madman been down here? How long would Montanero be here? He knew that to be able to rest, to sleep if it came to that, he must have the wretched pile on which to crouch so as to be high enough out of the water to nod off. How had these others died? At the hands of the snarling ghost in the dark? Had they been dead when they were thrown in? Had they died from fatigue, from hunger. He could thus imagine how the Other had lived; drinking water from the well's reeking pit, feeding on the corpses, rest and sleep upon the pile of flesh and bone. And no light except the occasional glimmer from a torch above, and no word of humankind at all.

Hours passed and Montenero still stood, leaning against the wall, his eyes heavy with fatigue and misery. Visions began to paint themselves upon the canvas of the dark. Faces began to emerge as though from a fog, and he had the sudden and powerful sense that they were the faces of the dead there at the bottom of the well. His misery was complete; he could not untangle

the knot of terror, fatigue, cold, nausea, and the overwhelming desire to lie down and sleep. Simple, blessed sleep was a treasure he remembered as if it was his most precious memory. But he knew that the instant he could lie down, which he could not because of the water, that the madman in the well with him would throttle him and add his flesh and bone to slough and decay on the hideous high seat of this hideous kingdom.

And so Montenero, the cynic, the hard case, the petty bureaucrat who snuffed out the small dreams and hopes of slightly lesser men with a wave of his manicured hand, this Montenero who scoffed at the devotions of the old women walking behind the coffins of their husbands and sons, dead in the nascent cause of freedom, this same Montenero now wept. He sobbed in his misery and then he cried out to the heaven, which he hoped was up up and far up out of the eternal night of this pit of hell. He despaired in the deep silence that followed, and began, ever so slowly, to slip down the side of the well, his back against the curved wall, his knees giving way, his spirit in no kind of peace with the future or with eternity. His tears mixed with the greasy, cold, fetid water in the darkness. He heard first the breathing, and then the faint laughter of the madman across the way. Then he could feel the slight pressure of the water lapping up against his chest, now nearly up to this chin. It signaled that the madman was on the move, and there could be but one place he was headed, but one objective in the well, but one goal in this pit.

Montenero felt the coldest of hands, now on his shoulders, groping for his throat. He squeezed his eyes closed and surrendered his defense, his manhood, his life. But in that instant there was a sickening lurch in the whole well, the water seeming in the dark to disappear to his front, and the madman swept along with it. Then came a mighty rumble and the water was

running crazily all around the well, and he and the madman and the bodies and the darkness were all stirred together as if some malignant soup in the mess of hell.

Then though the continuing rumble, there came a great cracking sound, and he heard stones fall into the water, one fell close enough to splash water up into his face. Then the rumble and the cracking grew so loud, being in the bottom of the well, and at the lowest point of the city, that it was painful. Later, he would see that there was blood streaming from his ears and he was considerably deafened for the rest of his life.

Then at the great crescendo of sound, the wall shifted and split and the earth belched up the blackness of the pit into the light of the upper levels. The Great Earthquake, as strong as the great terror of Lisbon, threw stone off of stone and shifted the rocks of the mountains and stirred the muck that was the foundation of the great metropolis of Mexico. Light streamed in from above and the waters went to only God knew where, for Montenero could not tell. He lay for how long he knew not, on the wet stones of the fortress, and could see the cracked wall, the courses of stones, now torn off one another almost forming a crude stairway up and out of the bottom of the well of madness. He was stunned and, as he raised himself up dazed, he saw a figure, small and hunched and otherwise indistinct except for the glint in his eyes like a reptile, as it looked back once over its shoulder at him, laughed a maniacal burst of laughter and then scrambled up the broken rock of the wall and squeezed through the opening to the light and the free air outside.

When, it seemed hours later, Montenero had hauled his bulk up and out the same opening he found a city in a panic, fires and waters all shifted top for bottom and the streets full of people and animals all mad with fright of another blow from the hand of God, a blow which many, like Montenero knew they deserved all too well.

In his later years, Montenero would remember this conversion experience from his monastic cell and thank God that he could remember it no clearer, and he never knew who the madman in the well had been. He never knew to whence the figure had fled, nor did he know the tenacious drive of such pure evil to continue and to extend its reach into the peace of the world.

La Noche D'Alma

In the grand palaces of Mexico City, the excitement of the recent revolt from Spanish power was still echoing through the marbled and satined halls. The talk was all of how the Mexican people had the Frenchman, Napoleon, to thank as he dragged the remnants of his reluctant allies, the once grand House of Hapsburg, as well as the opposing Spaniard *guerillos*, around the Iberian Peninsula in his wake, his marshals thus responsible for dissipating what was left of any Spanish strength in their “scientific” assaults on Wellington’s tough veterans in the bloody lines of Torres Vedras.

The colonials here in the New World had judged that their rebellion of 1810 was the dawning of an entirely different day, free of the prejudices and the superstitions of the decaying Old Continent. While this may indeed have been the case in the brilliant drawing rooms and in the academies in Mexico City, there were still many rotting links with the powers of dark old Spain, and there was certainly much of the old, even the ancient chthonic ways, still holding sway in the less cosmopolitan hinterlands.

The people in the little mountain town of San Juan knew the gnarled, skinny little figure with the long, sharp nose who lived somewhere up in the canyons was a witch. For years, he had been seen here and there, in glimpses mostly. He was furtive as an animal. It was said he had scalded those who had come too near his lair in their search to find and ogle him. He had only struck them with a bundle of fine switches, but these switches had had a poison that burned like boiling water and which, except for the healing skills of the town’s *curandera*, would surely have left scars.

Most people said that whenever they had seen the crouched figure at all, it was sunset or later, and usually near the river, far up its course. The great river flowed by noisily and with great power just below the town. A steep path led from the edge of the small plaza down to the bank of the river and to a narrow wooden bridge that stretched all the way across the rushing stream. The bridge, which was only about two feet wide, was awash during the passion of the river as the snow melted each year high up in the mountains above the town.

The river there was lined with great cottonwood trees that had irregular breaks in their densely growing ranks every few dozen yards. In the quieter flowing parts of the river thereabouts, in the side pockets and backwashes, cattail reeds threw up their melancholy silhouettes against the darkening sky in the chilly evenings.

One particular evening, like any other to the village at the head of the path, there was a different feel to the air, if one could but feel it; a different sound in the wind, if one could but hear. This night, the small twisted figure was moving stealthily along the riverbank through these common gathering places of frogs and snakes. It was short for a normal man and any other definition of the shape being hidden by the long folds of dark cloth. The figure didn't actually move in the waters of the stream, for it was bitingly cold there in the mountain ranges of central Mexico, but rather it followed the bank opposite the town, ducking furtively in and out of the dark patches of trees and reeds.

Down the bank on the town side in the gloom was a swirling flicker of the light, gay-colored clothing and the chirp of youthful laughter. The small group of merry-makers consisted of Amelia, the seventeen-year-old daughter of one of the town's sturdy merchants, Don Baltasar Vega; her fiancé, Gabriel; and, chaperoning as their *duena*, Amelia's younger sister, Mercedes.

Amelia was beautiful with the classic straight European features of her Spanish heritage, but with a hint of the dark mixture of Indian blood, a mixture that in time yielded the most beautiful women in the world. It was to her credit that she did not spend more time looking into the mirror than she did and she was truly modest enough that she had sincerely confessed and sincerely repented the sin of vanity to the sleepy old priest who came to the town church from time to time.

Gabriel had light-colored eyes and light skin as well, although he had the deep tan of a healthy life in the outdoors. He was already known for his maturity and responsibility and did much to support his family as his father had grown old and partially lame. This responsibility he seemed to shoulder easily, being of good humor, ever ready to help friends in need of counsel or work or even to share a joke.

Mercedes was strange, never having been normal since her birth fifteen years ago, with a strange look as though some of the parts of her face were not quite right. But she was gentle and, though she never spoke, she showed love and emotion in other ways. She worshipped her sister and was girlishly in love with Gabriel. Her greatest happiness was that her sister had said that, when the wedding came, she, Mercedes, would be the maid of honor in the procession.

The older two laughed and whooped as they played a game of tag with a reed stalk and ran around and around Mercedes, who was transported with joy to be in the center of this obvious fun.

The sound of the laughter drifted across the broad, gently swirling surface of the river to the figure watching from the darkness of the shadows. He saw all the young people dissolve in a laughing heap on the farther shore. Their merriment wove its way into the sound of the river's rush through the great rapids, just downstream from the town.

He looked at the passive younger girl and thought for a moment with his small eyes narrowing. Then his gaze left Mercedes and he saw that the older girl had a woman's proper shape. His gaze groped over her hair and her breasts and the ankle he imagined he could see at the hem of her skirts. His look never left her as she walked away up the path toward the town. Only once did his eyes bounce off to the young man. The brujo D'Ugarte gave a low animal growl at this fellow who might stand between him and what it was that he had decided he now desired so coldly.

They were gone now and the light had gone from the sky. D'Ugarte considered his next move. Now he didn't even want to risk a light along the shore for hunting frogs and small animals. From time to time over the years, someone curious from the town would come down and try to identify the source of such lights. Some spoke of *La Llorona*, but the only ones who had gotten anywhere close had heard guttural muttering and curses instead of the bereaved wail of the unfortunate ghost who drowned her children and, according to legend, calls out to them eternally by the river.

Others guessed it was the brujo, but they didn't know why he wove in and out of the reeds, like a slow firefly of dull red embers. On more than one occasion, if their curiosity had brought them close enough to disturb his scavenging for the foul things in the mud, from where he lay with light quenched in the shadows, the witch had used the tiniest of tiny darts in a tiny blowgun to prick a nosy pursuer's skin. He had potions he used on these flying splinters that could make the worst horsefly bite seem like a kiss. Some of the potions used burning plant saps and some the venom or excrement of poisonous snakes and lizards. It was usually at this point, having felt their sting, that the bravery of the curious failed and they turned back. So, the legend of the lights would grow a bit more lurid.

The strong, ungraceful step now took him back up his side of the valley, the wild side where no one else lived, in the thickets and twisted rocks. There he lived, moving miles between one cave and another over the years. Once in a great while, a hunger would drive him to raid across the river on the town side to take some larger prey. On such raids, he used the great blowgun with a thick coating of deadly poison on the great, thorn-like dart. With this, he stole cattle. He would have taken the cattle off the hoof with his knife, but it took too long for them to die and the herdsman might catch him. So, he would hit them at moonset, darting one of the smaller animals on the edge of the herd and then sitting back in the shadow until it was no longer breathing, at least no longer moving, or at least not resisting too actively. There was less struggle as he butchered the paralyzed beast and, so, less chance of attracting a herdsman's attention.

He had a few things with him in the caves. Animal skins, grimy with age, scattered on the dirt floor. A bundle, which contained several smaller packages wrapped in oilskin, each containing a plant or a powder or some other talisman. In the shadows of the back of the cave, there were several strange animals in small wooden and wicker cages. Among these were several animals not usually found in that part of the country. These had been bred by his family for generations for the particular aid they could provide in the spells; one small animal, for instance, could see in the dark as well as a man could see in the daylight. When its limbs had been crippled in just the right way so it could not move about and, when it was harnessed upon a shoulder, its reactions could give one a fairly good view of the night world. There was also a pair of goats. These animals he had had always, needing goat's blood at times to aid in the casting of spells for sickening.

There was a small shelf made of a flat piece of wood. On this shelf were three moldering old books, bound in leather. The contents of these he knew chapter and verse like a biblical

scholar knows the Gospels, though he could not read anything else in any proper sense of the word. These were the books that had come down from his great-grandmother. She had been the shadowy lady of his great-grandfather, Don Basilio the Sleepless. She, who after killing that dark lord, had escaped many years before from his doomed *hacienda*, the remains of which still stood high up in the mountains, with crumbling walls and hints of ghostly anguish on foggy nights. She had escaped the fall of the house and born a posthumous son to Don Basilio and that son a son and that one, on his own daughter, had fathered this same D'Ugarte that now groveled and muttered in caves out of sight of the town below. The decline in the state of the family had been of satanic scale indeed, from the great ducal domain to this filthy hermit.

Over the years, as the power of the family had fallen from dominating whole provinces to the point of furtively casting spiteful spells on the occasional neighboring peasant, the officials of the church had lost their fear of the D'Ugartes and finally had taken steps to excommunicate them formally from the universal mother church. In the spiritual sense, this had but little effect upon the D'Ugartes, who, from the time of Umberto and the Shadow Court, had thought of the superstitions of religion as simply a convenient tool with which to manipulate the masses. But, as the estate of the family fell, and they were no longer surrounded by their own retainers, the social effect of the proscription had stung more deeply. By the time of the excommunication, in the mid-seventeen hundreds, the line had already become so strange and warped that they had little intercourse with other people anyway, but the excommunication put them under an even more complete isolation and their malevolence toward the world had become an article of faith with them, to be handed down and beaten in father to son, father to son, as each new heir to the books of Umberto had appeared. The line had maintained the great books of Umberto the Wizard, their earlier ancestor. That and little else. The last generations had been bred like this one would now

be, if it were to survive, by literally capturing a woman and forcing it upon her. This almost spiteful drive to reproduce was surely rooted somewhere closer to revenge than to the heart. There was certainly nothing in the line to recommend itself to any willing woman. The D'Ugarte didn't care.

Now, this D'Ugarte began to lie in wait along the paths where he knew Amelia might walk. Then, one evening, near dusk, he watched her, up to his hips in the sticky mud as he squatted in the flats among the reeds. He saw her on the open side of the river kneeling on the stones washing her long black hair. She waded in the shallows, holding her skirts up high enough to clear the surface of the water. The big, friendly family dog, Scroopo, lay near where Mercedes sat playing on a rock on the bank.

For days, Amelia had been followed by a tiny sense of unease at something unknown that even a good general confession and the penance of a hundred Hail Mary's had not dispelled. Now, suddenly, the girl had the strong sense someone was watching her. Though Mercedes continued to play quietly with the little pebbles and shells on the bank, Scroopo's head was up, and he whined faintly as he started across the river. Calmly, she looked first up and down the river. There was no one to be seen. Trying not to let silly fears get the best of her, she began to walk slowly, but directly, back to the shore and was careful to let her skirt down even as she was leaving the water. Once on the shore, she slipped the sandals onto her feet, took Mercedes by the hand and made with a quick, but steady, walk to the bottom of the winding dirt path that led back up to the plaza. Scroopo barked and whined, but he seemed agitated most at not knowing exactly where or what to guard against. It was as though he was being attacked by a whole swarm of some kind of invisible insect coming from all directions at once, yet Amelia could neither see nor hear anything there immediately around them. She was now beginning to look behind her,

trying not to be too obvious, but quickening her pace. She felt a skip in her heartbeat when, clearly now, she was aware of a presence and now it seemed it was on her side of the river.

Then, the bushes just ahead of her shuddered and she came to an abrupt halt on the path, a tiny cloud of dust sweeping on before her as her feet skidded to a stop. Her heart was in her throat and she found she couldn't shout, even if it was the devil himself. Scroopo stopped stock still as though made of stone. As the bushes parted, the girl managed to make only one tiny, high-pitched, tight-string squeak.

But, as terrified as she had been, she was now as joyous, because the bushes had yielded not the devil, but her own Aunt Seraphina. Scroopo began to leap about and bark normally again and bounded to the older woman to give her a lusty, paws-on-shoulders slurp on the face.

Seraphina was generally regarded by the people thereabouts as an act of nature in herself. She worked harder, she knew more, and she had more capacity for caring for others than any of the rest of them. She was a healer, a white witch of great power, the *curandera*, whose mother and grandmothers had done that work before her for as long as anyone could remember. She was thick-set, stocky without being fat, like the stump of a tree upon which it is yet easy to imagine foliage and flowers.

She now crashed onto the path from the bushes holding a large stick. It could pass as a walking stick, but Amelia noticed it had been very freshly cut and had a strange fork in the end. Seraphina took in the situation in one quick scan and then, as she relaxed the walking stick into a clearly passive position with one end on the ground, the girl knew the threat was not continuing up the path behind her and that she was safe again.

Seraphina now greeted her with her a great grin and took her hand to lead her on up the hill, but Amelia noted her aunt's eyes darted once more to the riverside before they turned to go.

Neither of them spoke anything to the other about the evil presence that had scared the girl out of the river. They walked the rest of the way back up to the low town gate, talking about this and that. Amelia totally relaxed only as they crossed into the circle of early evening light coming from the windows of the houses on the square. As they entered the family's house, Amelia left her aunt with an *adios* to go with Mercedes to their room and Seraphina, pausing in the front room near the niche that held the statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe, closed her eyes and then opened them again and bestowed a *via con Dios* on her niece.

In the morning, Amelia noticed there was a sprout of aloe vera mounted over her family's front door. Had she gone to the side of the house in the next few days, she would have also noted a smaller sprout of the protecting herb hung over the window of the room in which she and her sister slept. This plant was changed every few days to keep the shielding spell strong.

D'Ugarte had been taught the art of spying, of looking into lighted windows from the darkness. He had been taught by his father. They had walked in the late night around the windows of the town to listen and to occasionally steal and to watch what they could use to their own ends. That had taught him a hundred spells to keep dogs quiet. Some involved using herbs or scents to distract the watch-dog's attention. Some involved putting the dog to sleep for a few hours, but there were certainly potions that would put even the largest mastiff hound to sleep forever. These last two kinds of potions could be delivered in a number of vehicles, but the one D'Ugarte had favored ever since he was a boy was the blow pipe with its darts, fletched with kapok and tipped in one potion or another. Such a dart could be made out of a wooden splinter and made so small no one would ever see that the dog had been drugged and, so, would never suspect they had been visited in the night by anything other than a spirit.

Indeed, D'Ugarte had already watched patiently for thirty minutes as old Scroopo, who usually lay outside the door of Amelia's family's house, became unnaturally still after taking a dart in the flank. But, as he approached the house through the shadows, he became aware of a terrible stench, a small and swarming of the air that burned his eyes and throat. The closer to the house he came, the worse the sensation. Then, he spotted the aloe vera above the door and suspected he wasn't just fighting silly townspeople anymore. He knew there was another powerful being about and that it sensed his presence. He gave up his attempt to be close to the girl that night and retired to his cave for a long time to think bitterly about this new development.

Over the next few days, while waiting for the dark of the moon to come, the tight face with the long, thin, rat-like nose peered into the books that sat upon the shelf. He gnawed the bones of the rabbits he had snared and, as his greasy finger followed the Latin script, he muttered under his breath, mumbling something that sounded like a liturgy or, perhaps, a recipe.

From time to time, he would look at the blank, gray wall of the cave and his gaze would fix and he could cast there the image of the girl covered now only by the long cascade of her dark hair. Gradually, as he stared and stared, with only the candlelight and the gray wall ahead, he gradually drew back his lips without really realizing it. Slowly, they drew back over his yellowed and broken teeth and, as his breath became more pronounced, his lips set in a kind of snarl. Then, despite the fact that it was his own creation, the girl on the wall held her hands to cover herself and cowered back from him in the most abject terror. In the mountain stillness of the cave, it seemed he heard her voice.

"What do you want with me?!" the image said to the little man who sat nonetheless as though rooted. A moment more and, just as the spittle was beginning to drool over the corner of his twisted lips with his heavy breathing, he rocked back his head and closed his eyes for a brief

moment. Then, the image of the girl was gone and D'Ugarte was worn out in body, but more than ever resolved he would possess this girl, and he didn't care if he had to ambush the fiancé or to struggle with the power he had smelled in the air in San Juan town.

He went away from his accustomed lair for a few days to go lower in the mountains to the edge of the plains to pick red flowering poppies for part of the spell he would use. On his return, he worked until he had his spells and potions lined up on the shelf with the books that gave their ingredients, each spell in its own small bag of skin. One bag held several blow darts with poisons that could kill a grown cow or a man.

After one last check of the spells he would need, and a quick consultation with the night and the wind, he was out upon the trail down to his side of the river. It was marked in ways that would make it recognizable as a trail only to him. Down to the river, he was merely careful, occasionally looking up and grumbling with impatience at even the small crescent of moon that was now low in the west near setting.

He came in the dark of the night wrapped in a dark gray shroud, a hunched figure with a sack over his shoulder, making his way across the bridge to the foot of the path to the town. He paused for an impatient moment at the near end of the bridge before first touching the shore, waiting until the moon was fully down. His father would have done it like that, step by step, every move ritualistically exact, according to the book, to make the whole spell work from the beginning to the end in all its parts; the approach, the abduction, and then the escape.

It was still early in the evening, in spite of the coal blackness and all the family of Don Baltasar was inside the house, including Aunt Seraphina, who stayed home from her usual round of visiting, as she often did these days.

The aloe vera, which had to be replaced to stay effective in warding off evil spirits, had been replaced by a more permanent barrier; a small cross discreetly above each door and window.

D'Ugarte saw the crosses and cursed them, but at least, he thought, there wasn't that terrible stench as before. He had come with a poultice he could wear like a mask, if the charm was as strong as before. It wasn't that the crosses held any real power over him, yet after over a hundred years of the deepest and most concentrated hate by his family for the church, it was difficult for him to perceive it as a simple, silly fetish. The power of the cross over him, D'Ugarte knew, was to be able to raise in him an instant and horrendous anger that would surely break his concentration upon the steps of the spell and render him as powerless as the rest of the peasant herd that believed in such drivel. Now, at least he knew he could deal with their crosses at leisure, for there were ways to defeat all kinds of their charms.

Though, with the falling of night, there was only the tiniest of breezes, D'Ugarte had approached from the downwind side of the house so he might get close to the dog by the door. Just as Scroopo got the tiniest whiff of a new scent, gamey and pungent, he had felt a burning stick in the side of his throat. He let out a yelp and got up, turning this way and that, looking and barking. Amelia's father came out in his comfortable slippers and found nothing by virtue of the fact that, by this time, D'Ugarte had, according to the plan of the spell, retreated back to the river to ritually wash his filthy-nailed hands as the book had prescribed and to wait for everything to settle down again in the town above.

The spell said the timing would be right with the size of this animal and the amount of the particular paralyzing poison such that the dog would have time to be excited, to be calmed by his master, left alone again and, then, to die in the night without waking again.

When all was quiet, D'Ugarte started back up the pitch black trail once again. This time, though, the family inside had not even sat down to the last meal of the day and the candlelight shown from the kitchen and the parlor, and the dog now lay drunkenly, raising its head slightly, D'Ugarte giving him a small but nonetheless painful, kick as he crept past, partly as a check and partly to grind into his opponent's dying mind the contempt which D'Ugarte heaped on him.

Then, D'Ugarte crept to the back courtyard of the house and, by the back door, found the small water bucket with the gourd dipper that the family all used. D'Ugarte knelt in the shadows and removed one of the small pouches from the larger sack, which he had set down. From this pouch, he brought a stone jar and mixed some of the elixir of poppies it contained with the water in the bucket.

Amelia herself came to fill a pitcher for the family's evening meal, which, by custom, was a light one. During the meal, which the family took around the table in the large room near the front of the house, the first pitcher was consumed and, soon, D'Ugarte heard her footsteps coming to the back door again. He began to feel the driving urge to grab the girl the minute she came within reach. He crouched, a voice from his gut crying, "Yes, now," and another in his brain quietly repeating the steps of the spell like a recipe. Caught between the voices, he almost involuntarily coiled for his spring, but, as she rounded the corner from the front room into the kitchen, her shadow fell on the ground outside the lit kitchen door. D'Ugarte sneered and relaxed as he saw it was not Amelia, that it was the shape of Mercedes that was echoed upon the earth in shadow.

D'Ugarte backed away into the deep shadow not ten feet away and watched as the younger girl filled the pitcher. She didn't have the same smooth skin and shining hair of the sister. He would wait, wait, and continue the spell to its real goal.

He put more of the potion into the bucket, which was now only half full. Then, as the spell directed, he took a piece of a sea sponge and put it into the bucket until it swelled up greater than its original size. Then, he held the sponge up over the bucket, letting the first gush of liquid back downward bounce first over his hand so as to silence the noise of its splash. He peered around the lower part of the door frame into the deserted kitchen. The family was apparently finished with the meal and, though they were still moving about, it was noticeably quieter now inside, the younger children already asleep.

Now, D'Ugarte fixed the still wet sponge upon the bracket on the wall, which held the bucket itself by his handle and which stuck out from the wall over its center. He listened with satisfaction to the clear sound of a single drop of water as it fell from the sponge into the bucket, echoing quietly through the house in the now almost dead calm air. Again, after a few seconds, came the next drop, as called for in the book. Then the next and the next and the small sounds of movement in the house became quieter and less and less frequent.

There was a quiet cough from the front room, then stillness. D'Ugarte waited with his head turned, first one way and then the other, listening with both ears, one at a time, toward the family room.

In that room, the smaller children all lay still on the cushions, which was not that remarkable after any kind of a day of activity for them. Amelia's father was dead asleep in his chair, which was also not that odd in itself. Amelia noticed, however, that her mother's head bobbed slightly over where she was quietly doing needle work. Only Mercedes continued to appear her usual, admittedly placid, self. Amelia wanted to say something to her Aunt Seraphina, who also seemed strangely quiet, but she forgot what it was she wanted to say. As she sat there trying to remember, everything seemed suddenly unimportant and not worth remembering

anyway. As she said this to herself, she was watching a candle that was burning on the big table where she had been working with her own needle.

Seraphina realized in some part of her consciousness that what was happening was not normal. Her eyes were closed and, if her sense of here and now was still not gone from her, it was certainly like the ragged last ends of a straggling parade. She felt as if she was floating in warm water. Then came the faint and steadily hypnotic plunk of the drops from the bucket on the back porch. She felt herself dissolving. Her mind, with its last glimmering, jumped from that fact to a connection with the malevolent presence with which she had contended down by the river path.

Her eyes flew open and she tried to clear her vision. She was deathly weak in all her limbs, but, now, at this heightened level of awareness, she could hear a crunching and scratching sound coming softly from the back of the house. She rose and went to her brother and tried to rouse him there in his chair, but, having worked outside all that day, he had drunk much of the water and was deep under its spell. She went unsteadily to Amelia, who sat with her eyes fixed and her jaw slack. She slapped the girl hard, but got no real response. She, then, took the needle the girl was working with, which she still clutched in her fingers, and drove it into the end of Amelia's finger. Even this could not rouse her for more than an instant, part way out of the stupor.

Seraphina rounded the corner unsteadily just in time to see the little man gouging at the plaster around the cross by the door. D'Ugarte would not touch the cross, but nothing said he could not get it off the wall whole. When he saw the tough, stocky Seraphina come around the corner, he froze. Even in her groggy state, she was still a formidable woman. Besides, the heart of the spell lay in its secrecy, in the fact that no one would awaken with any idea of what had

happened. If it was worked correctly, beginning to end, all they would know in the morning was that Amelia was gone and that all their crosses had failed to protect her. Now, that was all ruined.

The sound of the chipping mortar stopped and, through the swirling, hazy light around her, Seraphina saw a glimpse of the face of the devil himself as it snapped back around the corner out of sight.

“Madre de Dios!” she gasped.

Behind the door post, cursing the meddlesome woman and cursing himself for an impatient fool, D’Ugarte realized the last thing he had seen as he slipped around the corner was the whites of the woman’s eyes as they flew wider open from their nearly closed state. He knew, for his father had beaten it into him, that, “If you can see a man’s eyes, that means he has seen you, too.”

He had been beaten every time he allowed anyone from the town down the river near where he had grown up to see him. He and his father, who was also, through the perversion of nature, his grandfather, had lived a solitary life with most of their communication being kicks and cuffs. If he didn’t remember by heart a certain portion of the books or if he was childishly careless in making up the small spells his father taught him, he could surely expect curses and a hard beating.

Now, he knew the woman had seen him. It must be dealt with, for, if she told her story, she might be believed, especially with the dog dead on the step and the small chip marks on the wall around the cross, and, if she was believed, a hunt might be mounted for him. He felt he had enough power in his spells to defeat any solitary hunter, given ambush and the foulest of play, which he would not hesitate to employ, but the thought of a whole village, perhaps, raised against him, knowing now that he really existed and, indeed, posed a threat, this was intolerable.

The woman, in the few heartbeats that had passed, shook her head and tried to gather her wits. She was trying to muster up enough alertness to shout for help when she saw the end of a long tube, as big around as her finger, come snaking around the corner of the door sill, as well as just a trace of the bugging black eye, sharp nose, and grizzly cheek. The pipe came up to the lips of the figure, to the silent amazement of the stupefied Seraphina. She heard in the stillness the tiniest intake of a breath. At just that instant, however, Mercedes came walking through the door.

She was too simple to speak, but, in her own way, knew that when everyone was still, as in the front room, something was not good. Unable to shake the others awake, she had come following her aunt to seek comfort and reassurance. She never knew how she had saved her aunt's life. She didn't notice the pipe pulling quickly around the corner. No one, even the sharpest and most alert, had they been there, would have heard the retreat of D'Ugarte out of the town and down to the river. Not until he was across the river and on his way up the far end of his rough box canyon, did he allow himself to break into curses.

Seraphina told her story and the people listened. They had found the dog dead on the step as they had come in. Along with the family's normal activities being so disturbed and Seraphina's story, to which she swore an oath on the robe of the Virgin, this convinced the town's people. They made a great deal of angry noise. The old women, who sat on the square to gossip, whispered to each other, none too quietly, that this surely had aspects of the *mal ojo*, or evil eye. Seraphina bit her lip and held back the urge to scream at the meddlesome hens that this was a serious malevolent power that would make their common domestic envious *mal ojo* look like a child's spiteful pout.

Someone shouted they should go to the church, though others were not sure why, as the priest wouldn't be around again for almost two months. The crowd grew a bit as they made, like

a wave of torchlight, for the church. Someone ran and told Gabriel that Amelia had been attacked and he flew to the church directly.

He found them all safe enough and Seraphina quietly telling, for the sixth time, the story of what she had seen, neither adding nor deleting a bit of what she could honestly remember. Amelia was shaken and went to Gabriel for comfort and security.

Gabriel took Seraphina by the sleeve and drew her away from what was left of the crowd, asking her for details.

“Then, he is really up there,” said Gabriel, motioning out the window toward the mountains on the other side of the river.

“Yes,” Seraphina said, “and this was not the first time, I think. He has been watching her,” she said, indicating her niece. “We should not leave her alone for a moment. We must constantly be on the defense, you, me, and Don Baltasar.”

“We shall be defense...and offense,” said Gabriel seriously. “You stay and watch over her and her family. She should not just have to sit here and wait in fear for him to strike again. I will take to the mountain and bring this goblin to a face-to-face fight.”

“Stay here and we will fight him on our own ground. If you go to him in the hills, he will control the battle,” she said.

“I cannot just sit here and let him have time to make his plans up there. No, I will go,” Gabriel replied hotly, in a voice Seraphina feared had more strength and passion than craft and reason in it.

Seraphina, who was troubled with the divided strategy, nonetheless said slowly, “So be it, but do not go unarmed, either unarmed of body or of spirit, for I fear this one lives in both worlds and is very powerful.”

Within the hour, Gabriel had returned home and fetched his father's fowling piece, a blunderbuss with a range of about twenty reliable yards. He was presented the sword that hung on the church wall and that was said to have been blessed with the blood of infidels from the Holy Crusade six hundred years ago. Along with these martial tools, Seraphina gave him a scapular in the shape of a crucifix and a small jar of balm, which she said could help keep him safe for a few hours at a time. Amelia gave him the bright blue and red kerchief she often wore around her shoulders.

Armed with these weapons and favors, he set off in the early predawn of morning, followed by the last of the village men who were brave enough to walk with him even a short way from the river side. Winding the scarf around his arm, he turned to look back at those on the other side of the bridge. Then, leading a small band of the bravest of the men, he turned and walked into the wilder lands on the far side of the river.

Because he had often hunted in these mountains with his father and brothers, it wasn't until late afternoon of the second day that the land began to seem unfamiliar. As soon as he had passed beyond lands that any of them normally hunted, the rest of the townsmen had turned back and left him to carry on the pursuit alone.

From time to time, his own sense of perspective would suddenly attack him. Just for a horrifying second or two, it would make him feel the immensity of the wilderness around him. He was grateful that Seraphina had warned him about this trick of the mind and because he could now think about that conversation, he felt rooted in the real world and safe. Once, when the feeling had engulfed him, and his rational mind had to stand square against the massed charges of the terrors of isolation and strangeness, he seemed to hear her throaty voice.

“When we are born, our only fear is of falling and, perhaps, being startled at a loud noise. The fear of not knowing our surroundings is a fear we have to learn. If it can be learned, it can be unlearned at need.” When the first tingling of nervousness began, he opened the jar of Seraphina’s unguent and, as she had instructed him, put just a touch on his upper lip just under his nose. He’d told her it would interfere with his sense of smell, upon which a hunter must rely along with his other senses. She had reassured him, though, and so, now, he did as she had instructed. He found the unguent didn’t have any smell at all as far as he could tell. Except that the air, which had been close and oppressive in the late afternoon sun, suddenly seemed cooler and fresher, and this made Gabriel think for a second about his own power. He had begun to feel the very land around him was in league with the *brujo*, but, after all, the rocks and the trees around him could not even think, let alone fight, while he had both a good mind and a strong right arm. That moment was enough to stop the slow spiral he had begun into uncontrolled fear, which would have certainly been fatal in that wilderness.

As he had stalked all that day up the mountain, he had remembered his grandfather’s words, as he had once taught him to hunt: “Move little, and watch much.”

He made a fireless camp that night, just as he had the first night out of town. He found, because of his keyed up nerves, that it was difficult to fall asleep. He dwelt on this for a moment, and it came to him that it was probably best to obey his body and not try to force himself to sleep.

He used the time to simply look at the dark horizon in the starlight, careful to stay in shadow at all times. As he let his senses reconnoiter for him, he felt the presence of the one he had come to find, coming from somewhere nearby, higher up the mountain, perhaps looking down for him. From time to time, he could see a point of fire, far up on the mountainside. But, as

soon as he thought he could orient himself to it and begin to plan an approach, it would seem that it had gone out and then shifted to another place. It was far too large a flame to be a mere torch, however. In a way, it made him feel more comfortable that it and, presumably, the witch were so far away. Then, he realized that was what the *brujo* wanted; for Gabriel to relax his guard for so much as a moment here might be fatal.

On the other hand, he knew he must rest if he was to face the enemy in any condition, physically or mentally, to defeat him. It had been, perhaps, the hardest discipline to follow, but, as he had not fought his alertness, he had also not fought sleepiness when, eventually, it did come in due course. He once again bowed to and trusted his body to know the limits of the danger. He found breathing the vapors of Seraphina's salve, while not clouding his mind as a simply sleeping draught might, allowed him somehow to relax and put aside the tumult in his mind and use his time of rest well.

Now, he curled against the bottom of a scrubby tree in a deep pool of shadow and it would take a pair of eyes that were indeed watching much in order to see him. Seraphina had told him to act as though it was daylight always and she said this with the gravest of tones, which had seemed strange to Gabriel. Now, he knew what she meant; not to be cheerful with the prospect of any kind of vision in the night for himself, but, rather, to stay alert to the possibility that it would not be him, but, rather, this thing he was pursuing who could indeed see in the dark.

The first night down in the town, Seraphina and Amelia could see the fire on the mountain as well. For an instant, it cheered Amelia, until Seraphina explained that Gabriel would be traveling in darkness and that the fire was not of his making. At that, Amelia shuddered. The two of them prayed many prayers together for the young man that night and they watched the

threatening light on the mountain until the clouds descended near morning and obscured everything. Then, they sent their prayers upward into the gray void.

Seraphina put some of the same type of salve that Gabriel was using into a small bowl of warm water and put it by Amelia's bed when she finally led the girl in to get the rest she, too, needed.

Up on the mountain, Gabriel awoke and lay still for a moment in the still, dark, early hours of the morning, his single blanket damp with droplets of water from the cloud that had settled on the mountain and turned the world into a dark gray swirling soup, no stars nor moon to light it from without and no fire to light it from within. He could not be sure, but he somehow sensed the light was only a little time away.

In the fog, sounds seemed to come from everywhere and from nowhere at the same time. His mind wandered for a moment trying to chase the image of the fires on the mountain he had seen earlier in the night. Again, he realized, suddenly, that to let his mind wander from the very here and the very now could be all the *brujo* would need in order to kill him, that the lights, though gone now, were still acting as the decoy the *brujo* had intended them to be. He pulled his focus back to where it should be.

Just as he did so, he thought he saw a deeper patch of black against the blackness all around. He could not be sure; there was far too little light to see that there was anything more than a shape of some sort, just looking in at the edge of this bubble in the fog where he existed. He sensed, more than anything else, that the blackness was the one he had come to find. When he had finally surrendered to sleep in the night, it had not been before he had made certain the sword of the Crusade was by his right side and his gun to his left, fully loaded and primed. Now, he felt the chill increase from the direction of the darkest darkness and, as the faintest beginning

of the light of dawn filtered through this swamp of fog, he thought he saw a movement in that obscured place. Quickly, but moving as quietly as possible, he reached for the blunderbuss. He could hear a small sound in the darkness, like the gasp of a wheezy breath being drawn in.

He got the hammer cocked back quietly and lifted the muzzle off the ground to a well-guessed aim. There was a slight movement within the darkness and he pulled the trigger. His heart froze when the air echoed the harsh laughter of the hammer striking dead priming powder that had become wet in the night fog. The dull *thock* caused his blood to stop in its course, but it also was enough to discomfort and startle the visitor. A fraction of a second later, Gabriel heard a tiny tap on the skin sack in which he kept his supply of dried food and upon which his head still almost lay. Then the shape in the darkness was gone.

Almost immediately, he noticed the air around him had the faintest trace of light. Not really so much clear, free light, it was, rather, only the almost imperceptible difference in the size of the bubble of space around him in which he seemed to exist and, beyond which, because of the night, the darkness and the visitor, might as well be the end of the world.

Gabriel held his breath and turned toward the Toledo steel sword at his right. Even in the time it took to reach the hilt, it seems something had bumped the world out into just a little more light. He slowly released his breath and slowly turned his head to the left, now, confident that the growing light would reveal any close threat. Sticking into the bag of food was a tiny dart of hard wood in a long, thin, not quite regular shape. On the end protruding out of the bag, which stuck up perhaps three finger widths, there was a tuft of obviously worked kapok fletching, forming a cottony tuft around the entire nether end.

The head of the tiny missile disappeared, now, he did not know how many finger widths into the sack and its contents, mostly dried jerky meat. With his head close to the sack, he could

hear a very faint hissing sound and, within seconds, with more light, he first saw a faint trace of vapor rising from around the shaft of the dart as it protruded from the skin and was also assailed by the cadaveric smell of putrefying flesh.

The full morning light and the slight lifting of the fog seemed to him as though brought by a miracle, revealing no one and nothing but the desolate, gray, dripping mountainside.

All the rest of the day, he had pressed steadily higher and deeper in the great canyon formed by the two arms of the great mountain. The next night was again spent in the dense, cold fog, extra dry powder at the ready.

Toward the middle of that night, the wind began to pick up and the shrouds of fog began to move. He was so high on the mountain that the clouds stretched on for many miles and the fog that enveloped Gabriel wasn't so much blown away as set in whispering motion. Dark and light both within the dark, like the faces of souls being dragged along toward a dark hell. He crossed himself at the thought.

The wind got up particularly high and the fog faces raced by so it seemed they began to make keening sounds there in the fog around him. Muffled as it was in that cold, dark, quiet world of cloud, whether it was their laughter or their moans, he couldn't make out which. The presence, the sense or smell of evil, of his foe, seemed to grow and came palpably up from the mountainside. From the power of this sense, he was certain his quarry could not be too far away now. He clenched his jaw and, striking no flint, sat for all the hours of the night with eyes open, gazing intently into the mantle of fog.

He listened to where the *brujo* was holding court for the ghostly voices until just before dawn, when the wind died down, allowing the dancing spirits to settle into the earth for their rest

and the laughter, for that was what he had decided it was, faded away with their fall into the ground.

When the light was enough to travel, he set out immediately in the direction he had been facing all night. Within no more than a mile, he felt the full concert of malevolent influences. It took him almost an hour to move the next twenty yards. Not in fear, as he had a true load in the fowling piece, the sword at his belt, and he had both right and at least dim daylight on his side. He was simply following the words his teachers had ingrained about walking and watching.

Finally, he saw he was coming to a clearing in the otherwise dense, head-high scrub. As he sprang into it, he swept the air with the gun muzzle, but, seeing no one else there, soon brought the gun to his hip and took in the objects there within the perfectly square clearing. Pole with feathers, the cold remains of several fires, bags of powders, parts of animals, all kinds, all parts, but not a living movement to be seen.

There on the ground, he found a jar not unlike the one which held Seraphina's unguent. He was certain it was the source of at least the smell with which he was besieged. Then, he noticed that, on the pole with the feathers, were oddly shaped gourds with intricate designs carved through the outer hull. The wind whispered around just then and he could hear it whine faintly through these gourd whistles.

"The voices of the mountains, no doubt," he thought to himself. "But, then, where is he?" Suddenly, he knew Seraphina had been right and his heart felt as though it had turned to ice in his foolish chest. He looked down off the mountain toward his town far below, out of sight through the clouds. There was another storm in that direction.

While Gabriel had been wakefully watching up on the mountainside far away, "he," D'Ugarte himself, had that night been watching from the riverside as the leading front of the

black cloud covered the gleaming edge of stars as a storm swept in on the little town. He cackled to himself at this bit of luck—luck which he could most surely exploit, he told himself. The afternoon had been clear and blue down this low on the mountain, but, by nightfall, this monster had eaten up three parts of the sky and fearsome bolts of lightning danced across the tops of the distant hilltops. Then, by midnight, came the first fearsome cracking sound of thunder, like the low growl of a large, threatening animal.

D’Ugarte, in his hiding place across the river bridge from the footpath, noted the moments when the calm between the winds marked the passage of the wind being pulled into the storm like a giant, taking great deep breaths, and the time when it would begin to blow a gale outward and over everything in its path. The lightning flashed closer, and the trees by the river stood out in greater relief in the darkness. It was then that D’Ugarte judged must be his moment. As he stealthily mounted the bridge and began to cross, the wind had changed enough to show effect on the surface of the already swirling waters of the river. Because of the amount of rain under the storms, higher up in the mountains as well as this one here below, the new legions of water raised the level and energy of the river. D’Ugarte thought he noticed something large, perhaps a tree, rushing by just beneath the bridge, out of the corner of his eye. He didn’t care, for his course was set, but something in him that was not blinded and fooled by lust noted that either it had been an awfully big tree or else the water was already very near the level of the bridge itself.

The roaring from the river’s throat was certainly an order of magnitude greater than usual. This was in some back part of his mind as he set foot on the bottom of the path to the town. The sounds of the first drops of rain were mixing with the clacking of larger and larger branches as the wind grew and grew.

He now started up the trail with a large, thick, musty cloth he had spent the previous night stealing from a fairly new grave by a small chapel out in the hills. The book directed this. In the shroud were wrapped a small mattock, stolen from a mine, and D'Ugarte's own sharp, single-bladed ax.

The storm had begun in earnest by the time he got to the top of the trail near the town, and the sound of the rain driving down was by then a roaring cacophony, punctuated by rolling peals of thunder at close intervals.

D'Ugarte saw and avoided a large wooden bucket, which was down on its side and fairly skipping across the square. In a lightning flash, he saw it slamming into the base of the fountain and scattering wood around. The sound could barely be heard over the storm, and D'Ugarte smiled, as the water cascaded down his face and off his rough stubbly chin. He pulled the great hood over his head finally, not because of the storm, to which he seemed oblivious, but because the spell, as hastily and impetuously as he had cast it from the book, called for him to blend as completely as he could with the night and the storm.

He awaited the next flash of lightning and, as it subsided, he darted to the side of Don Baltasar's house. He could see that there were only a few candles burning in the house. In actuality, there was one in the new niche and shrine by the back door and one by the foot of the older Virgin that had always stood inside the front entrance to the neat little house. D'Ugarte could see through the cracks in the shutters of a side room. It was the room he sought, the one where the sisters slept.

He had an old rag soaked in a poultice and wrapped around the bottom half of his face that kept the aloe vera, which was once again in place and fresh, from choking him. This gray rag, draped against the grizzled gray of his own skin, made it appear, in the flashes of lightning,

as though the bottom half of his face was melting into a shapeless mass. Among the shrouds from the grave draped over his shoulder and the shapeless mass of his tool bag, his silhouette against the lightning looked like some huge, twisted, wax candle, melting without a flame.

Inside, in the light of a tiny real candle, Mercedes lay awake as she often did. Since her birth, she had been different, things affecting her in ways other than the norm. She might begin weeping during a comedy put on by a traveling band of players and could almost be depended upon to suddenly burst out laughing at a funeral.

The townspeople all knew about Mercedes and, as she was basically a loving being herself, they all loved her like she was one of their own children. Most people knew that, from time to time, Mercedes might simply pass out and fall to the ground, only to awaken a few seconds later apparently none the worse for wear. Most people didn't know that, on most nights, Mercedes lay awake most of the hours of darkness. Once in a while, she would become restless and venture to rise from her bed. Usually, she could simply sit on the side of her small bed and watch the candle flame or stare out the window at the moon on warm nights. Amelia was habituated to her sister's patterns and seemed to awaken as though to a clock work, if Mercedes showed any real inclination to wander.

Along with this strange effect was another only her Aunt Seraphina had noticed, but which she had kept to herself. Mercedes had not succumbed to the drugged draughts of the previous spell. Indeed, it had been this fact, for which she sincerely thanked God, which had saved Seraphina herself.

Tonight, Seraphina had commanded that Amelia try to get some sleep, feeling that way the girl would be the stronger in her spirit to resist any mischief that the witch might try. The

curandera herself had gone, before the storm broke, to the church to light candles at the altar for Amelia and for Gabriel, for whom she had begun to feel deeply uneasy.

As the storm grew in intensity outside Don Baltasar's house and the shutters began to buck on the windows and, as the sound of her sister Amelia's regular, light breathing was gradually eclipsed by the storm's roar, Mercedes became restless. Louder wind and the sound of something smashing and splintering out in the square drove her to an upright position in the bed. Amelia stirred in her sleep. The windows rattled loudly now with the wind and something struck the ground outside. Mercedes arose quietly and walked toward her sister's bed.

Amelia was awake by the time Mercedes' foot was on the floor. She awoke to hear the storm outside and to see her sister standing in the middle of the room looking at the window, which rattled with the wind and rain now beating upon it.

Though Mercedes had not uttered a sound, as often before, Amelia said to calm her, "Hush, *mi hija*, it's alright. We're all here and we're all safe." She looked at her sister for a minute and heard the storm slamming the side of the tight, little house. "*Mi hija*, it's alright. It's the storm. Come to bed with me," she said, raising the covers for her sister, as she often had before.

The latch on the window almost gave way, so strong was the force that beat upon it. It brought a quick gasp from Amelia and fairly drove Mercedes under the covers.

Mercedes was just feeling her heart slow down, now that she was in a safe, closed place, with her head covered, feeling the warmth of her sister. Amelia was just thinking she should perhaps get up and do something about the window before the storm blew it open, but she didn't want to move, now that her sister had begun to nurse security from her.

The sharp iron mattock had savagely removed both the aloe vera and crucifix and, now, the *brujo*'s broad-bladed old ax slammed into the window again, this time fully bursting the latch and unleashing the full fury of the rain straight into the room, instantly snuffing the candle.

At this point, Mercedes made a whimper, which was as much a sound as Amelia had ever heard from her. It wrenched at her heart to hear the terror and misery in that sound. Her attention was on her sister as the next flash of lightning revealed a figure coming over the window sill. Then, blackness for the space of a heartbeat and the next flash of lightning revealed the moldy smelling shape directly over her. She screamed, but, at just that second, her head was engulfed in the folds of the shroud. Also in those folds was a poultice of vapors to make her head swim. She felt herself being wrenched from the warm bed and the cold rain sting her legs, which were not enveloped by the wrapping. Again, she screamed for her father and Gabriel, but even she knew the sound was feeble and as though through water. The potion was quickly doing its work, but she could feel the tug of Mercedes hand on her wrist as she was pulled from under the covers.

The simple, silent girl clung fiercely to her sister, who was being dragged into the night and the storm by a demon. D'Ugarte was still holding the ax as he consolidated his hugging hold around Amelia's head, trunk, and arms with the shroud. He risked losing his hold on his prize for a split second to heft and swing the ax, striking the bothersome younger girl squarely over the right eye with the flat hammer face of the weapon. Mercedes' head snapped back and she was slammed to the head of the bed, striking the wall with a thud.

The world now seemed turned to water for Amelia. She could feel the rain of the outdoors on her lower body and it seemed she was swimming through very dark, very thick, very warm water. She posed little problems for the little, wiry man to control. Though any kind of true strength had long ago been bred out of the witch's line by the watery fusion of forbidden

matings, he made up for this with the strength of the spells and potions in overcoming his enemies and victims.

As he dashed out of town, through the now slackening torrents of rain, Amelia was aware that a voice was calling her name. She could not determine who it might be, though she thought it sounded familiar.

Amelia's father was fully awake by now and, as he had taken to sleeping in his trousers of late, was already to the broken window. His wife was just discovering her younger daughter, unconscious and bleeding profusely from a terrible wound to her head.

The father stopped long enough to run to the back door and retrieve a keenly sharp, two and a half foot machete. He was out the back door and around the house to the path in a matter of seconds and caught a glimpse of the two conjoined figures headed that way in the flashes of lightning.

As Don Baltasar began his rush down the path, D'Ugarte could sense him coming from behind. He quickened his pace and, in the lightning flashes, he soon could see the swollen river at the bottom of the path.

As he reached the landing of the bridge, he once again risked loosening his hold on the girl, trusting the potion to keep her in check while he dealt with his pursuer. It was still blackest night and the lightning, though not as frequent nor brilliant as before, was still flashing. As D'Ugarte set the girl down, the shroud slipped from her face and she breathed clean air again, beginning to revive very quickly.

By the time Amelia was just beginning to hazily think again and wonder why she felt all wet and cold, D'Ugarte had scrambled back up to the last turn in the path. He waited and, in only a few seconds, he heard the labored breathing of the man coming down the path behind them.

D'Ugarte pulled his pipe out of his sack of tools and quickly, but carefully, placed a dart in the near end. As D'Ugarte almost assumed he would, Don Baltasar had something white about his clothing. In this case, it was the white cotton pants that could be seen in contrast to the dark. To D'Ugarte, a hint about an enemy was as good as a solid fact. He aimed the pipe at the whirling white patch coming toward him and sent the dart faster than the eye could have seen it, even assuming there would have been enough light to see by. All Amelia's father felt was a small, sharp pain in the front of his right thigh, which, for an instant, he interpreted as a cramp. But, in another instant, excruciating pain quickly spread far around the center source. He doubled up and fell, writhing with the intensity of the pain, but righting himself with clenched teeth and trying to stand, the leg, which already seemed on fire, simply would not support him. He crumbled again and slowly began to crawl. Waves of pain swept over him and he began to lose sight of the world. As consciousness left him, he thought he could hear the far away voice of Amelia calling to him.

So secure was D'Ugarte in the knowledge of spells and poisons from the books of his fathers, that he had scrambled back to the rapidly awakening girl by the river bridge without waiting the few seconds it would have taken to see his enemy fall. Amelia was just able to stand as he reached her and she tried to fight him off with her hands, but he was much too quick for her in her dizzied condition.

Deftly, he snatched the girl off her unsteady feet and forged out across the bridge. The water in the river was now surging in a smooth arch over the walking surface of the bridge by a full and powerful foot. D'Ugarte knew he could best this flow, for he often walked among the rapids of the river in normal times.

Midway across, however, Amelia got enough purchase on his shoulder to push herself away, but, in doing so, she found herself in the clutches of the river. She grasped a bridge railing and only this kept her away from the greater torrent below. D'Ugarte trod through the few feet she had gotten away and reached for her. She shifted her hold so as to avoid him, but at just that instant, the river surged and took her away into the darkness away from D'Ugarte, the bridge, her father, and the world itself. The people of the town could find no trace of her in the storm and the night.

When she awoke, it was cold. There was a sharp pain in her back, and then she realized it was a stone intruding itself into her back. She felt sore all over before she ever had the strength and presence of mind to open her eyes. She had thought there was movement nearby, but, when she actually awoke enough to look, there was nothing. She could see little, for, though there was light, there was a faintly iridescent-gray pall over everything as far as she could see. She rolled her head slightly to one side and her perception and her orientation came creeping back as she made out the familiar shape of trees in what she now realized was simple, though thick, fog. She had a roaring in her ears, which also stabilized itself as she realized it was not from within her head, but, rather, was the sound of the river very close by. She managed to sit up to try to more rapidly clear her head. She felt especially cold in her hands and could see she had been thrown last night into what was now a cold, mud flat. Her hands were sunk into the gray, sticky muck almost to her wrists. She shivered with the cold on her legs. After these few seconds, she was sufficiently awake to survey herself more clearly.

She lay in the cold muck at the side of the river into which she had fallen the night before. She was on her back and the skirt of her torn night dress was pushed up to her waist and

she lay naked and exposed from the waist down. She instinctively closed her legs and curled into a fetal position in the slimy ooze.

She felt especially sore between her thighs. A strange sensation for her. Her heart froze as she felt a different kind of wetness between her legs, a sticky, slippery wetness. She was terrified of feeling blood there when there should be none. Slowly raising her head to look, she was trembling when she finally looked closely at herself.

There was no sign of blood. She had been mistaken. But, then, to her greater horror, she made the proper connection. The river had not swept her to this place; she had been dragged to it. She could see footprints in the sticky muck, leading away up the riverbank and out of sight in the shroud of fog.

She lay there on her back through D'Ugarte's design; he had pulled her from the river. Her dress was not just accidentally where she had found it and the strange wetness she felt between her thighs was his semen. She remembered hearing one of the neighbor ladies talking in hushed tones to her Aunt Seraphina, pouring out her tale of despair at living with a drunken and useless man. One of this woman's greatest indictments about the situation had been when she told Seraphina, "He is no good for anything...he isn't even able to be a husband anymore. He crawls on top of me when he wakens from his drinks and pushes and pushes, but his *viga*, his manhood, it is gone and he cannot get it inside me. Or, when it is hard, he cannot control himself, cannot wait. He just makes a mess between my legs and I have to go and wash off the stickiness while he rolls over and reaches for his bottle again, if he doesn't go right to sleep."

That had been when she was small and she hadn't really known exactly to what the woman had alluded. But she had marked the conversation, mostly because it was strange and foreign to her at that age. Now, she was older and, as she approached her marriage to Gabriel,

her mother and her aunt had had talks to make sure she would know of all the duties of a good wife in that world. Now, this long ago conversation came rushing back to her and her mind fell apart. It was as though a part of her floated away.

In her panic, she scrambled to rise and ran to the river to wash the terrible feeling off. The fog seemed to close in around her vision. She slipped in the mud in her haste and was now covered with mud both front and back. Still, she scrambled to the riverside, pushing the mud and her dripping hair out of her eyes as she ran. Her breath came in great wracking gasps as she neared the water itself, still flowing briskly after the last night's rain. But, as she reached the water and started to wade in, it became instantly obvious to her that the waters of the river had taken on the same viscous, thick feeling as that which she wanted to wash away. She scrambled from the river and looked back at it in horror. She slowly turned around to once again survey her situation. Time had stopped for her at that instant. The very air around her, moist and gray and thick, seemed to be something which had come out of the hideous little man.

She turned in terror as her thought turned to D'Ugarte, but in the almost supernatural quiet, except for the river's roar, she now heard nothing and saw nothing move. She had no idea where she was, but being lost was only a small pang to her, compared to the horror she felt at the mere touch of the damp fog on her skin. Crying out silently to the part of her soul that was now gone, her mind seemed full of a million horrible images and, at the same time, empty of everything, not knowing what to do next.

* * *

When Gabriel had found himself in the middle of D'Ugarte's fool's garden at the top of the mountain, he immediately knew the storm over the town and river below was not the only threat there to the people he loved and to she whom he loved most of all. He ran the whole way

back, not suffering himself to stop to “rest” as one normally thinks of the word. He threw himself at breakneck speed from turn to turn in the trail and over small rocky outcrops and through the tough tangles of the chasms, if they cut time off the more winding path. He came down in just over a day and a night, that which it had taken him three days to go up in the face of gravity and caution. Then, the word had been “walk little, watch much,” during the last day of the hunt. Now there was no restraint. Gabriel knew exactly where he had to go and that he must get there as quickly as he could. He only stopped running when he fell, completely exhausted, to the ground. Even then, he did not allow himself the opiate to pain he could have had with sleep or even with allowing his mind to wander where it would for a while, like a horse cropping grass after its saddle has been removed. Gabriel kept a tight rein on a cruel bit in his own mind. He lay only long enough so his muscles would function again. Then he was up, pelting along for what seemed like an hour for every minute he spent on the ground.

* * *

In the town, it had taken all of that first day, with the help of the neighbors, to clean up the rain-soaked bedroom, repair and barricade the shutters, begin to clean the blood from Mercedes wound off the walls and floor and, of course, to see to the injuries. Seraphina had had to interrupt the girls’ care for a moment to attend to their mother, who was hysterical at what had occurred in her house.

Seraphina had examined Mercedes, who had remained unconscious since they had found her, and had spoken to the inert form in a few low, quiet words. She had pulled the hair on Mercedes’ temple to see if she could get the girl to respond. Then, she had gently washed the cut, which went all the way to the bone from the middle of Mercedes’ forehead to the hairline on the right. She then had one of the neighbors bring her a long, strong hair from a horse’s tail, with

which she sewed the wound closed. She had salved the wound with aloe vera and left an open stone jar of the unguent open by the bedside. Then, looking at the younger girl and trying to think if there was something more she might do, she turned and went from the bedroom into the front room, casting a glance at the mud encrusted Amelia and her softly weeping mother on the way out.

On the table in the front room, where she had the gray, rainy early morning light at her back by which to see, Seraphina gingerly pulled back the torn pant leg that covered Don Baltasar's wound. As soon as they had carried him into the house, Seraphina, seeing this normally strong, quiet man was insane with pain and was incoherent, made him swallow two drams of an elixir to ease the pain. She had had to slap him to get him to unscrew his eyes long enough to see the spoon and stop moaning long enough to hear her instructions to him.

"A demon! A demon has my Amelia!" was all he could say.

She could now look at the wounded leg without his writhing too much, thanks to the elixir. At this point, it had been perhaps two hours since the attack and, before the full light of morning unleashed the townspeople in the search that led later that morning to find Amelia wandering by the river, Don Baltasar's whole thigh had already swelled to half again its normal size. There was a great pustular-looking sore in the middle of the front of his thigh. It looked tense, as if about to explode and release corruption all around.

When Seraphina had seen the apparent abscess, she knew lancing such a lesion was most of what was needed to cure it. When she had taken a sharp, small blade to the skin, however, she pulled back with her brows knitted and frowning as she said to Baltasar's wife, "Whatever caused this, it is not like a wound of nature, it isn't normal. It is a solid mass. It won't drain. We'll just have to wait and see. It is in God's hands and Baltasar's."

The thought of amputation crossed Seraphina's mind at least once during that day. She had seen them done, had helped hold men down while the surgeon from the big town down the river cut off a leg. She thought that, if it came to it, she could do it, but she was concerned, because she didn't think there was anyone in town who could assist her. She had more or less discarded the idea when, in almost no time at all, she noticed the anger of the inflammation, the swelling and the redness, had advanced all the way past the fold of the groin. He would either live a whole man or die. At that point, even amputation would not save him. Seraphina placed hot, wet towels with a drawing poultice on the angry area and waited, praying for the thing to show some sign of halting its aggressive advance. It was a critical problem that Baltasar could not tell her what had happened himself, and the tissue was so swollen that she could not see the tiny dart that was causing the problem. The blowpipe was still a secret weapon, and even Seraphina had been so far under the effects of the spell in the water bucket when she had glimpsed the pipe in the first attack that its image and the connection to a dart as the cause of this wound lay beneath the surface of her already overtaxed consciousness, trying to fight its way to the free air of her working thoughts. She knew the wound was caused by some curse of the evil little witch, but without knowing more about it, she was powerless to fight its effects. She put the hot poultices on the wound to generally fight infections, shook her head, and prayed for knowledge and guidance.

* * *

The next day, when Gabriel had finally stumbled into the plaza of the town, he threw down his pack, sword, and musket on the steps of the church, without stopping for more than an instant, crossing himself and thanking the saints for the use of the armor. Turning, even as he was finishing the prayer, and running up the street, he felt his stomach knot when he saw a small

crowd of people standing on the square by the house of Don Baltasar and his family. People turned to him and stopped their conversations as he came up to them. They parted a path wordlessly. Slowing to a walk, Gabriel entered the disordered house.

The first thing he saw was his future father-in-law stretched out in the front room, obviously in great pain. Seraphina was placing a poultice on the upper part of the big man's leg. His face grimaced in pain as the weight of the nostrum settled onto the already volcanic wound made by the wizard's dart, which lay completely buried, out of even Seraphina's acute vision.

"Amelia is in there," Seraphina said to the young man, motioning to the door to the back of the house. "Go in. Her mother is with her."

He could see splattered blood as he crossed the threshold. Then, he saw a figure with a great swath of bandage lying as still as death and, for a moment, he thought it was Amelia. Then, somehow, the figure under the cover seemed wrong and he realized it was Mercedes.

He saw the makeshift barricade that had been placed in the window of the room and that the saint from the back door was in the room with a small flock of candles at his feet. In the candlelight, he could see the huddled figure of Amelia's mother and a glimpse of Amelia lying on the bed beyond. He stood in the doorway, fresh from the trail and dripping wet. The sound of the drops of water hitting the wooden floor sounded in the dismal silence.

Amelia's mother noticed the faint grimace on the face of her daughter at the sound of each drop. Gabriel went to his beloved and stretched his fingers down to touch her limp hand. As their fingers met, Amelia could feel the cold drops of water from Gabriel's hair. She cringed and then screamed and rubbed the drops off as though they were a burning fluid. But she would not speak; of sensible words, she was as mute as her now dangerously wounded sister. She cringed at the sight of her fiancé. He backed away for fear of scaring her further.

The source of her apparent fear was not known to any of them. Even Seraphina had looked at her, clucked her tongue, and told Amelia's mother to stay with the girl, who showed no carnal wound, while she, Seraphina, took care of the other two patients with their more mundane, but massive, injuries.

Along with her more obvious malady, Amelia suffered from a more serious symptom. She had refused to drink anything since and cried out in fear immediately at the mere sight of water. They had found her on top of the bluffs above the river and away from its sound and sight. How and why the young girl had clawed her way up the rough face of the bluffs was a mystery, but her hands, covered with cuts and blisters, attested to the fact.

She would not suffer the hands to be washed, however, nor any other part of her mud-caked body. The mud had dried in her long, flowing hair and it hung in straw-stiff bundles of gray. When first her mother and then her Aunt Seraphina, had approached with a basin of water, she had cowered in the bed, against the wall, as though avoiding a blow and, since they did not move the basin, now knowing it to be the cause of the girl's distress, she continued in a hysterical state until she retched and vomited, but she brought up only a small amount of greenish bile-smelling stuff, which ran down her chin and onto her gown without her apparent notice. She would move no more than that.

She had completely lost her power of speech. At times, she might become animated and, with a pitiable look of obvious anguish on her face, it seemed as though she might be trying to speak to her aunt or to her mother, but, finally, it was as though some relentless hand of iron would squeeze her throat and choke off the words before they could surface, allowing perhaps a tiny squeak or a whimper and leaving her gasping for breath at that.

By the third day, Amelia had still not spoken or reacted normally, even with her aunt, since she had been brought in. She would not speak; she was terrified of water, shrank from her young man, and had a continual look of anguish and fear in her eyes. She didn't sleep, except that, from time to time, she seemed to faint away for a while as the result of agitation from her condition.

The old ladies, who sat on the bench outside to "help" Seraphina, began to mutter the word "*susto*," among themselves. Seraphina, who would have just as soon shooed this flock off like a bunch of plump laying hens, was civil, but tried to find a way to put her own mind at ease by answering their veiled questions. She, herself, more and more feared this was, indeed, a case of "*susto*," and a very severe one at that.

Though the word could be thought of as an equivalent of fright, Seraphina knew the importance was lost, if one thought of the fright as having occurred at one time and then dissipated. The "*susto*" was a malevolently dynamic and continuing process. The girl not only had been frightened, but in the part of her that existed in the spiritual world she was still being frightened, in spite of the calmest voices and friendliest faces in the most secure place she had ever known. It was as though a part of her soul, a part that held the key to peace and trust, had been ripped away from her larger spirit leaving her vulnerable to some terror the rest of them could not see by the light of the outer world.

Seraphina looked at her niece again and shook her head. More and more, she feared she would have to give the biddies outside the satisfaction of admitting that this was *susto*. And, then, would come the much harder part of doing something effective to counter it. Seraphina knew it would take much skill and energy. What, more than that, at this point, she didn't know.

By the fifth day after the storm and the attack, the world had rarely piled so many burdens on the occupants of any house in the town. Mercedes was still, at that point, unconscious. Don Baltasar was almost continually burning with fever or else wracked with chills, which caused so much pain in the leg and groin that Seraphina would give him willow bark tea for the fever and the narcotic elixir for pain. The leg looked worse, something Seraphina had not thought possible, but now the center of the massively swollen thigh was forming an ulcer as big across as Seraphina's small finger was long, but, still, the wound would not drain to cleanse itself.

After his first visit, Gabriel had stayed outside the house for fear of upsetting Amelia again in some way. Amelia was still unwashed and weaker now, partly from the effect of the spell she was under and partly because she would not take anything to drink whatsoever. She took so little food that, even using foods that were as moist as she would stand, she was not taking enough fluid to sustain life for very many days. Seraphina placated the women of the town by letting them burn the incense that now gave the room a foggy cast day and night. After all, they were saying the rosary for Amelia around the clock in turns, which could not hurt, and Seraphina and Amelia's mother were grateful for their concern.

Then, on the evening of that fifth day, the sun came from behind the gray murk where it had lain since the evil night. It must have served as a good omen, because, as the rays of the setting sun struck the shutters and a few stray rays penetrated between the crude boards, they fell upon the first of those early spasms of Mercedes, which eventually signaled her return to life. Her mother lit another candle to the Virgin and said another complete rosary for those tiny movements of wrist and fingers. Within a couple of days, Mercedes, whom they had all but given up for dead, would begin to rally. She first showed an occasional twitch of a hand or foot,

and then her eyes opened. Within a day, she was reaching for things, though with a weak grip on the left side of her body. As she had awakened, for that day it was as though watching, compressed all together, the first years of a child's life as she began to accomplish first one task and then another; such things one takes for granted, like being able to hold her head up and then to sit. Her mother had made a secret prayer to St. Martin de Porres to let her daughter grow up all over again and, this time, to let her do it like all the other children without her handicapped mind. But all that happened over the hours was that Mercedes advanced back to near her former state and no further, only now she had a weakness on her left side and a gash across the right side of her face.

It was that same sunlight, falling through the window of Don Baltasar's room, where he now lay in agony, which showed the near exhausted Seraphina the tiny flash of light of wisps of kapok protruding from the swollen flesh. She had not made the connection until then, but the hazy picture of the demon with the pipe struck her fully now. The pipe. A blowpipe, of course. And that was the fletching. Now, at least she could guess at what she was fighting.

With the reddening sunlight of evening behind her, tilting her head up slightly and then down to see the tiny scintillations of the kapok fibers in the lowering light, she found the pinpoint of the entrance wound. Focused on the spot, she dared not move her eyes. Quietly, she said to Amelia's mother, "Hand me the small knife. Quickly, please! I think I see the dragon's tail."

She came closer to his side, always watching the same spot. She took the knife that was brought to her and made one small, deft cut in a place no one else could see. Out popped a tiny sliver, or what was left of its already decaying skeleton.

She took the remains of the tiny dart and quickly went to her own work table in a small room off the kitchen. There, on the table, were all her powders and potions, along with her ever present holy relics. She wasted no time in setting up what appeared to be a small scale of some kind. She tied the dart to a long cotton thread and hung it on a bracket on the scale's arm. Then, she allowed the needle, like a dart, to swing freely to and fro out across the table and across her materials. It seemed to swing wildly and at random at first, but soon settled down to a steady back and forth motion over the stone jar containing *polvo de vibora*, dried, powdered rattlesnake.

"Yes! Yes!" she exclaimed. "Praise be to the Virgin. It's not putrefaction, it's only a venom. Now, we'll see!" she said, beginning to bustle around the small room.

It was well that Seraphina was so optimistic. Don Baltasar had reached a state of delirium blending into unconsciousness, accompanied by a burning fever by the time the splinter was found. Indeed, Seraphina had not found it necessary to stop to give him anything for pain when she cut because of his insensate condition.

The removal of the fragment, however, true to the rule, in and of itself seemed to cause a marked lightening of the physiological load on the man. Now, Seraphina began to supplement this remission with tiny doses of the *polva de vibora* mixed in tea daily and also applied in the poultices. At least now she felt he might have a fighting chance. With time, God would speak.

This left Amelia. Her mother had removed her muddy gown and, when the mud finally dried in her hair, she had broken it loose with her fingers and gradually combed it out. So long as her mother did not bring water near her, she was quiet and docile, but she still did not speak. Finally, looking at the graying the mud had left even when combed out and the sinking of the flesh occasioned by her thirsting without water for so many days, Seraphina saw her niece old and knew Amelia was losing a significant amount of her strength in the lack of water.

She passed almost no urine now. Her eyes were sunken and her skin was doughy. Her mother trembled when she touched her for the cold lifelessness of that skin.

Finally, Seraphina knew she could delay no longer the probing she would have to attempt, no matter how inexperienced and unequal to the task she might feel. After lighting many candles and saying the rosary seven times, along with exactly one hundred more prayers to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Seraphina took a spotless white egg and, cradling it in her hands, with eyes closed, asked also the aid of the saints. She set the egg aside, reverently kissing it as she put it on the table. She then took a pot of creamy white animal lard and, scooping a small amount up with her fingers, smeared it gently on her niece's rigid abdomen as the girl lay stretched out on her bed. After she had smoothed it over the entire front of the girl's body, she once again took the egg and gently cracked it with precise taps of her index fingernail, praying over it once more with each small tap. Then, holding it close to Amelia's greased stomach, she opened the egg's two halves and the yolk, along with the primordial white, oozed out and settled in the slight valley of her navel. Then, after carefully greasing her own hands, Seraphina ever so gently gathered the egg, both white and yolk, between the palms of her two hands. Slowly, she moved the egg across the slippery flesh. The movement was so fluid that the yolk, far from being broken, rode out the small strain on it quite nicely. She herded the egg from side to side over the girl's trunk, from her hips, up between her breasts, all the way to her neck and shoulders. The egg yolk didn't break. The three old women from the gossip's bench, who were in the room because Seraphina needed "pious and virtuous souls" to say the responses in the rosary and prayers, began to bubble among themselves. Their voices gradually grew and, eventually, Seraphina's attention was pulled away from the egg by the sound of one of the ladies saying that perhaps they should be testing her virtue to see if perhaps that was the part of her "soul" that had

been torn away. After having covered every other part of the girl, Seraphina, pointedly looking into the eyes of the loudest of the porch hens, took the egg up into her cupped hands. She moved her hands downward over the girl's torso until she came to a stop directly above the delta of the girl's thighs. She held the egg steady there with a challenging look in her eye, as if to say, "See, the yolk is whole and unbroken," which would mean her niece was still a virgin.

Seraphina was just savoring the last seconds of her admittedly petty triumph over the gossips, when, for some reason she could not explain, though the yolk was indeed still whole and still in her hand, the white, the whole of it, had somehow slithered over the side of her fingers and fallen directly into that delta two finger breadths below the dark, inner fold of Amelia's thigh. They all stood breathless, Seraphina included. The egg white quickly fell away under her, but left a trail on her upper thigh. Amelia muttered the first words anyone had heard. As in a dream, she said, "No, not again."

Seraphina looked into her own hands and confirmed to herself that the yolk, even after so long a time, was still intact. Then, slowly, in the silence, she brought her cupped hands up over the girl's figure from her feet to her head. The egg remained whole as she held it first over her mouth, then her nose, her ears, and her eyes. Then, finally, as she moved it down to hover over the fingertips of her hands, the yolk seemed to almost explode in her hands.

Seraphina's mind immediately screamed. "Something she felt frightened her! Her eyes, her ears, they were not assaulted. Something felt terrifying to her." But outwardly, Seraphina said nothing. Returning to her work room for a moment, she broke off several sprigs of the mallow plant, which had grown at the river's edge and which now hung head down to dry. She returned to the girl's bedside and, using two separate small stone bowls with hot coals in their bottoms, she generated a smoke from the cleansing mallow. She splayed Amelia's hands off the

edges of the narrow bed and placed these smoking censers under each one. She watched as the smoke flowed upward over Amelia's hands, noting the fluid motions of the vapors, hoping they would act as water would have had she been able to let it flow downward over the forearm, but, over the hours, the small fists stayed blindly clenched. She finished the sign of the cross with incense bowls under Amelia's feet and head. The air was blue by now.

Later, with Gabriel in silent attendance, Seraphina retired to the outskirts of town to walk and think and, eventually, when she came to a particular shrine on the edge of a high bluff overlooking the river, she stopped and looked out across the river with the now late afternoon sun slanting down over the water below. Gabriel stood a short distance away down the trail, lost in his own thoughts of what was happening.

The stout little woman gave a great sigh and knelt before the saint and began to pray for guidance to know what to do to counter the force of the *susto*, which had sickened Amelia so. As she raised her head, her eye was drawn to a flash of white below her, out over the river. It was one of a pair of doves, steadily pumping their way above the river upstream through the gorge formed by the fluffs, probably heading to their roost, following the course of the water. She watched the white dove for an extraordinarily long time, because she was high up on the bluff and could see out through the valley below and because the sun glanced off the bird's silver-white back.

Then, her eye was suddenly drawn to another speck in the sky. This time not for its scintillation, but for its dull blackness and its size. A huge black raven was surely pursuing the dove. As its greater speed took it past the smaller bird, Seraphina saw a small flutter of white feathers go tumbling away from the dove's wing and into the river below, but, though the blow

was clearly a hard one and staggered its flight, it was not enough to bring the white bird down. The raven rose and turned slightly, apparently to strike again.

“This cannot be happening!” thought Seraphina as she watched amazed. “Ravens just don’t do that. This is unnatural.” No matter how hard she tried to deny what she was seeing, however, the conclusion was inescapable; the raven was attacking the dove. Furthermore, it appeared that, if it struck again, the dove was in serious danger of being knocked from the sky into the river. Still, it kept flying up the river to escape its black pursuer.

As the raven was lining up for yet another strike, a yet more miraculous thing occurred. From high above, where it must have been circling, a gray hawk folded its wings and dove downward toward the pair. Seraphina thought again that she was imagining what she was seeing, but she realized that all of the things that were passing before her were indeed happening, no matter how strange they might seem.

Intent as it was on the whiter dove, the raven did not swerve or stray from its straight line of flight. The whole image, the doves, the raven, and the plummeting hawk were now just at the edge of Seraphina’s field of vision, about to turn the next bend in the river out of her sight. At that moment, just as they passed around the bend up the river, she saw a glimpse of an explosion of black feathers as the hawk struck at full speed from above. She could see nothing after that but the mass of dark feathers as the wind carried them back down the river canyon until they struck the water far below.

She held her breath and stared until her eyes went dim. Clearly, though, she knew it was the sign for which she had asked. She was, as she liked to say, a simple woman. God had to speak plainly to her.

“Gabriel! I have seen a vision and I now know your quest and my work,” she said, calling back to him while keeping her eyes on the river.

Soon, they had both returned to the village, Seraphina having given Gabriel his instructions and her blessing before leaving him at the door of the church where his arms were stored, having lain before the altar since shortly after he had dropped them on the porch. They had been placed inside by his own brothers and sisters.

By sundown that evening, they were both pressing on with their respective tasks. Gabriel would walk night and day, because he felt now that he knew where he needed to go. He followed the river as it went back up into the mountains. Because he had never been this far up the river, he didn’t know where leaving the river would yield a shortcut or an ultimately longer way around, so he stayed close to the water course itself. He followed through its high, sunless canyons with weird echoes bouncing off the night darkened walls. He walked by the pebbly beaches of the still, mighty river where it would be out of range, even of his blunderbuss to hit the other side. On up the river he headed, watching all the time for a sign of any kind.

By that same sundown, Seraphina had purified herself through washing and prayer. Earlier, she had looked again at Don Baltasar’s leg. She had faith in her sense that things would go well now that the stinger itself was removed. She was mildly gratified when it was clear the swelling was smaller and the angry area looked a bit less evilly inflamed. She reminded herself to make the poultices even stronger from now on and to begin a second dose of the powder of the viper tomorrow. But that would be tomorrow; first, she must do her work tonight.

By the actual setting of the sun, she was at the niche by the bluffs to begin her rosaries and her own self-penances. She had tried to bend her attention as fully as possible to her niece. She had silently sat with her for a while just before she left their home. Now, the night was

coming on in its fullness. With no light, except the stars, she proceeded to follow a rough path down the bluff face and to get into a small, sturdy canoe of hides and a pole framework. She stooped for just a moment to touch the dark bottom of the inside of the craft. It was dry to her sensitive touch. She remembered to say a silent prayer for the fellow who had offered the use of the good little boat. She paddled out into the dark river. Guiding by the sense of where she had been and the pull of the current, she finally saw, looming up in front of her, a large, indistinct shape. She bumped against it gently and, in the faint starlight, it registered with her. *This is the tall rock. The one that stands just up river from the rock I'm seeking*, she thought to herself, trying to calm the beating of her heart. She let the bow of the canoe bounce off the rock and, back stroking with the paddle, she gingerly made her way down the loud, pouring stream among the many small sharp rocks that lay just under the surface.

Once again, she could make out the shape of a particular rock. This one was low and flat. She guided the nose of the canoe onto the upstream end of the little island, which was only a few paces across, amid the surging stream around it. She swung the canoe in such a way that the middle of its length now rested against the point of the rock, balanced between slipping around the island bow first or slipping around stern first. But it didn't go either way. The canoe stayed balanced long enough for Seraphina to very warily rise from the wooden frame and set her foot upon the rock. As she continued to hold the side of the boat still, she stepped out and put her other foot on the rock. Then, very smoothly, so as not to splash the water, she pulled up on the side of the light canoe and slipped it up onto the edge of the rock. Shifting her grasp, she gave a full tug and the boat sat fully on the rock. Importantly, she had not gotten so much as a single drop of water on her since the beginning of the entire procedure. She took her station there on the upriver end of the little stone platform, out amidst the water and the night. She sat down and set

her cloth bag down beside her. From it, she pulled a small brown glass bottle, her own rosary beads and a set of a few small bones, as those from a bird.

She was sitting in the open night in the mountains with the wind fairly whistling around her after first rolling and caressing the frigid waters. She sat on a loose shift of plain cotton, but, in spite of this, she didn't appear to be cold. "A healer," she told herself, "must have great self-discipline."

She took the pieces of bone and laid them in front of her. She opened the bottle, which was half full of water dipped from the holy font of the town church. This she set down, cork out, close at hand. She began with one of the bones, seemingly picked at random from the set of nine. She lifted this first one and blew on the end and, because of the way it had been shaped and dried and carved, this sent a high pitched wisp of a whistle down the river on the wind. After a short time, she set this one down and, selecting another, once again sent a pure tone off into the darkness toward the upper reaches of the river, higher in the mountains. Then, she chose a third and so on until she had blown them all. Then, it still being deep in the night, she began again. It became obvious that the seemingly random choices of not only the specific pipe, but, indeed, the particular notes, had not been random at all, as she repeated them, note for note, through an hour or more. Then, she repeated them a third time, sending their weird echoing ululation up into the darkness of the mountains.

Higher up in those mountains, during that same night, Gabriel continued on his relentless path. He was still following closely by the river. He didn't so much hear the whistles coming from so many miles below as he felt them as they rushed up the river canyon and on past him, flying upward faster even than the wind that boosted them on their way.

Farther up the mountain, farther back in the deep end of his cave, D'Ugarte, however, heard the notes clearly. He had been crouched over a small phial, into which he had just crushed the head of a large diamond back rattlesnake, and he remained transfixed by the sound, holding the snake and the venom flask motionless. He was gathering this venom in order to do with it what he had done to Don Baltasar, this time to anyone who stood between him and the girl.

In her bedroom, from time to time during the long night, Amelia would roll in her bed and begin to gasp as though she had just broken the surface of waters around her. Her mother sat vigil with her every minute. Toward morning, her mother trimmed the wick of the candle by her bed, as it was burning down to a mere stump.

* * *

D'Ugarte was headed to a thin rope bridge that only he knew about, having been the one who built it. He used it to cross the river far above the town bridge to avoid and elude people. It spanned a canyon from cliff to cliff a full hundred paces above the river, which was only about that wide at this narrow point. Being narrow, the river was deep and leapt powerfully along in its course here.

There were vines growing on the woven rope, which blended it more completely into the background, unless one was looking for it. The sun would soon rise and D'Ugarte wanted to be on the town side of the river by the time the light would reveal the bridge, even in that isolated chasm.

He had been continually following the trail of the wailing melody, letting it make his mind wander, deviating from his real surroundings for a moment. All of a sudden, just as the music had been drawing him, there was a change in the sound, as though everything was being done backward.

Sitting on the rock in the river, Seraphina had indeed turned the ceremony around. She now went through the bone whistles in reverse order and played the whole pieces with the notes running backward. She had the whistles turned backward in her mouth and drew breath in on them making a summoning spell. It was this reversal that D'Ugarte had sensed and "heard," as a piece at a time, the girl's soul was being pulled back away from him. With her soul back, her body would not be so easy to possess. He gnashed his teeth in impotent rage.

The change in the sounds had made him stop and his musings had left him now. It was already later than he had meant for it to be when he had planned to get to the bridge, and he thought he could smell the change of the night coming into day as the smells of the heated daylight world to the east pushed their way on ahead of the light and fire that raises them. Then, just a faint trace of a change from black to gray. He scurried forward toward the bridge like an insect whose rock has been turned over and exposed to the sunlight.

Far down the river, with each inhalation to make the whistles sound, Seraphina would first fill her mouth with the holy water, careful not to spill or swallow a drop, then, when she drew in her breath, in her mind she silently called part of Amelia's spirit back down the river in it. The breath and the whistle and the water would mix and she would then let it run back into the bottle from her mouth, mixing a little more of the missing soul with the blessed water at each breath. She repeated the process from before first light was discernible to the time of the rising of the first part of the sun itself, herself serving as the vessel in which the mixture was accomplished. It was because of this that she had been so careful and thorough about her rituals of purification the night before.

As that spirit had been drawn back towards its rightful home, D'Ugarte followed as the scavengers of the world follow after the hurt and bleeding. Now, he was to his rope bridge and,

in spite of the fact that it was now slightly, but definitely, gray in the air, he started across, drawn by the thought of the girl and the spirit notes of the whistle.

Across the river, Gabriel was still making his way upstream and watching for the sign Seraphina had said would surely come to him. Being very quiet as always when in the field, he was still down in the darkness of the bottom of the canyon below. Suddenly, he stopped and gazed with uncertainty at what he saw above him. In the light that was ever so gradually broadening in the upper world above the canyon, still near the bluff, he thought he could see the figure of a man walking, as if perhaps he was drunk, in the middle of the air. Even in these upper reaches, the light was still barely discernible, and Gabriel did not at first believe the dim and shadowy report his eyes gave him. He gave pause and sat on his haunches behind a low scrubby bush down on the river bank. Gabriel watched as the figure worked its way slowly across the single-foot strand of rope, holding onto another strand hung chest high on that compact shape. The combination of the young hunter's observation post and the progression of the coming of dawn gave true proof of what it was that Gabriel was seeing: not some drunken child of airy Terpsichore, but the malevolent gnome D'Ugarte himself.

The witch had not seemed to see him yet. The night seer on his shoulder was apparently blinded by even the faint light that was now coming from the east. Gabriel thought quickly, weighing his possibilities. It was not that he had to settle the mission in his mind; he would kill this demon so his love could be safe, that was certain. His question was only how. He feared most that D'Ugarte might see him and scurry on across the bridge, probably to cut it and leave him no way across the swift, ripping rapids that flowed in the stream at this steep and narrow point. That would leave him stranded there on the far bank, the slow side for a man on foot. That

might leave D'Ugarte racing for the town on the near side, if only he were bold enough to travel the rural roads of the "civilized" side.

The most logical thing for Gabriel was to shoot him off the bridge as he passed over head. Gabriel was a very good shot, but even so, with the wide mouth of the musket and without any rifling in the barrel, he knew it would be a miracle if he could hit the figure on the bridge swaying some hundred feet over him in the air. And, because the element of surprise would be so important in this struggle, he dared not take the shot, if it meant he might miss and alert his adversary.

As he was pondering this tactical dilemma in the shadows of the mountain canyon, Seraphina, now in the broadening light, stopped her whistling and calling of the soul. D'Ugarte froze in midair. His head went up and around, trying once again to pick up the sound. Gabriel, seeing this erratic behavior, supposed D'Ugarte had spotted him with the eyes that supposedly could see in the dark. He must act now or the chance would be lost.

* * *

Back, now, from the rock in the river, Seraphina would begin an all day vigil over the bottle of holy water she would use after nightfall to give God back Amelia's spirit, and God, being merciful, would cure her of this curse. She sat in the silence of the open and light of the front room of the little house, praying to the statue of the Virgin with all her heart and soul. As she waited, she felt a great peace, but also a great sadness for some reason. There seemed to come to her a hazy and indistinct vision in which she could see that Don Baltasar would live, but that, in the end, he would lose his limb. She shuddered and prayed to God to help her if it came to that, hoping that this time her vision might have been unclear.

Don Baltasar lay in his bed with a foul odor coming from his leg, though, had Seraphina gone into that room of contagion, which her current mission forbade that day, she might just have had to admit that the leg was a trace smaller than it had been at its worst. And, too, Don Baltasar could now sleep, albeit fitfully, without requiring draughts of the pain-killing elixir. She could worry about him after she dealt with Amelia.

It was Seraphina's intention to allow the sun to shine all day through the bottle, which now held Amelia's soul, and to pray over it without ceasing until the last ray of light. Only then, she felt, would all be right to attempt to reintroduce the soul into its rightful range. As she sat muttering her prayers, Mercedes came quietly in on her still-unsteady feet and sat down in the room with her aunt. Out of the corner of her eye, Seraphina noted the huge blue knot and the jagged line of the cut on her forehead. The girl had worried her bandage off, much as an animal would have done. Seraphina thought there was little danger though, the sunlight and air would do the wound good and there was, thankfully, no sign of the infection which accompanied Baltasar's wound. After a time, Mercedes got up and left the room as quietly as she had come, to go into the kitchen and, perhaps, stare at the wall or out the window. Since Seraphina wanted to concentrate on building power until nightfall, the girls' mother was in the bedroom with Amelia. The house wore a garment of waiting and expectation.

* * *

When D'Ugarte had stopped, head up on the bridge, Gabriel had reacted more on instinct than on craft. He pulled back the hammer of the weapon and, taking a deep breath, stood and swung the barrel upwards. Smoothly letting out half of the breath and sighting along the barrel as best he could, he pulled the trigger and the canyon was filled with the sound of the report. A great cloud of smoke obscured his vision for a second and, as it cleared, he became aware of the

situation above. He could no longer see the form of the man above and, just as his mind was coming to accept that piece of information from his eyes, his ears reported the sound of a great splash in the still-dark river as a great leaping fish might make. Then there was nothing but the silence and the flowing of the river. Looking at the now vibrant blue-silver of the dawn sky between the blackness of the bluffs, he could see only one of the two strands of rope of the bridge. Perhaps one of the ten rosary bead-sized lead balls had struck not only D'Ugarte, but the bridge as well. He ran to the shoreline and looked down the river as far as he could see in the darkness down the canyon. There was no change in the order of the maelstrom of the rapids. No head bobbing up or dark figure pulling itself up onto a bank. He stood for a moment in silent thankfulness that the life of his love was now safe.

By nightfall, Gabriel was halfway home, having swung hand over hand across the remaining strand of the bridge back to the near side where the trail was better marked among the small farms and the traveling was faster.

In the town, as night fell, Amelia's mother mentioned to Seraphina that Don Baltasar's fever was back. Seraphina was troubled by this small, but erratic, turn of events and beseeched God to look after the man for this one night to allow her to turn her full attention to the cure of her niece.

When it was quite dark, the family turned toward the bedroom where the girl lay. Mercedes stayed quietly outside, by the door of the room. Baltasar could not move from his bed. Before his wife had given him an especially large dose of pain medicine on Seraphina's orders, the two parents had said the rosary for the help of their daughter. Finally, Seraphina and Amelia's mother entered the room and closed the door behind them.

First, they prayed yet again. Then Seraphina again placed four bowls of herbs around the bed. One bowl was at the head and one at the foot. The other two sat at the right and left hands of the girl. Seraphina poured oil in each one of the bowls and lit the little pile of herbs, which gave off a pungent and sweet smell and filled the room with a faint haze. Everything had been much the same before at the querying session, save that Seraphina felt she could do without the services of the front bench biddies who had been in the room then. Still, however, the candles blazed in the saint's niche.

Amelia was lying in the bed, now so far gone from dehydration that she would not raise her head from the pillow, but, instead, lay and stared vacantly out across the room. She had spoken no conscious word since she was brought in days before. She had taken no fluids of any kind, withdrawing in fear from anything liquid. On the second day, she had urinated on herself, apparently while in a daze, and when she became aware of the wetness, she had screamed without ceasing until she had ripped the mud-grimed gown nearly completely off herself. Then had come the diagnostic session with the egg, but Seraphina's nostrums at that time had not caused any change in her condition. Since that time, over the days, her mother had kept her wrapped in a simple, but warm, blanket. Her hair, now at least combed, lay dry and stringy on the pillow.

When the two women had finished with their prayers, Seraphina brought the bottle of holy water out, careful not to show it too early to Amelia, who might bolt at the sight. After saying another prayer, Seraphina pulled the cork and took a mouthful of the water without swallowing it. She then turned back toward the bed and, taking a great breath through her nostrils, spewed the liquid out all over the head of the stuporous girl. Amelia's immediate reaction was to buck and tear like an unbroken horse. But, as suddenly as she had begun to

struggle, she became still, allowing the clear fluid to drip down her face and onto the bed. Quickly, Seraphina again sprayed her, this time from neck to toes. Then, quickly again, a third time all over. Seraphina and Amelia's mother were seeing the child become quiet, the tense look dissolve off her face the way some of the dried mud was beginning to melt away. Again and again, Seraphina repeated the process, now stopping between mouthfuls to pray, hoping to increase the strength of the waters.

Amelia had felt for all the days since her attack that the whole world was fouled with a thick, sticky covering and that all liquids were part of that one liquid. She had felt herself encased in the stuff and that she could never be clean of it again. This was hell, she decided, to be forever in filth and slime with no chance that she could see to break free. Even her vision was covered with a gray, shifting cloud. When Seraphina's first jet hit her, she had thought it was what had happened before, another attack upon her with more of the same stuff. But this she soon found was different. Instead of the new liquid just becoming a thicker coating of the slime, this liquid felt as though it dissolved the secretion and she could feel herself coming out of the depths, like a butterfly must feel when it comes out of its damp, dark chrysalis and experiences the free air of sight and air and of flight.

Before the last of the holy water had been used, she felt the last speck of the horror was washed away and she could even turn in her weakness and smile at her mother. Seraphina tried to give her a small sip of pure holy water and she let it trickle gladly over her parched lips and into her dry throat. "It's gone now," she said weakly to her aunt.

Some of the night was spent gently washing away all the real mud with simple water. This Amelia now accepted with pleasure. She began to drink the water and fruit juice her mother brought and even had a small bowl of soup.

Then, they heard a great clatter at the door. It was Gabriel staggering back in from his long and weary trail. The now cleansed Amelia and the trail-stained young man held each other and said nothing, basking in the freedom from the terror. Then, it was time for Amelia to sleep and the house began to quiet down after the long trial.

Amelia's mother was the first to notice that, in the excitement, Mercedes must have wandered off. She looked on the plaza, where she sometimes went, but found nothing. then, on her way back inside, by the front door, where Mercedes often sat, she saw on the ground a drop of what looked like blood and the faint trace of a wet footprint. She looked up over the door. The cross! It was gone and the masonry around its support was scraped out as with a knife.

Mercedes was gone. The house was searched from top to bottom and, then, the entire town turned out to see if she was still nearby. There was not the faintest trace, except the blood and the footprint.

When Seraphina found out, a cold chill ran down her spine. She called for Gabriel and told him to tell his story again, which he did, not missing a single fact. She asked if he was sure he had not seen any trace of the witch after the gun went off. Again, he told all he had seen and done without omission or addition.

“While we have been busy with Amelia, I fear the *brujo* has come up from the river or back from the grave and made away with the other girl. God have mercy upon her.”

Immediately, Gabriel, as travel weary as he was, set out to track them. The whole town armed themselves and went at least a little way with Gabriel, but the problem was which way to search. D'Ugarte was the craftiest being any of them had ever seen for leaving no tracks, even with the mute girl in tow. Eventually, Gabriel traced his own path back up the river and found the trail up to D'Ugarte's cave. The only reason he found it was that D'Ugarte no longer cared.

When Gabriel entered the musty cave, he was sick at heart at what he knew he would find. If the object of his new quest was there, D'Ugarte would have challenged him before now. Everywhere in the cave were the signs of a hasty packing up and leaving. Perishable foods were gone, but many herbs were left, as though drying.

There was a filthy pallet in one corner of the cave and, in the middle of it, there were blood stains. When he returned to the town to report to the family, he would leave out this detail. Also, there in the cave, he found a sort of low shelf upon which still stood some half empty pots and jars of foul smelling spices and unguents. Though Gabriel himself could never know, that shelf, until very recently, had contained the remaining books of the Great Umberto. Now, they, along with the new bride, were being carried far away into a new part of the country by D'Ugarte, who not only had not been hit by the buckshot that had cut the bridge from under him, but had found the momentary discomfort of falling into the river only a small problem to overcome. He had not fought the river, which would surely have killed him. Finding it was carrying him not only out of the righteous reach of the hunter, but also rapidly toward the object of his lust, he let himself be swept away and down the river, finding a floating tree trunk upon which to cling, ultimately to arrive hours before the foot-bound Gabriel. Not to say the river wasn't dangerous, but D'Ugarte was used to it in all its forms and used its current to his advantage.

When he had arrived, he found the approach to the town unwatched and, when he had come to the particular house he sought, there were people in the back rooms, but there was no one about in front, except the young idiot girl standing in the front room. Something, however, had changed for him when the music of Amelia's soul had flown away from him and back to Seraphina. Then, he saw all of them, Amelia included, as so many cattle. He saw that girl

standing alone and it had been easy to take her away into the night while everyone was absorbed with her sister.

Now, there would be a new D'Ugarte. He swore he would make that happen when he had her away and was safe from all pursuit in some new cave in a different canyon in the vast wilderlands. They may chase and abuse him, but, in the end, he would see to it that his way, the way of the D'Ugartes, would be kept alive to continue their revenge against the world.

The Brujo

Ugarte danced in the sickly light of the rising crescent moon. It was not a handsome picture, nor cheerful, for Ugarte's old body was as wizened and twisted as his thoughts, and both were now cloaked in the rotting rags of ages gone by, the spells, and the funeral shrouds of a distant ancestor. Ugarte was a *brujo*, a malevolent witch of the worst sort.

His father, who had, like Ugarte, made his tenuous outward living herding goats, had been a *brujo* before him. And his father before him, and so on, back in an unbroken line as far back as the sixteenth century during the height of the power of the so called Holy Roman Empire, the most powerful days of the dark Spanish Hapsburg dynasty.

Their common ancestor, Umberto D'Ugarte, had spent his life as a secret sorcerer to the elegantly decadent Spanish Imperial court itself. Now, here was an Ugarte dancing and cackling to himself out in the dark night on a sandy hillside in turn of the century New Mexico Territory.

He was wearing a crudely figured mask of cloth across his face, with two holes cut out of the fierce design so he could peer through. He wore gauntlets of hide, with elbow length cuffs woven of the dry prairie grasses. He wore greaves of the same material over his skinny old shins. Over the shrouds he wore as a tunic, a woven mat coat with a thick grass fringe hung down to his knees. There were symbols painted on the coat and mask in the hues that hide in the night, blues and dark, venomous greens, which go to blackness. There were no reds, yellows, or whites to show as gray in the dimness. Only the night could see the dull blue and the deep green of the snakes and lizards painted there. He had spent the last two days making these garments to be ready at the rising of the first fingernail paring of the new moon.

It was the stillest hour of the deep night. The moon would have framed him only dimly on the hillside over the sleeping village for an observer, had there been any.

He was still on his property. He didn't care about Munoz's claim to it. Munoz was an animal; they were all animals. He knew he had the deed for the entire piece of hardscrabble where he and his goats lived, handed down from father to son for generations, with the seal of the Viceroy of New Spain himself on it. He knew he had it, he just wasn't sure where it was...but it didn't matter, they were animals.

He looked down at the goat tied to the stake before him. The goat was obviously very sick. Saliva dripped from its slack jaws, it tottered where it stood. Its condition was so pathetic that Ugarte's killing it was perhaps the greatest kindness it had ever been shown, certainly so by that particular human. Ugarte didn't care about that, however, he wanted the goat's blood.

When he slit the animal's throat, he held a cup with big handles under it to catch the blood as it spurted and then dribbled out of the veins. Only the night could see the cup was of silver, almost black with age and tarnish, and the handles were shaped in the form of coiling rattlesnakes. It had been presented to the great Umberto by the Emperor himself in 1546, when the sorcerer had commissioned an officer in the colonial service to smuggle back two healthy diamondback rattlesnakes from the northern deserts of New Spain. Umberto had presented them as tokens of esteem and pledges of his service to His Majesty, and His Majesty had commissioned the cup in return. Now, it held the blood of a dying goat in the dark of the world. Such, however, had actually been its intended purpose.

The night would have spoken of the small spots of blood on the front of the old man's strange coat. Had it looked at that instant, indeed, as the animal still flopped in its death agony, the darkness would have seen the old man quickly, but carefully, pour off the dark liquid into an

oddly shaped clay vessel. A pot in the shape of a squatting devil, a gargoyle, held in the old man's hand. The head was made to fit the body exactly, as a secure lid. It would be difficult to open by accident.

As quickly as the blood was poured into the pot, with no further thought for the little animal's death agony, he began to doff the ceremonial garb, following a sort of ritual chant and series of prescribed movements. Just before first light, he would burn these strange vestments. At the hour between night and day, "when one can see neither the smoke nor the fire." That was what the writings said.

Ugarte could read the old parchment book, which his father had taught to him. He couldn't read any Spanish or English, though. He had never gone to the little public school in the town when he was a child. His father kept him tending the goats and teaching him from the book in its strange language. He had been alone all his life and had grown to like it. By the time his mother died, calling from her deathbed for him to stop the evil craft, he laughed at her, spit on the dirt floor of the hut where she lay, and turned on his heel as she gasped out her last pleas for his soul to his receding back.

On the other hand, he had actually killed his father. It had been at the old man's request, and he had used one of the most pleasant poisons in the book's large repertory of such spells. It might not have been so morally reprehensible, but to Ugarte, it had simply been a fascination to watch, up close, as someone, anyone, was dying. By the end, he hadn't liked his father any better than the rest of them, anyway.

By now, the tiny moon was level with the tops of the surrounding low scrub. The night still had more than an hour before it began to yield to the light. He would burn the garments and gloves and the goat's carcass in the early dawn, but now he set out in the night upon his real task.

He walked by memory the paths by the fields and along the side of the dirt road in the darkness, now so thick he could breathe it like coal dust. The watching night would have seen the paper posters peeling off the rough adobe-brick walls of the town's clustered buildings, like the scales of a beaded lizard. The *brujo* passed by like a ghost, wrapped now in dark vestments around the undergarment made of the yellowing funeral shroud, not a glimmer of which now showed from underneath. He passed by the sleeping town, then doubled back by other paths and cut through more fields all under the futile light of the tiny moon. Then he came to the fence around the adobe house of the fool Munoz. There were no lights showing, no sound, except the occasional moan of the wind vibrating the sword-like leaves of the maguey in the yard.

Before he entered the gate, he paused to test the wind with fine, glimmering powder from an ancient pouch of soft, worn leather. He pulled a rolled piece of cloth from a pocket in the outer gown. Had the vigilant night been a male dog, such as the one who guarded Munoz's house, the packet would have carried the pungent and completely attention-stealing scent of a bitch in heat.

Ugarte kept dogs in and around his house to be able to depend on having one in heat at any time. He often needed the bitch's scent wiped from them with a sponge to mix with a vulture's liver to make the spell he now held in his hand for just this kind of use. For any other man, no matter how much he liked pets, the resulting tide of puppies would have been a problem, but not Ugarte. He just killed them as a matter of course.

He tested the wind again with the powder, calculated for a moment, and then flung the fist-sized package past the side of the house and far out into the surrounding field. It was a potion from the book, a poultice laced with just the right amount of poppy juice that he got from

the strange garden he tended on his land. Munoz's claim was there on that side of Ugarte's place, on the half mile that lay between them.

When the dog was attracted up the wind, even though he had not found what he had expected and hoped, he would nevertheless, without fail, set down to worry the loosely tied packet open to get to the source of the smell. Upon opening it, he would also, without fail, either eat it or at least thoroughly lick the bloody potion off the liver. In either case, within the time it took the moon to go from the top of the bushes to the tops of the highest trees out in the fields around Munoz's place, the dog would be asleep. Ugarte could have walked up, raised the drugged beast's neck and slit that, too, if it had fit his plans, but it did not. He needed there to be no trace of his coming, not even a footprint, so the dog must be awake again before dawn, as though nothing unnatural had passed in the night. It took a deft touch with potions, as it did with poisons, to use them well.

Ugarte glided up the doorway path. He turned and made for the well by the kitchen at the back. As he passed beneath the windows on the side of the house, he stopped. There was a light, the faintest light, which came from a back window.

He drifted like fog toward the window, carefully approaching from the side and slowly peering in. The house was asleep. The light was coming from a small candle, and the shutters of the window were partly open in the calm of the night. The candle burned as a night light in a room that seemed full of children. Five children lay about the room in beds and cribs and one, a little boy, on the floor. The candle sat on a shelf near the crib of a child of perhaps one year.

To Ugarte, the infant was as an insect, beneath consideration. What his sly, rheumy, old eyes sought was the oldest girl, the one with the face and the budding figure. He often watched her from the bushes on the hillside where she lived and, though she knew nothing of it, he had

been commanding her in his dreams. She was his to use in the dreams. It made him feel power over Munoz to thus use his daughter for his own pleasure. He had spent much time dreaming in the last few months.

Now, he watched her through the window; the light of the candle was perfect for his purposes. He could see the side of her face with a wisp of the shiny black hair playing coyly down her cheek. Her eyes, with their long lashes, were now closed. He watched the rise and fall of her breast. He knew how perfect her breasts were; he had seen her bathing one night as he looked in at this window. He watched the movement, and he grew tight inside and excited in his wrinkled old loins. The girl moved, turned her head and, in her sleep, she stretched her arm over her head. The brujo's breath came more quickly as her breasts now stood out in relief under the thin shift, and he could see one foot and a naked leg up to the knee lying out from under the covers.

The candle, which had been burning low, flared up and, in the light that leapt forth, he could see the texture of her skin, of her shoulders and her throat. He was beside himself. Carefully, he set the demon pot of blood aside, careful that he had spilled not a drop. He watched the young girl as she lay only five feet away through the window where he was just a shadow. Into his robes went his gnarled old hands to the very depths where they touched and began to fondle the old organ that the sight of the girl had made hard.

All in his mind, his spirit slipped through the window and drew back her covers. He was her incubus now. She lay sleeping, unaware. She was a virgin, he knew, he just knew. His probing spirit could feel the silk of her thighs, and he stroked himself faster. His own heart was rumbling like a rock slide and felt like it was swelling in his chest.

Imagination found her soft moist center and, while in reality, the girl sighed in her sleep and turned restlessly again, in the dream world of the sorcerer, she had opened herself up to him and groaned with pleasure.

The moon reached to the tall trees on the other side of the yard by now, and the *brujo* had still not done what he had come to do with the blood. By now, though, he was totally in the hand of lust, standing outside the window looking in at the young girl. Swept away, he opened the robe and the shroud, so there was nothing between the warmth of her and the end of his greasy old organ, but the night air and the blanket that now lay across her upper thigh. He dreamed that her eyes were open and that she was watching him. He was biting her tender young nipples and blood ran down her thighs in the dream world, as his loins swelled to exploding in reality. She would not know that only her coverlet and the five feet of distance through the window had protected her from being ripped open to hold the witch's seed inside her body.

When his breathing permitted, he closed his robes. He leaned against the house for an instant, the frustration and spite and rage at Munoz flared like a cold fire, and then he turned and snaked his way to the side of the stone well. As the moon rode low, he returned to his original purpose and poured the blood into the well. He was careful to pour it directly into the water, not spilling a drop to be seen on the sides. Then, having cast the spell, he disappeared in the blackness.

Ugarte's seed slowly crawled down the wall outside the girl's room. She never awoke that night, but she had bad dreams. She would have more in a few days. The next time would be during the days of fever that would kill her.

* * *

Ugarte had brought on the fever with the spell of the sick goat's blood in the well. When she died, Ugarte's only thought was that it was a waste to bury her so soon. He was put out that she was the first to die in Munoz's house. But there were other young girls in the little town; other girls and other windows.

Munoz would figure it out, about the spell. He was an animal, but he wasn't a complete fool. Soon, he would give up about the land, when someone else died in the house. Of course, he would never know exactly what was happening, but he would know it was through Ugarte's power that he suffered so, and he would give in.

Two more times, after the girl died, Ugarte returned, under cover of the last of the dying moon and at the next month's new rising. Munoz's wife finally died after the third spell. She died in spite of the amulets around her neck, in spite of the charms over both doors, and in spite of Munoz's prayers that she wouldn't. Munoz cried on his knees in his front yard. As he wept, he cried to the heavens to protect him and the rest of his family. Ugarte watched from the hillside bushes with what might, for him, have passed as a smile.

Soon, the wooden sign with Munoz's name on the disputed property disappeared. There had been three mysterious, crooked crosses carved on the back before, but now it was quietly gone, taken down by Munoz, who, by now, no longer cared whether he lived or died. The *brujo*'s knotted rope went up at the gate of the disputed land as a sign of his victory. The townspeople crept about their daily lives under the dark shadow that his presence cast. They prayed in the small church that God might yet remember them, that He might hear their pleas, and perhaps send St. Miguel himself down with his fiery sword to smite this demon, delivering them from the sadness and terror that he wrought.

The old part of his land, the part no one ever ventured onto, except occasional adventurous or foolish young boys, still contained the heart of his arts. Here was his garden of herbs and other plants. Plants to make a man feel no pain, plants to make a man feel terrible pain, plants to make a man go mad.

The house had its packs of guard dogs. It was also a problem at times keeping so many when he had the goats to think about. Once in a while, one of the dogs would kill a goat. The *brujo*'s father had taught him that, every once in a while, he should bring in a young *cabrito* and, with it, tease one dog out of the pack into a frenzy. He would let that one dog get to the little animal as the rest of the barking mob were held back by the fence. Then, just as its jaws closed on the little goat's neck, in full view of the snarling, snapping pack, with one quick stroke, Ugarte would cut the head completely off the dog with one sweep of his razored machete. He found that, at some level, he could communicate even with the hounds. They generally left the goats alone after that.

It was just as well for them that they did. Just as the old garden back of the house was full of strange plants, so the witch also kept a special goat pen a quarter of a mile from his house and away from the regular pens. In this enclosure, made of close-set branches with the thorns still on them, for as long as he had been alive, and his father before that, there had always been at least one goat that was sick or which was certainly about to become sick. Each time he slaughtered the sick ones, he picked as many new ones as he felt he might need in the immediate future, usually just one, to keep the spell alive. He picked that one from the flock and mixed a bit of blood from the snake-handled cup with its food for a few days. It had never failed. A tiny spark of evil could be kept alive in the blood by those who, from time to time over the years, might need it for their own purposes. This special strain of goats had been tended like this for more generations than

Ugarte could count. Even when all the others had been sold off or stolen or driven off by wars, this small flock lived, and died, on.

It was all according to the book his father had taught him. He sometimes wished the fever spell could make use of worthless puppies, instead of tasty young goats. The book, in fact, did speak of sorcerers who had kept rabies spells under their command with dogs, passing down the madness like passing the fevered blood of the goats. The book described the grass matting and the cloth mask to wear while handling goat's blood and the exact words to use to call upon Satan to protect the disciple himself from the sickness of the spell as he burned the garments, according to the Great Dogma of Umberto. The book and its knowledge and its terror were the only legacy that remained through the centuries, like the malice and contempt for other humans, passed down from father to son, through their evil line.

The Fall of Man

There was tension again in the air in the little New Mexico Territory town near where Ugarte the *brujo* lived on his scraggly patch of desert. The middle-aged folk who could easily remember the terror of the last raids by Apaches out by the nearby mountains only a few years before feared Ugarte more. The people there took him very seriously, like the black thunderheads that would blast the flat expanse of creosote with lightning in the summer. The more so since the last year when the whole family Munoz had first opposed him and then had, one by one, sickened and died. Though there was no proof, no trace of a knife or a bullet, the people believed in Ugarte's strange and malevolent powers.

He usually maintained the posture of open disdain for the other people of the town and spent his days alone, tending his goats and mumbling to himself. His sense of insult, however, was as delicate as a snake with its skin newly shed. He was always being slighted and always threatening to retaliate for some imagined indignity. It had been that way for years, for generations, in fact. There had been Ugartes here for as long as anyone living could remember, for a hundred years, and they had always been witches. Generation after generation, they had kept to themselves., the sons bringing women for wives, usually as strange as themselves, from elsewhere. The few daughters all deemed to die in infancy and the town's people only partly in callous jest imagined these girl children as being glad of it. Some spirit looked down and would not allow them to face maturity in such a house.

This Ugarte had no woman, yet. Mothers shuddered if ever he even looked at their daughters and they made the sign of the cross to ward off the *mal ojo*, or worse.

The people of the town all avoided Ugarte's gaze on the rare instances when they met him on a road or in the plaza. Only a few of the oldest still knew he had a given name and none of them were about to be so familiar with him. He had no other family and there would be few in the town to mourn the passing of that line should it fail and through God's mercy die out.

Given the fact that he had never once been known to deviate from his course of misanthropy and also that it had been long years since his last open fight, since anyone had seen him openly avenge an insult, Ugarte was considered a worthwhile target for the attempted deprivations of bolder teenaged boys of the town. Many knew, however, if only from reputation, that there was significant risk indeed in attempting a youthful raid on even his most outlying orchard, let alone the herb garden in the middle of his small farm. Once in a great while, a particularly reckless boy would try to reach the center garden to come away with some of the strange plants that grew there.

Only once in living memory, had anyone gotten away totally clean, stealing some of the opium poppies that the *brujo* grew for clandestine use in a cave in the hills. That one died, mysteriously, in great pain, less than a month later. Whether or not they believed in the witch's supposed magical powers, as most surely did, most of the raiders weren't doughty enough to face the very solid and mundane threat of Ugarte's twelve-gauge shotgun, which he loaded with rock salt.

Long ago, it was whispered, his father had used buck-load instead of the less lethal rock salt. If it were up to Ugarte, it was whispered, he would still be using buck and leaving their meddling carcasses in the sun, but it was also remembered that the elder Ugarte had actually blown the lower leg off one unfortunate boy and the entire town had gone with the boy's family

to bring him to task for it. Such was his power and threat with spells, however, that the crowd had gone away and left him alone again in the end.

The concession, on the part of this *brujo*, purely to avoid such inconvenience again, was apparently to change to the salt. This didn't mean a step slower in pursuit or a minute more of the time asleep; the Ugartes never seemed to sleep, no matter when the raiders ventured onto their land. Nor did it mean the old *brujo* had aimed in anymore merciful a way than before; he had always aimed for the belt buckle.

He had inflicted some fairly horrendous looking wounds, but most of them turned out to be a mass of superficial wounds from the chunks of salt and, usually, though the salt caused hell's own pain, there were no really deep wounds to cause fatal trauma.

This danger really proved to be the basis for a custom for at least three generations of *novios*, or sweethearts. The young lady would treat her young man as though he were going to war between the time he announced the impending raid and the time he actually "went to the *brujo*'s." If he was wounded with the salt, it was custom that she would have to pick out the salt to stop the fire. The most commendable wounds were from the face-to-face belt buckle shot, but most actually got theirs in the back or buttocks.

Now, Oscar, the cockiest kid around town, had announced to his girlfriend, Rosa, that he was going to raid the witch's garden. He said he would go at the next full of the moon. These announcements between lovers usually happened just after one full moon began to wane and were traditionally scheduled at the next full moon. The darkness had long ago been conceded to Ugarte. There was no doubt whatsoever that he could see in the dark. Since the state of the moon didn't matter to him, one might as well go when light was best to see by offensively.

One of the things Oscar wanted to do was to raise the spirits of his *novia*, Rosa, when she became sad on the anniversary of the death of her lifelong friend, Herlinda, the daughter of the lamented Munoz. The two girls had been weaned together. Indeed, Herlinda had been the very first person Rosa had told when she had first decided it would one day be Oscar whom she would marry.

Herlinda had died, along with her mother and two of her younger brothers, the year before. Though they said the family was taken by a fever, Herlinda had told Rosa of her dreams of being pursued by a shriveled little devil. It was whispered that Ugarte was somehow responsible, though as to how exactly, no one would offer more than an unintelligible mutter or mumble. Rosa was more than superficially frightened by the prospect of Oscar taking the old man on, even in boyish adventure. To her, and she knew to Herlinda, Ugarte had been a recurring visitor in their childhood nightmares. As their families were quite close, deep night would see one of the girls wake the other up to tell of a dream in which Ugarte had “gotten” them, one or both.

Now, Rosa’s own *novio* was intentionally going to beard this evil old coyote in his den. For what? Why risk it? Oscar would really have had no answer, had Rosa asked the question. But it was not the way of the world there, either for her to question, or for him to back down once he had made his decision. Things flowed onward as toward an edge.

He told her he would go to the garden and would bring her a bouquet of the strange flowers and she could wear a poppy flower in her hair and they would celebrate at a cave in the hills. Soon all the young people of the town knew of the quest. Oscar’s younger brother, Martin, walked about as puffed up as the young knight errant himself, snapping his fingers with childish bravado on Oscar’s behalf if anyone mentioned the evil old *brujo* or his dragon of a shotgun. He,

too, however, shared Rosa's unspoken fear though he could not speak it. With so much pride on the line, however, Oscar was bound, in the full sense of the word, to go.

Oscar was nimble and quick and had always been a good hunter. On the appointed night, he crept under the outer wire of Ugarte's place in an isolated spot where trees, or at least low scrub, covered his actual entry. Oscar had his Apache grandfather's eyes, which were as good as anything this side of a cat, but still he believed Ugarte was better in the dark.

He slipped quietly to within six feet of the first break in the scrub cover. A full ten minutes he sat on his haunches calmly waiting, quietly watching. The moon was full and its reflection off the light colored sand made it all look like a blue colored day. He saw small movements of rabbits, ground squirrels, and the hunting owl that lived in the tops of the cactus.

Quietly, moving carefully, he timed his speed through the tall grass to the speed of the wind. His sound in passing would be a part of that wind to any listening ear, or so Oscar hoped. He could only guess whether Ugarte's hearing was like his legendary night vision.

Meanwhile, Ugarte most certainly was awake and moving about on his scrubby land. The night-seer rode on his shoulder in a small harness. It was the small, sloth-like creature his family had bred, also in secret, for generations. Ugarte understood the first pair had been brought from somewhere far to the south, but by whom, or exactly when, was lost to family history. He was sensitive to the slow turnings of the lethargic, but wide-eyed, beast. Where it was looking in the darkness was the most likely center of any other body heat. Ugarte understood only that this spell-monkey let him see in the dark. When he was "hunting" his land for intruders, Ugarte kept his dog-pack locked in the house so they would not give him away before he could get to intruders and deal with them himself.

The sky was full of clouds, all being swept along on the wind as well. Oscar would move only from one piece of cover to another when a cloud cast a moon shadow, which he could follow along in, and then watch for a while. He eventually came to the edge of the garden he sought. The poppies were in the middle, with low lying herbs and tangled vines growing on the ground around them. He went down on his belly and, still in the shadows of the brush at the edge of the garden, he lay for another ten minutes. He even lay with his ear to the ground for a moment. Then, slowly, always with his face hugged close to the ground, crawling on his belly, he made his way slowly toward the center. He reached the edge of the poppy patch and again lay completely still in the shadow for another ten full minutes. Then he turned and began to gently cut the tough stalks of the poppies.

The cracking and shaking of each stalk caused a great hand around his chest and stomach to squeeze down on him in terror. Then, he had them. He watched, again for ten minutes, quietly feeling the stalks of the poppies in his hand. Carefully, he watched the skyline and the breaks in cover that the moon floodlit now. Nothing moved. Again, he crawled the width of the garden, picking up the scent of many herbs as he passed. Then, he was back to the edge of the cover and, for the first time, allowed himself one relaxed breath. As he exhaled that breath, the world exploded, turned to the orange of flame, and then to darkness.

Mercifully, he would not remember the rest of the night. Ugarte had grabbed his unconscious figure by the pants leg and dragged him, sometimes face down and sometimes face up, to the edge of his land, where the road to town ran by. He had simply dragged him to the middle of the road and dropped him. Without even looking down to see who it was or how badly hurt, he turned and went back to his fence line.

Martin found Oscar at daybreak. The bridge of his nose was gone along with much of the rest of the nose and upper lip. Given what it did to his appearance, it may have been a relative mercy, but both of his eyes had been riddled with the salt crystals. At that point-blank range, it had been like being shot in the face with a load of glass shards and his eyes had been at the center of the shot. Ugarte might have been using salt, but he had shifted his aim from the center of the belt buckle to the center of the face. Oscar was alive, but blind, his face hanging shredded, and when Rosa saw him, there was terror in her eyes. The future was a black chasm for her. There was so much to bear and now Herlinda was not even there for her.

Oscar awoke and knew what condition he was in and the physical pain and psychological shock tore at him. Who would have the remains, even if he lived? He screamed in pain as his brothers held him down and Rosa and his mother washed the wounds and tried to get the slowly dissolving salt out of the worst of them. He screamed until his mother cried. He screamed in his pain until even his brothers cried.

Because of all the excitement about his brother, no one but Martin knew of the great changes that had occurred within himself in this one long night. Martin knew it had been his own *Noche D'Alma* as well as Oscar's tragedy.

It had begun under the brilliant full moon, with the hard packed *caliche* road glowing in the white night. Friends, including Rosa, of course, had walked with Oscar to the head of Ugarte's road. Only Martin, however, had continued with him to the actual fence line. He remained outside and held up the strands of sharp wire so his older brother could slip inside.

It had begun as a strange enough night to begin with, but it was also to be the first night, as Martin had vowed to the Virgin, that he would stay awake all night. He didn't care what his parents might say, he was twelve now, and, besides, his brother might need him. Though Rosa

was awake all night, it was in the church in front of the Virgin's niche with rosary in hand and head bowed in the candlelight. But, while she and all the others were in town, inside, Martin was squatting in first one place and then another across the road from the fence that formed Ugarte's boundary. Little moved all night. An owl flittered past and, occasionally, a bird sang its solitary notes in the moonlight, but, basically, time sat still there with Martin.

Then, far into the night, really almost morning, there had been a single shotgun blast, surprisingly close, it seemed. Martin's head had been nodding just when the trees and brush around about were lit faintly by its flash, so, when his body hit full alert, his mind was still catching up to the situation. He sat still, tensely watching and listening. There was no sound, no movement, but he knew it was no dream, because, in a moment, he caught the faintest whiff of burned gun powder. Then, in a few minutes, he could hear something rustling the brush there across the road and he thought he could hear muttering. In the low, late moonlight, he could make out someone, presumably Ugarte by the size and shape, who was dragging something large behind him, crashing through the scrub brush and the barbed wire of the fence as well by simply yanking on the bundle hard enough to pull it along. Through the creosote he dragged the inert bundle to the center of the road and flung it there with no more care than one would give an empty sack. Then the figure turned and disappeared back onto Ugarte's property in the first beginnings of the gray of morning light.

Martin could not make out the bundle for a moment, but then from it there came a low moan and Martin's blood froze. The light was growing and now he could see that it must be his brother there in the road. As he approached, with the colors still all gray in the dawning, he could see that Oscar's face didn't look right somehow. It was only as he approached nearer that he saw the *brujo's* work.

By sunrise, the whole town knew about what had happened and was gathered outside the door. It was many miles by wagon to the nearest *gringo* doctor, in El Paso, and, besides, there was no money. Oscar would live or die, suffer or not, here in his little town with whatever his family and friends could find or fashion to help him. They knew Ugarte had the poppies on his land and that their juice was the only thing they could give the boy to fight the pain he was having.

Martin had carried Oscar across his small shoulders in the dim dawning as far as the nearest crossroads where a wagon happened to be passing by on its early morning way and it took them back to town. His family had borne Oscar off the wagon and into the house with much shouting and crying. Martin, walking in the strange, floating light of his first dawning, but totally awake, could feel the blood pounding in his temples and in his chest.

He sat outside the window and listened to what they did and said. Someone, through Oscar's screams, had mentioned Ugarte's poppies and that someone should go get them. Martin did not wait to hear any more, for now he had a mission. He ran without stopping to the back side of Ugarte's place.

As the townspeople were gathering to march toward the front gate of the *brujo*'s place to demand justice or at least the remedy for the boy's pain, Martin had cut across back fields and was leading old, sad Munoz's last bull through a gate to water. He let the beast drink its fill. Then he waited and stroked the bull's flanks and waited some more, until, finally, the big animal let loose a stream of pale yellow urine. Martin dashed through the bull's legs and was thoroughly splashed by the stream. When he sprinted on through to the other side of the bull, he kept running up to the fence that bordered Ugarte's and vaulted it in the open. He continued as

directly through the low scrub as he could run to the center of the land where Ugarte had his herb garden and his house.

In spite of the strong odor of the bull's water, Martin could smell a sickly sweet aroma in the air. Though he didn't know it, he was smelling the burning poppy stalks as Ugarte fired them up at the front gate. As he topped a small sandy hillock he came to the center of Ugarte's land. He could see the decrepit old house and, nearby, the herb garden. Several of the red flowered poppies were still standing, though Martin could see that most of what had been there must've been very recently cut. Six, in fact, had been cut by Oscar, the rest were what was being burned.

Suddenly, there was loud fierce barking on all sides. A whole pack of large, heavy cur dogs was descending on him, Ugarte's watch dogs. "This," Martin thought, "is when the spell had better work."

The band of men with hoes, axes, and clubs headed for Ugarte's place, only to find him sitting close to a fire made of poppy plant stems by the front gate. He had obviously burned them all, all but one and that one he threw into the fire with a laugh as Oscar's father broke from the crowd toward him.

"You witch! You shit of the devil!" he cried, tears running down his face. "You don't deserve to live!"

At that, Ugarte pulled the shotgun out from under the dead grass and leveled it at them. "I used salt, but the important thing is my right. Yes, my right to stop people from coming onto my land and stealing what belongs to me alone."

"Damn your rights! And damn you! You'll burn in hell, Ugarte!" cried the boy's father.

Ugarte only laughed and stepped into the cloud of thick smoke coming from the burning poppies. He was enveloped in smoke and invisible to them. Though he had simply turned to go,

fearing the shotgun or worse, the crowd looked uneasily at one another and they did not follow. Not knowing of his younger son's raid or his own unwitting role as decoy, Oscar's father burned his hands trying to salvage some of the pods of the drug from the fire. There was pitifully little left.

When the dogs came at him, Martin lowered his head and, putting his hands on his head, miming horns, and giving his best bellow, charged directly at the largest dog. It, and then the others, stopped dead and silent and then turned and ran as the skinny twelve-year-old swept on toward the house, now unopposed. To the dogs, the question was whether to believe their sight, which said, "small rabbit," or their much bigger scent brain, which said to get away lest they be trampled by the bull they were smelling.

When he got to the house itself, Martin slipped in through the window in the back. He didn't know whether the *brujo* was there or not at this point and he didn't care, his brother needed help that he could only get from this accursed place, *brujo* or no *brujo*. In fact, he had not actually "slipped" in, but had gotten squarely up on the window sill and kicked the wooden shutters in. The dogs still stood a respectful distance away, readier to flee than to attack. Martin knew, however, that the bull piss spell would only work for so long before the scent, the illusion, and, thus, the protection of the spell would fade. He looked among the dusty pieces of wood and leather and cobwebby things lying about and saw there a small sickle, as he started back out the window. He stopped half in and half out for a moment, to look back at the dark room with its dim tables and its squat, ugly pots and jars, but he saw nothing that looked sacred or even very clean. Then, he was back out and running to the garden, sickle in hand.

The dogs were either less put off now by his scent or simply more exercised over his open thrashing in their master's central plot. They began to close in. Whick! Whick! Whick! The

sickle slashed efficiently through sections of the remaining poppies. Martin was careful to have them all fall in the same direction, so that, when he finished he could scoop them all into one arm, using the sharp blade of the sickle as a sword to fend off the feints of the boldest of the pack. He felt the blade bite the nose of a snarling dog, which probably weighed more than he did. Backing and turning all the way, covering his retreat with the now-bloodied blade, Martin carried every single poppy stalk, dropping none, all the way to the back fence and out again. He ran all the way home carrying the precious bundle.

It did not take long for some of the old women to make a tea from these pods that seemed to bring Oscar at least some small relief from the pain.

Having drifted back to his house on the cloud of opium smoke and not really sure how he'd gotten there, Ugarte's fury and resentment at the people returned, tripled. First, they trespass, wanting to steal his property. They threaten him and curse him. And now! They had come to the very center of his land, breaking into his house and his garden to steal again! Well, he would show them. Especially the family of that willful whelp he had caught and shot the night before. They were the worst of the lot. He only wished he had been using real lead shot instead of salt. As he thought of it, he promptly went to an old cabinet, reached into the top part, pulled out two "real" shotgun loads and put them in the chambers. Then he put eight more shells in his pockets, just in case.

As he sat through the day, he seethed with anger at the people. He resolved to throw a spell. That was what he would do. He would throw a spell on Oscar's father and mother and his whole family. They would think his blinding and disfigurement were kindnesses he had done them all compared to the wrath he would unleash now. Muttering and cackling to himself, he

went back to another cabinet and pulled out a leather bound book of great age. He spent the failing light of day poring over its pages, looking for just the right thing.

For a week, he was not near his house, spending all night setting small traps out in the open air. In the days, he had moved to a cave that only he knew of, out in the hills. He didn't want to have to deal with them. Not yet, not until he was ready, and then it would be on his terms.

Finally, one of his traps yielded what he wanted. It was a skunk, not normally a favorite of hunters, yet it was exactly what he needed. The skunk was obviously in the last throes of life, snapping and frothing at the mouth. It was rabid.

Using the book and the dead skunk's still warm body, he soon had cast a spell on a stray kitten that would certainly mean the little animal would soon be rabid itself. Knowing this, he put it into a cage and he swore to himself that he would get it into the house of Oscar's family.

Oscar had several small brothers and sisters. They were made to go outside and play in the yard, since Oscar had been hurt and Oscar's tragedy had been a shock for them all. Some not old enough to understand that their handsome older brother would be a blinded invalid. That evening, they were overjoyed to see a cute kitten tumble out of the brush at the edge of the road that ran in front of their house.

Ugarte paused for just the blink of an eye to watch, making sure the young children picked up the kitten and took it into the yard. In that moment, from up in the brush on the hillside above where he was gathering wood, Martin caught just the faintest glimpse of the witch's old dirty coat below. He crouched and waited until he sensed the witch moving off. He followed the *brujo* for some time, far enough behind that he could just hear the faint sound of the cackling laugh and the muttered curses, until, finally, far away from the town or even from Ugarte's own

house, he saw the old man pull aside a bush and go into a cave, carefully replacing the screen after himself.

Martin carefully noted the place and started uneasily back to town. When he returned home, he saw the children with the kitten when he came into the yard. He asked his little sister where it had come from. She pointed back to the road directly at the base of the hillside where Ugarte had stood.

Martin froze inside, but, remaining calm, he asked his sister if he might hold the cat for a few minutes. He took the animal into the house where his mother and father were and quietly told his father about the kitten and about Ugarte on the hillside. Over the whining and objections of the younger children, Martin and his father took the cat away and, that evening, they had it in its own small, but strong, cage in a shed behind the church. Several men were lounging about smoking and talking about the whole situation.

“I say we go up there and burn him out. Burn his place while he’s gone. That’s the way to handle a witch,” said one of the men.

“This *brujo* is powerful, because he cares so little about anything but his spells and his wickedness. If you burn his house, it will just make him spend all his time making us miserable. I am going to watch the kitten each day. If what happens is what I think will happen, then at least I will know how I will strike at him, in his own coin. Otherwise, God will not help us. And, friend, whether you know it or not, against Ugarte, we will need His help.”

Days passed and, sure enough, the kitten began to sicken and act strangely. It wouldn’t eat and soon began to hiss and spit at anyone who came close to the cage. Oscar’s father knew that Ugarte had sent a rabid animal to his children. There was no longer any question; the witch must die. This could not be tolerated by any of them.

Again, they gathered at the church shed and, this time, they made a decision. They broke into two groups, one going to Ugarte's carrying the cat's cage and the other larger group, all armed with their hunting rifles and shotguns, heading for the hills, with Martin leading them to the witch's new lair.

They knew this was serious business, because the cave was on Ugarte's land and they could expect no forgiveness from him for their trespass. He would not hesitate to strike, if he could.

It was near noon, the bright part of the day, which they figured reduced Ugarte's advantage over them. Also, there were ten of them and, this time, they would not hesitate to shoot Ugarte, if it was a question of him or one of them. They formed a ring around the top of the mouth of the cave. They only had their faith that he was inside and not somewhere else, perhaps even farther up the hill looking down on them.

Then Martin stood up and his father nodded to him. The boy casually sauntered down the hill and across the field of view from the cave, though he had gotten to the edge of what he estimated was shotgun range before he made his turn across the cave mouth. Sure enough, the waiting men saw the ugly mouths of the double-barrel slowly slide through the brush door. Then, a terrific explosion and another and Martin fell dramatically, clutching his chest. As the smoke cleared, the brush swung back and the old man emerged cackling. He had heard someone moving around outside and now he wouldn't have to worry about them anymore. It was as simple as that to him.

But just as he stood up, breaking open the shotgun to reload, four of the strongest of the men leaped down from above the cave mouth and, after more than a little struggle, in which Ugarte managed to bite two of them, they forced him to the ground and tied his hands and feet

with a strong rope. The rope was the bell rope from the church, which they had cut down and brought with them, because it was blessed. Ugarte cursed them and they could see the rough rope left welts on his wrists and ankles.

They carried the writhing old witch silently back to the part of his land where his house was. The first group, the ones who had come there originally with the kitten, had, by then, gone through the house, emptying everything outside in a big pile, which they were burning.

When they had approached the house, they had had to shoot several of the dogs to get inside. The rest had all run away now, except one huge, fierce mongrel, with the mark of Martin's sickle still on his nose, whom they had trapped inside the house.

With the doors of the empty house closed now and the dog inside, the men went to one of the windows and, opening the door of the cat's cage, pitched it inside with the dog. Then, they slammed the creaky shutters on the window. There followed a tremendous racket inside for the next five minutes and, looking in at one point, they could see the kitten clinging to the nose of the dog with fangs and claws buried deep in the infuriated animal. Then, the dog shook the cat off and literally caught it in the air as it came down. There was a sickening crunch and then the cat was in a spasm within the jaws of the dog, then it was still. The dog proceeded to tear the cat's body to shreds in its rage. Within a few minutes, everything inside the house was quiet.

When the other group bearing the brujo arrived, they quickly opened the shuttered window one more time and, none too gently, they threw the old man in, still bound hand and foot. He hit the floor with a thud and a curse. He may have expected the people to come in and loosen his bonds, but he was mistaken. In fact, all he heard was the sound of nails being driven by a hammer. He could see they were boarding up the windows and he could hear the boards go across the doors. It was Munoz who drove in every nail himself, calling to the *brujo* to listen to

every blow, as he had listened to the screams of his own dying family. Martin and Oscar's father handed him the nails, one at a time.

Outside, the men sat and determined the shifts that they would watch the house and who would stand there by the bonfire into which they had thrown all the evil tools of this devil. On the fire went the strange symbols and charms, the old and musty clothes, the cages of the strange small animals and the bodies of all the foul creatures, from the ugly birds to the night-seer to the devil-eyed black goats.

Even when this fire died down and became cold ash, which they scattered with prayers, they still stood, through the day and the night. Among them, Rosa stayed and would not leave or even sleep so great was her watchfulness, her fear and her hatred of Ugarte. The two lives closest to her had both been shattered by this monster.

They ignored Ugarte's threats of the first three days. Then, they learned to ignore the entreaties of the next several days. Still, Rosa stayed, and Martin, and Munoz. At one time or another, however, the whole town, including the now-blind Oscar, came to listen to the growls and curses and screams as the dog and Ugarte became starved and fought one another inside the house. They didn't know if Ugarte had managed to loosen his bonds nor did they particularly care. Without his spells and potions and his shotgun, he was powerless. They had burned all the potions, broken the gun and fed it to the flames as well, saving for the time being only the last one of the great heavy books in the strange print, which had been packed in a bundle with a small sack of greasy meat and stale bread.

Finally, Oscar was there, sitting in a chair by the window, for the final two days and nights to hear the *brujo* scream and choke and gurgle and, at last, die in his own foulness as the spell of the rabies caught up with him and slowly shook him by the throat in its cold, bony hands.

It was only then, after the *brujo*'s own works had killed him, that they burned the house down, with his body still inside.

The father of Oscar and Martin took the final piece of the *brujo*'s works, the great book, from the curious crowd who were scratching their heads over it. He walked with strong and sure step to the bonfire that had been the *brujo* and his house and, turning to the people, he held the book high and shouted, "Here it ends. Now is the end of this witch and his works!" Then, he turned and threw the book into the center of the flames.

They could see it, though it seemed to sear a bit at the corners, sitting as though it would stand the flames intact. They began to gasp at the thought that it might somehow survive the flames. Then, Rosa, tears streaming down her face, raised her clasped hands and fell to her knees at the edge of the fire and, appealing to heaven, she cried out, "Holy Mary! Please! Please do not suffer this evil to continue!" At that instant, they saw the book fairly explode into flame and they saw it burn furiously with a bright light. Only when they could see that this last book was totally devoured did they begin to turn away from the fire again. Many of them watched until the fire was completely burned down, however.

They waited, standing in a circle so that nothing and no one could escape. Until there was nothing more than the bare ash left, they watched the fire roar on and, when it was cooled, they found the cursed bones, scattered the ashes and scoured the ground where it had burned, leaving no trace on the earth of the malignant line and the evil name of Ugarte, the Brujo.