



The Headless Priest

PD Collar

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From the Collection:

Costa Gothika

City of the Mists

Cartago

May 15, 1630

“Bless me Father, for I have sinned.”

“*Arroz con mango*,” squawked Gatica, the parish familiar.

Father Antonio Aquinas Santábria Brunca smirked from the quietude of his dark enclosure at the parrot’s odd comment, which sounded like a warning, clearly she was posturing. But now that he thought about it, why it was clear. Gatica was simply jealous; that’s all it was.

The priest’s penitent, Señorita Josefina Elena Talbot, was the beautiful great-great-granddaughter of a *converso* from Ferdinand and Isabella’s ethnic cleansing over a century ago of the Jews the same year they expelled the Moors from Spain. She kneeled upon a cushioned hassock in the left-hand confessional and tried her unpracticed hand at genuflection. She was cloaked from any hypothetical curiosity the priest may have harbored by a black-laced curtain that covered the small hole in the wall that separated them. It was an open secret across the colony that no small number of such “mixed-faith” Jews, including entire families, had migrated from the kingdoms of Castilla and Aragon to, among other places scattered across the four winds and seven seas of the known world, this particular colony, known as Gran Cartago from its 1548 founding through the turn of the century. The “Gran” was lost along the way, and we called our capital, founded 67 years earlier by Juan Vázquez de Coronado, the *Salamantino conquistador* born out of wedlock and veteran of the campaigns he led in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, simply Cartago, after the great Phoenician capital of antiquity, known at the time of the events of this narrative by its post-Romanic, Moorish name of Tunis.

With our population numbering just over eight thousand souls, there was little chance that Father Santábria might recognize the voice of each member of his extended flock. But there was little room for doubt about Josephine. She stood out from the crowd like a Jamaican with vitiligo, the subject of close attention paid by men, adolescent boys and lesbians of all ages, their moist eyes clinging to her movements as she walked through the streets, her garments shuffling upon her body like linen tote-bags filled with live rabbits, or as her nostrils ebbed and flowed in her sniffing of fresh

fruit beneath the delicate shade of her parasol in the Saturday open-air market, or as she dawdled beside the governor's mansion, on the lookout for wealth and opportunity.

"When was your last confession, Daughter?"

Josephine Talbot was by now the fiancée of the priest's brother, the hidalgo Juan César Santábria Brunca. Formal introductions had yet to be brokered, and the two, Señorita Talbot and Padre Antonio, had not formally met, nor ever before their turn in the confessional, exchanged words. Yet, Father Santábria knew who she was by her smell in the curtained hole and from the insouciance that hung in the turgid confessional air to raise beads of sweat on the priest's upper lip. He knew why she was there before she parted her own to reply. She bit her lower lip and scowled at her vulgar exposure for the parishioners in the nave to crane their necks to ogle at will, leaving her dirty and cheap. Josephine Talbot had first ventured into Father Antonio's family's gaze through her clandestine seduction of their youngest brother, Daniel Aníbal Santábria Carmona, months earlier. Daniel may have preferred in the name of his masculine honor that it be interpreted the other way around, but he had gathered his weapons less than a week earlier and turned his silver mare, Anastasia, northwest to seek his fortune as first soldier, soon to become condottiere. His abandonment of his birthplace could not be completely separated as a consequence of whatever turn beneath the wheel he had taken with the *femme fatale* now stalking their older brother Juan César through the crosshairs of the middle one, Father Antonio Aquinas.

"This is my first time, Father. You see, I am not fully Catholic."

'And not fully a virgin either,' mused the priest. 'If unkind comments from the street are to be paid any heed at all.'

'It has always been my impression,' she returned his unspoken musing, 'that there are no virgins in this brimming land of plenty.'

'Not just a looker,' the priest judged, 'but smart as a mule as well. Cruel, I bet, as a sated cat...'

Customarily, it was the second son that took up arms and the third the cloth, but in this Santábria family, Daniel and Antonio had exchanged roles as befitted their respective personalities. Daniel was born to a woman that don Vinicio had wed following the death of Antonio and Juan's mother from the small pox that the European wave eventually bequeathed her. Not to be outdone in mortal prematurity, the sons' father, don Vinicio, endured the weep of pustulous lesions from the great pox, a creeping insanity that echoed a steady-state craziness he had suffered in adulthood through voices he could sometimes hear that came from people not really there, and finally blindness shortly before death. It had to have been his own wife, his first two sons' mother, that had gifted the malady in return, for the old man never took a lover from the quarters of his many indigenous and less numerous Jamaican slaves and had never been unfaithful to his beloved Angelina Brunca Montes. Hemispheres had collided across the vast salt,

tomatoes and potatoes for Europe, oranges and lemons for America; the clap for Amerindians, syphilis for the promiscuous of Florence, Venice, and Marseilles; tobacco for Amsterdam, cannabis to stoke Jamaica's rising industry of piracy. But don Vinicio Eusebio Santábria León, either had a revelation before the birth of his sons, or in his naming conventions played a trick on the three with his choice of their second names. Truth be told, each son reveled in his own particular second name that defined the identities they assumed as adults in a way that the names Juan, Antonio and Daniel could have never achieved. The eldest son, Miss Josephine Talbot's true mark, Juan César, inherited all the lands and operations as well as don Vinicio's coat of arms. Antonio Aquinas aspired to his namesake's panpsychist adaptation of the challenging contours of the austere Catholic order of the bowdlerized mothership of Christianity, and Daniel Aníbal dreamed of taming lions and riding elephants into the fabled streets of El Dorado, paved in the gold from the mountains and rivers of Panama, Peru, and perhaps even Colombia, one of those martial potentates and empires to the south, biding their marked time before being forced to face the glint and temple of his coming Damascene blade!

Virginia Magdalena was born two years after Daniel Aníbal and was married off to an up-and-coming Extremadura-born, Nicaraguan caudillo with the surname Somoza, shortly before her sixteenth birthday. The family parrot, an ocular heterochromic blue macaw named Gatica, had been given to the family by Antonio's mentor, the anchorite priest with jet hair gone suddenly silver and green eyes that went by the pseudonym Padre Gato Cartago, the man that nearly single-handedly raised the only *Parroquia de Santiago Apóstol* to ever be completed. Gatica, as patriotically fond as she was of the words '*tabaco*, *azúcar*, and *café*,' could never quite navigate the diphthong "rg" and simply gave up on trying to pronounce 'Virginia' and wound up calling their kid sister simply Magda. But Gatica called the three brothers not by their Christian names but by their second names, César, Aquinas and Aníbal. It was all considered strange inside the family, for neither Padre Gato Cartago nor their own father, don Vinicio Eusebio, was known to have taught the bird any words at all, so the fact that she settled on their second names of her own accord portended something unusual about the creature, not even taking to account her Methuselan age. Before their father began his descent into the tenebrous madness spawned by the syphilitic brain, don Vinicio used to laugh uproariously and feed the macaw almonds and cashews and encourage the animal without success to drink from his cup of sugar-cane *pitorro* in the evenings and corn or chicha in the afternoons. By the time of the events of this narrative, Gatica had been living as a mascot in the **City of Mists** for eighty years, and had been fully grown when first gifted to the long dead Padre Gato Cartago in 1555 by an aging shaman from High Sixaola, a medicine man that spoke all three of the Bribri, Cabécar and Miskito languages, and claimed to have won the bird in his mid-twenties playing keno with a Barbary privateer navigator, whose captain's corsair got whisked away to the New World by a cyclonic storm that rose up just off the Spanish Saharan coast in 1485.

"Then why are you here," replied the priest, "if you are not fully Catholic...?"

"Aquinas," came Gatica's squawk above the fervid flap of heavy wings alongside a gasp from Miss Talbot at the bird's sudden intrusion upon her **private** encounter with her brother-in-law to be.

"Don't mind Gatica, Josephine. She just wants a cashew. Gatica, silence, can't you see that we are busy confessing our sins?"

"*Tabaco, Michi,*" the bird replied, abbreviating '*mi chiquito*' into the slang term of affection bandied about by the servant class of our families. Father Toñito passed Josephine a cashew nut through the veil separating the two booths, and she offered it nervously to the large bird that now perched on the outside arm of her chair. She watched its massive beak attentively but without fear as the creature stared at her through its aquamarine eye and settled not around the cashew nut but around the meat at the base of the thumb of her hand, pinioning it gently between its upper beak and its tongue and lower beak. Gatica mimicked the growl of a jaguarondi, "Grrrrr," but merely kept her beak pressed around the girl's flesh without causing her any pain. The macaw hopped to the other chair arm to glare at the slut through its heliodor eye and pushed at the woman's shoulder with her feathered head, urging her to rise from her cushioned ass plant to hit the fucking road...**bitch!**

"I have been having impure thoughts, Father," Miss Talbot replied undaunted, staring down the petulant bird with a newly confident frown. She shoe-ed it with the backs of her manicured fingers, but gently, honor among whores in the house, and after a sullen stare at the adversary, Gatica recovered the cashew meat dropped on the upholstery of the seat and flew out of the confessional and to the altar where it slowly nibbled its begrudged kibble.

"The confessional's privacy is purely symbolic, Daughter. Just as you know who I am, I of course know who you are as well, Josephine Elena Talbot."

"Of course, Father; that's why I'm here; I would never hide my identity or spiritual conflict from you. You are the only person on this planet that can guide me through this."

"You are engaged to Juan César. He will make a good husband to you. He will guide you. He is responsible, hard-working and as rich as Midas. He has no vices," Father Tony demurred. "Well, hardly any at all."

"But I am still in love with your other brother," she lamented. "Sort of."

"Then it is good that Daniel Aníbal flew the coop," Father Santábria said through the veiled window. "And showed you how little he thought of you."

"Sadly," she blushed, "my impure thoughts are for neither one of your brothers, Father."

“Well, you’re out of luck with me. I am sworn to a life of celibacy. And Juan César is my brother, after all.”

“But I love you. I cannot lay down at night but that you invade my sleep to kneel upon my chest and absorb from me my will.”

Father Antonio smirked.

“My dear, I absolve you of that tiny sin; the truth is that I am by nature irresistible, and your sin is not very unusual in our little Carthaginian parish. Some claim it is the work of the devil through an incubus or succubus. But, it’s just an anatomical disconnect between deep sleep and waking. Call it waking sleep for lack of a better term, completely ordinary, as normal as the sexual arousal and night terrors that it can bestow. That will be three hail Mary’s from you, little Miss Josephine. Plus, I want you to visit Miss Anita Bermudez, the new school marm. I want you to offer to help her, and make friends and smooth her way in. She has not fit herself in well here, yet.”

“And I have, Father? Fit myself in well here, yet?”

Father Tony chuckled. “Oh, come one, Josephine. You rule the roost wherever you perch.”

“Ms. Bermudez...?”

“She feels adrift. I sense it.”

“I don’t know what I can do,” the girl replied coolly.

“What would your rabbi think if he knew you were over here slinking around my confessional, Josephine?”

“He would probably be jealous, would be my guess. I am not supposed to acknowledge even his existence,” she demurred. “My secret is safe with you, I hope, Father Tony?”

“This here is a fence, little sister,” Father Tony tapped the curtain. “Go on, now. Get busy with those hail Mary’s.”

Upon Deaf Ears

Tokyo

July 3, 2030

Fuji Yamanaka felt the morning sun upon his face, filtered through slats in the blinds lowered across the eastern windows of his fifth-floor office in the Hachioji District. Sunkyu Seismic Consulting Services held three floors. Their Asian market suffered yet the unending stigma of World War II; they had high rise projects in Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore and a casino complex in Macaw. Sunkyu had a toehold in

Italy and was making inroads in Greece and Turkey both with one tower in Istanbul and a shopping center in Ankara, plus a downtown Athens hotel under its belt. They were on the move in South America and Mexico, though mostly from empty-tower projects capitalized by the cartels. But this Costa Rican cathedral job was an opportunity for Sunkyu to crack the American nut and expand its reach into nominally legal money across the Ring of Fire, the world's largest single seismic market. Yamanaka stared across the space between the two into the eyes of his boss Ibo Sagami, who reposed through upturned palms against the outer edge of the glass plate that held newspaper clippings and photographs pressed against the desk's wooden surface.

"It's our bridgehead into the Americas," Sagami leaned across the desk and into Fuji's space to open the file folder and retrieve a photograph of the ruins to turn around for Engineer Yamanaka to examine. "This is an opportunity, Yama, not a portent. What's the long face about?"

"I have a funny feeling about this one, Chief."

"How so?"

"This church that we are being asked to ensure against seismic damage..."

Ibo nodded enthusiastically.

"This church was first built in 1575 and lasted 55 years before collapsing during a 1630 earthquake."

"Get on with it, Fuji, so what? What is it?"

"The site stood in ruins from 1630 until the very end of the 18th century," he tapped the file, "when efforts to rebuild it beginning in 1795 ran into disaster with new, stronger earthquakes, the Saint Stanislaus Quake of 1822 and then the Saint Antolin Quake of 1841."

"Tokyo's had its share of seismic disruptions to projects as well, Fuji: Hanshin, Yokohama, Tohoku, the list is long..." Ibo scoffed. "It goes with the territory."

"So," Engineer Yamanaka continued on unconsolidated ground, "the Ticos, wealthy from coffee exports of the era, sought out in 1870 the greatest seismic engineering brainpower of the day," he smiled, "recurring to none other than..."

"The Germans, Yama. I know the history of our business. You are testing my patience!"

"Just like the Ticos are now recurring to us, Japanese, in modern times, Sir."

“Well, it is not only Costa Rica money behind this,” Sagami chided. “The Germans failed, Engineer Yamanaka; past is NOT prologue. You must succeed.”

“This time, in 1910, it was the Santa Monica Quake, the largest ever recorded in the country until the Limón quake of 1991. Santa Monica put the final nail in the coffin of the Moor slayer church, Chief.

“Semi-final nail, Fuji,” Ibo corrected his subordinate. “Penultimate reconstruction,” he made clear. “And it’s an idea only until it becomes a deed. What of it, man?”

“Now it has been named a Natural Patrimony site, under Costa Rican national protection since 1982 as a site of cultural importance and a candidate even for a World Heritage Site designation. And you want to go ‘*Round FOUR*’ in rebuilding this citadel of indomitability? Sir? You think this is a good idea?”

“All the more reason, Engineer Yamanaka,” Sagami frowned. “What better opportunity to show Costa Rica and Latin America that we are the final solution for world-class seismic engineering, design and construction than to rebuild their national religious shrine that for over a century they have been unable to rebuild themselves?”

“Chief,” Yamanaka insisted without hesitation. “Try FOUR centuries. This *Parroquia de Santiago Apóstol* in what is nicknamed the City of Mists, has been in ruins or under reconstruction since 1630. That’s exactly 400 years, Chief, only to be forever stalled by new and bigger earthquakes with deepening and increasing crustal damage pushing the project with each new temblor decades farther into the possible future.”

“Fuji! For heaven’s sake, snap out of it!! Think Chile! Mexico! Perú, Ecuador, Colombia, Panama. It’s a huge market, one fifth of the world. Think about the Antilles, greater and lesser. Think Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, Cayman Islands. Banking. Panama Canal trade, drug smuggling, people smuggling, weapons sales, wealth. Think of our penetration into the San Francisco market, Los Angeles even. The San Andreas fault is long enough to produce a quake greater than the great Chilean earthquake. Fuji, imagine the honor of erecting a skyscraper that resists a quake above M8.

Fuji Yamanaka broke into polite but convulsive laughter at Ibo Sagami’s absurd turn to death-wish fantasia.

“We will remain frozen out of the Philippines and southeast Asia for the rest of time, no friends in Korea or China, either, naturally, the Germans always leaning into our business from their stable subsurface, ever competitive, Peru nipping at our heels, and don’t even get me started on the Americans.”

Fuji wiped hilarity’s tears from his eyes and composed himself. It was true that Sunkyu must keep its eyes on the eastern horizon for growth, but Engineer Yamanaka remained uneasy. Some jobs you glom onto and some jobs you pass over.

"It all begins with the Santiago Apóstol Parish re-build, Fuji. So, take the lead on it or go back to herding draftsmen."

"Chief," Yamanaka insisted without any hesitation, "this church rebuilding has been going on for four hundred years. Sonkyu Seismic Consulting is good, sir, a solid firm that will outlast its visionary and honorable founder." Fuji winked at his boss and rose to bow respectfully in his honor.

"You know I would not ask if I were not truly concerned, sir. But are you *sure* you want to get mixed up in something that has not been resolved in four hundred years? Sir?"

His boss clucked his tongue softly. "Superstition," he dismissed this whole line of reasoning.

Engineer Fuji Yamanaka could not put into words what his gut was telling him.

"Yes," he relented, at last, viscerally unsettled. "You're right, of course."

"What is it, Yama? Is it that this church has a will of its own and is sentient and refuses to be rebuilt? Fuji Yamanaka? Is that it? That the region's seismicity prohibits the erection of this particular church, this church alone, that the ground is sacrosanct? Haunted by ghosts that refuse both construction and demolition? Is that what you want me to take away? You would have me retreat with my tail between my legs?"

Principles of Shintoism were not restricted to Japanese soil alone, and the kami oozing from the Parochial Ruins of Cartago had all the dark and malevolent hallmarks of Poenari Citadel or Poe's great House of Usher. His boss's summary was not too far from where Engineer Yamanaka's viscera trembled with warning lights and a rising claxon about where the true story lay. But after a pregnant silence between them overstayed its welcome, the subordinate finally relented and exhaled with a long whistle. "When in doubt," he tee-ed up his boss for the verbal drive with his number one wood.

"Design it stout," the boss chimed in with perfect pitch, the ball sailing over the fairway in a giant arc to bounce twice and come to rest two dozen centimeters from the first hole of the course.

"That's the spirit, Fuji."

The Fuck?

Municipality of Cartago

November 15, 2030

“The fuck?” Vázquez glanced at the paperwork.

“So much for our back channel, Chief.”

“CFIA approval already?” He laughed from his belly. “These yoyos are serious!”

“The Opus Dei, you mean...”

“The fuck does the Opus fucking Dei have to do with goddamned Tiquicia, Deniso?”

Denny the Mini shrugged.

“Okay, let’s dial it back a bit. One, our bishop—here in Cartago—he knows about this, what’s his name, Quirós?”

“Yes sir.”

“Could the archbishop—in San José—possibly be unaware of the little problem here? He’s another Quirós right?”

“Quirós Quirós, actually sir.”

“Which one of them?”

“Both of them, sir.”

“So, they are brothers?”

“No sir, they are not related.”

“The hell you say.”

Deniso Miniano shrugged. “I am being told the archbishop does not believe in ghosts, Chief.”

“The fuck? Guy believes in the three-day zombie Christ but not in ghosts?”

“No small irony, sir.”

“Don’t tell me our bishop is a non-believer also.”

"Our Quirós Quirós," the Mini Man raised his eyebrows to a nearly hostile height upon his protuberant forehead, "knows good and well that nothing good comes to anyone set out to stir up the Parochial Ruins!"

"I should hope to pray!"

"Still, it is the archbishop that has the final word on such things, not the bishop," Miniano shrugged. "And the archbishop wants the church tore up from the floor up and rebuilt *al Romanesco*."

That statement hung in the air for a full three seconds.

"Permit denied on the basis of seismicity," Vázquez declaimed at last. "End of story. The place has been pummeled by three earthquakes, Denny—wait: or is it four, or even five majors? They never even got the original chapel rebuilt in the first place before it collapsed beneath a new temblor, rinse and repeat time and again since 1630. Do I have the picture right?"

"It will do for government work, Sir."

Now they are going to...ahem...remodel it?" Vazquez glowered at his colleague. "Keep it up, Denny, and I'll show you government work!"

"It's Morazán and Castro, Chief." The Mini turned his palms up at the greatest name in Costa Rican—arguably Central American—architecture and urban planning.

"They have a Japanese outfit handling seismic, Sir, with a Peruvian-born seismic engineer as project manager. The plans are unassailable."

"Cultural Patrimony, then!" Vázquez coughed. "Act of 1982. Set me up a meeting with the director of the national museum!"

Miniano produced a document and dangled it between them.

"Executive waiver, sir," he shook the piece of paper. "Delisting the ruins from patrimony. Signed by President Johnny Artavia himself, countersigned by the archbishop José Rafael Quirós Quirós."

"There has to be a way," Vázquez slumped his shoulders.

But there was no Denny-the-Mini repartee forthcoming and Vázquez weaved his way among golden thread in a tepid ocean bath.

"Very well, then. Get their seismic experts over here; let's go bowling with rolling footers. Machu Picchu me, baby. Send in the clowns! Let them negotiate with the Priest directly!"

Deniso Miniano cracked a grin and slapped his thigh. "The Priest is sure to give them a real head's up, Chief."

They laughed as Vázquez signed off on the permit and tossed the folder across the desk, where the Mini Man swept it up to spin on his heels, the very portrait of bureaucratic efficiency.

Rage Against the Dying of the Light

Cartago

May 15, 1630

"Have you set a date, brother?"

Tony had never seen Juan César so filled with absent-minded glee. Maybe there would be an opening for what he had to tell him, not likely. Best to just keep his tongue furled.

"I have news on Daniel Aníbal," Juan could no longer hold back the secret.

"Flunked out of basic training?"

"Shipped out of León to Panamá," Juan raised his eyebrows. "There's this Spaniard dude that's putting together a force to conquer down south, off the map. Pizarro is his name, Francisco Pizarro. Looks like Daniel is a shoe-in to make the grade."

"Our little Daniel sure does get around," Tony sighed, sweeping the floor with his eyes.

"Funny you should say that. You know about him and Josephine, right?"

"Daniel and Josephine? Your fiancée, Josephine?"

"I think that's why he fled in the middle of the night to seek his fortune in Managua. Fell in love and ran away when she wouldn't have him."

"So that's what that was all about," Tony remarked.

"But there was no betrayal," his brother made clear. "That was before Josie and me got to really know one another, you know what I mean?"

They chuckled nervously.

"Who can blame Daniel Aníbal?" Juan César smiled awkwardly. "Who would not be smitten by my blushing bride to be?"

"Yes," Tony agreed. "Count me in; I can't deny; she is fetching sight indeed."

Everything Happens for a Reason

Cartago

December 15, 2030

Fuji Yamanaka awakened upright on a park bench and tugged at brain tendrils to get his bearings. He was clothed. He was dry. It was nighttime and dark but not too late, ten p.m. maybe. He was cool but not cold. He knew who he was but not where he was. He sat a park bench in a country he did not know, certainly he was, as usual, somewhere beyond Japan. The air was damp, cool and misty. A stiff breeze cut beneath the hem of his light jacket to invade his abdomen with puffs of chilled air. Gusts blew up his pants legs. He was on a seismic engineering job in some Hispanic country, clearly, but where eluded him still. It would come back any minute, now. It did not feel like Argentina and it did not feel like Mexico, though it did feel a bit like Colombia. It was certainly not Lima. A seizure was what it was. He had had a fit. His generalized tonic-clonic epilepsy was not debilitating, just something else in his life, like his ex-wife and aging parents, that had to be managed. He could not yet tease out what had triggered the fit. That would come eventually. Still, even though infrequent, he nearly always emerged from his twice or thrice yearly grand-mal seizures tousled to say the least, with rent garments, bleeding from his mouth or elsewhere, bruised, sore, soaking wet, exhausted. He felt none of those things now, but if it had not been a seizure, it had to have been some other medical event. As an epileptic he did not drink, so he did not patronize bars and disapproved of prostitution and had only once in his life—that he knew about at the time—even been inside a brothel—and that was in Lima as a high school senior thirty-three years ago. His head was not foggy, no hypothetical mickey or Rohypnol. Still, there was a remembered image of a woman's face brushing his prefrontal cortex, and he examined her there studiously, eager for any clue about himself that her visage might engender. A Latina woman, early thirties, beautiful and voluptuous, respectable and decorous, sensuous...a brick house.

Cars passed along the avenue in front of him, and in a space between two of them he felt the floodlights upon his shoulders in what should be the taped-off front boundary of the Cathedral ruins he was here to protect against long-term seismic damage. Costa Rica flashed in his head, a nation that he had never visited before. He whorled to behold the cathedral completely finished and splendid in its Romanesque magnificence, evening mass going on inside right then. He had carried out seismic refraction blasts this morning throughout the historical site grounds historical site for inferred subsurface characteristics that would guide him in the footings design required to achieve protection up to a 7.9 Richter quake, or an VIII in Mercalli Intensity, pick your poison. But here it was, the cathedral rebuilt, its narthex splendid and sweeping to grade with three stair case sides to converge upon the entrance platform, lights flooding the yard through the opening between hardwood main doors, each one four meters tall by two wide, entrance lines foreshadowing those of the receding nave bound for its crucifixion by transepts meeting in the middle to send the bell-tower spire heavenwards. Fuji Yamanaka scratched his head over the couple years it had to have taken to rebuild this cathedral. He had surely just awakened from a coma. Either that, or it had just been a really, really, really long day.

The gaping doors drew him in through sonorous echoes of song from the choir and soft light channeled through the motes of dust that hung within the citadel's air. There was a confessional inside the doors to the left, a central cubicle for the hidden priest, and booths on either side. Only the cubicle to the priest's left was occupied, by a buxom young woman of great beauty, with two people waiting their turns at a discreet distance of five or so meters outside her closed curtain. Fuji felt the assault upon vestigial *kami* in the land, the stones, the sky, the mist and felt the dark, relentless fury of the *kami* resident in the rebuilt ruins themselves—aka this imagined church—that surrounded him and spoke with him wordlessly, in everything he heard inside and everything he saw inside and in all his thoughts, both past, present and future. Engineer Fuji Yamanaka has either moved through time, slipped through a portal into a different dimension, or is having an active hallucination or a vivid dream. No matter which is true it is his duty to self and country through Shinto to scatter the mists enveloping him, to resolve the mystery, and to set this universe right again with its axes aligned correctly and its spin and mass dialed to its proper settings. He is honor- and duty-bound to resolve these discrepancies even if the means of so doing entail ritual observations of a religion inconsonant with his own, or who knows, perhaps even worse things than that.

The priest stood with his back to the congregation, cloaked by a loose cowl, ensconced in the shadows peopling the apse behind the candle-backlit curtains of the altar. The priest's booming Lord's Prayer echoed off all the surfaces everywhere and rebounded several times from within the bell tower above the intersection of the nave and transepts. Echoes converged discordantly, and this gave the Priest a reverb knob for his acoustic projections. "...hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come..." Yamanaka had often been tapped, of course, for jobs in South America and Mexico because of his language skills. Born to Japanese parents in Peru he spoke Spanish natively. He was actively understanding the Priest's evocation of the Lord's Prayer, though he realized suddenly that the language was not actually Spanish, but Latin, the liturgical language of old Catholicism, a language that Fuji had never studied, yet now apparently understood as if it were his own first tongue. And **that** was **some** kind of *kami*!

The finality with which the Priest said "amen" brooked no quarrel, and the robed one whorled to, if not 'face,' to at least stand before, his congregation. His parishioners were bathed in the yellow light of complacency and crossed themselves eagerly, not at all shocked that their priest was missing his head. The Queen of Hearts, plonked into this particular scene, would surely have abided. Absent a head, that meant no mouth, no tongue, so how could the Priest have been saying anything at all, much less so booming? And it was then that Fuji Yamanaka became sure that he was in the middle of a waking dream; alternate explanations belonged to the realm of the supernatural, which Engineer Yamanaka did not believe in; he was certain that all phenomenology was natural, and that the term "supernatural" was simply a contrivance by those incapable of grasping elusive and conflictive paradigms of each person's unique experience of reality. Lights began to flash pinkly in serial rotation inside his eyelids and he felt himself lean toward the abyss. He was going down, but at least the congregation rushed now to his aid, even before he fell across the pew—when he was still just

leaning in that direction—right before collapsing upon the polished hard-wood floor to convulse and writhe.

Fuji Yamanaka came to seated on a park bench after dark and immediately knew where he was and whorled about to stare at the Santiago Apóstol Parochial ruins for which he was tasked with compiling a footings design structure capable of withstanding an earthquake up to 7.9 on the Richter scale, or level VIII plus in Mercalli intensity. He remembered selecting this shirt and these pants this morning at the Sunkyu rental house in El Guarco. He remembered riding with colleagues this morning in the rented Mitsubishi. He remembered positioning the geophones and preparing the charge. The charge! It was dynamite. And he was a seismic engineer, it suddenly occurred to him, and a seismic geophysicist that uses dynamite professionally in his workaday. He could not recall a detonation, but was now sure that there must have been one, that it was something he was not remembering, that perhaps was the cause of today's first seizure, though it was hard to blame for both fits.

He remembered waking up on the park bench with the finished church behind him, before walking up again in a astral loop, this time with the ruins behind him. He had suffered a concussion from the blast, surely, that was it. He had made a mistake with the explosive. Or...could it be that he was dead and simply not accustomed yet to his new state? Laugh if you must, but the apprehension at being newly dead is nearly universal following sudden death by accident or violence.

But when a cab stopped for him and asked where to and smiled and was friendly, Fuji Yamanaka was pretty certain that he yet walked the land of the living. There were rumors of a headless priest that his team had laughed about as they poked chopsticks into their faces back at their Guarco headquarters. Yet, clearly, the headless priest schtick must have impressed him subconsciously for why else would he have invoked through his personal madness a completed cathedral replete with just such a deconstructed priest, body modifications and all? What could possibly be in it for him to imagine and dream such things?

A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Santiago de Apóstol Parish

16:30

Try though he might, the master of the house was unable to hide his torment as the days separating his betrothal and nuptials extended into the second of three scheduled months. He had once mocked the very idea of elopement, years before his own engagement of course, as petty, vain, cowardly even, yet now debated with himself the very mechanics of just such an act. Of course, for anybody else, it would be an option, surely, but for Juan César Santábria Brunca, the richest and most widely admired of all regional *hidalgos*, it was out of the question. His leadership was not simply by mandate and coercion but foremostly—and as a matter of great personal pride—by example. At 28 years of age, don Juan César was still, ssshhhh, a virgin, whereas his younger two brothers—one of them a priest even—had bedded countless maidens and

widows. And, if rumors were to be countenanced, Daniel Aníbal had hanky-panky-ed on top of that with half the capital's matrons as well. Juan César's former self-confidence had been vast, unassailable even, forged in the power of wealth and tempered through personability and kindness. Yet, following his engagement he was immediately beset by fear, suspicion and the jealousy that he had observed in others but never experienced personally. He longed now to be married as soon as possible and to even elope to speed it up though that was clearly a bridge too far. Nicola Tesla would two hundred and seventy-five years later proclaim that knowledge comes from a place that is accessible to all and understandable to none, and the wealthy older of the three brothers denied what he had come to know from that mysterious place in order to cling to sanity, to turn his back on what his gut churned daily up for him: he was to lose his beloved before their nuptials, now scheduled a mere 40 days hence. As he moved about his home and grounds and the town itself, snippets of conversation between others would reach out and grasp him by the earlobes and intrude evilly upon any possibility of peace.

"...the sheer amount of time that she spends at the chapel, don't you think it a bit odd..." was one such phrase to drop unbidden from the lips of a house servant speaking with a kitchen maid, unaware of the master's tiptoed approach from behind.

"...it's about time that Ms. Bermudez snapped out of it," a tendril wrapped around a corner and into his ear. "of course, in the end it's surely more from Ms. Josephine's intervention as from Anita's resilience that she's turned the corner here in the mists and emerged from her little cocoon."

"I heard that she and Josephine..."

"Oh please, no gossip among us gals. But **how** the two of them do laugh..."

"...you know Talbot's old man shorted Don Juan César with such a miserly dowry," a seamstress proclaimed leaned into her wheel to flirt with the furrier leaning against the wall to admire her comely bosoms. "None of my business, of course, if the don himself finds it adequate..."

"...the curves on that bonny lass," the iron man was quick to wager, "I'll lay my week's wages that Don Juan would offer a dowry up to the new father-in-law just to be the one to peel back the raiment to reveal them milky white breasts rising like loaves of leavened Christmas bread. "Speaking of which" he leered lustily through his mildly drunk eyes and seized the maid's attention with his stare, "I have three pieces of eight to my name and will offer up a full third of my fortune **your** mama if you hitch up with me," he cackled. "We can try it out for a week, see how it goes..."

"I am pretty sure, Mr. Gutierrez," she turned her nose up primly at him, "that I shall not play second fiddle to that ewe that you are so fond of bathing and pampering, no matter how much you plead and beg me." She lifted her skirts quickly to show him what he was missing out on.

Then there were the complicated patterns of the religious conversion rituals. The *conversos* from three generations ago had converted under the sword; nobody took those conversions as genuine, and here they all were, one hundred and thirty-eight years later still questioning the sincerity of the Christianity purportedly held by a third generation's descendants. The final conversion—if such a thing was even possible—had to take hold and be real, or at least be seen that way by the people. As mayor of this town, brother even of the town's priest, Juan César could not marry a woman outside of the colony's shared Catholic faith. As if that were not enough of a rag to chew, there was the whole virginity thing. She was fond of claiming that Costa Rica had no virgins, a comment that might be pretty funny had her own fiancée not been one of those nonexistent virgins, himself. It tortured him that by rights it should **be** he that guides her from **his** prior carnal experience on their wedding night and **not** the other way around.

“...and dancing naked beneath a full moon...” exclaimed a rail-thin woman wearing mourning clothes.

“That's nonsense, dearie, you must've made that one up yourself...!”

“All he is doing is preparing her! After all, the groom is his very own brother, and Father Antonio is an authority from León to Portobelo on scripture in both translation as well as in the original Greek and Aramaic languages, so who better than to gentle her from maidenhood to matronhood than Father Toñito?”

Juan César whirled around the corner to challenge this little line of dialog that cut particularly close to the bone, but upon so doing, he found the swept-dirt floor of the corridor absent of feet, bare or slippered, and there was simply, indisputably, no one there. Yet he had heard the voices clearly. It was **not** coming from his head; he was **sure** of it. But dear brother, Antonio Aquinas Santábria Brunca, could surely bring him peace in this matter, that much was certain. What's more, his brother would be able to tease out the divine rationale to move the nuptials up by one month to celebrate two weeks hence and get him out of this arduous limbo! Juan César would clear his head tomorrow on horseback, inspecting fields and pastures and would return by way of the Chapel to drop in on Antonio to unburden his shoulders.

*

Don Juan César worried over Bianca's discomfiture. The hound had joined him reluctantly as he cantered out of the courtyard and whistled her up. Normally she would be ahead of the team pushing the boundaries, waiting for the party to catch up, but today she met him with a whine and was skittish all day long. As the party doubled back after a full day inspecting the far northern boundaries of the farm, Bianca descended into madness, howling and resisting the call to return. The master dismissed his foreman and farmhand as the path forked and he continued toward the chapel to meet up with Antonio, his forehead furrowed with discomfort over the dog's clear nervousness and Diana's sudden skittishness.

At the site of the stone chapel, Bianca could stand it no more and turned to flee and ran back toward the farm house, abandoning her master, who stepped down from his stirrup and onto the ground. The cottage window was lighted from a candle within. Electrified by the stillness of the heavy air, he tied the bridle to a post beside the chapel and strode quietly toward the voices that emerged from the open window to vent into the night.

"You just act like everything is normal," his brother's voice was clear. "I will be officiating the wedding, so as you deliver your vows, you simply need to keep those vows directed at me, inside your head; he is so full of himself, he will never be able to tell."

"But Toñito, my love. Imagine my shame to submit myself to the whims of his consummation, when my heart will burn for your grasp upon my buttocks, your teeth clenched upon my translucent pink nipple, your firmness filling everything soft in me."

"But you have already debased yourself with half the men in the country-side," Father Antonio scoffed. "Slut that you are..."

"I must go now," she said. "To see to Papa's supper. Take me once more, Aquinas, take me once more, right here in the sacristy!"

Gatica's protestations were squawks too little and too late, and Juan César tore around the corner, batting at the bird in midair with his unsheathed machete as she tried to raise the alarm. Sweating profusely, Juan César left the animal flapping on the ground, knocked silly by the flat of his blade and burst into his brother's living quarters where he found him huddled wide-eyed over a bowl of stew with a large spoon in one hand and a crust of bread in the other.

"Brother Juan," Antonio leapt to his feet in shock, glaring at the naked blade bandied in the stuffy air of his own quarters.

"Where is she, you devil-worshipping blasphemer?"

"Where is who, Juan César?"

Today's ride was all along going to be a long one. His station in life was above that of the wielder of the machete, so when he went out with his machete tied about his waist under normal circumstances, he hardly ever carried the whetstone that regular *macheteros* always holstered on the opposite hip. A day's work with the steel blade by an actual peon would require sharpening of the tool four to five times during the course of the day. And today, knowing that he would be out all day long, Juan César had strapped his own novaculite stone holster. In an abundance of preparation, and as they rested after a lunch of pecc jerk and rice-and-bean down at the confluence of the Toyogres and Reventado rivers, he had honed the edge of his blade with sweeping motions of his whetstone, up then down then up then down, one side up,

down the other, bored, lazily rising and falling in iron-song and after one minute tested the result on his forearm, raising a little fuzzball of shaved hair. He sheathed the steel and holstered the stone, and turned to his upset mare, which whinnied nervously in circles to complicate his mounting as Bianca dashed around, batshit crazy, howling at the clouds over something hanging in the air.

So, when the blade came slicing diagonally down through the thick air that hung inside the cottage foyer of the Cartago chapel, the last thing that Father Antonio saw was a brief reflected glint of the candle off the uncovered fresh steel of the cutting edge of his brother's machete. For his part, Juan César marveled with his jaw agape at the three surprised blinks from the eyes of the head reposed on the basalt rock floor to glare up at him with pity and shame before starting with a sputter to dim.

"Where is she?" Juan César shouted at the disembodied head and tore out of the room in search before the progression of death had tinted the priests eye sockets first purple, then yellow and finally green. At the threshold of the entrance to the inner workings of the chapel itself, the first temblor knocked him to his knees, and through the door he watched as the roof fell in upon the altar. A family of rats emerged to flee the doom and ran right over the chest of supine Juan César before he gathered his wits to shuffle out on all fours through the front door, not without first passing for a second and final time the pool of blood welling from his brother's trunk, this time to examine it up close. Gatica the parrot perched on the dead man's chest and wailed "azúcar, café, tabaco, Aníbal, Aníbal, Aníbal," tears streaming down its beak. As loud cracks portended the imminent collapse of the roof, Juan César burst from the doomed structure to run out into the patio where the movement of the ground prevented him from holding his footing. As he scrambled hand over foot to distance himself further from the collapsed building beneath which his brother lay murdered, his mouth opened in horror but no noise emerged, and the bird burst from the collapsing doorway and beat its wings against the misty evening air to rise toward the tree tops and disappear beyond them. "*Arroz con mango, César, arroz con mango. Aníbal, Aníbal, azúcar Aníbal,*" came the fading squawks as Siotu shed ninety years of parrot-hood to revert to her solitaire identity and rise along the slope of Irazú Volcano to find a mourning tree upon the lip of the crater from which to wail the sadness that steeped the countryside and sculpted the birdsong that finally emerged from her beak.

Josephine was not here, after all, Juan César was now sure of it, and all those awful voices had been in his head all along. And now, there was only one thing that remained to be done...

Time to Take Responsibility

JALFlight1093

December 20, 2030

Fuji Yamanaka was over the Pacific Ocean 40,000 feet above sea level when the Saint James earthquake struck Costa Rica at 16:45, Central American time, its epicenter five kilometers beneath the civil-war battlefield of Ochomogo, just outside the city of

Cartago, the first colonial capital of what was to become Costa Rica. As his Tokyo colleagues readied damage-control talking points in Japan and survivors staggered from collapsed buildings bleeding and bruised in Costa Rica, the teetotaler Engineer Yamanaka indulged in a full liter of Daiginjo sake and kept the air hostess busy with serving him and rewarming the remainder of the bottle until it was all gone and he finally slept. Starlink made internet access available across the Pacific, but Yamanaka had decided to be on vacation during the duration of his flight, so his laptop was stowed and his cell phone in airplane mode. He was spared the awkward news for a full five hours until the images burst from NHK-WORLD JAPAN on the monitors that lined the walls of the Narita customs hall.

Streets of GAM

16:45

The collapse of bridges made parking lots out of central valley expressways. The power outage turned rush-hour networks from San Ramón to Turrialba into ever more mutating and minuscule ant trails of vehicles inching forward in bumper-to-bumper traffic beneath the wailing horns of the more impatient and self-loathing of those caught in the morbid congestion. The widespread damage to the power grid had hot lines sizzling in the streets, poles toppled, transformers crushing windshields, dangling aluminum loops shorted out on grounded things they touched before everything stilled on the far side of the temblor, sparks flying from each contact. The roar that gripped the totality of existence was beyond what anyone had ever lived before, transforming it into a once-in-a-lifetime descent into a darkened hell always lurking right beneath every surface, just rarely seen until there comes a day, like today, in which the world is unmasked by the universe and denial is free to be widely stowed by sentient beings shorn of the wrappings of little white lies in the sudden recognition of all of everything.

Deniso Miniano was stranded in Cariari, stuck between the Belén and Rohrmoser off ramps, his merry band of mischievous keyboard-cowboy, headset Houdinis on their Friday-afternoon way to the coke and hooker scene of nearby mid-Pacific destination for libertines, Jacó, the trunk filled with pints of red paint, sinuses opened up already with the galloping effluvia of the white mare in full rush-hour stride. Its “nearby-ness” foreshortened by circumstance, Denny the Mini’s posse got out of its ride and put away their dead phones and huddled on what the living fuck to do next—and was another line—at thick one!—really altogether out of the question?—just as a race of rain swept from the west toward them across the roofs of the the maze of stranded cars, its percussive approach unrelenting, finally rushing over to soak the pals from head to foot as the afternoon darkened wetly with dusk on an Appaloosa gallop drawing up the rear.

The roadway sashayed beneath his tires for many seconds as he passed over the *Puente de la Hispanidad* and fully realized there was hell to pay coming up, and Juan Vázquez miraculously made it to shaking but solid ground as the superstructure spanning the San Pedro traffic circle collapsed behind him in a roar louder than the howl of war. Vázquez squealed his tires about the Social Guarantees roundabout. He pulled off into the Barrio Córdoba exit as the red of tail lights ahead rushed toward him in a sudden arrest of forward motion. He abandoned his car and set back out on the streets

on foot. It was only twenty kilometers or so; he could walk it in five hours if it came down to it. If a bicycle or motorcycle presented itself, well, perhaps less. No cell service, of course. Transformers along the roadway were arc-ing, but not all of them. There were sparks and jolts from high-voltage ground shorts from downed cables. People poured out of buildings and homes, normal mostly, here and there someone cloaked in white dust from a home collapse and the pulverization of concrete rubble. Smoke rose off to the east and a blaze broke out just north of him. Alarms wailed; sirens were silenced. From the middle distance came a sudden burst of small arms fire, semi-automatic nine-millimeter, figured Vázquez, fearing for the burst of automatic weapon fire sure to come next. From a partially collapsed building just down the street a man's sudden wails of despair told a story that pulled tears onto Vazquez's cheeks as he picked up his pace to get away from gunfire and the grief and electrical shorts and fires, to get to Carmela, Juanqui and Sarita, who were still alive and well **of course**, to get home, where his house was **still** standing, he was sure of it, where they would all be okay once they were all together again. The low clouds could not withstand the tension in the air and were torn loose amid bursts of wind and waves of rain, no lightning nor thunder, thankfully. He strode into the diluvium with twilight looming in what would turn out to be a moonless night, and the blackest one of his entire life, a night in which the Milky Way enveloped him and throbbed, and he could pick out three of what he was sure were planets, though he was no astronomer. Mars, Venus and Jupiter, he settled on the names to use. Low in the sky to the south but above where his mind's eye had the Cerro de la Muerte line of craggy peaks, the Southern Cross beamed down with animistic self-possession. When a sliver of a moon crept above the horizon around two in the morning, the crescent was nearly horizontal. He had once traveled to Toronto for a zoning conference, where he had seen this self-same moon stage appear in the night sky nearly vertical. The juxtaposition gave him succor and he picked up his pace yet again. He kept to the shoulder, uncomfortable about walking past the quarter or so of the vehicles that remained occupied by the marooned, now settled into a nervous sleep, blinks and twinkles of artificial lights in a ribbon unable to dispatch the overall negritude that enveloped them all.

Tokyo

20:30

"You may already know, Engineer Yamanaka," his boss sat the corner of his executive desk to softly intone, "that I come to this business from a background in the insurance industry, where I grew somewhat intimate with the nuances of probability and statistics."

"You cannot console me, sir," Fuji replied, the grip of sake still tugging at his tongue. "I offer my resignation. I have it hand-written." He produced a sheet of paper with two folds to offer it up. "In case you need it immediately."

"Your resignation, Engineer Yamanaka?"

"I clearly failed."

"But you adhered to company protocol, Fuji, to both its letter and its spirit."

"I did not advocate strongly enough before this debacle inside this firm for stricter standards of protection."

"That sounds like you are now having it both ways and shifting the blame."

"No my intention, though I acknowledge the point.'

"Someone has to answer for it, sir. And I'm your huckleberry."

"An 8.3 happens only once per year," Ibo pointed out. "Planet wide."

"Perhaps, statistically," Fuji was exhausted. "But it happened today, Chief, at my project site, on my watch. And I recommended protection up to 7.9 only, Chief." The engineer stared into his boss's eyes. "Well, WE recommended."

"But you did so," frowned Ibo Sagami, "We did so, according to company protocol. Nothing improper has been done. We are under no delusion. It all gets down to budgets and no client doubles building costs to suppress liability from 1% to 0.1%: nobody. It's the nature of the business. You know this, Engineer Yamanaka, as do I."

"There were eight hundred dead when I got off the plane. By the time I make it home tonight, the count will be over fifteen hundred. Within one week the dead and missing will number more than five thousand, Chief, perhaps as many as fifty thousand, one percent of the population." Yamanaka held Sagami's eyes in silence for several seconds. "Fifty years from now they may speak of a temblor that killed one quarter of a million people, Chief. FIVE percent of the nation.'

"Tell the survivors I did nothing wrong, chief. Tell them!"

"Ten percent of the nation died from cholera in 1856, Engineer Yamanaka. Columbus's 1502 landing carried a mortality rate for the indigenous inhabitants of 90%. Remember Stalin in such times. Today's deaths, Engineer Fuji Yamanaka, are merely a statistic."

"This is not 1856, and it is not 1502. It is 2030, and Stalin's babble is a ruse, a greater gaslight than even the **American** potentate is probably capable."

"Do you think, in that case, Engineer Yamanaka, that your resignation is enough to show the proper atonement and contrition for your failure?"

The old engineer chuckled and glanced up wryly at his new-fangled statistics CEO.

"Now it is YOU, having it both ways, Chief. What would you have me do?"

Ibo Sagami kept a meaningful silence between them before his invocation of the absurd. "I suppose you can take up gardening," he intoned the words slowly...very slowly. "Maybe you prefer origami," he turned his palms up. "*Ai ki jutso*, perhaps? What can it hurt?"

"Maybe it's time for me to go back to Peru," Fuji mused. "One thing's for sure, Chief."

"Seppuku is out of the question, sir, altogether."

"At least for me."