

The Meeting at the Green Lake Room: September 15 2578

The Book And Its Proof

The Generale of the Flagellante Brotherhood folded his hands into a steeple, and arched one eyebrow over this improvised ecclesiastical structure; his other eye squinting in disbelief at the Abbot of Carlsbad, seated before him at his great desk in the Abbot's Office. It was just after the first hour; Lauds were finished, and the monks were all present for Mass, except for their Abbot, in private audience with the leader of the lay brotherhood.

"Father Abbot, forgive me for my unbelief, but if I may be so bold as to say it, your explanation for the Queen's gathering is preposterous at best, and dangerous at worst."

The Abbot smiled broadly, enjoying the discomfiture of this self-proclaimed leader of the poor of New Spain. Between the Abbot's wide-spread hands lay a large book, backed with wood and bound with leather, belted and buckled top and bottom, The leather was old and worn, cracked in some places; it had the look of something left untouched for a long time. There was, however, a large seal of unbroken red wax at its center of the bindings. Even now the Abbot was careful to keep his hands off it, for fear of contaminating its secrets.

"I need to hear this story again, in much greater detail, to help my unbelief," said the Generale.

More likely to find discrepancies with my first quick explanation, thought the Abbot. He breathed deeply and began again. "No more than a day after the news reached New Spain about the Chihuahua massacre--we're much closer to the frontier, so we hear this kind of news before you do in Santa Fe--an Apache Trader walked out of the wilderness, demanding an audience with me. The gatekeeper of course made it clear that such demands are unheard of, and that he pursue whatever urgent matter he had through the Queen's Guard, the usual channel.

"The man simply opened his satchel and produced his medallion of office, assuming I suppose that we on the eastern frontier aren't educated enough to tell one Apache from another."

"That's a detail I'm having trouble with," the Generale said. "Please tell me again exactly what it was."

"Three triple sickles and three vulture skulls," replied the Abbot.

"There are seven Apache Traders, and none of them have such a medallion," the Generale objected.

"Yes," the Abbot smiled. "I know them all personally, and there is only one explanation."

"You are not the only person in New Spain with connections to the Apache," the Generale countered. "The medallion you described was lost fifty years ago, its owner killed in a disgraceful fashion. But go on."

"This...Trader.." the Abbot emphasized, "handed me a package of undeniable authenticity..."

The Generales's hands flew apart, a church exploding from within. "Which, of course you neglected to bring to this meeting!"

"In due time. It was to be delivered at all haste to the Queen herself. If my couriers can be trusted--and I believe they can--the Queen immediately gave orders for a meeting of all heads of state of the Empty Earth. That's why I have called you here," the Abbot said raising his right first finger and waving it before the Generale.

"Why? To test my allegiance to the Queen? The Flagellantes have always been loyal," the Generale insisted.

"No, good Generale. It is because she invited the Western Bandits, anyone who could come. I do not have enough Guardsmen stationed here for such a conglomeration. I would ask that you position your Flagellantes around the far perimeter of the Abbey, as protection for our Monarch, " the Abbot allowed himself a quick grin, not too gloating, just one cheek a little higher than the other.

The Abbot stood up from his desk and chair; the Generale did likewise. "This conversation is at an end. Thank you for coming. One of the monks will see you out."

"That is all you are going to tell me?" The Generale asked.

"Yes, the Queen will be here within the hour, and I would like to change into formal attire for the occasion."

"You told me previously that she would arrive at the fourth hour."

"What can I tell you? Our Queen is like that, she is known to change her plans on a whim. But your point is well taken, and as such, I will personally escort you out, and you may ask questions along the way."

A well-built young monk carrying an iron-tipped staff entered the Abbot's chambers, bowing as he did so. He led the way for the two religious men. The Abbot walked alongside the Generale, leaving his chambers behind, on his way to the Great Entrance. A series of twisting steps lead all the way down from his Office to the amphitheatre just outside the Caverns themselves.

"Let's take the scenic route, along the walls," the Abbot suggested. "I tire easily of caves and tunnels."

The two religious leaders walked along the south guard of the Abbey, facing Old Mexico, the morning sky achingly blue and clear. The Abbot imagined he could see the Great Inland Sea from this perspective, but that was just imagination. So near, yet so far, he thought. Tantalizing; an easy entrance to a place of torment. New Spain was getting crowded; there was a need for new lands for all these new young people, who could move neither east into Comanche territory; nor west into all-powerful Apacheria, New Spain's great competitor.

The Generale was deep in his own cogitations, his eyes and head staring intently at the next step before him. "Do you wish my Flagellantes to arm themselves, so as to protect the Queen?"

"No, please do not," the Abbot replied. "We have the Queen's Guard stationed in mesquite cover all around the Great Entrance, and sharpshooters in every crenellated tower in the Abbey Complex."

"That is a great many mesquite bushes, and a great many crenellated towers," the Generale agreed, his jaw muscles tight.

The Abbot smiled again. "Your Brotherhood needs to show its courage by facing danger without weapons, as our Saviour did. Please put away your swords; it is time to heal the dangling ears of the Western Bandits."

The Generale stopped suddenly, nearly losing his balance. "And whose idea was that? Yours? We Flagellantes have been robbed and beaten by the Western Bandits many times."

"The Queen has decreed it." Cogitate on that for a while. "We must hurry, we have only an hour to prepare the Great Entrance. Hardly enough time to station guards, monks, and your Brotherhood, must less sort out New Spanish nobility from Apache Trader and Navaho elder."

"And Western Bandit rabble," the Generale added, his jaws grinding.

The Nobility Arrive

The first impression that Don Antonio Sepulveda, rancher and leading citizen of Socorro, New Spain, had of the Great Entrance to the Abbey of Carlsbad was one of utter chaos. He rode in front of the family carriage, itself leading the Socorro contingent of the Sepulvedas, expecting bowing Guardsmen and obsequious monks, instead to find two Flagellantes blocking the road. They were having a heated argument as to which one of them had locked the other's donkey in their traces. Both of their andas--their 'holy carts' as they called them--were entangled all the way to the yokes, their donkeys braying above the shouting New Spaniards. Behind them, the King's Guard were too busy to bow to the Socorro nobility, as there were two or three andas to each Guardsman, and each anda driver was arguing about his place in the train. The monks--high ranking, given the grey color of their hoods and scapulars--were doing their best to calm the Flagellantes, but as near as Don Antonio could tell, it was to no avail.

These Flagellantes have more faith than brains, he thought.

Finally, a tall elderly-looking monk who looked as though his tonsure could use a trim walked up beside Don Antonio's horse. "Greetings from the Abbot, Don Antonio. I am Brother Zhilogous, I will be your guide to the Green Lake Room.

Dona Carmencita, Don Antonio's wife, peeked her head out through the carriage curtains. "Are we to get going now"? she insisted.

"Good morning to you, Dona Carmencita," Brother Zhilogous said, bowing from the waist. We are honored by the presence of the Sepulvedas, that family of legend."

"Legends are all right," Dona Carmencita replied, "But I came for the tour. Specifically, I want to see what our contributions have made to Her Chamber."

"Well, then, my wife. Now that we have all made our greetings, let's see to parking the carriage and horses. " Don Antonio interjected. "I'm assuming that tent near the Main Entrance that bears the Sepulveda coat-of-arms is the destination for our livery?"

"Yes, Don Antonio. I will personally guide you there," the monk replied. He motioned away the Flagellantes who were venturing near the Sepulveda carriage, and led the horses by their traces to the waiting tent. Two novice monks opened the flaps and the carriage entered a cooler, cleaner area, fresh with white sand.

Don Antonio dismounted, went around to the port side of the carriage, pulled down the folding wooden steps so that Dona Carmencita could make her entrance in all her finery. She wore a formal full-length gown of gold-and-carmen brocade, bordered in white lace, with a high frill collar of the same material.

"Don Antonio, my mantilla, please" she whispered. Don Antonio leaned past her and pulled a large circular box off the passengers' seat. He opened it and carefully unfolded the headgear of Spanish nobility, placing the center brim on Dona Carmencita's head and adjusting the veils, all the while avoiding touching her coiffure.

"Brother, we are ready to enter." Don Antonio said.

"This way," the monk said bowing. As he straightened from his obeisance, he produced a small box made of carved acacia wood that he opened. A smell of cinnamon and sage wafted forth. "A gift from those devoted to Dona Rina." He offered one to Dona Carmencita, and then to Don Antonio. "These will protect you from the smell of the bats."

There is a price to pay for all the opulence of Carlsbad Abbey, Don Antonio thought. Bats have made the monks rich with their guano, but they are still filthy little rodents after all.

The three made their way to the natural, rounded opening of the cave. All the commotion had awakened what few bats still clung to the roofs of the caves; they would fly out, feel the sun, and quickly flit back into the darkness, like so many tormented shadows. Brother Zhilogous led the way to the awning that snaked off into the darkness. "Be careful to stay under the awning. There may be bat droppings, which are quite harmful to your health. Please use the Dona Rina handkerchiefs until we have passed out of the Bat Cave, and into the Big Room.

Out of the corner of his eye, Don Antonio saw the carriages of the other New Spanish nobility arrive and dismount. There were the Bacas, who would probably immediately begin to complain about their position in the train. Let them, Don Antonio thought. The Sepulvedas have invested far more in Carlsbad Abbey guano, this is our just reward.

"Don Antonio, your handkerchief", Dona Carmencita reminded him. He hurriedly put it up to his nose, just as the burning effects of the ammonia stench hit him.

"We need to hurry here," Brother Zhilogous insisted. "The fumes can harm your eyes if you linger too long."

"I expect to have an unsoiled gown and mantilla when I reach the end of this walk," Don Carmencita warned the monk, although her words were muffled by the handkerchief.

Then the morning sun began to disappear as the pathway curved deeper into the caves. There was a wintry chill in the air. Don Antonio turned around to look back, and noticed the other nobility huddled together, shuffling along, their distaste evident by the way they glanced at the few huddling bats dropping guano near the path.

"Three more turns, and then we can let our little wonders go back to sleep," Brother Zhilogous said. Dona Carmencita waved her free hand frenetically, indicating to Don Antonio to hurry up. She practically glided to the end of the path, turning her head only when she stepped off the path, and onto the limestone slabs, the mundane walkways that led throughout the Abbey confines.

When the last of the nobility's feet touched limestone, all the monk attendants went around to collect the handkerchiefs, and to inspect the shoes and boots of the leading citizens of New Spain. The monks faced Brother Zhilogous and gave him a hand signal of two palms--one at right angles to the other--which Don Antonio interpreted as the 'all clear'. The two at the rearmost stepped in opposite directions, pulled some levers, and two great bronze doors slid forth, sounding for all intents like a waking dragon, due to the echoes of the cave.

Gas torches in bronze holders lit up along the walls, and the entire cave of the Big Room was lit in a golden hue, the color of the setting sun. Only a few shadows clung high up among the stalactites. To Don Antonio's pleasure, this cave was bat-free.

"We are now in the Big Room, the source of the wealth of Carlsbad Abbey," Brother Zhilogous proclaimed. "Here bat guano is processed into many things, the first of which is methane fuel, the second of which is fertilizer."

"Don't forget gunpowder," a member of Baca contingent added, causing a burst of polite laughter.

"You will notice three of everything in this processing area; this ensures that no mechanical failures will cause a stoppage of the heat and lights that New Spain can take for granted." Brother Zhilogous explained.

"So that's where the Sepulveda gold went," Don Carmencita said quietly to Don Antonio.

As a group, the nobility walked more confidently now, chatting among themselves. The next cave beckoned, the lights of its entrance forming a arc of red over its opening. They stepped into a cave that was a well-lit and clean as the Bat Cave was dark and dirty.

"The King's Chamber, center of the administration of fuel and fertilizer," Brother Zhilogous said. "And gunpowder," he added with a flourish of his hands, directed at the Bacas. Here iron railings painted red led all the way to the highest stalactites, and then wound down along the walls to brightly lit cubicles where monks came and went.

"I'm sure all this is very impressive to bankers and book keepers, but I came for the Shrine," Dona Carmencita directed at Brother Zhilogous.

"The very next, the Queen's Chamber. You won't be disappointed," the monk replied. They proceeded a hundred paces, to come to a veiled entrance, outlined in torches burning in three colors of pure blue, cyan and a pearlescent white that Don Antonio had to shield his eyes to look at.

And so they entered the Shrine of Dona Rina. Dona Carmencita folded back the forehead piece of her mantilla, to reveal three ribbons of the same colors. Don Antonio hurriedly took his miraculous ribbons of pure blue, cyan and pearl white and pinned them on his chest while Dona Carmencita's attention was diverted.

There in its center was the Big Rock, whereupon a bas-relief of "Dona Rina Curing The Children Of The Laughing Sickness" was carved. Dona Rina stood four times the height of a man, and even the smallest child was gigantic. Silver and turquoise filigree outlined all the figures, and even the Sepulveda hacienda in the background.

Dona Carmencita knelt before the carving as best she could, motioning to Don Antonio to do the same. "I thought it would be finished by now," he said. "The Flagellantes are already asking me for more gold for more shrines, and this one isn't even completed."

"Hush," Dona Carmencita insisted, touching the ribbons on her forehead.

"Shall we proceed to the Green Lake Room?" Brother Zhilogous inquired politely.

"About time," Don Antonio responded. "Otherwise we will have to circumnavigate the Big Rock three times in honour of Dona Rina." He quickly held up his miraculous medals to deflect Dona Carmencita's withering glance.

The Meeting Begins

"And now, let me show you the pride and joy of the Abbey. This is our new design. We call it the Opera House." Brother Zhilogous said throwing his arms wide, as the nobility trooped into the Green Lake Room. "Please line up so that you can be guided to your tables. There are litters if you cannot navigate the stairs." He motioned to several young monks, who came up through the walkways that curled around the rooms.

No one was listening to him, as they all stood gawking at the magnificance of the architecture. Nine rows of twelve tables wound around the walls, creating an amphitheatre over the Green Lake. Each table was esconced with bronze torches; each table was made of bronze with silver-and-turquoise trim, covered with a tablecloth of emerald brocade.

"I want the first table on the top row," Dona Carmencita said insistently to the brother monk.

"Certainly. However," he said, furrowing his brows, "someone has asked to sit with you, if you do not mind. There are six seats per table, so you will not be crowded."

"And they are?" she inquired, her right eyebrow raised high.

"Don and Dona Baca," the monk returned matter-of-factly.

"I knew things were going too well," Don Antonio moaned.

A tall and elegant couple moved through the nobility, parting it like water. Where Don Antonio was stocky and powerful, Dona Carmencita curvaceous and matronly, Don Baca was lean and saturnine, Dona Baca delicate and angelic, except for the cold regality of her gaze.

"And we make this request most humbly," Don Baca said in his deep voice.

"We too have much at stake here. Our youngest son Miguel was one of the Chihuahua settlers."

"What, that ne'er-do-well?" Don Antonio retorted.

"Dear Antonio, this is neither the place nor the time," Dona Carmencita said forcefully, pulling on her husband's sleeve.

Don Antonio looked around at his wife, the monk, the Bacas, and the assembled nobility of New Spain. He rolled his eyes. "Yes. Why not? We will have much to discuss today, of that I am sure."

Don Antonio led the way along the bronze steps, wide enough to two abreast. He held Dona Carmencita's gloved hand as the stairs led up past row after row of tables. Each table had two stations of bronze, one holding a flagon of sangria, the other a porcelain pot of fresh-brewed coffee. In the center of the table was a bronze dish with a generous helping of pastries.

"If you can take your seats quickly," Brother Zhilogous encouraged "the opening address is about to start. After the Queen has spoken, you may use the restrooms provided at the end of the hall on your floor."

"Don Antonio, may I have the middle seat? It has the best view of the Dais."
Dona Carmencita asked her husband.

"Certainly, as long you push the pastry tray over to me."

Don Antonio slid into the first seat, near the coffee. He looked over the tabletop just in time to see the methane torches light up under the Dais, which slowly rose from its place cantilevered over the Green Lake. Bronze pistons, freshly oiled, slid out, reflecting the torchlight and sending flashes along the walls. The Dais continued to rise until it came to its topmost position, where a small stage complete with curtains awaited it. The curtains were pulled back by monks, and three figures stepped forward. As they did, methane torches lit up around them.

The middle figure, a woman dressed in a gown of white, indigo and cyan walked toward the edge of the Dais, where a bronze-and-green speaker's podium was set up. On her right was the former Lietenant--soon to be Captain--Alphonso Sepulveda, nephew of Don Antonio and Dona Carmencita, who was carrying a bound volume wrapped in some kind of shimmering cloth. On her right was Abbot Gaudentius of Carlsbad Abbey. The Abbot spoke first.

"Good day to all of you, guest of Carlsbad Abbey. I see that the last of you has entered the room, and none of you were splattered by our little miracles, the bats". There were some guffaws and titters in reply.

"Can't he just once start a meeting without a joke?" Don Antonio asked Don Baca, doing his best to be cordial.

"He's your relative, not mine." Don Baca replied.

"Shush, the two of you," Dona Carmencita interjected. "The Queen is about to speak. And just look at her! She is wearing the colors of Dona Rina."

Dona Baca pulled out from the edge of her mantilla a ribbon with a miraculous medal dangling from it. The ribbon was woven of the same three colors: a pearlescent white, a rich indigo, and a bright cyan. The medal was of pure gold, inscribed with a flowing script.

"What do you think, Dona Carmencita?" she asked. "The medal was an heirloom in honour of Dona Rina. I had the ribbon made especially for this occasion."

"It's just lovely, you should show it to the Queen after the meeting."

Lieutenant Sepulveda delivered his package to the podium, stepped back and shouted. "All rise for the Queen of New Spain."

The entire assemblage did. Spanish nobility, Apache traders, Navaho, Hopi, Comanche, yes and even the drooping hats of the Western Bandits were visible, though Don Antonio thought they should have doffed them upon entering the Green Lake Room.

Abbot Gaudentius and Lieutenant Alphonso lined up shoulder-to-shoulder with the Queen, something Don Antonio thought of as a strong indicator of solidarity concerning whatever topic was about to be discussed.

The Abbot spoke first. "I'm sure you all know why this meeting--this singular and ground-breaking event in the history of the Empty Earth--has been convened. It was a year ago that our young settlers set out on rafts down the Rio Grande to Old Chihuahua, determined to reclaim Old Mexico in the name of New Spain. Such a spirit of adventure they had! What they encountered was something or someone beyond their knowledge, and only this brave young Guardsman standing before you survived to tell the true story."

"As soon as he was able--he was wounded and starving when we found him--the Queen organized this meeting. Without any word from Apacheria, a Trader emerged soon after, with items of intense interest to New Spain, and I believe to all of you gathered here."

"There are three items: a book; a garment; a brooch. The book bears the unbroken royal seal of King Carlos Sepulveda. In order that there be a full disclosure of its contents, the Queen herself commanded that it not be opened until this assembly has met. If any of you doubt the veracity of this item, please step forth and declare your concerns."

The Abbot stopped talking. The entire Green Lake room, filled to capacity, entered the silence of a single person holding their breath. No one broke this silence.

Abbot Gaudentius bowed to the Queen, and stepped back from the podium. Lieutenant Alphonso placed a small pen-knife in the Queen's outstretched left palm, and she cracked open the Royal Seal, unlocking fifty year's worth of secrets.

Two small reading lamps rose of themselves out of either side of the dais as the Queen opened to the first page and began to read in her clear but powerful alto.

"The War Between New Spain And Nuegua, Being An Illuminated History Of A Divine Conflict On Earth. Compiled by First Sister Rintiala Of The Healing Guild, Clan Tiala, Anno Domini 2530."

Dona Carmencita could not contain her words before she clapped her hands to her mouth. "Written by Dona Rina herself!" she exclaimed.