

About 2,775 words.

**CHAPTER 10:**  
**VAULT OF THE AZTECS**

Vick was impatient. The bore had just penetrated into the round chamber and Vick was practically sitting on its tip, so antsy was he to finally intrude upon the ancient hall.

Once the bit jumped through, he swooped down. He examined the features of the door and was confirmed in his fear and suspicions.

The door was closed and locked, surrounded in a ghastly green glow.

Mateo, Katy, and Trent watched through the viewscreen.

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Vick called for them soon.

There were glyphs carved all over the face of the door and surrounding archway. Mateo recognized some of them. As an anthropologist and amateur archaeologist it was all very fascinating.

Bright green jade gargoyle faces leered at them from the stone and turquoise-inlaid façade.

Through the dreamcatcher Mateo felt and heard whole sentences ring against his skull.

"GO AWAY. YOU HAVE NO BUSINESS HERE."

Mateo shuddered.

Vick was less frightening in this heady milieu. He was somewhat demure and diffident. He watched Mateo gripping at his temples and manifested an emotion bordering on concern.

"What is happening?" he asked.

"The spirits here are ANGRY!" said Mateo. "They want us to leave."

"Nonsense," scoffed Vick. "I am wearing both the helmet and the mask of Quetzalcoatl. They will submit to me."

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Vick had a scaffolding erected by his thralls so that Mateo and Trent could pore over the ancient structure for clues. This they did for more than a day while Katy watched impotently and trademark complained in a counterintuitively upbeat mode.

The door was large. Nine feet wide and over 12 feet tall. Large enough to accommodate the width and breadth of a very large being. The wall had a shiny burnished jade and turquoise-inlaid façade. There were a great many

contours, bulges, knobs, and grooves as features of the exterior art work.

Mateo soon took the glyphs to be telling a story, though he didn't let on immediately. It looked like a terrifying story with implications for all mankind. Perhaps the authoritative version of our mysterious common origins and a pronouncement of our collective doom. How frightening!

For the most part, the Toltec glyphs were carved into the hard dark jade and overlaid with a crusty yellow pigment. Less like ruins, more like the fresh originals.

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After a day of concentrated effort and Trent asking Mateo, "What does this glyph mean? What does this one mean?" they had an idea of what the door was there for.

"It's like a DNA lock," Trent told Vick.

"A lot of the glyphs over here are referring to the old Toltec priests, who believed they were descended from the old Titan Quetzalcoatl. There's a lineage of the high priests which goes on for hundreds of years. Anyways, it all goes away about the year 1200, and it shows the familiar glyph of Quetzalcoatl being tossed in the volcano, and emerging from the ashes as a flock of birds who flew back east over the sea, to the home kingdom.

Anyway, this symbol of the birds is equated with the Toltec glyph for key. We take that to mean that whatever became of Quetzalcoatl, whatever's left of him on this planet, is the key to what's inside of here."

Vick nodded.

"So what do you think it is? What remains of Quetzalcoatl?"

Mateo came up at this point.

"I take that to mean that Toltec priest's living descendants. Come here, I think I found something."

There was a very smooth worn piece of flat stone near the doorframe. It was quite high up, nearly as tall as Mateo could reach from the ground. It was a little square set into the stone, set apart from the rest of the door by shallow grooves. On it was the Toltec glyph for key in light crusty yellow pigment.

"This is the lock," said Mateo.

"Why, it's a thumbplate. Same technology that we have at Positsoc," said Trent, excited.

They all looked at each other, Mateo at Katy, Trent at Mateo, and Vick at nobody, rather awkwardly.

"Anybody here a living descendant of Quetzalcoatl?" asked Trent.

"Only one way to find out," said Mateo.

Vick tried first of course, then Katy, Trent and finally Mateo. When Mateo stuck his thumb to the plate there was a rumbling in the chamber beyond the door. Vick looked around triumphantly. In his mind, he was on the very verge of godhead apotheosis.

The rumbling stopped and they all expected the door to slide open. Instead however, a little box thrust out of the middle of the door. It was small, about the size and dimensions of a truncated shoebox. Mateo took his thumb off the plate in alarm and the box retracted back into the door again, leaving hardly a seam. The painted symbol on the face of the box remained in the middle of the door.

Mateo went to go look at it and blanched white.

"What is it?" thundered Vick in antsy anticipation.

Mateo croaked the answer to Trent. There was death in his eyes.

"It's the symbol for a human heart," he blurted out lamely.

"We knew it was going to take a certain amount of sacrifice," said Vick in a fiendishly sinister voice, after a pregnant laden silence had had time to sink in to the walls and collected psyches. "None of us suspected this would be easy when all was said and done."

Mateo sat disconsolate against the wall, quaking in turgid fear.

"I didn't expect to have to sacrifice my own heart. I kind of need it to keep living. Bloody Toltecs."

Vick cajoled. "We'll all remember you fondly. Now come on, be a man, we're wasting time. How are we going to do this? Trent?"

Katy shrieked out in terror. "You can't be serious. You can't kill him for his heart just to enter this room."

Vick assumed a terrifying aspect. The mask on his face contorted in ruthless frightening taut rage. "That's the whole point sister. You think I've spent over a hundred years exploring and excavating these hills, gathering power to myself, plundering this great city for every billion, just to stop now because some little Spic needs his heart so he can make out with his girlfriend and plop down an anchor baby?"

He walked over to Mateo.

"Stand up," he said. Mateo stood up with knocking knees. Vick took out his sidearm and a dangerous looking Bowie knife. "This won't hurt a bit."

He pointed the gun at Mateo's brain.

"Aren't you going to do something, Trent?" screamed Katy. She rushed at Vick to stop him from shooting.

They all heard a rumbling in the inner chamber beyond the door again.

"Wait!" shouted Trent. "I believe the key needs a living heart, and he may still need to live to touch the plate."

"Well, that's fucking impossible." Vick tossed Katy to the ground. The rumbling inside the chamber grew louder. A glow animated the features of the door like a soft green fog, and suddenly the enormous drill-boring machine roared to life.

They all looked up in time to see the drill operator through the windshield. He had a crazed look on his face. He had started up the enormous drill and was bearing down directly at Vick. Vick looked up at the driver with his terrible visage but the driver was unswayed. He had the look of a man possessed. Mateo and Katy leapt out of the way, as Vick rose from the ground and aimed for the windshield twenty feet off the ground. He slammed his hand through the glass throttling the driver as the enormous drill barreled into the wall of the vault, setting off an enormous electrochemical reaction. Sparks flew, blue light crackled off the door and drill like heat lightning in the clouds. Miniature detonations and explosions rocked the cavern as the drill was surrounded in a bluish electrical

aura. Then as if repelled by the world's most powerful magnet, Vick and the drill were lifted up and tossed across the cavern at an astonishing rate of speed, where they crumpled into a cacophonous roaring heap at the far end of the cavern near the tunnel opening.

Trent exclaimed, "Wow. That drill was over 40 tons and 8 billion dollars, and it just got tossed like a down pillow. This power must want you alive, brother," said Trent.

They heard Vick screeching from across the cavern. He rose from the rubble with a terrifying grim expression. His hand and mouth were covered in blood from the unfortunate drill driver.

He was coming back their way.

"What do we do?" shouted Katy. The door had not stopped rumbling. Suddenly to their great amazement, the door swished open, a figure walked out and the door swished close right behind him.

They all gasped, including Vick this time.

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Under the influence of Pulque 231, Alberto had felt almost impervious to the deleterious effects of nature and the harsh elements. Just clothed in a few rags by this point, he made his way the five further miles south to the

slopes of Weaver's Needle, the Gun of Santa Fe hanging from his hip in an antique holster.

The lingering effects of the powerful hallucinogenic substance were wearing off but it no longer mattered. Alberto's perceptions were keen and wide open. After the drug, Alberto's light body had been completely opened up to the world.

He saw the world a lot purer and more concentrated than most men could, and more than most men would bear, willingly or unwillingly. He traipsed up the slopes in this atavistic ecstasy. The gun was speaking to him now, the Old Master, Mr. Waltz, trapped in the atavistic ecstasy of time, telling him what to look for. He was looking for an entrance.

He walked in a ring around the bottom of the mountain, up ridges and over hills and black volcanic formations, rocky promontories resembling stacked giant rock soldiers, looking intently for more markers of man-made artifice. At last he found what he was looking for. With his keen eyes, he spotted another subtly fashioned cairn fashioned out of flat wide stones. He rushed up a slide of hard black rock and started wildly digging at the large rock next to the little sheltered cairn. As if they were mere feathers, he started tossing huge boulders down the hill. He had

tunneled a good five or feet six deep into the side of the mountain before he found what he was looking for.

With the Gun of Santa Fe, Alberto shot a hole in the steel-like metal flat surface of the ducting he found there, now exposed to the air and elements. Then using a stone he ground at the hole until he could fit his hands inside. Then with superhuman strength and shocking ambivalence at how he was literally ripping his hands to shreds—like some addled PCP addict—he opened a hole in one of the airshafts of the enormous ancient facility housed inside the old volcano, Weaver's Needle.

Then he was inside.

He crawled through the ductworks for a few hundred yards before he was able to drop through a grating into one of the rooms inside. It was some sort of ancient hall and at the far south end, he came across an ancient elevator. The facility was running on some ancient back-up power. He pressed the lower button outside the elevator, which had some incomprehensible scrawl on it.

The door opened and Alberto descended. The basement floor was the Vault of the Aztecs outside of which's door were his brother, Vick, Katy, and Trent, all trying to get in. Alberto looked around himself with wide-eyed amazement. All the wealth of the ancient Aztecs piled up

as tall as two men against the sides of the vault. A whole wall of ancient spacesuits. Ancient craft for zipping through these mountain canyons sat in cobwebby disrepair.

Alberto cocked his gun. He had a sacred mission to carry out.

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Alberto wasted no time with pleasantries. Vick stood before him with a stupid look on his face while Alberto raised the gun.

"Remember this, Taylor?" asked Alberto in a high-pitched curious grating nasally stooge-like parrot tone of voice.

"Where'd you get that?" asked Vick, betraying fear for the first time in many ages.

"Waltz left it for me. He knew there'd be a time for taking your stupid ass out."

Then Alberto shot Vick with his very own gun, the fabled Gun of Santa Fe. The gun which had made Vick's career as an outlaw, which had been blessed (or cursed depending on your point of view) by a Zuni shaman. The one relic which could kill the mask-wearer, a relic made terrible by its creator, the tortured friar de Niza, and now its intended victim, the good sheriff.

Vick slumped over, then fell, holding his stomach. His whole awful dissolute life flashed before his eyes, and as he had lived almost two hundred years, this took a while. His childhood in rural Arkansas. His seventeen brothers and sisters. Sticking up the 1<sup>st</sup> Bank of Little Rock at 17. Spending his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday in jail, his parents having either forgotten the day or him, or disowned him outright. His various stakes at Cripple Creek, Old Dominion, and the Vulture Mine, among many others. Rustling horses outside of Santa Fe. Being called to the mask as his gun whispered to him in his dreams at night.

Then there was the old padre, de Niza or Childs as he was known, in his tomb with his pristine evilly contorted face and undulating tentacles underneath. He Vick Taylor putting on the mask and being captured outside of Taos, where they'd been unable to make him hang until dead. All the unwholesome feeding he'd been forced to do over the many lapsed years to keep the mask happy. The stake he'd opened here in the Superstitions over a hundred years ago, down in the Goldfields. Meeting that rat bastard Waltz, who'd happened upon this vault [it was open] and never told him where it was. Who had stolen his gun and buried it somewhere in the hills, and now here it had come back to him. Returned to kill him as it were. And there, now he

had reached the present, and here his part in the story ended.

Vick Taylor, sheriff of Maricopa County, expired on the floor outside of the object of his immortal life's quest—the Vault of the Aztecs, holding his grotesquely distended belly. He never attained his dreams of conquest and empire. His gun and his mask and his foul master had betrayed him.

Alberto looked around like a mad lemur. On some basic level, he comprehended his relationship to Katy, Mateo, and Trent. They all looked his way in shock. He was somewhat wild and subtly luminous. His movements were rangy and sharp. He lifted the mask off of Vick's dead face and applied it to his own. The mask molded perfectly to Alberto's contours, leaving a slight sheen like that of sweat, but otherwise this new face was indistinguishable from Alberto's accustomed rapacious expression.

Vick's face had concurrently become a patch of undulating green tentacles swarming back and forth like seaweed in brackish water.

"No," shouted Mateo. But it was too late. His brother was gone.

To their ever continuing amazement and horror, now Alberto did something even more atrocious and primitive.

He grabbed up Vick's Bowie knife and cut a square through his own ribcage. He then plucked out his own thumping heart, and dripping blood all over the ground approached the door. Possessing the same lineage as Mateo, he pressed his thumb to the plate causing the box in the door to slide out.

Then he put the heart into the box, the cavern rumbled again, and the door swished open and stayed open such.

"Wait," shouted Mateo. "Alberto, don't you need a heart?"

Alberto paused and looked over at his brother in a semi-familiar way, the last contact they'd have in this familial mode. Alberto walked over to Vick. With scant ceremony he ripped the still pulsating heart out of Vick's chest cavity and slammed it into place in his own. They all saw with astonishing speed how fast the DNA cell repair technology was functioning in Alberto's light body. The new heart was grafted in and in seconds was pumping blood throughout the new body.

"Thanks," Alberto croaked, then turned and went in the door.

Not knowing what else to do, the others followed.

***End Tenth Installment...***