

## CHAPTER 2:

### THE BLUEBIRD MINE

Lesdents went on filibustering for hours about ancient spacemen, past ice ages, world glaciers melting, Antediluvians being killed by God or possibly leaving the planet altogether, the prevalence of Great Flood myths in the anthropological record, especially the Salado and Apache versions, in short the hooey Mateo had always been professionally groomed to discard as utter falderal.

Nonetheless, he listened to all of it, a knot of lactic acid cramping in his back, causing him to occasionally grimace.

If Lesdents saw this expression of discomfort, he didn't let it stop his polar cap melting tirade of syllables. Mateo's mind swam. Now the discussion had taken a turn towards the drowned continent of Atlantis, the Cro-

Magnons and Aurignaceans, Merovingians, Masons, Illuminati, Bilderbergs, Rosicrucians, Templars, and Tom Hanks.

Finally, he let off. "That was a lot to digest, I know. But now that we're up to speed, I'll tell you about the proposal, that is if you're interested?"

He looked at Mateo keenly.

Mateo was feeling clammy and unsure of himself. "I had a dream last night," he finally said. "Maybe you can explain it to me. I had the dim notion that the helmet was speaking to me from beneath a pile of clothes in the wardrobe. I dreamt about the mudhead."

Lesdents smiled.

"In my dream, the Koyemsi was bumbling in my direction, making absurd childish noises like some animated character in a Japanese morning cartoon. He took my hand in his and started leading me toward the horizon.

'Where are you taking me?' I asked, though I felt perfectly at ease in the clutch of his dusky red fingers.

The mudhead made stoogelike bird noises, but could not speak in any language I'd ever heard before. Nonetheless, he exuded such calmness and reassurance as he guided me into the darkness that I had a feeling I'd never felt so supremely calm and at ease.

We emerged on the lip of a sandy red cliff overlooking a narrow and shallow ravine. In the bottom of the gully, in

the smooth light glow of a swollen orange moon low on the horizon, danced a mix of shadows. On closer inspection, I could make out that they were colorful katsinas. Corn Katsina, Eagle Katsina, Crow Katsina.

I gazed upon their dance circle in amazement. The Koyemsi by my side stared directly at me with this turgid inscrutable slow-wittedness, his mouth a completely circular "O". I'd never seen anything more amazing. Then when I turned back to the dance circle, the moon and the light it provided had disappeared. The Koyemsi remained for one more shocked second, then faded into the soft surrounding darkness, leaving me alone.

Then I woke up."

Lesdents nodded. "Look, I'll level with you. My medallion communicates with me inside my head. I have no idea how."

"Look," said Mateo. "All I care about is my brother in this situation. I don't know what you and he were up to. I certainly don't put much stock in this alien astronaut hooley. It all just seems a bit much."

Lesdents nodded gravely. "I am not surprised. And don't worry, I've learned not to be offended over all my many years.

In the end it's really not necessary if you believe me or not. To your credit, you haven't left yet, so I guess

I'll fill you in on what I know. A few weeks ago, the Historical Society put on its annual mixer. Your brother crashed in with this crazy old coot of a prospector named Joe Hagan. Both were as drunk as lords.

Hagan said he'd found something on a mine out near his property. In Globe, near the Bluebird Mine. I want you to start tracking your brother's footsteps from there. Find out if he's giving me the slip. I'll pay you \$5,000 for photographs and any findings from the site."

"Why don't you go?" asked Mateo.

"I don't like going underground," said Lesdents. "Makes me feel like I'm being buried alive. Besides I'll need your expertise when you emerge anyway--that is, if my hunch is correct."

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Hagan's trailer was littered with stamped out cigarette ends and empty beer bottles. The TV was set to a program about sport fishing.

Mateo looked around. The only fish trophies he could see mounted on the peeling wood paneling looked to be of the plaque-mounted plastic singing variety.

The miner looked surprised to see another diminutive Mexican outside his rusty screen-door so soon.

"Say, ain't you?"

"I'm his brother, Mateo."

"I'll be danged. You want a beer?"

"No," said Mateo. "It's still quite early."

"Shit, son. Your brother showed up here sheets to the wind, and it warn't even noon time yet. Hang on right there."

Mateo heard the miner crack two beers. They sloshed all over the carpet in his dust-smudged demonstrable hands as he returned to the door.

He handed the dregs of a mostly empty beer to Mateo, spilling the last few swallows on the chest of his flannel work-shirt. Mateo sampled the final sip.

"How's it taste?"

"Like a rusty trailer hitch."

The miner laughed. "It's homebrew. Hagan's Own, I call it. You know, you're just like your brother. Funny."

Mateo frowned.

"Here come back with me, I want to show you something."

A rust-orange stream ran behind the miner's trailer. The rocks beneath looked like orangeish blood platelets, submerged in a swift gurgling stream. "Taste it."

Mateo dipped his finger into the rock-hearted stream. "Tastes like the beer."

The miner nodded. "That's the taste of money. Copper. It's everywhere around here. Copper, silver, gold, quartz, hematite. Mostly copper, though: one of the richest ores in the world right here in little ol' Globe, Arizona."

Now the miner's eyes glistened with a little of the native greed.

"The signature you're after is for one Fray Marcos de Niza. Heard of him? I thought so. Now, look here, I know you're smart. I'm sure of that. You look around here. Sure I got a place to live, satellite, everything a man could want. Except for a woman to share it with."

He took Mateo back into the house, and produced a catalogue.

"Here's the one I want. Roxana. That's her name."

The catalog rivaled JC Penny's for thickness and was called "White Slave Trader" magazine. Each page featured six medium-sized glamor shots of potential Eastern European brides.

Mateo's eyes bulged wide.

"All this could be hers. Eight acres for raisin' chillun's, racin' quads, blasting tunnels. What a hoot!"

"Sounds nice. Well, let's take a look at that signature."

"As much as it pains me to tell you this, a man's gotta make a living."

Mateo patted a purse on his hip. "Five thousand right here, Hagan. Half now, half at the end, if my employer likes what he sees."

"I'll tell you what. Your brother seemed to like it plenty."

Without looking in it, Hagan tossed the bag of money under the house as they climbed into the mud-covered Ford, lifted up on big chunky nobuled monster tires.

They drove a few miles up a loose gravelly road, hardened into a washboard-like consistency from alternating high heat and soaking rains. They passed over a cattle crossing and then by some outbuildings and rusty tractors. Hagan then pulled into a chunked up gravel lot in a weed grown-over circle abutting on a limestone hillside.

"This is the old mining camp. Bluebird Mine," said Hagan.

"Now this ain't exactly my claim, per se," said Hagan, reaching into the center console for a pistol. "But I ain't never seen anybody up here."

The shaft was bored into the rock in between two saguaros standing like sentries, their uprearing arms in

the air as if they were being held up by stagecoach robbers.

Beyond the tunnel mouth, Hagan switched on his flashlight then switched it off real quick, pretending it had burned out.

"Just yankin' your pocket python," he said guffawing loudly.

Mateo laughed nervously.

"They didn't leave nothin' here. Shaft's as clean as cotton."

They walked along passing various side passages, then started going up. Suddenly they burst into a swath of light, filtering down the substrate from a fissure in the ceiling.

"Now I was right about here," muttered Hagan to himself, turning in every direction for a hint of something to jog his recollection. "Ah yes."

"Climb this way."

The mineshaft here had merged with a naturally occurring cavern. "You see that sinkhole up there? This limestone used to be under water. Used to be a great pluvial lake here. Carved out these caverns. You can tell from above ground where there's caverns like this because

they got ocotillo growin' over them. They soak up the water in the rock. You see, feel the wall."

The wall was sleek with moisture. They climbed up the wall into a room, which by careful ledge navigation, led up to the sinkhole.

"There's how they got in here."

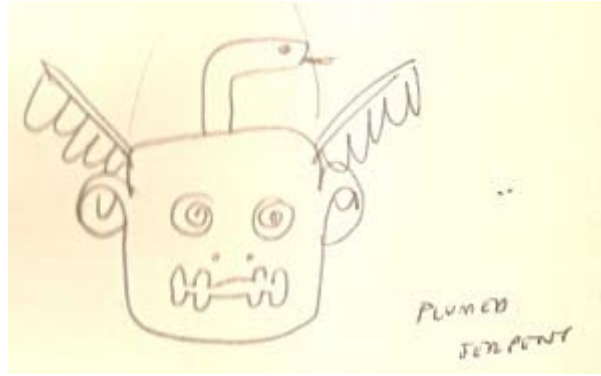
"Who?"

The miner pointed the flashlight now at the stone at the inmost extremity of the cave wall. There amongst a few dangling strips of cave bacon, stalagmites, and stalactites--residual sculptures of aeons of calcium drip--lay two distinct sets of bones.

*One of them had to be Esteban,* realized Mateo.

Then he gasped.

Above the bones, visible in the beam of Hagan's flashlight, were etchings scoured into the moist rock wall. He instantly recognized the Toltec petroglyph for "mask" with a variation to indicate the plumed serpent deity, FIG.1 below--and then he saw the unmistakable carved signature of Fray Marcos de Niza beside it and the date 1538.



**Fig 1. "Mask of Quetzalcoatl" / Toltec Petroglyph.**

"Come to Papa, Roxana," said Hagan. "Say I was wondering, who do them bones belong to?"

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"Ah, here," Lesdents said, leafing through a brittle folio, from De Niza's official Cibola Missions Accounts.

"The death of Esteban, his negro guide. De Niza says here that tidings have come from natives to the north that his noble guide was felled on the outskirts of Cibola by hostile Zunis."

"Here De Niza says he only caught a glimpse of Cibola in the distance. Nonetheless, he admits to a curious discovery. The Salado Indians provided Esteban with a map they said would lead to a cavern filled with gold.

"That could be all bullshit, though. De Niza was a notorious liar and exaggerator," said Lesdents. "In fact, it's likely he never set eyes on Cibola until he had riled

up Mendoza and Coronado to lead a military expedition up north to conquer it."

He appeared to consider something then asked Mateo to follow him.

The solution brought out the etchings of de Niza's signature in stark relief in the dim red ambiance of the pungent-scented darkroom. Lesdents carefully scrutinized the petroglyph and seconded Mateo's analysis that this was of authentic Toltec origin. Then he turned his gaze to the signature. It read simply, "Fray Marcos de Niza. 1538."

He brought his hand to his forehead in a sharp slap, and broke out in deep cascading guffaws.

Mateo looked over Lesdents's shoulder, curious as to the joke.

There, showing as clear white lines in the developing print, was an even lighter etching to the south and east of the original date. It read, "1558."

"I thought De Niza died in 1558."

"Apparently not," said Lesdents chuckling. "And it's him too. I had a feeling. He was a compulsive chronicler. Now did he come back as a ghost? Doubtful. Irrelevant, really."

They went back to the diary now. "Here was a puzzling statement that I didn't think much of initially. The map

was for the tomb of a fallen Salado Chief named Huitzopotl. The local Indians feared his spirit and would not approach the cave, and they had no need of the treasure hidden inside. There had just been a Great Indian war fought over evil weapons and this contributed to their fear and reluctance to explore the accursed chief's final resting place. This chief had been called a demon and was finally felled by arrows dipped into what the Salado called *Pulquito*.

So they bartered the map to Esteban for a few muskets. Now here's the interesting part. The chief had lain there for thirty years or more by the time Niza entered the cave. He said the chief's body was still in pristine condition, and appeared to be still throbbing with life, despite having lain there for thirty years or so. No decay whatsoever. This he attributes to the "cavern air". It wasn't the "cavern air" at all. It was the mask which was preserving him via cell repair technology."

Mateo slapped his forehead. "Of course."

Lesdents grinned. "So you get it?"

"No," Mateo deadpanned. "Not at all."

"He must have found out about the mask, some of its powerful properties, and returned to search for it. After faking his death of course, down in Mexico City."

Mateo sunk into the leather sofa, exasperated.

In a lower voice, Lesdents muttered to himself. "He would settle somewhere nearby to try to seek out other relics. But where? Cibola?"

At this moment Reggie entered the room with Mateo's phone. He had a slip of paper in his hand.

"Alberto's call was routed through a cell phone tower near Santa Fe."

***End Second Installment...***