

### CHAPTER 3:

#### THE SANTA FE TRAIL

They descended into El Aeropuerto de Distrito Federal de Santa Fe on Lesdents's Gulfstream. After deplaning, they were picked up by a cab and ferried over to the main piazza.

There was still a hint of that late winter chill in the high. Through the brisk morningtide air and the misty windowpanes of the cab moving slowly through the clogged streets of the piazza, Mateo locked eyes with the decrepit form of a man huddled at the end of a shopping arcade in front of the mouth of an alley, a rug full of turquoise marketwares spread before him. The man unaccountably sent an atavistic shudder through Mateo, and his long gaze appeared to take him in body and soul. It all seemed very

witchy and familiar all of a sudden, and it wasn't a pleasant sensation.

The cab deposited them at the door of Mission San Miguel, established 1626, off the main piazza.

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Their tour guide inside, a Jesuit by the name of Samuel, led them across the narrow nave. "Under Mexican rule," he said, "When an abbot left or died, often the mission was run by lay clergy. In fact, during the Pope rebellion, for fifty years this church was run by an illiterate shaman and they prayed to a chicken-headed idol."

He now took them into the little chapel where there hung many oil and wood portraits.

"You see some of those laypeoples' portraits here in our gallery."

Lesdents kicked Mateo in the shin, and said in a hushed eager voice, "It has to be him. De Niza. Look it's the same man in the different portraits. There he has a moustache, and there an eyepatch. Longlived men tend to adopt innumerable disguises. Hell, I've only been gay the last thirty-five years."

The tour guide caught nothing except for this last snippet of conversation. His mood became noticeably more

grave, but he held his tongue because Lesdents was paying handsomely for this executive tour.

"Shall we go to the crypt now? Where our padres are entombed?"

"Yes," said Lesdents. "That sounds very interesting."

They descended a stone staircase and left the red adobe walls behind. This underground catacombs appeared to have been hand-carved out of the hard ochre rock.

"Now this room is most curious," said their guide.

"For here, in the most prominent sarcophagus is not a great abbot at all, nor a layperson nor even a functionary of the church, except in the loosest sense of that term. This tomb, the most prominent, is actually for the mission's handyman, Harry Childs, deceased May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1836."

Lesdents's eyes widened. He approached the tomb curiously.

"And that is not the only interesting tale regarding this tomb. It was famously robbed fifty years later. In 1884, our padre came across the opened tomb. According to some of the local characters, the old padre came across something altogether unholy.

Mr. Childs was immolated shortly after his body was found desecrated. My theory is that the body was mutilated in some misguided Masonic ritual or something. Awfully big

in that time. Now, would you like to see anything else?

The dormitory in our seminary is quite well-known?"

"Not right now," said Lesdents, "Thank you."

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They walked across the plaza now. Again Mateo caught the eye of the Indian sitting in the shadows with his turquoise artifacts spread out before him.

This time Mateo felt compelled to go over.

He quickly realized the old brown Indian was blind.

The Zuni sensed him standing there, though. He passed a murky iris over Mateo head to toe, as if he were keenly observing him, sniffing him out with his defunct eye.

"You don't think I see you, but I do."

The Zuni spoke with a curiously familiar stoogelike parrotspeech.

Lesdents and Reggie had already walked on across the plaza.

Time seemed to slow down around Mateo and the old man. As if the Indian's gravity was pulling Mateo in and showing him down. It was a very eerie feeling.

"You're wrapped up in all this, aren't you?" said the old man, fingering a turquoise and feather dreamcatcher in his fingers.

"I don't know," said Mateo.

"You've been having dreams, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have."

The old Indian's form had subtly morphed in the soft glow of the late spring morning. A chill breeze hit Mateo's face like a wall rustling the eagle feathers interspersed in the Zuni's thick salt and pepper hair.

"Are you a shaman?" asked Mateo.

The old man chuckled. He was bent over at the back, and at first Mateo had thought it a hump, but now he realized it was a pack.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mateo saw Reggie and Lesdents had turned around and were returning across the flagstones of the plaza, but doing so in a ridiculously slow fashion. They seemed minutes away, even at a distance of less than a hundred yards.

Time moved very slowly. The cracked brown lids of the Zuni's eyes, sunk into their mystery-housing orbital sockets, appearing to warp their relative motions.

Then the old man swiftly reached up and grabbed surely at Mateo's hand. He appeared to examine Mateo's palm for a second then traced his fingers through its shallow grooves. He hummed below his breath.

Sounded like bu bu bu bu.

"Are you reading my fortune?" asked Mateo, a little alarmed as his associates approached.

Bu bu bu bu.

The fortuneteller suddenly looked up in Lesdents's direction.

"Stay away, Coyote," he barked at Lesdents. Lesdents grinned sardonically and he and Reggie retreated to a nearby alcove and leaned against the shaded stucco wall of the adjacent Georgia O'Keefe museum.

"You lack faith, Mister Rodriguez, but you have strong blood. Blood of the Toltec priests, Mendoza the Conquistador, and even the Peraltas in fact. The Star People are the beings who visit you in your sleep. This is a great honor, though it will soon bring you many challenges. Keep faith and have a stout heart. Now, go in peace," he said in his curious stilting lilting stoogelike bird vox.

He cleared a strand of long salt and pepper hair from his brow. Part of the spell had been broken, but Mateo's hand remained captive.

Finally the old man released Mateo's hand and the spell ended. Time regained its established ebb and pulse. Mateo quickly stood up and noticed a slim clear nearly imperceptible tube running from the old man's left nostril

over his shoulder and into his pack. *Did he have an oxygen tank in the pack?* wondered Mateo.

The old man gave Mateo a creased smile, stooped to gather up his rug of turquoise jewels, and in a hunched over manner, turned away and scrambled off into the narrow alleyway between storefronts. His pack or hump completely obscured by a poncho. In a second he had disappeared completely from of sight, and Mateo couldn't even remember what he had looked like. Such surprising speed, too, he noticed, for a blind old humpback.

"So who's your friend?" asked Lesdents.

"I have no idea," replied Mateo, quite honestly. He now noticed the turquoise dreamcatcher the old man had been fingering, sitting there cold in the secret hollow of his palm, somehow spirited there. He kept it hid.

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The abbot had referred them to the Route 666 House of Curious Magick for more information about Childs. The proprietor wore a gaudy ten gallon hat and a bolo tie with a turquoise clasp. "So you're interested in Harry Childs, I take it. Now my daddy, Juan Fermin, founded this museum during a period of weird supernatural occurrences called the 1960's. He took a bunch of peyote buttons and walked off a mesa bless his heart."

Lesdents and Mateo nodded. Mateo felt, after his encounter with the fortuneteller, as if he were coming off a similar trip himself.

'Anyways, before he died my daddy opened up this little museum. It was supposed to get the attention of tourists drivin' down ol' Route 66. But hell, we ain't had a verified supernatural episode around here since Roswell in 1947, that I know of anyhow. I daresay when my daddy was growing up they were everywhere."

That abbot was right about what he told you, too. When that padre took off that slab in 1884, he saw an unholy sight." Martin shuddered. "Gives me nightmares just thinkin' about it. According to my pa, Childs's face was all replaced by little green tentacles, all still wriggling, squirming up to the stars. Gave the old padre a heart attack."

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The attorney, Enrique, spread Vegemite over a slice of toast as Lesdents and Mateo entered, Reggie in tow.

He had busts of Cesar Chavez and Van Helsing on his glossy mahogany table. Their marble necks were bedecked with garlic clove necklaces. A silver crucifix hung against the wall above his head. He explained his curious

fetish. "My uncle Juan was killed by vampires," he said, perceiving Mateo's and Lesdents's confusion.

The brass nameplate facing them from the desktop read the same as the clapboard sign off the plaza: Enrique Fermin, Esq. Attorney at Law.

On the sign outside, it also read in smaller lettering, *Se Habla Espanol*, and *Drop-ins Welcome*.

Enrique produced a flask from his inner vest pocket then filled his teacup with a clear liquid. He now dipped the two main fingers of his right hand in the cup and made the sign of the cross on his chest. Finally, he took a swig.

"Was that holy water?" blurted out Mateo.

"Nah, it's vodka, but those blood-sucking bastards don't know that." He looked around in wary alarm.

Then he stood, turned, and drew the blinds closed.

"You are not the first men to ask me of this recently," he said in a gruff whisper.

He was staring at Mateo again.

Enrique showed them the will which mentioned Childs's crypt, how it had passed down for hundreds of years through a string of aliases, and the will also mentioned a key which was to be left with his body at the Mission. A key for a safe deposit box at the Bank of Santa Fe.

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At the Mission they were unwilling to discuss the key, except to say that it had been stolen recently.

At the 1<sup>st</sup> Bank of Santa Fe, Mateo received the same searching stares as he had from the museum proprietor, attorney, and tour guide, but this time from the teller.

Another small brown man had appeared to ask about Box 232.

Box 232 had sat there undisturbed for almost two hundred years and now all of a sudden, two little guys show up in as many days to get a look?

The bank manager took them into the vault.

"So it's empty?"

"Would you like to rent it? As you can see, it is quite large."

The manager frowned, looking inside. "It has obviously not been cleaned out yet," he pointed out.

Lesdents looked in and began laughing. "Thank the lord for small favors."

In the thick dirt coating the tarnished steel-plated bottom, amongst tattered yellow paper corners, someone had traced a message with the butt of their finger.

They all saw the by now familiar mask petrolgyph, the initials "AR", the date 5/2, and the three-letter code

"PHX". Alberto had apparently been there recently and it seemed as if he had been able to trace the mask back to Phoenix.

*End Third Installment...*