

# The Dead Priest's Dagger

By Carol M. Foegen

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## Chapter 1: The Robbery

The robbery was discovered that morning by the day guard, Kale McFarland. He found Timothy Dashly, the night guard, dead. His throat viciously cut and blood everywhere in the hall outside the South American special display.

When Kale entered the room carefully where the display was in, he saw one of the glass displays broken and the ceremonial dagger gone. He immediately notified the police and then Dr. Cassandra who'd only gotten there moments after he called the police. She then called Detective Malfort who had helped her in the past.

Now the two of them stood just outside the museum, under the shade of portico looking out at the square. The police moved in and out and they also watched as the body was finally being removed. The overcast skies and usually chilly day seemed to fit the whole ugly event, Cassandra though.

Kale touched her arm and motioned with his head to the area beyond. She turned and saw man shambling toward them a dog tailing behind him without a leash. His hat looked as if he sat on it before putting it on. His threadbare treed jacket looked worn even with so many patches.

"I swear, I saw a mouse sticking its head up out of that poor homeless man's pocket," Kale explained, "but it must have been my eyes playing games with me. I'm starting to see ghosts."

"No, actuality, you saw Steward Little though he usually goes by just Stewart," Cassandra replied, quirking a smile, "and that homeless man isn't a homeless man at all but rather the man whom we happen to be waiting for."

Indeed the one of the police officers seemed to have stopped him and seemed to be talking to him, but as they talked the dog made its way up the shorter steps across the square and then up to the portico steps to them.

"Einstein!" Cassandra exclaimed, as he shambled up the last set of stairs to her. She bent down and began roughly petting him as his tail wagged happily. He was a border collie mix with a shaggy coat of brown, white and black, floppy ears and intelligent eyes as well.

"What sort of breed is that dog?" Kale asked.

"City Pound special," came a voice.

"Albert! Thank the L-rd you are here," Cassandra said standing back up and bushing hair from her skirt as Einstein returned to his master.

"Detective Harrison told me everything they had, is there anything you can add?" he said coming up to them.

"Only that we have to recover that dagger, it's not ours," she answered.

"Let's head in side, and I'll go over the crime scene and meet you in Professor Whalen's office after I've had a look," he said, "you need to get inside anyway, you're shivering."

He reached the door before either of the others and ushered them both in before following, Einstein included.

"Can you take Einstein with you," Albert asked her once inside, "Detective Harrison said he wasn't allowed at the crime scene."

"No justice," Cassandra teased, "Sure I take him, come on Einstein." He took one look at Albert whose eyes told him to follow, then did.

"What about Stewart?" Kale asked remembering the mouse.

"Who?" Albert asked innocently and Cassandra laughed, then he turned and walked off.

Kale hurried to catch Cassandra and Einstein and said, "I thought you said..."

"What the police don't know won't hurt them and Stewart is likely needed, so the less we say the better," she answered continuing on, so that he had to follow after.

They waited in the office for some time Kale asking Cassandra so myriad questions that she turned them off now as she searched through the records on that dig that turned up the dagger.

Kale now was sitting, feeling left out and useless as Cassandra stood reading a folder she drawn out of professor Whalen's office which was technically her's, while he was recovering at Buffalo General. Einstein lay by the door looking forlorn when suddenly his ears perked up.

"What is it boy, is you master coming?" Kale said as Cassandra looked up and Einstein tail started thumping. As he jumped up and moved back, Albert knocked and came in.

"Did you find anything?" Cassandra asked, closing the folder.

"Stewart seems to have found something, got a paper I can use? I forgot mine."

She set down the folder and went to the desk. Opening two drawers she found blank paper in one and handed to him. He set it down on the desk then pulling out a pen wrote every letter of the alphabet down on it and every number from 0-9. Then he removed Stewart from his pocket and set him on the paper.

Kale stood as he did this to watch over his shoulder as Cassandra waited knowing what was coming.

Stewart studied the letters then carefully touched with his paw one at a time as Albert wrote each one he touched in a small notepad. Then when done the intelligent mouse opened up a paw he had held tightly closed and rubbed a black oily substance onto the page.

"What did he say?" Cassandra asked.

"How can a mouse say anything," Kale exclaimed.

"He's not a normal mouse," Albert said as he separated the words so they made sense. "He came from a friend of mine who did research on brain development."

"Really," Kale asked disbelieving, but when he looked at Cassandra she only nodded.

"So what did he say?" she asked again.

"Hum, oh, he found greasy and bloody dirt. He left some on the paper there," he answered pointing to the black and maroon oily dirt the mouse left, "I saw it too, it looked like a messed up foot print mixed with blood. The police likely want to take pictures of that print but Stewart's little bit shouldn't mess with that."

"So what do you think it is?" Kale asked, bending for a closer look.

"Won't know till I analyze it," Albert answered, lifting Stewart up and returning him to his pocket. He reached into another pocket, drew out a tiny bit of a carrot and gave it to Stewart. The mouse took the piece happily and disappeared again from sight.

"Is there anything you *can* tell us?" Cassandra asked.

"What?" he mutter looking from the page, "well only a little could be seen at the scene itself. The cops have already gone over much of it anyway. The blood luckily left prints with that oily substance from his shoes. I took a picture of the print," he mentioned drawing that out of his bag and showing them it.

"Looks like a boot print," Kale said after seeing it.

"With a hole near the toe," Cassandra stated seeing this in the picture.

"The police saw that too and their was another print," he said showing that one. "Whoever this was, he tried not to walk in the blood unlike the other guy."

“That’s part of a heal of a shoe,” Cassandra stated.

“I agree, so two were there, a bum and a better dressed fellow, likely the brains and the strength.”

“So what are you going to do?” Kale asked. “All these facts you giving don’t seem to add up to anything.”

“That greasy oily dirt came from somewhere,” Albert explained, “I’m going to leave and check out what’s in it is. With this other information we’ll get a clearer picture.”

“Call my cell when you know,” Cassandra replied, “I probably will not be in this room.”

He left the room and once Kale could no longer hear him he asked Cassandra, “Why are those animals he has seem so smart?”

Cassandra looked up from reading the folder she formally set aside and said, “The dog and his cat, ‘You’re highness’ as far as I know are just well trained animals and given dogs have lived among men from almost the beginning of time that should help explain Einstein’s intelligence.”

“I suppose, but a mouse that can spell?”

“A UB experiment on ways to recover the brain loss after brain injuries ” she answered, “Steward Little was part of an experimental drug and procedure. Usually, the school doesn’t give these mice away but he had a poorer student he helped out who smuggled out Stewart and give him to Albert as payment. At the time Albert though he was just being kind letting that kid pay with a mouse but that mouse has turned out to be gold.”

“Is the drug out of trials,” Kale asked wondering if it could be used to increase even normal peoples intelligence.

“Yes and that was the funny thing, that drug only seemed to work on rodents. Human subjects did not seem to be effected by it at all,” she answered, “now if you have no more questions, I need to get some work done.”

“No more, but thank you for explaining,” he said then he too left the room and Cassandra kept looking into the files but found nothing important.

~\*~

Inside the old blown engine house at the former Bethlehem Steel site in Lackawanna, several men toiled building a pyramid. Another watched and several more around the outside carried guns pacing and watching the workers. Most of the workers looked like indigent poor street people wearing miss matched and messy threadbare clothing with un-kept hair and facial growth.

Another man came walking in and over to the the robed man who was turning the ancient Mayan ceremonial dagger in his hands.

“A b’boss, the cops checked out the museum but my sources say they’ve got nothen to go on,” a older man said, ducking his head and fingering his worn hat.

“Good, go join your comrades, we need to get this prepared for the Master. Everything must be right for his visit..,” the roped man stated that last part more to himself and that creeped the other man out. The man hurried off to help glad to get away from him.

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Cassandra walked among the patrons feeling nervous. Part of the South American display had just reopened to the public now that the blood was cleaned up, and investigation the entire museum was opened for business. She was heading down the stairs when her cell phone rang in her purse. She opened her purse and pulled out the slim Nokia phone she just bought a month ago.

It was much better than that brick like phone everyone else had, the Nokia 9000. She sat outside the store half the night when this one came out to get it. She answered it and heard, "Hi Cass its Albert. I analyzed that sample and it turns out to be greasy dirt like what you find in industry or more often on train wheels."

"That would suggest somewhere on the east side or in Lackawanna," she answered, "The Bethlehem Steel plant been closed for over ten years, it has dozens of train tracks running through it but of course it not the only closed place like that."

"I suspect Lackawanna as well," he answered, "I agree with the large number of tracks there but far fewer than a dozen. Still Bethlehem Steel's my bet," he stated, "Its likely rail grease someone picked up on their shoes, its all over the old railroad tracks."

"So you going to share this with the cops?" she asked.

"Not yet, I could be wrong, as you said. There are other places but this one fits best. So I'll headed there right now to confirm or know if I have to look elsewhere," he said as the taxi pulled in at a side street that flanked the old steel mill. He got out and paid, then waved him on.

He put the large cell phone back to his ear and said, "I going to send in Her Highness. Steward will go with her so I can get an idea what is going on. Stew can get into all the buildings even the locked ones and so can Her Highness."

"Just be careful," she added softly because some homeless man seemed to be trying to listen in.

"I not going in," he laughed, "but I already told Steward to be so. Take care."

He hung up and Cassandra turned to the man watching her and asked, "Can I help you with anything?"

"Where is the new exhibit?" he asked.

"Just up the next set of stairs, though keep clear of the area still cut off by the yellow ribbon" she replied but though, *exactly where those newer exhibits always been since this museum opened*. She continued down the stairs to her office not noticing the man still followed her but at a greater distance.

~\*~

Her Highness returned with Steward on her back several hours later. Albert was sitting in a nearby cafe when he saw them and paid up his bill before going outside. He walked till he reached School Street and sanding in front of the school he pulled out a paper like the one he used in the museum office earlier only this one was covered in plastic. He placed it on the sidewalk.

He brought Steward down from Her highness's back and Her Highness climbed into the cat carrier he'd brought along and curled up to sleep. Steward again danced

over the paper excitedly as Albert, taking out his note pad out wrote every letter down and later the numbers Steward gave.

When done he put Steward into his pocket with a piece of cheese, then tucked that paper back into his coat's other pocket. Then he pulled out his black shoe sized cell phone with the long floppy antenna, and called another cab.

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Cassandra left the museum at six because her shift was done and started for her car with her car keys in her hand. It was dark and the street lights were on partly because the late season and partially because the sky was overcast. The light by that part of the parking lot where she had parked seemed to have gone out and night was falling as it always did early in late fall.

A black van was beside her car that was illegally parked, it was in Professor Whalen's spot. She pulled out her cell phone to report this illegal parking when a man came up behind her, silently, then covered her mouth and nose with a cloth. It was the same man she seen before and he smelled unwashed.

She dropped her cell and her keys to fight him but the drug induced cloth covered her only way to breathe. She tried to not breathe in as she struggled but could not hold her breath long enough. At last she was forced to breathe in the drug that filled her lungs and then she collapsed unconscious into his arms. She never saw that van pulled out and up beside them as her assailant lifted her into the back. Then the back doors closed and it sped off into the night heading for the 33.

## Chapter 2: The Pyramid Scheme

Albert worked out the message from Steward in the taxi, so he knew he had to take Steward to the library to hopefully clarify some of his words. So he asked the taxi driver to wait and the taxi driver replied, "Hey buddy, its your dime." Not even in the nineties did taxes rides cost a dime, but then that just a common phase.

He dropped off her Highness freeing her and feeding both her and Einstein and petting him, let him out and then back in, before hurrying out. Getting back into the back of the cab, he told the driver to head to the Buffalo Downtown Library. Her Highness had a cat door so she could go out when she wanted to.

The library was that not far from his home on the west side and he was let off by the large double doors. He went in and up the stairs and headed for the card catalog. A microfilm machine was beside the card catalog. This had the newer books but he was after older ones. There was also one of those bulky desk top computers nearby that had the entire catalog in it, but he wasn't yet ready to give up his card catalog for *that* machine.

He searched in the Ma section for Mayan architecture because Steward had written he'd seen a pyramid and the dagger was from South America. He found several book names that were promising and quickly jotted them down in a small spiral notebook then hurried to find them.

Once he found three good books, he headed for a secluded area of the library where he always hung out on the top floor and sat down. No one was near, not even librarians.

He brought Steward out placing him on his shoulder and opened the first book. Steward sat quietly as he turned each page that had illustrations. Then Stew started to chatter excitedly into his ear and he stopped to read, translating from Spanish book named "El Sol en Chichén Itzá y Dzibilchaltún: la supuesta importancia de los equinoccios en Mesoamérica" by Šprajc, Ivan; Sánchez Nava, Pedro Francisco.

It explained that the pyramid Steward saw was the one at Chichén Itzá. Its called El Castillo or 'the castle'. The pyramid had four stairways, each with 91 steps with the upper plate. Together those stairs and plate totaled 365 stairs in all.

It is also referred to as the Pyramid of Kukulcán which means "plumed serpent"; it was a name of a Mayan god. At the equinoxes, as the setting sun's rays are projected on the northern balustrade, shadows formed of triangular shapes create the illusion of a snake winding its way down the steps of the pyramid. At the base of the northern stairway there is also a massive snake head sculpture, completing the display.

It was a place of sacrifice but still it was taller than the blown engine room. "Are you certain?" he asked and Steward chattered he was. Not that he could talk but Albert knew his different vocalizations and what each meant. There were only a handful, yes, no, maybe, directional and the alarm squeak and a few others. Here he heard the "yes", chatter.

He though a moment then said aloud more to himself, "I wonder if its smaller," only to have Steward chatter "yes" again.

"It is?" he asked to Stew's chattering voice, "Well then that makes more sense. Only the reason for building it is highly troubling. I'll phone Cass, she should be at home."

He took Steward down from his shoulder and set him into his coat pocket with a bit more of cheese then pulled out his black phone and dialed Cassandra. Her phone rang but she didn't pick it up. Thinking she'd stayed late he dialed her cell but she didn't answer that either.



Getting up and taking his three books and setting them on a cart, he headed down stairs. Then out the door to the cab that was thankfully still there. He gave him his address again and they headed toward his home. He paid the cab and hurried inside.

Inside, he pulled Steward out and set him into his dollhouse suite he'd made for him, feeding him. He bent down to pet Einstein who'd been bugging him since he came through the door. "All right buddy, I got to feed myself now."

He hurried and pulled a Stoiffer's pizza from the freezer and set it into the toaster oven to cook. Then he dialed the museum. Guy Michelson answered, "Night sift, the museum closed."

"I know Guy, this is Albert Mailfort, PI, Cassandra hired me to find the missing dagger. I'd like a share a lead with her but she not answering her phone. Is she working late, by any chance?"

"No, I saw her going out as I came in," he answered, "Maybe she went out to eat, or something."

"Maybe," he agreed but knew Cassandra hated restaurants, her cooking was better. "I try her home again, thanks," he answered saying goodbye and dialed her but again her phone just rang. He hung up again and called another cab. He decided maybe she had gone out to eat, or somewhere else and would try her again later.

He took Einstein out to do his duty when the toaster rang. He was eating when the cabby honked his horn. He stuffed that last bit in and running for the door, he grabbed his coat and raced out.

"You have problem with my bringing my dog and cat," Albert asked him.

"Got carriers?" the cabby asked.

"For the cat but the dogs mid-sized, too big for a carrier," Albert answered, "but if I keep him off the seats and on the floor would you accept him?"

"It'll cost extra, that's all. To clean my cab afterward," he answered.

"Deal," he answered, swearing inwardly and wondering when his rabbit would get out of the shop. He ran back inside and soon he was coming out, a bag slung across his back, a cat carrier in his right hand and the dog leash wrapped around that same hand and Steward hidden in his pocket as always. The cabby got out and opened the door as Albert directed Einstein to the floor and he put the carrier in.

"That's a well behaved dog," the cabby stated as he closed Albert in. As he got back in Albert answered, "yes, this breeds one of the brightest I known."

"What's the breed, it looks mixed," the cabby asked as he pulled out and started down the street.

"A collie and shepherd mix. Smart but gentile and highly loyal. He can be fierce if I or someone I care for is threatened as well."

"Cool dog, I think I look for one. So where am I going?" the cabby asked him.

"Lackawanna," Albert said as he laid back, "School Street," he added as he closed his eyes, Einstein laid down placing his head on his feet as the cabby turned onto the 33 heading for the Skyway.

~\*~

The taxi dropped Albert off on the end of School Street as he asked and Albert paid him the extra money after he got every animal and his packed goods out. After the cabby left, he hid the cat carrier in a bush nearby and taking the extra bag which a back pack.

He was dressed in clothing that match the stone Steward had described first to him and then the one he pointed out. He had cloth pads on his pocket for himself and Einstein. He pulled out his cell making a quick call then headed for the steel mill.

He crossed the main road then made for Dona street when his phone rang. He stopped and pulling it out her answered.

"Hi Albert," Kale voice stated, "I needed to tell you something important."

"What?" Albert said, "I'm a little busy right now."

"Professor Cassandra never made it out of our parking lot. Her car's still out here and I found her cell and keys or rather sent then flying when I came out of work."

"Where are you now?" Albert asked him.

"I'm at a phone both on Delaware Ave heading for home. I was going to call you there but decided to stop here when I saw the phone."

"Could you then call directive Harrison for me, his number is 716-876 5132."

"Could you say that again, I missed a couple of numbers," Kale asked.

He repeated it then had Kale repeat it back before he was satisfied. "I call as soon as I get home, I'm out of quarters," Kale added.

"That will have to be good enough, but be careful, these guys have already killed one man and maybe others," Albert reminded him.

"I know, I know, that why I didn't go back into the museum, not sure who I can trust and the doctors missing from there," he added with a shiver. He never heard Albert's response because the phone needed more money. The obnoxious operator drowned him out. It had sounded as he spoke and now Albert heard the dial tone.

Sighing he headed down to the gate surrounding the old steel plant, Einstein and Her Highness staying close. They would have looked like a comical group if anyone was out but it was just too cold that night. He was worried for Cassandra and that kid Kale but he couldn't do anything for them except what he was attempting. He hoped it was enough.

He cut through the fence then climb inside and followed Her Highness as she made her way to where Steward had reported seeing the pyramid. He came to the back side of the old blown engine building.

Guards had been posted by the doors in front but no one was here, on this side. He brought Steward out and set him down and Steward led him around the side and a little further down to where there was a hole had been breached in the side of the building. It was just large enough for him to slip through.

He was behind some pallets pushed up against the wall as he came through. Otherwise the building seemed empty except for that giant pyramid. He waited and waited and was rewarded as guard passed him and then stop a little further up to talk to another guard coming the other way. Einstein had laid down and put his head into his paws while Her Highness rushed out and up the stairs as the man passed.

Albert studied the ceiling where a large light seemed to be suspended. He was surprised the old roof held it up. The building was in bad shape. Yet he could also see the upper parts of the pyramid. He guessed correctly it was to help display the effects of that snake.

The two guards went on after saying something he couldn't hear and the other passed him going the other way. That guard glanced upward clearly looking for Her Highness but she was already at the top hidden in the darkness up there. Then he shook his head and moved on. He was instructed to report intruders not cats likely chasing a mouse or something.

As that guard passed them, Albert slipped to the edge of the stacks and watched after donning his cloth shoe covers and then covered Einstein's as well. Then he made

his way to the pyramid after that man was out of sight. He started up it quickly keeping a measure eye for either guard. Einstein followed silently. It was more like a bumpy ramp because they kept all 91 steps only making them much smaller.

They were halfway up when the guards came round again and both froze and waited pressing themselves against the pyramid. Neither man looked up but in truth few do even when on guard and neither thought of that mischievous cat. Still Einstein and Albert did not moved till both guards were again out of sight again.

They made it to the platform and froze again as they came around but now another problem presented itself. The only place to hide was on a side the guards traversed.

He waited but as the guard passed where they were on the platform he started to crawl forward and around the platform to the door passing in front of the altar as the other guard passed below them. Then he moved into the dark.

Steward had written there was a drop in the back and Albert and Einstein made for the hole. It took a little maneuvering but both manged to get onto a long piece of plywood that was near the hole in back of the temple area likely made for workers erecting this pyramid and never removed. They were scattered at different levels on the inside.

There they settle down to wait.

~\*~

Kale got home and locking every door and window to his apartment he dialed the number to Harrison, and when Harrison answered and he filled him, in the detective told him he'd be right by. Kale fried himself an egg with bacon and put bread to toast then pulled out a Budweiser cracked it open and took a swig. Then he returned to his cooking.

He just started eating when there was a knock at the door. He quickly woofed down his eggs and was finishing his bacon as he went his apartment door. He rubbed his pants legs before looking through the peep hole to see a cop there in a suit. He opened his door leaving on chain lock and cracking it open he said, "Defective Harrison?"

"Affirmative," the detective answered, "can I come in?"

"Can you confirm it," Kale asked, "I have to admit, I'm a bit paranoid."

He gave him his badge to look at and handing it back.

"One moment," he said closing the door and unlocking the chain lock then opening it again, "Detective Albert said I should be careful," he admitted feeling foolish for keeping a police man waiting.

"That's wise, as we still don't exactly what we are dealing with," Harrison answered but he knew more than he let on, "do you have the items you told me you found here?"

"What, sure, one moment," he stated hurrying into the kitchen.

"Just show me them," Harrison quickly added as he saw Kale reaching for something.

"Oh, right. here then," Kale answered pointing to his counter. Detective Harrison put on plastic gloves and pulled out a bag from his coat pocket and scooped them into it.

“I’m going to need to take your prints,” Detective Harrison stated as he tucked the items back into his coat and pulled out an ink pad and paper.

“Am I a suspect or something?” Kale asked worried.

“Not likely,” Harrison answered, “but you touched these correct?”

Kale turned crimson and admitted he had so the detective took his prints and asked him several questions before leaving. Feeling run out and tired he pulled out another beer and headed to watch TV and to finish his cold toast. He’d missed the earlier news but there be sitcoms on and he wait for the 11:00 News to learn what was going on.

He dozed but was waken when he heard of a murder of a guard from the museum. The commentator stated, “He was found outside his home likely coming home from work. Robbery is suspected. Police are offering a reward for anyone coming forward with information.”

“That’s a farce,” he grumbled knowing full well his buddy had died in the museum, “Why is there a cover up?” he decided to tell Albert in the morning. Maybe Albert knew why but just then he was so tired that turning off the set, he headed to bed.

### Chapter 3. The Importance of Teamwork

Cassandra woke bound and laying in a dirty office of some kind that was mostly empty. Cobwebs hug around the ceiling and in windows with broken blinds and the carpet she lay on was matted down rug. It was covered in thick dust and had worm holes eaten in it. She tried to move but her bonds dug into her hands and she teared up as she did and sneezed at the gathering dust she loosened as she moved.

She was wearing something different than her suit dress, a golden collar was around her neck and some kind of headdress was laying nearby. She had on some kind of ceremonial dress that did not forebode well for her, if her guess was correct.

She tried to look around but there wasn't much in that room, just the torn carpet, and cobwebs. Moonlight shown through from the window through broken blinds. Still it was no help.

She suddenly heard talking outside her doorway and strained to hear what was said but failed. Then the door opened. And four burly men came in and lifted her up, as another was untying the ropes at her feet.

"Don't try to escape us or we'll club yah hard," the man freeing her legs said to her. They tried to stand her up but she collapsed into one of the other two men's arms. The one who untied her started to massage her legs till she could stand again while the other retrieve the golden headdress. When they got her up where she could stand they placed the headdress on her head and matched her out.

It wasn't as if she could escape. Both men had her by her arms as they matched across the hall, then down the stair as one carried a flashlight to illuminate their way. The others one took point and the other walked directly behind her. They came to a door which was forced open, clearly and once outside she couldn't help shivering and not just from cold. They formed up again once outside the building and started again into the cool night.

It was just below 50 but there was a light breeze and the sun was down and 48 in the sun is different than 48 in the shade. She stumbling along shivering violently but none of the men seemed to care and only lifted her up and carried her when she tripped over debris. Then after twists and turns around many empty decaying buildings, they came upon a well lite building showing in the distance. Guards were outside the lit building that they came to and all heavily armed.

The guards motioned that they could pass and they dragged her inside. As she entered she gasped. Before her was El Castillo and a flood light above the pyramid shown right upon the stairway with the correct angle to produce the effect of the snake winding down the pyramid to its head. All doubt and all arguments that her death was not pending fled in this fearful reality, gone mad.

Then she saw the pyramid was surrounded by street people mostly or all men from what she could see, as her headdress fell partway into her eyes. These men parted so she and her guards could pass.

The guards took her up the stairs which was more like going up an uneven ramp which caused her to stumble more than once. Then she was on the platform where the altar was and her headdress was removed so she could see again.

They forced her down and all four men now started tying her down as well. Technically, she knew the original altars had no way of binding the sacrifice but then again they had mostly willing victims back them.

Then the men left her alone as a man in a robe who had been given her headdress as they reached the top now fixed it to her head. All she could see now was straight

above her and fear of what was to come coursed through her veins. Still a part of her was not yet cowed as she said to the motif above her, "I can't be sacrifice by the way, I haven't had my special meal and lover as required."

"Silence!" the robed man growled placing a knife against her throat drawing a little blood.

"Why?" she replied unruffled because she seen the golden eyes of a cat looking down at her from above, "What are you going to do? Kill me? Isn't that what you already planned?"

He struck her with the blunt end of his knife and laughed, "Not only wisdom will I gain when my Master allows me a taste of your heart but also courage when I taste your brain. A good feast." Then close to her ear, "But only your heart and brain needs to be undamaged," he whispered coldly. "So be quiet!"

She grew silent hoping to glimpse Her Highness once more, because she was sure she'd seen cats eyes and if Albert's cat was above her. Her temple throbbed from that hit and she have a goose egg likely.

If that were all of her problems then she wouldn't mind. Still if her Highness is above her then Albert, Einstein and Steward, were likely also somewhere close. "L-rd let it be so," she thought as a new sound was heard below where she waited.

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Albert had climbed back into the narrow hallway inside the pyramid because it was in darkest in back and along the sides. Thus he saw what happened to Cassandra and reaching into his pocket set Steward down and whispered very softly, "watch for an opening then go and cut Cassandra's bonds."

Steward looked up to him then without a sound slipped forward moving from shadow to shadow till he found a place in shadows to watch. Another robed man came up and the younger had left Cassandra to meet him half way. The second, older dark man in a robe held the stolen dagger in his hands. He lower his hood and it was clear to Albert, he was clearly South American. He wore a golden breast plate and golden shin guards and other ritual attire.

From within the other man's robe the student reverently pulled a headdress with even more ornamented than the one Cassandra's gaudy headdress. He carefully placed it upon the South American leader's head bowing and backing away from him as if he were a god or king. Cassandra rolled her eyes.

Then the new man stood before those gathered speaking of the great glory he was about to give them with this woman's sacrifice. He also taught them about the ancient rite and its importance. How this women, wise and courageous would give them her power, her gifts, when they took her heart and brain and took all this into themselves (as if any of those homeless would get anything).

As he faced them, so did his acolyte, both standing on either side in front of the altar. Steward slipped out then as the speech droned on and began cutting those ropes closest to the ground first, which were holding Cassandra's hands. He did not cut all the way through but most of the way, leaving a few threads that Cassandra could later break.

Then he moved to her feet which were tied too high up for him to climb up to because of the smooth stone's surface. So he returned to her hands and climbing up

them then rushed along to her feet and climbed down first one leg to cut these the same way he had the others.

Cassandra felt him, watched him only briefly and now knew what he was doing, she schooled her face and went to continue looking straight up. Now she knew she seen Her Highness, it wasn't her imagination. Still his tiny feet tickled so she struggled not to show anything especially with her still throbbing head.

Steward soon finished cutting the bounds on one leg then hurried over to the other. Fortunately he was hidden when the acolyte turned to look at Cassandra who by then was still and just staring.

He turned back and thus missed Steward rushed down her leg as she stifled another giggle, it really really tickled. It would be great, she thought if I end up laughing and give everything up! She thought but the head pain helped she to stifle them bit.

Fortunately he was off her leg and cutting the rope before she lost it completely. He was almost done as the leader finished his oration and a prayer that followed to a Mayan god, Kukulcán. He turned and crossed around behind the altar so that he faced the group gathered below.

"Now, as promised, we will taste new life, and gain greater strength this hour, as we feast upon her wisdom" he said raising the blade above his head.

Several things happened at once. Cassandra knowing what Steward had done threw up her hands to defend herself breaking the loose bonds and catching his hands coming down. She was a strong woman, often working in the field at archaeological sites, though the man had the advantage of thrusting down but holding off.

Steward jumped down after finishing his work of free her legs and racing back into a shadows hissing as he did. Hearing that hiss, Her Highness dropped down onto the high priests head dressed sending it off his head dress with Albert's black cat falling as well. The headdress clattered to the floor falling to the left of the doorway.

Her Highness however did not fall with it but twisted in her fall landing on his back, claws extended. He screamed, dropping his knife as she raked his back climbing upward, like he climbing a tree.

As all this was happening the acolyte drew a knife, he had beneath his clothing and went to throw his knife at Cassandra who was now free and trying to flee into the pyramid. Einstein seeing this motion raced out and jumping caught his arm in his jaws. Biting down hard, the acolyte too dropped his knife as the high priest tried to extract the cat from his backside. Two screams of pain emanating from the pair for a time.

Einstein let go of acolyte's arm as his knife dropped and knocked it with his back paws skittering down the stairs. The acolyte raced after it as it fell. The other knife had fallen toward Cassandra when it fell. She had moved out of the away before fleeing, so that it only sliced her arm before falling in the back of the platform. It now lay on the floor near the headdress.

So as Einstein released the younger man, and sent his knife flying, he veered as he went around the altar and snagged the knife in his jaws and raced toward the doorway following Cassandra as she fled through the doorway.

Her Highness was now climbing up the high priest's head as he swung his hands to extract her. Once on his bared head she jumped back to the roof motif fading into it as she was before. Though the flood light was on the pyramid the deep crevices of the design allowed this black cat to fade into its shadows as she had before.

The high priest freed of that crazy cat and in intense pain, now turned and studied the motif above but could not see that cat. He then sought the knife but of course Einstein now had it on a plywood platform where he fled to.

He growled then and headed through the doorway after Cassandra where he knew was the only place she could have fled to. As he came through Albert, who was now hiding just beyond the doorway pointed a gun at his temple. "you can stop right ..." was as far as he got when the deranged mad man slammed into him, throwing his arm upward as his gun went off. Her Highness yowled and was heard skittering away deeper into the motif above them.

Up above in the doorway of the Pyramid two men struggled together for that gun when the younger priest who was now down at its base cry out, "Shoot him, shoot him."

Albert realized his back was to the open door and that "him" they were about to shoot was him so he pulled the priest toward the side as guns started to go off below them. Several bullets struck the High Priest's side but this did not seem to effect him.

Albert was somewhat protected, however to his shock and surprise the crazed priest who was bleeding heavily had his gun pointing right at his chest and murder in his crazed eye. At the exact moment Cassandra screamed the crazed priest fired.



## Chapter 4: A Uncertain Resolution

That scream caused the crazed priest to hesitate only a millisecond but in that hesitation Albert dove downward as the dying priest fired that first shot. Still the bullet missed his heart and struck his shoulder and it was wedged in his shoulder blade. He cried out with pain unable to stop but dove for the hole in back.

He was struck more times before he reached the opened end, he didn't know how many times. Now blood loss and shock were a risk. He did the only thing he could think of as he dove into darkness.

When the firing started Cassandra climbed to a lower plywood section and lift Einstein and Steward down to her level. It was below the gun fire. She had screamed because a stray bullet had passed close to her head when they first started firing and it had startled her. Another grazed her shoulder but she forgotten this in her rush to flee. This was why she moved. After this they stopped.

Albert came moments later distracting her even more. He missed the first platform and slammed into a lower one. Then the high priest shadow showed above and Albert rolled off the plywood allowing himself to fall the rest of the way.

As he hit the ground he rolled away from the opening but his fears of the high priest were unfounded as that man fell straight down striking platforms sending one tumbling down as he did till his dead body struck the ground not too far from him the platform following and striking him in turn.

Albert then noticed raised areas of ground where he fell and roll off of to another area of raised ground. The dead priest wasn't the only dead one here, he realized. Only after he knew the high priest was dead did he stifled a groan and pulled up against a support beam.

He'd landed on that arm where he's been shot which had sent lacing extreme pain across the entire area. He still rolled into the fall, it was habit even with the agony he felt. This wasn't the first time he's been shot but maybe it was the worse.

The pain had been intense and he was feeling very cold, that didn't bode well. True they were having a cold snap and the temperature was likely in the forties or lower now but still. He had been warm before he got shot, more than once and swore inwardly at that thought.

"Albert," Cassandra whispered down, "what are we going to do now?"

"Wait," he said through clinched teeth and whipping blood from his eyes. He took a cloth tissue from his pocket and held to a the head wound where another bullet had merely glazed the spot. He was hoping he wouldn't need it stitched as he already knew he be getting several if he survived at all. The chill was another problem all together.

Then the sirens were sounding but they must have been sounding for a time only now they could be heard. "Cops, we have to get out of here," a voice cried but the shrill voice of the still living acolyte, "No witnesses," but the men on the outside did not care. They dropped their guns and fled.

The priest picked one gun up and fired on some of the fleeing men when the swat team came in firing and the priest was struck with at least one mortal wound among the many he faced and the firing stopped abruptly.

"Is it over?" Cassandra asked, she sounded just above him after no more gun fire sounded .

"Think so," Albert stated with pain in his slightly slurred voice. "nother problem," he thought, "dam".

Cassandra carefully made her way down and lifting Einstein, and Steward down till both were on the ground though Einstein jumped the last one.

Einstein immediately came over him and Albert pet him with his good hand, the one that had far less blood on it. Then he forced himself to stand using the pillar for support and Einstein. He limped toward the front end of the pyramid, not wanting Cassandra to see him. He limped because one bullet had struck his shoe and was stopped by their steel toe. Another seemed lodged in his thigh. Though the movement also made him both sweaty, light headed.

"You're limping," Cassandra stated coming over to him and grabbing his arm to help him. He gasped. She felt rather than saw wetness on her hand. "Were you shot?"

He was saved by another voice, "I think I hear someone in there!"

"We are," Cassandra called, "and I got a severely wounded man," she added, "we can't find the way out, because it dark in here and he is bleeding badly."

"There has to be a trigger or latch somewhere around here," another voice exclaimed.

"Sheck the nakes ead," Albert put in, definitely a slur in his speech, definitely! He swore again inwardly because a hospital stay, he didn't need, nor death, he also thought. He was loosing a lot of blood. Cassandra corrected his wording so those outside had a better chance of understanding. She guessed his meaning from her knowledge of Pyramid of Kukulcán.

Nothing happened at first then the door swung open and light flooded in. Albert's guess likely had been true. Cassandra drew her free arm up as she was suddenly blinded to shadow her eyes as police came in. Thus she didn't at first see how bad Albert was.

Two took Albert out of Cassandra's hands and helped him to the outside as Cassandra followed slowly with Einstein and Steward hiding in the fur around Einstein's collar.

The police carried Albert to a gurney and he was helped down as a pair of paramedics came asking him a barrage of question while they raised his feet. He answered these as adroitly as he could. They found each bullet hole removing shoes and slicing his pants and filled any bullet holes with gauze.

They also wrapped his temple with the same when they saw a bullet just glazed across his head. After all this, they also covered him with a thermal blanket to slow his movement into shock and unconcousness. The woman paramedic kept asking him questions though he was feeling a bit tired and just wanted to sleep.

They were started to take him out and load him into the ambulance when he stopped them and called out, "Ein-tein, get er -ighness's -arrier and bring ow Cass".

Einstein hurried off to obey him as Albert was taken out and put aboard an waiting ambulance. Cassandra followed and said, "Don't worry, I take care of them and get them home."

"Tanks Cass," he said feeling extremely tired and thirsty, "awso gold and gaves..." he added drawing out the last part.

"Buddy, hold still," the male paramedic stated, "I got to get this IV in you."

"Left bag in thingy py-mid, first sep. Ouse ees," he called out with some renewed strength though still heavily slurred. Its funny how you can be in so much pain and then noticed a needle going in wakes you back up. Thus he suddenly remembering she needed his keys.

Those words were the last thing Cassandra heard as the woman closed the doors and the ambulance took off moments later siren blaring. Cassandra sighed and thinking through the difficult words she guessed his keys were in a bag somewhere in

the pyramid. True this pyramid was much smaller than the real one but finding that bag might be difficult or impossible.

She sighed a worried sigh and turned to find Albert's missing bag and said a silent prayer for his safe recovery.

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Cassandra came out of the top of the pyramid with a police woman following her and Albert's bag hanging over her shoulder and right arm bandaged. It was a flesh wound, less than what Albert got when the bullet glazed his head. Of course heads also bleed more than arms.

Einstein was coming up the steps with the small carrier held in his jaws. He dropped it at her feet as she came around the altar. She bent down and opened it as the police woman said, "Looks too small for that dog."

"It's for Albert's cat, Her Highness," Cassandra said then she called several times, "Highness, here kitty, kitty, kitty..." nothing happened. Stopping she wondered if Her Highness would refuse to come, cats can be that way. Then Einstein let out a series of barks and Her Highness came down, jumping favoring one leg.

She limped three footed into the carrier, her head down, as Cassandra closed her in, frowning. She yowled softly once locked inside but Cass ignored her for now, she take care of her when they got to Albert's apartment and then to a vet in the morning if she needed one.

"Now I'm ready to head home," she told the cop beside her though she was actually heading to Albert's apartment. It was his keys she held in her free hand. She had no idea were hers were and as far as she knew they were still in the parking lot.

"Then follow me to my car," she replied. Together they headed down the stairs.

As they reached the bottom and started moving through the police, victims being cared for and criminals being herded together, when a well dressed darker skinned man stepped in front of her.

"Doctor Cassandra Gianchi, may I have a moment, please," he said.

"Sorry sir, but I'm taking her home. She has had a highly traumatic time," the officer replied stepping in front of her, "you can contact her when she returns to work."

"But that a highly expensive artifact she is wearing, and it looks to have been damaged."

"Be as that may be..." the officer started to say when Cassandra stepped beside her and said touching her arm she turned to her, "That's alright officer Hamilton, you are Professor Regilo, correct?" she asked, "we met a few years back in Argentina."

"Yes, I am, I'm pleased you remember me, that may make things easier," he answered with a nod of his head, "I am in the US to recover several articles stolen from our country. The political situation is a bit tenuous (bribe, drug lords and political posturing he meant) and so we like to get this resolved as quickly as possible without unwanted questions."

"To begin then, I was forced into wearing one this artifact," she admitted, "by those seeking my death. I do not know what happened to my clothes so officer Hamilton is taking me home to get some clothing. I will leave these artifacts at the Buffalo Museum of Science when I return to work on Monday if that is alright. Also, Detective Malfort saw golden objects under the altar as well".

She guessed that was what he meant by “old and graves” that there were gold and graves under the pyramid, she seen the graves herself or rather stumbled over one. She didn’t see the gold though, but then she was a different kind of investigator and her job normally didn’t include being shot at.

She added though, “I’d check there to see if any of that gold is your stolen objects. Further you should check with the police as the two dead men who were behind this also had items.”

“Thank you Doctor Gianchi, I will indeed,” he replied, “and as a great favor I hope you keep what happened to yourself and the police for now. As I said, things in Argentina are a bit uncomfortable because of this thief and the other issues I am not at liberty to discuss right now. The less known the better.”

“Understood,” she answered.

“Before you go though I wonder, where can that detective you named, Malfort was it? Where is he now, inside?”

“No he was taken to the hospital though I do not know which one,” she answered, “I can let you know on Monday or you can ask inside,” inside she added, “and if he still lives...” she start to break up with that admission and could not say more.

Luckily he saw this and said:

“I’ll ask about him inside and thank you, I can see you are cold. I’ll let you go so you can get into something more appropriate from the blasted frigid weather.”

With that he headed up to the sea of cops at the opening showing his ID. Cassandra headed off with the officer, his arguments far from her thoughts. The officer was carrying Her Highness who seemed rather too quiet in her carrier. Einstein traveled beside her looking miserable. Steward whom she’d scooped up and put inside the bag was now filling up on the cheese Albert always carried for him. What the kind lady didn’t know could only help him.

Yet not knowing this she only worried for Albert. The police officer looked over to her as they walked together and said, “I wouldn’t worry too much. I heard how he gave you instructions. If he had been dying, he wouldn’t have been able to do that.”

“But he was so weak...” she admitted, “and he’s speech was highly slurred.”

“Loss of blood will do that to a person, but those EMT’s are professionals. They’ll take good care of him.” Kind words Cassandra thought, lots of gun victims have qualified EMT and still bleed to death. Then her thoughts were broken as the woman said, “here’s my car,” as she unlocked the squad car. She opened the front first, “Do you want me to take that bag?” she asked as Cassandra climbed in but she declined.

“Well I’ll just get these two in back,” she added opening the back to putting in the carrier and then coaxed Einstein in right afterward who obediently went to the floor. Then she got in and they started out.

Cassandra stared out into the night as the cop turned onto Rt 6 and headed toward Buffalo still worrying about Albert. She known him for many years and never saw him so weak and helpless, not Albert. “Blood loss will do that” the cop had said “but blood loss also kills,” she added to herself.

“Please Lord keep him safe,” she prayed quietly to herself as they road past street lights that lit up and skeletal remains of Bethlehem Steel.

## Chapter 5: The Cover-up Confirmed

Albert lay watching the news from his bed. He lost a lot of blood so he was also drinking an orange drink that helped replaced what he lost and was hooked with many IVS. "I also had more stitches than my mother's quilt," he said to no one in particular. Though not a private room the other bed was empty.

They removed five bullets in all and he'd had several other wounds from grazed bullets and lost a part of his big toe. Detective Harrison had come by just earlier today when he heard Albert was awake and well enough to answer questions. When he heard what happened he said Albert had been lucky. With all those bullets flying and that man trying to kill him, he actually did better than he might have.

Just like Harrison to put things in perspective but he still wasn't happy and it wasn't the wounds though they itched something terrible. They offered him morphine but he declined any more drugs than Tylenol. It wasn't that he felt no pain or that he was a glutton for punishment but the truth was, his health insurance.

He had a high copay and he hadn't use it enough so now with the ambulance ride, and surgery to remove those bullets, and stitch him up, a few days in intensive care and now this lengthy hospital stay were going to break him even with the pay coming from Cassandra.

He sighed and switched the channels on the set. There was really nothing on TV during the day even with cable. He turned it off and grabbed the newspaper beside his bed. It was the Sunday Buffalo News from two weeks back.

He'd searched local News for information on the incident at near Bethlehem Steel. All he saw was that a gang appeared to have been hanging out near the steel mill and several members had died in the resultant gun fight. Police had shown up with the swat team and shut this down with the only loss of life to those that were shot before they got there.

He figured this was the incident, being covered up. There was no other explanation, and when talking with Detective Harrison, Harrison told him not to talk to anyone but the police. He said, the Lackawanna Steel plant was a touché subject already and finding people to reclaim and rebuild on that site was hard enough without the bad press.

Kale, who had stopped by on his way into work this morning with these Newspapers and had suspected as much. He'd told him what Detective Harrison had told him. Kale had replied, "That I know but isn't that a Superfund hot spot right now? I heard there was toxic wastes all though that plant."

"So they tell us," Albert had replied suddenly realizing he'd been wounded and dropped into toxic soil after he got those wounds. More to worry about, he thought but did not say this aloud. Kale left soon after giving him more deary thoughts.

"Politics" he grumbled pulling out the comics to read, he had some catching up to do. It was then a knock came at his door. "Come in," he said expecting another cop. Nurses and doctors didn't usually knock.

In came two men with suits. "Detective Malfort?" one asked him.

"Yes," he answered putting the papers aside, "How can I help you gentlemen?" He figured they were the South American men who Detective Harrison mentioned in passing might stop by.

"I'm Professor Regilo and this is my associate, Professor Maximo, we are from the South America. We were sent to recover certain antiquities."

“You both will excuse me if I do not get up,” he joked, “Detective Harrison mentioned you, Professor Regilo, but not your associate.”

“Professor Maximo had other issues to deal with the night I met the good detective. If you can be circumspect about this whole troubling issue there may be a substantial reward for the work I understand you played in solving this case.”

“How large are we talking about?” Albert asked starting to like what he was hearing.

“There is a \$10,000 dollar finder’s fee,” Professor Meximo replied. “and we understand from Professor Cassandra and Detective Harrison of the Buffalo Police department that you were instrumental in breaking this case that ended in the recovery of most of the items we were missing save the few that were heavily damaged.”

“I sorry I couldn’t recover them all but that crazy man order his men to fire on both me and that crazed man who assaulted me,” he added.

“We know, the fool Zambrano, a student of Doctor Yorio, the crazed man as you named him. Likely his was and his insanity rubbed off on that fool student of his,” Professor Maximo exclaimed.

“Believe me, both were insane by the time they both died. If I may ask, what going to happen to the pyramid they created?”

“Its going to return with us on a shipment out of NY City. If we can square everything with you today, we’ll be heading out that way following that shipment. they finished removing yesterday.”

Albert had lost few days, he knew after first entering the hospital while in critical care before being moved to intensive care. It had been close a couple of times he’d been told. So likely they snuck everything out when he was preoccupied with surviving.

Still, being discrete would cost him nothing and not being so would loose him everything so he agreed and even sighed the documents they proffered before him before they left. When the nurse came back in he asked for something stronger than Tylenol and he agree. He could now afford it.

~\*~

Albert wasn’t the only one to get a reward, or hush money if you prefer. Kale got enough to go to collage, which he did dropping to part time at the museum. Cassandra received enough for a special dig she been wanting to set up in Egypt and was now off to that dig.

She had stayed around till he got out and was strong enough to care for his pets. A better friend he could not have, he thought. He got his Volksvagan Rabbit out of the garbage using the money he got for the case but used most of the money from the South American University to buy a double in North Buffalo with a small back yard.

He used the upper floor because a quiet elderly man rented the lower apartment. The back yard was for Einstein and even had a tree though it was small and a foot of unshoveled snow. Einstein was in heaven

He also had bought one of those new computers, though he had Kale install everything including Microsoft Works with that funny paper clip trying to be helpful. He placed this beside Steward’s doll house which was expanded to include a wheel and merry-go-round fenced in play area in one of his bedrooms.

He had three bedrooms in all. He'd filled the other one with cat climbing toys and scratch posts and hanging feathered bird like things for Her Highness rehabilitation. He put back in the cat door once she got her cast off but for now she had a room to herself.

The last one, furthest from the front of the home, was his own room. Life was particularly good, he thought, as he started typing this story down in code. He couldn't write it as it really happened, he promised. That didn't stop him from creating a fictional version. Change enough details so none would be the wiser.

"No one would believe the truth anyway," he said to Einstein who looked up from warming his feet. He frowned at what he had written, deleted it by backspacing.

He bent down to pet Einstein then turned back to now the blank screen and started to typed again as Steward raced along setting his wheel to spin. He was getting better with this computer stuff but had to watch the spell check as it often got stuff wrong. Yet deleting and correcting stuff, looked worth the trouble, to White Out, now just to get this idea down....