

Monday 3:05 PM

Prologue

Four men followed the priest in single file. Their leather soles clicked over the Italian marble and echoed off the gilded dome high above. The satin swish of the priest's vestments, the only other sound, led them to the end of a long corridor and into a lavishly decorated room. Four wing-backed chairs, with silver crests embroidered into the deep blue velour, were arranged around a massive oak table. The opposing chair, a hulking mahogany relic trimmed in royal velvet, dominated the room. It waited, as they did, for the most important man in Rome to arrive.

In the palatial setting, each man seemed small and unimportant. Although they sat like truant schoolboys, these men represented the most powerful democracies in the western world—France, England, Germany, and the United States.

Facing the door that they had just passed through, they waited for the man who had summoned them the night before.

Like his phone call, his entrance came unexpectedly.

Without a sound, two sixteen-foot doors that appeared to be part of the wall behind them separated and opened into the room. A pair of Vatican guards, with axed spears and helmets gleaming, stood at attention as two more men shuffled silently into the chamber. After they entered, the guards pulled the wall shut.

Cued by the snap of the door's latch, the quartet turned and rose immediately to face their host.

The head of the Roman Catholic Church, supported by a portly cardinal in a black cassock and scarlet sash, tottered toward them. The two clerics circled the table slowly and made their way over to the heavy chair. With his right arm, the man in black steadied Saint Peter's representative. Under his other arm, the Pope's plump assistant carried a small golden chest.

After seating the Pope, and with great care, his pudgy hands centered the golden box in front of his superior. He pushed in the throne-like seat for the wisp of a man in white, and from inside his dark vestments, retrieved a small dagger. The blade, about five inches long, resembled an ice pick. He laid the dagger next to the chest, nodded deferentially, and stepped back behind the Pontiff.

The visitors studied the ornate container—a miniature replica of the Hebrew Ark of the Covenant. The chest, its workmanship stunning and intricate, was made from pure gold. A solitary beam of sunlight, funneled through a narrow window, struck the jeweled edges and lit the alternating rows of green and red gems.

Two kneeling angels, the centerpiece of the lid, dwarfed the box with their long, elegant wings. Upward they stretched, giving the illusion that the tips of their plumes touched. Both cherubs, locked in prayerful worship, heads bowed and hands clasped, were oblivious to the room's elegance or the stares of the powerful statesmen.

After clearing his throat, the Pope looked up at his guests for the first time. "Welcome gentlemen." His head bobbed to each dignitary. "Please, sit." Tainted with a Portuguese accent, his voice carefully enunciated each word in stilted English.

The foursome took their seats.

"We appreciate you coming," the Pope continued. "No doubt, our sudden communiqué intruded upon your busy schedule, eh? Please, our apology for disrupting your conference." He stopped and took a slow breath. "But despite this inconvenience, we felt to meet quickly is best, especially in the light of Dregov's election." His eyes moved carefully to each man's face. "We agree that the situation is now critical, no?"

Each of them nodded.

Although obviously an extreme effort for the aging man, the Pontiff hunched forward and pulled the chest closer. "We know, too, that our message was perhaps troubling. Preventing this situation is maybe not possible. Perhaps, not even necessary. In either case, your idea of government is not to be the same after today." His bony white fingers stroked the jeweled chest. "And, of course, our role as leaders of the free world is also to change much, if we are correct to assume Strekoza is behind Dregov."

The four men looked at one another but said nothing.

"So this is why we ask you to come," he said, caressing the papal crest carved into the front of the oblong box. "To show something to you. Something of great importance. Something that no one else besides the Pope has seen."

At this point, the youngest man, in his late forties, stood up. "Your Excellency," he said, "as President of the United States, I'd like to suggest a private dialogue with your Grace, before we go any further. Our intelligence in regard to the current Russian election warrants some very special considerations. We can't be too careful." He lowered his voice. "With all due respect, your Holiness, our latest reports from Incirlik would dictate a great deal of prudence." He nodded for emphasis. "We believe Strekoza to still be alive."

The Pope picked up the small stiletto on the table and, without looking up, touched the end of it to his index finger. He twisted the point slowly into his fingertip

and watched it twirl. Somewhere in the back of the room, the methodical ticking of a clock dominated the awkward silence.

The President leaned back but remained standing. "Your Grace?"

Deep in thought, still studying the dagger, the Pope finally spoke. "Yes, of course. Prudence does dictate this, does it not?"

"Naturally, your Grace. Tensions are high. There's a lot at stake right now."

For the first time, he raised his head and looked the American in the eye.

"Perhaps more than you know. This discretion you speak of, we appreciate very much. But such secrecy, President Stanton, is soon to be quite unnecessary."

He smiled at each of the seated men and laid the knife back on the table.

"But, your Grace—"

"We thank you for your concerns, but they are, eh, not required. Please, sit." His pale hand straightened the knife, then found its partner in a folded, chalky jumble against the bone-white frock. "Allow us to continue."

Stanton stepped backward toward his chair and meekly sat down.

"When a new Pope is to be chosen," the Pontiff said, "a ceremony takes place inside the Vatican. A very special ceremony. In his first minutes as Pope, this chest is brought to him. It is to be opened but once in his life, and only when he is completely alone. After he has done so, and the chest is once more secure, it is removed. It remains so, sealed and secure, never again to be opened, until the next Pope is elected."

He took a deep breath and exhaled. "Today gentlemen, this sacred tradition is to come to an end—with us."

The Pontiff cleared his throat again. "Many times the good Virgin appears to the faithful—words of hope, sometimes instructions, and at other times, a warning." He emphasized the last word and raised one eyebrow with his voice. "Near our home in Lisbon is the most significant vision, maybe. Our Lady spoke of three events that would change the world. We were but a small child—"

"Your Grace?" asked the biggest man, who spoke with a thick German accent. "You reference the three children in the field? In 1917, was it not?"

"Yes, of course. The holy Vision of Fatima." He crossed himself as he spoke.

All four men knew about Fatima and the three visions Mary had purportedly revealed to the children. The first two had been made public long ago, but the Vatican's attempts to guard the mysterious third prophecy were legendary. Lucia Santos, the only still-surviving child of the Fatima vision, finally agreed to write it down after World War II. In 1957, thinking she was dying, she had it delivered to Pope Pius XII for safe keeping. Nothing more was known about its contents, other than rumors that it connected the Bolshevik Revolution with the end of the world. Many had theorized on its portents—all of them ominous, but none of the last five Popes had ever spoken about the third secret publicly before now.

"Two are known well enough, I think. The damned, writhing in Perdition's flames, is the first." He stopped to make the sign of the cross over his lips. "Terrible for such small ones to witness. And the visions of war: the end of one, the Great War, and then the start of Hitler's madness. Terrible. Too much really. And to be so young, to see such things." He shook his head in disbelief. "Just terrible."

The clock ticked steadily louder.

"Ah, but the third," he said solemnly, staring beyond the four men, "must have been worst of all."

He paused and studied their faces. "For a generation, this third secret has been entrusted to us, kept from the world, at the Holy Madonna's request, and stayed here within these walls." He lowered his gaze to the chest and tapped it. "And her words have remained safe inside this box."

They studied the gleaming object with greater interest, leaning forward over the table's edge.

“That is, until today, no?” He looked up. “Is clear, is it not, what we say to you, gentlemen?”

They nodded slowly. It was as if they'd been enchanted, his soft words, strumming them to sleep.

“Pardon me, your Holiness,” the Frenchman said. “May I, please to clarify just one point? This third secret is to do with, uh, the Moscow crisis, yes? You propose a, uh, an . . . association to this Fatima visitation and to Strekoza as well?”

The Pope tugged the stiff collar away from his neck. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. We do not know so well yet. But soon enough, I think, maybe we know little bit more.” He winked at the American President. “After you read these holy words, we hope you will help us to understand more of what you may also know, and what we shall do if Strekoza is the Dragon she speaks of.”

He pulled a thin golden chain from underneath his vestments. A tiny key dangled from it. He stuck the key into the face of the jeweled chest, and with deliberate force, turned it one complete revolution. The old lock clicked, and like a safe deposit box, its lid sprung open lengthwise. With the same reverence as if he held the crown of thorns, he slid out a false bottom and gently set a worn suede folder on the table.

“Since our election—in 1977—no one has seen this open.” He raised his head. “Today, we shall show it to you, because you see, gentlemen—” His voice cracked. “We are to be the very last Pope.”

Their eyes shifted from the Pontiff to his assistant, whose blank face offered little explanation.

“We thank you, Cardeal Munoz,” he said, his gaze still fixed on them. “You may leave us now.”

The cardinal nodded with a half bow and left quickly.

The five leaders, silent and alone, listened to the ticking of the old clock.

All eyes focused on the chest.

The Pope picked up the knife and slid the ornamental blade along the folder's seam. The pressure snapped the wax seal, and a dark leather folder slipped free. It was held together with a twisted brown ribbon.

"We have waited long for this historic moment, gentlemen. Nothing is to be the same now." His hands trembled as he spoke. "We hope maybe a new age, to bring this peace and safety that she speaks of, is now upon us. Sister Lucia wrote down four copies of the vision. Although we knew not why she did so many, we know now pretty well, eh?" He smiled weakly. "The ink, it has faded. At first, it will seem to be too much to grasp perhaps." He removed the four long sheets from the folder and passed them across the table. "Please. As you read, keep your minds open to possibilities, hmm?"

The thick yellow parchment crackled in their hands. They lowered their heads. The German started to put on his glasses, but stopped. "Your Grace, the bottom. It is been cut out."

"Yes, of course. A portion is removed."

Eyes closed, the Holy Father's elbows rested on the arms of the chair, his chin in his hands. He blinked them open, trying to focus over his spectacles, and watched the men read what only a handful of others, now all deceased, had ever gazed upon.

When the final man looked up, ignoring their stunned expressions, he resumed. "Now you appreciate our summons better, no?" began the Pope. "Also, as we said, how much will change when this is revealed to the world. A most difficult step, we think—especially for the Orthodox religions. Is to be expected. Naturally, some will resist this idea of our Faith coming to an end."

"Sorry," the Prime Minister said, looking up from his copy. "Believe I missed that final bit, your Eminence. Which idea is that?"

"Of our Faith. Now that we will see, instead of just to believe, is no longer needed."

"What?" gasped the Englishman. "Finished? That is rather much, I'd say. Inconceivable, really."

"The end, Monsieur? Of the Christian faith? It cannot be so."

"Please, please, gentlemen. You misunderstand us." The Pope settled his glasses on the thin bridge between his glazed eyes. "We do not mean Christendom. Is to be all the faiths, but more of a maturing than an end. Despite this unbelievableness, even to Rome, you are persuaded much is explained about these, eh, disturbances now?"

"You suggest these radar anomalies to be alive? Actual living objects?" asked the Chancellor of Germany. "Not possible."

The Pope nodded. "Admittedly, is difficult to grasp. Especially for Christendom. However, is possible to do if our religious traditions are reexamined more thoroughly. And if we consider some, eh, other possibilities. Other explanations."

"Sorry, your Eminence, and forgive me for being forward," the Prime Minister said, putting his page down on the table, "but did I hear you correctly? 'Especially in Christendom'?"

"Yes, of course."

"Right, well, you see, that does seem a bit of a stretch now, doesn't it? What I mean to say is that it's a bit like—well, it's a bit like science fiction, really. Particularly, this notion about our being started up by them. These benefactors, for lack of a better term, returning straightaway—to avert our own extinction? I say, this whole business is quite—" He stopped and looked at the others.

The Pope waited, scrutinizing his English guest. "Yes, Prime Minister?"

"Well, it's very nearly—and I hate to put it like this, but very much like—"

"Heresy?"

"Why, yes, that's it exactly, your Eminence. Very nearly blasphemy, I should think. You're proposing a whole new religion? That won't sit well at all, you know? Not in the least."

"No, Mister Prime Minister. We propose not a new religion, but a convergence of them all. We realize the, eh, implications. Preparations are needed, of course, to make the announcement correctly. Please, though, to remember, is not the Vatican's proposal. It is our Blessed Virgin who speaks, eh?" He paused and leaned back in his chair.

"However, we must all admit that our origins are but theory. Interpretations. We try to understand, to fathom the universe, but we are, after all, only human. The Fatima vision, however incredible, however soon it is to be, explains much, does it not?"

The Pope turned toward the American. "We wonder, Mister President. Do you think it to be—science fiction?"

The American looked at the others and straightened his tie. "I guess I'm not sure what exactly to think, your Excellency. It's a little out of my realm of expertise, but I'm afraid I'd have to agree with my English friend. Seems a little far-fetched. But then again, I've never been a very religious man, as you know. I'd think you'd have a much harder time with it. More than any of us."

"Your Grace," interrupted the German. "If I might be so bold?"

The Pope turned and nodded.

"You know this to be authentic?" He held up the yellow paper. "What I mean, and I intend no disrespect, sir. Believe me." He touched his chest. "How are we to be confident that this is to truly happen? That they are real? Some measure of proof is needed, I think, whether it would be possible for such an occurrence, or not."

"I am agreed with the Chancellor, your Holiness. The French people would also need some, uh, documentation, as well. There is to be some thing to corroborate this prediction, yes?"

The Pope touched his wire-rimmed glasses. "Gentlemen, all governments will be skeptical without physical evidence—which is to be available soon enough, we think. The Holy Scripture speaks of such things—of heavenly signs—as this time nears. And already there has been too much to ignore, but have we not all done so? Have we not all

wondered what import these appearances hold? Even if not fully understanding their holy source or significance, does this not explain, and we think, move your heart of hearts, that Lucia's words *may* be true? Or is it mere coincidence that Dregov is elected and threatens our peace? That these lights appear more frequently each day? That the Holy Mother has predicted all this and that the arrival of our true Creator is near? Perhaps. But we think not."

The German gazed at the floor, considering the Pontiff's words. "It may be as you say," he said. "But some corroboration, your Grace? Some thing to hold onto. Some assurance for our people? We discuss events that will change the entire world. Or maybe our annihilation if Dregov should strike before their arrival. Surely some evidence—"

"Much is to be confirmed soon, we think. This we would not have shown to you if we did not think such events were upon us. Trust, gentlemen. It must be nurtured between us first, if we are to be ready for this—revealing. All flows from trusting one another. Who they are, and who we are, and who we are to become, depend upon our mutual interdependence as leaders. We must trust one another implicitly. Share what we know with each other regarding these happenings. Surely you each know more about these UFO's than you have said so far?"

Feet shuffled, but none offered what could be considered a response.

"Perhaps we can help you to see more clearly what is at stake, and why we must begin to trust one another better?"

For the next ten minutes, the Pope spoke of the third prophecy in vivid detail. He suggested that the Cold War, although officially over for years and the largest abuse of trust in the twentieth century, had never been more alive than on the day that Viktor Yevgheny Dregov assumed the office of the President of the Russian Federation. His administration, only a few days old, had resuscitated fears throughout the world—fears that had been as cold as Lenin's corpse. Fears that Strekoza was really behind it all.

Little was actually known of Strekoza—the Soviet Union's master spy. If he existed, which had not been confirmed since his disappearance during World War II, the rumor had him tucked deep inside the rolls of fat in the Russian intelligence system. Even the most privileged Soviet officers knew little of the KGB's overall structure, let alone those outside Moscow. The disconnected Directorates kept everyone unaware of who did what to whom.

Each of the four men sat still, trying to comprehend the enormity of the Pope's words. After he had finished, only the pendulum's rhythmic swaying, ticking forward with each swing, managed to break their combined silence.

“Then this Dregov chap, he could touch off the whole thing?” the Prime Minister asked finally. “This whole muddled up affair starts with him, and if he's alive, Strekoza as well?”

“Perhaps. Seems to us that Russia may be this cleansing the Virgin speaks of. We cannot be sure, but we could wait no longer.”

“Well, that's just splendid. We've got a bloody lunatic on our hands, and all we can do is wait for him to strike?”

The Pope nodded. “It would appear so.”

“That's it? What if Dregov launches? What if Strekoza is running the show? We just wait—hoping you're correct? Hoping this “god” intervenes? What then if we're amiss? We get routed by the Russians? That's brilliant!”

The other men stared at their hands, their feet, or even into space, anything to avoid eye contact with one another. Each leader had slowly acknowledged that if the Pope spoke the truth, the world had changed without their consent. It was already underway.

“Can this be?” the Chancellor mumbled under his breath. “How it is to end?” The Pope exhaled. “It is, to be sure, most difficult to say. You hold in your hands more than an old piece of paper, gentlemen. It is our mutual destiny—if we should survive this

present situation, of course. For all of us, it is to begin today. And what we do, or decide not to do, may determine our tomorrow. All of our tomorrows."

"Pardon me, your Holiness," murmured the Frenchman slowly, "but this is, uh, all permissible? This mingling you speak about, I mean, is possible to do this?"

"Yes, of course. The prophecies of the Christ child prove this to be so. Spirits become flesh? Preposterous, some said! Their arrogance, presuming upon the Holy Scripture their own limited interpretation, blinded them to the greatest miracle of all—Bethlehem. It still does this today." He sighed heavily. "But this time," he said, shaking his finger, "this time we know. We shall be ready. Baby . . . woman . . . alien . . . whatever. It matters not. We will not err, as our Israelite brothers once did, eh? This time, the One is to be welcomed back as the Savior-Creator. Our messiah will rescue us. Strekoza will become the pawn to the One who ushers in our new Earth. A new united world of peace and safety where threats of war are a distant memory. This is her promise to us, but have we avoided the absolution Sister Lucia wrote of?" He shook his head. "Who can say?"

The Pope rose tentatively, pushed away from the table, and moved gingerly to the back of the room toward the clock. "We pray only that we have not waited too long. Our sleep, each night is uneasy. Wondering. How to know, when to share this vision, and with whom?" He watched the pendulum's motion. "How you say? The box of Pandora, it is now open wide." He turned around. "Mister President, please. Finish for us your thoughts." He stepped toward the table and nodded. "Surely the great America knows something more of these events, these sightings, hmm?" His tone changed. It was almost cheery now.

"Well, it's a lot to absorb, assuming you're right, that is. You've had the last twenty years. Like the rest, I'm just trying to sort it all out. I guess it does seem to overlap somewhat."

"Indeed, Mister Stanton?" The Pontiff wobbled closer to the table and gestured. "Please, continue."

The President's eyes narrowed. "Well, not too much to add, I'm afraid," he said. "Near the end of the War, we did intercept some Nazi stuff headed for the Alps. Pretty advanced, really. Quite a jump past where our scientists were at. Which, of course, made us wonder how they'd gotten so far along. It was their stuff that actually put us over the top. Had we keyed in on the Pacific, like MacArthur wanted, instead of pushing on to the Rhine, well, things would've been a lot different." He stopped abruptly and shot a sidelong glance at the Chancellor, then back to the Pope. "We got one that they'd finished, then modified it at Los Alamos. And then dropped it, on Hiroshima."

The German shifted his weight but looked straight ahead.

"Nothing like this though," he continued. "I'm afraid that's the only connection I can see." He shrugged, then glanced at the other men, and then back at the Pope. "Sure we get sightings from pilots all the time. But no actual contact with another dimension or beings of light. Nothing like you're suggesting, anyway."

"You mean to say, the Blessed Virgin suggests, do you not, Mister President?" the Pope said. He lowered his head and peered over his spectacles.

"Well, yes, if you believe that sort of—but the point is that it's all highly speculative. I'm afraid we'd have a hard time getting behind this sort of thing publicly. We'd need a lot more proof, as Chancellor Schmid mentioned, and even then I'd be somewhat reluctant to go to Congress. We could set off riots all over the world unless we think this through. To be honest, your Grace, it'd be total pandemonium. To confirm Strekoza's still alive, let alone announce that God is an alien who's chemistry experiment turns out to be us. That's a lot to swallow. Without some real proof . . ."

"Yes, of course," said the Pope. "If nuclear absolution is near, as Our Lady warns, and their intervention is imminent, this proof will surely be provided in dramatic fashion. The longer Dregov waits, the more nervous the Israelis become, and the less

time there is to be for us to act. Perhaps things go beyond our control even now. Dregov must allow these weapon inspections.”

“That’ll never happen,” Stanton said. “Not in my lifetime, anyway. Dregov won't tip his hand, especially to Tel Aviv. Not unless Strekoza wants him to. He's just a figurehead anyway.”

"Precisely, Mister President. And assuming the Holy Mother is correct, and we can do no less, we may expect some new revelation soon. If it is to begin in the Middle East, and these beings permit this cleansing to begin, our response must be as one united nation to stop Dregov. We must come together. A clear course to lead the world, however the next few months unfold, is before us now. The burden of the Popes, carried these many years, is now shared for the first time by all of you. Perhaps they wait to help us, as some sort of test for the human race, but if Dregov does not change his intentions," he said, raising both arms, "what is to be done?"

His words echoed around the back of the room.

The Pope dropped his arms, came back to the table’s edge, and leaned against it. “One thing more you should know, Mister President. The third prophecy, we have not shown entirely to you, as Chancellor Schmid has noted. This is but part of the reading of Sister Lucia's vision." He paused for a breath. "We took the liberty to remove from the bottom something, eh, significant for America."

"What do you mean?" Stanton asked.

"The Holy Mother, she mentioned another incident—one that would precede this return, that would verify her vision for skeptics such as yourself Mister Stanton."

"Another attempt? To contact us?"

"Yes, Mister Stanton." He locked eyes with the American. "An attempt in your southwest, it would seem. In New Mexico.”

The President straightened. “Excuse me?"

"An encounter, she predicted, that would occur after the War—and that it would go poorly. Very poorly indeed." He steadied himself on the table and smiled.

"I'm not sure I know . . . "

"Ignorance? Fear? We may never know, eh? Such young pilots. It would be hard to say why they fired without provocation."

"I'm afraid the United States government . . . "

"Please." The Pope held up his hand. "Since 1957, the Vatican has waited for some explanation from your government, but none has come to us." He shook his head. "It appears none is coming today, eh? Very well. So be it. Perhaps the rest of Lucia's words refresh your memory?" The old man looked down over his spectacles. "Our new futures must begin full of trust, Mister President. Is critical to stop Strekoza's destruction. Please, tell us what happened in 1947—at your Roswell—when they tried to contact your aviators?"

The American glared at the Pontiff and stood up sharply. The other men, startled by his sudden reaction, leaned back, as did the Pope.

"This is absurd," the President said, shaking the paper as he stood. "It's completely unsubstantiated." He dropped Lucia's parchment on the table. "The government of the United States of America has no official comment on any paranormal activities, either now or fifty years ago. As far as we're concerned, any story concerning inter dimensional attempts to contact us is a total fabrication. So are these allegations. Gentlemen, if you'll excuse me. I think this meeting is finished."