The Church of the Homeless

The alarm on the old Timex woke her at 4 AM. She silenced the watch, and began to rub her hands together to relieve the aching that the stillness of sleep always caused. Then Sister Maria began the day as she always did. She swung her feet over the side of the cot, and slid them into the slippers that were always there. Next, she bent down and retrieved her glasses that were placed behind the slippers. She stood and stretched her aching body knowing that another busy day awaited her.

"Get up Karl. We have work to do," she said, as she began to gently shake the cot across from hers.

"I think I'll sleep in Maria. You start without me," Karl mumbled, as he rolled over and pulled the blanket over his head.

"Five minutes, no more. It's Monday, and a food shipment is due in two hours. You have to heat up the ovens, and there is prep work to do before breakfast. The homeless don't feed themselves," Maria said, as she patted him on the shoulder, and turned towards the bathroom.

She opened the door, flicked on the light, and turned to stare at the stranger in the mirror.

"My wrinkles have wrinkles, and my hair is going from gray to white. When did I get so old?' she asked herself, as she swept back her hair, and fastened it with a rubber band she always left on the side of the sink.

She stared at the mirror again, and saw the child she had once been standing on her tip toes beside her mother as her mother applied her makeup.

"You were so beautiful then. I wanted to be just like you. Why did you leave me? Why did God give you cancer?" Maria asked, in the voice of a devastated ten year old.

"Self-pity? Since when do I have time for self-pity?" she said, as she hiked up her robe and sat on the toilet.

Nature's business complete, she pulled her tattered robe tightly around her, and left the sacristy of the abandoned church. The Church of the Crucifixion was built in 1927, and thrived into the 1990s until the city began to disintegrate around it. Over a period of ten years the parishioners left, or died, and the church was left for those too poor to flee urban blight.

"I have to get more help. Karl is almost as old as I am, and there is so much work," Maria said, as she stepped into the old sacristy that had been converted into a kitchen.

Three commercial stoves, all different makes, stood where the altar had once been. Two large sinks and prep tables, stood against the left wall. The right wall was filled with donated cabinets where she stored her pots, pans, oven trays, and utensils.

"Two hundred meals a day, every day, and we still turn people away. I need a loaves and fishes moment," Maria said, as she stood in front of the stoves.

Turning, she glanced upward at the huge crucifix mounted on the wall above the stoves. The tortured face of Christ glanced down at her as if in pity.

"I don't know why I haven't sold that. The carving is exquisite and it's probably worth a fortune," she asked herself, as she studied the life size depiction of the final moments of Jesus of Nazareth.

The wooden carving had originally been whitewashed, the effect almost ghostly. Time, steam and heat from the ovens had faded the paint and stained the wood. It now had the appearance of an actual man nailed to a wooden cross. Some people found the effect quite disturbing.

Turning, Maria glanced down the long nave of the old church. All the pews had been removed and sold years ago. She had needed the room and the money. An assortment of tables, some wood, some metal, most old discarded folding tables donated by well-wishers, now filled the nave. The tables were surrounded by a similar assortment of creaky wooden and folding metal chairs. Amazingly the stained glass windows were still intact. Images from the New Testament were still as bright as the day they were installed.

"Father God, I'm getting so old. Who will help these people when I'm gone?" she said, then shook the self-pity from her mind.

She looked at her watch, sighed, and then turned back toward the sacristy. It was time to get dressed and kick Karl out of bed.

"Come on Karl, time to rise. I gave you fifteen minutes," Maria said, as she repeatedly shook Karl's large form.

Karl groaned and then threw back the blanket. He groaned again as he stood and stretched his six foot six form. Karl was a sixty five year old black man and had been with Sister Maria for over ten years. At well over three hundred pounds he was huge and Maria smiled as she imagined the cot breathing a sigh of relief as Karl walked toward the bathroom.

"Don't forget to warm up the ovens and start the biscuits," Maria said, as she stripped out of her gown and slipped her working dress over her head.

After putting on her shoes Maria picked up a note pad and pencil from under her cot and headed for the pantry beside the sacristy. She opened the door, and reaching up pulled the light chain hanging from the ceiling. It was then that she noticed the sleeping form huddled in the back left corner. He was clutching a half-eaten loaf of bread as he slept.

"I told Karl to check the building last night before he locked up," Maria said, as she gently prodded the man's foot with the toe of her right shoe.

She had learned the hard way that waking the homeless from too close could elicit a violent response. Most had been assaulted and robbed many times and were very defensive when approached while asleep.

"Wake up, my friend. You're not supposed to be in here," Maria said, as she prodded the man once again.

The man rolled over and sat up. He was of mixed race, as were many of the homeless that she fed. Most were broken souls, trapped outside of any supportive culture. Drugs, alcohol, mental illness, violence and an overwhelming sense of hopelessness were what they all had in common.

"I'm sorry. I came in late after all the food was gone. The smell of the meal was still in the air and I was very hungry. I'm sorry about the bread," he said, as he stood and handed the half-eaten loaf to Maria.

"That's quite all right. That's why we're here," Maria said, as she resealed the loaf and placed it on a shelf.

"We will be serving breakfast in a couple of hours. You can stay with us and eat again. If you want you can have a seat at one of the tables. I have a lot of work to do," Maria said, as the man approached her.

Maria had run the food kitchen for seventeen years. By now she could read people's intentions with one glance. She saw no malice in this man's eyes, only a familiar sadness or perhaps pity.

"I am Maria Albagetti. And you are?" Maria said, as she thrust her hand forward.

"Abia . . . Abia Saviari, kind lady, and since I ate your bread I would like to repay you," Abia said, as he grasped Maria's hand in both of his hands and held it.

"There's no need for repayment, but I could use some help," Maria said.

"You have a good heart, Sister Maria. I see it in your eyes and feel it in your bones. I would be glad to help you," Abia said, as he bowed in respect.

"How did you know who I was . . . that I was a nun?" Maria asked, her hand still held firmly by the strange man.

"Ahh, everyone around here talks about Sister Maria. They say you have fed thousands and have tried to help them with their problems," Abia said.

Maria slowly withdrew her hand as she continued to stare at his face. Long curly black hair framed a light brown oval face with gray blue eyes that were almost oriental in appearance.

"Saviari? Is that Italian?" Maria asked.

"Ohh, I'm a little bit of everything," Abia said and laughed.

Maria smiled at his laughter, which was rare for her . . . to smile at anything. She found his laughter rich and buoyant. Her heart began beating faster, but she didn't know why.

"I have a food truck arriving soon. We've been very lucky. A major chain has over bought and needs to get rid of excess stock. They get a tax credit and we get a blessing," Maria said, eager to change the subject.

"The room where you slept will need to be cleaned a bit and straightened up. All of the canned and dry goods will go in there. We have two refrigerators and a freezer. If they happen to send any perishables, that's where they go. I'll show you where they are," Maria said, as she turned and walked out of the pantry.

As she turned she almost ran into Karl's chest.

"Who's this?" Karl asked, as he stared over Maria at the stranger in the pantry.

"Karl, it seems we have been blessed once again. The Lord provides for the needy," Maria said, as she gestured towards Abia.

"He's going to unload the truck so we can focus on breakfast. Karl this is Abia . . . Sala . . . ?" Maria said, embarrassed that she had already forgotten his last name.

"Saviari, Abia Saviari. It is a pleasure to meet you my friend?" Abia said, as he reached out to shake Karl's hand.

"Karl Jackson. Good to meet you," Karl said, as he reached out and grasped Abia's hand, as Maria stepped past the two men.

Karl held his grip and drew Abia closer and said, "Listen . . . friend . . . Sister Maria is very trusting. Me . . . not so much. I grew up around here. I don't trust anybody I don't know. You mess with her and I will bust you up. Understood?" Karl said, as he squeezed Abia's hand with more than a little force.

"She is a kind soul. I would never hurt her," Abia said, as he returned Karl's squeeze.

Karl was surprised at the smaller man's strength. Whatever he had done for a living it had given him strong hands.

"Just so we understand each other. If you're straight with her, then we're cool," Karl said, as he released his grip, turned, and walked away.

"I appreciate that you protect her. We will have no problems," Abia said and smiled.

"Karl, you haven't turned the ovens on. You know they take almost an hour to heat up," Maria yelled from somewhere behind the two men.

"On my way, Maria. It's all under control," Karl said, as he glanced over his shoulder at the smiling face of Abia.

Abia glanced around him. The pantry was probably fifteen feet on a side. The shelves were maybe ten percent full.

"Yes, this shipment will be a blessing and just in time," Albia said, as he began sorting and consolidating the existing supplies.

"So where'd you find this one?" Karl asked, as he walked past Maria.

"He was sleeping in the pantry? Somebody didn't check the place before he locked up last night," Maria said, as she updated the inventory ledger.

"Oh yes I did, including the pantry. He must have found an open window or something," Karl said, as he turned on the ovens.

"This church has four windows that open. They're in the back and I made sure they were all secure last night. That leaves the front, side or back doors. Either that or he was hiding in here somewhere," Maria said.

"I checked all the doors and all the windows and all the hiding places, so he must be Santa Claus and came down the chimney," Karl said.

"We don't have a chimney, Karl," Maria replied, never looking up at the huge man standing beside her.

"Yes Sister," Karl replied, as he turned away and went for his mixing bowls.

He always called her 'Sister' when she was being stubborn and he was starting to get angry with her.

The truck came as scheduled though not with the expected shipment. Maria sighed when the driver lifted the rear door. There were a dozen boxes of canned goods, a few bags of flour, but little else.

"I was told that we were getting a truck load of supplies. Why so little?" Maria asked the driver.

"Lady, this is my fifth stop. Food pantries all over the metro area are hurting. You're lucky there's anything left. I told the people at Helping Hand that I had another stop or they would have taken it all," the driver said, as he handed Maria a receipt to sign.

"Well, thank you for remembering us. Anything received is a blessing," Maria said, as she signed the receipt.

The truck driver smiled and said, "Tell your man to close the gate when he's done unloading. I don't unload, union rules," the driver said, as he turned and jumped in the cab of his truck.

Maria turned and looked up at Abia.

"Well, I was hoping for more. Unless I can find another source we're going to run out of food this week. I was hoping for enough to get us through Easter this Sunday. We won't even make it to Good Friday," Maria said, as she shook her head and sighed.

"I'll unload, Sister. Maybe there's more than you think," Abia said, as he smiled and lifted himself into the back of the truck.

"I've got to help Karl with breakfast. Then I have to start making some calls. We have to find more food," Maria said, as she glanced into the back of the truck, sighed, and walked back into the church.

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"So tell me the good news, Maria. Was it as good as you hoped?" Karl asked, as he began kneading the dough for the morning's biscuits.

"No, it wasn't a good load. We'll run out of food by Wednesday at the latest. I'll help with the prep. Then I have to start making calls," Maria said, as she walked to the sink and began washing her hands.

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An hour later, Maria unlocked the front doors, and let in the day's volunteers. On a good day seven or eight people would show up to help with the day's work. This wasn't a good day.

"Jose, Alfred, Denique, thank you for coming. Your help is always appreciated," Maria said, as she shook each person's hand as they walked into the church.

"There was a couple more, but they booked when they saw how few had showed up," Denique said, as she greeted Maria.

"Well, it's their loss. Karl is cooking up a fine breakfast. Please, talk to Karl and see what he needs. I have to go check on something," Maria said.

Maria knew that the truck had long gone and steeled herself for how little food was going to be in the pantry. Karl was serving up food for the three helpers as she walked past and turned the corner. The pantry light was still on at the end of the hall and she could see Abia still stocking shelves.

She reached the doorway and stopped. The shelves and most of the floor space were packed with food.

"I put all the boxes out back under the breezeway. I couldn't find a recycling bin," Abia said, as he tore open a box filled with huge canned hams and began placing them on the shelf to his right.

Maria stepped into the room and stared at the abundance of food. The pantry had never been this full.

"How? The truck was almost empty," Maria said, as her eyes began to tear.

"There was a tarp in the back. Most of this was covered up. There was a lot more than you thought. Let me finish here while you go check the refrigerators and the freezer," Abia said, as he placed the last canned ham on the shelf.

Maria smiled and shook herself. Then she turned and almost ran down the hall and turned into the small room containing the two battered industrial sized refrigerators and the huge freezer. The refrigerator on the left had been empty. It was now filled with eggs and milk. The door shelves were packed with butter. Her hands were shaking as she closed the door.

She wiped a tear from her face as she opened the doors on the second fridge. It was filled with vegetables of every description. She slowly closed the doors as tears began to stream down her face. Her whole body was shaking as she turned and walked over to the freezer. She lifted the heavy lid and stared in amazement at what had to have been a dozen huge turkeys. She picked up one label and the bird weighed twenty-two pounds and it wasn't the largest. Below the turkeys she could see a layer of beef ribs on one side and pork ribs on the other. In between were stacked huge roasts and hams. The freezer was four feet tall and it was filled to the top.

Maria closed the lid, and turning, saw Abia standing in the doorway with a huge smile on his face.

"Like I said, there was a lot under that tarp in the back of the truck," Abia said, as he stepped into the room and hugged Maria.

"I don't understand. I swear there were only a dozen boxes of canned goods in that truck. I didn't even see a tarp," Maria said, as she held Abia at arm's length and stared up into his eyes.

"Obviously you were mistaken," Abia said, as he began to chuckle.

"I think that you have the kindest eyes that I have ever seen," Maria said, then pushed herself away and wiped tears from her face.

"I'm sorry. That was too personal. I'm just surprised at the amount of food. I feel like this is a dream and I'll wake up and be disappointed." Maria said, as she turned and stared at the refrigerators and freezer.

"No, the food's real. You have more than enough to get you through Easter and beyond. The Lord provides," Abia said.

"Yes, He does. I have to tell Karl. He'll think I'm exaggerating," Maria said, as she rushed part Abia and ran down the hall.

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Karl began laughing as he closed the freezer.

"I really thought you had gone over the edge, but when I saw the pantry and now this. Maria, this is an entire truck load, a large one. This is restaurant quality stuff not leftovers. I'll cook roasts for Good Friday. The turkeys and hams for Easter, but we have to be careful and only cook what we think we'll use. We need to make this last. I need to think about this," Karl said, as he began to laugh and picked up the small woman and spun in a circle.

"Where's Abia? I want to talk to him about that truck. How did he unload all this in less than an hour?" Karl asked, as he set Maria back on her feet.

"He was here when I went to get you. Maybe he's out front eating. Which reminds me, people are probably lined up outside," Maria said, as she checked the time on her watch.

Abia was nowhere to be seen. The three helpers hadn't seen him leave, but the day and the hungry demanded their attention. Three meals a day is what they were determined to provide. The servings weren’t always large, but they kept people from starving. The locals said that you won't go hungry at Sister Maria's, but you won't get fat either.

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Friday morning came and Maria awoke at 4 AM as always. Karl was reluctant to get out of bed, as always.

"Good Friday, Karl. Those roasts should have thawed over night, but they'll take hours to cook," Maria said, as she shook Karl's cot.

Karl groaned and rolled over, as always.

"Five minutes," Maria said, as she began her morning routine.

When she had dressed and crossed into the sacristy she found Abia staring up at the crucifix above the stoves.

"Abia, it's good to see you. I was worried when you just disappeared. Where have you been for the last few days?" Maria said, as she walked over and hugged him.

"My father had me out visiting and talking with some friends," Abia said, as he continued to stare upward at the Crucifixion.

"Your father? Does he have a place nearby? I'd like to meet him sometime," Maria said, as she joined Abia in studying the sculpture.

"He has many houses in many places. One day he will welcome you into his home. I'm sure of it. All you would have to say is that Abia sent you," Abia said, as he smiled down at the elderly woman.

"He must be very wealthy," Maria said.

"Yes, he is very wealthy," Abia said.

"Then why were you sleeping in my pantry?" Maria asked.

"I like to get out amongst the people and see how they are really doing. Sometimes it makes me very sad to see how they treat each other," Abia said.

"I think I understand now. You had another shipment of food sent here that day. I knew that truck was mostly empty," Maria said.

"I swear to you, Maria, all of the food that fills your pantry, the refrigerators and freezer came from that truck," Abia said, as he held his right hand over his heart.

"Know that where ever the food came from, that you have my eternal gratitude. It was a Godsend," Maria said, as she bowed her head.

Abia laughed and said, "It was my pleasure, but what can I do for you today. This will be the last time I will visit here. My father has need of me elsewhere," Abia said.

"I'm sorry to hear that, but I could use some help. It's Good Friday and we'll be very busy thanks to you. Can you cook? Karl could certainly use some help in the kitchen," Maria said.

"I have many skills and one of them just happens to be cooking," Abia said, as he hugged Maria again and kissed her on both cheeks.

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Breakfast and lunch went well. Word passed quickly that Sister Maria's pantry was flush and the hungry came by the hundred. Volunteers were still cleaning up in the nave and the kitchen at 2 PM.

"Karl, I'm exhausted. I haven't sat down since seven this morning," Maria said, as she settled onto a bench beside Karl.

"We haven't had this many people in a long time. If you hadn't sent Abia to help me I don't think I would have made it. He's a hard worker and knows his way around a kitchen. I asked him who taught him how to cook and he said his mother. Then he burst out laughing. I didn't get the joke and he just walked away," Karl said, as he sipped from a mug of hot coffee.

"Will we be ready for tonight? They'll start showing up at 7PM," Maria asked.

"Thanks to Abia, yes we'll be ready. As soon as lunch was prepared he disappeared. I found him an hour later back in cold storage. He had set up a table and trays and was prepping the four biggest roasts. The smell was intoxicating and he hadn't even started cooking yet," Karl said.

"The man knows his spices. Each one of the roasts is spiced in a different way. I asked him where he learned to cook like that and he just laughed and said his family was from everywhere. I hope he changes his mind and stays. I could learn a few things from him," Karl said, as he wiped sweat from his brow.

"I know. We've only been around him for a couple of days and I'll miss him when he leaves," Maria said, as she leaned back against the cool stone wall.

"And here he comes," Karl said, as Abia appeared and dropped a heavy tray loaded with the four roasts and began transferring them to individual trays prior to placing them in the ovens.

After placing two in one oven and two in another, Abia paused and glanced up at the crucifix above him. After a minute he sighed, wiped his face with his apron and walked away.

"What was that about?" Karl asked.

"I have no idea, but I've seen him staring at the crucifix before," Maria said.

"We all have a story, young lady. We all have a story," Karl said.

Maria smacked him on his thick arm, stood up with a groan and said, "What we have is more work to do."

"Yes, Sister Maria," Karl said, and received another playful smack on the arm as he rose to his feet.

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The rain began to fall at 5PM. It was just a drizzle, but the dark clouds overhead foretold a greater storm as the evening progressed. The lines began to form outside the old church at 6PM despite the weather. Word had passed that roast beef was on the menu and this was a delicacy that many had not tasted in more than a decade.

As the drizzle increased, Maria opened the doors early and provided hot coffee, tea and cocoa for those that had become chilled by the rain. These people were used to deprivation, but she would not have them suffer unnecessarily. The storm increased and more people began to pack into the Church of the Crucifixion until there was no more room.

"Karl, we have to do something. I hate to say this, but we're going to have to turn people away. We can't serve this many people," Maria said.

"I'll do it. They won't like it, but I'll get the doors closed," Karl said, as he left his stove and began to make his way through the thick crowd.

Karl reached the large wooden doors, shut one and locked it. As he grasped the other door a pistol was shoved under his jaw and he was forced back against the wall.

"Ain't nobody shuttin' this door, big man, not even you. I'm eating my fill tonight or somebody gets shot," the young man said.

"No need for that, brother. It's just getting too crowded in here," Karl said, as he considered his options.

"Like I said, I'm getting' mine. Everybody else can go to the devil for all I care," the young man said, as he stepped back and leveled his gun at Karl's chest.

"Let's me and you go to the front of the line. I'm hungry now," the young man said, as he gestured for Karl to lead the way.

Karl looked at the pistol and saw a Colt model 1911 .45. If it had been a .38 or even a 9mm he might have chanced jumping the boy, but he knew that a .45 from this range would bust him up inside.

"Why don't you put the gun up? Nobody's wantin' any trouble. It's Good Friday. We're just here to eat and go away peaceful," Karl said over his shoulder as he made his way to the sacristy.

"Good Friday? Some fool got himself killed back in the day. That don't mean nothin' to me," the young man said, as they reached the front of the nave and the tables in the front.

"Maybe it should mean something to you," Abia said, as he stepped from the crowd and stepped between Karl and the young man.

"Abia, don't do nothing stupid. Just get the boy some food," Karl said, as he grasped Abia's shoulder and tried to push him away.

But he couldn't move Abia.

Abia stared at the gun and then stared into the eyes of the young man that stood before him.

"You have a choice now. You always have a choice," Abia said.

"You the one with a choice now, dumbass. Either get out the way or I'll shoot your ass," the young man said.

"You don't have to fall into the pit. You don't have to suffer there. You still have a choice," Abia said, as he stepped closer to the young man.

"I ain't got no choices. I got this gun and that gives me all that I want. Now you either get out of my way or I'll kill you," the young man said.

"Free will to choose," Abia said, as he smiled at the young man.

"Here's my choice," the young man said, as he shot Abia in the right side.

The sound of the weapon going off was followed by screams of panic. The young man smiled as Abia fell to the floor in front of him. He didn't notice Karl until a massive fist impacted on the right side of his face. The pistol fell to the floor, smoke still drifting from the muzzle.

Many scattered and ran from the old church. The sound of gunfire was familiar and many reacted as they always did. Others stood transfixed as Abia rose from the floor. His right hand covered the wound that bled freely and puddled on the floor at his feet.

"You all have a choice. That is the way that he wants it. You have a free will. All you have to do is believe. Why are so many of you so foolish?" Abia said, as he staggered up the two stairs to the sacristy.

He turned and faced the few people remaining in the nave. He placed his feet together and stood with his arms raised above his shoulders.

"All . . . you have to do . . . is . . . believe," Abia said, as his head dropped to his right and his body began to rise in the air.

Roasted potatoes and green beans still simmered on the hot surfaces as he rose above the stoves.

His body approached the Crucifix and began to glow as it merged with the carved wooden image until Abia's face peered down from the cross at all the people that remained in the Church of the Crucifixion. The gunshot wound merged with the spear wound and began to freely bleed. Most of the remaining people screamed in terror and fled. A few, including Maria and Karl fell to their knees and began to weep.

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Maria stood beside Karl as the young man was arrested and hauled away. The police weren't sure what he was going to be charged with. He had discharged a firearm, but there was no body, no corpse. They weren't sure what to make of the story. They suspected that drugs were involved.

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"Look, Sister Maria, I've heard about you and the good work you do for the homeless. I've also heard that you're broke and your place is going to be shut down. If this is some kind of a scam to get some publicity and funding just let me know now and we'll go easy on you," Detective Crowley said.

"Did you see the blood? He bled. Our Lord suffered, died for us and bled from the cross," Maria said, for the tenth time in the interview room.

"Yeah, the blood's getting analyzed. It's human, but we want to know whose it is. Where did you get the blood sister? Is it yours or Karl's? Please tell me that you didn't kill someone," Crowley said.

Maria sighed and rubbed her eyes. All she could think about was what she had seen and that the homeless that depended on her had not been fed for the three days that she and Karl had been held in jail. The fact that they both had been charged with fraud and conspiracy to commit a felony didn't bother her at all.

"Listen Sister, I'm a Catholic. I believe in the Holy Trinity, but these aren't the End Times and Jesus isn't supposed to come back until then. That's what the Bible says. So this story that you, Karl, and a few other less than reputable witnesses have told us about some vagrant being shot and then rising into the air and merging with the old crucifix above your stoves doesn’t float with me," Crowley said, as he rose from his chair.

"Father Alonzo, my parish priest, is giving me a lot of grief about this. He says we're picking on an old nun who's just trying to help the homeless. I tell him I'm just trying to do my job. So do us both a favor and tell me the truth," Crowley said, then shook his head as Maria remained silent.

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"Yes Monsignor, I've heard about the case. It's all over the internet. It strikes me as ludicrous if I must be honest," Cardinal Belinse said, as he sat behind his ornate 15th century Italian desk.

"I understand your concerns, Your Eminence. But I have some new information that you might find interesting," Monsignor Alliante said.

"Monsignor, I have a meeting with His Holiness in one hour. You have ten minutes," Cardinal Belinse said.

"It involves the blood, Your Eminence, the blood that reportedly bled from the wound in the side of the Crucifix . . . we have analyzed it in great detail," Monsignor Alliante said.

"Nine minutes, Monsignor," Cardinal Belinse said.

"It is human, as had previously been reported, but it is quite unusual," Monsignor Alliante said.

"How so?" cardinal Belinse said, as he became mildly interested.

"It's the DNA, Your Eminence. The DNA in a blood sample can be analyzed for racial background. It can tell you who your forbearers were, where they came from," Monsignor Alliante said, becoming more animated as he spoke.

"Seven minutes, Monsignor. Get to the point," Cardinal Belinse said, his interest beginning to wane.

"Your Eminence, this sample showed characteristics of every racial stereotype on the planet. It is an impossibility. Millions of individuals have had their blood analyzed to find their heritage, where they came from. Not one sample has ever been found to have all these characteristics," Monsignor Alliante said.

"Then the answer is simple. Your analysis is flawed or the sample has been doctored to show these results. Five minutes," Cardinal Belinse said, as he began to pack his briefcase.

"Your Eminence . . . two things. We went to the site and retrieved our own samples. Three separate samples gave the same results from three different labs. Second . . . we compared the results with a certain item in possession of the Vatican . . . a certain spear head. The results were the same. We had always assumed that the samples from the spear head were corrupted by time and therefore unreliable. I think we were wrong," Monsignor Alliante said.

Cardinal Belinse stopped packing his briefcase, placed his elbows on his desk and rested his chin on his crossed fingers.

"Now you have my attention. But if your data is flawed and you make me look foolish to His Holiness I will have you assigned to a Parrish deep in the Amazon forest for the remainder of your life. Is that understood?" Cardinal Belinse said.

"Yes, Your Eminence, but there is no mistake. This sample is identical to the sample retrieved from the Spear of Destiny," Monsignor Alliante said.