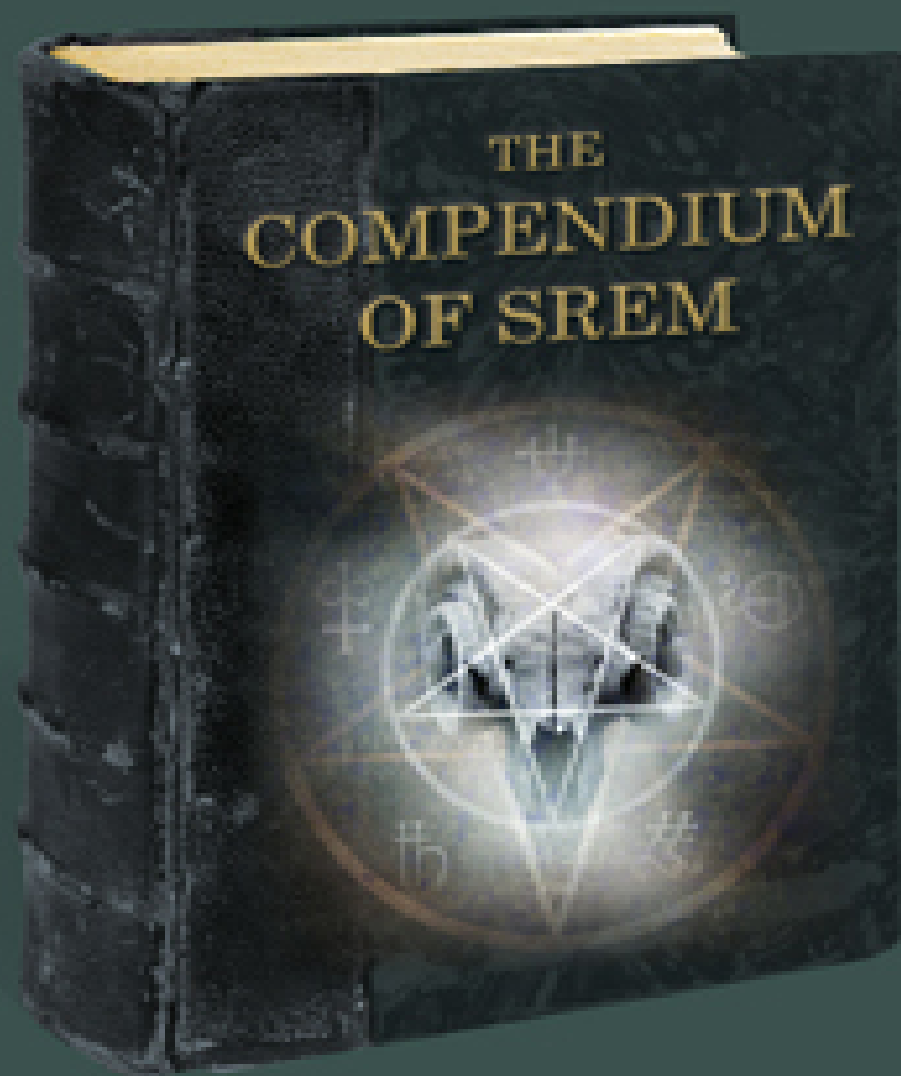


#1 *New York Times*—Bestselling Author

F. PAUL WILSON



BIBLIOMYSTERIES

Short Tales about Deadly Books

The Compendium of Srem

F. Paul Wilson



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1

Tomás de Torquemada opened his eyes in the dark.

Was that ... ?

Yes. Someone knocking on his door.

“Who is it?”

“Brother Adelard, good Prior. I must speak to you.” Even if he had not said his name, Tomás would have recognized the French accent. He glanced up at his open window. Stars filled the sky with no hint of dawn.

“It is late. Can it not wait until morning?”

“I fear not.”

“Come then.”

With great effort, Tomás struggled to bring his eighty-year-old body to a sitting position as Brother Adelard entered the tiny room. He carried a candle and a cloth-wrapped bundle. He set both next to the Vulgate Bible on the rickety desk in the corner.

“May I be seated, Prior?”

Tomás gestured to the room’s single straight-back chair. Adelard dropped into it, then bounded up again.

“No. I cannot sit.”

“What prompts you to disturb my slumber?”

Adelard was half his age and full of righteous energy—one of the inquisitors the pope had assigned to Tomás four years ago. He seemed unable to contain that energy now. The candlelight reflected in his bright blue eyes as he paced Tomás’s room.

"I know you are not feeling well, Prior, but I thought it best to bring this to you in the dark hours."

"Bring what?"

He fairly leaped to the table where he pulled the cloth from the rectangular bundle, revealing a book. Even from across the room, even with his failing eyesight, Tomás knew this was like no book he had ever seen.

"This," he said, lifting the candle and bringing both closer. He held the book before Tomás, displaying the cover. "Have you ever seen anything like it?"

Tomás shook his head. No, he hadn't.

The covers and spine seemed to be made of stamped metal. He squinted at the strange marks embossed on the cover. They made no sense at first, then seemed to swim into focus. Words ... in Spanish ... at least one was in Spanish.

Compendio ran across the upper half in large, ornate letters; and below that, half size: *Srem*.

"What do you see?" Adelard said. The candle flame wavered as his hand began to shake.

"The title, I should think."

"The words, Prior. Please tell me the words you see."

"My eyes are bad but I am not blind: *Compendio* and *Srem*."

The candle flame wavered more violently.

"When I look at it, Prior, I too see *Srem*, but to my eyes the first word is not *Compendio* but *Compendium*."

Tomás bent closer. No, his eyes had not fooled him.

"It is as plain as day: *Compendio*. It ends in i-o."

"You were raised speaking Spanish, were you not, Prior?"

"As a boy of Valladolid, I should say so."

"As you know, I was raised in Lyon and spent most of my life speaking French before the pope assigned me to assist you."

To rein me in, you mean, Tomás thought, but said nothing.

The current Pope, Alexander VI, thought him too ... what word had he had used? *Fervent*. Yes, that was it. How could one be too fervent in safeguarding the Faith? And hadn't he previously narrowed procedures, limiting torture only to those accused by at least two citizens of good standing? Before that, any wild accusation could send someone to the rack.

"Yes-yes. What of it?"

"When ..." He swallowed. "When *you* look at the cover, you see *Compendio*, a Spanish word. When I look at the cover I see a French word: *Compendium*."

Tomás pushed the book away and struggled to his feet.

"Have you gone mad?"

Adelard staggered back, trembling. "I feared I was, I was sure I was, but you see it too."

"I see what is stamped in the metal, nothing more!"

"But this afternoon, when Amaury was sweeping my room, he spied the cover and asked where I had learned to read Berber. I asked him what he meant. He grinned and pointed to the cover, saying 'Berber! Berber!'"

Tomás felt himself going cold.

"Berber?"

"Yes. He was born in Almeria where they speak Berber, and to his eyes the two words on the cover were written in Berber script. He can read only a little of the writing, but he saw enough of it growing up. I opened the book for him and he kept nodding and grinning, saying 'Berber' over and over."

Tomás knew Amaury, as did everyone else in the monastery—a simpleminded Morisco who performed menial tasks for the monks, like sweeping and serving at table. He was incapable of duplicity.

"After that, I gave Brother Ramiro a quick look at the cover, and he saw *Compendio*, just as you do." Adelard looked as if he were in physical pain. "It appears to me, good Prior, that whoever looks at this book sees the words

in their native tongue. But how can that be? How can that *be*?”

Tomás’s knees felt weak. He pulled the chair to his side and lowered himself onto it.

“What sort of devilry have you brought into our house?”

“I had no idea it was any sort of devilry when I bought it. I spied it in the marketplace. A Moor had laid it out on a blanket with other trinkets and carvings. I thought it so unusual I bought it for Brother Ramiro—you know how he loves books. I thought he could add it to our library. Not till Amaury made his comment did I realize that it was more than simply a book with an odd cover. It ... ” He shook his head. “I don’t know what it is, Prior, but it has certainly been touched by devilry. That is why I’ve brought it to you.”

To me, Tomás thought. Well, it would have to be me, wouldn’t it.

Yet in all his fifteen years as Grand Inquisitor he had never had to deal with sorcery or witchcraft. Truth be told, he could give no credence to that sort of nonsense. Peon superstitions.

Until now.

“That is not all, Prior. Look at the pattern around the words. What do you see?”

Tomás leaned closer. “I see crosshatching.”

“So do I. Now, close your eyes for a count of three.”

He did so, then reopened them. The pattern had changed to semicircles, each row facing the opposite way of the row above and below it.

His heart gave a painful squeeze in his chest.

“What do you see?”

“A ... a wavy pattern.”

“I kept my eyes open and I still see the cross hatching.”

Tomás said nothing as he tried to comprehend what was happening here. Finally ...

“There is surely devilry on the covers. What lies between?”

Adelard's expression was bleak. "Heresy, Prior ... the most profound heresy I have ever seen or heard."

"That is an extreme judgment, Brother Adelard. It also means you have read it."

"Not all. Not nearly all. I spent the rest of the afternoon and all night reading it until just before I came to your door. And even so, I have only begun. It is evil, Prior. Unspeakably evil."

He did not recall Adelard being prone to exaggeration, but this last had to be an overstatement.

"Show me."

Adelard placed the tome on the table and opened it. Tomás noticed that the metal cover was attached to the spine by odd interlacing hinges of a kind he had never seen before. The pages looked equally odd. Moving his chair closer, he reached out and ran his fingers over the paper—if it was paper at all—and it felt thinner than the skin of an onion, yet completely opaque. He would have expected such delicate material to be marred by wrinkles and tears, but each page was perfect.

As was the writing that graced those pages—perfect Spanish. It had the appearance of an ornate handwritten script, yet each letter was perfect, and identical to every other of its kind. Every "a" looked like every other "a," every "m" like every other "m." Tomás had seen one of the Holy Bibles printed by that German, Gutenberg, where each letter had been exactly like all its brothers. The Gutenberg book had been printed in two columns per page, however, whereas the script in this compendium flowed from margin to margin.

"Show me heresy," Tomás said.

"Let me show you devilry first, Prior," said the monk as he began to turn the pages at blinding speed.

"You go too fast. How will you know when to stop?"

"I will know, Prior. I will know."

Tomás saw numerous illustrations fly by, many in color.

“Here!” Adelard said, stopping and jabbing his finger at a page. “Here is deviltry most infernal!”

Tomás felt his saliva dry as he faced a page with an illustration that moved ... a globe spinning in a rectangular black void. Lines crisscrossed the globe, connecting glowing dots on its surface.

“Heavenly Lord! It ... ” He licked his lips. “It moves.”

He reached out, but hesitated. It looked as if his hand might pass into the void depicted on the page.

“Go ahead, Prior. I have touched it.”

He ran his fingers over the spinning globe. It felt as flat and smooth as the rest of the page—no motion against his fingertips, and yet the globe continued to turn beneath them.

“What sorcery is this?”

“I was praying you could tell me. Do you think that sphere is supposed to represent the world?”

“I do not know. Perhaps. The Queen has just sent that Genoan, Colón, on his third voyage to the New World. He has proven that the world is round ... a sphere.”

Adelard shrugged. “He has proven only what sailors have been saying for decades.”

Ah, yes. Brother Adelard fancied himself a philosopher.

Tomás stared at the spinning globe. Although some members of the Church hierarchy argued against it, most now accepted that the world God had created for Mankind was indeed round; but if this apparition was supposed to be that world, then the perspective was from that of the Lord Himself.

Why now? Why, with his health slipping away like sand—he doubted he would survive the year—did a tome that could only be described as sorcerous find its way to his quarters? In his younger days he would have relished hunting down the perpetrators of this deviltry. But now ... now he barely had the strength to drag himself through the day.

He sighed. "Light my candle and leave this abomination to me. I would read it."

"I know you must, dear Prior, but prepare yourself. The heresies are so profound they will ... they will steal your sleep."

"I doubt that Brother Adelard." In his years as Grand Inquisitor he had heard every conceivable heresy. "I doubt that very much."

But no matter what its contents, this tome had already stolen his sleep.

After Adelard departed, he looked around at his spare quarters. Four familiar whitewashed walls, bare except for the crucifix over his bed. A white ceiling and a sepia tiled floor. A cot, a desk, a chair, a small chest of drawers, and a Holy Bible comprised the furnishings. As prior, as Grand Inquisitor, as the queen's confessor, no one would have raised an eyebrow had he requisitioned more comfortable quarters. But earthly trappings led to distractions, and he would not be swayed from his Holy Course.

Before opening the *Compendium*, he took his bible, kissed its cover, and laid it in his lap ...

2

Tomás read through the night. His candle burned out just as dawn began to light the sky, so he read on, foregoing breakfast. Finally he forced himself to close both the abominable book and his eyes.

As he slumped in his chair he heard the sounds of hammers and saws and axes and the calls of the workmen wafting through his window. Every day was the same—except Sunday, of course. Main construction on the monastery—*Monasterio de Santo Tomás*—had been officially completed four years ago, but always there seemed more to do: a patio here, a garden there. It seemed it would never be finished.

The monastery had become the centerpiece of Ávila. And that it should not be. It had grown too big, too ornate. He thought of the elegant studded pillars ringing the second-floor gallery overlooking the enormous courtyard, beautiful works of art in themselves, but inappropriate for a mendicant order that required a vow of poverty.

It housed three cloisters—one for novitiates, one for silence, and one for the royal family. Since the king and queen had funded the monastery, and used it as their summer residence, he supposed such excess was unavoidable. The queen was why he had moved here from Seville—he had been her confessor for many years.

He opened his eyes and stared at the cover of the *Compendium of Srem*. He wasn't sure if Srem was the name of a town or the fictional civilization it described or the

person who had compiled it. But the title mattered not. The content ... the content was soul rattling in its heresy, and utterly demonic in the subtle seductiveness of its tone.

The book never denounced the Church, never blasphemed God the Father, Jesus the Son, or the Holy Ghost. Oh, no. That would have been too obvious. That would have set up a barrier between the reader and the unholiness within. Tomás would have found shrill, wild-eyed blasphemy easier to deal with than the alternative presented here: God and His Church were not presented as enemies—in fact, they were never presented at all! *Not one mention*. Impossible as it was, the author pretended to be completely unaware of their existence.

That was bad enough. But the tone ... the tone ...

The *Compendium* presented itself as a collection of brief essays describing every facet of an imaginary civilization. Where that civilization might exist—or when—was never addressed. Perhaps it purported to describe the legendary Island of Atlas mentioned by Plato in his *Timaeus*, supposedly sunk beneath the waves millennia ago. But no one took those stories seriously. It portrayed a civilization that harnessed the lightning and commanded the weather, defying God's very Creation by fashioning new creatures from the humors of others.

But the tone ... it presented these hellish wonders in a perfectly matter-of-fact manner, as if everyone was familiar with them, as if these were mere quotidian truths that the author was simply cataloguing for the record. Usually when imaginary wonders were described—the Greek legends of their gods and goddesses, came to mind—the teller of the tall tale related them in breathless prose and a marveling tone. Not so the *Compendium*. The descriptions were flat and straightforward, almost casual. And the way they interconnected and referred back and forth to each other indicated that a great deal of thought had been invested in these fictions.

Which was what made it all so seductive.

Many times during the night and through the morning Tomás had to force himself to lean back and press the Holy Bible against his fevered brow so as to counteract the spell the *Compendium* was attempting to weave around him.

By the time he closed the covers, he had dipped barely a fingertip into the foul well of its waters, but he had read enough to know that this so-called *Compendium of Srem* was in truth the *Compendium of Satan*, a library of falsehoods fashioned by the Father of Lies himself.

And the most profound lies concerned gods, although he didn't know if "god" was the proper word for the entities described. No, "described" was not the word. The author referred to two vaporous entities at war in the aether. The people of this fictional civilization did not worship these entities. Rather they contended with them, some currying favor with one so as to help defeat the other, and vice versa. They had not bothered to name their gods, and had no images of them. Their gods simply ... *were*.

But reading the *Compendium* was not necessary to appreciate its hellish origin. Simply leafing through the pages was all it took. For the book had no end! It numbered one hundred sheets—Tomás had counted them—but when he'd leafed to the last page, he'd found there was no last page. Every time he turned what appeared to be the last page, another lay waiting. And yet the sheet count never varied from one hundred, because a page at the front was disappearing every time a new one appeared at the rear. Yet whenever he closed and reopened the book, it began again with the title page.

Sorcery ... sorcery was the only explanation.

3

Brother Adelard and Brother Ramiro arrived together.

Tomás had rewrapped the *Compendium* in Adelard's blanket and carried it to the tribunal room. He had been shocked at the thick tome's almost negligible weight. Once there, he summoned them and waited in his seat at the center of the long refectory table. The room was similar to the tribunal room at the monastery in Segovia where he had spent most of his term as Grand Inquisitor: the long table, the high-backed leather-upholstered chairs—the highest back reserved for him—facing the door; stained-glass windows to either side, and a near life-size crucifix on the wall above the fireplace behind him. The crucifix was positioned so as to force the accused to look upon the face of their crucified Lord as they stood before the inquisitors and responded to the accusations made against them. They were not allowed to know the names of their accusers, merely the charges against them.

"Good Prior," Adelard said as he entered. "I see in your eyes that you have read it."

Tomás nodded. "Not all of it, of course, but enough to know what we must do." He shifted his gaze to Ramiro. "And you, Brother ... have you read it?"

Ramiro was about Adelard's age, but there the resemblance ceased. Ramiro was portly where Adelard was lean, brown-eyed instead of blue, swarthy instead of fair. Those dark eyes were wide now and fixed on the *Compendium*, which Tomás had unwrapped.

“No, Prior. I have seen only the cover, and that is enough.”

“You have no desire to peruse its contents?”

He gave his head a violent shake. “Brother Adelard has told me—”

Tomás gave Adelard a sharp look. “Told? Who else have you told?”

“No one, Prior. Since Ramiro had already seen the book, I thought—”

“See that it stops here. Tell no one what you have read. Tell no one that this abomination exists. Knowledge of the book does not spread beyond this room. Understood?”

“Yes, Prior,” they said in unison.

He turned to Ramiro. “You have no desire for first-hand knowledge of these heresies?”

Another violent shake of the head. “From what little I have heard from Brother Adelard, they must be contained. Heresies spread with every new set of eyes that behold them. I do not want to add mine.”

Tomás was impressed. “You are wise beyond your years, Ramiro.” He motioned him closer. “But it is your knowledge of book craft that we need today.”

Ramiro was in charge of the monastery’s library. He had overseen its construction in the monk’s cloister—was still attending to refinements, in fact—and was in charge of acquiring texts to line the shelves.

Ramiro approached the *Compendium* as if it were a coiled viper. He touched it as if it might sear his flesh. Adelard came up behind him to watch over his shoulder.

“I do not know what kind of metal this is,” Ramiro said. “It looks like polished steel, but the highlights in the surface are most unusual.”

Tomás had wondered at the pearly highlights himself.

“It is not steel,” Adelard said.

Tomás raised his eyebrows. “Oh? And you are a metallurgist as well as a philosopher?”

"I seek to learn as much about God's Creation as I can, Prior. But I think it is obvious that the covers are not steel. If they were, the book would weigh much more than it does."

Ramiro gripped the *Compendium* and hefted it. "As light as air."

"Note the hinges that connect the covers to the spine," Tomás said. "Have you ever seen anything like that?" As Ramiro raised it for a closer look, Tomás added, "I ask because we must determine where this was fashioned."

Adelard was nodding his understanding. "Yes, of course. To help us hunt down the heretic who made it."

Ramiro was shaking his head. "I have never seen anything like this. I cannot fathom how it was put together."

"Through sorcery," Tomás said.

Ramiro looked at him, eyes bright. "Yes, that is the only explanation."

He hid his disappointment. If Ramiro had recognized the workmanship, they would have brought them that much closer to naming the heretic.

"This Moor who sold it to you," Tomás said, turning to Adelard. "He was in the marketplace?"

"Yes, Prior."

"Could this be his work?"

"I doubt it. He was poor and ragged with crippled fingers. I cannot see how that would be possible."

"But he may know who did make it."

"Yes, he certainly may." Adelard slapped his palm on the table. "If only we had jurisdiction over Moors!"

Ferdinand and Isabella's edict limited the inquisition's reach to anyone who professed to be Christian, but its focus had always been the *conversos*—the Jews to whom the Alhambra Decree had given the ultimatum of either converting to Christianity or leaving the country.

"We have jurisdiction over the purity of the Faith," Tomás said, pointing to the *Compendium*. "That includes heresy

from any source, and this is heresy most foul. Have him brought here.”

4

The Moor stood before them, quaking in fear.

Because of the sorcerous nature of the *Compendium* and his determination to keep its very existence secret, Tomás had decided to forego a full tribunal inquiry and limit the proceedings to himself and the two others who already knew of it.

After Adelard identified the Moor, soldiers assigned to the Inquisition had rounded him up and delivered him to the tribunal room.

Tomás studied this poor excuse for a human being. The name he had given upon his arrival was mostly Berber gibberish. Tomás had heard “Abdel” in the mix and decided to call him that. Abdel wore a dirty cloth cap and a ratty beard, both signs of continued adherence to the ways of Mohammed. His left eye was milky white, in stark contrast to the mass of dark wrinkles that made up his face. He had few teeth and his hands were twisted and gnarled. Tomás agreed with Adelard: This man did not craft the *Compendium*.

“Abdel, have you accepted Jesus Christ as your savior?” Adelard said.

The old man bowed. “Yes, sir. Years ago.”

“So, you are a Morisco then?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And yet you still wear your beard in the style required by the religion you claimed to have given up.”

Tomás knew what Adelard was doing: striking fear into the Morisco's heart.

The old Moor's good eye flashed. "I wear it in the style of Jesus as I have seen him portrayed in church."

Tomás rubbed his mouth to hide a smile. Adelard had been outflanked.

"We are not here to question your manner of dress, Abdel," Tomás said, wishing to turn the inquest to the matter that most concerned him. "No accusations have been made."

He saw sudden relief in the Moor's eyes. "Then may I ask why—?"

Tomás lifted the *Compendium* so that the Moor could see the cover. "We *are* here to question why you are selling heresy."

His shock looked genuine. "I did not know! It is just a book I found!"

"Found?" Adelard said. "Found where?"

"In a trunk," he said, head down, voice barely audible.

"And where is this trunk?"

The Moor's voice sank even lower. "I do not know."

Adelard's voice rose. "Do you mean to tell us you have forgotten?" "Perhaps some time on the rack will improve your memory!"

Tomás raised a hand. He thought he knew the problem.

"You stole it, didn't you, Abdel?"

The Moor's head snapped up, then looked down again without replying.

"Understand, Abdel," Tomás went on, "that we have no jurisdiction against civil crimes. We are concerned by the immorality of your action, yes, and trust that you will confess your sin to your priest, but we can take no action against you for the theft itself." He paused to let this sink in, then added, "Who did you steal it from?"

When the Moor still did not reply, Tomás kept his voice low despite his growing anger. "We cannot punish you for

stealing, but we can use every means at our disposal to wring a confession from you as to the source of your heresy.” He released his fury and began pounding on the table. “And I will personally see to it that you suffer the tortures of the damned if you do not—”

“Asher ben Samuel!” the Moor cried. “I stole it from Asher ben Samuel!”

Silence in the tribunal room. Ramiro, who had sat silent during the interrogation, finally spoke.

“Asher ben Samuel ... at last!”

Samuel was a prominent Jewish importer who converted to Christianity rather than leave the country after the Alhambra Decree, but no one on the inquisition tribunal believed his conversion had been true. They had dispatched townsfolk to spy on him and catch him engaging in Judaist practices. They watched for lack of smoke from his chimney on Saturdays, which would indicate observance of the Jewish Sabbath. They would offer him leavened bread during Passover—if he refused, his true faith would be revealed. But he always ate it without hesitation.

Still, the tribunal had not been convinced.

But now ... now they had him.

Or did they?

After Abdel was removed, to be freed again to the streets, Tomás said, “What accusation can be leveled against Asher ben Samuel?”

“Heresy, of course!” Ramiro said.

“Who will accuse him?”

Adelard said, “We will.”

“On the word of a disreputable Morisco street merchant who will have to admit to thievery to make the accusation?”

They fell silent at that.

“I have an idea,” Ramiro said. “In which are we more interested: exposing a crypto Jew, or learning the origin of this hellish tome?”

Tomás knew the answer immediately. "I think we can all agree that the *Compendium* presents a far greater threat to the Faith than a single *converso*."

"It surely does," Ramiro said. "Although in my heart I believe that Asher ben Samuel is guilty of many heresies, we have not caught him at a single one. But in the course of our attempts to catch him over the years, we have kept too close a watch on him to allow him the opportunity of fashioning this book without our knowing."

Tomás reluctantly agreed. "You are saying that if the book did not originate with him, he must have bought it from someone else."

"Exactly, good Prior. Each owner and subsequent owner is a stepping stone across a stream. Each one brings us closer to shore: the heretic who fashioned it. And so I propose that Brother Adelard and I confront Asher ben Samuel in his home with the book and learn where he obtained it."

"That is most irregular," Tomás said.

"I realize that, Prior," Ramiro said. "But if we wish to limit knowledge of the book's existence, we cannot keep bringing suspect after suspect to the monastery. Who knows how many we will have to interrogate before we find the fashioner? Eventually the other members of the tribunal will begin to ask questions we wish not to answer. And by our own rules of procedure, each accused is allowed thirty days of grace to confess and repent. If the trail is long, the fashioner will have months and months of warning during which he can flee."

All excellent points. He was proud of Brother Ramiro.

"But how will you induce him to speak in his home? The instruments of truth lie two floors below us."

Ramiro shrugged. "I will tell him the truth: that we are more interested in finding the heretic behind the *Compendium* than in punishing those through whose hands it happened to pass. Asher ben Samuel is a wealthy man. He has more to lose than his life. He knows that if brought

before the tribunal he will be found guilty, and then not only will he face the cleansing flame at the stake, but all his property will be seized and his wife and daughters cast into the streets." Ramiro smiled. "He will tell us. And then we will move on to the next stepping stone."

Tomás nodded slowly. The plan had merit.

"Do it, then. Begin today." He tapped the *Compendium's* strange metal cover. "I want this heretic found. The sooner we have him, the sooner his soul can be cleansed by an *auto da fé*."

5

From within the sheltering cowl of his black robe, Adelard regarded the twilit streets of Ávila. He was glad to be out in the air. He left the monastery so seldom these days. Spring had taken control, as evidenced by the bustling townspeople. When summer arrived, the heat would slow all movement until well into the dark hours.

Brother Ramiro carried the carefully wrapped *Compendium* between his chest and his folded arms as they crossed the town square. Adelard glanced at the trio of scorched stakes where heretics were unburdened of their sins by the cleansing flame. He had witnessed many an *auto da fé* here since his arrival from France.

"Note how passersby avert their eyes and give us a wide berth," Ramiro said.

Adelard had indeed noticed that. "I don't know why. They can't know that I am a member of the tribunal."

"They don't. They see the black robes and know us as Dominicans, members of the order that runs the Inquisition, and that is enough. This saddens me."

"Why?"

"You are an inquisitor, I am a simple mendicant. You would not know."

"I was not always an inquisitor, Ramiro."

"But you did not know Ávila before the Inquisition arrived. We were greeted with smiles and welcomed everywhere. Now no one looks me in the eye. What do you think their averted gazes mean? That they have heresies to hide?"

“Perhaps.”

“Then you are wrong. It means that the robes of our order have become associated with the public burnings of heretics to the exclusion of all else.”

Adelard had never heard his friend talk like this.

“What are you saying, Ramiro?”

“I am saying that we are not an order that stays behind its walls. We have always gone out among the people, helping the sick, feeding the poor, easing pain and sorrow. But the order’s involvement in guarding the Faith seems to have erased all memory of our centuries of good works.”

“Be careful what you say, Ramiro. You are flirting with heresy.”

“Are you going to accuse me?”

“No. You are my friend. I know that you speak from a good, faithful heart, but others might not appreciate that. So please watch your tongue.”

Adelard was surprised at Ramiro’s familiarity with the people of Ávila. He had imagined him spending all his time in the library or tilling the monastery’s fields. He changed the subject.

“I’ve known you for a number of years now, Ramiro, but I don’t know where you are from.”

“Toro. A province north of here.”

“Do you still have family there?”

“No. My family was wiped out in the Battle of Toro. I was just a boy and barely managed to survive.”

Adelard had heard of that—one of the battles in the war for the crown of Castile.

“How did you come to the order?”

“After the horrors I’d seen, I wanted a life of peace and contemplation and good works. And that is what I had until the Inquisition changed everything.”

Adelard had come to the Dominicans for very different reasons. The order provided him a place to pursue the philosophy of nature and to write papers explaining God’s

Creation and how what he had learned bolstered the doctrines of the Church. Sometimes he had to stretch the truth to avoid censure, but in general his papers were well received and seen as a cogent defense of doctrine. As a result, when the pope decided that the Spanish Inquisition needed outside influence, he assigned Adelard to be one of the new inquisitors.

But concerns about doctrine faded as the *Compendium* took command of his thoughts, much as it had since he'd opened it yesterday and begun reading. The ability of its text to appear written in the reader's native tongue certainly seemed sorcerous, and yet ... and yet it seemed so congruent with the civilization described within.

Since his youth, Adelard had been fascinated with the philosophy of nature. When his father would bring home small game from the hunt, he would insist on gutting them, but doing so in his own way—methodically, systematically, so that he might understand the inner workings of the creatures. And even now he had reserved a room in the monastery where he could mix various elements and record their interactions.

He wondered if there might be a natural explanation for the marvels described within the *Compendium* and for the wonder of the tome itself—something that would not violate Church orthodoxy.

He would have to ponder this alone. He could not discuss it with Ramiro, who had not read it, and he might be risking his position, perhaps even his life, if he broached the subject with the Grand Inquisitor.

They reached the large plot of land on the edge of town where Asher ben Samuel lived, and started down the long path that led to his house.

"Does it seem right that a Jew should have such fortune?" Adelard said as they passed through a grove of olive trees.

"He is a *converso*—no longer a Jew."

Even though they professed to be Christian, *conversos* were mistrusted and even held in contempt. Especially someone with the financial influence of Samuel. Was his “conversion” simply economic pragmatism, or had he truly rejected his old beliefs? Adelard suspected—nay, was convinced—of the latter. The problem was proving it.

“You are so naïve, Ramiro. Once a Jew, always a Jew.”

“I have Jewish blood. And so, no doubt, do you.”

“You lie!”

“There’s hardly an educated person in Castile who does not carry Jewish blood.”

“I was raised in France.”

“Probably the same there. Even our own prior—were you aware that a grandfather in the Torquemada line was a Jew?”

Tomás de Torquemada, the Hammer of Heretics, the Queen’s confessor ... had Jewish blood? How was this possible?

“That can’t be true!”

“It is. He makes no secret of it. He has said that the purpose of the Holy Inquisition is not to stamp out Jewish blood, but to stamp out Jewish practices.”

“All right, then, if the Prior says it is true, I accept it as true. But even so, his Jewish blood and yours are different from Asher ben Samuel’s.”

“How?”

“The prior and you were raised in the Faith. *Conversos* like him were not.”

At the end of the path they found the high-walled home of Asher ben Samuel.

Ramiro said, “It reminds me of a fortress.”

They stopped before the wrought iron gate and pulled the bell cord. An elderly footman exited the house and limped across the gap between.

“Yes?” he said, his eyes full of fear.

“We have come to see your master,” Ramiro said.

"On a matter of faith," Adelard added.

The old man turned away. "I must go ask—"

"Open immediately!" Ramiro said. "Members of the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition do not wait outside like beggars!"

With trembling hands, the old man unlocked the gate and pulled it open. He led them through a heavy oak door into a large, tiled gallery that opened onto a courtyard. And there sat Asher ben Samuel, reading under a broad chandelier.

A squat man of perhaps fifty years, he rose and came forward as they entered. "Friars! To what do I owe this honor?"

Adelard wondered why he didn't seem surprised or upset. Had he seen them coming?

"We will speak to you in private," he said.

"Of course. Diego, go to your quarters. But first—can I have him bring you some wine?"

Adelard would have loved some good wine, but he would accept no hospitality from this Jew.

"This is not a social call," he said.

Still apparently unperturbed, Samuel waved Diego off and then faced them. "How may I be of service?"

Ramiro pointed to the large illuminated manuscript that lay open on the table behind Samuel. "You can first tell us what you are reading."

Samuel smiled. "The Gospel of Matthew. It is my favorite."

Liar, Adelard thought. He *had* seen them coming.

Ramiro unwrapped the *Compendium* and placed it on the table. "We thought this would have been more to your liking."

Finally Samuel's composure cracked, but only a little.

"How—?"

"How it came to us is not the question. How did it come to you?"

He backed a step and sat heavily in a chair. "I collect books. This was offered to me. Since it was of such unusual

construction and written in Hebrew, I snatched it up.”

“Written in He—?” Ramiro began, then frowned. “Oh, of course.”

“When I began to read it I realized it was a very dangerous book to have in one’s possession.”

“Why did you not bring it to the tribunal?” Adelard said.

Samuel gave them a withering look. “Really, good friars. For years you have been trying to find a reason to drag me before you. I should provide you with such a reason myself?”

“You know as well as we that many *conversos* pay only lip service to the Church’s teachings and hold to their Jewish ways once their doors are closed. One cannot shed one’s lifelong faith like an old coat.”

“Ah, but you forget that I am a Castilian as well. If my queen and her king want to rule a Christian land, then I become Christian. It is not as if I am forsaking the Jewish God for a pagan idol. As I am sure you know, Jesus was born a Jew. The Old Testament of the Jews leads to the New Testament of Jesus. We worship the same God.”

He possessed a persuasive tongue, this Jew; Adelard would give him that.

Ramiro said, “So, instead of bringing this book to the tribunal, you packed it in a trunk. For what purpose?”

“You seem to know so much ... ”

“Answer the question!”

“I intended to throw it in the river. I did not want such a dangerous text in my library, nor in anyone else’s.” He spread his hands. “But when I reached the river, I could not find it. It was gone, as if by magic.”

Not magic, Adelard thought. A thieving Morisco.

“Who sold it to you?”

Samuel said nothing for a moment, then took a deep breath. “I hesitate to condemn another man to the rack. Do you understand that?”

"We understand," Adelard said. "We wish to find the author of this heresy as soon as possible. If you assist us in locating him, I have the authority to overlook the time the book was in your possession."

Asher ben Samuel tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair as he pondered this. He knew the enormous cost to him and his family to withhold the name.

Finally he looked up and said, "You will make the same offer to the man I name?"

"We offer you absolution and you dare to bargain with us?"

"I merely asked a question."

Adelard hated conceding to the Jew, but they had to stay focused on their ultimate goal.

"As long as he is not the fashioner. If the book merely passed through his hands, he will not be punished. But the fashioner ... the fashioner has committed heresy most foul and will pay a severe penalty."

Samuel smiled. "No possibility of the man in question being your fashioner. He is a simple carpenter. I doubt he can read a dozen words, let alone concoct such a fiction as you have in this book."

"He stole it then?" Ramiro said.

Samuel shrugged. "He told me the book had been freely given to him, but who is to know? He has done work for me, building shelves for my library. He knows of my love of learning and so he came to me to sell it."

Adelard raised his voice. "The name! We want his name, not your empty excuses!"

"The only name I have for him is Pedro the carpenter."

Ramiro was nodding. "I know him. He built shelves for the monastery's library as well. He does excellent work." He looked at Adelard. "But I agree: It is inconceivable that he wrote the *Compendium*."

"Perhaps. But he will be able to tell us how it came to him. And then we will be—as you like to say, Brother Ramiro—

one stepping stone closer to the source.”

6

Eventually, after asking questions at a number of intersections, they came to a meager shack down near the east bank of the Rio Adaja. The river ran sluggishly here, and stank from the waste thrown in the waters upstream. Faint light flickered through the gaps in the hut's weathered boards. Certainly no more than a single candle burned within.

Adelard stopped in the darkness and stared at the hovel. Ramiro drew close to his side.

"Does it seem fair to you, Ramiro, that a skilled craftsman should live in such poverty while a man who simply buys and sells lives in luxury?"

"We are not to expect fairness in this world, brother, only in the next."

"True, true, but still it rankles."

"Pedro is a simple man. I fear the two of us appearing at his door will terrify him. He might flee and hide. But he knows me. Let me go in and speak to him alone, assure him that he has nothing to fear if he tells us the truth."

"Very well, but be quick about it."

Adelard was exhausted. He had not slept last night. How could he, knowing his aging, ailing prior was up alone reading that hellish tome? All he wanted now was to complete this step in the investigation and return to his cot.

He watched Brother Ramiro approach the door with the *Compendium* under his arm, hesitate, then enter without knocking.

Immediately a cry rose from within, a hoarse voice shouting, "No! No, I'm sorry! I did not know!"

And then a scream of pain.

Adelard rushed forward, almost colliding with Ramiro as he stumbled from within.

"What happened?"

Ramiro was shaking. "When he saw me, he grabbed a knife. I feared he was going to attack me, but he thrust it into his own heart!"

Adelard pushed past him and looked inside. A thin man with graying hair lay on the floor with a knife handle jutting from his chest. His unseeing eyes gazed heavenward.

"Do you see?" Ramiro cried. "See what you and your Inquisition have done! This is what I said before: The very sight of this robe terrifies people! Pedro did not see me, he saw torture and burning flesh!"

7

“Do we have no other path to follow?” Tomás said to the two monks standing before him.

He had napped this evening while they were out, but then had waited up for their return. The news they brought was not at all what he had hoped for.

Adelard shook his head. “I fear not, Prior. The carpenter’s death cuts off all further avenues of inquiry.”

“How did this come to pass?”

Brother Ramiro spread his hands. “As soon as I stepped inside, he began to cry out in fear. Before I had a chance to say a single word, he snatched a knife up from his table and thrust it into his heart.”

“He must have thought Brother Ramiro was there to drag him before the tribunal,” Adelard said. “He knew he had transgressed and feared the stake.”

Tomás shook his head. After all these years of the Holy Inquisition, the common folk remained ignorant of the process. They saw someone taken in for questioning and later saw that same person tied to a stake and screaming as the flames consumed them. They assumed the *auto da fé* was the outcome of every arrest, but nothing could be further from the truth. They forgot that the vast majority of those detained were eventually freed after confessing their guilt and doing penance. The instruments of truth were used only on those who refused to confess. Those consumed at the stake were usually *relapsos*—sinners who returned to

their heretical ways after having been released by the tribunal.

"So unnecessary," Ramiro said, shaking his head. "And so frustrating. He lived alone, so we will never know where he obtained the book."

Tomás pounded his fist on the *Compendium*. "We must find this heretic!"

"How?" Adelard said. "Tell us how and we shall do it."

Tomás had no answer for him.

He sighed. "I see only one course now." He gestured to the fireplace behind him. "Consign it to the flames."

The fire had burned low by now. He watched as Adelard and Ramiro added wood and fanned it to a roaring blaze. When the heat had risen to an uncomfortable level, Tomás handed the *Compendium* to Adelard who opened it at the middle and dropped it upon the flames.

Tomás waited for the cover to scorch and then melt, for the pages to smoke and blacken and curl. But the *Compendium* ignored the flames. It lay there unperturbed as the fire burned down to faintly glowing embers around it.

"This cannot be," Tomás muttered.

Ramiro grabbed the tongs and pulled the book from the ashes. As it lay unmarred on the hearth, he held his open palm over it.

"It doesn't seem ... " He touched it, then looked up in wonder. "It is not even warm!"

Tomás felt his gut crawl. A heretical text that would not burn ... this went beyond his worst nightmare.

"Brother Ramiro ... " His voice sounded hoarse. "Bring the headsman's ax."

As Ramiro hurried off, Adelard stepped closer to Tomás.

"I am glad that Ramiro is gone," he said in a low voice. "He has not read the *Compendium* and you and I have. His absence offers us an opportunity to discuss its contents."

"What is there to discuss about heresy?"

"What if ... " Adelard seemed hesitant.

"Go on."

"What if this *Compendium* speaks the truth?"

Tomás could not believe his ears. "Have you gone mad?"

"This is just supposition, Prior. We have this strange, strange book before us. I ask you: Is it heresy to theorize about its origins? If you say it is, I shall speak no further."

Tomás considered this. Heresy involved presenting falsehoods about the Faith or the Church as truth. Merely theorizing rather than proselytizing ...

"Go ahead. I shall warn you when you begin to venture into heresy."

"Thank you, Prior." He stepped away and began pacing the tribunal chamber. "I have been thinking. *The Book of Genesis* tells about the Flood: How the evil of Mankind prompted God to bring the Deluge to cleanse the world and start afresh. What if the *Compendium* tells of an evil, godless civilization that existed before the Deluge? What if the *Compendium* is all that is left of that civilization?"

Adelard ... ever the philosopher. However ...

"The Holy Bible makes no mention of such a civilization."

"Neither does it give specifics about the 'evils of mankind' that triggered God's wrath. The *Compendium's* civilization could have been the very reason for the Deluge."

Tomás found himself nodding. Adelard's theory would explain why neither the Church nor Jesus were ever mentioned in the book, for neither would have existed when it was supposedly written. His idea was certainly unorthodox, but did not contradict Church doctrine in any way Tomás could see.

"An interesting theory, Brother Adelard."

Adelard stopped his pacing. "If it is true, Prior"—he waved his hands—"no, I mean if we *suppose* it is true, then this tome is an archeological artifact, an important piece of pre-Deluge history—perhaps the last existing piece of the pre-Deluge world. Do we then have a right to destroy it?"

Tomás did not like where this was leading.

“Right? It is not a matter of our *right* to destroy it, we have a sacred *duty* to destroy it.”

“But perhaps it should be preserved as a piece of history.”

“You tread dangerous ground here, Brother Adelard. Let us suppose that the *Compendium* does predate the Deluge and that the heretical civilization described therein did exist in those ancient days. If the book is preserved and its contents become widely known, then people will begin to ask why it was never mentioned in the *Book of Genesis*. And if *Genesis* makes no mention of that, then it is logical to ask what else *Genesis* fails to mention. And right then and there you have planted a seed of doubt. And from the tiniest seed of doubt can grow vast heresies.”

Adelard backed away, nodding. “Yes, I see. I see. Indeed, we must destroy it.”

He didn’t have to explain to Adelard that questions had no place where faith was concerned. All the answers were there, waiting, no questions necessary. Questions, however, though a necessary part of philosophy and the pursuit of knowledge, were toxic to faith. If one feels the need to question the Faith, then one has already fallen from grace and entered the realm of doubt.

Tomás was well aware that every thinking man contended with doubts about some aspect of the Faith from time to time. He had experienced one or two himself during his middle years, but he overcame them long before he was appointed Grand Inquisitor. As long as a man confined his doubts to his inner struggle, they did not fall under the authority of the Holy Inquisition. But should that man communicate those qualms to others for the purpose of infecting them with his uncertainty, *then* the tribunal stepped in.

“You have an inquiring mind, Brother Adelard. Be careful that it does not lead you astray. And see to it that our discussion here goes no further than this room.”

“For certain, Prior.”

Ramiro returned then, puffing from the exertion of hurrying his portly frame to the basement two floors below and back up again with the burden of the heavy, long-handled ax.

Not all recalcitrant heretics were allowed the cleansing flame of the *auto da fé*. Some were simply beheaded like common criminals. The ax was stored below and its wide cutting edge kept finely honed.

"Shall I, Prior?" he said, approaching the *Compendium* where it lay open on the hearth.

Tomás nodded. "Split it in two, Ramiro. Then reduce it to tiny scraps that we may scatter to the wind."

Ramiro lifted the ax high above his head. With a snarl and a cry, he swung it down with all his strength and struck the *Compendium* a blow such as would have severed any head from its body, no matter how sturdy the neck that supported it. Yet, to Tomás's wonder and dismay, the blade bounced off the exposed pages without so much as creasing them.

"This cannot be!" Ramiro cried.

He swung again and again, raining blow after blow upon the *Compendium*, but for all the effect he had he might as well have been caressing it with a feather.

Finally, red faced, sweating, panting, Ramiro stopped and faced them.

"Surely this is a thing from hell!"

Tomás would not argue that.

"What do we do?" Ramiro said, still panting. "Asher ben Samuel said he was going to throw it in the river. Perhaps that is the only course that remains to us."

Tomás shook his head. "No. Not a river. Too easy for a fisherman's net to retrieve it from the bottom. The deep ocean would be better. Perhaps we can send one of you on a voyage far out to sea where you can drop it over the side."

Ever the philosopher, Adelard said, "First we must make certain it will sink. But even if it does sink, it will still be intact. It will still exist. And even confined to a briny abyss,

there will always remain the possibility that it will resurface. We must find a way to *destroy* it."

"How?" Ramiro said. "It will not burn, it will not be cut."

Adelard said, "Perhaps I can concoct a mixture of elements and humors that will overcome its defenses."

Elements! An idea struck Tomás just then—why hadn't he thought of it before? He pointed to a small table in the corner.

"Adelard, bring the holy water here."

The younger man's eyes lit as he hurried across the room and returned with a flagon of clear liquid. Tomás rose slowly from his chair and approached the book where it lay on the hearth. When Adelard handed him the unstoppered flagon, he blessed it, then poured some of its contents onto the *Compendium* ...

... to no effect.

Angered, Tomás began splashing the holy water in the shape of a cross as he intoned, "*In Nomine Patri et Fili et Spiritus Sancti!*"

Then he waited, praying for the holy water to eat away at the pages. But again ... nothing.

A pall settled over him. Had they no recourse against this hellish creation?

"Good Prior," Adelard said after a moment, "if I could take the tome and experiment on it, I might be able to discover a vulnerability."

Tomás fought a burst of anger. "You seek to succeed where water blessed in God's name has failed?"

Adelard pointed to the *Compendium*. "That thing was fashioned from the elements of God's earth. I know in my heart that it can be undone by the same."

Could philosophy succeed where faith had failed?

"For the sake of the Faith, let us pray you are right."

8

Tomás did pray—all that night. And in the morning, when he stepped into the hall outside his room, an acrid odor assailed his nostrils. It seemed to issue from Adelard's workroom at the end of the hall. He approached the closed door as quickly as his painful hips would allow and pulled it open without knocking.

Inside he found Adelard holding a pair of steel tongs. The gripping end of the tongs suspended a glass flask of fuming red-orange liquid over the *Compendium*. The *Compendium* itself rested on the tile floor.

Adelard smiled at him. "You are just in time, Prior."

Tomás covered his mouth and nose and pointed to the flask. "What is that?"

"*Aqua regia*. I just now mixed it. The solution will dissolve gold, silver, platinum, almost any metal you care to name."

"Yet the simple glass of its container appears impervious."

"Glass is not metal. But the *Compendium* is."

Tomás felt his hackles rise. "This smacks of alchemy, Brother Adelard."

"Not in the least, Prior. Aqua regia was first compounded over one hundred years ago. It is simply the combination of certain of God's elements in a given ratio. No spells or incantations are required. Anyone with the recipe can do it. I will show you later, if you wish."

"That will not be necessary. What I want to know is, will it work?"

"If gold cannot stand against aqua regia, how can the *Compendium*?"

Tomás remembered having similar confidence about holy water last night.

"Please stand back, Prior. I am going to try a small amount first."

Tomás held his ground. "Start your trial."

He watched as Adelard tilted the flask and allowed a single drop of the smoking liquid to fall onto the cover. It stopped fuming on contact. It neither bubbled nor corroded nor marred the patterned surface in any way. Frowning, Adelard slowly poured a little more over a wider area with similar result. A container of spring water would have had the same effect.

Adelard used his sandaled foot to flip the cover open, revealing a random page onto which he emptied the flask. The corrosive had no more effect there than on the cover.

Adelard's shoulders slumped, and Tomás imagined his own did as well.

"I see no recourse but a deep-sea burial," Tomás said.

Adelard lifted his head. "Not yet, good Prior. I am not yet ready to surrender. Give me three days before I must admit defeat."

Tomás considered this. Yes, they could spare three days.

"Very well. Three days, Brother Adelard, but no more. And may God speed."

9

Tomás spent those three days in prayer, often with Brother Ramiro at his side. Tribunal matters were postponed, meetings were canceled for the time being. Two *relapsos* awaited their *auto da fé* but Tomás delayed the sentence until this more pressing matter was resolved.

They did not know what Brother Adelard was up to, but Tomás was aware of the monk making many trips to and from his workroom carrying mysterious bundles of materials. Questions were raised by other members of the order, inquiring as to the cries of anger and anguish, the cacophony of hammering and sawing and smashing glass issuing from behind the closed door. Tomás was able to put them off with the simple truth: Brother Adelard was engaged in the Lord's work.

Toward the end of the third day with no results, Tomás called Ramiro to the tribunal room. He squinted at the stains and sawdust on the monk's black robe. Ramiro must have noticed the scrutiny.

"I have been making some changes in the library, Prior—doing the work myself since I no longer have a carpenter to call on."

Tomás wasn't sure if he detected a barb in that last remark. Never mind ...

"While Brother Adelard's efforts have been heroic, every time I pass him in the hallway he reports no progress. I have given up hope of success by philosophical means. I see the ocean bottom as the only remaining option."

Ramiro nodded. "Yes, Prior. I am afraid I agree. I will be happy to make the voyage."

Tomás smiled. "How well you anticipate my thoughts. I was just about to tell you that I was assigning you the task. I do not think Brother Adelard has slept at all these past three days and he will be in no condition to make the journey."

"It is the least I can do after all his efforts."

Just then they heard a voice calling in the hallway.

"Prior Tomás! Prior Tomás! I have done it!"

Praying that Adelard was not mistaken, Tomás allowed Ramiro to help him down the hall to the workroom.

"I have been trying one combination of elements after another," Adelard said, leading the way. His eyes looked wild and his robe was pocked with countless holes burned by splashes of the corrosive compounds he had been handling. "Finally I found the one that works—quite possibly the only combination in all Creation that works!"

He reached the door and held it open for them. The workroom was full of fumes, which billowed out and ran along both the floor and ceiling of the hallway.

Ramiro waved his free arm ahead of them, parting the fumes as they reached the threshold. Tomás squinted through haze to see an odd structure sitting in the middle of the floor. It appeared to be a wooden cabinet but a deep glass bowl took up most of its upper surface. Through the smoke rising from the bowl Tomás spied what appeared to be a rectangular block of metal, immersed in a bubbling, fuming orange solution.

"What is happening here?" Tomás said.

"The *Compendium*! It is dissolving!"

Tomás prayed he wasn't dreaming. The letters and designs had been eaten off the cover, and the whole book appeared to be melting.

"But how—?"

"Through trial and error, Prior! I kept adding different compounds and solutions to the aqua regia until ... until

this! Isn't it wonderful?"

Yes. It was indeed wonderful.

"Praise God. He has worked a miracle." Tomás looked at Ramiro. "Don't you agree?"

Ramiro's expression was troubled, then it cleared and he offered a weak smile. "Yes, Prior. A miracle."

Tomás wondered what was distressing him. Jealous of Adelard's success? Or disappointed that he would not be going on the ocean voyage?

They watched for nearly an hour, with Adelard periodically adding fresh solution, until the *Compendium* was reduced to a mass of semi-molten metal. Adelard used tongs to remove it from the solution and lay it on the floor.

"As you can see," he said, his voice full of pride, "the *Compendium* of Srem is no more. The solution has fused it into a solid mass. It is not even recognizable as a book."

"I'll dispose of the remains," Ramiro said.

Adelard stepped forward. "Not necessary, Brother Ramiro. I—"

"You've done quite enough, Brother Adelard," Tomás said. "Go rest. You have earned it."

"But Prior—"

Tomás lifted his hand, halting discussion.

He did not understand Adelard's uneasy expression.

10

Tomás awoke to soft knocking on his door. It reminded him of that night not too long ago when Adelard had shown up with that accursed tome.

"Yes?"

"It is Brother Ramiro, Prior. I must speak to you on an urgent matter."

"Come, then."

He remained supine in his bed as Ramiro entered with a candle. "Good Prior, I must show you something."

"What is it?"

"It would be better to see with your own eyes."

Tomás looked up at him. "Tell me."

Ramiro took a deep breath and let out a sigh. "I wish to show you the *Compendium*."

"It was not destroyed?" Tomás closed his eyes and groaned. "How is this possible? I thought you buried what was left of it."

"I regret to inform you that what you saw dissolving was not the *Compendium*, Prior. That was a sheaf of tin sheets."

"But—"

"In addition to gold and silver and platinum, aqua regia dissolves tin."

The meaning was suddenly all too clear.

"You are accusing Brother Adelard of deceiving us!"

"Yes, Prior. Much as it pains me to say it, I fear it is so."

"This is a terribly serious charge."

Ramiro bowed his head. "That was why I wanted to show you."

"Show me what?"

"Where he has hidden the *Compendium*."

Tomás realized he would have to see for himself.

"Light my candle and wait for me in the hall."

Ramiro pressed the flame of his candle against the cold wick of the one on the desk and left. Tomás struggled from his cot and slipped on his black robe. He grabbed his cane and joined Ramiro in the hallway, then followed him to Adelard's workroom.

"I found it here," Ramiro said, opening the door.

He stepped to the acid-scarred cabinet in the center of the floor. The glass bowl in the top still contained residue from the dissolution they had witnessed yesterday. He knelt and removed a panel from the side of the cabinet. Then he removed a board from the base of the inner compartment.

"A false floor," Ramiro said.

From within the hidden compartment he removed a blanket-wrapped parcel. He placed it atop the cabinet and unfolded the wrapping, revealing ...

The *Compendium*.

For a moment Tomás did not know what to think. Was this a trick? Was Ramiro so jealous of his fellow monk that he would—?

Just then Adelard rushed in, gasping. "Oh, no! Prior, I can explain!"

No denial on the young monk's part, only the offer of an excuse. Tomás felt crushed by this betrayal.

"Oh, Adelard, Adelard," he said, his voice barely audible. "Preserving heresy."

"It is not heresy if it is true!"

"It goes against Church doctrine, and it will raise dangerous questions. We have discussed this."

"But Prior, it won't burn, it won't be cut, it laughs at the most corrosive compounds we have. It is ancient and it is a

wonder—truly a wonder. The Colossus of Rhodes, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Lighthouse at Alexandria—six of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World are gone. Only the Pyramids at Giza remain. Yet we hold the Eighth Wonder here in our hands. We have no right to keep it from the world!”

Tomás had heard enough—more than enough. Adelard was condemning himself with every word.

“Brother Adelard, you will confine yourself to your quarters until members of the Inquisition Guard bring you before the tribunal.”

His eyes widened further. “The tribunal? But I am a member!”

“I am well aware of that. No more discussion. You will await judgment in your quarters.”

As the crestfallen Adelard shuffled away toward his room, Tomás had no worries that he might run off. Adelard knew there was no escape from the Holy Inquisition.

What concerned Tomás was bringing a member of the tribunal before the tribunal itself to be judged. It was unprecedented. He would have to give this much thought. In the meantime ...

“Brother Ramiro, wrap up that infernal tome and make certain that no one else sees it. Prepare to take it to sea on the earliest possible voyage.”

“Yes, Prior.”

He watched him fold the blanket around it, then carry it off toward his quarters. Tomás made his way to his own room and was just about to remove his cowled robe when he heard a knock on the door.

Was he never to have another full night’s rest?

Ramiro’s hushed voice came through the door. “I am so sorry, Prior, but I must speak with you again.”

Tomás opened the door and found the portly friar standing on the threshold with a stricken expression. He held the

wrapped *Compendium* against his chest. The blanket looked damp.

"It floats," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I dropped it into a tub of water in the kitchen. It will not sink."

Tomás was not surprised. Why should it sink? That would make it too easy to dispose of.

"We will place it in trunk weighted with lead and wrapped with iron chains and—"

"Trunks rot in salt water, as do chains. Sooner or later it will surface again."

Tomás could not argue with that.

"What do we do, Brother Ramiro?"

"I have an idea ... "

11

Tomás stood to the side while the two *relapsos* dug a deep hole at the rear of the Royal Cloister.

King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella would be arriving in a week or two to spend the summer, and the cloister would be empty until then. The queen had wanted a patio on the north side that would be shaded in the afternoon. Since the royal treasury was funding the monastery, her every whim was a command. The area had been cleared and leveled, and was now half paved with interlocking granite blocks. The remainder was bare earth. That was where the *relapsos* labored. Lanterns placed around the hole illuminated their efforts.

"Here, Prior," said Ramiro from behind him. "I brought you a chair."

He set the leather upholstered chair on the pavers and Tomás gladly made use of it. He had been holding the wrapped *Compendium* against his chest. Standing for so long had started an ache in his low back.

"This is a brilliant plan, Ramiro," he whispered.

"I live to serve the Faith. I would like to think that the Lord inspired me."

His plan was simple and yet perfect: Bury the *Compendium* in a section of the grounds that was scheduled to be paved over with heavy blocks. The *Monasterio de Santo Tomás* would stand for centuries, perhaps a thousand years or more. The *Compendium* would never be found. And

if it ever were, perhaps the monks of that future time would know then how to destroy it.

But that day might never come. There would be no record anywhere of the existence of the *Compendium of Srem*, let alone where it was hidden. The two *relapsos* had no idea why they were digging the hole, and would not know what went into it. And even if they learned, what matter? Each had been sentenced to an *auto da fé*. Tomás would see to it that they had their time at the stakes early tomorrow.

Only Tomás and Ramiro would know its final resting place. The secret would die with them.

Together they watched the progress of the hole. The *relapsos* took turns in the pit: one would climb down the ladder with a shovel and fill a bucket with earth; the one topside would pull the bucket up on a rope, empty it, and send it back down. This went on until the top of the ten-foot ladder sank to a point where it was level with the surface.

"That is deep enough, I think," Tomás said.

Ramiro ordered the *relapso* down below to come up and pull the ladder from the pit. He tied their hands behind their backs. After blindfolding them, he made them kneel, facing away.

He held out his hands to Tomás. "May I, Prior?"

Tomás handed him the *Compendium* and watched as he unwrapped it. The flickering lantern light revealed the strange cover. The background pattern was crosshatching now. He closed his eyes for a few heartbeats, and when he reopened them it had changed to asymmetrical swirls.

"This is the last time anyone will ever see this book from hell," Ramiro said. He handed Tomás two cords. "I believe you deserve the honor of tying the covering around it."

Tomás tied one cord vertically and one horizontally, forming a cross, then handed it to Ramiro.

"Do you not wish to consign it to the pit?"

Tomás shook his head. His legs were tired and his back pained him. "You do it, Brother Ramiro."

“As you—?” His head shot up. “I believe I just saw a falling star.”

“Where?” Tomás searched the cloudless heavens.

“It is gone. A streaking flash that lasted less than the blink of an eye. Do you think that has meaning, seeing one fall at this moment? Is it the Lord blessing our work?”

“Some say they are damned souls being cast into hell, others say they are signs of good luck. And still others say that falling stars are just that: stars that have slipped free from the dome of heaven and are falling to earth.”

Ramiro was nodding. “Perhaps it is just as well not to read too much into these things.” He held up the tied bundle. “I would carry it myself to the bottom but I fear my girth will not allow it.”

He lifted one of the lamps as he approached the pit and held it high over the opening. Tomás watched the *Compendium* drop into the depths. Then Ramiro began shoveling dirt atop it. After half a dozen shovelfuls, he untied the *relapsos* and had them finish the job.

When they were done and the earth had been tamped flat over the hole, he bound them again, but this time he gagged them before leading them back to their cells.

Tomás remained seated, gazing at the bare earth. He would keep close watch on this patio until it was completed. Once the pavers were in place, the *Compendium* would be hidden from Mankind ... forever.

12

The *relapsos* finally stopped screaming within their pillars of flame.

Ramiro lurched away from the town square and stumbled back toward the monastery. He had always avoided the square during an *auto da fé* but today he felt obliged to brave the dawn's chill and bear witness. Those two had repeatedly preached against the Church's practice of selling indulgences. In his heart Ramiro agreed with them, but would never be foolish enough to profess that aloud.

He had imagined the horror of seeing someone burned alive, but the reality proved worse than he had ever dreamed. Those *relapsos*, however, were gone for good. They would preach heresy no more, but more important, the location of the hole they had dug last night had been consumed with them.

As he walked along, the people who passed him averted their gaze—as usual.

He hated the Inquisition and what it had done to the Spains. He found it logical that the Church should want to safeguard the doctrines that empowered it, but at what cost? Thousands upon thousands had been tortured, hundreds upon hundreds had died in agony, tens of thousands had been banished from the land. A whole society had been upended.

But preserving the Faith was only part of it. The war for the crown of Castile, in which his family had been slaughtered, plus the war in Grenada—the whole

Reconquista, in fact—had bankrupted the monarchy. Banishing the Jews and Moors did more than make the Spains a Christian realm. It left the abandoned properties to be looted by the Church and the royal treasury—an equal share between them. The same with heretics: the Church and the treasury divided their property and money down the middle.

Wealth and power—the two Holy Grails of church and state.

When he reached the monastery he ventured around the Royal Cloister to monitor the progress on the patio. The masons were hard at work, fitting the paving blocks snugly together, chipping away at the edges to assure a tighter fit. By tonight, or mid-tomorrow at the latest, the patio would be fully paved.

Satisfied, Ramiro moved on, entering the cloister that housed his quarters. His fellow monks spent spring mornings tilling the monastery's fields for planting. Soon he would join them, but first ...

He descended to the basement that housed the heretics and what Torquemada liked to call the "instruments of truth"—the rack, the wheel, the thumbscrews, the boots. Adelard had been locked in one of the basement's windowless cells. No guards were needed because the doors were thick and the locks sturdy.

He approached the only locked cell and looked through the small iron-barred opening.

"Brother Adelard?" he whispered.

Adelard's face appeared. "Ramiro! Have you news? Have they decided what?"

"I am sorry. I have heard nothing. I feel terrible for betraying you."

"I know. But you had no choice. I might have done the same. I don't ... I don't know what came over me. Almost as if that book had put a spell on me. Against all reason, I had to have it, I had to save it."

Ramiro nodded. He knew the feeling well.

He reached through a slit in his robe into a pouch strapped to his ample abdomen. From it he withdrew a small wineskin.

"Here," he said, pushing it between the bars. "For strength. For courage."

Adelard pulled off the stopper and drank greedily.

"They don't feed me and give me very little water."

How does it feel? Ramiro thought. How many have you treated the same to make them weak and more easily persuaded by your tortures?

When Adelard finished the wine he pushed the empty skin back through the opening.

"Thank you. I had no hope of any kindness here."

"I will save you some bread from the midday meal and return with it."

Adelard sobbed. "Bless you, Ramiro. Bless you!"

"I must go. I have no business here and do not wish to be caught."

"Yes. Go. I anxiously await your return."

"Good-bye, brother."

As Ramiro climbed the steps to the ground floor, he knew he would have no reason to return. The poison in the wine would kill Adelard within the hour.

He sighed with relief when he reached the library on the second floor. As usual, he had the library to himself at his time of day.

At the rear of the room he lifted one of the larger tiles and gazed at the *Compendium* of Srem where it rested in the space he had hollowed out for it. He ran his fingers over the cover.

The crimes I have committed for you ...

The *Compendium* had been under his family's care seemingly forever, handed down from father to first-born son for more generations than he could count. But no

generation had taken credit for fashioning it. The book simply *was*.

Ramiro had not been his family's first son, but after the Battle of Toro he was the only son left. He had guarded the *Compendium* then, from the Inquisition and from others who had been searching for it down the ages. But as the Inquisition progressed, strengthening its hold on the populace and penetrating deeper and deeper into the lives of all within reach, he realized that possessing such a magical tome endangered his life. His anxiety grew to the point where he knew he had to change his ways: either flee to a different land, or hide in the belly of the beast.

He chose the latter and joined the Dominicans. He brought the *Compendium* with him, thinking the last place anyone would look for a heretical book would be in a monastery inhabited by the very order running the Inquisition. His family had never followed any religion, merely pretending to be Christians to fit in. After joining, Ramiro had found it easy to pretend, and came to enjoy the serene life of a monk.

But still his anxiety grew. He kept the *Compendium* hidden in a false bottom of his tiny bureau of drawers, but if someone found it, he would end up on the rack. He decided that he wanted to be done with guarding the *Compendium*. That had been his family's tradition, but he could no longer honor the commitment. He had to rid himself of the book, hide it for some future generation to find. But he could not allow himself to know where it was hidden, for he did not think he could resist digging it up and paging through it one more time. And one more time after that. And again after that ...

So he had wrapped it and tied it and given it to Pedro the carpenter. He trusted the simple man to follow his instructions: Do not disturb the wrapping and bury it somewhere safe of his own choosing; he was to tell no one

the location, not even Ramiro. Pedro had agreed and hurried off into the night.

Days later, Ramiro had almost swooned with shock when Adelard had invited him into his room to see the wondrous new book he had bought in the marketplace.

Pedro had betrayed him.

Right then and there Ramiro had known he wanted it back. The *Compendium* had to be his again.

He pretended to be ignorant of the book and followed along with Adelard until the trail led them to Pedro. When he'd entered the carpenter's hovel alone, he drew a knife from the sleeve of his robe and stabbed him in the heart. He had felt no remorse then and felt none now. He had trusted Pedro with a task and the man had betrayed him in a way most foul, a way that could have cost him his own life.

Ramiro knew from his family tradition across the generations that the *Compendium* had survived flood and blade and fire. That was why he had attacked it so enthusiastically with the headsman's axe: He had known the book would be impervious.

And then Adelard's pathetic attempt to fool them into thinking he had found a solvent to destroy the *Compendium*. Torquemada's eyes were poor, but Ramiro knew the book too well and had recognized the decoy for what it was. After that it was a simple matter of finding where Adelard had hidden the original.

Regaining possession had been the easiest. After making sure Torquemada had tied up the *Compendium* himself, Ramiro pretended to see a falling star. While the old man was searching the sky, Ramiro reached through the slit in his robe into the same pouch where he had hidden Adelard's wine this morning. He removed Adelard's tin fake, wrapped identically as the original. The true *Compendium* took its place in the pouch and Adelard's fake went into the earth.

Ramiro shook his head. He had lied for the *Compendium*, killed for it, betrayed and killed a friend for it, then stolen it

back from the Grand Inquisitor himself.

Perhaps you are from hell, he thought, touching the raised lettering. Look what you've made me do.

But no, the *Compendium* was not from hell. Adelard had been right: It came from the past, from before the Deluge. Indeed, it *was* the Eighth Wonder of the Ancient World. But it must remain hidden from the modern world. Not for Torquemada's reason of a threat to the Faith—Ramiro cared not for any faith—but because the world did not need it yet.

He replaced the tile and headed for the fields.

Pedro and Adelard and the two *relapsos* were dead. One look at Torquemada and anyone could tell that the Grand Inquisitor would soon be joining them. The Morisco from the marketplace was practically illiterate and had no idea what treasure he had held. Only Asher ben Samuel remained, and as a *converso* targeted by the tribunal, he would never talk about it.

The *Compendium* seemed safe ... at least for the moment.

Ramiro's family tradition said the *Compendium* was a thing of destiny, with an important role to play in the future. Ramiro had rededicated himself to preserving it for that future. It would be safer hidden under the library floor than in the chest of drawers in his room or buried in a field. Someday it would find its place in the future and fulfill its destiny.

One day he would leave the order and find a wife. He would have a son and start a new tradition of protecting the *Compendium*.

But until then it would belong to him and him alone. No one else could touch it or read of the marvels described and pictured within. Only him.

Ramiro liked it that way.

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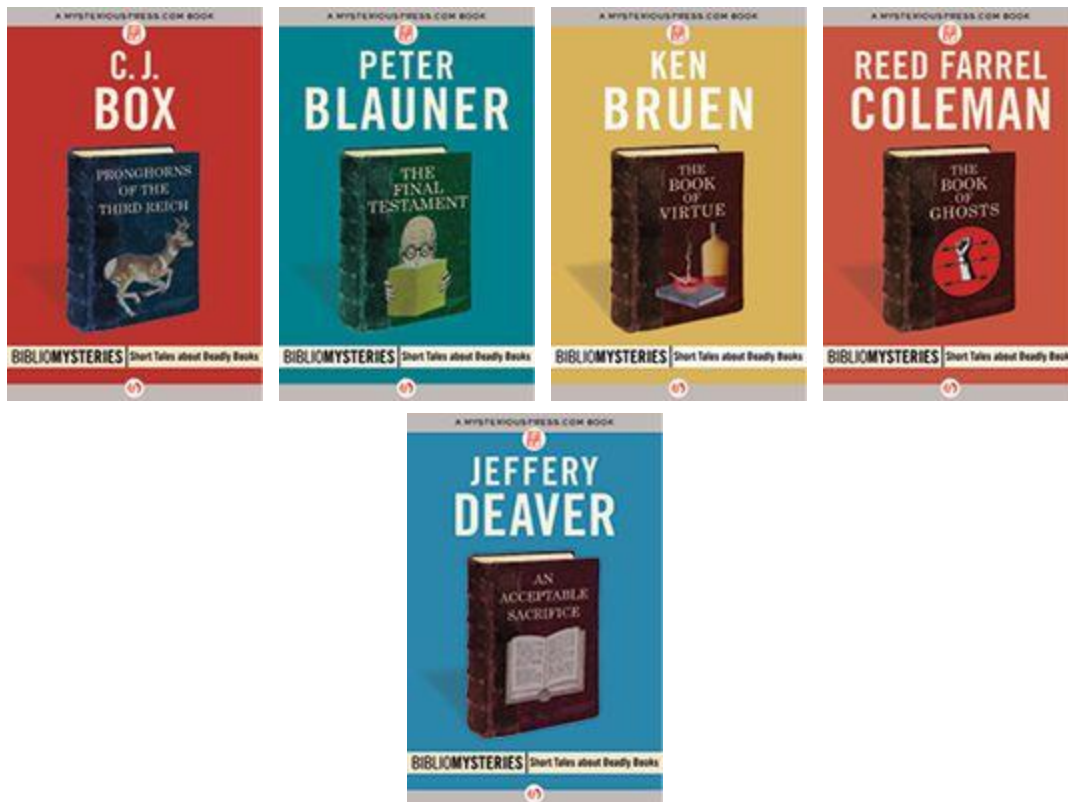
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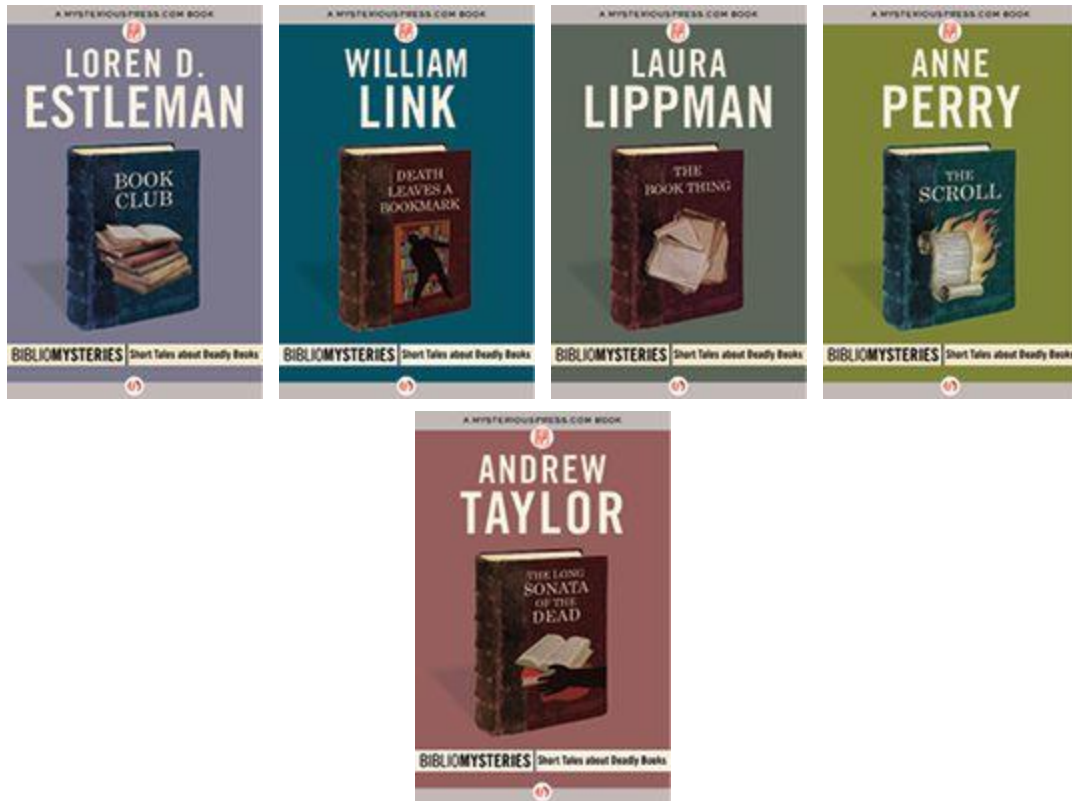
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