

PROLOGUE

...there are the monks called gyrovagues, who spend their entire lives drifting from region to region, staying as guests for three or four days in different monasteries. Always on the move, they never settle down, and are slaves to their own wills and gross appetites.

— **Benedict, on The Kinds of Monks in The Holy Rule of St. Benedict**

November 30, St. Andrew's Day

Ed O'Hirlihy, keeping bar, had seen the large, disheveled, red-robed figure enter more than two hours earlier, with what looked like a katana, a Samurai sword, encased in a wooden saya, dangling from his rope belt.

A little late for Halloween! Ed thought. It was late November, and in the cool southern Louisiana evening the flamboyant monk wore no outer cloak.

Ed didn't think much of it at first. He'd heard that the old itinerant, Father Eli, was staying at the local St. Andrew's Abbey, though he had national prominence as a would-be 'prophet.' So what? Religious could drink, and Eli was rumored to have both Japanese and Russian blood. He was a real international lightning rod.

It was after the fifth round of beers, when the good Father was on his third Vodka straight, that things got dicey. Fr. Eli Jahrls, known to some as 'Eli-Jah' for his pretensions about being a prophet, had become agitated and was now standing unsteadily on a wooden bench at a table surrounded by other losers.

As Fr. Eli waved his tuniced arms and the sword swayed in its scabbard, Ed winced. He didn't want his establishment going to the dogs in one evening.

Suddenly Fr. Eli jumped down, dramatically marched to a

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central spot in front of the row of stools at the bar, and shouted out an unrecognizable epithet that got the attention of even the drowsiest drunks in the place. He deftly pulled the slender, two-and-a-half-foot sword from its sheath, careful not to slice his own huge callused hands, and with its tip drew a circle around himself on the rough floor.

Then Fr. Eli-Jah began performing what looked like a carefully choreographed dance, enhanced with Cossack movements. For an old fart, he was surprisingly light on his feet. But it was the mask-like solemnity on his rugged face, and then, when he had finished, his guttural outcry, that made nearly everyone in The Camellia Bar suddenly freeze to attention:

"Vengeance is mine...!" The startled reactions of the drinkers that broke out served to muffle the rest of his pronouncement. Who was this kook, anyway?

Ed, who had been taught well by the nuns but who considered himself a burnt-out case, knew the quote. *"Says the Lord,"* he muttered to himself, before stepping in to settle the unease that had taken over the atmosphere in his pub.

But before Ed could manage to lead the disruptive figure toward his swinging exit doors, the old monk managed to swipe at the rough oak pillars and put a long gouge in one.

Imagining worse outcomes, Ed the atheist breathed a prayer of thanks that it had only scratched wood.

Why couldn't the Abbey keep its guests better ensconced and out of the community's hair? The bar owner sighed and turned back to the business of wiping down the bar.

CHAPTER 1

Unity is the principle of all things and the most dominant of all that is: all things emanate from it and it emanates from nothing.

≈ **Theon of Smyrna**

As soon as Father Malachi opened the door from the sacristy and entered the chapel, he sensed sacrilege before he actually saw the wet pile of blackened wood ashes in the center of the altar. He was as shocked as he would have been had he come upon a cremated Jesus heaped in a mound on the fair linen cloth. The scent of burned wood overpowered the usual scent of candle wax and the astringent incense he had used at High Mass the day before. Who could have desecrated their sacred space in this manner?

Father Malachi differed from his fellow monks in that he had married and lived in the world before he became a seminarian, then a monk, and, now, an abbot. As a healer, he knew the limitations of wounded human beings for his own wife had committed suicide years ago. But he was still sickened at the sight of some warped creature's idea of creativity. A note lay beside the charred mess, and after closer inspection, Fr. Malachi saw that the pile contained the remnants of burnt religious cards, some bearing the image of Jesus. The note, written in poorly formed letters, read: *Yore not gods.*

He couldn't help thinking: Hell has terrible grammar. And lousy decorum. Someone had been setting up an "alternative" display on the altar, had burned holy symbols and heaped the offensive ash on the corporal during the night. Who had done this? One of the monks at his beloved St. Andrew's Abbey? Not possible. One of the secular helpers or suppliers in their bread baking operation? Possibly. Maybe the shabby, sullen "handyman" who had come seeking work recently? He knew the sacristy had been locked the

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night before, as always, keeping the sacred vessels safe. How had the person gained entrance in order to take the cards and do this?

Father Malachi glanced up at the statue of the Virgin Mary in her immaculate blue gown, standing on a snake that had its red fangs extended. "Blessed among women, and blessed be the fruit of your womb," he said, taking the corporal and folding it over respectfully to enclose the ash.

He crossed himself before a wooden replica of the crucified Christ hanging behind the altar and went about dressing it again, realizing it was 6:45 a.m., almost time for early Mass. No moments for meditation or investigation of the sacrilege. No ashy fingerprints visible. Malachi, whose genuine piety was matched by his unflappable logic, wondered why, in real life, the demands of existence always involved excruciating choices of what to give prime attention to.

In the sacristy, he put on his chasuble and purple stole and scratched his smoothly shaved head in perplexity. During his preparations, the Abbot's ring, a mounted gold medallion, suddenly caught the morning light, and his mind, as though in sync, exploded in outrage. Here it was Advent, the time of waiting for the Christ, and some twisted soul had tried to turn Him into ash before He materialized! The foolish menace didn't even have his seasons straight. "You're not gods" or "You're not God's"? It could be taken to have several meanings. Though the perp had fumbled the expression, the threat was clear enough.

Fr. Malachi, who had seen much worse in his career, still felt a strong prescience of evil lurking within the stone walls of the sacred residence. He heard the monks processing in, two by two, practicing their unembellished plainchants that usually transported him into contemplative realms. But he didn't experience his daily uplift.

The traditional mental picture of Gregory the Great receiving chants from the Holy Spirit with a dove sitting on his shoulder caused him to smile. Gregory had been a compiler, and there weren't any doves sitting on the shoulders of those who altered the Divine Harmonies in their efforts at post-modern commercialization, he thought ruefully. This had become the stickiest issue on his current slate as Abbot, and he really WAS going to have to make a decision about it soon.

CHAPTER I

The purity of chant composition had always been respected in the Benedictine monastic tradition. Devoted monks had acknowledged that the seven notes of the musical scale were sacred, just as the story of beginnings in Genesis told of *seven* days of creation. The octave, which consisted of seven notes in succession with a 'do' repeated an octave higher at the end, symbolized a coming together of Divine and earthly forces in a mellifluous flow of creative strength. Some even believed it was key to altering the level of vibration in the air, and when properly sung, heightened peacefulness in the community.

The practice of chant, for the monks, was not only an act of worship, it was a spiritual exercise, a creation of unity that the singers themselves brought into being. Even the novices understood that the perpetuation of the traditional tones in sequence were a powerful sign to the world that *God's order prevails in the universe*, that the Divine unity underlies all.

Was the sacrilege on the altar a crudely expressed message intended to chide the monks about crossing into the forbidden realm of the secular world, profaning ethereal music by making CDs of their plainchants and marketing them? Whose buttons had been pushed worst by the sudden change in the Abbey's material fortunes? The list of potential grievance bearers was too long for Malachi to contemplate now.

He had given the brothers permission to record the voices of The Heavenly Choir, as they called themselves. But, by doing so, had he invoked some kind of dark reprimand? As Abbot, father of the community and virtually their Christ, Fr. Malachi thought of his monks with paternal anxiety. As their leader, teacher, and ruler, it was his responsibility to investigate the desecration and find the Religious who had violated the peace of the Community; that is, if one of the monks had anything to do with the sacrilege. And this music venture they had launched might have to be scrapped, despite the wealth it brought.

He loved his flock, this community that was tangible evidence of his genuine midlife calling, and he wanted them to be happy in their life at the Abbey. He also desired for them to have the proper disposition of heart. The chants helped them with that disposition, but he didn't want any obsession with them to cause the monks to replace the teachings of the Gospel, the centrality of the Word,

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or usurp their order's essential Benedictine Rule either, for that matter.

He felt that his wife, who had some years ago sought a kind of liberation from her demons by committing suicide with a handgun, would have benefited from The Rule.

The Rule of St. Benedict, founder of their order, was the true way of life, not a set of laws. Unfortunately, Fr. Malachi's wife had been extremely narcissistic, and God hadn't been the true point of reference in her life. The center of her circumference had been herself. She had possessed no stability, no conversion, no sense of otherness, and no listening powers. With those lacks, it was a wonder she had survived to the age of 30.

In his previous work as a psychiatrist dealing with disordered minds, Fr. Malachi had revered Jung; but he found that St. Benedict knew more about the human psyche than Jung. The legendary saint had a grasp of this thing called *unity* that had been perverted by dualistic religions. After his wife died, Fr. Malachi found a way of returning to his heart through reading about the Rule of St. Benedict that had been written in vernacular Latin during the 6th century. Nine thousand words had changed his life.

Fr. Malachi sighed and thought about the chants again. He wasn't a musician himself, and the sequences had been difficult for him to learn. He respected the talent of his young cantor and choirmaster, Fr. Paul, who had a sublime voice, and felt he could trust Fr. Paul's skills and intense commitment to making the chants a success. However, he also knew that some monasteries were allowing their chants to be characterized as musical preparation for the Apocalypse, which was a bow to the fundamentalists in order to sell more copies.

Malachi relied on the supreme importance of love in the biblical book of First John to guide him, and he knew that he could achieve that love only through humility. He sighed again, remembering his previous days of work with people who were mentally disturbed. Their willfulness had made him cynical, which, in turn, made humility even more difficult, but...

Fr. Malachi returned to his thoughts about loving his flock and wanting them to be happy. Yet, he also realized the necessity of tough love. On a bulletin beside the sacristy sink, Fr. Malachi had only yesterday posted these words from St. Benedict: "If there

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are artisans in the monastery, they are to practice their craft with all humility, but only with the abbot's permission. If one of them becomes puffed up by his skillfulness in his craft and feels that he is conferring something on the monastery, he is to be removed from practicing his craft and not allowed to resume it unless, after manifesting his humility, he is so ordered by the abbot..." Fr. Malachi had also enjoined his fellow monks to read this rule at Noonday Prayer and to commit it to memory.

He thought that the baking of bread by the Order to sell at the Farmer's Market in Marksville every Friday was a worthwhile enterprise, although the proceeds had been modest, compared to the staggering profits already garnered from the CD sales. The stalwart Fr. Frank had been in charge of bread production for many years, and relying on his expert administration of the process, Malachi had hardly needed to supervise. It all worked like clockwork. Part of the proceeds was dispersed to at least ten charities in the area, just enough donations to keep the monastery from appearing to be a commercial operation. The Diocese provided some upkeep for their Order, but they had supported themselves well enough through their own baking and gardening skills for the better part of 100 years.

The sound of bells startled his reverie and summoned him once again to his sacred purpose. He glanced out the sacristy window at the line of monks in their white tunics, hands inside apron-like black scapulars, processing along the trellised walkway to the chapel, two by two, subdued by their own chanting. No time to ponder the ashy mess in the sacristy sink, but the monks wouldn't escape his interrogation before breakfast. He'd call a meeting in the library while they were still fasting.

Fr. Malachi walked out to the altar to begin the service, genuflected before it, and went over to stand beside his chair, allowing himself to be transported by the clear voices of the now assembled monks as they began to chant the Introit.

Some invisible prod caused him to look up. The painted angels swirling in a circle on the ceiling above his head suddenly begged his attention, as though they had added their voices in song, and he was caught up in peripheral awareness that something else had gone very wrong this morning. He stared, dumbfounded, at a gaping hole in the once-pink face of one of the cherubs that

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had been artfully rendered by the famous Dutch artist, Jon Vroon. The faceless cherub now looked like a Martian creature who had invaded the ring of winged messengers. Amid the soaring voices of The Heavenly Choir, Fr. Malachi drew back as though he had been punched in the face.

“Holy Bleedin’ Zerubbabel!” The words spurted out of his mouth in spite of himself.