

VERDIGRIS

By Gary R. Moor

Copyright © 2015 Gary R. Moor
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

To request permission to reproduce selections from this book, send
Email to Gary R. Moor at garyrmoor@gmail.com

ISBN 000-0-000-00000-0

Book design and cover art by Adrienne Fritze and Gary R. Moor

Portland OR 97211
7 8 9 0

CONTENTS

Chapter	Title	
One	And Pray For the Thunder and the Rain.....	2
Two	Your Stairway Lies on the Whispering Wind.....	31
Three	Wretched Life of the Lonely Heart.....	50
Four	Lay Down Upon the Sword.....	56
Five	. . . Though We Refuse to See.....	68
Six	All The Good Times I've Been Misusin'.....	87
Seven	Merciless Eyes of Deceit.....	117
Eight	You Have Made Your World Mine.....	145
Nine	There's Still Time to Change the Road You're On.....	173
Ten	I'm Going out in a Blaze of Glory.....	205
Eleven	Then The Piper Will Lead Us to Reason.....	240
Twelve	I Hurt Myself Today to See if I Still Feel.....	270
Thirteen	The Baffled King Composing Hallelujah.....	319

First Interlude

The last Ohio class nuclear ballistic missile submarine built for the United States Navy, the USS Oregon, SSBN 744, cruises silently in 34° F water, deep in the North Pacific. She is one of two remaining *boomers* on regular Pacific patrol after the 2020 NART treaty. Hidden within her steel hull, 155 officers and crew perform their normal routines in safety and comfort. On her starboard side, within the 6th missile tube aft, resides a Trident II D5 submarine launched ballistic missile. Its three multiple, independently targetable, reentry vehicles each have a W88 warhead with a 475 kiloton yield. The navy designed the D5 originally for eight warheads, but the START 2 and NART treaties reduced them to three. The lighter payload increases the missile's range considerably. The missile's guidance system is over 30 years old, having undergone a life-extension program in 2011. Each W88 is 32 times more powerful than the "Little Boy" that destroyed Hiroshima. Each warhead will produce a nuclear fireball destroying everything within a 2.38-mile diameter circle. The damaging effects of a single W88 will cover an 840 square mile area. Most U.S. targeting packages include multiple warheads on a single target.

CHAPTER ONE

And Pray For The Thunder And The Rain To Quietly Pass Me By

1

Prague, Czech Republic, eleven meters east of Staronová synagoga.

No one had walked this floor for seven hundred and forty two years. He had lain in his sarcophagus, immobile for two thousand years. This was but the newest place for his geologically ancient and indestructible container to reside. Eleven meters below Prague's narrow Pařížská třída he listened with a glacial consciousness, waiting in blackness without patience, or dread, waiting with a certainty so absolute that it constituted his only remaining identity. This particularly odd species would activate him one last time.

A dim emotion glimmered within his crystalline brilliant mind—a grim loneliness tinged with grief that had lasted six millennia. For one who had lived for eons, this was a new experience. They were indeed an odd species. He would love and be lost again, left with a patina of shared moments that all the coming horror and violence would compare as nothing.

2

Prague Ruzyně Airport, Czech Republic Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021
—sixty four hours to activation—

Colonel Johnson Proffit, USMC, watched three identical crates roll up a cargo conveyor ramp into the China Airlines Boeing 747-400F cargo plane. Wearing a brown wool business suit, he stood outside a cyclone fence. Heavy browed, with wide cheekbones, he had the face of an unsuccessful boxer. At five foot nine and heavily muscled, his body resembled a fireplug.

The crates ostensibly contained variously colored silica sand for a glassblowing artist in Kentucky. However, one of the crates actually

contained the colonel's mission: an ancient sarcophagus. In that sarcophagus lay something only a handful of people in the world knew existed.

Also wearing civilian clothes, his force recon team of six men waited behind him chatting casually. None appeared to give the least thought to the cold rain drizzling down on them. Unlike the rest of his team, Colonel Proffit wore no hat, the frosty rainwater accumulated on his balding head as a fuzz of tiny beads.

When the three crates disappeared into the aircraft, Colonel Proffit allowed himself a moment's triumph. As he automatically scanned for threats, he did not entirely notice, nor felt any concern, for a fourth identical crate rolling up the conveyor.

He and his team had accomplished the physically difficult part of their mission. They had taken the crate on an excruciating two-day journey in absolute secrecy from under the streets of Prague to here. He had enjoyed working with his men in the field again. As commander of the 2nd Marine Division's 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion, he hadn't operated in the field for many years.

Fifteen minutes later the Chinese 747 lifted off the main runway in seeming slow motion, the roaring whine of its engines muffled by distance and dense wet air.

As the plane melted into the overcast, the colonel turned to his team leader, Gunnery Sergeant Anders. With his face scarred, brutal, and meaty, standing six foot two, and built like what the colonel imagined a Roman gladiator might have looked like, Anders was someone you really wanted as a friend.

"We're done here boys," said Anders in his rumbling, hoarse voice.

They remained casual as the colonel shook each man's hand. No salutes. Each man held his gaze. These were very good men indeed.

The colonel said, "Gentlemen, well done. See you in Kentucky. Fly safe."

"You too colonel," said Anders.

The team walked to the airport terminal. Once inside, they dispersed, each man taking his own secret and roundabout way back to their rented warehouse in Louisville Kentucky.

Strolling to his assigned gate with his ticket to Paris in hand, no one seeing Colonel Proffit would ever suspect he anticipated the most important event in his life, perhaps the most important event in human history.

3

Let the wicked fall into their own nets,
while I pass by in safety.

Final line of Psalm 141

8160 NW St. Helens Road, Portland, Oregon, Thursday Nov. 11, 2021

Lillith Adams concentrated on the child's eye, feeling the joyful nothingness of full investment in her work. Shifting her grip on the wire rake she made a thoughtless cut in the clay eyeball to simulate a reflection in the pupil. She leaned away, the small of her back resting against the scaffolding's top rail upon which she stood. The scaffolding put her head level with the top of the ten-foot tall sculpture.

"Oh yeah," she said.

An athletic woman of five foot eleven, she had a long angular face with almond-shaped eyes, black eyebrows and a firm mouth. She wore a stained and worn tank top with khaki work pants. At the age of 42 her dark olive skin remained unblemished. An elastic band made of colored beads held her shoulder-length black hair at the base of her neck.

Behind her, completed two weeks ago, stood the reddish-brown, hollow wax figure of a lamb, standing six feet at the shoulder. The broken parts of its mold and the original clay sculpture stood in the southeast corner of the studio. With her assistant, Anna, they had finished chasing the wax figure yesterday, removing the parting lines and flashing. In two days they would sprue and gate it at the foundry.

The lamb and the child made up the final figures of a monumental bronze sculpture of St. Francis of Assisi. Months of work remained with ceramic molds, pouring bronze, and weeks and weeks of chasing and surface finishing. They would assemble the full sculpture on site. Lillith's largest work to date, the wealthy archdiocese of New York had contracted her to build it with the spiritual and financial support of the Vatican itself. It included a 17-foot tall statue of Giovanni Francesco di Bernardone, aka St. Francis, patron saint of animals and the environment, standing among a gathering of animals and four children.

Her studio filled most of her building's 90 by 50-foot industrial basement, a rugged space of carved stone and molded concrete. The

tools of her trade surrounded her from her past twelve years as a bronze sculptor. Above, past two-feet of the arched ceiling's concrete and steel, resided her tenants—high-end misfits, who with profound unreliability helped pay her mortgage and business loan.

Outside, through the line of windows set high in the stone wall, the sky had grown dark many hours ago. She had totally lost track of time.

The joy of doing her work faded, leaving tension in her shoulders as she anticipated a new crisis arising from one of her tenants.

On the floor near the center of the south wall lay an eight-foot-long Persian rug. It covered a door with access to her inner sanctum, a subterranean basement no one in her life now knew about. Just as she decided to escape to that place of surfeit and peace, a knock came from the heavy wooden door at the top of the stairs. It made Lillith jump. Anger came.

"Here we go again," she said aloud.

"What? What is it!" she shouted, knowing that whoever stood outside couldn't hear her through the door's three inches of solid wood.

Her cell phone rang. She pulled it from her pocket. It's how one of her tenants, Nancy, got her to answer the door.

"Shit."

She ran up the stairs and swung the door open, perhaps too energetically, in the hidden hope it might hit Nancy. She could take Nancy to the hospital, rather than deal with whatever crisis had arose. But she had trained Nancy too well; as the six foot, two hundred and forty pound woman cowered well clear of the door's path.

"Thank God you're in there," said Nancy as she stared rigidly at the stone tiled floor.

"Not anymore," said Lillith.

"What?" said Nancy.

"What's the problem Nancy?"

"What?"

"The problem. What's the problem Nancy?"

Nancy made a furtive glance in the general direction of Lillith's face and hesitated. Lillith knew she wanted to lead into the problem with a long story of introduction—sometimes Lillith tolerated that—but not tonight and Nancy knew it.

"It's Andy," said Nancy with unaccustomed boldness.

"Of course it is," said Lillith.

Nancy opened her mouth to speak.

Lillith said, "Don't bother. I got it."

Disappointed, Nancy moved aside. Lillith walked out of the hall that provided access to her studio, as well as the apartments of Sherry, Sinise, and Nancy. It opened into the resident's foyer. Making her way to the stairs across the stone-tiled foyer floor she could hear the music throbbing from upstairs, classic rock and roll; Guns N' Roses, "Sweet Child of Mine." Lillith liked that song.

At the base of the stairs, she could see Nancy hovering at the hall entrance.

Lillith said, "S'okay Nance, I'll take care of it. I was a little short there, sorry, tired I guess."

Brighter, Lillith said, "I finished the boy."

Nancy grinned self-consciously and with too much exuberance said, "Great! I'm so glad! I'm sorry to bother you so late Lilly, I just gotta get my sleep...work in the morning you know."

"I know," said Lillith as she started up the stairs.

Although Nancy lived off an annuity from a real estate fund she inherited from her grandmother, she insisted on continuing to work long, hard hours as a hospice nurse.

Nancy said, "Uhm, I still have to use Sinise's kitchen sink, Lilly. She doesn't really mind, but it's been two days."

Halfway up the stairs, Lillith stopped and said, "Shit."

Leaning on the marble stair rail and looking down at Nancy, Lillith said, "I'm not mad at you. It's his job...but did you tell him?"

"I thought you did," Nancy murmured.

"Nancy, I told you. I'm busy right now. Just talk to him. He doesn't bite...much. You can talk to him."

"But he won't—you're the..."

"Listen, it's his job, he serves at the tenant's pleasure, he knows that and if you don't tell him something's broken, he can't fix it, okay?"

Nancy said, "Okay", but Lillith knew, after having a hundred versions of this conversation over the past seven years, all would remain precisely the same—Nancy terrified of Andy. In fact everyone in the building had some level of fear regarding him, including herself, Lillith admitted. But her fear arose from another quarter.

She put Nancy out of her thoughts and bounded up the stairs, turned left, walked down the palatial hall, and arrived at Andy's door. Axl Rose's voice threatened to shatter it.

For a few seconds, with her head throbbing in time with Guns N' Roses, the oppressively familiar list of her tenant's seemingly insurmountable problems arose. Bob Crowder lived off the dwindling annuity from selling his truck repair business. He lived down the hall from Andy. She knew Bob would drink himself into a stupor every night. He rarely bothered her, or anyone, so she found his drinking easy to ignore, yet it worried her sick. Behind Lillith, across the hall from Andy, lived Aaron Wislowski, who made a good living at playing the stock market, yet regularly had excellent and dramatic reasons not to pay his rent. He managed to live a tumultuous life fraught with complaints. Downstairs, her door next to the studio's, lived Sinise Bradley who suffered from heavy metal poisoning. She lived off the proceeds from a court settlement—yet she had to battle in the courts to preserve it, spending more time in court and in hospitals than at home. She rarely managed to pay her rent on schedule. Next door to Sinise lived Sherry Maloney, their resident Wiccan, whose income source Lillith had forgotten. She would simply forget to pay her rent. Without reminders Sherry would never pay her rent. After seven years, Lillith had lost track of how many months Sherry owed in back rent by virtue of, *oh, I'm sorry, I forgot again.*

Seven years of this. Lillith decided she would run away—that's what she would do.

The imperative of the throbbing beat in her head, however, had her knock on Andy's door. Unable to hear it herself, she knew Andy would never hear it. She tried the knob, unlocked, as always. Her fear ratcheted up several notches as she swung the door open. Andy, former Marine Corps Master Sergeant Anderson Jones, would use a gun, most likely his M-45 MEU(SOC), the one patterned after the old Browning 1911 .45—the standard issue sidearm for Marine Corps Force Reconnaissance. The .45 ACP round would make a hell of a mess and she scanned the room for blood. Instead, she saw former Master Sergeant Jone's shadowy shape slouched in his chair, his bare legs bracketing an end table supporting a flat screen TV. A movie played on the screen she recognized as *Always*, Steven Spielberg's masterful remake of *A Guy Named Joe*.

Her head ached as the song neared the end. Guilt, with a measure of regret, arose at seeing his powerful tuner and speakers—her Christmas gift to him last year—she had given everyone in the building expensive Christmas gifts from her St. Francis advance.

In the dim light she trotted over strewn clothes, dirty plates and silverware to reach the CD player before the next song started, *You're Crazy*. Once that song's single guitar vamp ended, she feared the full opening might fracture her skull. Guns N' Roses' 1987 album *Appetite for Destruction* came out while she and Andy attended grade school.

She pressed the power button. The silence hurt as much as the music. He had the volume off on the TV.

In the few seconds between music tracks she watched Andy sleeping with the .45 held in both hands on his lap. He remained remarkably fit. He had served with the USMC Force Reconnaissance, as a superbly trained and dangerous warrior. His VA benefits inadequate, he suffered not only from PTSD, but exposure to sarin nerve agent in Afghanistan from which his brain function gradually degraded every day. Lillith would never leave behind a fellow marine.

As always, with her thoughts returning to her time in the Marine Corps, her brain went into its electrified, grieving chaotic remembrance of Major Donovan, her father, the feel of a uniform she could never wear again and back to Andy. The cycle repeated. *Wash, rinse, repeat*, stumbling through her brain between each cycle. Over and over with such rapidity she got dizzy.

The moment *You're Crazy* would have begun, Andy surged up off the chair, the muzzle of his M-45 swinging across the room as he held it out stiff, gripped in both hands. Eyes wild, he swung toward her, stopped short and lowered the gun, easing the hammer forward.

The final scene of the movie played on the TV. Holly Hunter appeared child-like between the immensely tall Brad Johnson and the huge John Goodman as they walked away on an empty runway.

Barefoot, Sergeant Jones wore clean white jockey shorts and a tank top that contrasted with his chocolate brown skin and lean, muscular legs and arms.

Her gaze ranged from his feet to the top of his head. She felt a not unfamiliar, though odd excitement she refused to acknowledge. His rugged, lined, and horse-like face broke into a crooked grin. Gray stubble ranged about his jaw and chin. He flipped his arms behind his back to hide the gun, and stood at parade rest.

"Ma'am," he said.

"Sergeant. Fuck you," said Lillith.

"Sorry," he said.

His shiny bald head reflected the TV's light as the credits rolled.

Lillith pulled back her hair. She stood with her hands behind her head and stared at the TV.

"Never would have shot you," said Andy.

"I know that," she said unconvincingly.

He said, "It's uhm, well it's not...it *is* loaded. Solid points though, you know."

She did. Only hollow points would do the job. As far as shooting her, she had the odd thought that it wouldn't be such a bad idea. It gave her some notion of what he might be going through. She kept her attention on the TV, thoughtlessly reading the credits.

After a moment she said, "Off your meds again."

Andy nodded.

"Sergeant," she said.

"I get too muzzy ma'am, I can't think. I know about Nancy's sink, but couldn't think how to fix it on the meds. Scared me. I can't live here without earning my keep. Been takin' those meds too long. It doesn't help. I don't think any clearer than I did. It's not helping."

He kept the building immaculate and could manage a few non-skilled repairs. A year ago, he would never have had the gun out. Tonight, for the first time, he had the hammer back and the safety off. She felt a soul-deadening premonition of failing to complete the monument, having to pay back the advance, and getting stuck forever with Andy as he slowly crept toward complete insanity, yet never quite getting there.

She turned to him. He met her gaze. They would go through this cycle every four to six months, so it was time, once again, to break out the Blue Label.

Without a word, she left and walked down the hall to a central flight of stairs that led up to her attic apartment, the largest in the building. She returned with the \$400 bottle of scotch. He had two clean glasses and a \$350 box of Padron 80 Maduro cigars ready on his red painted kitchen table. He sat in one of his uncomfortable yellow painted wooden chairs. Still barefoot, he wore a pair of brown wool work pants with the tank top.

Once they had their cigars going and had sipped some scotch, he got out a handmade cribbage board and a deck of cards.

For hours they said nothing, other than counting cribbage hands.

"...got fifteen two, fifteen four, fifteen six; fifteen eight, ten, twelve, pair's fourteen and a run for seventeen..."

They played game after game, sipped scotch and smoked until the blackness outside the four large windows had begun to fade.

Exhausted, but finally relaxed, Lillith stubbed out her third cigar butt in a plain glass ashtray. Their glasses empty, more than half the Johnnie Walker remained. At this rate Lillith figured it would last another year or so.

She had soundly beaten Andy in the last three games. His counting had slowed considerably, and she figured the next game could take a long time. Poised to shuffle the cards once more, she looked across the table at Andy. He sat with head bowed, hands spread flanking his glass. His face held a glazed, slack expression. Affection and compassion for him swelled within her, threatening tears. She knew, once again, why she would never abandon him to his fate. That odd excitement arose too and she immediately stood, a bit unsteadily.

"Ma'am," said Andy as he rose from his chair too.

She said, "Frank's delivering the head and hands for the finish work, and I got a delivery of clay scheduled tomorrow from Prague."

Andy looked at his watch and said, "Today."

"What?"

"Tomorrow is today."

She sighed, grabbed the bottle of Blue Label and pushed her chair back on the polished wooden floor.

Facing the door with her back to him, she said, "I loved the marines, Sergeant. I loved everything about them. I couldn't imagine being anywhere or doing anything else."

He said, "Yes ma'am."

She walked out of the room.

4

Army Navy Dr. & Fern St. Arlington, VA
—25 hours to activation—

The Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Gordon S. Cooper sat behind his desk with arms folded and eyes closed. He wore an impeccable khaki service uniform with jacket and tie. Colonel Johnson Proffit stood at rigid attention before him in his combat utilities. Out the window behind his boss, the colonel could see across the night black and bejeweled water of the Potomac to the white shaft

of the Washington Monument, over a mile away. He watched the line of moving white and red lights of parkway traffic on this side of the river. The scene became surreal as he had a frightening premonition. He would never see this again.

Finally, the general sighed, and leaned forward with his elbows on the desk.

He said, "Colonel, I'm going to say the required bullshit, knowing full well you'll do what's required. I have my orders too."

The colonel's eyes flickered ever so slightly.

The general said, "I would not let them fire you. In addition to the injustice, we'd be totally fucked. But we're only pretty well fucked now. So, once again, it's totally up to you."

The general's hands curled into fists on the desk blotter and he looked at a Marine Corps coffee mug next to his right arm.

"So this thing's real? Your report indicated . . ."

The colonel didn't move.

"Permission," said the general.

"Yes sir, it's real," the colonel said softly.

"Holy . . ." said the general. "...if someone else activates it by accident."

"It won't happen by accident, general. It will just happen on the sixth day. Two days from now. It could activate as soon as one day, though, sir."

The general stiffened and he said, "Like you said, despite calculations to the contrary it could activate at dawn of the seventh day or midnight of the sixth."

"Yes sir. As I said, too, we don't know if it'll pay any attention to time zones."

"So, Colonel Proffit, I want you to know I know whatever happened, it had to be the mother of all *we'll-never-find-out-what-the-fuck-happened-situations*. I'm also well aware that you warned us and this happened due to efforts by certain individuals to cover their asses, but you are responsible, shit rolls downhill and all that. I believe neither one of us gives a shit how it happened and no one cares a fart sniff who's at fault, but holy fucking mother of Christ, you are going to find that crate."

The general's hands relaxed and he gathered in the coffee mug, holding it centered before him on the desk.

As if speaking to himself, the general said, "Unless some asshole threw it off the 787 before it got to Louisville, it got to Louisville, right?"

Neither moved, nor spoke.

"Unless . . ." said the general.

Colonel Proffit said, ". . . unless there was . . ."

"A fourth crate," said the general.

The colonel murmured, "There was—something in Prague. I remember, at the plane."

He snapped back to attention.

The general said, "Never left Paris did it?"

The colonel stood more rigid than ever.

The general said, "Go ahead. Permission to sp..."

"It did though," said Colonel Proffit. "Someone could have mixed up the crates in Kentucky. As I said in the transmission we got the two for the glass artist and an identical one full of clay. Maybe the artist got the...."

"Dammit, colonel, go forth! I remind you of your work for me in Afghanistan. I know you're up to this. You and your boys did a helluva job over there, tougher situation than I've ever seen. Saved a lot of Marines. This is nothing. Helicopter's outside to get you to Andrews. I've got you a Hornet and a hotshot pilot. Now...dismissed."

The colonel snapped a salute. The general returned it and watched Colonel Proffit march out of the office and gently shut the door behind him.