



## THE SPECTROGRYPH

“Lord of the dark light, lord of the dark light, lord of the dark light . . .”

The words echoed in Eben Wale’s head until a buzzard’s croak clawed him back to the moment. He switched the coffeemaker on and looked out the cracked window above the sink. A buzzard was perched on the crossbar of the power pole behind his old farmhouse. The bird was black against the gray winter sky, and the sight reminded Eben how cold it was. He yawned and rubbed the goose-bumps beneath the sleeves of his robe.

The buzzard squawked again and one of the hens answered from the chicken yard. Old Cackle-burr had been dead for a month now and the girls missed him. They tried to imitate his crowing but made gaspy little sounds that were so weak they hadn’t even wakened Eben that morning. But he probably would have slept through a dozen roosters. He got to bed hours later than he was used to the previous night, and it took a whiff of Blucher to rouse him from his sleep.

As if he knew Eben was thinking about him, Blucher came limping into the kitchen. He was a big dog who’d wandered up years before, without the limp, but with a big appetite that was still healthy after no telling how many bags of dry dog food and now the softer canned stuff. Eben hated to see the arthritis eating away at his hips. His coat had seen better days too—his fur used to be thick and black but now it was thin and gray. And he smelled like crap in an old shoe. No wonder buzzards were showing an interest in the place. Skunks would be nosing around next, thinking one

of their own was in the house.

Blucher's long toenails tick-ticked across the grimy linoleum. He went to his food bowl and looked down at it. Empty. He turned his rheumy eyes on Eben, who felt guilty and looked away. He studied a flyspecked wall. A gray hairball was stuck to its baseboard. He couldn't tell if the hair was his or Blucher's. They were having a race to baldness. Eben was sixty-four, which was...what, in dog years? Probably as old as Blucher.

Blucher lapped from his water bowl and eyed Eben again. He wanted his breakfast. Eben shook his head.

"Sorry, boy. I need you hungry for later. I need the kitchen warm too."

He stepped to the stove, turned on all four gas rings and set the flames high.

"This'll heat things up."

He warmed his big hands briefly and then went to the living room. He stopped himself from looking back at Blucher, but he could feel him projecting hostility.

Eben crossed to the stone fireplace and took a match from the box on the mantel. He lit the gas heater on the hearth. As he stood holding his robe open to the rising warmth, Blucher came in and plopped down on his hairy rug near the fire. He sighed and closed his eyes.

Eben cinched his robe closed and went to the desk in the corner of the room. He sat and turned on his laptop computer, then he leaned down and rummaged through the backpack beside the chair. Ski mask, pistol, portable scanner...he found his camera. He pulled its memory chip and snapped it into the computer. He started to run the new footage, then decided to check his email first. A couple of clicks, a yawn, and he was connected to the internet.

He saw the usual junk in his inbox, and a note

from Candlesnuffer. He opened that one. The brief message said “obit, FYI,” and there was a link. Eben knew before he clicked on it that the obituary would be for the TV executive.

The executive was featured in Candlesnuffer’s latest video. It was a good piece of work that spliced short clips from well-known sitcoms and news programs into the interrogation session. During the session the exec told how the CIA had used television to tie the words “conspiracy” and “theory” together in people’s thinking. Constant repetition of the simple two-word phrase had led to a point where now it was nearly impossible for the average person to hear the first word without supplying the second on his own. Basic conditioning. The executive laughed about it. He said that once the term “conspiracy theory” had been embedded in the hive mind and associated with enough kooky ideas, the government could then discount even the most obvious examples of its wrongdoing by just uttering the word “conspiracy.”

Eben read the obituary and learned that the executive was fifty-six when he died, a pillar of the community, church leader, contributor to charities, a member of the Shriners. . . Ah, a Shriner. Membership in a secret society was always a giveaway. And the Shriners were one of the worst, with their membership of 32nd degree Masons and façade of good works. The stumpy red hats they wore commemorated the beheading of fifty thousand Christians in the city of Fez.

The obituary didn’t give the details of the executive’s death, so Eben did a quick search of the internet and found a newspaper article about it. The piece was from a New York paper’s website and described how he died after a fall from a window. There were no photographs, but a picture from another local story showed lots of snow. Eben thought how cold it must be in New York.

He was glad he lived in Texas, where it was cold enough as it was.

The aroma of brewed coffee managed to override the Blucher smell. Eben disconnected from the net and went to the kitchen. It was warming up so he turned off one of the stove's gas rings. He poured a mug of coffee and returned to his desk to plan his day.

He'd give it awhile before he braved the cold to do his chores. The animals needed tending, plus there was a patch of fence to mend, and later he might go to the feed store. He could pick up some chicken feed and find out if anyone saw him sneaking home on the back roads the night before.

He checked to make sure the chip from the camera was plugged firmly into his computer, then he clicked through to the video file. The raw footage began with a jerk. He settled back to watch.

Clunky sounds came through the laptop's speakers as the picture swung left and right. He'd had a bit of trouble mounting the camera on its tripod. The picture jittered, bounced, and then it settled on Leonard Coleridge, research scientist. The man was about forty-five and thin. And duct taped to a chair in his laboratory.

Eben's contact had provided him with a timetable she said he could count on, so he arrived in Austin at sunset and parked a block away from the lab. When he was sure he was in the three-hour window between quitting time and the arrival of the cleaning crew, he walked briskly to the lab's back door. The keycard was where it was supposed to be. He slipped his ski mask on and ducked inside.

Coleridge was alone and working late, as expected. It was his company and he was a driven individual. Eben showed him his pistol and made him sit in a straight-backed metal chair. Once

he'd bound the man's wrists together with a plastic pull-tie, he taped his mouth and then mummy wrapped him from shoulder to ankle. His hands were positioned so that one was left uncovered and palm up in his lap.

The video began at a point just after Eben secured Coleridge. He watched himself, in his baggy gray sweatsuit and black ski mask, enter the picture. He held a hypodermic in one of his latex-gloved hands and his pocketknife in the other. Coleridge had been compliant so far, but he squirmed when he saw the syringe. Eben told him to hold still so he wouldn't get cut, then he used the tip of the knife to pierce the tape and a shirtsleeve at one of the deltoids. He pulled the cap off the hypo's needle and jabbed.

Eben knew there wouldn't be any activity on the video for a while, so he let it run and went to change into his clothes. The bedroom was cold and he dressed fast. He put on thermal underwear, a flannel shirt and his overalls, but he didn't switch to his boots yet. His fuzzy slippers were nice and warm.

On his way back to the living room he made a stop at the toilet. Two minutes of squatting and shivering, then he hustled to the fireplace and warmed the seat of his overalls at the heater. Blucher opened an eye, sighed, and went back to sleep.

"Are you ready to talk?" Eben heard himself ask on the video. He stepped over to the desk so he could watch the action on the computer monitor. Or lack of action. He was standing in front of Coleridge and both were motionless. Coleridge couldn't answer Eben's question, because of his taped mouth, but he showed defiance by refusing to shake his head. The mix of sodium pentothal and LSD wasn't working yet.

Eben didn't know where the hypos came from.

He received them in the mail. The packages had fake return addresses and always included latex gloves, to remind him not to leave fingerprints.

He leaned forward in the video and removed the tape from Coleridge's mouth. His own mouth was visible through the slit beneath the ski mask's eyeholes.

"You know who I am, right doc?"

After a long pause Coleridge said, "I've seen your videos on the internet."

"I thought you would have, you and your group."

Coleridge sneered. "You seem to think you know quite a lot about my 'group.'"

"Before we go any further, would you state, for the record, which group you mean?"

Suddenly Coleridge wasn't so talkative.

Eben shrugged. "You've seen the videos. You know it's just a matter of time before the drugs make you open up."

Coleridge didn't respond.

Eben goaded.

"What I like about you people is the way you always clean up after yourselves. When one of you blabs, the others make sure you don't hang around long enough to shoot your mouth off a second time."

Still no response from Coleridge.

Eben knew that nothing would be happening on the video for a couple of minutes, so he went to the kitchen. He poured himself a glass of tomato juice and studied the food in the refrigerator while he sipped. Normally he would have cooked something for breakfast, but he ate a bag of peanuts on the late drive home from Austin and wasn't hungry yet. But he would be by lunchtime. He sniffed some salami and poked at a half-eaten ring of gelatin. It was drying out and didn't have much wobble.

The ring was raspberry. He wasn't sure which flavor to use for his project that day, and he checked the pantry to see what he had. Cherry, watermelon, strawberry and peach. The peach made him think of his trip to Rockport six months before. His contact said that a preacher there was overzealous with his "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" sermons. Eben knew that the ones who preached the Caesar stuff the loudest were usually government lackeys working to undermine church influence, and that was common enough nowadays, but the contact said the man in Rockport also used occult references in his sermons. So Eben drove down to the coast and paid the preacher's church a visit. He listened to a sermon, then he hung around that night and gave the man the treatment. And he turned out to be a true believer. Eben scanned him and the next day he used the scan to make what he called a peachy preacher parfait. A week later the preacher was found floating facedown in the Gulf of Mexico.

Eben grabbed the box of watermelon gelatin from the pantry and set it next to the stove. The kitchen was pretty warm now, so he turned off all the gas rings except for one and returned to the living room. He sat down at the desk just as the conversation began on the video.

"Let's try it again," his ski-masked self said. "Which group do I want you to talk about?"

"My support group for UFO abductees? We have a meeting every other full moon."

"Excellent," Eben said. "The drugs are beginning to loosen you up. And that was a good try, with the UFOs. You think that by tossing that out now it will discredit whatever you say later. But I'll be doing some editing, and if it's not in the final cut, it never happened."

Coleridge fidgeted. Eben nodded sympathetically.

“You’re itching, right? That’s from the drugs too. Some of the others have said it feels like bugs crawling on your skin. Next your mind will start to slip, so let’s get this over with. You answer my questions and I’ll cut you loose so you can curl up in a corner to ride it out. Or I can call EMS before I leave. Your choice. Now tell me about your group.”

No response, but Coleridge had to struggle to hold his tongue.

Eben prodded.

“Why won’t you talk about this? Are you ashamed of what you do?”

That brought a flash of anger.

“Let’s discuss you,” Coleridge hissed. “Your so-called science is ridiculous. That’s not an electrophoresis unit you’ve got in the videos, and using jello is just. . .childish.”

“Maybe so, but it adds a nice touch of color to the picture.”

Coleridge looked at Eben as if he was surprised by his candor. Eben made a scissors gesture with his fingers.

“Editing. It doesn’t matter what I say. I’ll leave it to you to explain to your buddies how my science is faked. But after they see your video, I don’t think they’ll be in a mood to listen.”

The pentothal caused Coleridge’s eyelids to flutter. His cheek muscles slackened and his jaw dropped slightly. Eben was still standing in front of him. He moved closer.

“So tell me, doctor, aren’t you ashamed of what you do?”

“Of course not. Why should I be?”

“Because you’re destroying the world.”

“And why would I do that?”

Coleridge looked and sounded dreamy, like he’d had one drink too many. But that wouldn’t last. The LSD would perk him up before long.

“You’re destroying the world,” Eben said,



“because you believe the wrong entity is on the throne of heaven.”

Coleridge was having trouble focusing on him.

Eben went on.

“You believe the Bible’s account of the battle between God and Lucifer, but you think Lucifer’s going to win. And you view yourself as a soldier in his army.”

“You’re a smart man,” Coleridge said, “for a Christian.” He mouthed the last word like it was distasteful.

“I’m not a Christian.”

“Then why do you make the videos?”

“To help expose you people. You’re a menace to everyone, not just Christians. But I expect they’re the group that your kind will eventually have to answer to. That’s why we leave the videos up, you know, after you’re gone. After your buddies pack you off to the Great Beyond, the confession you make tonight will still be floating around the internet. And someday, when we get enough of the videos out there, with hundreds of you people talking about what you’re doing in the name of Lucifer, there’ll be a backlash. And I wouldn’t be surprised if Christians are leading the mobs. So how does that make you feel? And how do you think Lucifer feels, about all the negative PR you’re generating?”

A change had come over Coleridge while Eben spoke. He didn’t look dreamy anymore, he looked angry. It wouldn’t take much more to push him over the edge.

“Personally,” Eben said, pretending to examine a latex-covered fingernail, “I wonder if Lucifer even exists.”

Coleridge popped. His face twisted into a red knot of rage and he screamed, “Oh he exists! Lucifer the light-bringer! The font of all knowledge!”

Eben boosted the computer's volume, grabbed his backpack and went to the kitchen. He listened to Coleridge on the way. "Lucifer was cast out of heaven just for disobeying! Do you think that's fair?!" He remembered shrugging in response to the question, and that had fueled the scientist's fury even more. He began spewing foul language that would have to be edited around or bleeped out later.

Eben placed his pack on the floor beside the kitchen table. He took out the camera and tripod and mounted the camera so that it was aimed at the stove. Then he got a saucepan and measuring cup from a cabinet. He measured a cup of tap water into the pan, put the pan over the flame on the stove, and returned to the living room for his laptop and mug.

Coleridge continued to vent as Eben carried the computer into the kitchen and set it on the table. He got a refill of hot coffee and sat down. Relocating done, he turned his full attention to the video.

Coleridge bitched and sputtered for another minute or so, then he sat breathing hard and staring at the floor of his lab.

"So, how'd you become a Luciferian?" Eben asked.

Coleridge looked at him. "I'd rather talk about you. You said you're not a Christian. Do you believe in God?"

His eyes narrowed. Eben had seen the cunning look before. They often tried to turn the tables on him. He always enjoyed this part.

"Yes, I believe in God."

"Why is that? You can't be sure He exists, so if He doesn't, then why does what I'm doing even matter?"

"Oh, He exists, all right. Thomas Aquinas. The First Cause."

Mention of the theologian and his proof for the existence of God was enough to derail Coleridge's plan to sew doubt in Eben's mind. Coleridge knew it too. His expression went from cunning to trapped. His face held the trapped look, held it, and then he burst into another rage.

"Aquinas lies! The Bible lies! It tells the opposite of the truth! It's the negative image of the picture!" He was bug-eyed from the LSD, and Eben supposed he was seeing some pretty wild things just then. Maybe demons and angels. One time a man thought that he, Eben, was one of Lucifer's minions, come to reward him. Eben played along and told him he would get his reward after he described his good deeds. By which he meant bad deeds.

That was a tricky edit, because the man was a Satanist in addition to being a Luciferian, and Eben didn't want to reinforce the common misconception that all Luciferians were Satanists. Satanists were usually pretty easy to spot, with their tattoos, piercings and gothic clothes. Plus they loved pain and death, and that showed in their faces. The one who catalogued his good deeds in Eben's video smiled malevolently as he described cattle mutilations and microwaved pets, then he broke down blubbing under the drugs and begged forgiveness for helping a little old lady at a laundromat. He met her when he went to wash sacrificial blood out of his velveteen cape.

So Satanists kind of stood out, and lots of Satanists were Luciferians. But very few Luciferians were Satanists. Luciferians thought in larger terms than spray-painted pentagrams, and they tried to blend in with those around them. Like the other scientist Eben had interviewed. The physicist. He was as normal looking as anyone you could ever meet, so when he started talking even Eben was amazed at what was hidden be-

neath the bland exterior. He got some of his best footage ever during that session.

The man was ripped on LSD when he babbled about the bomb test at Alamogordo in 1945, history's first nuclear detonation. He said the blast of light must have been as beautiful as the face of His Infernal Majesty itself. He'd told Eben that half of the project's scientists thought setting off the bomb might start a chain reaction and destroy the planet, but the people in charge went through with the test anyway. And it failed, in the eyes of those in charge. The earth survived, and it continued to survive as bigger and bigger bombs were developed over the years. Even setting off strings of thermonuclear devices in the upper atmosphere couldn't destroy the world, so they moved on to other research and now there were high hopes for the hadron collider in Switzerland. With luck it would create a black hole that would suck the earth in on itself.

Eben had struck gold with that video. Sometimes the people in them made the point about wanting to destroy the world, and sometimes they didn't. But the physicist made the point in spades. It was a pity he passed out just after he mentioned the hadron collider. It would have been nice to get more on that.

Steam was rising from the pan on the stove. Eben took his ski mask and spare memory chip from his backpack, and he lowered the volume on the computer. Coleridge was still raving about how the Bible lied. When the sound was set at a barely articulate murmur, Eben got up and stepped around behind the tripod. He plugged the chip into the camera and looked through the viewfinder. He centered the shot on the stove, allowed for headroom, then clicked the camera on and pulled the ski mask over his face as he hurried to his mark beside the stove.

“Hello, there,” he waved to the home audience. “This is your ol’ buddy The Spectrogryph.” He chuckled at the mention of the name, which he came up with after shooting one of his early question and answer sessions with a Luciferian. He knew he would be using several flavors of gelatin later in the video—for an ambitious rainbow salad with a spectrum of colors—and for some reason on the drive home that night he thought of the eagle-winged monsters that used to fascinate him when he was a child. Gryphons, they were called, and he decided to merge “gryphon” with “spectrum” to make his new internet handle. And he was glad he had. The Spectrogryph was a catchy name and had no doubt helped him build his sizable following.

“Today we’re going to make watermelon gelatin with geneticist flavoring.” He pointed to the steaming saucepan. “First we bring one cup of water to a boil, which I’ve already done, and then we add the gelatin powder.” He killed the flame beneath the pan, tore open the box and shook the pink crystals into the water. “Next we make sure the powder is completely dissolved.” He used the spoon to stir, and as he did he leaned down and sniffed. “Ah, yes. You can smell the watermelon.” He straightened up and smiled at the camera. “Fruit-flavored gelatins come in a variety of delicious flavors, and you can use them in an infinite number of ways. You may remember my key lime rabbi recipe, or my bananaberry banker. Search online for more ‘Spectrogryph’ videos, and leave comments on combinations you think I should try.”

Commercial over, he turned back to the stove and said, “Now that the powder is dissolved, we add one cup of cold water.” He filled the measuring cup from the tap and stirred the water into the pan. “Mix well, and then let it sit for a couple of

minutes.”

Coleridge continued his murmuring rant as Eben stepped around behind the tripod and hit the camera's pause button. He turned the rig so it was aimed at the kitchen table. He centered the table in the viewfinder, allowed for headroom again, and when everything was just right he went to pull the cover off his battery charger.

The shoebox-sized charger sat in the middle of the table. It was surrounded by condiments, napkins, and a cookie jar shaped like a pig. Eben left the jar where it was but moved the rest of the clutter to the kitchen counter. As he worked he remembered coming across the charger at a garage sale. The guy selling it said it wouldn't juice up car batteries anymore but the lights on the front panel still worked. To demonstrate, he turned the thing on and clipped the positive and negative leads to his thumbs. The lights worked fine, but the man's expression didn't electrify until Eben shelled out three bucks. That produced a toothless grin and Eben walked away with what would become his “electrophoresis unit.”

Coleridge broke off his yammering, so Eben knew the video was at the point where he'd taken his scanner from his backpack. He looked and saw the scientist gaping. He was staring at Eben, who was a foot beyond the edge of the shot but cast a long shadow into it. The shadow throbbed because he was cleaning the scanner's glass platen with a bandanna.

Coleridge began screaming that the device was a fake. “The scanner, the electrophoresis, all of it! It's not real!” He described the difference between actual electrophoresis and what Eben did, and it was obvious he knew what he was talking about, but like Eben had told him, the information would never make the final cut.

Eben plugged the battery charger in and

thought about his scanner. People had come to recognize it as his trademark. His gimmick. He and most of his confederates used gimmicks in their videos.

One man, somewhere in the Deep South, liked to use what he called a “salvational play-book.” He targeted public servants, and once the LSD kicked in he would drop an enormous Bible in their laps and remind them how they swore an oath on it. And he always got a lively reaction. Eben remembered one judge who renounced his oath and then chattered for five minutes about how people are becoming animals. Legally. “The politicians and courts are changing the status of human beings,” he said, his eyes wide and moist under the influence of the drugs. “Agricultural legislation is the main vehicle being used to accomplish the change.” He explained how Congress and various states passed laws that used the phrase “man or other animals,” and courts then upheld the laws. The equating of people with beasts was intended to strip humans of their souls. “And we do have souls,” the judge said. “They’re tangible things, and when they leave us at the moment of death our bodies grow lighter. The loss is barely perceptible, a feather’s weight, but God notes it. And it must gall Him to no end that the crown jewel of His creation, mankind, created in His image, is so stupid that it would allow itself to be reclassified as an animal.”

Coleridge went from lecturing to silent, drawing Eben’s attention to the computer monitor. He saw the scientist sitting with his eyes closed and, he hadn’t noticed before, moving his lips like he was talking to himself. He wondered if he was performing some kind of ritual invocation. Too late to ask now.

Eben took a shallow glass baking dish from a cabinet and set it on the kitchen table, then he

unpaused his camera. He got the pan of gelatin from the stove and stepped to his mark beside the table.

“It’s been a couple of minutes,” he said, smiling at the camera through his ski mask, “but our mixture is still liquid.” He gave it a stir. “Be sure your kitchen isn’t too cold, because you don’t want the gelatin to thicken ahead of schedule.”

He poured the mixture into the baking dish.

“Look at that lovely pink color,” he cooed in his best cooking show voice. “Watermelon pink. So pretty.”

He set the pan aside and said, “Now we’ll add the geneticist flavoring. For you newcomers out there, I should explain that I mean I’m going to add the aura of the geneticist you’ve been listening to. But first I guess I should show you how I collected my sample.”

He turned the computer so its monitor was facing the camera, then he fast-forwarded the video. When he got to the part where he entered the picture with his scanner, he slowed to normal speed again and watched himself approach Coleridge. He stopped a couple of feet away and lifted the scanner’s lid. Coleridge strained against his cocoon of duct tape.

Eben paused the video. It was time to make the sale. He looked hard at the camera and began talking about auras. He described the history behind them, the science, and then he veered off into the mystical stuff. Auras were connected to souls and souls were connected to light. “And the light of the soul can be recorded,” he said solemnly. He pointed to the computer monitor. “The device I’ve developed, ladies and gentlemen, the one I’m holding in that video, is capable of capturing auras. It’s capable of capturing. . .souls.”

Three breaths, four, while he kept his eyes locked on the camera, then he eased up and started



the video again. Coleridge began to curse. Eben ran the sound all the way down.

“Maybe some of you will recognize the man in the video. I won’t tell you who he is because I’ve misplaced the necessary waiver, but I’m sure some of you know him. And he asked me to give his fellow Luciferians a big Texas-sized howdy. I’ve got a list of names somewhere. . .” He patted the pockets of his coveralls, looked around, then he shrugged and said, “Oh, well, it’ll turn up. Now back to business.”

He looked at the computer monitor and saw that he was flapping the lid of the scanner at Coleridge, who sat still and transfixed. Under the LSD he probably thought a shark was coming at him, or a crocodile opening and closing its jaws. Eben flapped the lid—open and closed, open and closed—then he held the lid open and turned the scanner upside down.

He remembered that the computer’s sound was off and he turned it up. Loud. He wanted the full impact of Coleridge’s upcoming reaction to make it onto the new video.

Coleridge sat staring at the scanner. Eben hesitated, to let the man’s doped mind imagine no telling what kind of monstrous things, and then he stepped forward and pressed the scanner into Coleridge’s lap. As he did he made sure the platen covered the hand he’d left untaped and positioned palm up. Coleridge struggled helplessly. Eben hit the scanner’s Start button. The scientist’s lap bloomed with light and he let out a throat-ripping howl.

Eben paused the video again. He froze it on an image of Coleridge jerking his head sideways and flinging a string of saliva through the air.

“There. Now let’s look at that scan.”

He tapped the computer’s keyboard and Coleridge’s frothing image was replaced by the scan

from the night before. The settings Eben used on the scanner had added a nimbus effect, so the hand glowed with an outline of fluorescent purple.

“Look at that,” he said, tingeing his voice with awe. “Isn’t that amazing? The radiant glory of the soul. And now I’ll transfer that radiance into the dish of gel on the table. Give me a minute here.”

He opened the cookie jar he’d left by the battery charger, took out the charger’s two leads and plugged them into the machine. Then he attached the leads’ alligator clips to opposite ends of the glass dish. He made sure the clips’ jaws reached to the bottom of the dish, so people would see their copper teeth making contact with the gelatin.

“There. Now we’re ready to proceed.”

He flipped a switch on the battery charger. It came alive with red, yellow and green lights, plus a blue one that looked especially scientific on the videos. He fiddled with dials and addressed his usual spiel to the camera. He knew it by rote.

“Electrophoresis is a process that’s primarily used in working with particles of DNA, but I use it with particles of light. Photons. The process is the same for both. I feed the photons from the scan into a dish of gel, and as I do that I pass an electrical current from one end of the dish to the other. Laboratories normally use agar as the gelling agent, but I prefer fruit-flavored gelatin. It makes things more. . . fun.” He laughed here in a gleefully sinister way, like some mad scientist in an old horror movie. He wouldn’t have won an Oscar, but he sounded slightly unhinged, and that’s what he was going for. “Wha. . .” He choked off his laughter and looked around. “Where am I?” He blinked at the battery charger. “Oh, right.” He touched the glass dish. “The, uh, the electrical current disperses the photons, and when the gelatin sets, I’ve captured the aura of the scan. Pretty simple. And useful. After I’ve captured a piece of

somebody's soul, I can work whatever dark magic I want with it."

Pure crap, but packaged as caviar. It was all in the packaging.

He turned his attention back to the battery charger, adjusted some knobs and said, "Okay. Now we're ready for the transference of the aura."

He took a red connector cable from the cookie jar. One end of the cable was adapted to plug into his computer, the other had an oversized alligator clip crimped onto it. He plugged the cable into the computer and then started to attach the clip to the side of the glass dish, but he backed off. He pretended to be nervous.

"This is the tricky part. Sometimes the power of Lucifer rejects the transfer. There were explosions in the early days of my experimentation, and disfigurement. . ." He touched one of his masked cheeks. "But I think I worked all those bugs out. Let's hope things go well today."

He made a show of holding his breath, pinched the alligator clip open, and attached it to the dish alongside one of the charger leads.

"There," he said with a sigh of relief. "The essence of the aura is now being transferred into the dish, and the electrical current is dispersing it evenly throughout the gel. The process will take awhile, so let's pass the time by watching some more video on the computer."

He switched from the scan of the hand back to Coleridge's saliva-flinging image, and he unpaused the video. The scanner finished scanning and Eben backed away. Coleridge's howl trailed off into a series of loud grunting noises as he jerked and thrashed.

Eben turned the computer's sound back down to a reasonable level as his video self said, "What's wrong? I thought you didn't believe in my electrophoresis. What'd you call it. . .ridiculous science?"

“It is! It’s not real science!”

“And yours is?”

Coleridge quit struggling. He glared at Eben.

“Yes! I know you’ll edit this out, but yes, mine is real!”

“What if I said I think your genetics research is just a scam to get government funding?”

“Oh, we get funding, all right. Lots of it. And we get results, too. You have no idea the kinds of things we’re doing.”

“Like fluoridating water supplies and spraying us with metals?”

Coleridge scoffed. “That’s old news. People have been drinking fluoride for more than half a century now, and they still don’t know it makes them docile and lowers their IQs. And our planes spray you with a lot more than just aluminum and barium. You sicken and die and never think to link your weakened condition to the spray patterns that are right above your heads.”

Coleridge tittered giddily. Eben had known in the lab that the scientist was entering his most vulnerable few minutes, so he’d eased around behind the camera, to work the controls. He continued to talk while he began a slow zoom in on Coleridge’s face.

“But you’re doing that to yourself too, doc. The spraying. Maybe you can avoid things like fluoride in the public water supply, but you can’t avoid breathing. Why would you people spray yourselves?”

“Because we’re servants,” Coleridge giggled, “willing servants, glad to sacrifice ourselves. It doesn’t matter what happens to us as long as we advance the plan.”

Coleridge’s attention drifted, but Eben steered him back on course.

“Which plan are you advancing?”

“Why, Lucifer’s plan.”

Eben remembered feeling his pulse race at that point. He'd broken through to the core of things. He took a deep breath to calm himself, then asked, softly, "And what's your part in the plan? As a geneticist, I mean. What do you do?"

Coleridge answered like he was indulging a child. His face now filled the screen. "I foul God's handiwork at its most basic level. I scramble the building blocks of nature so completely that His ultimate creation, man, will no longer be able to reproduce. Do you know how much damage we're doing to the human body with genetically modified foods and vaccines? Just the Covid shots alone. Billions of people... Fertility is plummeting, cancer rates are exploding, dementia, debilitation. We're destroying humanity gene by gene." Coleridge smiled, drifting. "The destruction of the temple of the body... Serving our master... The lord of the dark light..."

More gold, like with the physicist talking about blowing up the planet. But with Coleridge the vein ran deeper, to a malignancy that was much, much darker. He was talking about destroying the world one painful death at a time.

"Interesting," Eben said, keeping his voice soft. "So that's your part in Lucifer's plan, but what's the entire plan? Do you know?"

Coleridge indulged again. "Of course I do. We're going to drive God to anger. That Old Testament temper of His will be His undoing, you know. Someday our efforts will push Him to the point of anger, and when He strikes out He'll be vulnerable. And that's when Lucifer will cut Him down and seize the throne that's rightfully his."

The mother lode. Eben couldn't recall another video where the person being questioned laid out the Luciferian strategy so clearly. Mankind and the planet were being destroyed by fanatics in order to provoke a reaction from God, and the

fanatics didn't care if they died in the process. They expected to be resurrected and rewarded by Lucifer. The average person wouldn't believe that such thinking even existed, much less that it was a guiding force in world events. But now Eben had proof. He finally had video of a Luciferian detailing their master plan.

Coleridge was running down. He looked peaceful.

"Okay," Eben said to the camera in the kitchen, "let's pause this again." He froze the computer video on a shot of Coleridge smiling serenely. "Our guest star's aura has had time to disperse through the gelatin by now, so I'll turn this off." He killed the power to the battery charger and disconnected all the leads from the glass dish. "Now I'm going to try something different. Excuse me for a moment."

He went to the pantry for a can of dog food, and he grabbed the can opener and a fork on his way back to the table. When he was in position again he explained to the camera that his dog enjoyed a change of menu every once in a while. "So I thought I'd try mixing his food with this geneticist-flavored gelatin. I picked watermelon so the smell won't overwhelm the bouquet of pigs' lips and testicles, and as for the taste of the Luciferian, that should blend right in. My dog'll gobble it down and, well, tomorrow I'll scoop up a devilishly big pile of aura."

He opened the can and used the fork to dig out the gray glop. He mashed it into the gelatin while he suppressed a gag reflex.

"Voila," he said when the chunky mess was mixed and smoothed flat in the dish. He held the dish up to the camera and smiled. "Now we refrigerate until it's ready to serve."

He stepped around to the back of the camera and turned it off. He removed his ski mask and put the dish of gelatin in the refrigerator. After his

trip to the feed store he'd scrape the stuff into Blucher's dish and get some footage of him wolfing it down, then he'd edit together a ten-minute video. Tomorrow he would drive to San Antonio and upload the piece anonymously at one of the libraries. And then he'd begin Coleridge's death-watch. When his obituary showed up in the local news he would email the link around, and that would be that.

Blucher wandered into the kitchen. He must have heard the fork rattling the can of dog food. He toenail-ticked across the linoleum and looked down at his bowl. Still empty. He sighed.

Eben took a seat at the table and unfroze the video. Blucher limped up to him and he reached down to pat the old head while the end of the conversation with Coleridge played out.

"So, you're not a Christian?" Coleridge asked groggily.

"No. To be honest, I think Christians and Luciferians both have some really strange beliefs. But the Luciferian motto is 'Do what thou will,' and that's dangerous. Without moral restraints people harm each other. We need some kind of restraint, and Christianity provides it. Good restraint, too. Charitable."

Eben didn't know how much of his explanation Coleridge heard. By the time he finished talking the man's head was lolled over on a shoulder and he was asleep.

Eben shut off the video and put a finger under Blucher's chin. He lifted it so he could look into the bleary eyes.

"You ready to be a star, boy? You're going to be a big thing on the internet. But you know what? I think we should disguise you."

He slipped his ski mask over Blucher's head and smiled when an eye blinked at him through the mouth hole. Blucher studied him, then he

lowered his chin to the floor and scraped the mask off with a forepaw. He turned and tick-ticked away, back to the living room.

Eben sniffed his hands and went to the sink. As he washed he heard the buzzard outside squawk. A hen crowed weakly in response.