

Call of the Forbidden Way

Selected Excerpts:

On a remote mountainside in the Chilean Andes, the parish Jeep slowed to a stop. Clutching his rosary, Father Clemente stepped from the Jeep, moving cautiously to inspect the unexplainable. A frightened man had come to him that morning from a nearby village, continuously repeating that none of the people who lived at the pagan commune could be found.

"Padre, come please," the man had pleaded with him, his voice trembling as he constantly made the sign of the cross. "Satan must have taken them. All gone—all destroyed."

A veil of heavy clouds was dissipating. In this region at ten thousand feet there was little but rocks and small scrubs covering the mountainside. Flames still flickered from the blackened hulls of several of the community's buildings. The trucks and cars that belonged to the members remained parked in their customary spots.

Climbing the stone steps of the main building that served as the commune's -temple, Father Clemente saw that the doors were shattered and partially torn from their hinges. Just in front of the doors lay the body of Bacco, the large dog that had always played so gently with the children. He knelt and examined the dog, searching through the thick black fur for wounds. He found none. A lone crow sailed across the sky, its cry puncturing the silence.

Father Clemente had been here many times since the group had arrived from the suburbs of Santiago and founded their spiritual community some eight years ago. At first, he tried to warn them of their misguided ways and the dangers of ignoring the Catholic Church. He was deeply troubled that educated people would reject salvation through Christ. But as the years passed, he had come to know, respect, and love these people. Now this—as if some Biblical scourge had descended after all.

For the last six months, the community's leaders had vigorously confided to the priest that a great danger was coming.

"Father, they are spirits—ones not of this world," Hernando, the commune's elder, had warned.

Hernando had implored him to pray with all his conviction—for them, for the people of his own parish, for all God's creatures.

Although he was somewhat troubled by their sense of urgency, Father Clemente had decided to dismiss their warnings as superstition. How like the simple country people of the mountains they had become, he thought. But now, something horrific had indeed occurred.

Father Clemente searched the rest of the compound, looking in vain for something besides smoldering buildings and a dead animal that might explain how twenty-eight adults and thirteen children could have suddenly vanished in the night.

The afternoon passed into evening as they drove, now deep in the wastelands of Nevada. At the outset of the trip, the three of them had been talkative, but their conversation waned the further they advanced. The growing silence intensified the uncertainty of what was to come. Uneasily, Carson sensed a growing force, pulling him more strongly by the minute into a strange realm.

Suddenly, Luther pointed ahead. "Turn north at the next road."

Carson felt his stomach tighten.

"Start slowing," Luther commanded.

"What road? It's all sagebrush."

"Just up there," Luther said. "About a hundred yards."

Carson slowed the vehicle, turning left on a barely noticeable dirt road with no signage.

"Man, Luther, are you sure you know where this goes?" Carson asked.

"It's a back way into the reservation," Luther said decisively.

"Otherwise, we'd have to drive about a hundred miles around to come in the main entrance. Besides, this brings us in close to where Wounded Paw lives. We'll be less noticed by others this way. It's best."

"How is it you know this place so well?" Carson asked.

"I've been here before," Luther replied. "When I was a teenager I came here to be an apprentice for a year or so. And I've been back several times for additional training."

"So you are one of those, are you?" Jimmy said with a hostile tone. "Son of a bitch, I should have figured."

"One of what? What the hell are you guys talking about?" Carson interjected, alarmed by Jimmy's tone.

Jimmy leaned forward, speaking directly into Carson's ear, while keeping his eyes locked on Luther. "You see, Carson, as in most professions, all medicine men are not created equally, so to speak. And evidently, Luther here is one of those considered to be 'marked'; they have special talent. They're usually noticed at a young age by elder medicine men then selected to undergo special training—training that can be very dangerous."

Luther continued to look straight ahead, ignoring Jimmy's embittered tone.

"I didn't realize you knew so much about this side of our work, Jimmy. I'm impressed. I guess I shouldn't underestimate your intellectual side."

"It's not my intellectual side," Jimmy countered. "I lost a cousin on one of those trainings. He was only fourteen."

"I'm sorry, Jimmy. I know there are some aspects of our culture that you must consider cruel. No one would challenge you on that. And I, too, have lost dear ones in this work. But it's not a choice; you should know that."

"I don't know much about your work, Luther," Jimmy responded. "But I do know there's a difference between being a healer and a sorcerer. And once one has crossed onto that path, it's a different kind of medicine, engaging in powers that aren't suited but for a very few, if any."

"Yes, it often seems that way to me, too, my friend." Luther paused. "But then, as I said, for those of us who go there, it's not a choice."

"You better know what you are doing here. Carson doesn't deserve to be subjected to such dangers."

Luther turned to face Jimmy, his face stern and determined. "And you know that neither myself nor Owl Eyes would have insisted on bringing him here if we thought there was a choice in the matter."

"Oh, this is just great," Carson blurted. "Now I learn more scary shit is involved, as if alien spiritual beings weren't enough. We're dealing with some kind of sorcery? Why don't I just pull over and let you guys scalp me and be done with it? This is way too messed up."

"Take it easy, Carson," Luther said calmly. "I'll be taking care of you, as well as you, Jimmy. Just trust me, will you?"

Carson caught a glimpse of Jimmy White Stone's face in the rearview mirror. He was biting his lip and nervously drumming his fingers on his seat back. Seeing Jimmy, a Native American, struggle to cope with the mysterious elements of these old ways allowed him to

feel less like an outsider. Yet witnessing Jimmy's change in demeanor only amplified his anxiety.

Luther began singing a native song under his breath, a soft monotone chant similar to one he had sung that night on Carson's patio. The three men retreated into a temporary peace, choosing to focus on the more immediate challenges of the dirt road as it wound up through the hills. A range of jagged mountains loomed ahead, providing a citadel for whoever lived within its massive walls.

"Jesus, guys, how do people live out here?" Carson asked.

"Not easily," Luther answered dryly.

As the session progressed, new spirits continued to reveal themselves. Carson felt reluctant to engage with some of these new demigods, knowing that the portals Rhiannon was opening for him would include those that would challenge his limits. Yet he knew it was necessary to acknowledge any spirit with whom direct contact was made. He suspected that many of these beings had been sent by Rhiannon or, perhaps, might even be her in some archetypal form.

The music Rhiannon had chosen enhanced their journey; its potency was due more to its viscosity than to its melodic essence. Their souls moved upon energy streams driven by ethnic drums, while the droning of didgeridoos and sitars maintained them in a state of suspended flight. The rich soundscapes propelled their psyches through a range of realms, from primal ones charged with sexual energy and hedonistic pleasure to ethereal ones of purity and formlessness.

Arriving at one exceptional spiritual domain, Carson was suddenly overcome with what he could only describe as divine grace. Tears poured forth. As he sobbed quietly, Rhiannon reached over and gently held him, absorbing his release with a deeply comforting embrace. In that moment, she manifested the pure essence of the eternal mother.

But this reassuring experience was not to last. Carson began to have a growing awareness of Rhiannon's sexuality. Heretofore, he had resisted allowing himself to acknowledge her as someone he found attractive. Now, lying beside her, he could smell the natural perfume of her skin and hair. A mounting need to touch her teased at him. He wondered if this, too, were not part of some scheme of hers, and possibly Wounded Paw's as well—perhaps a test. Trying to unravel the possibilities presented by this new twist was too much to contend with now. He tried to shrug off his growing desire, chalking it up as just another absurdity of the situation.

A sudden movement from Rhiannon interrupted the spell. She rose to her knees and began making gestures with her arms, muttering another mantra under her breath. Her body trembled in spasms.

Only a moment before, she had been holding him, intimately bonding in a state of loving support. Now, without a word of warning, she had catapulted herself upright onto her knees and away from him. She seemed to be entering a trance. Working with Indians had been bizarre enough, Carson thought, but at least they didn't suddenly shift into a state of madness.

Rhiannon's body stilled. She folded her arms in front of her in a position of prayer and muttered more unintelligible words. She then lay back on the mat and reached for Carson's hand.

"Carson," she began, "I'm asking you to focus your attention with me. Can you do that now?"

He lifted halfway up on one elbow, while slightly turning toward her. "If that's what I'm supposed to do, I'll try to follow your directions."

"I know you think I'm crazy," she continued. "What you think of me at this time isn't important. Perhaps you and I aren't really important. Work with me; you need what I can show you. I don't believe either of us has a choice in the matter. Certain forces are already at play. I know Wounded Paw has taught you that much. There may not be time to do what's required—from now on, obey me!"

He lay back down as a wave of fear washed over his mind. The locus of his fear shifted to something waiting in the near future, something nonhuman with powers beyond his comprehension.

"I'm sorry to be so resistant to you. Bear with me if you can."

"Carson, we don't have the luxury of doing this work at your pace, much less according to your sense of what's appropriate," she scolded. "Wounded Paw told me that you have been marked by the medicine. I trust him. Don't screw this up, for his sake. Do you hear me?"

"Yeah," Carson responded softly.

"And another thing, don't ever be timid in this work. Humble, yes. Frightened, sure. Confused, certainly. But never, never timid. Hold on to your soul at all times and honor the privilege of being an extension of the medicine. Just because you're only a human being doesn't mean you don't have as much right as any other manifested form in the universe to be a participant. Whether gods or dust, it's all part of the Divine. In this work, timidity is the opposite side of the coin from hubris. Either will get you struck down fast and hard. And that would happen in a way that you don't want to imagine. Do you understand?"

"We were fortunate last night," she continued. "Our prayers were heard and forces came to assist us, but it was very close. I'm sure you realize that. It took an enormous amount of strength to hold them off—ours and that of our allies."

"Why us?" Carson interrupted. "I mean, if these energies are so strong, why don't they just come on down and take over or something? Why haven't they unleashed some kind of Armageddon?"

"Because they aren't that powerful, at least not yet," she said. "Besides, an Armageddon isn't in their interest. To replace what's been operating on this planet, with all its interwoven complexities and exchanges of energy, is no small undertaking. They would themselves become highly vulnerable if they simply tried to muscle their way in by using brute, military-like force. Part of the reason they need this planet is to have ready access to all of its preexisting energies.

"What do you mean?" he asked, pulling his jacket zipper up tight to his neck.

"Think of them as kind of parasite-like. They aren't here to destroy but rather to sustain themselves off all that already exists on the planet—plant, animal, and mineral, and all the millennia of relationships and networks of life and matter that already exist here, everything from the energy of the Sun as it affects the planet to bacteria. They will only destroy what resists their access to it all, to taking over here."

"How can you be sure you understand their intentions so clearly?" he pressed.

"Come on, Carson." She smirked, placing her hands on her sides. "This is what the medicine has shown nearly all of us. You saw glimpses of this yourself that day at Wounded Paw's, by the petroglyphs, did you not?"

Carson took a moment to reflect on the god's words then asked, "Were you actually born, that is, created through a birthing process?"

"Not as you know that process. Originally, we emerged from a concentration of energy that was held within bodies of matter at the planet's surface. Such energy occurs in numerous manifestations, such as oceans or deserts or forests—in our case, a great mountain range. As a result, deities or spirits reside in such places," the Great Lord explained. "There's an intelligence in matter, adept, a telos. Certainly your studies have taught you that much."

Again, an unseen power pulled Carson into another vision. Fast-forwarded sequences revealed the evolution of matter that was concentrated within the granite walls of a soaring mountain. At first, the mass of stone was nothing more than a potential. As the passing centuries hurled past as if seconds, he observed a consciousness begin to emerge from it. He began to weep in wonder. He was beholding the birth of a god.

"That's how the older ones of our type were born," the deity explained, momentarily impressed with his pupil's emotion. "Much later, we procreated as other beings do, mating with consorts."

Embarrassed, Carson struggled to regain his composure.

"How old are you, Great One?"

"We do not count time as you do. Though not timeless, I am both ancient and young. If you must measure my existence, I will simply say that my type has existed long before human time and will do so long after your species is extinct. Your wise ones understand this. Fear me well, adept."

"If it is permitted, I would like to learn more about the process whereby matter becomes infused with consciousness. How does a mass of Earth's matter evolve into a consciousness—become a god?"

"There's much to my wisdom that stands outside the limits of human language."

"Yes, I acknowledge that, Great Lord. Still, could I be permitted to experience some way of knowing how matter turns into consciousness?"

"Very well, this may amuse me." The deity laughed. "So granted."

Carson's skull was suddenly pulled back under enormous pressure. He lay paralyzed though fully aware of his entire physicality, his body undergoing something akin to petrification. Gradually, he recognized that he had transformed into a giant layer of stone, one that topped a soaring mountain peak.

From above, forces of gravity pressed down upon every particle of his body, while from beneath, an endless pressure pushed upward from subterranean forces needing release. Far greater forces, greater gods, competing causes, and distant cosmic energies bore down with their conflicting needs. Squeezed between these forces, impregnated by their energies, the once dormant, inert matter that now composed Carson's mind began the process of self-organizing. He was radically transforming from mere physical substance into a god.

He was atop a great mountain; he was the mountain itself. The scars of the planet's birth and growth were imprints on his soul. Here, in this place of awe and hostility, he was master. Nature herself had transformed him, granting him place and privilege as a great feudal lord encased in trillions of tons of solid stone, a sentinel standing among snows, wind, and sun. The rocks and dirt strewn over the surface constituted his afterbirth. Far below, in the remote valleys, lesser forms of his being expressed themselves as raging streams and windswept valleys. A variety of fauna and flora struggled to eke out an existence upon the rugged surface of his being.

For a few brief moments, Carson held the full manifestation of this condensed state of matter and energy. But the enormity of the

teaching soon overwhelmed him. It was beyond human limits to continue. He began to swoon, releasing the experience.

Carson fought to retrieve his soul from petrification, to stay human. A keen sense of fear implored him not to lose consciousness.

The Great Lord jarred him fully back. "Well, adept, did your curiosity find satisfaction?" He laughed. "You did well. Not many practitioners of your art have ventured into such realms, and among those who have, not all have returned. Peril awaits on the path to paradise. Always beware."

Carson listened through a fog of exhaustion. Yet one more question still urged him on.

"Great Lord, what about those known as the Visitors?"

"We shall not speak of this now. Go elsewhere, adept; I will allow your departure. I have other matters to attend to. Perhaps we shall reconvene sometime—if you live long enough. In the meanwhile, I shall absorb your prayers."

The deity withdrew.

Carson lay silent upon the mat, his body trembling. He was back. Slowly, he opened his eyes; Rhiannon lay beside him.