



THE SPARROW

MARY DORIA
RUSSELL

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

After the first exquisite songs were intercepted by radio telescope, UN diplomats debated long and hard whether and why human resources should be expended in an attempt to reach the world that would become known as Rakhat. In the Rome offices of the Society of Jesus, the questions were not whether or why but how soon the mission could be attempted and whom to send. The Jesuit scientists went to Rakhat to learn, not to proselytize. They went so that they might come to know and love God's other children. They went for the reason Jesuits have always gone to the farthest frontiers of human exploration. They went for the greater glory of God. They meant no harm.

Taking you on an extraordinary journey to a distant planet and to the very centre of the human soul, Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* is an astonishing literary debut - a powerful, haunting and exciting novel about the nature of faith and what it means to be 'human'.

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Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also by Mary Doria Russell

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The Sparrow

Mary Doria Russell

**FOR MAURA E. KIRBY
AND
MARY L. DEWING**

***quarum sine auspicio hic liber in lucem non esset
editas***

PROLOGUE

It was predictable, in hindsight. Everything about the history of the Society of Jesus bespoke deft and efficient action, exploration and research. During what Europeans were pleased to call the Age of Discovery, Jesuit priests were never more than a year or two behind the men who made initial contact with previously unknown peoples; indeed, Jesuits were often the vanguard of exploration.

The United Nations required years to come to a decision that the Society of Jesus reached in ten days. In New York, diplomats debated long and hard, with many recesses and tablings of the issue, whether and why human resources should be expended in an attempt to contact the world that would become known as Rakhat when there were so many pressing needs on Earth. In Rome, the questions were not whether or why but how soon the mission could be attempted and whom to send.

The Society asked leave of no temporal government. It acted on its own principles, with its own assets, on Papal authority. The mission to Rakhat was undertaken not so much secretly as privately – a fine distinction but one that the Society felt no compulsion to explain or justify when the news broke several years later.

The Jesuit scientists went to learn, not to proselytize. They went so that they might come to know and love God's other children. They went for the reason Jesuits have always gone to the farthest frontiers of human exploration. They went *ad majorem Dei gloriam*: for the greater glory of God.

They meant no harm.

ROME: DECEMBER 2059

ON DECEMBER 7, 2059, Emilio Sandoz was released from the isolation ward of Salvator Mundi Hospital in the middle of the night and transported in a bread van to the Jesuit Residence at Number 5 Borgo Santo Spirito, a few minutes' walk across St Peter's Square from the Vatican. The next day, ignoring shouted questions and howls of journalistic outrage as he read, a Jesuit spokesman issued a short statement to the frustrated and angry media mob that had gathered outside Number 5's massive front door.

'To the best of our knowledge, Father Emilio Sandoz is the sole survivor of the Jesuit mission to Rakhat. Once again, we extend our thanks to the U.N., to the Contact Consortium and to the Asteroid Mining Division of Ohbayashi Corporation for making the return of Father Sandoz possible. We have no additional information regarding the fate of the Contact Consortium's crew members; they are in our prayers. Father Sandoz is too ill to question at this time and his recovery is expected to take months. Until then, there can be no further comment on the Jesuit mission or on the Contact Consortium's allegations regarding Father Sandoz's conduct on Rakhat.'

This was simply to buy time.

It was true, of course, that Sandoz was ill. The man's whole body was bruised by the blooms of spontaneous

hemorrhages where tiny blood vessel walls had breached and spilled their contents under his skin. His gums had stopped bleeding, but it would be a long while before he could eat normally. Eventually, something would have to be done about his hands.

Now, however, the combined effects of scurvy, anemia and exhaustion kept him asleep twenty hours out of the day. When awake, he lay motionless, coiled like a fetus and almost as helpless.

The door to his small room was nearly always left open in those early weeks. One afternoon, thinking to prevent Father Sandoz from being disturbed while the hallway floor was polished, Brother Edward Behr closed it, despite warnings about this from the Salvator Mundi staff. Sandoz happened to wake up and found himself shut in. Brother Edward did not repeat the mistake.

Vincenzo Giuliani, the Father General of the Society of Jesus, went each morning to look in on the man. He had no idea if Sandoz was aware of being observed; it was a familiar feeling. When very young, when the Father General was just plain Vince Giuliani, he had been fascinated by Emilio Sandoz, who was a year ahead of Giuliani during the decade-long process of priestly formation. A strange boy, Sandoz. A puzzling man. Vincenzo Giuliani had made a statesman's career of understanding other men, but he had never understood this one.

Gazing at Emilio, sick now and almost mute, Giuliani knew that Sandoz was unlikely to give up his secrets any time soon. This did not distress him. Vincenzo Giuliani was a patient man. One had to be patient to thrive in Rome, where time is measured not in centuries but in millennia, where patience and the long view have always distinguished political life. The city gave its name to the power of patience – *Romanità*. *Romanità* excludes emotion, hurry, doubt. *Romanità* waits, sees the moment and moves ruthlessly when the time is right. *Romanità* rests on an absolute

conviction of ultimate success and arises from a single principle, *Cunctando regitur mundis*: Waiting, one conquers all.

So, even after sixty years, Vincenzo Giuliani felt no sense of impatience with his inability to understand Emilio Sandoz, only a sense of how satisfying it would be when the wait paid off.

The Father General's private secretary contacted Father John Candotti on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, three weeks after Emilio's arrival at Number 5. 'Sandoz is well enough to see you now,' Johannes Voelker informed Candotti. 'Be here by two.'

Be here by two! John thought irritably, marching along toward Vatican City from the retreat house where he'd just been assigned a stuffy little room with a view of Roman walls - the stone only inches from his pointless window. Candotti had dealt with Voelker a couple of times since arriving and had taken a dislike to the Austrian from the start. In fact, John Candotti disliked everything about his present situation.

For one thing, he didn't understand why he'd been brought into this business. Neither a lawyer nor an academic, John Candotti was content to have come out on the less prestigious end of the Jesuit dictum, Publish or parish, and he was hip-deep in preparation for the grammar school Christmas program when his superior contacted him and told him to fly to Rome at the end of the week. 'The Father General wishes you to assist Emilio Sandoz.' That was the extent of his briefing. John had heard of Sandoz, of course. Everyone had heard of Sandoz. But John had no idea how he could be of any use to the man. When he asked for an explanation, he couldn't seem to pry a straight answer out of anyone. He had no practice at this kind of thing; subtlety and indirection were not indoor sports in Chicago.

And then there was Rome itself. At the impromptu farewell party, everyone was so excited for him. 'Rome, Johnny!' All that history, those beautiful churches, the art. He'd been excited too, dumb shit. What did he know?

John Candotti was born to flat land, straight lines, square city blocks; nothing in Chicago had prepared him for the reality of Rome. The worst was when he could actually see the building he wanted to get to but found the street he was on curving away from it, leading him to yet another lovely piazza with yet another beautiful fountain, dumping him into another alley going nowhere. Another hour, trapped and frustrated by the hills, the curves, the rat's nest of streets smelling of cat piss and tomato sauce. He hated being lost, and he was always lost. He hated being late, and he was late all the time. The first five minutes of every conversation was John apologizing for being late and his Roman acquaintances assuring him it was no problem.

He hated it all the same, so he walked faster and faster, trying to get to the Jesuit Residence on time for a change, and collected an escort of small children, noisy with derision and obnoxious with delight at this bony, big-nosed, half-bald man with his flapping soutane and pumping arms.

'I'm sorry to keep you waiting.' John Candotti had repeated the apology to each person along the way to Sandoz's room and finally to Sandoz himself as Brother Edward Behr ushered him in and left him alone with the man. 'The crowd outside is still huge. Do they ever go away? I'm John Candotti. The Father General asked me to help you at the hearings. Happy to meet you.' He held out his hand without thinking, withdrawing it awkwardly when he remembered.

Sandoz did not rise from his chair by the window and at first, he either wouldn't or couldn't look in Candotti's direction. John had seen archive images of him, naturally, but Sandoz was a lot smaller than he expected, much thinner; older but not as old as he should have been. What

was the calculation? Seventeen years out, almost four years on Rakhat, seventeen years back, but then there were the relativity effects of traveling near light speed. Born a year before the Father General, who was in his late seventies, Sandoz was estimated by the physicists to be about forty-five, give or take a little. Hard years, by the look of him, but not very many of them.

The silence went on a long time. Trying not to stare at the man's hands, John debated whether he should just go. It's way too soon, he thought, Voelker must be crazy. Then, finally, he heard Sandoz ask, 'English?'

'American, Father. Brother Edward is English but I'm American.'

'No,' Sandoz said after a while. '*La lengua*. English.'

Startled, John realized that he'd misunderstood. 'Yes. I speak a little Spanish, if you'd prefer that.'

'It was Italian, *creo*. *Antes* - before, I mean. In the hospital. *Sipaj - si yo . . .*' He stopped, close to tears, but got ahold of himself and spoke deliberately. 'It would help . . . if I could hear . . . just one language for a while. English is okay.'

'Sure. No problem. We'll stick to English,' John said, shaken. Nobody had told him Sandoz was this far gone. 'I'll make this a short visit, Father. I just wanted to introduce myself and see how you're doing. There's no rush about preparing for the hearings. I'm sure they can be postponed until you're well enough to . . .'

'To do what?' Sandoz asked, looking directly at Candotti for the first time. A deeply lined face, Indian ancestry plain in the high-bridged nose, the wide cheekbones, the stoicism. John Candotti could not imagine this man laughing.

To defend yourself, John was going to say, but it seemed mean. 'To explain what happened.'

The silence inside the Residence was noticeable, especially by the window, where the endless carnival noise of the city could be heard. A woman was scolding a child in Greek. Tourists and reporters milled around, shouting over

the constant roar of the usual Vatican crowds and the taxi traffic. Repairs went on incessantly to keep the Eternal City from falling to pieces, the construction workers yelling, machinery grinding.

'I have nothing to say.' Sandoz turned away again. 'I shall withdraw from the Society.'

'Father Sandoz - Father, you can't expect the Society to let you walk away without understanding what happened out there. You may not want to face a hearing but whatever happens in here is nothing compared to what they'll put you through outside, the moment you walk out the door,' John told him. 'If we understood, we could help you. Make it easier for you, maybe?' There was no reply, only a slight hardening of the face profiled at the window. 'Okay, look. I'll come back in a few days. When you're feeling better, right? Is there anything I can bring you? Someone I could contact for you?'

'No.' There was no force behind the voice. 'Thank you.'

John suppressed a sigh and turned toward the door. His eyes swept past a sketch, lying on top of the small plain bureau. On something like paper, drawn in something like ink. A group of VaRakhati. Faces of great dignity and considerable charm. Extraordinary eyes, frilled with lashes to guard against the brilliant sunlight. Funny how you could tell that these were unusually handsome individuals, even when unfamiliar with their standards of beauty. John Candotti lifted the drawing to look at it more closely. Sandoz stood and took two swift steps toward him.

Sandoz was probably half his size and sicker than hell but John Candotti, veteran of Chicago streets, was startled into retreating. Feeling the wall against his back, he covered his embarrassment with a smile and put the drawing back on the bureau. 'They're a handsome race, aren't they,' he offered, trying to defuse whatever emotion was working on the man in front of him. 'The . . . folks in the picture - friends of yours, I guess?'

Sandoz backed away and looked at John for a few moments, as though calculating the other man's response. The daylight behind his hair lit it up, and the contrast hid his expression. If the room had been brighter or if John Candotti had known him better, he might have recognized a freakish solemnity that preceded any statement Sandoz expected to induce hilarity, or outrage. Sandoz hesitated and then found the precise word he wanted.

'Colleagues,' he said at last.

Johannes Voelker closed his notescreen at the end of his regular morning meeting with the Father General but did not rise to leave. Instead, he sat and watched Vincenzo Giuliani's face as the old man appeared to concentrate on the work at hand, logging his own notes about the day's events and the decisions they'd just discussed.

Thirty-fourth to hold the office of Father General, Giuliani was an impressive executive. A big man, attractively bald, straight and formidably strong in old age. Historian by profession, politician by nature, Vincenzo Giuliani had brought the Society of Jesus through difficult times, repairing some of the damage Sandoz had caused. Steering men into hydrology and Islamic studies - that had restored some goodwill. Without Jesuits in Iran and Egypt, there'd have been no warning at all before the last attack. Credit where credit is due, Voelker thought, waiting patiently for Giuliani to notice him.

The Father General sighed and looked up at his secretary, an unappealing man in his middle thirties, inclined to fatness, sandy hair lying flat against his skull. Voelker was a silent picture of unfinished business, sitting back in his chair, arms folded across his thickening waist. 'All right, out with it. Say what you have to say,' Giuliani ordered irritably.

'Sandoz.'

'What about him?'

'My point exactly.'

Giuliani went back to his notes.

‘People were starting to forget,’ Voelker said. ‘It might have been better for everyone if Sandoz had been killed along with the rest of them.’

‘Why, Father Voelker,’ Giuliani said aridly. ‘What an unworthy thought.’

Voelker made a mouath and looked away.

Giuliani stared out the windows of his office for a few moments, elbows resting on the polished wood of his desk. Voelker was right, of course. Undoubtedly, life would have been simpler had Emilio been safely martyred. Now, in the glare of publicity and hindsight, the Society had to inquire into the reasons for the failure of the mission . . . Giuliani scrubbed his face with his hands and stood. ‘Emilio and I go back a long time together, Voelker. He’s a good man.’

‘He is a whore,’ Voelker said with quiet precision. ‘He killed a child. He should be in chains.’ Voelker watched Giuliani circle the room, picking things up and putting them down without really looking at anything. ‘At least he has the decency to want to leave. Let him go – before he does more harm to the Society.’

Giuliani stopped pacing and looked at Voelker. ‘We aren’t going to disavow him. Even if that’s what he wants, it’s wrong. More to the point, it won’t work. He’s one of Ours, in the eyes of the world if not in his own eyes.’ He walked to the windows and stared out at the crowd of reporters and seekers and the merely curious. ‘And if the media continue to indulge in idle speculation and baseless supposition, we’ll simply call it what it is,’ said the Father General in the light ironic voice that generations of graduate students had learned to dread. He turned to gaze with cool appraisal at his secretary, sitting sullenly all this time. Giuliani’s voice didn’t change but Voelker was stung by what came. ‘I am not Emilio’s judge, Father Voelker, and neither is the press.’

And neither was Johannes Voelker, S.J.

They concluded their meeting with one or two businesslike remarks, but the younger man left knowing he'd overstepped his bounds, politically as well as spiritually. Voelker was efficient and intelligent but, atypically for a Jesuit, he had a polar mind: everything was black or white, sin or virtue, Us versus Them.

Still, Giuliani thought, such people could be useful.

The Father General sat at his desk and fingered a stylus. Reporters thought the world had a right to know. Vincenzo Giuliani felt no need whatsoever to pander to that illusion. On the other hand, there was the question of what to do next, regarding Rakhat. And he did feel a need to bring Emilio to some sort of resolution. This wasn't the first time the Jesuits had encountered an alien culture and it wasn't the first mission to come to grief and Sandoz wasn't the first priest to disgrace himself. The whole business was regrettable but not beyond redemption.

He's salvageable, Giuliani thought stubbornly. It's not as though we have so many priests that we can write one off without an effort. He's one of Ours, dammit. And what right have we to declare the mission a failure? Seeds may have been sown. God knows.

Even so, the allegations against Sandoz and the others were very serious.

Privately, Vincenzo Giuliani was inclined to believe that the mission went wrong at its inception, with the decision to involve the women. A breakdown in discipline from the beginning, he thought. The times were different then.

Ruminating over the same problem as he walked back to his lightless room on the eastern side of the Rome Ring, John Candotti had his own theory about how things had gone wrong. The mission, he thought, probably failed because of a series of logical, reasonable, carefully considered decisions, each of which seemed like a good idea at the time. Like most colossal disasters.

ARECIBO RADIO TELESCOPE, PUERTO
RICO:
FEBRUARY 2019

'JIMMY, I JUST heard they assigned you a vulture!' Peggy Soong whispered, and the first step toward the mission to Rakhat was taken. 'Are you going to cooperate?'

Jimmy Quinn continued to move down the line of vending machines, selecting *arroz con pollo*, a container of bean soup and two tuna sandwiches. He was absurdly tall, finally done growing at twenty-six but not really filled out yet, and constantly hungry. He stopped to pick up two packets of milk and a couple of desserts and checked his debit total.

'You cooperate, it's that much harder for the rest of us,' Peggy said. 'You saw what happened to Jeff.'

Jimmy went to a table that had only one open seat and set his tray down. Peggy Soong stood behind him and glared at the woman sitting opposite Quinn. The woman decided she was done with lunch. Peggy moved around the table and sat in the still-warm chair. For a while, she simply watched Jimmy fork in piles of rice and chicken, still amazed by the sheer volume of food he needed. Her grocery bill had gone down by 75 percent since she threw him out. 'Jimmy,' she said finally, 'you can't duck this. If you're not for us, you're against us.' She was still whispering but her voice was not gentle. 'If nobody cooperates, they can't fire us all.'

Jimmy met her eyes, his gaze blue and placid, hers black and challenging. 'I don't know, Peggy. I think they could probably replace the whole staff in a couple of weeks. I know a guy from Peru who'd take my job for half what I'm making. Jeff got a good recommendation when he left.'

'And he's still out of work! Because he gave the vulture everything he had.'

'It won't be my decision, Peggy. You know that.'

'Bullshit!' Several people looked up. She leaned toward him from across the table, whispering again. 'You are not a puppet. Everybody knows you've helped Jeff since he got sacked. But the whole point here is to stop them from sucking us dry, not to minister to the victims after the fact. How many times do I have to explain it?'

Peggy Soong sat back abruptly and looked away, trying to make sense of people who couldn't see the system reducing them to bits. All Jimmy understood was work hard, don't make trouble. And what would it get him? Screwed is what it would get him. 'It will be your decision, to cooperate with the vulture,' she said flatly. 'They can give you the order but you have to decide whether to follow it.' Rising, she gathered her things from the table and stared down at him a moment longer. Then she turned her back on him and walked toward the door.

'Peggy!'

Jimmy got up, came close enough to reach down and touch her lightly on the shoulder. He was not handsome. The nose was too long and no particular shape, the eyes too close together and set deep as a monkey's, the semicircle smile and the red curling hair like scribbles in a child's drawing; for a few months, the aggregate had charmed her senseless.

'Peggy, give me a chance, okay? Let me see if there's a way so everybody wins. Things don't have to be one way or the other.'

‘Sure, Jimmy,’ she said. He was a nice kid. Dumber than rice but nice. Peggy looked at his earnest, open, homely face and knew that he would find some plausible, contemptible rationale for being a good boy. ‘Sure, Jim. You do that.’

A lesser man might have been put off his feed by a confrontation with the formidable Peggy Soong. But Jimmy Quinn was used to small, insistent women, and nothing affected his appetite; his mother complained that feeding him in adolescence was like stoking a coal-fired furnace. So he returned to his seat as Peggy stalked out of the cafeteria, and thoughtfully worked his way through the rest of his meal, letting things percolate through his mind.

Jimmy was no fool but he’d been well loved by good parents and well taught by good teachers, and those two facts accounted for the habit of obedience that mystified and enraged Peggy Soong. Over and over in his life, authority had proven correct and the decisions of his parents and teachers and bosses made sense to him eventually. So he wasn’t happy about losing his job at Arecibo to an AI program but left to himself, he probably wouldn’t have objected. He’d only worked at the telescope site for eight months – not enough time to feel proprietary about a position he’d been dead lucky to get. After all, he hadn’t taken degrees in astronomy expecting a hot job market after graduation. The pay was lousy and the competition for work was savage, but that was true of almost anything these days. His mother – a small, insistent woman – had urged him to study something more practical. But Jimmy stuck with astronomy, arguing that if he was going to be unemployed, which was statistically likely, he might as well be unemployed in the field of his choice.

For eight months, he’d had the luxury of feeling vindicated. Now, it looked like Eileen Quinn had been right after all.

He gathered the debris from his lunch, deposited it in the proper bins and made his way back to his cubicle, swerving and ducking, bat-like, to avoid the doorways and low light fixtures and conduits that threatened to knock him cold a hundred times a day. The desk he sat at looked gap-toothed, and for that blessed state of affairs he was indebted to Father Emilio Sandoz, a Puerto Rican Jesuit he'd met through George Edwards. George was a retired engineer who worked as an unpaid, part-time docent at the Arecibo dish, giving tours to schoolchildren and day-trippers. His wife, Anne, was a doctor at the clinic the Jesuits had set up along with a community center in La Perla, a slum just outside Old San Juan. Jimmy liked all three of them and made the trip to San Juan as often as he could tolerate the tedious, traffic-choked forty-mile drive.

At dinner that first night with Emilio at the Edwardses' place, Jimmy kept them laughing with a comic threnody, listing the hazards life held for a regular guy in a world built by and for midgets. When he complained about smashing his knees into his desk every time he sat down, the priest leaned over, the handsome unusual face solemn but the eyes alight, and said quietly in a nearly perfect North Dublin accent, 'Take d' middle drawer outta d' desk, y' fookin' tosser.' There was only one reply possible and Jimmy supplied it, blue eyes wide with Irish admiration: 'Fookin' deadly.' The exchange convulsed Anne and George, and the four of them had been friends ever since.

Grinning at the memory, Jimmy opened a line and shot a message to Emilio's system, offering 'Beer at Claudio's, 8 P.M. RSVP by 5,' no longer amazed by the idea of having a drink in a bar with a priest, a notion that had initially stunned him almost as much as finding out that girls had pubic hair, too.

Emilio must have been in the J-Center office because the reply came back almost immediately. 'Deadly.'

At six that evening, Jimmy started down through the kars hills and forest surrounding the Arecibo telescope site to the coastal city of the same name, and from there drove eastward along the coast road to San Juan. It was twenty after eight before he found a parking spot within sight of El Morro, a huge stone fortress built in the sixteenth century, reinforced later with the massive city wall that surrounded Old San Juan. Then, as now, the wall left the slum of La Perla unprotected, clinging to a strip of beach.

La Perla didn't look too bad when you were standing on the city wall. The houses, tumbling down six or seven levels from the heights to the sea, appeared substantial and fairly large until you knew that, inside, they were all cut into several apartments. Anglos with any kind of sense stayed out of La Perla but Jimmy was big and competent and known to be Emilio's friend, and he was gratified to be greeted now and then as he jogged down the cascade of stairways toward Claudio's tavern.

Sandoz was sitting in the far corner of the bar, nursing a beer. The priest was easy to pick out of a crowd, even when he wasn't in clericals. Conquistador beard, coppery skin, straight black hair that parted naturally in the center and fell over high, wide cheekbones, which narrowed to a surprisingly delicate chin. Small-boned but nicely made. If Sandoz had been assigned to Jimmy Quinn's old parish in South Boston, his exotic looks would surely have drawn the traditional title bestowed on attractive celibates by generations of Catholic girls: Father What-A-Waste.

Jimmy waved to Emilio and then to the bartender, who said hi and sent Rosa over with another beer. Picking up the heavy wooden chair opposite Sandoz and rotating it one-handed, Jimmy sat wrong-way around and folded his arms on the chair back. He smiled up at Rosa as she handed him the beer mug and then pulled a long swallow, Sandoz watching him peaceably from across the table.

'You look tired,' Jimmy remarked.

Sandoz shrugged expressively, momentarily a Jewish grandmother. 'So what else is new?'

'You don't eat enough,' Jimmy said. This was an old routine.

'Yes, Mama,' Sandoz acknowledged obediently.

'Claudio,' Jimmy yelled to the barkeeper, 'get this man a sandwich.' Rosa was already on her way from the kitchen with plates of food for both of them.

'So. You have come all this way to feed me sandwiches?' Sandoz asked. Actually, it was Jimmy who always got tuna sandwiches, bizarrely combined with a double side order of *bacalaitos fritos* and a half guava in the shell. Rosa knew that the priest preferred beans in *sofrito*, spooned over rice.

'Somebody's got to do it. Listen, I got a problem.'

'Don't worry, Sparky. I hear you can get shots for it in Lubbock.'

'De Niro,' Jimmy said, wolfing a bite. Emilio made a sound like a game-show buzzer. 'Shit. Not De Niro? Wait. Nicholson! I always get those two guys mixed up.' Emilio never got anybody mixed up. He knew every actor and all the dialogue from every movie since *Horse Feathers*. 'Okay. Be serious for ten seconds. You ever heard of a vulture?'

Sandoz sat up straight, fork in midair. Professorial now: 'I presume you do not refer to the carrion-eating bird. Yes. I have even worked with one.'

'No kidding,' Quinn said, around his food. 'I didn't know that.'

'There's a lot you don't know, kid,' Sandoz drawled. It was John Wayne, marred only by the barely perceptible Spanish accent that persisted during the quicksilver transformations.

Jimmy, who mostly ignored Sandoz's private games with language, continued to chew. 'You gonna finish that?' he asked, after they'd eaten in silence for a little while. Sandoz swapped his plate for Jimmy's empty one and slumped against the wall again. 'So what was it like?' Jimmy asked. 'Working with the vulture, I mean. They assigned me one at

the dish. Do you think I should cooperate? Peggy will have my guts if I do and the Japs will have 'em if I don't, so what's the difference? Maybe I should go for intellectual immortality and devote my life to the poor, which will include me, after the vulture picks my brains and they dump me at Arecibo.'

Sandoz let him roll. Jimmy generally reached his own conclusions by talking, and Sandoz was accustomed to confessional musing. Instead, he wondered how Jimmy could eat so fast and still talk without sucking food into his windpipe.

'So what do you think? Should I do it?' Jimmy asked again, finishing off his beer and using a piece of bread to sop up the *sofrito*. He waved to Claudio for a second beer. 'You want another?' he asked Sandoz.

Emilio shook his head. When he spoke this time, it was in his own voice. 'Hold out for a while. Tell them you want someone good. Until the vulture does you, you still have some leverage. You have something they want, yes? Once they've got you stored, they don't need you. And if a vulture does a poor job on you, you're immortalized as mediocrity.' Then he was gone again, embarrassed for giving advice, and Edward James Olmos appeared as a pachuco gangster, hissing, '*Horale . . . ese.*'

'Who did you?'

'Sofia Mendes.'

Jimmy's eyebrows shot up. 'Latina?'

Unexpectedly, Sandoz laughed. 'Remotely.'

'Was she good?'

'Yes. Quite. It was an interesting experience.'

Jimmy stared at him, suddenly suspicious. When Emilio said interesting, it was often code for bloodcurdling. Jimmy waited for an explanation but Sandoz simply settled into the corner, smiling enigmatically. There was silence for a little while as Jimmy turned his attention back to the *sofrito*. The next time he glanced up, it was Jimmy who smiled. Down for

the count. Sandoz fell asleep faster than anyone he'd ever met. Anne Edwards claimed the priest had only two speeds, Full Bore and Off.

Jimmy, an insomniac whose mind tended to run on a hamster wheel at night, envied the man's ability to catnap but knew it wasn't just a fortunate quirk of physiology that let Emilio crash at will. Sandoz routinely put in sixteen-hour days; he crashed because he was beat. Jimmy helped out as much as he could and wished sometimes that he lived closer to La Perla, so he could pitch in more often.

There was even a time when Jimmy had considered becoming a Jesuit himself. His parents, second-wave Irish immigrants to Boston, left Dublin before he was born. His mother was never vague about their motive for the move. 'The Old Sod was a backward, Church-ridden Third World country filled with dictatorial, sexually repressed priests sticking their noses into normal people's bedrooms,' she'd declare whenever asked. Despite this, Eileen admitted to being 'culturally Catholic,' and Kevin Quinn held out for Jesuit-run schools for the boy merely on the basis of the discipline and high scholastic standards. They had raised a son with a generous soul, with an impulse to heal hurts and lighten loads, who could not stand idly while men like Emilio Sandoz poured out their lives and energy for others.

Jimmy sat a while longer, thinking, and then went quietly to the debit station, punching in perhaps five times the amount needed to pay for their meals this evening. 'Lunches all week, okay? And watch him while he eats, right, Rosa? Otherwise he'll give the food away to some kid.' Rosa nodded, wondering if Jimmy noticed that he himself had just eaten half of the priest's meal. 'I'll tell you his problem,' Quinn continued, oblivious. 'He's got two-hundred-pound ideas about getting things done, and a hundred and thirty pounds to do it with. He's gonna make himself sick.'

Over in the corner, Sandoz, eyes closed, was smiling. '*Sí, Mamacita,*' he said, mingling sarcasm with affection.

Abruptly, he hauled himself to his feet, yawned and stretched. Together, the two men left the bar and walked out into the soft sea air of La Perla in early spring.

If there was anything that might have strengthened Jimmy Quinn's faith in the ultimate reasonableness of authority, it was the early career of Father Emilio Sandoz. Nothing about it made much sense until you got to the end and saw that the collective mind of the Society of Jesus had been working patiently in a direction mere individuals could not perceive.

Many Jesuits were multilingual but Sandoz more than most. A native of Puerto Rico, he'd grown up with both Spanish and English. His years of Jesuit formation tapped the rigorous riches of a classical education and Sandoz became nearly as proficient in Greek as in Latin, which he'd not just studied but used as a living language: for daily communication, for research, for the sheer pleasure of reading beautifully structured prose. That much was not far out of the ordinary among Jesuit scholastics.

But then, during a research project on the seventeenth-century missions to Quebec, Sandoz decided to learn French, in order to read the Jesuit Relations in the original. He spent eight intense days with a teacher, absorbing French grammar, then built vocabulary on his own. When his paper was complete at the end of the semester, he was comfortable reading in French, although he made no effort to learn to speak the language. Next came Italian, partly in anticipation of going to Rome someday and partly out of curiosity, to see how another Romance language had developed from the Latin stem. And then Portuguese, simply because he liked the sound of it and loved Brazilian music.

The Jesuits have a tradition of linguistic study. Not surprisingly, Emilio was encouraged to begin a doctorate in linguistics immediately after ordination. Three years later, everyone expected Emilio Sandoz, S.J., Ph.D., to be offered a professorship at a Jesuit university.

Instead, the linguist was asked to help organize a reforestation project while teaching at Xavier High School on Chuuk in the Caroline Islands. After only thirteen months of what would ordinarily have been a six-year assignment, he was moved to an Inuit town just below the Arctic circle and spent a single year assisting a Polish priest in establishing an adult literacy program, and then it was on to a Christian enclave in southern Sudan, where he worked in a relief station for Kenyan refugees with a priest from Eritrea.

He grew accustomed to feeling inexperienced and out of his depth. He became tolerant of the initial frustration of being unable to communicate with grace or speed or humor. He learned to quiet the cacophony of languages competing for dominance in his thoughts, to use pantomime and his own expressive features to overcome barriers. Within thirty-seven months, he became competent in Chuukese, a northern Inuit-Inupiak dialect, Polish, Arabic (which he spoke with a rather good Sudanese accent), Gikuyu and Amharic. And most important from his superiors' point of view, in the face of sudden reassignment and his own explosive temperament, Emilio Sandoz had begun to learn patience and obedience.

'There's a message from the Provincial for you,' Father Tahad Kesai told him when he returned to their tent one sweltering afternoon, three hours late for what passed as lunch, a few weeks after the first anniversary of his arrival in Sudan.

Sandoz came to a halt and stared, tired and green-faced under the tent fabric. 'Right on schedule,' he said, dropping wearily onto a camp stool and flipping open his computer tablet.

'Maybe it's not a reassignment,' Tahad suggested. Sandoz snorted; they both knew it would be. 'Goat shit,' Tahad said irritably, mystified by the way their superiors were handling Sandoz. 'Why won't they let you serve out a full assignment?'

Sandoz said nothing so Tahad busied himself sweeping sand back out to the desert, to give the other priest a little privacy as he read the transmission. But the silence went on too long and when Tahad turned to look at Sandoz, he was disturbed to see that the man's body was beginning to shake. And then Sandoz put his face in his hands.

Moved, Tahad went to him. 'You've done good work here, Emilio. It seems crazy to keep pulling you from hill to valley . . .' Tahad's voice trailed off.

Sandoz was, by this time, wiping tears from his eyes and making terrible whining sounds. Wordlessly, he waved Tahad in closer to the screen, inviting him to read the message. Tahad did, and was more puzzled than ever. 'Emilio, I don't understand—'

Sandoz wailed and nearly fell off the stool.

'Emilio, what is so funny?' Tahad demanded, bewilderment turning to exasperation.

Sandoz was asked to report to John Carroll University outside Cleveland in the United States, not to take up a post as a professor of linguistics, but to cooperate with an expert in artificial intelligence who would codify and computerize Sandoz's method of learning languages in the field so that future missionaries would benefit from his wide experience, for the greater glory of God.

'I'm sorry, Tahad, it's too hard to explain,' gasped Sandoz, who was on his way to Cleveland to serve as intellectual carrion for an AI vulture, *ad majorem Dei gloriam*. 'It's the punchline to a three-year joke.'

As many as thirty or as few as ten years later, lying exhausted and still, eyes open in the dark long after the three suns of Rakhat had set, no longer bleeding, past the vomiting, enough beyond the shock to think again, it would occur to Emilio Sandoz to wonder if perhaps that day in the Sudan was really only part of the setup for a punchline a lifetime in the making.

It was an odd thought, under the circumstances. He understood that, even at the time. But thinking it, he realized with appalling clarity that on his journey of discovery as a Jesuit, he had not merely been the first human being to set foot on Rakhat, had not simply explored parts of its largest continent and learned two of its languages and loved some of its people. He had also discovered the outermost limit of faith and, in doing so, had located the exact boundary of despair. It was at that moment that he learned, truly, to fear God.

ROME: JANUARY 2060

SEVENTEEN YEARS OR a single year later, on his way to see Emilio Sandoz a few weeks after their first meeting, John Candotti very nearly fell into the Roman Empire.

Sometime during the night, a delivery van had provided the last little bit of weight and vibration that could be withstood by a nineteenth-century street paved over a medieval bedroom constructed from the walls of a dry Roman cistern, and the whole crazy hollow thing collapsed. The road crew managed to extricate the van but hadn't gotten around to putting up barriers around the hole. John, hurrying as usual, almost walked right into it. Only the odd echo from his footsteps warned him that something wasn't right and he slowed down, his foot in the air, stopping just short of a historically interesting broken neck. This was the kind of thing that kept him constantly on edge in Rome but that he made comical in his messages home. His entire experience in this city sounded better than it lived.

John had decided to see Sandoz in the morning this time, hoping to catch him fresh after a night of rest and to talk some sense into him. Somebody needed to let the guy know exactly which rock and what kind of hard place he was between. If Sandoz was unwilling to talk about the mission, the crew of the ship that had sent him back, against all odds, had suffered from no such reticence. People who'd

argued that interstellar travel was financially impractical had reckoned without the immense commercial possibilities of having a story to tell to an audience of over eight billion consumers. The Contact Consortium had played the drama for all it was worth, releasing it in tiny episodes, milking the interest and the money even after it was clear that their own people had probably perished on Rakhat.

Eventually, they got to the part of the story where they found Sandoz, and the shit hit the proverbial fan. The disappearance of the original Jesuit missionaries was transformed from a tragic mystery into an ugly scandal: violence, murder and prostitution, doled out in teasing, skin-crawling doses. The initial public admiration for the scientific expertise and swift decisiveness that made the mission possible wheeled 180 degrees, the news coverage as relentless as it was vicious. Sensing blood in the water, media sharks hunted down anyone still living who might have known members of the Jesuit party. The private lives of D.W. Yarbrough, Marc Robichaux and Sofia Mendes were dragged into the light and piously tittered over by commentators whose own behavior went unexamined. Only Sandoz had survived to be reviled and so he became the focus for the outrage, despite the fact that he was generally remembered with fondness or respect by people who'd known him before the mission.

It wouldn't have mattered if Sandoz had been as pure as a newborn baby here, John thought. He was a whore and a murderer there. No additional scandal was required to bring the pot to a boil.

'I have nothing to say. I shall withdraw from the Society,' Sandoz still insisted, when pressed. 'I just need a little time.'

Maybe he thought he could keep quiet and the interest would die; maybe he thought he could stand the hounding and pressure. John doubted it; the media would eat Sandoz alive. He was known all over the world, and those hands were like the mark of Cain. There was no safe haven left on