

The Cornfield Shrine

One of the diaries of Leilani Hawkins, by We're All Mad Here

Ever been stalked in a cornfield?

It's the pun that's scarier than anything, really.

Oh well, at least this time I'm not tied up naked on an altar. No, instead I'm naked, in an armbinder, walking through a maze, with a creepy horror unseen behind me.

And how did *this* happen, you ask? Well...

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I'd never been to Nebraska before. I have to say, now that I'm here, I could easily go the rest of my life without having to come back.

My first impression of Nebraska was: "Wow, that's a lot of flat."

My second impression of Nebraska was: "Wow. That's a lot of cornfields."

My third impression of Nebraska was: "Wow. That's a lot of flat cornfields on flat land. With corn. Damn."

I decided I am not at my most poetic in the middle of Midwest. Not that I'm ever poetic. So why was a sexy Hawai'ian librarian in Nebraska? Funny story, that. Ever heard of inter-library loans? It's a process wherein libraries agree to loan books to one another so their patrons can borrow books from libraries where they may not have a membership. It's all very civilized.

So why am *I* involved? Well Arcanum University has some very... peculiar... books in the stacks. Some of those books require special care and handling. Normally, we don't let those leave the Closed Stacks, but there's always an exception.

Bartholomew (“Big Bart”) Ford was one of those people who would always be the exception. Big Bart had money. I have to admit, I’m not sure where that money *comes* from, precisely, and why someone with a lot of money has opted to live in a small town in Nebraska, but the ways of the rich and shameless are a bit beyond my thinking.

Big Bart was a tall, stocky fellow in his early fifties with a squarish head and a ruddy, rough face that looked like the sort professional boxers or football players manage to work toward in their youth. His nose had been broken and reset a few times in the past. His eyes were dark and deep set. A thick, bristly mustache of grey and black dominated his upper lip. His still thick head of hair had a hint of receding and held that distinguished silver on the sides while dark on top look to it.

Big Bart favored a sort of cowboy-farmhand look. Brown cowboy boots, worn denim jeans, a flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up and unbuttoned a bit to show off some of his hairy chest. The more I looked at him, the more I was reminded of a bigger, burlier Tom Selleck, if the actor had been in a lot of rougher fights.

Why did he insist on being called “Big Bart”? I could only assume someone was feeling a wee-bit insecure.

“Well *damn*,” Big Bart said as I got out of the rental car. “Didn’t know they’d send the book with a supermodel.”

I offered a polite smile in return and tried not to roll my eyes. I wasn’t dressed especially classy. I’d gone for a vaguely “classic librarian” look. Dark skirt, blue blouse, low heels, and a leather jacket. My hair was done up in a more classic librarian bun. I guess I could have gone for those half-moon glasses you see in old movies, but I have my limits. I held an attache case in my hands and turned slightly as Jonas also got out of the car.

I’ll admit, Jonas Thorne was one of the brighter spots to this little sojourn. A professor of archaeology, he was one of the younger (and better looking) faculty. He and I had been casual, on-again, off-again, lovers for a while now. We always managed to have a bit of fun, and I was in the mood for that.

“Bart,” Jonas said. “Good to see you. This is Leilani Hawkins, one of our university librarians.”

Big Bart gave Jonas an absent nod, his eyes running up and down my form then eyeing the attache case. “So that’s it then?”

I hefted the case and nodded. "The *L'Archevêque Journals*, as you requested, Mister Ford."

Big Bart waved a hand. "No need for formality, my dear. You can call me Bart, or 'Big Bart'."

"Thank you, Bart," I kept my smile polite. "Please call me Leilani."

Big Bart's home was pretty damn impressive, I have to say. Low to the ground, it was a sprawling place that looked like a melding between a mansion and a farm. Or at least that's how it looked to my eyes. It's not like I've spent much time in mansions and less on farms.

I was intrigued by some of his staff, many of whom had a decidedly ex-military look to them. Big, muscular fellows with close-cut hair and stern looks. I didn't entirely disapprove.

Inside, his home was *much* more interesting. He had artifacts from all *sorts* of places. A Maori war club, a samurai's armor, a Zulu spear and shield, some Roman statues, what looked suspiciously like an *intact* terracotta warrior from China, and others. And his collection of Native American pieces was truly breathtaking with most of it from the Cheyenne, Pawnee, and Lakota tribes. It was all I could do to keep Jonas moving as "Big Bart" gave us the tour.

"Your collection is *very* impressive!" Jonas all-but-gushed at Bart as he was unable to tear his eyes away from the artifacts.

I sometimes have this suspicion that I could get a dozen naked supermodels to walk by Jonas when he's like this and he wouldn't notice. I was tempted to flash him, just to see, but I didn't want to give Big Bart a free show.

"Thanks!" Big Bart grinned. "But I haven't gotten to the *good* part yet. The reason why you two, and the book, are here!"

After what felt like a mile of hallways (truly the rich are different than the rest of us), Big Bart led us to a room with all kinds of fancy electronic defenses (voice-activated locks, eye scanners, the whole deal). Within was a room decorated with... honestly, I found myself at a bit of a loss to describe it. I glanced over at Jonas and his look of befuddlement bordered on the outraged.

“What *is* this?” he asked.

The room had a set of statues and plinths set about that looked vaguely Egyptian. The symbols on them had a more Mayan feel to them, however. And some of the writing looked to be Latin. Set in the middle of the plinths and statues was a tall figure of stone carved vaguely like the creepiest scarecrow you’d ever seen. Its arms and legs resembled corn stalks. Its fingers and toes resembled ears of corn that *bent* a bit, ending in hook-like claws. Its head had a rotting burlap sack over it..

“Looks like a joke, doesn’t it?” Big Bart chuckled.

His eye took on a glint as he smiled. “I can assure you, it isn’t. These are items found not far from here in a cornfield in Nebraska. Items I have had carbon-dated to indicate an unknown people who had contact with the *Romans*, but were *here* in the middle of North America when not even the *Vikings* had sailed from Europe!”

I circled the strange figure while Jonas excitedly talked to Big Bart about this bizarre claim of his. Behind the figure, encased in shatterproof clear plastic, was an old-time scroll of what looked like vellum. Written on it was Latin, complete with some truly disturbing drawings.

Despite myself, I started to study the scroll, deciphering the nearly-illegible Latin. I jumped when Big Bart’s voice seemed to appear beside me.

‘Shoulda figured the librarian would be reading up,” he chuckled. “We’re getting to your part in this.”

Frowning at the interruption, I let Big Bart lead me back to where Jonas was studying a plinth. Jonas looked up expectantly and Big Bart led us to yet another corner of the room. There, behind yet another sealed glass container, was a half-rotted book.

“A diary from one of the survivors of the Villasur expedition,” Big Bart explained. “Made mention of a people they encountered before the Pawnees and the Otoes slaughtered them. Most of it’s unclear, but the author says Jean L’Archevêque, the Villasur guide, met with these people and spoke with them at length, keeping notes in his journal.”

“And you think L’Archevêque wrote of these people,” I said. “Interesting. I haven’t read his journal, myself.”

“Well, gorgeous, that’s why you’re here,” Big Bart said with a nod.

Trying not to bristle at Big Bart’s leering and condescending manner, I donned a pair of latex gloves, then opened the *atache* and removed the *L’Archevêque Journals*. There were three of them. I set them out on a table. Big Bart similarly donned a pair of gloves and started to carefully peruse the books.

“Yes,” he mused upon reaching the third journal.

He blinked and looked up. “I’m being remiss as a guest. It’s nearly suppertime and I’ve got rooms for you both. Let’s get some grub.”

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Dinner was a hefty meal, if a bit on the bland side. Still, Big Bart has *excellent* taste in alcohol, with a fine selection of wines, whisky, and what-not. We’d left the journals in his sealed room. It wasn’t necessary that I babysit the books the *entire* time, after all. Still, something was bugging me about this whole situation.

Jonas and I retired to our respective rooms, but not before I got his attention.

“Something’s wrong,” I said. “Off.”

“You mean beside claims of a mysterious people living in Nebraska with artifacts dating back to Roman times?” He shook his head incredulously.

“You think they’re fakes?” I asked.

“They *have* to be fakes,” Jonas said dubiously. “But I know Bart. He’d have put them through every possible test before making claims like that.”

“There’s something else,” I said. “The scroll in the chamber. I think it was some kind of ritual or instructions for a ritual. How to summon and dismiss... something.”

“The ‘something’ didn’t have a name written in it?” he frowned.

I shook my head. “It looked incomplete. There was no name there that I could see.”

“Well, if he’s practicing invocations and summonings, he won’t get far without a true name,” Jonas yawned. “Hopefully he’s just a bit off his gourd.”

He glanced at me. “Nightcap?”

I shook my head. As delightful as a late night romp with Jonas might be, I wasn’t in the mood.

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I lay in bed, looking at the digital clock flip to one AM.

“The hour of the witch,” I murmured.

Restless, I got out of bed and threw on a shirt and jeans, then padded out into the hall.

“What are you doing, Leilani?” I whispered to myself.

I knew damn well what I was doing as I retraced the steps to that super-secure room. I was startled to find the door was ajar. I heard a voice within.

“..people claimed descent of castaways from a faraway land,” Big Bart was speaking as though reading aloud. “They were drawn here where their dark god led them to a castaway tribe. They were commanded to intermarry, binding the gods of both together to give... yes! To give birth to Aolachootori, the Maize King! I have it!”

Of *course* the journal had the name he was looking for. I sighed. I needed to wake Jonas.

I was so intent on what was going on in Bart’s weird little shrine that I really wasn’t paying all that much attention to my surroundings. A wet cloth was pressed against my face. A sickly-sweet smell filled my world. And I was chloroformed unconscious.

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I woke up fully expecting to be naked on an altar with some creepy statue leering down at me. Instead, I was lying on the cold ground with cornstalks all about me outside of a small clearing and narrow path. I did the calculation.

It was cold. I was naked. So that's one down. My arms were secured behind me. Felt like a leather armbinder. Don't ask me how I know. So naked and tied up. That's pretty normal for these situations.

A ballgag filled my mouth. That was annoying, but not surprising. What *was* surprising was that my legs were free and I wasn't anywhere near an altar, as far as I could tell. Instead, Big Bart leered down at me, flanked by a couple of his bully boys.

"Mmm-mm," he smacked his lips. "Yessir, you sure are a fine one. A shame, really."

"Fpmh yuph!" I said emphatically through the ballgag.

"Feisty too," he said approvingly. "Wish I could keep you around and train you proper, but you heard too much and it was really just auspicious timing."

Oh shit. Where they *taking* me to an altar? I looked around.

"So it works like this, dumpling," he said solicitously. "You get a chance. Not much of one, but a chance all the same. The servitors of the Maize King have awakened and are coming."

He glanced at the cornfield. I could hear rustling. His bully-boys looked nervous. I did not like this.

"You've got a path before you through the corn," he continued. "Stick to the path and keep ahead of the servitors and you might manage to get out before they claim you. Fail, and they'll hear your list cries then claim you for their King to make him manifest. And I will have the power of a god at my beck and call."

He smiled at me. "No offense, sweetheart."

"Npmpah akemph!" I said, then kicked out.

Years of Tae-kwon-do, Jeet Kune Do, and Krav Maga have taught me how to kick. So when my foot connected with the balls of Big Bart Ford, well I expect his day got a lot less good. I didn't stick around to gloat over my handiwork (footy-work?). I rolled to my feet and put a bit of parkour to the test as I ran like hell.

It was kind of Barty-boy to tell me the rules, in a way. By letting me know this was a ritual, I understood how this worked. If I went off the path and through the cornfield, I'd almost certainly get snagged by whatever these 'servitors' were, or Bart's bully-boys otherwise. If I stuck to the path, I had protections.

For all the good that did a naked girl in an armbinder, but hey! It's the little things!

A mist had started to rise, making the entire scene all that much creepier. And colder. Why do the bad guys *always* take my clothes?

I heard rustling and turned. Kind of regretted that. Behind me was a shambling, walking, scarecrow. Tattered cloth attire, straw peeking out of collar and wrists. Burlap sack for a head. Wide-brimmed hat. All the creepy shit you could imagine. And, of course, it was advancing after me like a monster in a horror movie.

Yeah... no.

Tapping into the fear, I bolted, running through the maze. A maze of maize. Yeah, someone needed to get their balls kicked for that stupid pun. Twice a shambling scarecrow emerged, nearly grabbing me. Each time, parkour came to my rescue as I twisted and tumbled out of the grasp of the monsters.

This wasn't buying me enough time. My mind raced. There *had* to be a way out! I tried to recall what I knew, then it hit me. A plan formed. I *really* hoped old Big Bart was right in all that he said or there was going to be one less sexy Hawai'ian librarian in the world tonight.

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When they found me, the servitors of the Maize King approached as I was kneeling, exhausted, in the middle of a intersection of paths through the corn. The ground was cleared to reveal the well-tilled earth beneath. I looked up as the shambling scarecrows advanced and *really* hoped I'd guessed correctly.



Two of them hustled me to my feet and held me by the shoulders while a third approached. It tilted its head and studied me. Its gloved hands ran over my body in a curiously-gentle caress. Then, and I swear I did not expect this, I saw a *corn cob* emerging from its crotch.

I wanted to make a quip about the health hazards of corn syrup, but thankfully I was still gagged.

There's certain dumb jokes that should really never be uttered.

"*Lovely,*" the grabby scarecrow rasped. "*You will do well.*"

"Iph maa foo?" I managed through the ballgag.

The scarecrow tilted its head again, then yanked the ballgag out of my mouth.

"*I would hear your pleas now, mortal,*" it said in a gloating tone.

"Wow, those things work the jaw," I said, moving my jaw back and forth. "Just a sec. Ahh! Yeah, so pleas. I think you're not going to like what I have to say."

"*Indeed?*"

"Yeah," I said, smirking. "See, your buddy Bart? Kind of an idiot. There's certain people one should never let read a scroll that dictates summoning rituals. Librarians are chief among them. Especially librarians who can discern the bits that are actual banishing rituals."

My grin grew wolfish.

"And have a good enough memory for the symbols."

My eyes flickered to the ground. The scarecrow's gaze followed to see the symbols I'd drawn in the dirt with my feet.

*“Monarcha mays regi: Egredere!”* I intoned. *“Tu autem proiectus es de hac terra! Tua causa est detrimentum patiatur? Uentis!”*

The scarecrow looked at me in what I can only describe as outrage then just... collapsed. So did the two holding me. I could hear a wail of anguish. And then I saw the fireball burst into the sky in what I guessed was the direction of Bart's mansion.

Looked to me like Jonas was having fun.

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It was another quarter-hour before Jonas found me shivering in the corn maze. He was all smudged and had a few cuts here and there. He had a pistol in his belt and one of those machine-gun carbine things.

Yeah, I'm not really a gun person.

Anyway, he looked all action-hero, so I figured he was doing action hero stuff while I was busy taking care of business and getting myself out of the damsel-in-distress role.

“You're late,” I accused as he strolled up.

He grimaced, took off his jacket, and draped it over my shoulders.

“Sorry,” he said. “Bart had a lot of thugs. And I knew you'd be pissed if I let the journals get damaged.”

“They're okay?”

“Yeah,” he grinned. “And I got some of Bart's library in for good measure.”

“And our host?” I asked. “He had a *lot* of bully-boys.”

“The hired help decided they were done when old Bart got strangled by a flailing scarecrow,” Jonas shrugged. “I gather his deal with the Maize King did not go as planned.”

“No,” I smiled. “It didn’t. So, are you going to help a girl out and let me out of this armbinder?”

Jonas paused and gave me an appraising look, then shook his head.

“Not just yet,” he said.

“Professor Thorne,” I said sternly. “Surely you don’t intend to take advantage of a poor girl in this situation?”

“The night’s young,” he replied.

“It’s almost two in the morning,” I countered.

“So it’s not like either of us are getting any sleep anyway,” he said in a reasonable tone.

I stared at him. He stared back.

“Oh god,” I broke down. “Get me somewhere warm and then let’s get on with it! God, these situations make me horny!”

Jonas Thorne’s smile told me he knew already. He swept me up and carried me off.

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The next day, an unremarkable grey car pulled in front of the ruin of the home that once belonged to “Big Bart” Ford. A man in a dark suit got out of the car followed by a woman in a matching dark suit. Both wore sunglasses and regarded the damage.

“Well, that’s that,” the man said.

“We were fortunate this time,” the woman mused.

“Fortunate?” the man scratched his chin. “No, I don’t think this was purely luck.”

“You think it was Thorne?” the woman asked.

“The house?” the man said. “Certainly. The situation? No, that had to be Hawkins.”

“Hawkins?” the woman nearly sneered.

The man gestured to the cornfield. “Is any of that on fire?”

The woman snorted. “A good point. So what now?”

“I think we need to pay closer attention to Ms. Leilani Hawkins,” the man said, opening the car door.

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Leilani Hawkins will return in **The Volcano of Pele**