

ALL MORNING CRISTINA DE ANE BATTLED HER MULE as they plowed furrow after furrow of stinking black dirt. This was Crista's first time working the wheat field since the attack and Eggbeater took full advantage of her injured body, continually stopping and starting, turning left or right, and destroying every attempt to plow a straight line.

As the cool spring morning warmed to day, the mule finally refused to move, pushing Crista's lupine rage too far. She screamed at Eggbeater, who brayed with laughter, causing Crista to kick the ceramic plow in disgust with her lame right leg. Embarrassed, she glanced around the field – praying no one had witnessed her outburst – only to see Beuten Pauler walking along the nearby road. Beu waved, the fool acting for all the world as if they were still best friends.

Rip his throat out. Split his guts and spine.

Crista gasped as the wolf surged in her thoughts. She fell to her knees – fingers gouging dank, plowed earth – and spun into dreams of chasing Beu down and tearing him to blood and meat. She wanted Beuten Pauler to pay for what he did. Wanted him to roll in pain, to scream for forgiveness. But she knew if she lost control, she'd be little better than him.

Breathing deep to calm herself, Crista grabbed the plow handles and pulled herself back up. She glared at the road, daring Beu to pretend any friendship still existed between the two of them.

But Beu was already gone. Instead, a deadly flash of red danced along the road, coming to a stop right beside the field.

Crista froze, only to be jerked forward as Eggbeater chose this moment to move. She cursed the mule and yanked the reins, but by the time she looked back the red had disappeared. Crista gripped the reins with suddenly sweaty palms. Was it a plague bird?

The mule, sensing her fear, brayed nervously. Crista pulled a carrot from her pocket and fed it to Eggbeater to quiet him, then stood on the plow for a better look. Her lame leg shook with pain, and she gripped the plow's handles to keep from falling.

The red flash was gone. Had it been an optical illusion? Or one of the rare unmodified cardinals which still nested in the nearby hills, their feathers as obscenely red as red could be?

JASON SANFORD PLAGUE BIRDS

ILLUSTRATED BY DARREN WINTER



024