

The Letter



BRADLEY PEARCE

The Letter

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Dedicated To: George of Inverness
The Patron Saint of Glenlabryn

And to my father:
Charles Pearce (1925-2021).
Who passed over while writing this book.
Brother, let me be your servant.
Let me be as Christ to you.

“In the last days,
The Gentile nations would come to the God of Israel,
As Gentiles, and not as proselytes to Israel.”

Zechariah 8:20–23



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Saul of Tarsus

Saul paced anxiously back and forth the marble floor. Making Timothy anxious as he watched on.

“Master. What troubles you?” He asked.

The question goes unanswered. His master’s mind held captive by the darkening blood red sky fused with arid smoke. An orb of blinding light blazed behind the distant hills of Rome. Silhouetting the stone columns like giant sentries that protected Rome’s great wealth and lust for power. Elongated shadows crawled across the roof tops like dark fingers. Penetrating large open windows as though searching for him help captive within the grand manor. Shackled to Rome. Permitted to roam only as far as the manacles of goodwill allowed until the day of judgement arrived. Whenever that would be. It had already been two years since his arrival, and two years before that since he had left Caesarea.

And beginning to feel like he would never have his right to be heard before Caesar.

Raising arms like wings as though to be take flight and flee the prolonged incarceration, he imagined himself standing before Christ on that fateful day. To see his face again.

Michael picked at a green grape from a wooden bowl. To Him it was as though it were only yesterday. But then every day was yesterday to Michael. As would be tomorrow. Placing a hand on Saul’s shoulder to sooth his troubled thoughts. Saul felt the warmth of the last apparent sun rays penetrate his soul. Sensing a blinding loving light. Inhaling deeply he opened his eyes. Expecting to see the Lord standing before. As he had so many, many, many years ago.

But all he saw was darkness. The sunlight had long since faded. He pondered the warmth he had felt. And sighed disappointedly.

Closing eyes again hoping to recapture the feeling. But what returned were memories of the past thirty years. Every event of those years flashed before him simultaneously. And in the blink of an eye, he found himself in Tarsus, as a child. Running through wheat fields with the other children. Squealing with laughter. Arms spread like wings, tickled by prickly tops.

‘Ah, the endless summers of youth.’ He thought to himself.

When time felt eternal. Saul grins and sighs and dismisses the nostalgic childish thought.

The innocence of youth was soon to be put away by Gamaliel.

“*Gamaliel.*” Murmurs Saul, as though summoning the long dead ghost.

And a darkly vision of the Rabbi stands before him. A chill of goosebumps erupts over Saul’s skin.

“Fetch me my cloak, for I feel a chill... And is not the air that gnaws at my bones.” Instructed Saul, looking about for Gamaliel as though had materialized.

Timothy returns with a thick woolen blue cloak, stained with time and wine. And places it over his master’s shoulder.

“That’s better...” Saul inhaling deeply as though he were now protected. The reassuring aromas ease his anxiety, “... I swear God hath given me a thorn in my flesh... A cross that I should bare.”

“Are you okay master... Some water?” Fearing his Master were falling ill.

“I am good boy... Where were we? ...” He asked having lost track of his thoughts.

“*Gamaliel?*” Responded Timothy timidly. Unsure who the man was.

“Ah yes... Gamaliel... If it were not for him... *Hm...*” Saul grumbles with disdain for the Rabbi.

Pulling the cloak tighter about his neck and shoulders, to shield him from the dark thoughts. Or to hide himself from what he had done.

For he had sinned.

A sadness comes over him. A remorse. A heavy pang of guilt. How many had died because of him. How many had suffered? His fertile young mind radicalized by the Rabbi. Empowered by Sanhedrin authority, he had gone about persecuting followers of ‘*The Way of Salvation*’. Christians as they would become to be known, for crimes of blasphemy against the Jewish faith. For defiling the covenant between Abraham and God. Calling on many to be stoned. He felt the stones striking him. Piling upon him.

Heavier and heavier until he could take no more.

“Forgive me Lord!” He shouts out.

His hands reaching up to the unseen God.

“Sorry Master?” Timothy questioned watching on.

“Wine...” Requested Saul. His throat was parched.

“Yes Master.”

“And pour one for yourself. It will do your stomach good. How fairs it?”

“It comes and goes... Wine seems to help.”

“Good. Good. But only in moderation... Understood.” He instructs his disciple.

“Yes Master.” Handing him a wooden goblet of dark red wine.

Nostril’s twitch, sniffing the bitter sweet aromas. Satisfied, Saul takes a mouthful and washes about his mouth as though to cleanse his pallet and swallows, feeling the arid solution burn to his stomach.

Then recalled the moment that had changed his life forever. As though it were an epiphany. Shredding Gamaliel’s chilling shadow from about him. And bathing him into a glorious warm light.

It all happened one day while on a road to Damascus.

A journey he had made a dozen times on his commission for the Sanhedrin.

But this time it would be different. It would be his last.

“Why me? ...” He questioned, “... I, the least worthy of all...” Recalling the exact moment, “... From nowhere, a brilliant light a thousand times brighter than the sun. And then some.” He gasped as though catching his breath at the moment again.

“Master?” Timothy asked.

Only to be silenced by a raised hand.

“I fell to the ground...” Recalls Saul as though he needed to explain.

Reaching for his head as though re-enact the fall.

“Were you okay Master?”

“I was blind Timothy! Blind! ... In more than one way...” Gasping, it was as he had seen a ghost, “...A Voice *spoke* to me...” He looked to Timothy wondering if he believed him, “...I can still hear His voice as clearly as I hear yours...” Dare he speak the haunting words that had echoed in his head for thirty years, but he did, “...*Why do you persecute me?* ...” He spoke softly to mimic the gentle voice, “... There was no anger in the Voice. Only Love... Forgiveness...” A lost look comes over Saul’s face, “... How could He forgive me? After what I had done. Tell me?”

Falling to his knees he raises his hands to God. Bowing his head, he had no answer. For all that was known to him, was known to the Voice. A vision of Gamaliel appeared, and turned to dust before blowing away in the breeze. And with it the burden of guilt he had carried all those years.

“I was told to find my way to Straight Street... To find Judas...”

“Judas? ...” Timothy asked inquisitively, “... I thought he had hung himself?”

“He did... This was another Judas...” Saul grumbled, the name leaving a bitter taste in his mouth and he takes another swallow of wine to wash it away, “... It was Ananias who healed me... I would not have blamed him if he turned his back on me... He laid his hands on me and the scales fell away from my eyes! ... *I was blind, but now I see...*” Remarked Saul, feeling a warm glow come over his aging body.

He had seen the Light. The Way. There was no denying it.

Taking another mouthful of wine he looked into the bottom of the goblet as though he were a seer. The future looked bleak and dark.

“What did you do after that Master?” Egged on Timothy, wondering where he had taken himself for the three years afterwards.

“I was a lost sheep Timothy... All those years I had persecuted Followers of Way... How wrong I was... I needed to know more about *them*... But first I needed to cast off my old shell.”

“How?”

“I wandered the desert for three years.”

“What did you do there?”

“Pray... (*ha*)...” before adding, “... And fasting. A lot of fasting.” He chuckled and grinned.

“Then where did you go?” Timothy asked eagerly.

“Jerusalem... To seek out the Apostles of Christ. Understand their Church, their teachings. To be like them... So I meet with James, Christ’s brother.”

“You answer to him?” Timothy naively asked.

“I answer to no one but Christ... It was He who anointed me. It is to He... And He alone I answer to.” Saul affirmed sternly, taking another mouthful of the heavy red wine.

He had made enemies over the years and none more so than the Pharisee. Looking over his shoulder as though he could sense someone standing behind him. Michael steps away. And the feeling passes. Twice assassins had tried to capture him. Twice he had evaded their grasp. Saved by the Grace of God. Seeking him for the very charge he had once sort to persecute. Corrupting Jew’s holy covenant between Abraham and God. And the call by Jews for Gentiles to be circumcised.

“I fear there are those that think that their Church is the only Church... I say we must find common ground if we are to be unified to spread the Word. Lest we fracture and go our separate paths...” Saul lamented aloud, and turned to Timothy, “... The pain you suffered so you could stand among them and preach... Did I not circumcise you personally?”

“You did Master.” Replied Timothy feeling naked and exposed.

Taking a mouthful of wine, Saul swallowed hard. His mind now reminiscing an old friendship of someone as determined as him.

“Petrus would know. I wonder where he is?” He spoke to himself.

Eyes look into the darkness of the abys that was Rome.

“What news of him?” Asked Timothy.

“News? If he is wise, he would stay out of Rome lest Nero knows of his presence. He is in a foul mood with the Christians.” Nostrils flared, irritated by the smell of charred bodies and smoldering embers lingering on the evening breeze.

“Some say Nero has gone mad. Drunk with power... Some say not even the light of heaven can pierce his sin-polluted soul... There is even a rumor he had the great fire lit.” Timothy leaned in and whispered.

“Hold your tongue boy lest a guard hears you and cuts both our tongues out...” Saul looks to the doorway, appearing dark and vacant. What lurked on the other side? Thinking he saw a shadow moving beneath the door. Then looks sternly at Timothy and advises calmly in a stoic voice, “...What use would we be then? Hm?”

“Sorry Master.” Timothy apologizes lowering his head in shame.

Saul regathered his thoughts from before he had been interrupted. Recollecting his first and only encounter with the Apostle some ten years earlier. After twenty years of evangelical wandering. Preaching and establishing churches in Greece and Asia Minor. Wary and tired, Saul returned home to Tarcus. Oh how the years had quickly flown by. Children ran through the wheat fields squealing and laughing.

Saul chuckled at the reminiscence.

“I visited him once...” Informed Saul, “... Strange how we lived so close that we never visit each other... Hm... We were like two ships that pass in the night... Neither one of us home... Always on the road...” Saul sighed heavily, dwelling on the unresolved issues they had between them.

“You met Petrus?”

“For fifteen days and nights we argued like school children... Both of us digging our toes in and neither giving an uncia... Then we parted ways... Vowing not interfere in each other’s spheres. I would preach to the Gentiles and he to the Jews... Oh how I miss him...” Laments Saul giving a faraway stare, “... I should write to him before...” Saul falls silent, fearful of upsetting Timothy.

“But you went back to Jerusalem with money and converts? What displeased them to have you arrested?” Asked Timothy confused.

“That’s true... As a sign of my allegiance I took up collection for their struggling Jerusalem church. Thinking that would be the end of the matter... Although they had no trouble accepting the money... The Gentile Converts were another matter.”

“How so?”

“I seemed to have over stepped the mark by taking them into the inner Temple.”

“You didn’t? Not to the Holy of Holies?”

“Hmm.” Saul acknowledges the fatal oversight.

The wine not tasting as sweet as it first had.

He looked into the bottom of the goblet finding it almost empty. And holds it out to Timothy to fetch another. He waits patiently and begins to wonder what was taking him. Moments later he returned with a fresh goblet.

“Sorry Master, I had to fetch another jar.” Said Timothy panting short of breath.

“Old wounds were reopened...” Saul continued, “... Accusations of forsaking Jewish law... Defiling the Temple... It did not take long for the Pharisees to muster a mob seeking vengeance... Wanting blood... My blood...” He quipped, “... Only to be saved by a Roman Tribune who had heard the raucous... I had gone from the frying pan into the fire...”, He mused,

“... Having escaped the angry mob about to stone me... I now found himself held captive by the Romans about to flog me.”

“You were saved by the Grace of God.” Answered Timothy.

“*Civis Romanus Sum! ... I am a Roman Citizen! ...*” Asserted Saul proudly as though standing before the Emperor himself, “... I have been flogged five times in my life, what would a scar be upon another... Christ suffered much more... If it were not for Governor Antonius Felix I would surely have been handed back to the mob.”

“You think Antonius Felix knew of The Way?”

“I believe so... Providing me sanctuary for two years until...”

“Until?” Asked Timothy.

“Until the new Governor arrived... Porcius Festus.” Saul spoke the name as though it was poison and left a foul taste in his mouth, “... The Pharisees high priests demanded my presence back in Jerusalem and Festus was willing to oblige, if only to keep the peace.”

“You told Festus of *The Way*? ... Surely he would listen and had heart?”

“When I informed him of Christ rising from the dead... He thought I was out of my mind.”

“But he didn’t you send you back?”

“No my dear, dear Timothy, (*chuckle*)... He did not. He could not... As you can well see...” Saul took a deep breath, puffing himself up like a blowfish and pronounced proudly for all of Rome to here, “...For I am a Roman Citizen...” Sounding like rolling thunder, “... I have a right to appeal unto Caesar.” He stated, as though it were a loop hole in the law.

Or making noose for his own execution.

“Yes, here you stand Master... You have survived assassins and ship wrecks. Tomorrow you stand before Nero to plead your case. Are you ready?”

“I have spent a life time being prepared for this moment. I have a powerful and compassionate God as my advocate... It will be my crowning glory.” Saul feels a sharp prickly tingle about his scalp as though a thorny crown had been placed upon it.

Fingers reach to his head expecting bloody wounds. Examining his fingers he sees none.

“It’s getting late my son, you look tired... You must rest your stomach.” Placing a fatherly hand on Timothy’s shoulder, “... Where was I? ...” Saul says aloud as though to continue his conversation alone.

Pulling the heavy woolen cloak closed he wrapped himself inside as though it were a shroud. And he the corpse. A peculiar chill hung in the air that evening that seeped into his bones. A foreboding sign perhaps.

Or perhaps he was just getting old he conceded.

Timothy stood in the shadow of the doorway and looked back at his old Master, grey and weathered. Thinking he was losing his mind. Talking to himself. Lest he answer back and encourage him. He turned and walked away.

Tomorrow would be another day.

On a wooden bench padded with lumpy calico cushions, Gamaliel and Michael sat and listened to the old man ramble on about a fierce storm and a small Mediterranean island. They had heard it all before. A hundred times. And then some. Suddenly there was a brilliant flash of light and both were gone.

Saul looks about for the source and waited for the thunder that never arrived...

The Trial

Saul watched as the sun rose for the very last time. Raising from its earthly corpus, like a soul from the dead. Filling the day with its glorious light.

Slivers of rays crept across the marble floor and lay at his feet. As though to bath them. And wash them with light. His cloak draped snug about his shoulders. Watching the sky change hues from ghostly grey to beige. As though the Holy Spirit was breathing new life into the day.

Inhaling the crisp cold air deeply. He felt alive. Sharp as a tac.

His mind entertaining the idea of travelling to Spain. A new beginning after his protracted internment was over. He had heard word of followers eager to hear of God's New Covenant.

Grinning as he fanaticized the faces of the new converts.

Michael stands nearby.

"Hm." Grumbled Saul now losing the thought, fading as quickly as it had come.

Sounds of the great city begin to resonate from the streets below. Voices called out and dogs barked as though to reply. And cocks crowed.

Nostrils flared as they took in the familiar pong of that could only be Rome.

Feeling the warmth of the sun on his face, he discarded the cloak. Tossing it on to the wooden bench where he had slept the night before. The wine having lured him into a slumber from which he could not wake to take himself to bed. Pinching a handful green grapes from the wooden bowl. Popped two in his mouth and jaws chew up and down. Tasting their sweet flesh and juices. Biting the seeds offer a bitter aftertaste in penance.

He stared out the window into the distance. There was something peculiar about the clarity of this day that troubled him. And for a fleeting moment he thought he saw someone sitting on a wooden bench out the side of his eye. Michael sat quietly. He has seen all. Knew all. He would not intervene.

All things must come to pass.

Timothy appears, distracting Saul from the apparent aberration.

"Master. You're up early. I'll prepare breakfast." He informed.

"Nothing for me today. Today I fast." Then remembered the seeds nestled in his mouth, swallowing them before Timothy noticed.

"You need your strength if you are to stand before Nero."

"I have the strength of God to bare witness before the Emperor... Besides what good is food to a dead man? ... Or a man that will feast in Heaven? Either way, my belly will be full."

"You must eat something..."

"Fear not my hunger Timothy... Fear the hunger of the Church... So many hungry mouths, so few fishes... Your mission will be more difficult than mine after my bones have long since turned to dust."

"Do not speak like this Master... Your time as not yet come. Nero will see the Light..." Said Timothy naively.

"Nero is blind and deaf! ..." Snaps Saul like a dog. Indifferent to being heard, he was standing trial for something far greater than offending Nero, "... He listens with his tongue, not his ears!"

Only one other man had stood trial for the same accusation. And it did not end well for him either. With anger raging in his heart he continued. Michael placed his hand on Saul's shoulder, to sooth the growing fury. The rage within subsided and he felt a peace come over himself as though a cage door had been opened and he had been set free.

The anger became courage and he spoke with conviction. And stared into space as though capturing a vision only he could see.

"Of course." He utters to himself.

"Are you okay Master?" Timothy asked, pulling Saul from the day dream.

"Yes, yes...", He continued, "... Alas, not even Ananias' hands could heal the Emperor's blindless... His time is near..." He prophesized, "... He has every right to fear the Word... No matter how many Christians he feeds his lions... No Roman army can halt this insurrection. A Light that seeps into crevices no Roman sword can pierce... To shine it *Glorious Light*..." Raising opening arms as though reaching out to the Lord.

"Who will stand with you today Master to advocate your case."

"Alas my son, like Christ, I have no one... But you. Stay close. I feel a peace when you are about."

"As do I with you." Said Timothy.

A loud banging sound of fists at the door. Shaking the heavy door at its hinges.

Saul wonders if his words had been heard. Two thick grey eye brows knit to become one giant hairy caterpillar. The caterpillars kissed and parted anxiety to become two hairy fat caterpillars again.

"See who it is." Ordered Saul knowing too well who it was.

The sun had barely risen above the horizon. Heavy shafts of sunlight flooded into the large room. It appeared Nero did his killing before breakfast.

Timothy opened the door to see two huge Centurions towering over him. Dressed in armor, scratched, and dented from unknown battles. The hilts of their menacing short swords jutted from thick leather belts. The Centurions look down the morsel standing before them.

Examining him briefly, they quickly dismissed him as a servant or companion.

"Saul... Saul of Tarsus. Is he here?" A Centurion grunted.

"I am here..." Saul steps forward, "... What do you want?"

"You are to come with us. Now!" The Centurion commanded.

"But the trial is not until midday." Saul corrected the man.

"The Emperor did not sleep well... He is up and wants this over with."

"Who am I to deny the wishes of the Emperor..." Joked Saul, "... Allow me a few moments to gather my cloak at least."

"Hurry up then." Growls the Centurion.

"Timothy, find some parchment and ink... I have a letter to write. And some wine. Now hurry."

Timothy dashed away into another room returning with a leather satchel and goat skin of wine. Saul shuffled, almost deliberately like an old man to bide time. Struggling with his faithful cloak that had kept him warm over the years. Infused with sweat and wine. Tears and rain. It had been a second skin to him like a womb.

"Come Timothy... Let us not delay the Emperor." Summoned Saul standing tall.

A Centurion marched in front and a Centurion marched behind.

The Apostles struggled to keep up. Saul shackled by chains lest the old man try to run and escape. A forceful hand pushes him in the back to hurry him along. Stepping down familiar steps they look back at the magnificent building that had housed him for two years.

Familiar faces watch him pass. Many of them converts, look away in denial of the man being taken away. As Peter had with Christ. Saul feels a sharp prick in his flesh. The tip a sword poking at him to keep moving. Ahead of them looms the Imperial Palace. Its steps littered with limp semi-conscious corpses. Courtiers and slaves. Male and female. Half-naked and half-clad. Intoxicated and docile from the all-night orgy celebrating Emperor's deprived cravings.

The twenty-eight-year-old Nero answered to know one. Kings would lay their crowns at his feet. Lest they face the might Roman army that would march at his command. Millions bowed in obedience fearful of his narcissistic frown. The name of Nero may have trembled the known world, but it did not tremble Saul. To him, Nero was nothing but a haughty monarch that epitomized everything evil in man. Sinking to the lowest of lows. Crimes and wickedness and immorality. Depravity by any other name.

Timothy was right. Nero had gone mad.

And it was up to Saul to save him. To be allowed to speak and be heard. To preach a final sermon. This he could not be denied. He was Roman. And maybe, just maybe. A slinter of Light. So brilliant. So bright. So small, it could sit on the tip of a pin. Would enter Nero's unforgiving heart.

The vast hall echoed solicited jeers. A restless crowd of Jews, Greeks, and Romans. All eager to catch sight of the Holy Man they had heard so much about.

The sea of people parted as Centurions push their way through. Those that did not move in time were shoved aside. Feeling like a minnow among giants, Saul looked about the vast hall and the faces staring back at him.

While many saw a certain death. Saul saw an opportunity.

"Glorious be your name Lord." He utters under his breath taken in the size of the congregation.

No one would be spare his sermon. The rich or poor. The learned or unlettered. The well and the suffering.

The Word would slip off everyone's tongue in time.

Saul stood before Nero, as Jesus had stood before Pontius Pilate some thirty short years earlier. Without council. Or advocate. He had been charged with sedition and heresy. And for good measure, accused of instigating the burning of the city.

Nero grinned when he heard this. Lest the finger be pointed at him.

Saul stood stoic and calm as the charges were read. Timothy stood by his side as though the charges were being read to him.

"What do you say to these charges?" Asked a judge.

"I say I am guilty... Of none of these. And that as a Roman Citizen I be permitted speak freely."

"It is your right. So speak."

And so Saul began his last sermon.

With eloquence and power he spoke. Casting aside the perils that surrounded him and imminent death. Proclaiming Christ's message. A salvation for all that truly repent. That all deeds of men, whether good or evil, are open to the eye of God.

Nero squirmed in his chair. Saul notices the Emperor's discomfort. Perhaps he had touched a nerve. Saul went on. He was God's representative. Anointed by Christ himself.

A mission he had devoted much of his life to.

"...And although I may perish..." He makes known the probable verdict, "...The Gospel will not!" Saul stopped speaking and stepped back a step to join Timothy.

The crowd was abuzz.

The venomous jeers that had greeted them when they had entered had turned to pleas for clemency and adoration. Saul remained unmoved. He knew the outcome beyond doubt. Staring defiantly at Nero as though to challenge him. That his God was greater than any Emperor of Rome.

Greater than Nero.

The two men's eyes met. Nero glanced away lest the old man's God saw into his soul.

If there was a heaven it was Elysium. If there were a God, it would be Jupiter, Juno, Mars, Mercury, Neptune, Apollo, Diana, Vulcan, and Vesta. And many more.

What foolishness this old man speaks. Could this man's God be mightier than all his Gods put together? For a fleeting moment Nero feared the Apostle's God. That he too could be arraigned and tried for his misdeeds. And judgement passed upon him.

Judgement passed upon an Emperor.

Perhaps the old man was mad. Yet the words resonated within him. Perhaps what he said, was true? The thought played on his licentious mind.

The devil whispered in one ear.

Michael whispered in the other.

Nero's head throbbed with pain. The conundrum needed more wine.

Nero raised his hand and a fearful silence hung over the great chamber.

Who dared to challenge an Emperor? To mitigate his authority. To place *him* below another. To chastise him before Senators and Countrymen. To have *him* crawl and place his crown at the feet of another God?

He snarled at the contemptuous thought. He crawled to no one.

Not even his mother.

Yet the crowd had found favor with him. He dared not pass sentence on him at this time.

"Take the prisoner back!!" Barked Nero wishing to see the back of old man.

He too knew how to play to the people.

A Centurion grabs Saul by his cloak, wrenching him backwards and toppling him over. Timothy catches him from falling, only to be shoved to the floor by the other Centurion. The rough treatment riles the crowd and the Centurion draw their swords to hold them off.

The crowd parts and allows them through.

Spiraling down a stone stair well, Saul is taken to a dungeon. Timothy follows some steps behind. A foul stench fills the air. Of feces and decaying flesh. Oil torches light the dim interior where no sunlight reached. And adds to the foul smell.

Arriving at an empty cell they throw Saul inside to the ground. Landing heavily the fall takes the wind from him. And he lays limp on the ground. Heavy iron gates shut banging metal on metal as it closes behind him.

Timothy stands in a dark shadow hoping not to be seen. The two guards walk pass unaware of his presence. Waiting until the guards were gone, hurried to the cage finding his Master laying inert on the damp dirt floor.

“Master?! Master?!” He pleaded Lazarus to wake from the dead.

“Ahh.” Saul groans on hearing the familiar voice. One that had not abandoned him.

It would be easy to simply lay there and die.

Finding strength he collapsed against the stone wall panting. Light from the torches sending dancing shadows over his body. His forehead glistening with sweat. Blood trickled down the side of his face.

“You’re bleeding?” Informed Timothy.

“Ha... That is the least of my concerns, don’t you think? ...” Chuckles Saul, “... Wine.”

Timothy reaches for the goat skin and tosses it over to him. Saul takes a mouthful. Savoring its sweetness. A contrast to the foul odors engulfing him.

Invigorating him.

“You brought the parchment and ink?”

“As you requested... I could write if you dictate if you like.” Offered Timothy.

“No...” Saul paused thinking long and hard as to why, “... What I write must be by my hand, with my blood... It is to an old friend... We have unsettled business.”

“Petrus?”

“Hmm...” He pants heavily with pain, “...I’ll have you dispatched this before...” Saul bit his tongue.

“I understand.” Said Timothy completing the sentence.

“Hmm... You will make a fine Apostle Timothy.”

“I have had a good Teacher.”

“Pass me the satchel and keep watch for the guards lest we are discovered.” Instructed Saul.

“Yes Master.” Timothy hurries to the entrance of the stair well and listens intently for approaching voices leaking from above.

Taking a swallow of wine, holding as though to help numb the foul stench of the cell. He swallows hard and feels it burn to his stomach. Carefully uncorking a small bottle of black ink he sat it down on the damp earthen floor. And pulled a sheet of parchment from the satchel. Smoothing it with his hand to flatten out the creases. Torches flicker. Casting moving shadows over the page.

He stares blankly at the ink. As though he had writer’s block.

“Oh_ the countless letters I have written... Now gathering dust in distance Churches... Ramblings of an old man perhaps... Was it all for naught? ...” He questioned himself, “... I fear my faith hath conspired against me... And the persecutor hath become the prey... This dungeon is too deep for any rope to reach... No basket shall rescue me here... I have faced my accusers and willfully bare my flesh for the lashes... Five times I have been flogged me, and five times I refused to deny Christ... I will never renounce Christ! Never!!” He shouted out defiantly to the door way, hoping the accusers would hear his conviction.

Dipping the wooden stylus, stained black from use, into the bottle of black ink, a steady hand began write. He had had a lifetime of what he wanted to say. His mind as clear as the day he had met Petrus so long ago. Their time together may have been brief. But their bond had lasted a lifetime.

It was his last chance to plead his case for the Gentiles...

'Petrus, my Brother in Christ...

The Letter

*'Petrus, my Brother in Christ...
Grace, Mercy, and Peace, from God the Father and
Christ Jesus our Lord... I pray this letter finds you safe
and well... I beg you stay away from Rome for now... For
Nero... Man of Sin... Dyes his sword with Christian
blood... My enemies will not rest until they have
compassed my death... For proclaiming salvation
through a crucified and risen Savior... To Gentiles...
Enemies that demand adherence to all the Jewish
Commandments... This is an affront to God's
Intentions... Did not Zechariah himself say, that in the
last days the gentile nations would come to the God of
Israel, as Gentiles. And not as proselytes to Israel... In
my dying breath on this earth I pray these words do not
fall on deaf ears... Fight the good fight my Brother... And
beware false teachers of God's New Covenant... The
Lord Jesus Christ be with thy spirit. Grace be with you.
Amen.
Saul.'*

The stylus fell from Saul's hand. As though there could be nothing more that could be written from it. The last word that he would ever write would be his name. Etched in black ink at the bottom of the page.

His hand fell limp. As though exhausted.

A hand that had written a thousand Epistles to a thousand brothers. He looked to his leather sandals. Soles as worn down as his own. Having wandered immeasurable distances and stood on countless rocks, proclaiming The Way to innumerable nameless faces. He allowed himself a grin of satisfaction. Michael grinned beside him.

His mission complete.

"Tis' done..." Informed Saul carefully folding the parchment and handing it to Timothy, "...Take this to Petrus... Find him wherever he may be... Promise me this."

"I promise Master." Taking the parchment from Saul, tucked it securely inside his robe without reading it.

"I am thinking planning a trip to Spain after all this is over." Informed Saul recapturing the lost thought replanted by Michael.

"But Master? You said..."

"What does an old man know... This is but temporal..." Gesturing his hands to the blackened smoke-stained stone walls about him, "... The Light of Christ the Redeemer reached the darkest fractures of the Emperor's heart... I saw it in his eyes..." Saul lied, "... By the time

you return. I shall be a free man... Off you go now.” Saul shoos Timothy away like a small child with an errand to run.

Standing at the bottom of the stairs Timothy looked back as his Master animated by dancing shadows. His head drooped and weary. His fuzzy white beard and hunched shoulders accentuated by the flickering light.

Saul catches him watching him.

“Go! Before they see you...” He warned.

“I’ll be back.” Informed Timothy.

“I’ll be waiting...” He lied again, “...And not forget, wine for your stomach... Now go!”

Ordered Saul.

Eyes meet.

The unspoken reality of his Masters’ predicament comes over Timothy. Fighting back the tears he rushes up the stone stair well. Torches light the way. He stumbles on a step. Falls and grazes a knee. Rubbing off the pain, quickly re-gathers himself. Eyes peeled for guards and Centurions that may appear at any moment. Raucous voices echo from a mess hall. Calmly, he walks pass the opening hoping not to catch the guards attention.

But it was too late. He had already been spotted.

“Hey you! ...” A growling voice barks from within the shadows, “...Stop! Stay where you are!”

Without thinking he ran. He ran like the wind. His slight build making him quicker than the heavier armored pursuing Centurions. Giving him an initial advantage. Scampering down the stairs outside, weaved his way between the crowd of people heading to the harbor. And slowing him down. Loud livid voices call out for people to move aside. Or die. Swords and spears parting people quicker than Moses had parted the Red Sea.

The barking voices snapped at Timothy’s heels.

To one side he sees an opening in a tent and rushes inside. Discovering a store of large dolium jars. The air was sweet with smell of fresh grain. Dare he be caught with the letter on him and have it confiscated.

If only he could hide it somewhere. And return for it later.

He has an idea and removes the cork lid of a jar and shoves the letter inside. Replacing the lid just as a heavy callus hand grabs his shoulder and brutally wrenches him upward like a spindly rag doll.

Legs dangle in the air. A blade held to his throat.

“Search him.” A Centurion orders.

Hands tear at his robes. Stripping away all but his loin cloth.

“Nothing.” Informs the guard.

“Bring him!” Snaps the Centurion. Thick black monobrowed eyes look about the tent and the two dozen dolium jars. Nostril twitch and flare as the dust and smell begin to irritate him.

“Ah-Shoo!” He sneezes violently.

A vice like grip takes hold of Timothy by the wrist and wrenches him forward. Jolting him against his will. Looking back at the jars now being loading onto a trading boat. Seeing an African captain of the boat pay the trader from a purse bulging with gold coins. The jars, appearing alike, being raised precariously on a wooden pallet, swaying side to side. Ropes and pulleys lowering precious cargo upon the deck of the boat. The letter somewhere within one of them.

But which one?

Any thoughts of rescuing the letter now lost as he is drowned in the sea of people about him. The jars, the boat, sail from view. And with it, the letter.

Saul waited. Michael waited beside him. It was only a matter of time before they would come for him. He had waited his entire life. What were a few more hours. He imagined the day had passed outside and tried to recall the sunrise of that morning as though to rekindle, or love, the warmth he had felt.

Countering his hangover with more wine, and with it any sobriety of rational thought, Nero considered the old man's fate. How dare he tell Caesar to lay his crown at this man's God feet.

That *he*, Nero, would be *forgiven*.

"For what? ..." Chuckled Nero to himself, "... I am Caesar! ... Emperor of *all* Rome!!... I am GOD!!" Proclaimed Nero loudly. His voiced carried through the palace sending a chill down Centurions and servant's spines alike.

Jews he understood. They had been around for centuries. They were useful. Law abiding. Almost tolerable. But this new movement, *The Way*, was proving a nuisance. A pestilence that needed to be pulled out before it took root. Why could they not get along with their brethren the Jews? Were they not the same? There was no room for two factions. One had to go.

But the old man of Tarsus was Roman. And not so easy to feed to his lions.

Nero takes a heavy mouthful of sweet red wine. And turned to a Centurion standing nearby. His hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

With clenched fist, Nero coldly gestures a downturned thumb as though it were a dagger stabbing Saul's heart.

Torches flickered in the darkness. The day outside had passed unnoticed. Saul had emptied the wine skin and was feeling warm and content with the thought of Timothy and the letter on their way to Petrus.

Rowdy voices begin to descend the stair well. The foul damp smell and chill of the dungeon came rushing back to him. Silhouettes of three menacing looking Centurions fill the opening of the stairway. They examine the old man leaning against the wall.

The satchel and empty wine skin beside him.

"Where did you get those?" A Centurion asked.

"My son." Answered Saul.

"Hmm..." The Centurion growled looking about for the lad, "... You're coming with us."

"I know." Accepted Saul.

Heavy keys clatter and clang in the lock and hinges squeak as the cell door is opened. Two Centurions take Saul by the arms and heave him to his feet. Dragging him from the cell, up the eternal stair well. Sandals striking against steps as he struggled to keep pace with the guards.

And is dragged unceremoniously to a small court yard outside.

The day was still light. Saul had misjudged the time. Thinking it would be dark. The sun hung on the horizon as though to witness what was about to take place. A small crowd begins to gather. Watching on as Saul is chained to a small stone column. On his knees he looked about the faces. Some he knew. Some he did not. There was one that did not belong. Dressed differently. Looking out of place.

Saul fixates his eyes on the stranger in the crowd.

A Centurion reads out the Emperor's decree. That as a Roman Citizen, Saul of Tarsus was entitled to a swift death.

Saul never heard the words being spoken. Only the singing of Angels to the Glory of God. It was as though all of Heaven had opened up to welcome him. He never felt the sting of the blade on his neck. As the sword fell swiftly and found its mark. Severing his head from his body. Toppling it from his shoulders. Bouncing three times upon the stone floor.

And for a moment it shone brilliantly.

People fell to their knees in wonderment. Centurions stood back from the decapitated body. Their swords drawn lest the old man come back to life and attack them. But Saul's limp body lay slumped against the post.

Lifeless, and very much dead.

The soul that had once resided there, now departed...

Ginger Cake & Tea

Meanwhile, some two thousand years later...

Phil stared out of the bedroom window. To the quiet street below. A postman could be heard whistling an unrecognizable tune as the southerly summer breeze pushed him along Watford Terrace. The postman slowed down but did not stop. Then, as if performing a slight of hand of a magic trick only known to postmen, skillfully inserts two envelopes into the slot of the mailbox.

Then continued his way.

The warmth of the morning sun was like a presence in the room. Asking Phil to stay a while longer. A file laid open on his desk table. Photographs of ancient artifacts, relics for want of the correct terminology. Meaningless to Phil, priceless to collectors. An itinerary detailed his imminent journey. There would be no need for a duffle bag of cash. Everything would be provided by the Entity. Fingers fiddle with the ring on his finger. Twisting and turning it as though to remove it. He had grown use to it. Pulling it free, he felt the nakedness left by it. It had left a pale white ban on his finger. He examined it briefly. The thick heavy gold band. The blood red stone. The relief in gold of a crossed sword and cross.

What had begun as an innocent adventure across Europe had led him to this moment. The thought dissipated as quickly as it appeared in his mind. Drowned out by the rush of adrenaline. He grinned. Clenching his fist to bare white knuckles. Lungs fill to extremities at the anticipation of the fight. The trill of the chase.

About to place the ring in a black velvet black but decides at the last moment to slip it back onto his finger. As if it brought good luck. Or assurance his back would be covered by someone. Or something bigger than himself.

His laptop would stay behind this time. It would only be dead weight and he would be back within the week. Checking his watch. He still had time to catch Arthur before he had to leave. Shoving the file into an overnight bag, takes one last look at the room.

"I'll be back." Bidding the room lined with colourful rock posters farewell. Blank faces stare back at him.

The sunlight that had filled his room had now slipped out the window and gone behind a cloud. As though it could not watch him leave. He looked about the room. Had he forgotten something? A feeling of déjà vu came over him. As though someone was watching him.

Michael stood unseen in the corner of the room. His presence felt as though the sun were still radiating.

"Weird." Said Phil shaking the feeling off.

On spying the old duffle bag, he poked a finger through the bullet hole. How easy it could have been him. Something told him he should take it with him. Instinctively he shoves it into the overnight bag.

A tantalising aroma enters the room. Nostrils twitch and like a blood hound to seek out the source. And makes his way down the stairs to the kitchen to find his mother removing a tray of biscuits from the oven.

"You off love?" His mother asked seeing him standing there with bag in hand.

“Yeah. Thought I’d stop in and see Arthur first.”

“That’s lovely... Here take some of these for him.”

Tying off a bundle of biscuits to take with him. Phil picks one from the tray only to be rewarded with burnt fingers.

“Oh-ouch-ah_!” He protests.

Suffering a failed attempt, before finally managing to lift one. Blowing on it and fingers jumping up and down to keep hold of the scolding treat as though he was playing a flute.

“Why you need to go to Edinburg is beyond me.” His mother questioned confused.

“Work is work, Ma... You know.” Hoping to stall further questioning.

“If you say so... When are you coming back?”

“In a week... I think.”

“You think? Don’t you know?” His mother stared at him.

“Depends on the assignment.”

“If you say so. You young people today... In my_ day...” She began.

“I have to go... Love you.” Putting his arms about her for a hug.

“Love you too son. Give my regards to Auntie if you see her.”

“Will do. You be okay?” Phil asked.

“I have your father. We’ll be fine... Just come home in one piece.”

Looking at his mother peculiarly. He wondered how much his mother knew. Had the Cardinal been speaking to her.

“I’ll try. See you a week.” Giving his mother a kiss on the cheek, taking the bundled biscuits with him.

Closing the front door behind him. He heard the lock catch. And suddenly realized how vulnerable he was. Perhaps the smell of home cooked cookies had softened him. Still standing on the front step and already feeling homesick.

Michael blew the thought of Arthur into his mind, as if it were his own.

Reminding him he should be moving. Looking up and down the Terrace, the postman had long since departed on his whistling way to perform magic tricks before other mailboxes. Checking the two envelopes in the mailbox. Both bills, and neither addressed to him. And returned them to the box.

And continued his way.

Striding confidently as if eager to get underway, steps lengthened. There was an aroma in the air. The gas works never smelt so sweet. Neighbours looked up from front yards to see a young man carrying a bag over his shoulder whistling a tune to himself.

Neither of which they recognized.

And before he knew it, he had arrived at Arthur’s home.

Standing outside the brick terraced building, he looked up to Arthur’s windows like a small boy wanting him to come out and play. Lace curtains fluttered in the open windows.

He was home.

‘Knock-knock-knock.’ Knocked Phil, standing back to wait.

Voices are heard coming from within. First Auntie’s. Then Arthur’s. Then the door latch sounds, and the front door opened to reveal Arthur looking bewildered and surprised.

“Phil!” Remarked Arthur, stating the obvious.

“Arthur!” Responds Phil, stating the obvious.

“Come in, come in... You off somewhere?” Spying the overnight bag.

“*Edinburgh*... If you know what I mean.”

“Eh? ...” Then the penny dropped, “... Oh, *Edinburgh*. Right then... So soon?”

“The *Cardinal* calls.” Informed Phil.

“What’s that about a *Cardinal*?” Asked Auntie appearing from nowhere.

“Oh, um... The *Cardinal*... Yes well, um...” Phil stammered desperately raking his brain for an explanation. Arthur’s Aunt was one assailant he had not trained for.

Then was rescued by Arthur.

“Phil’s heading to *Edinburgh*... To research a Medieval *Cardinal*... It is for a paper he’s writing... Aren’t you, Phil? What did you say his name was again?” Responded Arthur grinning at Phil.

“Ah yes, that’s right... *Cassini* I believe, *Cardinal Cassini*.”

“That’s right. How is that going? ...That *paper*?” Probed Arthur, grinning from ear to ear.

“Coming along... Just thought I’d stop by before I headed off.”

“Oh_ that’s lovely, why don’t you come in a for a cup of tea and some ginger cake for you go... I’ll just go put the kettle on.” Suggested Auntie wandering back into the kitchen.

“I guess I’m staying for a cuppa tea... Why does that feel so familiar?” Said Phil.

“Only if you have time mate, wouldn’t want to hold you up.” Asked Arthur.

“All good, still have time up my sleeve. Wouldn’t take off with seeing you first.”

“Come inside... Excuse the mess, Zara’s been busy organizing the wedding. You won’t believe what’s involved... You’d think the wedding was tomorrow, rather than three months away.”

“You’re a sucker for punishment Arthur... You won’t catch me getting tied down. No... Not me. Never... No woman will ever get their hooks into me.” Declares Phil proudly.

Michael grinned as He listened to him. Suddenly there was a bright flash of light in the kitchen that faded as quickly as it had appeared.

“What was that?” Asked Auntie, looking about.

“Dunno... Must be a faulty bulb...” Looking up to the ceiling to see a dead bulb, “... I’ll change that later Auntie.” Responded Arthur, “... There’s some bulbs in the attic.”

“That’s lovely Arthur... Here, sit down and make yourself comfortable, I’ll just go fetch the ginger cake.” Auntie places to porcelain cups before them and reaches for a tin can from a cupboard.

“I can do that Auntie.” Offers Arthur.

“Sit. Sit... Ah, there it is.” Reaching for a large colourfully decorated tin.

Lifting the lid to reveal a half-eaten cake. Cutting two thick slices places them onto plates.

“Thank-you Auntie... My mother said to give her regards... Oh, and to give you these, I’d almost forgot.” Handing her the bundle of still warm biscuits.

“Oh, thank you Phil... How is your mother?” Auntie enquired.

“Busy in the garden, you know... *Weeding this, weeding that.*” Which was the extent of Phil’s knowledge on gardens.

“Oh, that’s lovely... Here you go love.” Auntie places a slice of ginger cake on a plate.

“Thank you, Auntie.” Fingers reach for the slice and he takes a bite.

Just then as if by chance, the phone rings.

“I can get that Auntie.” Offers Arthur again.

“Sit. Sit...” She commands Arthur to stay like trained dog.

Eyes track Auntie and wait for her to leave the room. Hearing her muffled voice on the phone from the hallway.

“So, where you heading to? ... Turkey?” Asked Arthur curiously.

“Can’t say much, you know, *hush-hush* and all that... But since you asked... *Naples*.” Informed Phil as though it were a state secret.

“*Naples*?” Responds Arthur half disappointed.

“Yeah, well... I have to start somewhere, I guess... Your dad is coming.” Then wondered if he had said too much.

“Wouldn’t surprise me... Keep an eye on him will you.”

“I think it will be the other way round I’m figuring... Your dad can handle himself well enough.”

“What’s the ah_ relic this time? Can I ask?”

“Don’t really know... Apparently there is this collector... Marconi... We had a run in with him at the Cathedral...” Said Phil, his mind drifting back to the fire-fight that had ensued. Only to be rescued by the Swiss Guards at the final moment, “... He’s holding several items he shouldn’t be, and the Cardinal would like them back... If you know what I mean.”

“You know the Cardinal... How long you reckon you’d be away then?”

“A week tops I am guessing... Get in, get out... How’s the planning going?” Phil diverted the questioning.

“Don’t ask... You won’t believe what is involved... The guest list... The flowers... The bridesmaids’ dresses... The seating arrangements... And don’t start me on the cake! ... *The cake*...” Said Arthur as though the cake was possessed, “... Just get back here and be my best man. I need you to ride shotgun on this one.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world mate... Have I got a stag night planned you! ...” Warns Phil biting down onto the ginger cake, “... Umm, nice cake.”

“You okay for money? ...” Asked Arthur, then added, “... A gun?”

“Got plenty of guns mate, more than I can handle...” Boosted Phil, “... I’m guessing the Cardinal has the money side sorted.”

“Here, take this...” Arthur pushes a roll of Euros towards Phil, “... For *emergencies*, okay.”

Phil stares at the bulky roll of notes. A little extra cash would not go astray. His hand reaches for the roll and quickly pockets it from sight.

“For emergencies mate... I’ll pay you back.” Offers Phil.

“No, you won’t... It’s a gift, okay? You don’t repay gifts... Just get your ass back here in one piece for the wedding, okay? ... And bring back the old man... I kind a need him here as well.”

“Thanks man. Who’s paying for the wedding?” Asked Phil curiously.

“Seems dad has more of *that*, stashed away in other *boxes*... If you know what I mean.” Arthur’s eyes look up to the attic.

“Oh, I see.” Phil grins subtly nodding his head.

“I’d like to go with you, but I have my own dangerous assignment here to contend with.” Remarked Arthur just as Auntie walked back into the room.

“Dangerous assignment?” Asked Auntie inquisitively looking befuddled at the two young men.

“Getting married Auntie.” Clarified Arthur.

“Oh, it’s the important day of a woman’s life, don’t you forget that Arthur... I remember when your mother and father got married...” Auntie was about to begin to reminisce and go on and on and on and on and on and on, when Phil interjected.

“Oh_ look at the time... I’m running late.” He lied, shoving the last bite of ginger cake into his mouth, about to stand and leave.

“Oh, must you Phil? ...” Lied Arthur, “... Have another piece of cake before you go.” Handing him a freshly cut slice.

“Don’t mind if I do thank you Arthur.”

“Let me show you out.”

“Thank you, Auntie, for the tea and cake.”

“I’ll call your mother and thank for the biscuits... Have a safe trip to Edinburgh.” Called out Auntie tottering behind them.

“Will do Auntie.”

Arthur squirrelled Phil to the front door.

“This is it then?” Remarked Arthur.

“Yeah, I suppose... Don’t worry mate, I’ll be back... I can look after myself.”

“I know you can mate, just... Just watch your back, okay?”

“You too.” Phil offers his hand to be shaken, only to have Arthur pull him in for a hug.

“Get a room!” A voice calls out from the gate.

“Zara... Didn’t see you there.” Said Arthur grinning, “... Was just telling Phill all about the wedding... He’s off to Edinburgh for a couple of weeks.”

“Oh, what’s up there then? A *wee lassie* I suppose?” Mimicking a Scottish accent.

“Research for a paper I’m writing... *Apparently*...” Answered Phil, “... As for a wee lassie, that will be the day. No woman will ever tie me down... Never going to happen. It would take a blue moon to convert this bachelor.” Dismissed Phil fervently.

“Careful what you wish for Phillip.” Warned Zara.

“I’ll leave you two love birds to get on with your *dangerous assignment*, while I get on with *mine*.” Patting Arthur on the back.

Arthur watches Phil as he walked away. His mind begging him, ‘*Take me with you. Don’t leave me here.*’

But it was already too late.

Phil had waved down a passing taxi and was heading down the road from sight. Leaving Arthur alone on the doorstep with his betrothed.

“Hey.” He whispers and kisses her.

Only to be kissed back.

“What did he mean about *dangerous assignment*?” Asked Zara probingly.

“You know how Phil feels about weddings... So, how’d you get on with the cake?” Deflected Arthur.

“The cake, *the cake!* ...” Exclaimed Zara, as though it were possessed...

City of 333 Saints

'Tap-tap-tap.' Young bare knuckles knock quietly on a partly open door. Pushing it open with each successive knock.

The student thought he could hear noises coming from within. And peered his head inside to see if the Professor was about. Heavy curtains shrouded the room in darkness as the light. Cloaking the dozing Professor with a dark blanket. The cold morning air still lingered in the room. An intermittent noise sounded. Like a pig snorting for truffles. Then stopped. The sound seemed to be coming from beneath a Persian blanket covering someone laying on a large couch.

The Professor lay sleeping. And snoring. His foot twitching as though he were having dog dreams.

"Ah-ha. Um." The young man coughed quietly so as not to frighten him.

'Tap-tap-tap.' He taps a little harder as though the door was a wooden alarm clock.

Stirring, the Professor grunts like a pig, as if snorting for a truffle. Annoyed to have been pulled from a warm dream. Eyes lids flicker open. Adjusting to the dim light. And orientates himself to the room. His office. An empty coffee mug that lay toppled on the floor.

The student stands silhouetted in the doorway. He was sure he had no classes this day. But begins to doubt himself. And questions what day it was.

"Hmm_. What do you want boy?" The man sits upright looking to the clock on the wall.

"Sorry to waken you Professor." The student apologizes.

"You didn't waken me... I was ah... Thinking."

"Of course, Professor... Sorry Professor."

"What is it then? Speak up!" The Professor growls standing upright, feeling stiffness in his aging joints. Walking over to his desk and collapses into his chair. The curtains remained closed. The insufferable sunlight could stay outside a little while longer.

"They're found something... Professor Arinze thought you should come see." The student informed quietly, as though the walls had ears.

"Found what? Who did?" His curiosity aroused.

"In the library of the Great Hall... A parchment... In Geek."

"What parchment? ..." The Professor parroted, "... So what of it?"

"Professor Arinze thought you should come see for yourself."

"Did he now? Hmm..." Frustrated to have been woken, "... Tell him I'll be along in a moment..." He instructs the lad, "... I need to tidy up here first. Off you go now."

"Yes Professor. I shall tell him."

He waits for the lad to leave and close the door behind him. Leaving him alone in the partly lit room. Sunlight had found a gap in the curtains and was beginning to occupy every darkened corner it could find. Dust particles danced in the air. Stirred up by an overhead fan wobbling slowly on its axel. Fighting the need to open the curtains he opened the bottom drawer and pulled out another coffee mug and bottle whiskey. Splashing several swallows that would serve as breakfast. A small token for having been awoken at the ungodly hour of the morning.

Vapors play beneath his nose. Inhaling deeply, takes a swallow of the elixir and feels it to burn to his stomach. His thoughts turn to the mysterious page that had surfaced. The Geeks had never stepped foot into Timbuktu, let alone Mali.

Whatever it was, it was a long way home.

The Professor takes the final swallow, tasting better than the first and re-files the bottle to the bottom drawer. He stood for the second time that morning. And threw open the curtains. Then wished he had not. The brilliant sunlight blinding him. Though not entirely repentant, he uttered a silent prayer to an unseen God. As he did most mornings.

No curtain, nor bottom drawer, would hide the Truth from Him.

The Professor walked unhurried along the stone paved cloister, that took him to the Great Library. A library that had survived the centuries of raiders, looters, and wars. It held had some of the country's oldest manuscripts. Every subject and discipline considered to be important, had been written about, and been held there. Astrology, biology, chemistry, ethics, geography, history, jurisprudence, law, medicine. It was taught that be a Saint, one must have a respect for learning. And be a scholar, was to be on the path to Sainthood.

In man's unrelenting thirst for gold and treasure. Plundered by Sultans and invading European imperialists seeking wisdom and knowledge. And burned by those who wished to banish pagan ways. For millennia, the blood of conquerors, the sweat of slaves, and the tears of widows, had washed back and forth across the Sahara.

Giant dunes stood like unmarked tomb stones in a cemetery of sand.

The University, with its beige-colored walls, prickled with posts. Making it look more like balding hedgehog than an ancient University. Once holding over seven hundred thousand manuscripts. The collection now numbered a few thousand. Parchments of fine animal skins and papyrus paper.

Preserved in time. Protected by the dry ocean breeze of the Sahara.

Professor Levi did not feel like a Saint. He felt weary. His head beginning to find clarity. The hair of the dog was having effect. Shuffling at his own pace. Unhurried by the suggested urgency. Relishing the shade. He kept close to the wall as though in fear of the sun.

Stopping to look at the quadrangle that the cloister surrounded. A vibrant pool of cropped green grass. Contrasting the shifting ocean of sepia yellow sand beyond the University's walls. Color to an otherwise bland day and the pale clay walls.

Students kicked a football about. Scrambling after it. Darting one way, then the other.

Imagining a day when he once was like them.

'The energy of youth.' He thought to himself. The rainbow elasticity had morphed over the years become a blob of plasticine. With all the colors smudged together.

Much as he was feeling.

Arriving to a doorway he peers inside.

Only to find the library void of Arinze. Students sat sporadically about a table. Books and scrolls open before them. They look up to see the old Professor standing in the doorway, appearing lost. Or perhaps he was looking for someone.

Hopefully not for them.

"Professor Arinze?" Levi questions the intellectually vacant faces.

"His office Professor... You've just missed him." A brave student replies.

"Hmm." Grumbles Levi as though to thank him.

Continuing along the cloister. Leather soles scuffed pavement stones. Following in the path of those before him. Rounding a bend, comes to a benign sun-stained wooden door. Much like his own. The only distinguishing feature, a small brass plaque engraved with...

Professor Arinze
Department of Classics and Ancient History

Feeling like a summoned schoolboy, he stood nervously facing the wood paneled door. Large iron hinges holding it firmly in place. And closed.

'Tap-tap-tap.' Levi knocked gently and waited.

"Come in." Barked a voice, as though beckoning a student inside.

"You wanted to see me?" Levi asked, filling the doorway.

"Ah Jacob, yes. Yes. Please come in have a seat... I just been going over this..." Arinze holds up a piece of cloth, "... I can't seem to make hide nor hair of it..." Handing it to Levi, "... You're the Greek wizard around here... I wondered if you knew what it was all about... I don't know how it came to be within a manuscript totally unrelated to it."

Levi placed the flimsy sheet of parchment on his lap as he wrestled to retrieve a set of reading glasses from an inside jacket pocket. Pinching these on his bulbous nose. Eyes squinted to focus as his mind squinted to decipher ancient Greek words that had been scrawled as though in a hurray across the page. As if by a miracle, time had not faded the ink, and the words remained exact as the day they were written. Making out obvious key words, Levi pieced together a message of sort.

It was a letter of some kind.

But from who? To whom?

Arinze places a mug beside the Levi. Instinctively Levi offers thanks and takes a swallow. His mind focused on the words. Like a jig-saw puzzle he pieced it together. Two names strike him squarely between the eyes as though being hit by a sledgehammer. There was no mistaking them. And he takes a larger swallow, hoping he had been mistaken.

"Who found this?" Levi gasped, examining the parchment closer.

His hands beginning to tremble. The artifact in his hands no longer a mere piece of cloth.

"One of the students... He said it fell out when he opened a manuscript... Why? You look worried." Arinze asked anxiously, seeing the grave look on his face.

"Who else knows about this?" He probed further.

"Just you, me and the lad that found it? ... Omar..." Eyes look to the student standing quietly back.

"Hmm..." That was already one too many for Levi's liking. Taking the final swallow. Looking to Arinze for another, "... If it is what I think it is... (*sigh*)... We may have to call our good friend in Hungary, Professor Almesh... He'll know what to do."

"Almesh? Do what?" Asked Arinze inquisitively handing Levi a refill.

"This." Gestures Levi, holding up the parchment as though it were a winning lotto ticket.

"What is it?" Arinze asked returning to his chair.

A fan rotated above as though looking over his shoulder as Levi mulled over a reply. Unsure how much to disclose. If he could not trust Arinze, who could he trust? He looks about the office, then to the closed door, as though someone could be ease dropping on their conversation. Like a chameleon, Omar had become part of the room, the furniture, the walls. Thinking he

heard footsteps. Levy waits for the moving shadows beneath the door to pass. Silence again. Levi lowered his guard.

Leaning forward, he speaks quietly.

“If this is what I think it is... And I’m almost certain it is... Then it is of the upmost importance this finds its way back to Rome... To the Vatican.”

“The Vatican?... I don’t understand.”

“This...” Holding the parchment more delicately now, “... This, appears to be letter from Saul to Petrus. It speaks of his imminent death... Of Nero... And Gentiles... It may well be his final letter...” Levi contemplates its significance. Its value.

Materially. Theologically. It was priceless.

“Saul, Petrus? You talk in riddles my friend.” Said Arinze confused, his faith void of these names.

“Saint Paul. Saint Peter. Christian faith reveres them more than the Americans their Founding Fathers.” Responded Levi.

“Oh. I see... Christianity was never one of my strong subjects. Forgive me Professor Levi. I am but a humble Muslim... *Al-Hamdi-Lil-lah.*”

“You’re forgiven Professor... *Al-Hamdi-Lil-lah.*” Levi responds gesturing the sign of the cross with his hand, “... You mind if I keep hold of this. For safe keeping.”

“Better you than me, my friend... Talk to Almesh. This is all beyond me I’m afraid.” Forfeits Arinze.

“Very well... Watch your back. If word gets out about this, I fear a hornet’s nest will descend upon us... There are people who would shed blood to acquire this... And not necessarily their own. If you know what I mean.” Warns Levi, gently folding the parchment. Before pocketing it gently to his jacket pocket.

Then sees Omar standing there. Had he said to much?

“Omar... That is all.” Instructs Arinze unsure how much he had heard. Let alone understood.

“Thank you, Professor.” Omar bows to the Professor.

“And Omar!” Arinze catches him.

“Yes Professor.”

“Not a word of this... Understood?” Arinze instructs him.

“I hear nothing. I see nothing. I say nothing.” Omar lies.

“Good boy... Off you go now. Don’t be late for class next time.”

“Yes Professor. Thank you, Professor... *Al-Hamdi-Lil-lah.*” Omar bows subserviently to the Professor.

“*Al-Hamdi-Lil-lah.*” Parrots Arinze back and waits for the lad to leave and close the door behind him.

A heavy shadow lingers at the base of the door. Unusually longer than it should have. Before slipping away.

“Watch him for now. He has already heard too much. As for you... Tell no-one my friend... Not a living soul. Understood?” Levi warned.

Taking swallows from their mugs to calm their growing anxieties.

“Can’t we just give it to the local Catholic Church here?” Inquired Arinze, wishing to distance himself from the imminent danger.

“We could, but let us wait for what Almesh has to say... He has, more reliable resources to handle such matters shall we say.”

“As you wish.” Swallowing the last of his whiskey.

“I’ll be off... I have a call to make... Thanks...” Gesturing the mug, “...*Al-Hamdi-Lil-lah.*”

“*Al-Hamdi-Lil-lah.*” Arinze watches Levi leave.

Closing the heavy wooden door behind him. Shutting Arinze inside. Alone. The fan rotated slowly above. What had he gotten himself into? He reaches for the bottom drawer for enlightenment.

Levi shuffles back to his office.

The soles of his leather shoes scuffing the weathered stones. Stopping briefly to look about the green quadrangle. The lads that had been kicking a football, no longer about. Perhaps they had class. Not his class. And he quickly dismisses their absence.

The parchment safe within his jacket, neither here nor there in his mind. Looking much like an old Professor on a morning stroll about the cloistered quadrangle. Appearing to be in no particular hurry, to anyone watching.

But eyes were watching him. Young keen eyes. Opportunist eyes. Eyes that would report to the highest bidder.

And find favor with his uncle...

George of Inverness

The stillness about the Drawing Room that gave the impression that time stretched a thousand years. Darkness filled the pitched ceiling supported by dark thick oak beams that had witness treacherous events beneath its rafters. Shafts of sunlight filtered through the tall arched windows. Sending spotlight-like angelic rays into the darkened interior, as though they were searching for the sole inhabitant.

George Munro sat patiently surrounded by hollow statues of polished armor. Their souls long since departed to another realm. On a dark wooden desk sat a phone. He stared at the phone. Willing it to ring. But it defied him. In one hand he cradled a brandy glass. Swirling it gently. Warming the Le Cuvier Brandy Napoleon against the fine glass sides. Inhaling its sweet pungent fragrances, hoping it would subdue his anxiety.

About the walls stood glass cabinets of artefacts. Displaying trinkets of treasures from far-away lands. And a long-forgotten time. A man of wealth need not concern himself with, details. Possession was the primary purpose these days. And of course, prestige. What was the point of owning something if one could not rub it in the noses of one's brethren? A fraternity of shall we say, like minded men, who dabbled in the forbidden. Marconi, Braun, and others. Each with their own grand manors.

Or in Munro's case, Inverness Castle.

Nestled high upon the bank of the fast-flowing River Ness. It had been the site of too many sieges over the past millennia. Blood had been spilled. And allegiances sworn. Some for good. Some for bad. But time, as it always had and always would, outlive man. Shrouding the past with dust. To be buried and forgotten.

As though it never existed. If it had existed at all.

With an eye for grandeur, Munro acquired the archaic castle with its blood-stained floors and treacherous history. And restored it to its former royal splendor. As the richest man in Scotland, the industrialist saw himself as king.

And a King should have a castle.

A gust of cold air rushed past him and up the chimney. Stirring particles of dust to dance in the air. Munro watches the waltz and sips on the brandy glass. As the sun warmed his skin, the brandy warmed his belly.

Eyes shift to the ebony phone. Silent. It was being as stubborn as he was.

Checking a gold pocket watch, opens the engraved covering.

Three minutes past.

'What was keeping the man?' He wondered.

Eyes shift to the bookshelves consuming the walls to either side of him. As if they were in cahoots with the phone. Thoughts shift to Cassini. Munro could almost feel the man's presence in the room. As though he were a ghost. How he had fouled Marconi in Naples, and hobbled Braun in Munich, was extraordinary. Munro grins at the folly of his brethren.

Treasure snatched from their grasps.

"Amateurs." He scoffed.

But what did the Cardinal know of the latest find? He had heard incomplete rumors himself. A word here. A whisper there. How much was true? Perhaps he had over assumed the relic's

existence. Perhaps it was all a hoax to fleece him of money. Paranoid thoughts begin to surface in his mind. And he begins to doubt what he had heard. Or not heard.

Michael sits in a chair opposite unseen listening. Coaxing him along.

'Ring-ring! Ring-ring!' The phone suddenly sounds like a loud alarm clock. The large room amplifying the sound further.

Startling him.

The defiant phone had decided to come to life. To sing. He stared at the face of the phone, unsure if to answer it.

Was it friend, or foe?

'Ring-ring! Ring-ring!' It sounded again as though to remind him of its own impatience.

Munro blinked first. Curiosity had gotten the better of him. Greed had won over doubt.

'Ring-ring! Ring-ring! Ring-ring! Ring-ring!' He let it ring, as if to give the caller the impression he was in no hurry.

Lifting the stocky handset and speaks in a quiet voice.

"Hello." He answered. Feeling no need to state his name. It was his phone.

He listened intently as a frantic rushed voice gave details of a relic. Taking in the relevant facts of its location.

"I see... Are you absolutely sure?" He asked apprehensively.

The frantic voice falls silent, as if looking about as to who might be listening. Static and interference crackle in and out over the line. The call was long distance. The line primitive at best. The voice continues.

"Um, I see..." Munro confirms he had heard the informant correctly, "... And you're sure no-one else knows about this? ..." The line fades in and out as if the connection was about to be lost, "... Are you still there? Hello?" Munro pleads to the Arabic sounding man, some four thousand miles away.

Hearing a series of clicks as if the line was being wire tapped. Too much had already been said to kill the call. Eyes shift about the room sensing someone with there. Michael watched on indifferent. The whiffing sweet fragrance of the brandy, titillating his spiritual senses. Inhaling what he could, he focused back on Munro.

The Arabic voice continued. Stammering pigeon-English that held Munro on the line.

"I see... Don't do anything until I get there... Understood?!" Munro challenges down the mouthpiece. And waits for conformation, "... Very good, very good... You will be well rewarded my friend. Now, if that is all... I will be in contact."

Munro replaces the heavy black handset generally, as if he were laying a baby in a cradle. Dismissing the mischievous clicks as no more than long distance interference. Childing himself for being paranoid. So it was true. A Letter did exist.

Swirling the bulbous glass about with his hand, watches the layers of the golden liquor bleeds down the sides within. His nose deeply inhaling the ethereal vapors before they dissipated completely. His mind captivated by the tantalizing daydream of possessing the relic. As if it would complete him. Perhaps redeem him of his sins, of which he had a few.

Michael inhales deeply and contemplates his fate. Munro was of course only human.

The daydream fades abruptly as large doors open without warning and an attractive young woman entered unannounced. His daughter. Every King must have a Princess. With the energy of youth radiating from her. She was a ray of sunshine in his otherwise grey life. Ever protective

of his daughter blossoming into womanhood. His men keeping a watchful eye from a distance, lest an unsavory suitor came knocking and required persuasion to look elsewhere.

“Ella! My favorite daughter.” Munro welcomes her.

“I’m you’re only daughter... Aren’t I?” She inquired.

“Of course, you are. Of course, you are... But you’re still my favorite.” Munro grins, then notices something unusual, “... What have you done with your hair?”

The color seemed to change on a weekly basis, as the mood took her. And he wondered if it was the same daughter. He examines her smile and eyes.

It was her alright.

“Auburn... Do you like it?” She asked flicking her hair side to side.

The questions goes unanswered.

“What was it last week?” He asked befuddled.

“Blonde... I think.”

“Oh.” He struggled to recall.

Conceding his daughter was an ever-changing traffic light. Yet ever hopeful she would settle down one day. But those days seemed distant.

He sighs heavy and angel falls to the floor.

“Get up.” Michael orders the soulful creature fooling around.

“You have to get out of this stuffy castle Daddy... Away from all this... This... Stuff. Whatever they are.” She could never understand her father’s obsession with ancient relics.

“This *stuff*, as you so elegantly put it, are priceless might I need to remind you.”

“They look *old* if you ask me...” Then recalls the purpose of her visit, “... Come with me to the pub. It will do you good. We could play some pool... I might let you win a game.” She enticed her father.

“Hmm. You fancy your chances, do you?”

“Bring it on old man.” She grins.

Checking the pocket watch. The face springs open. He had time. A game of pool with his daughter. And another Napoleon for lunch, before a meeting with bankers and accountants that afternoon.

“Perfect.” Munro swirls the golden brandy in the glass and swallow the remains.

Sun light beamed through the tall arched windows, onto the breast plates of the lifeless armored warriors. With long swords and reaching halberds gripped by chain mail metals gloves. Their presence now unnoticed by Munro. As were the countless artefacts and books that lined the walls. Their appeal lustered by time.

The call had roused his appetite again. To possess what no one could.

The sky was blue. The grass was green. The air was still. The day was tranquil on the stroll down from the castle. Crushed oyster shells sound beneath their feet. With arms entwined, as though on an afternoon stroll, Ella kept pace with her father. He was all she had left of a family.

Inhaling deeply, Munro had found a spring in his step. Perhaps the discovered relic had invigorated him. Or perhaps he had the love of his life on his arm. Michael grinned and brilliant light catches Munro’s eye. Looking about for the source, sees a passing lorry puffing black diesel fumes. It windows reflecting the sun.

“Hmm.” Reconciled Munro and feeling the warm sun on his back.

“Are you okay?” Ellie asked wondering what had startled her father.

“I’m fine. Fine.” Munro dismisses the anomaly and pulls his daughter’s arm closer.

On the bridge they watched the swift eerie dark waters of the River Ness spew into the Firths of Beaully and Moray to become one with the North Sea. Unseen to the south, the formidable Loch Ness.

A lone fly fisherman stands fast. Like a stick in the mud. Flicking a thin rod back and forth. The line translucent and shimmering in the midday sun. Captivated, Munro stood transfixed by the hypnotic motion. As if time had stood still. Until Ella pulled on his arm to get moving.

The second hand of his pocket watch began to move again.

The pub awaited them on the corner. Like a Welshman's axe, it had been rebuilt over the centuries. Patronized by locals and the growing influx of foreign tourists. Ever hopeful of capturing a selfie with the mythical creature named Nessie that hid in the depths of the Loch.

Ella pushes the door open, and the sound of pool balls clattering rushes out. The smell of dark beer filled the air familiarity. Munro enters soon after his daughter and eyes the bar maid, gesturing he would have a *wee dram* on his tab.

"Well, well, if it isn't the Patron Saint of Glenlabryn." Greets a regular that had attached himself to the bar.

"Stewart." Cautions Munro.

"Mister Munro, what brings you down from the Highlands?" A stocky workman dressed in a tweed jacket and cap enquired. Gesturing that Munro should sit with him.

Munro was dressed in a business suit. They may have been chalk and cheese. But they were cut from the same cloth.

"Thank you, my good friend... Don't mind if I do. My daughter suggested I needed a break from the office." Munro replies, taking a wooden chair.

"She's a fine lass your daughter, if you don't mind me saying Mister Munro."

"Aye_ she is Alec, aye_ she is." Watching his daughter gather pool balls within the triangle rack.

His drink arrives, a dark nip of single malt Scottish whiskey. Earthy aromas whiff from the crystal glass. His eyes shift to the young men also eyeing his daughter, and then to his two men quietly sitting watching on. Supping on Caledonian beers. Looking like weary tourists.

Looking like everyone else.

Ella appears before her father, holding out the cue stick, suggesting he should make the break.

"Ladies first." He replied.

Ella slams the cue ball into the racked balls, creating a loud crack and sending balls flying in all directions. Ricocheting off cushions and other balls. Then one fell in a hole. Maybe by chance. Maybe by luck. Not by skill.

"Ha!" She calls out excitedly and purposefully drawing the attention of a feral young man at the bar.

Eyes meet, and unspoken affections are revealed. Ella liked her men on the wild side. Having been locked up in a Private School for young ladies, she was hungry to make up for lost time. The attraction does not go unnoticed by Munro's men.

Munro grins for her momentary joy of sinking a ball, then turned to Alec.

"Actually, I'm glad you're here Alec... You're just the man I wanted to see." Leaning forward as though he had a proposition.

“Is that right Mister Munro... Always happy to be of service. If you know what I mean...” Remarks Alec leaning closer himself, “...What you digging up now then? More old bones? (*Chuckles*)”

“No, no. Those days are long over for me... No... I’ve moved onto something more... *Exotic*, shall we say.” Speaking cryptically.

Lining up a straight poke, Ella slams a ball quickly into the pocket.

“Ha!” Another excited hallelujah cries out.

“Leave one for me.” Jested Munro appearing interested in the game.

“What can I do for you Mister Munro?” Alec asked quietly.

“I need some men I can trust... Got a job down *south*... Far south. Might get a bit warm, shall we say.”

“Of course, Mister Munro, how many you think you’d be needing?”

“A driver and couple of others... Could be trouble... If you know what I mean...” Warned Munro looking about faces that could be watching them, “... Can they handle themselves?”

“Of course, Mister Munro... Nay_ no one gets past Clan Frazer.”

“Aye, that’s good. I will be in touch.”

“Aye Mister Munro. Don’t you worry about that. You know where to find me.”

“Knew I could count on you Alec.” Thrusting out his hand to shake on it.

Feeling the callus grip of Alec’s palm. A man’s handshake was his bond in the Highlands of Scotland.

“Oh_ ah_!” A pitiful sigh cries out from the table.

Ella had missed the last shot.

“Looks like I’m being summoned...” Lifting his glass to Alec and takes a swallow, “... What am I on?” Munro asked inquisitively counting the balls left on the table...

Cardinal Cassini

Somewhere in the Vatican. In a large lavishness office. An office void of sound and movement other than the fluttering lace curtains in the morning breeze. Causing shadows of spiraling angels to dance over the checked marled floor. Cassini sat behind an ancient wooden desk. As his predecessors had. Deep in thought. Staring as at the phone. As if he too were willing it to ring. He too was expecting a call.

The power of prayer had failed him. But he too was a patient man.

Dressed in a cream robe. A scarlet fascia about his waist. A sign Cardinals should be ready to shed blood for the Church and Christ. He turns his head to the window. Sensing he was being watched.

Of course, he was being watched.

There was no hiding from God. What sin the Cardinal had committed were in the name of the Church. For the good of the Church. The Entity was there to serve and protect. He feels the weight of the ring on his finger.

A blood red stone. A relief of crossed sword and cross.

Before him, an open file on his desk. Glossy black and white photographs show a small chapel. Elaborately decorated with ancient artefacts. Greek styled terraces adorned with marble busts of heads long since severed. Hypnos. Tiberius. And the most fearful looking, Medusa. He had faced down darker beasts than her.

Unfurling a large old scroll. It revealed the design plan of the Chapel. Deceptively larger on the inside than it appeared on the outside. He was not interested in the two surface levels. Nor the sunken cellar with its fine red wines. The Vatican lacked for nothing.

Except, for what belonged to them.

Carefully he rolled out the scroll across his desk. Placing weighted items on the four corners. These were no ordinally plans. These dated back several hundred years. In a time when Naples was held by the Spanish who burrowed beneath the Chapel a series of secret chambers and passageways. To hide their looted Peruvian treasure. Folk stories were told around fires of such a place. The legend became a myth. Only to become rumors, and hearsay. Until finally fading and being forgotten. As if they never existed.

If they ever existed at all.

The plan said otherwise. How he acquired it was irrelevant. The Vatican Vault held treasures of its own. He runs a finger along a series of passages. Identifying a chamber, that he suspected held the relics in mind. A fingertip taps the spot. As to mark it. It had to be there.

Spying another passageway, follows it until it came to an end.

“Hmm.” The Cardinal speculates aloud.

Eyes focus on the spot. Grey brows pinch together. A thin elongated caterpillar forms and wiggles up and down. This could be what he was looking for. And he wondered how much Marconi knew about it. Challenged by the thought, his mind played out ways to get in, and ways to get out without being seen. Let alone captured. Vatican credentials would not protect him from Marconi and his henchmen. Marconi still had a score to settle after their last encounter.

Suddenly the phone rings. Distracting his thoughts from the plans and Marconi.

‘Ring-ring. Ring-ring.’

Echoing off polished marble floor. Filling void if the room with its incessant ringing.
And Breaking the Cardinal's thoughts.

'Ring-ring. Ring-ring.'

He eyes the phone with suspicion.

'Ring-ring. Ring-ring.' Ringing again, pleading to be answered.

Lifting the handset from its cradle, silences the expected intrusion. Filling the room again with a deafening silence.

"Hello." He spoke softly.

Listening carefully for subtle crackles on the line. With the sudden unfortunate death of Cardinal Dovizi, God rest his soul, he felt confident the line was safe. And recognizes the familiar voice on the other end.

"Alistair... How are you? ..." Cassini asked, "... Good, good. Where are you? ..." He listens intently, "...And Phil? ... Good, good... Very good then."

The Cardinal looks up to hear a tap at the door and watches it slowly open.

"Come in, come in Father..." Gesturing with his hand, "... Close the door behind you... I have Alistair on the line."

"Oh... Give him my regards your Eminence." Responds Francis, drabbed in black. Holding an in-tray of documents for signing.

"That was Father Francis saying hello... Yes, yes. He seems to have settled into Vatican life. Haven't you father?" The Cardinal grins at Francis beginning to unburden himself.

"Yes, of course." Unsure how to answer without sin.

His Parish in the small southern Italian town of Amantea, now a distant memory. Looking out the windows. He could almost hear the old parish bell rang. And begins to lament his decision. Not as though he had had a choice. The Pope himself had requested he stay after hearing of the miracle of his survival.

"Just looking at plans as we speak... When do you think you will arrive?... Tomorrow? Good, good. We can discuss the assignment then... God speed... *Dominus vobiscum.*"

Cassini replaces the handset to its cradle. Happy to have spoken with Alistair, knowing Phil was on his way.

"You care to come along Father?" Cassini joked, full well knowing the answer.

"Oh..." Wondering if the Cardinal was joking, his poker face giving nothing away, "... I think I'll pass on this one if I may Cardinal." Bowing his head subtly as though asking for permission.

"Hmm... You did seem to have an aptitude for it... Maybe next time."

Curiously, Francis eyes the scattered photographs and schematic open on the desk.

"May I ask?" Francis inquires hesitantly.

"You would be one of the few that can Father... Come have a look." Cassini ushes him around to the side of the desk for a better view.

Words on the drawing appeared to be written in old-styled Spanish. Subterranean passageways bleed down the page. Stained with time and wine. Francis made out a structure at the top of what appeared to be a chapel. The symbol of a cross suggesting a monastery or abbey of some kind. But this seemed too small. He looks to the Cardinal for answers.

"Villa San Michele... Once a Chapel, but that was long time ago. And home to your good friend Don Marconi."

"Oh... I see." Francis stands back from the map as though to distance himself from the man.

“Yes, perhaps you should stand this one out Father...”, Grinning, then continued, “... Here...” A finger stabs to a secret chamber, small by size, but well suited to its purpose, “... Here is where we find what we are looking for.”

“And what would that be”? Francis’ eyes dance of the schematic, with little reference to scale.

“A Chalice for one thing...”, Informed Cassini, “...And a cross that once belonged to Saint Augustine.”

“Not... *The* Chalice...” Asked Francis excitedly.

“We won’t know until we examine it.”

“What about security... Won’t it be heavily guarded?” Asked Francis, the drawing void of electrical wiring.

“Ah, you would think wouldn’t you... But it seems our good friend Marconi has let his guard down.”

“How so Cardinal? I do not understand.”

“Sure, there will be men about, three to be exact from what servants inform us... Nothing Alistair and Phil can’t handle... Being on top of a mountain, *Capodimonte*...” Raising hand to accentuate the height, “... Does not *hide* you... (*chuckle*) ... It only brings you closer to God... *Pater Noster*.” His arms now extended out as though to embrace the Father of all Creation.

Sunlight shines behind Cassini, silhouetting him, as if he were in transfiguration. And for a moment, Francis thought he saw a man standing on the other side of the desk. A momentary aberration before he disappeared and became dust particles dancing in the sunlight.

“Father? ... Father?” Cassini catches Francis daydreaming.

“Oh, sorry Cardinal... Of course.”

“Of Course?” Cassini now lost himself.

“To hide in plain sight, as you say.” Francis enlightens him.

“Ah yes, yes... Very good Father. Very good.” Cassini presses his hands together, forming a steeple. To mimic the Isle of Capri.

“How far is it to the top Cardinal?”

“About a thousand steps... I do hope Alistair and Phil are in good shape... Which reminds me... How would you like to meet Phil at the airport tomorrow?” Cassini asked, weighted more as an instruction than a question.

“Of course, Cardinal... I would be delighted to. What time would that be?” Francis asked.

“Midday I think...” Gesturing a hand to the in-tray Francis that the itinerary lay somewhere among the paperwork, “...Have him and Alistair accommodated in one of the rooms close to mine... Thank you Father.”

“Certainly Cardinal...” Francis’ fingers sifted through layers of documents until he came to the one that he was looking for, “... Midday as you say.” Francis confirms the flight. Folding the piece of paper and placing inside a pocket.

The Cardinal leaned over the yellowed plan, as though it were a treasure map. Getting in would be easy. Getting out another matter. Narrow passages and secure doors could well block their escape once discovered. A finger traces an outline of what appeared to be a passage leading from the chamber to the base of the mountain. But the line was faint, as though to suggest a proposed tunnel that had yet been built. Or had it?

It could well be a dead end. In more ways than one.

What was also unusual about the mysterious line was that it went below the water line drawn on the plan. The more Cassini dwelled on it, the more he believed the secret passage existed.

“Typical Spaniards.” He muttered to himself.

“What was that Cardinal?” Francis looked up in case he had missed hearing him.

“Nothing Father... Just thinking aloud... *Ignosce me.*” His mind captivated by the cleverness of the Spanish forefathers that had built the fortress.

He would have to assume Marconi did not know of the secret passageway below the vault. The Vatican held the only map. Nonetheless, Alistair and Phil had to be prepared. One way or the other.

“Will that be all?” Francis interrupts Cassini’s train of thought.

“Yes. Yes. Thank you, Father. Make those arrangements for our intrepid pair will you.”

“Yes Cardinal. Thank you, Cardinal.” Francis bows subtly and walks from the lavish room to leave the Cardinal in complete silence.

“*Dominus vobiscum.*” The Cardinal offers his blessing.

The summer sun streamed through the large open windows. Angels danced over the cold marble floor. Walls adorned with large gold gilded framed paintings of Cardinals and Saints long since dead. Long since left this earthly plane to another. Death was but a steppingstone. A continuance if it were.

Like shredding an overcoat. The corpus ceases to exist. The soul carries on.

Cassini hears the large door close behind Francis and looked towards the door, as though he could see through it, at the young man destined for greatness. The event he had witnessed that evening in the square outside Cathedral di Santa, was a miracle. Francis should have been dead. As dead as the Saints hanging on the Walls.

Yet, God had spared him.

“*Fiat voluntas tua (Thy will be done).*” Utters the Cassini, who was he to questions the mysterious ways of the Father of all Creation.

Rolling the lengthy scroll, he secures it with twine it had been bound with and ties it off. Leaving it for Alistair and Phil to look over tomorrow to make their final preparations. For now, the Cardinal had one last loose string to tie off.

He would have to inform his Superior. There was only one. Unless you counted God. Lifting the handset and dialed a simple three-digit number. Dialing each digit deliberately. Unhurriedly. And listened patiently to the dial tone.

Waiting for it to be answered.

“Your Eminence... Please excuse the intrusion... I have news.” Cardinal Cassini disclosed to his Superior, His Holiness the Pope...

Don Marconi

Reclining in a rattan chair, a white bath robe open about an ever-expanding belly, Marconi basked in the rising morning sun. Dark glasses shielded his eyes from the brilliant morning light slowly raising above the walled terrace. A granite Sphinx kept watch on one corner and gazes out over the sparking Mediterranean and the cradled township of Capri below. The Sphinx poised to pounce on the unsuspecting tourists that dare to trespass its territory.

Sipping on iced tea laced with vodka, he grinned.

Perhaps he was getting old and content in his ways. Or perhaps it was because of the news of a unique find which aroused his appetite to possess it.

“Al vincitore va il bottino! (To the victor goes the spoils!)” He says to himself.

It had become a bit of a game to him. A battle among adversaries. The victor took all. And bragging rights. It was an ongoing war, of endless battles. And endless relics. Each more valuable than the last. Until the novelty wore off, or forgotten, and a new conquest was required.

Flicking the newspaper open to review the stock prices. Recovering from the Covid pandemic. Precious metals showed gold and silver held steady. As was Dollar against the Euro. But how much gold was ever enough. Perhaps he should divest into Bitcoin. Whatever that was. Could he store it in his safe he wondered.

A feeling of déjà-vu comes over him as he was mentally counting his pennies, His nose twitched. Irritated by a strange lucid smell. It was there, but yet it was not. A sense that something had happened. Or was about to happen. It all seemed quite familiar, yet it all seemed quite strange. As if he could not put his finger on it. It had had the thought before and he did not like it. Guilt. Marconi fought to shake it free.

Michael sat opposite in a rattan chair, basking in the glorious eternal light. Looking as though he had nothing to do with how Marconi was feeling.

Like a tic the thought had taken hold. No matter what he thought, the guilt returned. Perhaps he was having a stroke, a seizure of some kind he thought. Why else could he explain the sudden uncharacteristic of wanting to give it all away.

Michael released him from the torment and Marconi returned to counting ethereal pennies. The moral dilemma of giving away his fortune now a distasteful forgotten memory. And he focused his attention to the paper again.

Financially wounded from his last encounter with the Cardinal, something told him this time he held the upper hand. A reliable source had informed him of a recent discovery in North-West Africa. Eyes up look to the distant land beyond the terrace walls to and he imagined himself an intrepid adventurer. Thrashing his way through the African bush on the back of an elephant. The fantasy quickly passes. And his thoughts return to the relic located in the unlikeliest of places.

The last place anyone would look. A library.

“Of course, where else would it be? ... (chuckle).” Chuckled Marconi.

Suddenly, caught out unaware, pages of the newspaper are violently wrenched from his hands in a swirling gust of wind. Causing pages to fly about like giant white Angels. Desperately flailing arms attempt to catch the pages, only to have them escape his grasp and lift higher into the air.

Michael played with them like kites. Washing them over and over, and over again. One way then the other.

Unable to prevent the assault the Sphinx watched as pages flew over terrace walls. Paragliding from the cliff face. Dancing on the breeze out to sea. A brilliant white light flashed, and Marconi looked about, but saw nothing but clear blue skies. Perhaps he was having a stroke after all. Settling back into the rattan chair and sips heavily on the iced tea until he felt his heart beating normally.

It all seemed so familiar.

“Hmm.” Grumbled Marconi. His day ruffled by the gust of angelic wind.

Thoughts turn to the archaic relic that had been hidden in plain sight for almost two thousand years. Like a pressed flower. He relished the thought like a school child and class project. He had men on commission in most of the Arab speaking countries.

But on this occasion, he found himself lacking.

After the last debacle, he was thinking he should go himself. If one wanted the job done right, one should do it oneself. Along with several trusted men of course. What he lacked in brawn personally, he made up for with money. He had tired on sitting on a hilltop. Becoming fat and lazy. One can only live in Eden so long before the temptation of forbidden fruit lures one to away.

“*Così sia.*” He said to himself, committing to going.

Marconi was a patient man. Men in his trade had to be. But time was of the essence. Every day that past was a day lost to a competitor. This time he seemed to have the jump of Braun. Who else would know? Surely not the Cardinal. He would have heard from his contact at the Vatican, Giovanni. A personal assistant to one of the lower ranked Cardinal's, but nonetheless had fingers in many trays, in and out. And keen young ear that could detect the subtlest of whispers. Cardinal Dovizi's death was not unexpected. He was old after all. Unable to keep up with the modern age. It was only a matter of time before Death had caught up with him.

Giovanni was young. In time, he would learn to serve two masters.

For now, no news was good news.

But if Marconi had heard of the find, it would not be long for before others would too. He needed to act, and act soon. Reclining in the large rattan chair, stared at his laced iced tea. Gently rattling the ice against the sides and inhaled the cool Mediterranean breeze. Could he get any closer to God he wondered. And how much closer he would be if he possessed the most holy of relics. His place in Heaven would be assured.

The newspaper now circulating over the harbor and the town of Capri below. In the distance, Mount Vesuvius sleeps. Waiting to awaken. As it had two thousand years earlier. But not today. Perhaps tomorrow.

Sitting drenched by a cloudless morning sky. And surrounded by crystal blue waters rolling waves upon golden sands and jagged rocks. Beneath his feet a vault of formidable treasure. Of gold bullion and priceless paintings. Some that may never see the light of day. Holy relics, occupying their own special cabinet. There was only one-way in. And one-way out. Motion sensor cameras operated twenty-four seven. Patrolling armed men ensured no-one but Marconi would come close to the forbidden treasure trove.

A special place would need to be found to display the latest holy relic. One thought not to exist. Yet like a miracle it had appeared. The thought sent a tingle down Marconi's spine. He had

let the Ring slip from his grasp. From his finger. What better than the next best thing. A letter from the Founder of the Church to the Rock upon which it was built...

Son of Piero

Though Leonardo was fascinated by the phenomenon of flight. He would never to have envisioned in his wildest imaginings he would have an airport named after him. Let alone an international one. The flying machines that he had sketched some four hundred years earlier, seem to have sprouted wings like strange looking moths, and taken flight from his notebooks.

Morphing into metal superstructures carrying hundreds of passengers halfway around the world in a single day. Magic. Sorcery, in the eyes of the Church. If God had meant man to fly, He would have given man wings. It was unnatural. Yet the Polymath was ahead of his time. But time always had a habit of catching up with man when he got too far ahead of himself. As if to right a wrong, time would restore order.

Again.

Unable to stay aloft, the law of gravity overcame the aerodynamics forces of the cumbersome metal wings. Pulling the Airbus back to earth. Massive tandem black tires screeched as they made contact the with tarmac. Bellowing a plume of white smoke in their wake. Hydraulics cushioning the weight of the four-hundred-ton silver skinned beast.

Having fallen asleep on the flight from London, the sound and bump of the tires shook Phil from a weird dream that lingered momentarily. Of a woman. Visions flashed and sparked in his mind. But he was unable to keep hold of them. He felt cheated and yearned for the woman to return.

Michael blew gently, and the ethereal visions and feelings were gone.

Confused and tired, he rubbed his eyes, orientating himself to the cabin of rowed seats. It felt like only yesterday since he was last there. Now he was back. Rubbing the ring, turning it over and over, to confirm it was real. To remind him why he was here. Perhaps he should have left it at home.

Feeling for papers inside his jacket pocket he watched as passengers gathered their bags and slowly shuffle down the aisle like sheep. He waits until the way was clear. Compared to last time, this assignment would be a walk in the park. Get in, retrieve the artefacts, and get out. No long cross-country excursions. No lengthy train rides and troublesome border officials.

Looking up he finds himself alone, as if he had been left behind and abandoned by the other passengers.

“Hey wait up.” He calls out.

With an urgency he reaches for his bag from the overhead compartment and hurried along the aisle. Before catching up with the other passengers as they were exiting. Puffing as if he had run a mile. Passengers followed the passenger in front as if they knew where they were going. Phil followed willingly behind. Happy to be lead somewhere.

Shuffling along boxed in corridors, passengers made their way to customs. Only to greeted by another queue of weary passengers. No concealed gun and bundles of cash. Then he remembered the roll in his pocket.

“Shit.” He muttered to himself.

Phil now appeared on edge. A dead giveaway to security looking for suspicious passengers. Everywhere he looked, he saw uniformed police, carrying machine guns. Sniffer dogs on leads.

Shoving a hand into his pocket, felt for the large roll of cash, and tried to shove it down deeper. But to no avail. The bulge stuck out, and there was nothing he could do about it. Passengers ahead of him dispersed to custom booths and he soon found himself being summoned to one.

The customs official eyes the young man before him.

A mild sweat breaking out across his forehead. A security dog stops and sniffs at Phil's bag. Then as if offended by the scent moves off to interrogate the next passenger's luggage. Having trouble reconciling the shaggy haired image in the passport to the well cropped Phil, the customs official looks at him strangely.

"I had a haircut since then." He informed the official.

"Hmm... Purpose of visit?" The official asked routinely.

Caught out by the question, he had not really thought about it. Was it business? Or was it personal? He was on assignment.

"Business I think." He boldly answered.

"You think? ... With whom do you think?"

"The Vatican."

"The Vatican, really? ... (chuckle)" The Customs officer examined the young looked nothing like a Father, let alone a Cardinal.

"Really..." Pulling out a folded letter the Cardinal had written should he ever become *detained*, "... I have this, if it helps." Sliding it through the open slot in the perplex screen.

The Official eyes the letter, the letterhead appeared authentic. And he had seen a few in his time. Its content brief. Sign off by an authoritative signature. He eyes the young man before him again. English. What *business* would a lad like this have with the Vatican? Then he spies the ring on the young man's finger. A blood red stone and gold relief. A chill ran over the Official's body.

His eyes meet with Phil's.

An eerie unspoken understanding hung in the air between them.

'*Slam!*' A heavy stamp slams onto the passport.

"Welcome to Rome Mister *Arbuckle*." Handing the passport and letter back to him.

"Thank you." Gathering the papers, shoves them inside a jacket pocket again.

After picking up his bag and wandering a few steps, he suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder.

'*Gulp!*', Gasp Phil feeling he had been caught out. This was it, he thought.

Barely five feet into Rome and already he had been arrested. He had been found out. It had been a trap after all. Paranoid thoughts bounced about his mind.

"Just one moment please Mister *Arbuckle*..." A uniformed voice instructs him, "... Would you mind coming this way please sir."

"Is there a problem officer?" He asked anxiously.

"No problem at all Sir." The Officer replied, leaving him further confused.

Passengers watched on curiously as he is escorted away. Formulating their own theories for his detention. They knew he looked suspicious the moment they first laid eyes on him. Who travels with a single overnight bag?

The Officer marched quickly, leaving Phil in his wake. If he was being arrested, the Italians had a funny way of going about it.

"This way Sir." The Officer looks back at him.

Arriving at a plain looking door, he could only speculate the fate that awaited him behind it. An interrogation. An inquisition of sorts. The cash burning a hole in his pocket. Perhaps he should have said *personal* when the Customs Official asked him. Why did he have to blurt out

business? He had failed the Cardinal before he had even started. Michael passes through the wall and waits for Phil to arrive. Like a photocopier, a bright light leaks from beneath the door. The Officer pondered the cause of the anomaly and opens to door to find a person waiting.

Dressed in black.

“*È tutto tuo padre.*” Informs the officer.

“*Grazie. Grazie.*” Francis replies.

“Father Francis? What are you doing here?” Phil exclaimed surprised to see him.

“The Cardinal suggested I meet you and accompanied you back to the Vatican... Would not want you to get lost... I remember my first visit... *Mamma mia*, if you know what I mean.”

“Thank you, it’s good to see.”

“It good to see you too... How’s Arthur?”

“He’s good... Busy organizing the married. You know how it goes.”

“Indeed, but I am usually on the other side so to speak...” Quipped Francis, “...That your only bag?”

“Yeah, won’t be staying long I reckon.” Remarkd Phil.

“Very good then. Alistair has already arrived and settled in... I thought we would take the Metro to the city. It’ll be a lot quicker than a taxi.” Informed Francis.

Phil opens the door, expecting the Officer to be still standing guard as though he had been held prisoner. But finds no one about, other than weary passengers trailing colorful luggage bags on short metal leashes like pets behind them.

Francis leads the way at a more orderly pace. The incongruent looking pair threaded their way through the terminal and down an escalator to the underground Metro system.

And waited for the next train to arrive.

“You not coming on this one?” Asked Phil curiously.

“No, those days are over for me I am pleased to say. The only danger for me these days is a paper cut.” Responded Francis holding up a bandaged finger.

“Oh dear... Will you live?”

“Doctor said I would survive.”

An announcement barked over the speakers. Firstly in Italian, then in English. But like all rail announcements, it was loud, garbled, and incoherent. Muffled by the chatter of people voices and trolley bags clattering on the tiled floor. Phil looked about as though expect a repetition of the announcement.

Only to have the speakers remain silent.

“A train should be arriving soon...” Informed Francis, “... They quite frequently.”

And as he spoke, a light appeared some distance into the tunnel,

Swiftly and smoothly the train pulled alongside the platform and doors gracefully slide open. Inpatient passengers waiting to board wait for inpatient disembarking passengers to exit. A short dance everyone knew. One step forward. A step to the left. And then to the right. All the time trying to avoid stepping on the other’s toes. A symphony of people being washed one way, then another.

Only to return at the end of the day and resume the dance again with another partner.

Doors closed behind them. Finding seats they settled into the journey that would take them to the heart of the city of Roma. Inside the train, passengers remained motionless. Outside,

intermittent lights flashed in the darkness. As if to suggest the train was moving. Very fast. Stopping periodically at stations on route to Termini Station.

Michael sat opposite the two young men, observing them. Though cut from the same cloth of God, He had made them unique. Each with their own unique talents. And own unique flaws. Imperfections that made man human. It reminded Him of two other men he had once sat opposite and observed. Petrus, the feisty fisherman. And Saul, the wandering Preacher. Complementing the other. Sharpening the other.

How strange, their paths should cross again.

“How are you settling in?” Phil asked breaking the silence.

“I miss *home*, wherever that was...” Reminisces Francis recalling the chapel of Amantea, and its simplicity, “...(sigh)... Alas the Cardinal wants me here.”

“Can’t you say no?” He questioned.

“Of course, but I feel I have been *Called*...” Francis fades as if he had trouble explaining it himself.

“I know exactly what you mean. One minute I am an unemployed engineer, the next I am here. Doing this... I can’t explain it myself.” Fidgeting with his finger.

Francis catches him fiddling with the ring on his finger as if it were burning into him.

“Are *you* okay?” Asked Francis.

“Yeah, good... Just anxious... First real assignment. Don’t want to mess it up for the Cardinal.”

“You won’t Phillip. I have a feeling.” Francis stares at the window opposite seeing his own reflection, and that of another over laid on his. Puzzled, it looked familiar.

Michael stares back. It was as if Francis could see him.

Suddenly the bright lights of the next station flood the compartment. And Michael is gone. Startled, Francis returns to the present moment.

“We’re here... Termini Station. We have got one more ride to catch. You’ll enjoy this one more.” Grinned Francis eager to escape the underground grotto.

“Taxi! Taxi!” Francis calls out, waving an arm to catch the attention of a circling cab on the prowl for tourist prey.

Reluctantly, the taxi pulled over. Tourists were easy money, detouring here, milking the unsuspecting of their tourist dollars. But not the Padre. That would be an unforgiveable sin. But it was too late, they had already made eye contact, and God sees all. There was no escaping this sin. Penitence must be made. The driver crosses himself, and taxi pulls to the curb.

Coming to a stop beside Francis and Phil.

They climb into the back seat.

“Where to Padre?” The driver asked expectantly.

“Vatican, no rush.” Informs Francis.

“As you wish Padre.” Perhaps this was not going to be unrewarding has he had first thought.

Then crossed himself at the transgressing thought. Rosary beads and wooden cross hang from the rearview mirror. Swaying side to side.

The Virgin Mary watched the driver suspiciously.

It all came rushing back to Francis, the symphony of vehicles as the waltzed about pizzas and argued with each other with horns as they stepped on each other’s toes. Scooters, overshadowed by double decker buses, weaved precariously through the school of swirling vehicles.

It was madness. It was Roma.

Outside, buildings ancient and new towered over them. Francis pointed out the ones he knew, and the ones he did not. Until finally the ominous presence of Saint Peter's Square and Basilica came into view.

"Proprio vicino ai cancelli, se puoi (Just by the gates if you can)." Instructed Francis.

"Come desidera padre." Responds the driver.

Two Swiss Guards dressed in colorful ancient striped uniforms watch as the taxi comes to a stop before them. Their halberds at the ready. Francis stepped out, looking familiar to the guards. The young man with him on the other hand, not so. What caught their attention was the blood red ring on the young man's finger. They look at each other and wondered his connection to the Padre was. Whatever it was, they wanted nothing to do with it. Like colorful stones statues, eyes stared forward as though the pair did not exist.

And allowed the pair to enter unchallenged.

Though late in the afternoon, the Vatican was still open for business.

Tourist filled the Square like vagrant pigeons. Strutting aimlessly, from one attraction to another. Snapping photos with flat nosed beaks. Phil and Francis shuffled their way through the plague of human pigeons. Tourist parted to allow the Father through, snapping a photo of him as he passed, as though he were one of the props.

Phil marched in time with Francis, his bag swinging by his side. The entrance to the Basilica looming ahead of them. Climbing the stone steps they entered through a door and disappeared from view.

"Wait here." Francis instructs, indicating an elaborate chair.

Francis wandered off along a grand hallway and disappeared from view.

Leaving Phil alone in an immensely ornate hall. A staircase led to an upper floor. A crystal chandelier suspended from the ceiling. Sparkling like a hundred million souls. Gilded framed portraits hung heavily on the walls. Ghosts of Popes of Vatican's past. Attired in glamorous regalia. Burgundy-colored robes lined with white fur seated on gilded thrones. Phil felt their eyes glaring at him. As they he had judged them. As though they had sinned.

This was no place for a Protestant.

Fidgeting in the seat. He heard voices. Among them, Francis' voice. He looked up to see someone with him. Someone he knew too well.

Alistair...

Professor Almesh

Meantime, some two and half thousand miles away, another Professor was enjoying an afternoon nap. A coffee mug lay lopsided on the floor. The late afternoon sun seeping through venetian blinds, basking the snoring Professor with zebra stripes. A nose twitched. A throat snorted, like a pig rummaging for truffles beneath the undergrowth.

'(Sniff-sniff-sniff!)' The nose twitch again as though it could smell something appealing.

The overhead fan rotated briskly in the otherwise motionless darkened room. Then something disturbing happened. Something that would wake Lazarus from the dead and the drowsing Professor from a lovely dream. The noise sounded as though it was coming from inside his head.

There it was again.

Snorting as though to protest its presence, his head nestles into the pillow to find a comforting position. Hoping the noise would go away.

"Ah mmm... *(sigh)*." He sighed, thinking the nuisance had passed.

Only to sound again moments later.

Caught between a warm delirious dream and the harsh cold reality of his office, eyes begin to flicker open. Sounding like a noisy alarm clock, the phone on his desk sang on and on.

'Whoever it was, is persistent!' He thought.

God help them if they were a student. Pulling himself upright, half dazed, still feeling the effects of the *coffee*, eyes stare at the phone. Willing it to cease.

The wishful command fell upon deaf ears.

'Ring-ring_! ... Ring-ring_! ... Ring-ring_!'

"Okay, okay... I'm coming already." He growled at the phone ringing louder than before.

'Ring-ring_! ... Ring-ring_! ... Ring-ring_!' The phone sang incessantly like a broken record.

Lifting the handset from its cradle, he raises it to his ear.

"Almesh..." A dry mouth announces into the mouthpiece. A hand reaches for the bottom drawer. An old familiar voice sounds on the other end, "... Jacob, my old friend, how are you?"

Skillfully he removes the cap of the bottom with one hand and pours its contents into a mug. Listening to the what the Professor had to say.

Freezing at the mention of the discovered relic.

"I see... Are you sure? ... Can you send a photo? ... You have? Good, good... I'd like to see for myself... Hmm... Yes, I understand... Does anyone know?... Good, good. Keep it that way. It may be nothing, but we must be careful..." Taking a sip from the mug to calm his nerves, "... Keep it safe, and yourself my friend... If it is what it is... There are people who would kill to possess what you hold ..." His mind shifts to thoughts of those who could be listening in, thinking he hears a sound outside the office, moving shadows pass beneath the door, "... Yes, yes my friend, I am still here... I'll inform the Cardinal once I have a better look at it... Thank you my friend. Bye."

Gingerly the Professor replaces the handset and stares at the old phone.

Now fully awake, the discovery shocking his senses. Inhaling the vapors of the dark malt whiskey through broad nostrils. The long grey hairy caterpillar over his eyes pinched together to

become one. He stared at the computer. Reluctant to turn it on. To open Pandora's box. A finger presses a button, and the screen comes to life.

And waits for the home screen to appear.

An email icon displays a small envelope in the top corner, indicating a message had been received. Hesitantly the Professor hovers the cursor it and clicks once. A window opens to reveal a list of emails. At the top of the list a message from:

Professor Jacob Levi, Head of Literature, Sankoré, Timbuktu.

It had travelled a long way to reach him. Albeit at the speed of light. Longer if had been delivered by Camel train. A paperclip icon suggested an attachment. The message itself was brief. Seeking his expert opinion of the parchment. Double clicking the attachment, hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Unsure what to expect. Technology would never replace having the actual parchment in his hand.

High-resolution digital images would have to do.

Another window opens and an image of a faded parchment appears in living color. Eyes quickly assess the parchment's age, still in good condition. It had yellowed with age, as one would expect, but its condition was remarkable. As though it had never seen the light of day in two thousand years. Preserved among ancient papyrus pages. At first glance it seemed authentic.

Keen eyes sift the text itself. Koine Greek. Continuous and without punctuation. Unsure where one sentence began and another one ended. Drawing upon his salient intellectual abilities, he raked his brain deciphering the archaic black scribble. Fumbling through pages of a Greek Codex from the shelf behind him. Runs an ink-stained finger down the page until he found the words he was looking for. Different by today's Greek. Slowly unravelling the message. Scribbling on paper the translated words...

'Nero... Gentiles... Demand adherence... As Proselytes.' He gasped as he read the translation.

And he wondered could have written them. The letter had been signed off...

Σαούλ (Saul)

Eyes shift to the start of the letter. Now sees another name. A chill of goosebumps run down his shins as though visited by a ghost...

Πέτρος (Petros)

Almesh stares blankly at the screen. Stunned by the discovery. Breathing in deeply and he exhaled like a slow deflating tire. Sitting back to distance himself from the cause of his anxiety. He takes a swallow from the mug. Hoping it would ward off the flutter of butterflies that had taken flight.

If not written in his own hand, then certainly by a companion taking dictation.

'Timothy?' He questioned himself.

"Not possible." Denying what he was seeing.

But there it was. Staring him in the face. It looked authentic. The rhetoric. The parchment. The handwriting. Preserved in time. And the arid climate of the Sahara. He could almost smell the familiar odor of the parchment through the screen.

There was only one thing left to do.

Eyes shift to the phone. Almesh glanced at the wall clock and he pondered the time it was in Rome. Which was exactly the same as Budapest. The weather on the other hand was another matter. But he would not be calling about the weather. Though he wished that he were.

Reaching for a tired notebook, opens it to an equally tired page, and slowly dialed the scrawled number.

And waited for the call to be answered...

The Call

Like a giraffe drinking from a watering hole, Alistair lean over the rolled-out scroll. His arms spread either side, holding down the edges. Phil stood beside him. Their necks stretched down to get a closer look. Their minds conceiving a plan that would get them in and out alive.

Phil jabs at the paper, as though to indicate where the treasure was buried. Tilting his head to one side catching the faint line.

“Is that what I think it is?” He asked curiously tracing a finger down, down, down. Until it can go no further. It was as though a secret passageway that led to a subterranean chamber.

Cassini sits behind his desk, watching the pair of giraffes.

“You tell me?” Responded Cassini shuffling papers on his desk, looking over his glasses pinched on his nose.

“Only one way to find out...” Remarked Phil.

Eyes focus on the line. Gauging the distance involved. If it were below the waterline, they would have to swim for it.

“Could be our way out if the other way is blocked.” Commented Phil, looking to Alistair as though thinking the same thought.

“Hmm.” Alistair responded.

“Does Marconi know about this?”

“Probably not.” Remarked Cassini.

“We’ll see... It could be trap...” Alistair dampened Phil’s enthusiasm, “... The Spanish did that sort of thing in those days.”

“Sit. Sit. Relax... You’ve been over it a hundred times.” Instructs Cassini.

Alistair surrenders to his master’s wish. Stretching the tense back muscles from leaning. Phil did likewise. Cassini watched the pair and wondered if they would be up to the task.

“You leave day after next... Servants inform us that Marconi is away somewhere... He seems to be taken off in a hurry... As to where, who knows...” Cassini speculates as to what had caused his sudden departure, nonetheless it was fortunate timing, “...He’ll take a few of his men with him... We’ll wait for him to leave before you go in... We’ll have men waiting below for you... Understood?”

“Understood.” Confirms Alistair.

“Understood.” Parrots Phil.

“Take what you need from supplies tomorrow... Check it, double check it... You know the routine.”

“You not coming?” Asked Phil.

“I can’t swim...” Lied Cassini, “... I’ll sit this on out. But I won’t be too far away.”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m knackered... Sorry Cardinal.” Phil apologizes.

“That’s okay Phillip, you’ve had a long flight... Get your rest, we’ll go over it again tomorrow.”

“Good night Cardinal... Mister McGee.” Phil excuses himself from the room.

“Good night Phil... Catch you in the morning.”

“*Bonum vesperam* Phillip...” Responds Cassini watching him leave. And waits for the door to close behind him, “... So, how are you coping? How’s the arm?”

Alistair grips his left arm, squeezing it and flexing fingers to assess any pain. The wound had taken longer than usual to heal. He was not as young as he use to be.

“Feels okay.” Alistair lied, twisting his arm side to side as though to show the Cardinal it was in working order.

The subtle grimace on Alistair’s face said otherwise.

“Is Phil up to it?” Questioned Cassini.

“I think so... He can *handle* himself. If you know what I mean.”

“I certainly do... His training was impressive.” Noted the Cassini.

“Leave it to us Cardinal, we’ll get the job done.” Assures Alistair, standing over the plan again.

Shaking his head and catching the Cardinal’s attention.

“What’s the matter?” Questioned Cassini, a grave look forming on his face.

“We’re putting a lot of eggs in the basket with that secret passageway.”

“Look on the bright side.” Said Cassini.

“And what would be that be?”

“You can always go out the way you came in.” Suggested Cassini.

“I’ll take my chances with the passageway.” Chuckled Alistair.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be fine. You’ll have back up if you get stuck down there.”

“The Swiss Guards?”

“Better... Me...” Chuckled Cassini, “... Get off to bed my son. You have a big day tomorrow.”

“Good night Cardinal.” Alistair steps away from the table and gathers his jacket.

“*Bonam noctis somnus.*” Responds Cassini.

Looking to the gilded ceiling as though God was looking down at him. Michael sat watching. Feeling the yoke that burdened the Cassini. And in that moment between thought and prayer Cassini found peace.

“*Fiat voluntas Dei*, (God’s Will be done.)” Cassini pledges his commitment.

No sooner had he uttered those words the phone rang.

It rang once. And waited patiently as though daring the Cardinal to answer it.

The phone blinked and rang again.

Cassini’s eyes shift from the ceiling to the phone. Who would be calling him at this odd hour?

It fell silent again. Waited.

And rang again.

Cassini lifts the handset placing it against his ear and speaks softly.

“Yes? ...” And listened for the voice on the other end to respond, “...My friend... How are you? What brings you?” He asked anxiously.

There would be only one purpose of the call from Professor Almesh.

“I see... Are you sure? ... Yes, I know Professor Levi... No, don’t send a copy... The Papal walls have more eyes than Medusa... I trust you, my friend. Your word is good enough... Where did you say it was discovered?... Oh... And where is now?... Yes... Hmm...” Cassini pauses to think, “...Leave it to me... I’ll be in touch. Yes... Who else knows? ... A boy? ... Hmm... It won’t be long for the vultures to circle... Have Levi keep it safe... And himself... I’ll send my two best men to collect it... Soon... I’ll be in touch... Thank you my friend, you have done the Church a great service... *Dei gratia vobis.*” Replacing the handset to the cradle.

Suspicious eyes shift about the walls as they had sprouted ears. Only the portraits on the walls had heard the conversation. And Dovizi was in his grave asleep.
A tingle shivered up his spine...

Capri

A passenger train comes to a halt beside a semi-deserted platform. Hissing hydraulic brakes as it released pressure. Other trains parked stationary beside other platforms. All the same size and color and features. Indistinguishable from the other. As though they were identical siblings of the same parental railway company.

People mulled about the platform. Some wanting to board. Some wanting to leave.

Two men, appearing as if father and son stand and begin to gather their belongings. Phil dressed in faded blue jeans and grey T-Shirt and Alistair a light cream suit. Sunglasses and a fedora hat complete his attire. Phil slung the duffle bag over his shoulder. Feeling the weight of the gun inside. Alistair gathers a bulky looking sports bag as though it contained something large. Alistair checked his watch as they stepped off the train and head outside. The morning sun hung low in the sky.

The day was fine, as it was most days in Naples.

Now a tranquil tourist destination, the city had changed hands many times over the millennia. From ancient Romans with holiday homes there, to invading Germanic tribes. Before the Eastern Roman Empire took it all back. Only to have the Normans arrive and take it away again.

The tug of war continued for centuries.

Bickering incestual bloodlines royal families of Spain and Austria squabbled over the region as to who had right to own this idyllic enclave. Sicily would unify with the kingdom. Only to have Napoleon claim it for France. Until his defeat and the restoration of the old order, until that led to a revolution.

Devastated by plague. Plagued by conquerors. It took one man, some say the father of the Nation, Giuseppe Garibaldi, to unite Italy as one nation. The Germans would return, only to be banished by allied bombers them once and for all.

The wheel hath come full circle.

Becoming again, a place of Roman holiday homes. The scars of wars past had healed. Mascaraed by construction and cafes and museums. Boutiques stores now competed for the foreign tourist dollar.

“We have forty minutes till the next ferry.” Alistair affirms.

Phil looks about for a café and spies one up the street.

“We got time a coffee?” He asked.

“I think I need one actually.”

Oversized super-yachts and glistening white launches of the affluent elite lined the wharfs. A cobblestone waterfront road segregated the haves from the have-nots. Phil being one of them. A waiter takes their order and disappears back inside the café.

Alistair eyes the horizon and sees an island jutting up in the distance.

Phil also spies the camel back island.

“That it?” He asked turning to Alistair.

“Yeah. That’s it alright.” Parrots Alistair, “... You ready?”

“I was born ready.” Responds Phil grinning.

“Thought you’d say that...” Alistair chuckles,

“What’s the itinerary?”

“Ferry to Capri... Survey the lay of the land... Marconi is out of the country somewhere... We go in tonight... Get the relics and get out.”

“Who’s picking us up?”

“The Cardinal says he has someone waiting for us.” Alistair advised.

“If you say so.” Questioned Phil anxiously, unable to imagine the Cardinal in a boat.

“Trust me, he’ll be there.” Alistair assured him.

“How many guards we are expecting?”

“Not many, three maybe four. We should be able to handle them.”

“Should?”

“You’ll be fine... Now drink up and relax.”

The pair looked like English tourists out for an early morning stroll. Phil took a photo of Alistair and sent it to Arthur. And wondered how he was coping with the wedding.

“Excited about the wedding?” Phil asked taking his mind off the mission.

“What father wouldn’t be, eh? ... I thought I’d never see the day. Then out of the blue...”

Alistair fades and ponders how it all came about.

“Yeah, came as a surprise to me too.”

“When are you going to tie the knot?” Alistair asked cheekily.

“Me? Ha. Never! ... I fly solo Mister McGee... No woman will ever tie me down.” Pledges Phil.

“Never say, never Phil... You just haven’t met that one that will steal your heart.” Advised Alistair.

“She’d have to be a thief to do that Mister McGee.” Warned Phil shaking his head.

“They generally are Phil... They generally are.” Chuckled Alistair.

To the east, Mount Vesuvius had raised its head like an inverted cone. Though over fifteen miles away, it was as if it were standing over them. The thought of the thing erupting sent shivers down Phil’s spine.

Eyes shift back to the tranquil floating hump-back isle on the horizon.

“That passageway...” He questioned anxiously.

“We won’t know until we see it... We can’t rely on something we know nothing about.”

“Hear you loud and clear Mister McGee.”

“Drink up, we better get going.” Alistair swallows the last of his coffee, throwing the sports bag over his shoulder.

Soon followed by Phil doing likewise. Leaving a tip for the waiter they made their way to the ferry building a short walk from the café. People were already beginning to gather and form a queue to board.

“Woah, must be popular... Not a moment too soon...” Remarked Phil joining the queue, “... I assume we have tickets?”

“Prebooked weeks ago.” Alistair holds up two tickets.

“Return?”

“Won’t be needing them. The Cardinal will not want us hanging about. If you know what I mean.”

“I think I do Mister McGee.”

Following the passengers onto the ferry like animals onto Noah's Ark. Ladies with broad brimmed hats and sunglasses taking photographs on mobile phones of themselves and the departing port. Alistair suggested he would sit down inside where it would be cooler. Phil found a seat on the open upper deck and took in the panoramic vista.

Ropes are cast away. And people gather about the stein taking photographs of the wharf and store fronts. Capturing the kodak moment that would chronical their life as being there. Their existence. Albeit fleetingly.

Frozen in space and time.

Like a prehistoric insect caught in gum. To be dug up again in the distant future and scrutinized. Void of scent or sound. The smell of coffee beans and freshly baked bread. The noise of people on the street. And the feeling of the sun on their faces.

Virtues that gave vista depth and feel.

Now reduced to a three-by-four two-dimensional colored polaroid. Preserved in albums. Beneath cellophane sheets as though to mummify them. Cardboard sarcophaguses of forgotten memories. Interned within pyramid attics. Collecting dust.

Waiting to be rediscovered.

'Click...' A photograph is taken. '...Click-Click-Click.' Then another, and another.

Mighty diesel engines rumbled to life. Spewing thick black exhaust fumes from elongated silver stove-pipe chimneys. Dirtying the otherwise crystal blue sky, before blowing and fading away.

Slowly the double-hulled catamaran moved away from the wharf. Egging its way to the breakwater wall that separated the sheltered inner harbor from the open sea. From the café, the ocean looked idyllic with its white tops flashing in the distance. From the ferry, it soon became apparent that the ocean was rougher than it had appeared. Waves crashed against the hull of the catamaran. Pitching the boat up and down.

Causing Phil's to feel nauseated.

Hydrofoils soon take effect, raising the boat from the water as it picked up speed. The banging noise dissipated and the pitching subsided. The ride became smooth and swift. Phil settled back in his seat to enjoy the crossing. Feeling exhilarated by the sea air rushing over him. The smell of the ocean filling his lungs. Seagulls hitched a free ride to the island. Clinging to the hand rail to fight the assailing breeze. If God had meant them for them to fly, why had He given them feet.

In the distance ahead, Capri grew ever perceptibly closer. Had Phil looked to his left, he would have seen the formidable Mount Vesuvius filling the eastern horizon. But his thoughts were soon swayed by an attractive young lady sitting opposite him.

"Well hello." Remarked Phil.

Vesuvius ignored the insignificant sea urchins that skimmed across the waters of the gulf.

There had been a day when the gulf was filled with mighty Roman Galleons, and Merchant vessels that traded wares from the far reaches of the Empire. Smaller craft, scapha, would dart amongst them. Loading and unloading wares and exotic spices. Now displaced by super yachts and ferry boats carrying itinerant tourists from the far reaches of the globe. Snapping images. Stealing digital fragments of the once mighty Roman Empire.

One polaroid at a time.

Alistair stared out the window at Vesuvius. And imagined the devastation it had unleashed two thousand years ago. Today it looked benign. Dead. He knew someday the beast would awaken and want to feast on the unwelcomed parasites that had settled on its slopes like.

But not today. He hoped. Not until he had completed what he had been sent to do.

Eyes shift to Capri. Its harbor appearing in the distance. The ferry rocked rhythmically on the ocean swells. The nauseating feelings he had experienced had passed. His mind focused on the pinnacle.

Playing out scenarios in his head. It all seemed too easy. But nothing in his job was easy. There was always a fly in the ointment. Events he had not accounted for. Marconi's men would be carrying. Not wanting to engage in a shootout, he would have to improvise.

Eyes shift to the ceiling, wondering if Phil would be up to it. He had proven himself in training. And was willing to take up a gun and shoot his way out of a tight situation. No one was more qualified than him. With that assurance, he pulled out a map of the Island. Finding the port that laid just ahead on the map. Traces two routes to the top. One involving a steep climb of nearly thousand steps. The other an easier path. He knew the one to take. A finger taps the page to confirm his decision.

Meanwhile on the upper deck Phil had made some progress with the attractive young women. Soliciting contact details should their paths cross again in the future.

"Still got it." He tells himself, watching the young women walk away.

Feeling the engines change tone and the boat speed slow, he looked up surprised to see the ferry had arrived already. Grey stone cliff faces towered either side over the port. Fawn colored three story buildings lined the waterfront. Cafes and tourist stores. Roads zigzagged like snakes up slope. Lined by flat-topped buildings stacked one upon the other.

"Welcome to Marina Grande." A voice announces through overhead speakers. Drawing passenger's attention they would soon be docking and disembarking.

Phil gathers the duffle bag and throws it over his shoulder. And made his way to the lower deck in search of Alistair. Finding him already waiting for him to arrive.

"There you are." Said Phil.

"You ready?"

"As I'll ever be..." Remarked Phil, "... How we are getting up there?" Looking to the cliff places.

"We could walk if you're up to it... Or we have an easier way." Informed Alistair.

"I like the sound of the second option better."

"Yeah, thought you might say that."

Following passengers onto a cobble stone wharf. Rental cars lined either side. Above them the imposing cliff faces. Stores lined the main street. Iron grilled terraces gutted out from the buildings. Row boats lined the foreshore, waiting to be hired. Everything was for hire. Boats, cars, rooms, and the one thing Alistair was looking for.

Scooters.

"Ah... There." He catches sight of them.

Phil looks about wondering what he had missed, thinking they would rent a car. Only to have Alistair walk past the kiosk.

The penny dropped as soon as he saw them.

"Way to go Mister McGee!" He exclaimed like an excited child.

"Might make it more fun. Easier to get through the traffic. Can you ride one?"

“Never tried. How hard can it be? Like riding a bike, right?”

“Something like that... You’ll be fine...” He informed him, raising two fingers to the attendant.

Forms are completed and money and keys are exchanged.

“Here, you better wear this?” Handing Phil a yellow open face helmet.

“What about you?” Questioned Phil confused.

“I’m good...” Informs Alistair, “...Its for your own safety. What would I tell your mother?”

“I suppose.” Relented Phil.

“Take it easy on the throttle... Accelerator there, brake there, if you need it.” Instructed Alistair mounting the red scooter and turning the key.

Phil mimicked what he had seen. Engines whined loudly from excessive throttle. Rattling exhaust pipes protested coming to life. Phil stutters forward. Leaping and stalling momentarily before coming back to life.

“I got it.” Revving the engine loudly.

“Follow me.” Alistair led the way.

Phil trailed closely behind. Weaving past parked vehicles. Buildings passed by in a blur. Watching him lean into sweeping turns. Accelerating on the straights. Braking to slow for another turn. Arriving at a fork in the road.

Alistair pulls over and Phil pulls up beside him feeling exhilarated by the adrenaline coursing through veins. Parking on the saddle of the hill that divided the Island. Behind them, the port from which that had just arrive. Below them, the sleepy hamlet of Capri.

“We’re here?” Asked Phil thinking they had reached their destination.

“Not even halfway...” Informs Alistair, gesturing his head to the summit ahead of them.

Phil looks at the imposing climb and wonders if the scooters would handle the incline. There was only one way to find out.

“I’ll race you to the top.” Challenged Phil.

And with that, Phil took off like a thoroughbred out of the starting gates.

Leaving Alistair in a plume of exhaust and soon on his tail...

Hotel Bamako

The late afternoon sun streamed through the tall open French doors of the old Colonial Hotel.

Outside, the River Niger flowed silently and unhurriedly by. Like a four-thousand-mile varicose vein, the *River of Rivers* clotted into lakes, split into capillaries, rejoining to become one arterial. Only to clot and splinter and rejoin over and over again. Beginning its epic journey in highlands of Guinea, it would carve a crescent path into the formidable arid interior before veering south to bleed camouflaged and undetected into the Atlantic. Ending as mysteriously as it had begun.

Munro slapped the back of his neck. Killing a pestering buzzing mosquito. Now having second thoughts about coming. Having forego the cool shade of the castle. There was a day he when he relished the heat of an archaeological dig at some remote site. His hands that had grown soft with age. His hands would not be soiled on this excavation. Four burly Scotsmen sat nearby drinking handles of imported lager beer. Appearing like fish out of water, frustratingly waving away mosquitos. Their thick Scottish hides impenetrable to the aerial parasites.

Only an Englishman could annoy them more.

Beside Munro, on a lace covered wooden table, a cherry stalk protruded from a martini glass. A squadron of mosquitos circled about the ceiling, as though they were preparing for an aerial raid. The overhead fan rotated making a dull humming noise, stirring up turbulence and keeping the aerial squadron at bay.

He hears a voice. A European sounding voice. And lowers the paper enough for eyes see over the top. Patrons sat about tables among large green potted ferns. Chatting and socializing. Colored waiters carrying silver trays of iced drinks.

Munro's ears prick as to the direction of the voice.

A man's voice. Of foreign accent. It was as though he could recognize it. But could not place it. There it was again. Eye brows pinch as though in discussion with the other. It was coming from beyond the ferns, on the balcony outside. And getting closer. Whoever it was had finished and were about to leave. Lowering the paper to his lap, leans his body to one side to catch sight of the man now approaching him.

Their Eyes meet. The man stops in his tracks. And looked at Munro suspiciously.

The men with him stop. And wandered why their boss had halted suddenly. Munro's men look up from their beers and warily gauge other men in tow. Like a cowboy standoff at high noon in a western movie, the two sides wait for the other to make the first move.

It was Munro who blinked first.

"What are you doing here?" He asked eyeing Marconi from head to toe.

Dressed in a cream cotton suit and white fedora hat.

"I should be asking you the same question." Responded Marconi.

"Hm_" Grumbled Munro.

There was only one reason why both of them were there. Neither wishing to vocalize it.

Pondering how much Marconi knew. Probably as much as he did. It would be a race as to who would find the relic first. There were various routes and means of getting to Timbuktu. The quickest would have been by air. But somehow the plane had mysteriously broken down. It would be down for several days until a new part arrived from Germany.

There were alternative means, and discomforts, of getting to the destination. Buses and four-wheel drives, taking most day to travel the thousand-mile journey over a desolate landscape into the Western Sahara. Two days if by river boat. Still, it would be quicker than waiting for the plane that still had to be repaired.

Both men knew that.

“Munro.” Marconi touched the brim of his hat.

“Marconi.” Munro reciprocated the gesture.

Munro’s men watch as Marconi’s men trail behind him. Prepared for any eventuality. One reaches beneath a jacket for a revolver. Munro subtly shakes his head to the man. Eyes follow Marconi and his men out. And Munro settles back in his seat. He was a patient man. But not that patient to allow a competitor to get the better of him.

Taking a sip on the strong martini.

The early bird gets the worm.’ Munro thinks to himself.

Gesturing a hand to one of his men to come closer. The man leans down and Munro whispers instructions to his ear. The man nods saying he understood and indicates to another of men to come with him. In a few hours it would be dark, no time for venturing into the unknown. Even with a guide.

‘Good luck to Marconi if he tried.’ Thought Munro looking to the French windows.

Content to have settled that matter, he leaned back in the rattan chair. Lifting the day-old Financial Times to read two-day old news.

The overhead fan stirred up mosquitos, sending them in a feeding frenzy for supple soft flesh below. Munro hears a buzzing sound and slaps the back of his neck.

And examines the bloody squashed corpse of the unfortunate insectoid vampire...

The Last Supper

The sun sat on the horizon like a fried egg. Sunny side up. Its orange yoke nestled on the shimmering sheen of the white albumen of the ocean. It would soon be dark. Phil looked out from the cliff top café to the South.

Africa laid beyond his view. Yet he felt as though something, or someone was pulling him there. A tingle of goosebumps erupts down his shins as he tries to shake the peculiar feeling. Michael reclined in the plastic chair beside him sipping on an imaginary coffee. One sugar.

His mind too, was focused beyond the Maghreb.

“You sure Marconi won’t be there?” Asked Phil anxiously.

“Yeah. He took off in a bit of hurry... Seemed to be an emergency of some sort. So our informant tells us.”

“Can we trust them? This, informant?”

“Let us hope so. We will soon find out... We still have a couple of hours...” Said Alistair checking his watch, “... Eat up, we may have some swimming to do.”

“Swimming?” Questioned Phil.

“You *can* swim?”

“Of course, but thought it would be above the water, rather than in it...” Phil casts his eyes to the shore below. Small waves crashed on the rocky outcrop. And then to nearest land fall some six miles away in the distance, “...That’s going to be a long swim if you don’t mind me say Mister McGee.”

“Don’t worry about that... There’ll be a boat waiting for us...” Comforted Alistair, “... Okay, let’s go over this again.” Pulling out a folded piece of paper.

Phil leans over the page and makes familiar landmarks.

“We enter here... The front door. Surprise them with a special delivery. Take out who ever answers and anyone else who gets in the way... Secure the ground floor and make our way to the basement... Find the concealed door to the vault... It should be on this wall, going by this plan.” A finger taps the spot, but first... We need to eliminate the guards.”

“That’s the easy part.” Informed Phil.

“I’m glad you think so.”

“It’s getting out I’m more concerned about.”

“Once those alarms are tripped, we’ll have the Police swarming all over the place in twenty minutes... That’s why the only way out, is down.” Suggested Alistair.

“You have a lot of confidence about that secret passageway Mister McGee.” Remarked Phil shaking his head with uncertainty. The line barely visible if it was a line at all.

“And where’s the exit?”

“Truth is, I just don’t know... That’s something we’re going to have to find ourselves. I doubt Marconi even knows about it... But by the layout of this plan, it should be about here.” His finger shifts to an invisible spot on the plan.

“Hope you’re right Mister McGee... I hope you’re right.” Responded Phil.

“You hungry?” Asked Alistair taking his mind away from the possible calamity.

“Is the Pope Catholic?” Responds Phil hungrily eyeing the menu.

Phil leans back in his chair, rubbing his stomach. His eyes had been bigger than his belly.

“Ah_” He moans, fingers press against his stomach as though help dislodge the meal.

“This might help.” Alistair pours wine into a glass.

“Think we should be drinking?”

“One won’t hurt, get it down you.”

“Cheers.” Toasted Phil.

The sun had retreated below the horizon and a full moon rose on the other, silhouetting Vesuvius in a soft saintly halo. The lunar glow romanticizing its beauty, luring the inhabitants below into a false sense of security. That all was well. What happened in the past was just an accident. And accidents happen from time to time.

Above them the cosmos. An ebony painted canvas of a million billion pin pricks. Radiating eternal divine light. A fraction of a fraction of a fraction of what is God allows us to witness. Like a tear in the cosmic umbrella, the Milky Way swept it’s wing to the heavens.

Alistair leaned back and rubbed his belly. Content to have eaten well. For it could well be his last. And sipped on the chardonnay as though it were water. He had almost forgotten he as on assignment. His mind had drifted to his son’s wedding. A day that he never really expected so soon. Time was catching up with him. One-minute Arthur was a carefree lad, the next, he was about to be married.

Then Michael pokes him in the ribs.

A sharp pang of wind catches Alistair unaware and he too groaned. Bringing him back to the small hilltop café he found himself. Thoughts of Arthur displaced by Marconi men that would be waiting for him.

“You okay?” Questioned Phil anxiously.

“All good...” Responds Alistair sipping a swallow of wine to wash away the pain, checking his watch again, “... Okay, another half hour and we go in... That will give us time to get there and set up.” Tapping the sports bag as though to suggest he had something inside.

Alistair peels off Euros to cover the meals and a generous tip. Using his wine glass as a paper weight. Both men stand and stretch their legs. Twisting torsos side to side as though they were about perform some physical feat. Patrons watched in amusement, chuckling quietly as though the two men go about stretching.

Alistair gathered his lumpy sports bag and Phil his duffle bag.

“You brought that old thing?” Alistair asked belatedly.

“Yeah, I thought it might come in handy with... You know what.” Responded Phil, looking about for eavesdropping ears.

“Hm... I suppose you’re right...” Conceded Alistair, seeing a hole in the bag, “... Is that what I think it is?”

“Souvenir curiosity of your friends at the safe house... Laptop took a bullet for us.”

“We better get going.”

Phil climbs aboard his scooter and pulls on his helmet.

‘Tap-tap.’ Alistair taps on the helmet, then gestures to follow him.

Vespa engines come to life. Singing a high-pitched soprano duet. Exhausts clattered like castanets. Billowing distinctive two-stroke fumes. Two red taillights faded into the distance.

Small white head lights punched thin white beams into the darkness. Barely lighting the narrow winding road ahead of them. Grand houses lined the streets behind high guarded walls.

Worrisome, silhouetted heads appear behind tall windows on hearing the scooters. Only to see the noisy voyagers go on their way.

Alistair led the way. Phil desperately trying to keep up. In the distance, a grandly lit home. Its features lit by flood lights. Accentuating the building's voluptuous crafted curves as though it were a Greek Goddess. Alistair raises a hand to and gestures Phil to pull over short of the gates. Out of sight of security cameras.

Killing the engines and lights.

The evening was deadfly quiet. The street empty, all but them. Street lights lit the darkness intermittently. A dog barks as though sensing someone beyond the walls. Then falls quiet. They wait. As though waiting for someone to appear.

Alistair dismounts and moves behind a large tree and gestures Phil to follow him.

From the sports bag Alistair pulled on a emblazoned courier jacket. And donned a matching courier cap. Then came out a clipboard, detailing a list of deliveries and signatures. Finally he pulled out a large, wrapped package.

Addressed to Marconi and too large to fit through the grills of the gate. Its face stamped in big red letters...

URGENT

Package for Marconi

“We set?” Asked Alistair.

“Set.” Acknowledged Phil shoving the Glock under his belt and securing the duffle bag over his shoulder.

“Okay... Stay back until I get through the gates, then follow me in... Watch your back.”

“Gotcha.”

Phil waits in the shadows. Eyes scan the street of people. It quiet. Almost too quiet. Cameras sat perched over gates, like gargoyles also eyeing the street for people. People who did not beyond.

Looking every part a courier delivery man, Alistair steps out of the darkness onto the sidewalk. A snub-nose revolver in his pocket. Restarting the scooter, revved the engine loudly, as though to wake the dead. Startling Phil as to what he was doing. Wary it would draw attention to them. But that is exactly what Alistair wanted. Gargoyle becks rotate and follow the itinerant noisy scooter moving towards the gates of the Villa. Lights appear behind darkened windows suspicious as to what was causing the commotion. But soon dismissed the intrusion as a harmless courier. Wary gargoyles returned their snubbed nosed becks back to their own nests.

Exactly what Alistair anticipated they would do.

Pulling up in front of the gates, he revved the engine again and again.

‘Beep-Beep! Beep-Beep!’ Sounding a horn for good measure.

Cameras turned and focused on the capped individual dismounting. Seeing the man pull an oversized brown paper package from a bag. Alistair holds the package up to the light pretending to read the address. On seeing the cameras he holds up the package as though offering a sacrifice to the gods that dwelled within.

Perched on high, white metal crows with single black eyes, follow the courier as he approached the side gate. Alistair checked his watch, as though he were in a hurry. And presses the gate bell repeatedly, *‘Ring-ring! Ring-ring!’*

Then rang it again, *‘Ring-ring!’*, as though wanting to rile those within to silence him.

Phil watched on from the shadows in amusement. Ready to make his move.

A light appears within the Villa. Someone was home. A man in a dark suit appears and approaches gate. Alistair steps back, acting as if he was about to shove the package back into the bag and leave, when the man in the dark suit calls out to catch his attention.

“Hey you! Wait up.”

“I don’t have all night.” Alistair complains.

“What you got there?” The guard asked anxiously.

“A package... A package for a... *Marconi?* ... Does he live here?” Alistair played dumb.

“Maybe does, maybe he doesn’t... Give it here!” The guard instructs callously.

“You have to sign for it... It a special delivery... Artefact, or something... So the contents say.” Informs Alistair, shaking the box and hearing it rattle inside.

“Hey! Be careful with that! ...” The guard warns, “... I’ll sign for it.” Reaching for the clipboard and pen through the iron bars.

Pushing the clipboard back to Alistair who examines the indecipherable scrawl momentarily before shoving it back into the bag. It was apparently obvious the package would not fit through

the bars of the gates. But Alistair played along nonetheless and turning the rectangular package sideways, shoving and trying to force between the bars.

“Hey, be careful with that!” Warned the guard noticing the large red fragile stamp.

“Sorry, not my job... I’m just here to deliver the thing... Maybe another time.” Joked Alistair turning about to the scooter.

“Hey, where you going? Stay there! ... Just wait here.” Instructed the burly guard fumbling for keys from a pocket.

Finding the one he wanted, jiggled it into the lock. Turning the heavy bolt, it sounds a resounding clunk. A hand reaches for a bar and pulls the heavy gate inwards. Exposing the guard to Alistair now stepping forward as though hand the man the package.

Which he did with one hand. And holding the snub nose revolver pointed at the guard with the other.

“Shh! ...” Warned Alistair, holding a finger to his lips, “...On your knees.”

Phil appears behind him ready for the unexpected.

The guard knells and Alistair pressing the barrel into the back of the man’s neck. Phil was worried what Alistair would do next. Unsure if he were about to blow the man’s brains out. Surely, he was not a cold-hearted killer. The man’s life flashing before his eyes.

Suddenly the man flinches.

Feeling a sharp pain in the side of his neck. He thinks he sees someone standing in front of him. Watching him.

“Help me...” The guard pleads lethargically, before keeling over face first into the bed of flowers.

But there was nothing Michael could do. It was not the man’s time.

“Sleep.” Whispers Alistair carefully pocketing the hypodermic needle.

“That was handy... Got any more of those?” Asked Phil curiously.

“Just the one unfortunately... He’ll be out for an hour or so... Long enough not to be any trouble. But I can’t speak for the others inside...” Alistair looks up at the camera’s now staring straight at him, “... Showtime! Be ready.”

“Gotcha your back, Mister McGee.” Said Phil leading the way along the crushed shell path towards the Villa’s entrance.

Spotlights come to life and flood the garden with daylight.

“They know we’re here.” Said Alistair.

“You reckon?” Said Phil. Veins beginning to surge with adrenaline.

“This way, we can get in the back.” Instructed Alistair crouching and hurrying ahead.

Angry voices sounded within the building. Phil looked up to the windows and saw moving shadows. Three, maybe four men. And one asleep in the garden. Still too many for his liking, but it was too late to back down now.

Behind them, they hear a door closing. Someone was on their tail. Seeing a lone guard approaching.

“Don’t worry about me... I’ll catch up.” Informed Phil, gesturing for Alistair to go ahead.

“Don’t be too long.” Jested Alistair, scurrying around the corner from sight.

Slipping behind a hedge he waited.

Hoping the man had not seen him. Lights casting the man’s shadow along the path. And the gun in his hand. Phil waits for the man to almost upon him and leaped out at him. Knocking the man over and sending the gun flying into garden. The man quickly gets to his feet and reaches

for a knife. Flicking it open to expose a lethal polished blade. Rushing at him, the man lashes wildly with the blade. Only to be deflected and smashed with a fist in the side of his head for his troubles.

“You’ll going to have to do better than that old man.” Phil informed, bracing himself for another onslaught.

Again the man lunged him. And again Phil pushed him away. Delivering another blow to the head. Blood from a cut over the man’s eye now streaming down over his face and over his white shirt. The eye twitched as though stung and aggravated. The man comes at him slowly, throwing a punch and then a stab. Phil threw out block after block. Wearing the man down.

Again and again he came.

Again and again Phil defensively blocked instinctively. His training paying off. The man panted for breath while Phil had barely broken a sweat. The man lunged at him again. Anticipating he would, Phil knocked the man off balance, catching his arm and twisting behind him in acute pain. The knife falls to the ground. And delivered a quick sharp blow to the back of the man’s head. Rendering him unconscious falling to the ground in a crumpled heap.

With no time to waste, Phil took off in search of Alistair.

Rounding the corner discovers a flight of stairs that led up to a Loggia. Phil looked up. Unsure what to expect. It was all too quiet.

Had Alistair bought it?

Quietly tiptoeing up the stairs, peered his head over the wall to an empty darkened patio. Lit by dim foot lights. Carved heads on stone columns lined the Loggia. Thinking he sees someone in the shadows. Eyes make out a darkened human form. Standing very still. Lifeless. As though in wait for him. The place gave him the chills. Moving slowly towards the darkened solitary figure. Eyes adjusted to the darkness, then noticed a soft sheen reflecting from the carved stone figurine.

Sitting quietly in thought.

‘Phew.’ Sighed Phil with relief.

Stone busts of Horus, Hypnos, Medusa. Tiberius. Their heads on pedestals. Frozen in time. For eternity.

Then as though to be caught napping he hears a crashing sound from within the Villa.

‘Alistair!’ Speculates Phil seeing a lit room in the distance.

Stone eyes watch Phil hurrying past.

Arriving at an open door to discover Alistair being restrained and beaten by two men. Heads turn to see Phil filling the doorway.

“What took you?” Asked Alistair, thinking the end was nigh.

“Taking in the view...” Lied Phil, “... Need a hand?”

“Nah, I got this.” Remarked Alistair, sending his boot into the groin of the man opposite.

Tumbling him backwards. Buckled over and groaning a gut retching moan in pain. Breaking the restraining hold of the other, turned about and throws a heavy right fist to the man’s jaw. Stunning the man momentarily. Before he shook the blow off, and delivers a hefty punch to Alistair’s stomach and another to the head for his troubles.

“This one is yours...” Instructed Alistair turning about to take on the man about to get to his feet. Soon to have a heavy blow to the jaw and fall back down again. Seemly unconscious. “...Stay down.” He warned.

“Thank you very much Mister McGee, I thought you’d never ask.” Grinned Phil stepping toward the burly gentleman standing over him.

Alistair collapsed into a comfy lounge chair to rest. It felt nice. He really did not want to move. His body battered from the beating. He would sit this dance. Placing his feet on the fallen man as though he were a human footstool.

And watched Phil do what he did best. Fight.

The man throws a punch only to have Phil duck out of the way in time. Pivoting on a leg Phil swiftly delivers a penetrating kick to the man’s rib’s, causing him to grimace with pain. Steadying himself the man stands upright, extending his full height.

Towering over Phil as though to try to intimidate him.

“You don’t scare me big boy.” Remarked Phil, holding his ground.

He had ditched in his bar brawling ways in training. Acquiring skill and technique. No longer would he have to rely on a lucky punch. He knew the man’s next move before he made them. Angered, the goliath came at him. Hands reach out like bear claws as though to tear at Phil. Only to have the man thrown to the floor by his own bulky momentum. In one swift movement, Phil twisted the man’s arm upward. Immobilizing him in acute pain and delivers a blow to the back of the man’s head. The body falls limp. Releasing the unresponsive man to the floor, he turned about to see Alistair grinning. Cradling a revolver on his lap.

“You good?” Phil asked, seeing him looking comfortable.

“Yeah... You? ...” Alistair flinches pulling himself upright, “... Here give me a hand...” Handing him a long black zip-ties.

“Too easy... Anymore?” Asked Phil looking about the room, expecting men to appear at the doorways.

“If there were, they’d be here already... But that doesn’t mean they haven’t alerted the police or security.”

“How much time you think we have?” Asked Phil anxiously.

“Twenty minutes if we’re lucky.” Securing the face down man.

“There’s one outside, what about him?” Recalls the assailant.

“Leave him, we don’t have time to go back...” Instructs Alistair, “... Follow me.” His revolver pointed the way.

Phil follows behind like a duckling behind its mother. Checking vacant rooms lined with strange antiques from another time.

“Down here...” Gestured Alistair to a stairwell that led to a lower level shrouded in complete darkness.

Hands scour the wall for a light switch. But fail to find one. Gingerly they step into the darkened abyss. With only the railing to guide them.

Then suddenly a bright light appears as though from no-where...

We might have Visitors

“Phil? You brought your mobile?” Asked Alistair surprised.

The light illuminating the room in a dim glow.

“Wouldn’t leave home without it, Mister McGee.”

“Just as well... Over there.” Alistair spots a switch on the far wall.

Phil flicks the switch. Fluorescent ceiling tubes stutter and flicker as though gasping for breath and coming to back to life.

Exposing Marconi’s private den.

Papers stacked neatly on a large dark wooden desk. Walls lined with small paintings in oversized gilded frames accentuating their worth.

“Where’s the vault?” Asked Phil expecting to see a large vault with combination locks.

“Behind here... I think.” Informed Alistair looking directly at a large metal cabinet.

“You think?” Remarked Phil confused by the sturdy cabinet.

Scratch marks on wooden floorboards gave away a secret.

Alistair examines the bulky metal tombstone that needed to be rolled away. Running fingers behind the cabinet as though he were reading brail. Feeling for a lever that would trigger the doors release. Senses tell him it was what he was looking for.

A finger catches on something suspicious.

“Got it.” Informs Alistair anxiously.

‘Click.’

The cabinet begins to move sideways. Metal casters rasp on the filed floor leaving tell-tale tracks.

Phil looked up, as though he thought he heard a noise coming from above.

“Quick inside... We don’t have much time...” Warned Alistair hurrying inside the opening of the lit vault. Walls lined with shelves and glass cabinets littered with artefacts. A simple wooden table stood at the centre, “... Close it behind you.”

Phil pulls the heavy cabinet back into place.

‘Click.’ The latch catches again.

“That won’t keep them out.” Remarked Phil.

“We’ll have to figure a way that will... Lodge something under those rollers.” He instructed.

Phil glances about the vault, looking for something he could wedge beneath cabinet, then spies exactly what would work. A Viking axe, centuries old. Laying inside a glass display stand. The door appeared locked, and Phil did not have a key. So, he improvised. Using the handle of the Glock.

“Sorry.” He apologized for the shattering noise of breaking glass.

“He probably has insurance for that.” Quipped Alistair.

“Perfect...” Said Phil wedging the ancient metal axe head and elongated wooden handle beneath the large cabinet. Giving it a good kick, secures to tightly into place, and giving the cabinet a shove to see if it would hold, “... Made for the job.” Standing back to admire his handy work.

“It won’t hold them forever...” Alistair inspects the jerry-fix, “... We better find what we came for... You start over there. I’ll start over here.”

“What exactly does they look like? ... They all look the same?” Remarked Phil eyeing display cases of metal crosses and chalices.

“*You’ll know when you see them...* Trust me.” Reciting what the Cardinal had told him.

A single overhead bulb lit the small room. Casting dark shadows of the two men to the dust covered stone floor. Alistair looked about for the switch. And could not see one. That would be the least of their worries if they were caught inside.

Methodically Phil inspected the orderly lined with relics. Small cardboard boxes containing fragments of pottery and pieces of corroded metal that looked like rusted nails. Nothing jumped out at him. He moved to the next shelf down. Alistair comes across an ornate silver chest adorned with coloured stones. Curiosity gets the better of him and he places the chest onto the table.

His heart racing, breath quickening, fingers fumble with the delicate latch.

Lifting the lid ever so slowly as though he were opening Pandora’s Box. Half expecting to have screaming demons come flying out and shafts of violet light. Nothing. He peered into the dark velvet cavity. Nestled at its centre as though a precious jewel, a simple wooden chalice. Incongruent to its confinement.

“If think we have the Chalice.” Announced Alistair. Standing back in awe and wonder. It may well be a fake, but its plainness suggested otherwise, “... Pass me the duffle bag.”

Alistair carefully lifts the wooden chalice from the chest. It felt heavy, as though it were weighed down by the passage of time. Or the Sins of Man. There were so many.

And places the benign looking Chalice ever so carefully in to the bullet riddle bag.

“We could take the chest.” Suggested Phil naively.

“We’re not thieves Phil... We only take what belongs to the Church.” Informed Alistair.

“Read you Mister McGee.”

Then as though by chance, or divine guidance, Phil spies something ugly and disfigured inside a glass cabinet. All by itself. As though it did not belong. Crudely forged and hammered into shape from pieces of chain that had once bound a Lamb.

“This one...” Said Phil, unsure what he was looking at, but certain in his heart he had discovered Saint Augustine’s cross. Michael stood next to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. The more he looked at it, the more certain he became, “... This is it.”

“Are you sure?” Asked Alistair looking at the disfigured cross.

“Absolutely... I have a feeling.” Declared Phil.

“A feeling eh? ... Well, I’ll take that... Best get going then.”

Just then stifled voices sound on the other side of the metal cabinet. Loud ugly voices. Barking and growling like savage dogs wanting to get inside and tear the trespassers apart.

“You think they know we’re here?” Whispered Phil.

The cabinet shakes and clatters violently as efforts are made to push it open. Banging thuds of fists against metal resonate within the stone vault.

“They do now.” Remarked Alistair.

Phil gauged the strength of the cabinet. The axe firmly wedged place,

“So, where’s this exit?” He asked looking about the four grey stone walls.

“I don’t know... But it has to be here somewhere.” Pondered Alistair eyeing the walls, now beginning to doubt what he had seen on the plan.

Without a back way out, they would have to leave the same way they came. And who knew the number of men there were now on the other side.

'Bang! Bang! Bang!' A heavy fist pounds on the metal cabinet blocking the entrance.

"Vieni fuori! Vieni fuori! ... Sappiamo che ci sei! (Come out! Come out! ... We know you're in there!)" A loud livid voice hollers.

'Bang! Bang! Bang!' Came another pounding of fists.

"Non c'è via d'uscita! ... Sei intrappolato lì dentro! ... Arrenditi ora finché puoi ancora! (There's no way out! ... You're trapped in there! ... Give up now while you still can!)" The burly voice instructs, "... Abbiamo tutta la notte! Ha-ha-ha! (*We have all night!*)"

"What are they saying Mister McGee?" Asked Phil frantically.

Alistair understood some of the Italian.

"Not a lot... They won't dare try to fire through that thing, lest they risk damaging Marconi's precious relics..." Informed Alistair, "... They're prepared wait for us to give up... Hmm."

"What are you thinking Mister McGee?"

"Seems to me they know nothing about the passage out of here."

"But where is it?" Looking about in walls again for the hidden exit.

"It has to be here, somewhere... Check the walls, floor, ceiling... We have to find it before they change their minds."

Laughter erupts on the other side of the cabinet. As if someone had told a joke or suggested something sinister. Then there was silence. Phil looked to Alistair. And Alistair looked at Phil. Minds rationalizing what was happening on the other side. Suddenly the vault fell into complete and utter darkness.

More laughers erupt on the other side.

"Sogni d'oro ragazzi! (Sweet dreams boys!)" A voice calls out.

The sound of heavy footsteps marching up a staircase suggest they were leaving.

"They're gone?" Questioned Phil, hands feeling for the table. Unsure which was up, which way was down.

"You have your mobile?" Asked Alistair anxiously.

"Yeah, yeah..." Phil frisked himself. Patting down pockets as to where he could have placed the phone, "... A hand snags the rectangular brick in his pocket, "... Got it." And activated it to life.

Catching Alistair by surprise, a magnified strong beam of white light illuminated the ancient vault.

"Hope you have enough battery life on that thing." Said Alistair.

Phil checks the power status bar.

"Half a tank Mister McGee."

"Good enough for me... Here, help me shift this." Instructed Alistair taking hold of a large wooden cabinet sitting against the wall.

Phil grabs the other side of the cabinet leans his shoulder into it. Grunting and groaning with each successive shove. Feet slide on the stone floor struggling to get grip.

"Again! ..." Instructs Alistair for another hefty shove, "...Aaah_!"

Slowly the cabinet moved away from the wall. Crawling like a snail.

"One more should do it!... Aaah_!" Alistair strained pulling on it as Phil pushed, "... That's enough." He pants exhausted by the sudden exertion.

"You want to take a rest Mister McGee?"

“We don’t have time Phil. Every minute counts.”

“Copy that Mister McGee.” And with that Phil gave the cabinet a final shove like an angry bull and moved the cabinet another couple of inches.

Alistair shines the mobile behind the cabinet. Thinking that if the exit was not there, it was not anywhere.

“Ain’t that a pretty sight?” Remarks Phil seeing a large concrete patch on the wall.

“Thank God for that... I didn’t like our chances going out the front.” Said Alistair, “... We do have one problem though.” Staring at the cemented exit way.

“What’s that, Mister McGee?” Asked Phil curiously.

“What do we use to break through it?”

“I have an idea Mister McGee... But it comes at a price.”

“What would that be?” Alistair asked inquisitively.

Phil shifts his eyes to the Viking axe wedging the cabinet in place.

“Shit... I see what you mean... (*sigh*)...” Alistair contemplates the alternatives, there were not any, but he did have an idea, but it was all in the timing.

“What are you thinking Mister McGee? You have that look in your eyes.” Remarked Phil suspiciously.

“We need that axe, and there’s nothing else to wedge the doorway in place... If we push this cabinet over there to block the entrance... It might buy us some time... You ready?”

Pushing the table over on its side to make room, Phil has an idea and breaks off a wooden leg. Alistair reads his thoughts.

“Good thinking... Let’s do this... On three... One... Two... Three_!”

“Aaah_!” The two men groan. The cabinet rasps loudly, heavy feet dragging on stone floor.

“Again! Aaah_! ...” Phil cries out, wanting to keep the momentum going, “...Again! Aaah_!” He cries out.

“Almost there, Mister McGee... Grab the axe. I’ll wedge it with this...” Holding up the detached table leg... I can finish it from here.” Instructs Phil.

“Okay, but we have to be quick.” Warns Alistair.

Phil wrestles the ancient Viking axe from beneath the metal cabinet, handing the heavy weapon to Alistair.

“Perfect.” Declares Alistair, examining the spiked sided head.

Phil wedges the table leg into place. Not perfect. But it would hold long enough. Leaning his back up against the massive wooden cabinet, knees bend and straighten with all the brute strength he could muster.

“Aaah_! ...” He groans, straining to shift the trojan cabinet into place. And again, “...Aaah_! ...” And again, “...Aaah_!”

Shadows danced against the walls, as Phil cried out.

Leaving men on the other side, wondering what was happening inside. What pricked their ears up was the sudden sound of banging. Of metal on stone. Voices rouse within the den and the light comes back to life. The vault is filled with light again.

“Aaah_!” Phil cries out, he was almost there, one more shove would do it, “...Aaah_!”

‘*Thud.*’ The cabinet sits up against the entrance.

Phil sits panting and exhausted leaning against the cabinet.

“Good job Phil. Get some rest.”

“Thanks Mister McGee.” Phil pants heavily.

“Ci fai lì dentro? (*What you doing in there?*)” A voice asked angrily.

“Non ti dispiace. (*Never you mind.*)” Uttered Alistair back, indifferent if they could hear him.

‘Bang! Bang! Bang!’ A fist pounds on the cabinet outside.

Alistair was not in the mood for small talk. And continued to chip away at the sealed opening. The ancient mortar crumbled beneath his hefty blows of the heavy Viking axe. Falling away to expose an opening to the secret passageway.

‘Bang! Bang! Bang!’ Fists beat the metal cabinet blocking the entrance.

‘Boom! – Clang!’ A shot is fired unexpectedly. Puncturing the metal and splintering the wooden cabinet.

Startling Phil leaning up against. An eye peers through the bullet hole, only to have its view blocked by another looking back at it. Rowdy voices call out from the other side. The metal cabinet begins to shake violently as men heave and shove to move it out if the way.

“How we are going over there, Mister McGee? ... We might have visitors.” Warned Phil...

Just a Scratch

“Almost there... Umh! ...” The spiked axe strikes the crumbling wall, and again, “... Umh! ...” Hands pull away clumps of mortar, “... One more... Umh! ... That should do it.”

Panting, Alistair wipes the sweat from his brow.

“You go first Mister McGee... I’ll be right behind you!”

“Okay. It won’t take them long to break in... We have to move fast... God knows where it leads.” Alistair stairs into the blackened passageway.

A surge of cold damp air rushes past him as though a ghost escaping its captivity.

“The mobile can light the way.” Said Phil, reaching for the Glock from his belt.

“Don’t forget what we came for.” Tossing the duffle bag to Phil for safe keeping.

Then, like a sudden thunder bolt, a shot fired from the other side of the cabinet rang out within the small confinement of the vault.

Alistair stands frozen, stunned, then looked to his shoulder. A small tear in the jacket leaked a red ink. Staining the pale cloth with blood. Gasping he fell to his knees.

Flinching with pain.

“Aaah! Shit!” He cursed, pressing a hand against the wound.

Instinctively, Phil unloads half a dozen shots into the wooden cabinet and out the other side. Sending Marconi’s henchmen hurrying for cover. Letting them know they were not going down without a fight.

“You okay Mister McGee.” Asked Phil anxiously.

“Yeah... Just a scratch.” He lied, grimacing with pain.

“It doesn’t look like a scratch.”

“I’ll be fine.... We don’t have much time... Follow me.”

Staggering to his feet, steadies himself against the wall. The shook beginning to wear off. Endorphins beginning to numb the pain. He pulls the revolver from a pocket.

“You better give me that... I’ll have your back, Mister McGee.” Throwing the duffle bag over his shoulder.

“I know you do Phil.”

Alistair crawls into hole in the wall. Holding out the mobile to illuminate the narrow passageway that spiraled into the ebony bowels of the mountain. Voices sound on the other side of the entrance. The cabinet begins to rock and shake more than before. The table leg would not hold for long. Phil unleashes another volley of shots at the wooden cabinet. Sending men diving for cover.

“Adios Amigos”. Informed Phil turning to catch up with Alistair down the stairwell.

In the darkness, feet fumble for steps beneath him.

Perhaps he had left his run a bit late. A head in the distance, a faint glow of the torch. Dancing side to side. Behind him, the riled voices of several agitated men after them. Alistair shines the light back up the passageway, blinding Phil momentarily. Illuminating steps before him. And he quickly catches up.

“Lead the way Mister McGee. We only have minutes on them. Maybe less.”

Salty cold damp air filled the air as they descended deeper and deeper into the mountain. Round and round. The eternal steps spiraled downward. Behind them voices became louder. They had gotten through. It was only a matter of time before the caught up.

“Aaah.” Alistair moaned with pain.

“Wait up Mister McGee. Catch your breath. Let me have a look at it.” Offers Phil, “... We have time.”

Reluctantly Alistair submitted and leaned against the chiseled stone wall.

“Hold the light up.” Suggested Phil to get a better look.

“You’re lucky Mister McGee. Seemed to have gone straight through. The bleeding has stopped. That’s a good sign. How you are feeling?”

“Like shit. You?”

“Great.” Chirped Phil.

“I thought you’d say that... Let’s go.” Ordered Alistair.

“How much further?”

“Not much.” Lied Alistair.

The raucous voices behind them grew closer. They were gaining on them.

The pair spiral further into the abys. Like a nightmare that never ended. Going around in endless circles. Time lost all meaning in the darkness. Until the mobile torch began to falter and the battery ran flat.

“Not now.” Cursed Alistair.

Ahead of them they could hear the sound of crashing water. The smell of the ocean rushed up the passageway passed them like a tidal draft. Venting the chamber. As if by chance, or a miracle, the torch flickered to life again. Michael watched on.

“We don’t have much time.” Warned Alistair.

Voices echoed closer.

Torch light danced like ghosts over the walls and ceiling. The sound of the crashing waves sounded close. Suddenly Alistair halts in his tracks. Steps ended abruptly as waves lapped over the landing. Surging up and down, washing over their feet. Crashing against rocks inside a large grotto. Moonlight glistened beneath the surface, signaling the way out.

“Can you swim?” Asked Phil, worried about Alistair’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry about me... Worry about those guys.” Warned Alistair seeing torch light appear in the distance up the stair way.

‘Boom! Boom! Boom!’ Phil fires a volley of shots causing the henchmen to back off.

Shots are fired back. Bullets ricochet off the side of the walls. Narrowing missing the pair.

‘Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!’ Phil empties Alistair’s revolver back up the stairwell.

“What doesn’t kill them, will deafen them.” Remarked Alistair, removing his jackets and kicking off shoes.

“Go! ...” Instructs Phil, “...I’ll catch up. I’ll hold them off... Go!”

Alistair dives into the surging swells.

Feet kick frantically to compensate the debilitated limb throbbing with pain. Favoring his good arm, he swims towards the underwater opening. Grimacing with every stroke. Looking back to see Phil in a fire fight. Bullets spit flashes of light from the barrel. The grotto filled with thunder and lightning. Until finally he had emptied the Glock’s magazine.

It was time to leave.

Alistair had gotten a fair distance ahead of him. Knowing the men would not follow, Phil dove into the water. Deep, so as not to be seen. Hidden in the distant shadows, Alistair clung to a rock. Phil had yet to surface. Heads appear at the base of the steps. Torches siren beams of light about the strange cavern. Discs of light dance across the surface in search of the escapees.

Nothing. No one.

A man empties his gun aimlessly into the water. Creating violent traces of bubbles as the bullets whistled past Phil. Unbeknown to the men above. Unwilling to drown themselves for Marconi. They had lost the chase. Their foe had gotten away.

The men waited.

Hoping someone would surface. But no one did. Even Alistair began to worry. Bobbing up and down like a cork. Successive rolling swells tossing him against the rocky wall. Desperately he tries to keep hold with one hand.

Seeing Alistair's jacket marred with blood floated on the surface the men concluded whoever it was drowned or was dead. Giving up the chase the men retreated back up the passageway. It would be a long climb up. A climb none of them wanted to make. Fearful in their minds as to what Marconi would say when he heard the news of the break in.

Alistair waits for the voices to fade and lights to dim before swimming back. Suddenly, Phil emerged like a whale breaking the surface.

Spouting water and gasping for breath.

"Phil. Thank God." Exclaimed Alistair.

"Another minute, and I would have been a goner..." Phil admitted, "... You okay?"

"Yeah." Alistair lies, blood beginning to leach again from the wound.

"Better get you out of here... Think you can make it?" Asked Phil seeing the entrance to the cavern.

"I'll have to."

"Let me go first. I'll see how far it is."

"Okay, don't forget to come back."

"Won't leave you behind Mister McGee. You have a wedding to attend remember."

"I'll wait here then, shall I?"

"You do that Mister McGee... Don't go away." Quips Phil disappearing beneath the surface.

Seconds seemed like minutes and minutes like an hour.

Moonlight light filtered through the entrance. Filling the grotto with a ghostly blue glow. Waves lapped against rocky walls adding to the eerie enclosure. Alistair imagined the treasure that had been smuggled through there. Michael stood on the ridge above him. Bathing the cavern with divine light. He had been in this grotto before. With cut-throat pirates that would murder each other over a gold ducat. But that was centuries ago. Their bones now washing back and forth across the ocean bed. Their souls less murderous and at peace.

Suddenly Phil surfaces before him.

"Well how far is it? Can we make it?" Asked Alistair anxiously. Wondering if he could hold his breath for a length of time. Less so with the wounded shoulder.

"You'll make it..." Answered Phil holding up a length of rope, "... I'll tie this about you and hold on. Give three tugs when you're ready."

"I don't understand, who's out there?"

"Just friends of ours." Grinned Phil.

Alistair secured the rope about his waist.

“What about you?” Frets Alistair.

“Sorted...” Dismissed Phil lifting a length of rope from the water already tied about his waist, “... You ready?”

Alistair nods, and Phil tugs the rope three times. The rope goes tense, and they find themselves being dragged swiftly along.

“Here we go!” Warned Phil a deep breath before the entrance.

Surrendering to the deafening emulsion of the ocean the pair submersed themselves beneath the surface.

Jagged rocks rushed over them. One untimely swell and they would find themselves being shredded upon them. The blue translucent glow of the entrance growing larger and brighter. Alistair was not sure how much long he could hold his breath. He was coming to his limit and beginning to surrender to the compulsion to breath.

Then appearing above him through the waters like an angelic light, the moon glistened in all its fullest. And then some. They had made it. Breaking through the surface of choppy water. Splashing arms and gasping for breath.

“You okay Mister McGee?”

“(Gasp!) ... All good Phil... Aah_.” He splattered, before falling unconscious.

“Mister McGee! Mister McGee!” Exclaimed Phil, frantically signaling the inflatable to circle back.

Men pull Alistair’s limp body into the boat and lay him down. Bringing him about before attending to his wound.

“That should hold... You’ll be fine Sir.” An Agent informed him dressing the wound.

“Stay down and rest Mister McGee...” Instructs Phil, “... It’s over... We did it.” Patting the duffle bag on the floor of the inflatable.

“I’m getting too old for this.” Lamented Alistair.

Morphine shot numbed the pain of the jolting inflatable ride.

Drifting in and out of consciousness and double vision. For a moment he thought he saw someone else in the boat. A man dressed in black. Shining black shoes. Looking out of place. The man smiled at him.

Then suddenly there was a flash

Marmalade, Toast and Tea

Marconi had had a restless night. Disturbed by a call he had received regarding an apparent burglary. And the discovery of a secret passageway that led beneath the Villa. His men informing him they were at a loss as to what may have been taken. Informing him of a silver chest had been found empty. Marconi knew immediately what had been taken.

And by whom.

Informing the police of the identity of the thief, let alone what had been stolen, would stir a hornet's nest of questions he would rather not answer.

The thief would declare himself to be sitting in the Vatican the whole time. As for the Chalice, it had been stolen from another collector years before. His men had put up a good fight. With several being wounded. Albeit by ricocheting bullets. What goes around comes around he rationalized and dismissed the unfortunate incident.

He had a more pressing urgency on his mind.

He had gone too far to return home empty handed. The Chalice would keep for another day. Musing in his mind that it was probably fake. The Letter was but a thousand miles away to the North-East. The Cardinal was in Rome, nearly four thousand miles away to the North.

Marconi chuckled to himself.

This time he had gotten the jump on the Cardinal.

Unlike himself, the sun had yet to rise from its bed. Barely 4:00AM, the streets below were quiet. A dog barked in the distance. The call for prayers would not before another hour. Not that Marconi was one for prayer. Though on occasion he would utter a prayer beneath his breath seeking forgiveness. God would ask him to speak up. Only to have the lamb fall silent.

There was a knock at the door. One of his men enters.

"It's time, if you want to get ahead of the Scotsman." The man informed him.

"I'll be right down, have the vehicle ready."

"Sir." Acknowledged the man.

Marconi inspects himself in the mirror.

Dressed in the finest of cotton suits, a white fedora hat, and polished white leather shoes. A dark wooded walking cane, complete with silver handle completed the tailored ensemble. Looking every inch an Italian gentleman about to go on an afternoon drive through the countryside.

At the entrance of the Hotel, a large white SUV awaited him. Its polished surface sparkled beneath foyer's lights. Tinted windows concealed the interior cabin. Its roof laden with water and fuel tanks, tied down with ropes and straps. A man stands holding open a rear door and Marconi climbs into the spacious interior and leather seats. Feeling a rush of cold air-conditioned venting onto the sidewalk. A pleasant change from the stale morning air. Interior lights contrast the dark exterior as he made himself comfortable in the seat. Closing the door, the cabin darkens. Tapping the driver on the shoulder with his cane to proceed.

Marconi looked up at the Hotel, knowing he had the jump on the Scotsman still sleeping soundly in his bed.

The SUV pulled onto the main road that would take it out of the capital and into no man's land. White head lights punch into the morning darkness. Parked some distance back from the Hotel, a dilapidated white Toyota Ute that sat in wait beneath a dead streetlight. Native occupants hidden in the shadows of the night. White pupils and teeth contrasted in their darkened skin. The vehicle comes to life. Growling its diesel engine it pulled away from the curb. And rushed in pursuit of its prey. Nudging aside other rusting corpuscles on arterial flow. Keeping a watchful distance.

They waited for their opportunity to pounce.

The sun crawled from its celestial crib.

Sending shafts of eternal light seeping beneath the distant horizon to color the morning sky. Stirring the muddy dark waters of the night with the crystal-clear waters of the encroaching day. From tall Minarets about the city, speakers' siren.

Calling the faithful to prayers.

The constant wailing, awaking an infidel from his slumber. He had tossed and turned most of the night before succumbing to exhaustion. A pale mesh veil suspended from the four posted bed, shrouded the infidel.

Munro's eyes stutter open, only to close again. Deliriously thinking he was in his castle overlooking the River Ness. Though his body craved for sleep, his mind told him he had to be somewhere. And with that, he sat upright. Sliding legs over the side of the bed. Feet feel cold wooden floorboards as toe's curl and stretch.

Stretching, he loosens the stiffness from his corpse.

"Umh." He grumbled, taking his body to the shower.

Reappearing sometime later draped in a white bath robe and looking refreshed.

There is a quiet knock at the door, and it opens.

A servant balancing a silver tray on one hand walked in and places it on a table on a balcony table. A folded morning paper lay beside a porcelain cup of tea. On a plate, two slices of toast, and beside that a porcelain bowl of small orange marmalade from Dundee. Which Munro had brought along with him. There were some home comforts that could not be bought.

The aroma of fresh toast filled the room.

"Thank you very much." Munro dismissed the servant.

And watches him leave as though suspicious of him. He was of course a stranger in a foreign land. Money would only go so far, his men less so. Looking out to the Niger river that flowed in the distance. Tempting as it was, the river boat would take days to reach Timbuktu. The plane had mysteriously been immobilized, as if by an act of God. It made no sense why it should suddenly fail. Now of all times. Michael grinned as he sat watching on. Drinking Earl Grey tea and chewing on marmalade toast.

Inhaling deeply, he takes a sip of the Earl Grey tea, feels reinvigorated. As though he were still at home. He hears a buzzing sound behind him, and a pinprick on the back of his neck. A hand slaps the pest, killing it instantly. Its soul departing this world and entering the next.

"Bastard." Protested Munro crossing himself as though to seek forgiveness for causing the pest's demise before buttering a slice of toast and spreading a thick layer of the chucky marmalade over the it.

The sun breaks the horizon, sending the first rays of light across the land. As the glowing advance of the dawn chased the fleeing night across the sky. Like a dog chasing its own tail.

Cocks crowed as if to fill the void left by the now silent Minarets. A bark barks. From the pavements below life was beginning to stir.

Drawing his thoughts to Marconi. He pondered his where abouts. And wondered to what extent Marconi would go to secure the relic that that brought them both so far away from home. He had heard rumors of Marconi's misfortunes at Naples. Ending in a bloody fire and leaving him empty handed. And wondered if Braun was a foot. His network of informants had been silent about him. Where there was smoke, there was always fire.

Nostril twitch as though smelling for Braun's presence.

A knock at the door, breaks his thoughts. One of his men enters to remind him it was time to get moving if the wanted to reach Timbuktu before midnight. Munro nods as to say he understood.

"Have the vehicle waiting outside. I won't be long." Dismissing the man.

Checking his watch. Midnight? It was barely 5:27AM.

He would need his strength for the sixteen-hour journey into the heart of North Africa. If it had a heart. Few survived in this desolate land. The river Niger would be their guiding path East. So long as they did not wander too far from its rejuvenating waters, they were safe.

Without water, nothing lived for long.

Munro takes a bite of the toast caked with marmalade and butter. Jaws chew rhythmically up and down, side to side, like a cow chewing cud. Before taking a swallow of tea to wash first bite down. Swallowing hard on the now lukewarm tea. Teeth savage to bite into the tough cold toast. Jaws chomped up and down, side to side. The marmalade now less appealing. Crumbs fall over a napkin. Brushing them off to the floor as he stood to leave.

Climbing into the English Land Rover that had lost its shine. Dulled by wind and sand. Its roof laden with water tanks and fuel. A door closes behind him. Cocooning him inside, with his men. Roughed and ill-prepared to the African continent. Unshaven and sweating profusely. Dark glasses covered their eyes. Irritated by mosquitos that feed on their single malt blood.

Driving from the Hotel entrance the Land Rover joined the building morning traffic existing the city. Munro made himself comfortable for the three-hour drive to their first destination, Segou. That would have them travel along a paved double lane tar-sealed road.

After that, it would be dirt roads. If that.

Wondering how Marconi was faring. Reception having informed him he had checked out an hour or so earlier. Unconcerned, he was happy for Marconi to lead the way. An hour could always be made up here. Or lost there.

'Fortune favored the brave.' Thought Munro as he watched the backwash of the city passed by outside.

Run down houses, made of clay brick. Parch dry yards. Sporadic solitary trees stood defiant. Their roots earth bound. For better or worse, there they would live and die.

Then strangely he wondered what Ella was up to. It was too early to call. His men would watch over her. Protecting her virtue from stray tomcats that came prowling. She was not too unlike her mother he thought. Sweet and innocent. God rest her eternal soul, laments Munro. A mournful look comes over his face. And takes out a wallet. Opening it to a photo of his late wife. Fond happy memories flooded back to him. Her face, much like Ella's. Her hair cropped to a

bob, fair and blonde. Twenty years had passed so quickly, yet it felt like only yesterday she was there. Closing the wallet and replaces it inside his jacket. Next to his heart. Patting it, as though she was still here. She leans her head against his shoulder beside him. Her hand over his heart. Michael grins.

A pothole jolts the Land Rover, shaking Munro from the romantic daydream.

“What was that?” He asked looking behind him, thinking that had hit something.

“A pothole... I think. Didn't see it... Sorry boss.”

“Be more careful next time.” Munro instructs nestling into his seat.

“Yes boss. Sorry boss.” The driver checks the rear vision mirrors for the pothole but could not see one.

The heat of the day beginning to shimmer heat waves off the road.

“It's going to be a scorcher boss.” The man beside him states the obvious.

Munro focused on a map laid open on his lap. A finger traces a road the veered from the main route. It was a gamble, but he had the vehicle to do it in. Perhaps he could make up the lost hour Marconi had gotten on him. He grinned knowing Marconi would be thinking the same. Checking his watch, estimated that if they maintained their speed, they would reach Segou in under two hours.

The Land Rover pushed on. Large black tires whistled on tarmac marred by sand drifts. The incessant winding of the engine filled the interior. While outside, the barren landscape passed quietly by. Punctuated by docile camel trains and nomadic goat herds. It was as though they were travelling back in time. If the Scotland was green, then the Sahara was sepia. The once clear blue morning sky now a stained yellow haze.

Shea trees peppered the arid land. Covering the savannah belt that stretched from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Ethiopian highlands. The once flourishing groves now reduced to sporadic footholds the further inland they drove. Highways craved a path through the remote barren land with no mountains, or landmark. Without a compass, or road, one would be utterly lost.

The Land Rover thundered on relentlessly.

Herdsmen marveled at the metal beast that dared to face the brunt of the desert. The foreigners were a long way from home. Watching their laden vehicle become smaller and smaller, until finally it was swallowed by the Sahara.

Then as if from no-where, after hundreds of miles of arid land, an oasis appears.

The mighty Niger ran parallel to the road. Appearing incongruent to the land it about it. It was as wide as the eye could see, magnificent in grandeur. Partitioned by islands of green and lush with vegetation. Splintering into capillaries before becoming whole again.

“Hey boss.” The driver calls out, drawing Marconi's attention from the river.

Appearing first as an aberration, a tower begins to sprout on the horizon. Marconi leans forward to catch the mushrooming turret, pondering its purpose. Its features becoming clearer the closer they got.

“Segou.” Informed the driver.

Like a coagulated junction on the arterial waterway it took what it needed from the river to survive. Allowing the rest to flow on its long journey to the sea. The SUV sped along the ten-mile shanty boulevard of derelict vehicles before being spat out the other end. Back into the barren wilderness. A fleeting civilization now receding in the rear vision mirror.

“Which way boss?” Asked the driver.

Marconi looked over his shoulder to the rear window, pondering how far the Scotsman was behind them. Then eyes the Google map on a tablet on his lap. Finger’s splay. Zooming in on the alternate routes. Up ahead the road forks, the R-Thirty-Three, and the R-Thirty-Four. Unsealed, the Thirty-Three half that of the Thirty-Four. The Thirty-Four was sealed. He examined the tablet again.

‘How bad could it be?’ He thought to himself. Wondering if the SUV could handle the dirt road.

“Thirty-Three.” Burps Marconi to the driver, before he had a chance to question the decision.

“You sure boss?” Questioned the driver.

“It’s what the Scotsman would do... We can’t afford to give him an inch.” Informed Marconi.

“Yes boss.” Putting his foot down accelerating the SUV.

Raising a cloud of sand and plume of black exhaust in their wake.

The water tower shrank like a missile back within its silo. The temporal aberration now lost from view. Growing ever smaller, until it did not exist at all. If it had at all.

And somewhere in the distance behind him, the Scotsman...

Sleep

Sun light streamed through large white framed hospital windows. Stirring eye lids to flicker and open and adjust to the light. To familiar surroundings. The sound of rubber sole shoes squeak on linoleum floors. A pungent cologne of disinfectant clung in the air. Disoriented and confused. Alistair comes to. Senses numbed by morphine. A memory detached from the past for twelve hours. A mind recalling fragments of *something*. Entangled visions of being submersed and rushing bubbling water. Of gun shots and darkened stair wells that went on forever. Down, down, down. Feeling more like a nightmare than a dream, he wrestles with the delirium.

Then Phil's head appeared through the nylon curtain, as though through water. And the cold reality of the mission resurfaced.

"Morning Mister McGee, how are feeling?"

"Groggy..." Responds Alistair trying to sit up, "... Aah." A pain in his shoulder suggested something awry. Eyes shift to his shoulder now bandaged heavily. A drip bag hangs on a silver pole beside the hospital bed.

"Take it easy Mister McGee... You're not going anywhere for a while."

"How'd we get on?"

"You don't remember? ... We got 'em." Phil pats the duffle bag in his hand.

"Well the Cardinal should be pleased... How are you going?" He asked groggily.

"Tired, but doing okay... Looking forward to heading home... Once I drop this off."

"You do that... And not a word to Arthur about this okay..." Gesturing his shoulder, "...He has enough on his mind without this. I'll explain everything when I see him."

"Copy that Mister McGee... You get some rest. You're in good hands..." Remarked Phil eyeing an attractive young nurse carrying a stainless-steel tray coming his way.

Her tight-fitting uniform was either too small for her, or she too big for it.

She grinned at Phil as though to acknowledge his attentiveness.

"Well_ hello." Quips Phil.

"No visitors until 2:00PM." She quickly informed him, now wishing for him to leave.

"But I'm with him. He's my partner." Phil pleads.

The nurse looks at Phil strangely, then to Alistair the older gentleman. Reconciling the relationship between the two men. Alistair was already onto it. Leaving it to Phil climb out of the hole he had dug himself.

"It's not like that... What I meant was..." Declared Phil caught out awkwardly.

"I'm not one to judge..." Informed the buxom blonde, "...Now, shoo. 2:00PM." She teases him with a smile.

"I'll see you later Mister McGee. Take it easy." Surrenders Phil.

"You too..." Said Alistair watching him leave and close the curtain behind him, "...Oh, and Phil."

"What's that Mister McGee?"

"Love you." Alistair calls out grinning, for all the ward to hear.

"Love you to Mister McGee." Responds Phil playing along.

"Oh, isn't that sweet..." Remarked the nurse, "... Have you known each other long?"

“He’s a friend of my son...” Alistair grins, “... Aah...” He grimaces, feeling a needle prick finding a vein, “... He’s going to be best man at my son’s wedding.”

“Oh...” Confusing the nurse further. Peeling away a bloodstained dressing to reveal a neatly sutured bullet wound. Encircled by a halo bruise of purple-yellow, “... You’ll survive. You’re lucky it went straight through.”

“Mmm... That’s what they say.” Alistair grimaced, watching the nurse swabbed the wound.

Redressing it with fresh bandages, the nurse checks the dip and injects a shot of morphine to ease the pain.

“That should keep you happy until your boyfriend returns... It’s a shame he’s taken, I think he’s cute.”

“I’ll tell him you said that...” Jokes Alistair, “... He’ll be flattered.”

“The doctor will be doing his rounds later. Get your rest. Try not to move that shoulder.” Instructs the nurse pulling the curtain close behind her.

Eye lids begin to flicker and flap like wings as morphine took effect. A pleasant warm glow comes over him as he began to doze off. In the corner of the cubicle stands a man dressed in black. Staring down at him as though watching over him. He looked familiar as though he had seen him before. Somewhere. Visions of the bumpy zodiac ride flash in his mind as though to prompt his memory. Thoughts that were not his own. Morphine mixed with the delirium of sleep. The two worlds collided to become one.

The man now glowing brilliantly like an Angel.

“*Sleep.*” Speaks Michael.

Professor Levi fumbled with keys to his office. Pushing it into the lock. The door opens freely by itself.

‘That’s weird.’ He thought warily.

He was sure he had locked it the evening before.

Then noticed the splintered lock as though the door had been forced. Looking about the dimly lit room to discover it in disarray. Ransacked. Or vandalized. Books pulled from shelves and strewn about the floor. Drawers wrenched opened. Their bellies scattered over a cluttered desk.

Overcoming the initial shock, eyes search for his own treasure. The bottle no-where to be seen. The least of his worries for now. He knew exactly what the intruders were after. The damage was superficial. Books could be shelved, Papers, filed again.

“Hmm.” Levi grumbled beneath his breath. Thoughts as to the possible culprit surface.

Picking up the handpiece of the phone and dials an extension and waits for it to be answered.

“Ibrahim... It’s me... Good morning... Yes, I wish it was...” Levi looks about the ravaged office, “... It appears I’ve had been a break in to my office... Yes, yes... Hmm... What was the name of that student who reported the letter? ... O_mar. That’s right, Omar... Could you find him and bring him to my office? ... Yes, sooner the better. I’ll wait for you here... The police? I doubt they could help. They would only make the matter worse. Best we keep them out of it for now... The less people know the better... Yes, yes... The Letter? It’s safe... For now. Whoever did this won’t stop to find it... The Cardinal is sending someone to retrieve it... I do not know when... But I wish they would hurry up getting here... Yes, yes... I’ll see you soon. And bring that boy... Omar... He has a lot of explaining to do... *Al-Hamdi-Lil-lah.*” Levi hangs up.

He wondered how far away the Cardinal's men were or even how would he recognize them if they did ever show. He would worry about that out when the time arose. Picking a book up off the floor, Levi examines the spine for a title. Bruised, but undamaged. And places it upon back from whence it had fallen. Whoever had done this had no respect for books or learning. For now all fingers pointed to one person.

Omar.

He barely knew the lad, mostly in passing. Having not tutored him. Another book returns home and takes its place beside its siblings. And like a brick wall being built, gaps slowly filled with books and took on a familiar appearance again.

There came a knock at the door. Levi turns to find Arinze, and surprisingly, Omar standing beside him.

"Come in. Come in." Ushers Levi.

"Oh dear..." Utters Arinze, taking in the carnage of lifeless books and papers littering the floor. His eyes shift to Omar, "... Did you do this?" Challenged the Professor.

"No Professor... Honest." Omar lied.

"Do you know who did?" Asked Levi watching the lad's eyes.

"No Professor. I have no idea. Honest." Looking sideways, to avoid eye contact with the Professor.

He could smell of whiskey on the lad's breath. If he had not been there, he had at least shared in the bounty.

"Hmm..." Levi finds the lad guilty, but could not prove it, "...Who did you tell about the letter after you left Professor Arinze's office the other day?"

"No one..." Hesitating, he corrects himself, "... Maybe my mother."

"Hmm..." Levi grumbles again, "... That would do it. It will be all over the city by now."

"Sorry Professor." Omar tries to apologize.

"No harm done... The letter is in Bamako." Levi lied to divert the lad's attention.

"Bamako?" Questioned Arinze curiously.

"I have friends too Ibrahim." Patting the Professor on the back, playing down the seriousness of the matter.

Omar was about to leave when Levi halted him in his tracks.

"Wait up Omar... I have a small chore for you."

"But I have class Professor." Protests Omar keen to leave.

"I am sure Professor Arinze can excuse you to help me tidy my office, seeing how..." Levi never finished the sentence. The unspoken words were enough for Omar to know that the Professor knew he was involved.

"You're excused from class Omar. Stay and help Professor Levi."

"But Professor?" Omar tries to wriggle out of it of the penance.

"Do as I say, or I will fail you." Warns Arinze.

"Yes Professor."

"We'll talk later Professor." Arinze informed, relieved the letter was safe and out of Timbuktu.

"Of course... *Al-Hamdi-Lil-lah...*" Levi bids farewell, "...Now Omar, you start over there, and I'll start over here... I think you know where they gone." Levi grinned...

Bandits

Marconi made good time. The dirt road compacted from continual traffic. Twenty miles from the fork, they came to a bridge. One of but a few that would connect the south with the north. Markala, a sentry commune nestled the banks of the Niger. Of some forty-six thousand souls spread over thirty villages that occupied the life-giving banks. Standing guard over the two-mile French colonial dam. Looking more like a giant Meccano construction. Its steel framing crude, but effective. It had weathered what time and the Sahara could throw at it.

Wind and sand and rain. And wars.

Beneath it a weir that diverted a trickle of the Niger inland to irrigate wetlands a hundred miles to the north.

Marconi marveled at the Niger below. Its waters clear and dark. Much like the Mediterranean. Wheels rumbled over the uneven surface. Suspensions cushioned the most stubborn of potholes. Below the bridge, waters surged over the weir. Bubbling and frothing with violent turmoil. Perhaps this land was not so arid and desolate as he had first thought. For here he was in the middle of the Sahara, surrounded by water.

The late morning sun filtered through tinted windows and Marconi checked his watch. Another six or seven hours to travel he estimated. The bridge ejaculated the vehicle out the other side like a bullet from a barrel of a gun.

Warily the driver checks the rear mirrors. There had been a suspicious looking Toyota Ute on their tail since Segou. Perhaps it was nothing. But the Ute was keeping its distance, no matter what speed they traveled.

“Boss... I think we have company.” The Driver informed, with one eye on the road, and the other on the rear mirror.

“That Scotsman? How did he catch up so fast?” Questions Marconi, looking over his shoulder at the inexplicable white vehicle.

“Don’t think so...” Fearing to voice his thoughts, “... Could be bandits.”

“Bandits? Here?” Questioned Marconi, squinting at the squat vehicle and its occupants. Looking more like Somali Pirates by the minute.

“From what I heard at the Hotel... They common as muck down here... Kidnapping.”

“Kidnapping?” Parrots Marconi, seeing the vehicle now gaining ground on them.

“Which way boss?” The driver asked seeing a fork in the road.

“Right... See if they follow us... You boys packing?” Marconi asked.

From no-where, three men draw their pistols. From under a seat, a man pulls out an AK-47 and cocks it.

“Christ! Where did you get that?” Flinches Marconi, his eyes bulging at the sight of it.

“Came with the vehicle.” The man responded.

The SUV accelerates, taking the right fork. Kicking up dust in its wake. Watching the path the Ute would take. That also veered right moments later. Accelerating to keep up with the SUV. The evasive maneuver now evident to those following. A man stands up on the tray of the Ute, one hand frantically holding on as it raced along. In the other hand a pistol. Too far away to get a clear shot and damage the SUV.

“Let them get closer, and I’ll let them have it...” A man calls out, lowering his window, “... You better get down boss, and cover your ears. It’s going to get noisy.”

Marconi crouches below the window line and places hands over his ears. The SUV slows, allowing the Ute to get closer. And closer. Until they were directly behind them. Dust bellow over the Ute. But it remains determined to stay with its prey. Sounding its horn to get the SUV’s attention. The man waves his gun, gesturing for them to pull over.

But Marconi’s driver would have none of it.

“Brace yourself boss.” The driver warns, suddenly braking hard.

Frightening the Ute’s driver to suddenly brake to avoid hitting them. The man up top bracing himself from tumbling over the roof onto the bonnet. The SUV accelerates away again. And the Ute drifted into the dust.

“Can we out race them?” Asked Marconi.

“They’d only catch up eventually boss...” Remarked the driver, “... Best we take care of them now than later... If you know what I mean.”

“Good idea. Keep ahead of them... If they want a fight, we’ll give them one. Okay?”

“Yes boss.” The men sound in unison.

“We’ll be coming to a junction in about thirty miles... It gets windy after that. They might make there move then. Be prepared.” Marconi informed the men looking at his table.

“Yes boss.”

The driver plants his foot on the accelerator and the SUV flies ahead of the trailing Ute. Its V8 engine no match for the four-cylinder Toyota. Eyes watch the rear. A haze of dust obscured their view of the vehicle. The long straight road going for miles upon miles without deviation. Another commune flashes by. Dark green Shea trees offering the only color to an otherwise dull landscape.

Suddenly the SUV braked violently and stutters to a halt. Catching the occupants unaware and throwing them forward in their seats. A herd of goats crosses the road. A herdsman presses hands together and bows to them in thanks. His entire purpose for living trotting across the road. Bleating and baaing under the arid heat. A small bell sounds on one, and the others follow blindly. Eyes shift to the rear. The dust beginning to drift and clear.

Far off in the distance, a small white Ute now appearing in the shimmering haze.

“Don’t they ever give up?” A man asked.

“Not for rich pickings...” Remarked Marconi, “... And neither do I.”

The driver toots his horn for the herdsman to hurry up. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the last of the goats is shooed off the road by Michael. And the driver accelerates. Spinning its wheels on the sunbaked road. Startling goats to run off in all directions. The herdsman raising arms to curse the infidel and for Allah to strike him down.

His prayer goes unanswered.

Suddenly, a white Ute rushes past the herdsman, indifferent to wandering goats. The herdsman recognizing the Ute and armed men within for what they were. Bandits. Looking to the heavens and gave thanks as though his prayer had been answered.

The vehicles galloped in a two-horse race. Behind them a bellowing cloud of dust. Blanketing the herdsman and baaing goats. Before fading into the distance. The herdsman secured a head robe and squints at the vagrant vehicles racing away. Then about for injured goats that may have fallen foul to the Ute. No carcasses lined the road.

He had been blessed and raised arms to give thanks.

The Ute had made up ground. The SUV becoming camouflaged with dust. Ahead an abrupt junction. Another river if it could be called one. More like an elongated lake. The Massina. Shriveled and dry at either end. The short, twisted water way sustained by an umbilical weir from the Niger to create an inland delta. Ahead of them appears another commune of Shea trees and crooked streets. Sporadic clay homes lined the road either side.

A bullet strikes the rear of the SUV. Startling the occupants, none more so than Marconi who cowered lower in his seat. He signals for his men to return fire. From a side window a man reaches out with a pistol and fires shots aimed at the Ute's driver.

'Blam! Blam! Blam!'

The man on the Ute's tray ducks for cover as the bullets strike bonnet and grill. One punches a neat hole in the windscreen, causing the Ute to back off. A bandit returned fire, only to punch a hole in the rear window of the SUV.

"Can't get a clear shot at them boss." Remarks Marconi's man with the pistol.

Suddenly the vehicle makes a sweeping turn to make the corner, the vehicle lurches left to hold the road. Everyone inside holds on to avoid being thrown to one side. Moments after the Ute takes the turn only to spin out and end up perilously close to the water's edge.

"Damn..." Curses Marconi, "... Take them out on a bend."

"Yes boss." Acknowledged a man cocking the AK-47, loading a round to the chamber.

'Click-clunk!'

Like an epileptic worm, the road twitched left and right.

Clinging to the banks of the winding water way. Wheels slide one way, and then the other. Kicking up dirt like shrapnel as threads bite viciously into the road.

'Ratta-tat-tat! Ratta-tat-tat!'

The burst of fire startles Marconi unexpectedly.

Striking the Ute its side. A burst of return fire strikes into the rear of the SUV and puncture a cannister on the roof. What appeared to be water, bleeds down the rear window like dirty tears. More bullets strike the SUV, ricocheting sparks and shattering the rear window. A bend in the road exposes the Ute's flank.

Seeing an the opportunity to fire through the scattered opening, the man gives a longer burst.

'Ratta-tat-tat! Ratta-tat-tat! Ratta-tat-tat!'

The Ute veers as though to avoid the shots, but it was too late.

The driver unresponsive to the upcoming bend. The Ute mounts the bank abruptly, rolling it over and over and over again. The man on the back to thrown onto the road. Bouncing a few of times before laying limp in a buckled heap on the side of the road. The Ute continued to flip like an Olympic acrobat. Before tumbling off the road and into the water.

Where it slowly sank to a watery grave.

Roaming hyenas would catch the scent of decaying flesh and devour the body left behind. Nothing would remain of the man, or the bloody fire fight.

"Well done... Keep going. Don't stop for anyone." Marconi instructs the driver.

"Yes boss."

The SUV now void of a scattered rear window. And the hushed silence replaced sound of rushing air. The realities, the smell, and heat of the outback washed over Marconi. Thinking that it could not get any worse than this.

Michael grinned at the thought.

“Which way boss?” Munro’s driver asked coming to a junction. One sign posted Thirty-three, the other Thirty-four.

Munro examined the folded map and assesses the alternate route. The short cut would make up time, but something in the back of his mind told him otherwise.

“Thirty-Four.” Spouts Munro involuntarily. Unsure where the decision had come from.

“Yes boss.” The driver responds taking the road to the right.

‘Surely that is what Marconi would do.’ The thought resonates in his mind. As if it were his own.

Route Thirty-Four would take longer, but it was sealed. It would be another five hours before they reached the next major junction of Mopti. Marking roughly two thirds of their journey. Located at the south west corner of entangled watery wetlands of the Niger Delta.

Munro sipped from a water bottle that tasted like Scottish Whiskey. The sun was rising higher in the ochre stained sky. Air conditioning gave a false security of the inhospitable land flashing by outside.

Vibrations Land Rover through the ground start a chain reaction of predatorial instincts.

Fearful of being crushed, a spiny-tailed lizard lifts its wary head to catch sight of the camouflaged metal beast.

A gazelle springs to life on hearing the rumble of the engine, fearful of a lioness on the prowl.

A cut-throat Finch takes flight from a tree, fearful a Boomslang was about to strike.

Only the alert survived in this fearful land...

Good News, Bad News

Numbed by morphine and bathed by warm sunlight, Alistair lay in a state of bliss.

Caught between two worlds. Eyes move back and forth beneath lids, struggling to keep hold of a romantic dream now shattering and falling away from him. Visions of his wife dissolve like ether. Frustrated, he concentrates harder. But the more he tried to hold onto her, the more he found himself slipping away and being pulled back to the ward. Nostril twitch as though he could smell her sweet perfume. Nestling his head into the soft pillow as though to rest his head on her shoulder. Thinking he could hear her voice talking to him.

He senses a dark shadow cast over him.

Startled his eyes spring open, to discover the nurse leaning over him. The scent of her perfume filling his nostrils. Her voice speaking to him.

“Mister McGee... Mister McGee... Wakey, wakey... We can’t have you sleep all day. You have visitors.” The nurse informed him, pushing a button on a remote to raise the bed.

Eyes squint to fight the bright afternoon sun now streaming through windows. He orientates himself back to cubicle. He senses a tightness about his shoulder. Bandages restrain its movement. At the end of the bed he makes out three men, one dressed in black cassock. A scarlet fascia about his waist. And a black briefcase in his hand.

Francis stood beside the man. A fawn folder tucked securely under his arm. A small travel suit case in the other. Beside him, stood Phil. Completing the Holy trinity. Looking as though he were the Holy Ghost. Dressed in faded blue jeans and a T-shirt adorned with Guns and Roses across its front.

“Cardinal?” Asked Alistair, his vision coming into focus.

“Welcome back. How are you feeling? ...” Cassini asked, “... You seem to be making a habit of this.”

“(Chuckle)... Tell me about it... Ah.”

“Keep still now.” The nurse instructs him.

“You making house calls now?” Questioned Alistair, sensing something was amiss.

“Kind of. I’ve actually come to see Phil, now that you’re, shall we say... *Out of action.*” Cassini grins, “... And say thanks for a successful mission. The Chalice and Cross are safe at the Vatican being examined.”

Phil’s ear’s prick up. And turned to look at the Cardinal. Cassini catches him in his peripheral vision and offers a grin.

“Something has come up...” Cassini began, “... Something that Phil and Father Francis can handle... You can sit this one out. You’re going home.”

“Eh? ...” Phil catches the comment, “...But I thought this was it?”

“It would have been. Something has arisen that cannot be delayed... It may already be too late. You leave within the hour. A train will take you to Amantea. You will fly out from there. Francis has the brief.”

“Where are we headed? Turkey?” Questioned Phil curiously.

“Timbuktu.” Announces Cassini, turning to watch the expression on his face.

“Eh? Timbuktu? You mean the place *actually exists*? I thought it was just a made-up name... Where is it?”

“In the middle of Mali... North West Africa.” Added Cassini to enlighten Phil further, “... It’s all in the brief. You can study it on the train.”

“Well I guess I won’t be going home just yet.” Said Phil wondering what he should tell his mother.

“You keep the Father safe.” Instructed Alistair.

“Who keeps me safe without you there?” Asked Phil.

“You can handle yourself Phil. You don’t need me to babysit you... Ah!” Flinches Alistair.

“Look... I told you to keep still.” Said the nurse, inserting a hypodermic to a vile of pain killer.

Stabbing Alistair in the arm.

“Ah! ... I think I’ll take my chances with the bullet... Hmm.” Complains Alistair, before feeling the warm comfort of the morphine take effect.

“It shouldn’t take more than a week. In and out.” Surmises Cassini.

“Competition?” Asked Phil.

“None that we have heard of... But be prepared just in case.” Warned Cassini.

“You packed?” Phil asked Francis.

“Ready when you are.” Francis lifts the small leather suit case. As though he were running away from home.

“We better get going then.” Said Phil.

“Ah-hm_, aren’t we forgetting something?” Asked Cassini, holding out the black brief case.

“What’s this?” Questioned Phil.

“Open it on the train...” Instructed Cassini handing him the case, “... This probably isn’t the place.”

Phil assesses the weight but is at a loss as to what it could be. Alistair makes the gestures of shooting a pistol. Then the penny dropped.

“Oh yeah. Might need one of those...” Phil grins, “... Guess this is it Mister McGee. See you back home... Say hi to Arthur. Tell I’ve been *delayed*... Seeing the sights.” Half fibbing.

“I will. You be careful Phil. You too Father. Keep an eye on him.” Jested Alistair, unsure who would be watching out for who.

The unlikely couple waved farewell and headed down the corridor. Cassini remained behind and watched as the two men left.

“They up to it?” Questioned Alistair.

“God works in mysterious ways Alistair... I have a feeling about this one.” Reflects Cassini.

“Hmm... What’s down there?”

“Just a Letter.”

“Must be one heck of a letter.” Stated Alistair.

“It is... It is.” Said Cassini economically. Leaving it there. The less he said the better. He may have said too much already.

Worried, he pulled aside the adjacent curtain to reveal an empty bed.

“I see what you mean.” Said Alistair.

“I’ll see you back at the Vatican. You can fly back to London with Phil next week.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Get your rest... And thanks.”

“What for?”

“The Chalice.” Grinned Cassini.

“Thank Phil for that... If it wasn’t for him... Ah.” A sharp pain penetrates the morphine.

“Rest.” Commands Cassini pulling the grey nylon curtain closed behind him as he left.

Alistair hears the sound of leather sole shoes on the polished linoleum floor. Fading into the distance. Voices echoed off the floor and carried the length of the ward. Eyes struggle to remain open. Unable to fight the effect of the morphine. The scent of perfume drifts pass. Nostril’s twitch.

And he drifts to sleep.

Eyes open to find himself standing before his wife in a field of colorful wild flowers. An orb of white light shone brilliantly in a crystal blue sky. Puffy white clouds floated like angels. She looked as beautiful as he remembered her. He reaches out his hand to her. He feels her hand in his. It feels so real. Pressing foreheads together. Feelings and emotions transcended words. They kiss.

It was as though he were in heaven...

Pay the Ferryman

Marconi tapped frantically at the tablet as though he were giving it CPR. But it does not respond.

“Of course not...” He berates himself. What was he thinking bringing twenty-first century technology to the middle of no-where, “... Hand me your map.” He commands the man in the front seat, “... How much further to go?” He asked trying to make out their location.

“About hundred miles or so.” The man informs Marconi.

Looking back over his shoulder as if to catch sight of the Scotsman. They had made good time since leaving the Hotel. More so after the accelerated chase with the bandits. The Scotsman would still be a good hour behind him. Probably at the bridge of Markala he thought.

Suddenly the SUV lurches to a sudden halt again. Wheels skids on the baked dirt surface of road. Marconi looked up thinking another herd of goats had crossed their path. But sees nothing. No goats. No nomadic herdsman cursing the foreigner to be struck down.

Shea trees stand either side of the SUV, like tall dark green sentries.

“Why are we stopping?” Marconi asked expecting an imminent attack by bandits.

Then he sees the unthinkable. A contributory river, no more than a couple of hundred meters wide, bleeding muddy brown waters from the wetlands into the Niger. A settlement of homes appeared on the far side. And the road. The only thing missing, was a bridge to connect them with it.

Marconi checked the map.

“Dia-far-abé” Pronouncing the knotted junction on the river Niger.

“What do we do boss?” The driver asked anxiously, not wanting to rile him.

Marconi spies a tired looking ferry boat tied tree on the far bank. A man appears from a hut on hearing the vehicle arrive. A frightful look came over the man catching sight of the bullet marred vehicle with its shattered windows. He could only imagine the fate of the bandits that were in pursuit.

“Talk to the man there. Pay him whatever he wants. Just get us across...” Barked Marconi beginning to stew in the afternoon heat. The air conditioning struggling to compete with the open window ventilation.

The driver haggles with the ferryman. One in a suit. The other in linen robes that had seen cleaner days. The driver pointed to the vehicle, then the derelict ferry, and mimicked taking the vehicle across the small river.

The ferryman although illiterate was not stupid.

He knew exactly what the foreigner wanted. Finally, the foreigner he pulled out a bill fold of notes. This was a universal language the ferryman spoke too well.

“Twenty... Forty... Fifty...” The driver counts off and stops. Looking at the ragged ferryman as to ask if that was enough. His skin dark and weathered. His eyes large and white and focused on the notes, “... A hundred...” The driver blinked first, handing the ferryman the money, “... We go?” The driver gestures his hand to the other side.

“Go.” The ferryman parrots.

“Yeah, go... Now.”

“Go now.” He parrots again.

With driver's patience was wearing as thin, opens his jacket enough to allow the ferryman to catch sight of a holstered gun beneath his armpit.

"Yes, yes, we go now..." The ferryman now speaks perfect English, "... This way." Wishing to see the back of the foreigners.

Slowly the driver eases the wounded vehicle onto a ramp on the ferry boat. Taking the weight of the vehicle. Marconi's nose twitches, as though he could smell diesel fumes.

"You smell that? (*sniff-sniff.*)" Questioned Marconi, looking over his shoulder as to the source, "... Check it out." He orders the man beside him.

"They must have punctured a fuel tank... I've patched it now, but we've lost a lot of gas."

"We have enough to get there?"

"Enough to get to Mopti. Let's hope they have a gas station..." Remarked the driver, "... Otherwise we're stranded."

"Mm_." Grumbled Marconi.

The ferry floated silently across the contributory with no name.

The ferry beached itself on the foreshore and the ramp lowered to have the vehicle drive off. The V8 engine rumbled as four large black treaded wheels slowly crawled off the vessel.

"Wait up..." Marconi calls out to the driver about to accelerate away, having formulated an idea that would delay the Scotsman, "... Pay the man to stay on this side until sunset. At no cost should he allow the Scotsman to cross."

"Yes boss..." The driver climbs out and talks again with the man. Hands gesturing another vehicle behind them approaching, "... Must stay here... Until sunset... Sunset..." A hand points to the sun, then to the horizon... Sunset. Understand?"

The ferryman understood perfectly as more notes change hands and are quickly pocketed before treacherous eyes could see.

"Stay here... Sunset." Repeats the ferryman. Nodding to cement the lie.

"Good." The driver confirms and climbs back into the vehicle before racing away.

Cloaking the ferryman in a drifting cloud of dust. The man watches and waits for the foreign beast to disappear from view before returning to the ferry, starting its motor and sails back to the other side. Pleased in the thought that another vehicle would soon be arriving. Keen eyes scope the distant horizon for a rising dust of the other vehicle but see nothing.

He was a patient man. Goats, baa and bleat on hearing the sound of the ferry returning.

Some distance to the south, on a smooth sealed run, travelling unimpeded of bandits and unnamed contributories, Munro sat back in air-conditioned comfort and watched as the seemingly endless country side flash pass. And wondered who had forged the path into this barren Kingdom. A Kingdom carved out by nomadic herdsman and pilfering French Colonials. And none more so than the faithful and their pilgrimage to Mecca.

A kingdom with more gold than the any Spanish galleon could stow. More wealth than the richest person alive today could ever possess. And then some. Now eroded by the sands of time and blowing in the wind.

The Land Rover slowed to pass a train of camels laden with furs. Wobbling side to side, black faced jockeys sit precariously atop the humps. Camels stepped out lethargically. Moving in slow motion. As though they were in no rush to get to where they were going. Each step as though a lazy second hand of a clock.

Plod... Plod... Plod.

The laden beasts towered over the Land Rover. A jockey looked down at the ill-equipped foreigner, appearing to be in a rush. You cannot eat the metal, nor drink its blood thought the rider.

Plod... Plod... Plod.

Rocking the jockey back and forth, side to side. Watching as the metal beast sped into the distance ahead of them.

Numbed by the ever-repeating vista, Munro shock a flask to gauge its contents and takes a swallow of the lukewarm Earl Grey. Laced with whiskey. Then leaned back and succumbed to the hum of the engine. And drone of the wheels on tarmac. About to doze off, when suddenly the vehicle begins to slow. Outside the sight of clay brick homes.

“Not more camels?” He asked peering his head up from the back seat.

“Worse boss. No bridge.” Informs the driver.

“What do you mean no bridge?”

“See for yourself.”

Before them, a span of river, not the Niger, but a nameless contributory stretching some two hundred meters. The road lead down to the water’s edge. And that is where it ended. Where a barge boat sat moored. A solitary man stood gesturing his hands for the Land Rover to drive forward.

“Boss?” The driver asked hesitantly.

“Do as he saids.” Instructs Munro. Having come this far there was no way he was about to turn about now.

Unsure if the barge could take the weight, the Land Rover crawls tentatively onto the tray. Gingerly moving forward, before the ferryman raises a hand for the vehicle to halt.

‘Click-click-click-click.’ A handbrake sounds like a machine gun and locking the vehicle in place.

“Pay the ferryman.” Said Munro.

The driver’s window opened, and an arm extends holding out a twenty Euro note. Snatching it from the driver before he had a chance to change his mind. A motor starts. Spluttering to life. Coughing white plumes of two stroke exhaust into the air. Casting off, the barge drifts with the current before the screw propellor found grip and pulled the rusting craft to the other side.

‘Chug-chug-chug.’ Sounded the engine, bellowing grey exhaust into the air.

“Any other vehicles come through here? Like this one?” The driver asked, patting the Land Rover.

The man eyes the driver suspiciously. Tongues have been cut out for less. He eyes the far banks for treacherous ears. Then to the money in his hands, as though to suggest it would come at a price. The driver peels off another twenty. The man quickly pockets the money.

And shakes his head.

“No one at all?” Questioned the driver.

“You’re the first today.” The man spoke with a French accent.

“You hear that boss? Marconi hasn’t been through.”

“Really?” Munro speculates Marconi’s whereabouts. Eyes turn to the map, “... He must have taken the back way. Good luck to him. (*Chuckle*).”

The far bank approached sooner than anticipated and the driver climbed back in and started the engine. The old barge slid its belly onto the embankment like a beached whale. A ramp lowers and the Land Rover rolls forwards.

Finding its black rubber feet on firm ground again it drives away...

Sapri

The Naples station bustled with activity. Francis stood quiet and composed. As though he were about to deliver a sermon to the transient congregation moving about him. Dressed in black, he appeared as he was. A Father going about his clergy duties. Phil on the other hand, looked out of place. One could well assume the two men were not travelling together. And looking not unlike the other passengers about him. Both men blended in, in their own way.

Yet there was something that did not look right.

Phil with a black brief case. And Francis with the luggage bag.

A CCTV camera eyes the men suspiciously. Unsure what to make of the odd couple.

“Where we headed Father?” Asked Phil.

“Amantea to begin with... We’ll catch a plane from there.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier if we took one from here.”

“They only fly once every two weeks. And this is not that week...” Informs Francis, “... Time is of the essence.”

“Oh I see.” Reconciling the train journey.

“We’ve arranged an alternative flight from Amantea... Besides, it will give me a chance to see the old chapel again.”

“Old Chapel?”

“My former Parish... It’s been a year since I left, but it seems a lifetime.” Reflects Francis visualizing the Chapel with its bell and old wooden gates. And faces of the people that came to service.

“You miss the place?”

“When you serve God, a Chapel becomes your home. The people, your family...” He pauses to contemplate how he had been called, “... I never in my wildest dreams, thought I would find myself at the Vatican. Least so, working under Cardinal Cassini.”

“Well, you must have done something right to be promoted...” Suggested Phil, looking about for the train they will be travelling on.

Two trains sat either side of a platform. One looking stylish and sleek. Streamlined for speed and comfort. The other as though it belonged in a museum. Francis knew exactly what train they would be traveling on. An inaudible announcement sounds through over speakers. Phil struggles to catch muffled words.

And turned to Francis for direction.

“This way.” Instructs Francis.

Phil follows obediently and was about to board the luxurious of the two trains, when he looked around to see the Francis climbing aboard the other.

“But I thought...” Phil began.

Francis grins at Phil’s misunderstanding.

There was something about the old train. It may not have had the sleek lines of the bullet train. It was roughed and would get them to Amantea in good time. What was an extra hour in the God’s Grand Scheme.

Finding an empty compartment, Phil takes a window seat facing opposite Francis who was taking in the familiar looking compartment. With its padded wooden seats, and large glass windows. Shoving the luggage bag onto an overhead rack and takes his seat below.

“How long to Amantea?” Asked Phil curiously, watching the bullet train slip quietly from the station. Eyes follow the silver snake. Wishing he were on it, heading in the opposite direction. Wishing he were heading home.

Michael sits unseen opposite reading his thoughts.

“Four hours, give or take.” Remarked Francis retrieving a thick paperback from the luggage bag and making himself comfortable for the long journey.

Outside, a whistle blows loudly. Screeching. Pleading for dallying Englishmen to hurry. Or be left behind.

“All aboard!” A voice calls out.

An old man, wearing an old uniform, checked his pocket watch and blows a whistle. Carriage doors close. And the old man pokes his head out of one to wave a red flag to the driver to be underway. A diesel motor groaned, taking the strain of the half dozen carriages. Shunting slowly from the station, carriages stuttered as couplings caught. As if it were a game of Chinese whispers.

One telling the other to hurry up and move. Or be left behind.

The carriage suddenly jolts. Catching Phil by surprise. Before settling to a smooth motion. Outside, the empty platform moved pass the window. The late afternoon sun streamed into the compartment. It would be eight o'clock by the time arrive in the small southern Italian township. Francis opened the paperback, pushing the red tickets between the back pages as book marks. And begins to read to himself.

Phil places the brief case on his lap and stares at it. Looking over to see Francis focused reading. Eyes return to the case as though trying to penetrate its surface. Imagining its contents. Fingers fumble for the latches.

'Click-click.' Catches sound their release.

Drawing Francis' attention. But does not look up.

Opening the brief case partially so as not to give its contents away, he peers in. Nested in dark grey foam was a new Glock-17. Several magazines of ammunition sat in their own foam profiles. What caught Phil by surprise, was not the gun, but the Rosary Beads the Cardinal had place on the gun. As though as a blessing. Picking up the chain he examined it. A suffering crucified Christ adorned a small silver cross attached to the end of the single strain of beads. Above this a silver pendant of a face. A woman's face. The Virgin Mary, he surmised. The thread ends there and joins with a larger necklace. He closes the case and ponders the beads significance.

The train rocked side to side. Sun streamed through the window. Vanishing when the train passed through tunnels. Outside the vista changed. A kaleidoscope of colors. From crystal blue coast lines to green grassy pastures and back again as the old train rambled its way south. Vesuvius passed unnoticed. Foreshadowed by the homes stacked like Meccano blocks on hillsides. The sun had captured Phil and held him in place.

And he began to fall asleep, exertion and tiredness now catching up with him...

The train violently jolts, causing Phil's to awaken. His nostrils twitching with the smell of freshly baked bread now whiffing under his nose. And finds himself alone in the compartment.

Thinking he must have nodded off momentarily. From the carriage window, he sees a small railway station and an oversized sign that read...

SAPRI

Dazed and confused, he wonders where Francis had taken himself. His luggage bag was in the overhead rack. His book still on the seat. Two red tickets protruded from it. Just then a woman hurried along the corridor. Stopping briefly to look into the compartment. As though she was looking for someone. Dressed in a robe, a blue scarf covered much of her head. Revealing her olive skin and mysterious emerald, green eyes.

Her eyes lock onto Phil's. A weird familiar feeling comes over him. As if he knew the woman. Suddenly, as quickly as she appeared, she hurried off. He was about to go after her, when suddenly the door slides open and an old man, wearing an old uniform, blocked the doorway.

And prevented him from leaving.

"Tickets!" The conductor challenged the apparent escapee.

Phil peered around the old man into the corridor only to discover the young woman had vanished into thin air.

"Tickets!" The old man asked again.

Eyeing Phil suspiciously, wondering why he was leaving in such a hurry. Perhaps today he would catch a free loader.

"Yeah, yeah. Wait up." Informed Phil, looking about for the paperback.

Pulling out two tickets from between the pages, hands them to the conductor, who looks about for the other passenger.

"Oh, yeah. The Father must have popped out somewhere. He'll be back soon... I hope."

"Hm." Grumbles the conductor unsure whether to believe the Englishman. The single luggage bag suggested otherwise. But then, why two tickets.

The anomaly confounded the conductor.

'*Chunk-chunk!*' Punching holes into the thick red tickets.

"Thank you... Oh, did you see which way that young woman went?" Phil asked curiously.

"What woman?" The conductor questioned back.

"Never mind... I'll find her when the Father gets back."

"Hm... You do that." Grumbled the old man sliding the door closed.

Inserting the punched tickets back between the pages, placed the book back on the seat. And took his seat again, to wait for the Francis' to return. The train jolts and stutters forward. Jostling Phil in his seat. The small town of barely four thousand souls on a good day passed leisurely by the window. Moored fishing boats lined the cove below. Their nets hanging in the late afternoon sun to dry.

'*Idyllic.*' He thought.

Then he noticed someone sitting opposite dressed in black. Thinking Francis had slipped back in without him noticing.

"You're back..." Phil begins, but is then left speechless.

"Idyllic, isn't it?" Enquired Michael watching the divine vista passing. A brilliant white orb shone in the clear blue sky.

"Yes, it is..." Phil agrees. His hesitant thoughts being heard by Michael.

"Michael... Father Michael... And who might you be?" Asked Michael knowingly.

“Phil... Ah I mean Phillip... I’m travelling with Father Francis. You haven’t seen him, have you?”

“Indeed I have... Many times... He won’t be too much longer I believe.” Michael grinned. Eyes shift to the black brief case, and back to Phil. Causing Phil to think the Father knew of its contents.

“You know Father Francis?” Asked Phil.

“The Father and I have spoken on several occasions... I understand he works for the Cardinal.”

“Cardinal Cassini?” Fingers fiddle with the ring on his finger.

Michael grins, as though to answer the rhetorical question.

“The Cardinal and I go way, way, way_ back... If you know what I mean.” Remarked Michael.

Michael appeared no older than Francis. Leaving Phil a little confused. Looking to the door hoping that Francis would return at any moment to alleviate the situation he was finding himself.

“You are in good hands with the Cardinal... *But you ever find yourself lost, follow the star in the East.*”

“I’m sorry?” Asked Phil confused by the riddle.

“You’ll know when the time comes... Ah_, isn’t it idyllic?” Michael diverts Phil’s attention to the glorious vista passing outside.

Like a rabbit caught in the headlights of an approaching vehicle. Michael grinned radiantly at Phil. Then looked out the carriage window, Phil’s eyes followed. The train rocked him in his cradle. The old train continued its slow waltz south. Continuing along seaside tracks. Through long dark tunnels. Phil’s mind re-connecting to a dream world and the smell of freshly baked bread.

Suddenly the train lurched forward.

‘Not again.’ He thought.

The aroma of freshly baked bread remained and drifted into his nostrils.

“Mm...” Inhaling the seductive aroma, “... I must have dozed off.”

Looking out the window to see a small seaside town. A population four thousand souls on a good day. Moored fishing boats lined the cove. Their nets hanging to dry in the late afternoon sun. There was something awfully familiar about it all.

Seeing an oversized sign that read...

SAPRI

Francis sits opposite to see Phil awakening from a snooze.

“Sorry, I must have dozed off... Good to have you back.” Said Phil, stretching arms and straightening his spine. Feeling it click back into place.

“I never left.” Remarked Francis.

“What do you mean? ... I’ve just been talking to your mate... What’s his name... Mm...” Like a faded dream, Phil struggled to recall the Angelic visitor.

“Father Michael?” Suggested Francis half grinning.

“That’s right... Said he knew you.”

“In a roundabout way... Nice chat?”

“Strange... I’m having trouble recalling it... He spoke in riddles... Something about following a star in the East if I got lost... What does that mean?” Asked Phil curiously.

“You will know when the time comes.” Advised Francis grinning.

“That’s what he said... And why are we arriving at Sapri again... We only just left there.”
Said Phil becoming confused.

An old conductor appears at the doorway dressed in an old uniform from yesteryear. An oversized cap covered much of his head. Ears prevented it from covering it completely.

“Tickets!” The old man calls out.

“You’ve already punched them.” Informed Phil still unable to reconcile the dream from reality.

Francis pulls two red tickets from between the pages of the book and inspects them. Noting that the tickets are pristine and whole. And passes them the conductor holding out a hand, who inspects them and the two passengers.

‘Clunk-clunk!’ Punching two holes into the tickets.

“That’s weird.” Remarked Phil sinking back onto the seat.

Wanting to pinch himself, wondering if it was all still a dream.

Phil looks over to Francis, who was drawing his own conclusions as to what that had just happened. Francis looks about the compartment as though he could sense Michael’s presence. His faith telling him he was there.

He was always there. Watching on.

“What’s going on Father?” Asked Phil.

“You’re in good hands Phil... You’re in good hands.” Responded Francis.

“Funny, that was what Father Michael said too.” Replied Phil staring out the window watching the Italian coastline roll by.

And the old train continued on its way...

Mopti

The Land Rover's wheels turned over and over and over on their endless journey.

In the distance ahead, Munro makes out a tall radio mast. They were approaching Severe. A cross road commune of some forty thousand parched souls. To the west lay Mopti, just ten miles away. Overhead powerline, haphazard as it was, suggested the place was civilized. And he pondered their chances of refueling there.

Eyes scope the desolate streets of clay buildings. Scattered trees offered a splash of leafy green color to an otherwise monotone landscape. Vegetation clung to life where it could find a foot hold. The Land Rover crawled through the streets, looking for life. Large white eyes peer from the skulls of darkened buildings. Framed with arched windows and doorways.

Alerted by the sound of an engine, small children rush outside. Curious to catch sight of the strange pale skinned foreigners. The vehicle laden with water cannisters, looking like overladen camels.

"There!" Said the driver, spying a dilapidated gas pump.

"Let's hope it works." Remarkd Munro.

The driver slowed and pulled in beside the pump. A two-story store front overshadows the pump. From the doorway a man steps out and adjusts his head gear. A black face with large white eyes and shining white teeth smiles back at the Land Rover.

"Diesel?" The driver asked winding down his window.

The man nods his head as though to say he understood. The driver reluctantly climbs out and opens the fuel cap. Then inspects the pump for the diesel handle. Lifting it, the pump comes to life, groaning and humming as though it were a juke box about to play a tune. Wary eyes watch as the foreigner refuels. Anxious to see the back of them. They would take their precious money and leave them to chase whatever gold they were after.

Why else would a foreigner come to this land.

"Pay the man and let's get going... Marconi can't be far away." Remarkd Munro. Sensing his rival was just ahead of him.

The driver hangs up the pump and looks to the price, but the dial had been broken years before. So he peels of several notes from a billfold, knowing it was more than enough. Handing it to the storekeeper who took it, examined it, nodded. Quickly disappearing back inside before the foreigner requested change. The driver climbed back into the cool interior of the Land Rover. Relieved to be out of the heat of the afternoon sun. And keen to get underway.

Their destination lay four hundred miles to the north.

The engine starts and rumbles to life. Coughing a fur ball of black diesel fumes from the exhaust. Large white eyes watch the foreigner drive away. The vehicle crawled from the crossroad town and headed north. There could only be one place they could be heading. Timbuktu. With the sun sitting on the western horizon. A Call to Prayers wailed over speakers located throughout the small city.

It was time for the infidels to leave.

Just as Munro was departing Severe to head north, Marconi was entering the outskirts of Mopti from the east only to encounter another river crossing. He was beginning to regret his decision taking the short cut. The SUV came to a halt at the edge of the road. They could go no further. Another delay. Looking over his shoulder through the shattered rear window expecting to see the rising dust Munro's vehicle in the distance behind him. Only to be blinded by the setting sun.

Then wondered if Munro had taken the long way instead.

'*Surely not?*' Reflected Marconi.

A moored car ferry sits on the opposite bank. Apparently in no rush to return to the other side. Nothing on the river moved. Fishing boats and barges anchored in place.

No one dare move.

"What's the hold up?" Questions Marconi to the driver.

"Don't know... There seems to be no one about. Where are they?"

On hearing a voice coming from the rear of a small hut. The driver spies a robed man kneeling and bowing on a mat. With the sun setting in the west, the man faced east towards the Ka'bah in the Grand Mosque in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. As all Muslims would point when performing their prayers. Ritually bowing up and down. Raising himself and arms in praise. Only to lower himself again. All the while calling out the scared prayer.

Michael lowered his head and gave thanks to the Almighty. God's house had many doors. And known by many names.

"Prayer's boss." Informs the driver.

"I can see that!" Cussed Marconi.

"Yes boss."

"How long does this take... These... Prayers?"

"Don't know boss... Ten? Twenty minutes?" The driver guessed.

"We better prayer that the Scotsman doesn't catch up..." Marconi looked over his shoulder again, "...Hmm." He grumbled, uttering his own prayer beneath his breath.

And with that it was answered.

The ragged man stood up and rolled his matt and return to the hut. On seeing the waiting vehicle, picked up the hand piece of a telephone and barked rambling native words to the mouth piece. None of them in English. Life begins to animate on the other bank. Ropes being cast and a plume of exhaust whoofs into the air before the craft began drifting towards them.

The day was dimming quickly. It would be dark in half an hour.

'*Chug-chug-chug.*' The sound of the barge's engine becoming closer.

Travelling at unhurried pace, the barge maneuvered between sand bars before gracefully beaching itself in front of the vehicle. And lowers its ramp. A robed man on board gestures for the foreigner to drive forward. Large black wheels roll forward and like an oversized beetle the vehicle crawled onto the back of the rusting barge. Leaving the engine running, the driver eyes the rear mirror and watched as ropes were cast away. The barge drifts with the current. Its engine straining under the weight of the SUV.

Suddenly there was a splash in the water beside the barge.

"Do you see that?" Asked Marconi, noticing something moving in the water.

"What's that boss?"

"That thing in the water." Fearing it was a crocodile about to leap onto the barge.

Sitting back from the window, he saw it was again. Whatever it was, pushed its cow like nose above the surface before gracefully submerging again. Appearing long and grey, it did not resemble any crocodile he had seen on television. Looking more like a walrus, the docile

Manatee swam playfully alongside the barge. Surfacing to breath before going back under. Somewhat relieved, Marconi sits back and takes in the number of long narrow fishing boats rushing about the water way. Causing the manatee to swim away.

A head of them, the commune of Mopti grows closer. Lights came to life within homes on the approaching shore. The blue of the day, mixed with the muddy waters of the night. And the day retreated below the distant horizon.

The barge flounders on a muddy bank. Having missed the ramp that connected to the road. And lowered its ramp onto the muddy foreshore. A hand taps the side of the vehicle as though encouraging a lazy ox to move along.

“Boss? What do we do?” Asked the driver, unsure if the vehicle would make it over the short distance to the road.

“Just drive.” Ordered Marconi.

Engaging the four-wheel drive, wheels sink into the sluggish wet mud, before finding firmer ground beneath.

“Take it easy...” Informed Marconi, “...I don’t want to get stuck here.”

Wheels spin relentlessly to find traction. Spitting mud back at the barge. The ferryman grins seeing the opportunity to make more money from them. The engine whined and groaned, as it inched itself toward the road. Just feet away. Then a front wheel caught the dry surface, then another wheel. The vehicle leaped forward by the new found traction and maneuvered the mud-spattered vehicle onto the road.

Spectators watched on disappointedly.

The driver lowers his window and pays the ferryman. Before accelerating along a main road that led to Severe to the East. Their eyes peeled for somewhere to refuel. Single story homes lined the street. Light glowed from within. Stars had begun to shine the night sky. Lights come to life on the vehicle. Punching strong beams in to the growing darkness.

In the distance, a gas station. A petroleum oasis after traveling over six hundred thirsty miles.

“Fuel up here and cover that damn window... It’s going to get cold.” Warned Marconi looking to the cloudless sky...

Amantea

The old train rambled into Amantea unhurried by the urgency of its passengers.

Tired and weary, brakes squealed as it came to a halt beside the platform. It could go no further if it wanted to. They had reached the end of the line. Outside, the night had overcome the day and shrouded the coastal township with a blanket of stars.

A township that had seen many visitors come and go. Like a series of falling domino bricks, empires do not last forever. It had begun with the Romans, then the Germans. Only to be displaced briefly by the Arabs. Who in turn fell to the Byzantines, the eastern cousins of the western Roman Empire, as though they were reclaiming their rightful inheritance. Normans muscled their way in, only to be toppled by the Holy Roman Empire. Which as Voltaire pointed out, was neither Holy, nor an empire, but a ramshackle collection of inbred Royal Houses. Under Napoleon, the French claimed Amantea as their own. Until he met his Waterloo, and the indigenous population saw their opportunity to claim independence once and for all.

The wheels of history had come full circle.

As had the wheels of the train.

Phil had nodded off again and was abruptly awoken by the shunting of the carriages. Stretching stiffened joints, his mind still confused by the events of his meeting with Father Michael. The more he thought about him, the less he seemed to recall. Eyes open to discover a darkened window, and a lit compartment. And the Father sitting opposite absorbed by his paperback.

Tops of two red tickets protrude from the pages. A feeling of déjà-vu rushes over him. Nostrils twitch as though he could smell of freshly baked bread. Looking about the compartment, sensing someone was watching him.

Michael sat opposite, unseen, and unheard. He could only be felt.

“Sorry, must have nodded off.” Said Phil, shaking off the odd sensation.

“No need to apologize. You must be exhausted after yesterday...” Remarked Francis, “... I see we have arrived... This was my former parish before...” He recalled the day the mysterious letter came from the Cardinal requesting his presence in Rome, “... Before I was called to the Vatican.”

“Promoted eh?” Joked Phil.

“One is never promoted in the Church Phil. One is called to serve.” Francis corrected him.

“Oh I see.”

“To this day, I still cannot understand the decision. But then, God does work in mysterious ways.”

“Hm, that’s what they say... Where to now?”

“We have accommodation at the Parish.” Informed Francis pulling the luggage bag from the overhead rack.

Phil stands and stretches his legs. There was something weird about the train ride as though it were all just a dream, and he would not have been surprised if he awoke back in his bedroom in Watford. A uniformed old man on the platform blows a whistle as if it were his alarm clock.

And he followed Francis from the train.

“Taxi?” Asked Phil looking about for one.

“We can walk... It’s just down the road a bit.” Informed Francis.

“If you say so.”

The familiar sounds of town came flooding back to Francis. Street lights lit their way. It felt like only yesterday he was there. Taking in one familiar street after another. Climbing winding inclines that seemed to up on forever. Phil began to wonder if they had become lost. And then he heard it.

The sound of a Chapel bell.

It rang once and fell silent. So as not to disturb the sleeping, and the dead. Like a beacon, it called out to Francis. Re-energized by the sound, legs stride out and this time it was Phil who had trouble keeping up.

“Hey, wait up.” Said Phil panting for breath.

“Not far now... Just around the corner.”

“What happened to... *It’s just down the road a bit?*”

“I lied...” Joked Francis, “... Thought the walk would do us good.”

“Next time I’m getting a taxi okay... I hate walking.”

Michael grinned and had to chuckle to himself.

Having climbed innumerable steps, Phil looked down upon the township lit with street lights. Cloaked in the dim haze of the moon and stars. A vagrant scooter screamed its noisy exhaust as it raced along a street. Reminding him of Alistair and Capri. Wishing now he had a scooter. Beyond the buildings, the vast darkness of the ocean. Beyond that, North Africa. And Timbuktu, wherever that was, thought Phil.

He peered into abys of the night sky.

“Phil. Are you coming?”

“Sorry Father.” Phil signaled.

Standing before the large wooden gates. Francis runs a hand over the weathered surface, if only to tell himself it was real. Feeling it roughed texture. Its simplicity. A far cry from the refinement of the Vatican. He pushes on the gate and it opens. Hinges squeak like an old familiar voice to welcome him.

Lights appear from inside the building on hearing the sound of the gates. Moving shadows appear silhouetted at windows. Before disappearing like ghosts. Francis stepped across the courtyard, there would be no marble Saints glaring down upon him here. Phil trailed behind like a human shadow, relieved to have reached the place.

Eager to eat and hungry for sleep.

A door opened and out steps an inexact clone of Francis. Another Father, from a different mother. Dressed identically as though the robes only ever came in one color.

Black.

“Father Antonio?” Asked Francis.

“Sì, sì. Father Francis. Welcome. Welcome.” Antonio holds out his hands as though wanting to give Francis a hug.

“Thank you, Father. It is good to be here. But we shall not be staying long.”

“Oh?”

“Just the evening and we will be off first light... We seek but food and shelter for the night.” Informed Francis as if he were beggar seeking refuge from the storm.

“That you shall find it here Father. You are always welcomed... And who is your friend?” Antonio asked curiously.

“My apologies... This is Phillip. He will be accompanying me.” Informed Francis.

Phil raises a hand to acknowledge him. His ring sparkled in the light, catching Antonio’s attention and the scared fraternity to which he belonged. But what was he doing with Father Francis thought Antonio.

Some questions are best let unasked.

“Oh I see...” Antonio leaving it there, “... I’d show you to your rooms, but I think you know this place better than I... Why don’t you settle in and I find you some supper.”

“Thank you, Father Antonio, you are too kind.”

“It’s as you left it Father.” Remarked Antonio.

Stepping inside the former monastery was like stepping back in time. Albeit the decade that Francis had preached the Word of God to his parishioners. And wondered if any of them had wandered off. Voices echo from terracotta floors, coming from the kitchen. The smell of delicious food carried in the air. Catching Phil’s attention and triggering his nostrils to twitch again. Triggering images of the train ride and a vague dream he had had.

A vision of Michael flashes in his mind.

“You okay? ...” Asked Francis, “... You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Yeah-nah. Smell that?” Lied Phil.

“Smells good. I show you your room... Then you can eat. This way.” Leading the way.

Instinctively he retraced steps along the corridor. Feeling foreign in his own land. Somehow, he felt he no longer belonged here. As though he had out grown the place.

Or outgrown his purpose there.

‘*Shhh.*’ Whispered Michael.

The troubling thoughts waned. And they arrive at Phil’s room.

“This is your room. It is not much. But it has a bed and four walls.” Remarks Francis opening the door and stepping into a small room.

“Hey, I grateful for a bed and a roof over my head father.”

Against one wall a single unmade bed. Blankets and sheets sat folded on top. The walls bare and unadorned. A wooden cross hung on a nail. A small white porcelain figurine of the Virgin Mary stood on a simple wooden side table. As though keeping guard of the hallow room.

A single naked bulb hung from the ceiling.

“It’s a palace. Thank you, Father.” Remarked Phil placing the brief case between the bed and side table. Concealing it from view.

“My room is just down the hallway. Why don’t you follow your nose and head to the kitchen, I’ll be there shortly.”

“See you soon.” Said Phil sniffing the air.

Francis stands before a wooden door. A door that he had stood before many, many times. And hesitates before entering. Had he become soft at the Vatican. A pang of guilt rushes over him as goosebumps. A hand reaches for the handle and turns it. Feeling the familiar tension. Pushing the door open. Darkness escapes the interior, allowing light to enter in its place. Illuminating a bed and side table.

More so, the cross on the wall.

He stepped inside. It was like the room was part of him. Like an old jacket buried at the back of the wardrobe. It still fitted. But there was a musty smell about it. In time it needed to be aired and worn again. Time that Francis did not have.

The re-union would be fleeting.

“I’m back.”

The room remained silent. And dark.

Flicking a switch, an electric candle, illuminated the room in monotone light. Fawn colored walls. Terracotta floors. Even the wooden cross had faded to a monotonous grey. Only Mother Mary stood pristine white on the side table. Virginal. He crosses himself before her. Francis places his bag on the bed and opened it. Taking out a bible his mother had given him and placed this beside the figurine.

As though it were a passport.

The room had warmed on him since he had stepped in. Feeling it had forgiven him for leaving. Or perhaps all it wanted was human company. Many had come and gone over the centuries. But the Word they preached, always remained the same. Comforted with that thought, he patted the bed and stood. If today had been long, tomorrow would be longer.

His stomach rumbled.

A delicious scent whiffed under his nose. Causing it to sniff and twitch. Thoughts of Phil surface and he remembered saying he would not be long. Crossing himself as though to seek absolution he made his way to the kitchen to find Phil eating as though it were the last supper.

His head over a bowl of soup and several doormat slices of thickly buttered bread. Dipping them into the soup, before shoveling it into his mouth. Jaws chewed up and down. Cheeks bulging. It was as though he had not eaten for a week. To one side of the bowl a mug of frothing beer.

If there was a heaven, Phil had found it...

Road Block

A star lit heaven silhouetted the distant horizon. The Milky Way stretched heavenward as though to point the direction.

Both vehicles traveled pressed on. Unbeknown of other's location. Unaware the lead had switched.

Headlights punched holes into the thickening darkness. Illuminating the single lane accelerating towards them. The drone of engine and wheels filled the cabin.

Suddenly the SUV brakes heavily. Wheels rasped violently into the dirt road. Throwing Marconi unexpectantly forward against the back of the driver's seat as the vehicle skidded to stuttering halt. And stalling the engine. Pulling himself upright to see why they had stopped. Fearful of bandits, he peers into the haze of drifting dust. Shrouding the immediate danger within.

"What's happening!?" Marconi asked.

"There!" The driver points to the middle of the road.

"What's there?" Leaning forward to get a better look.

Stepping through the cloud of dust, an enraged large bull elephant. Towering four meters tall. Headlights accentuate the two long white tusks that protrude like menacing spears. Stubbornly unwilling to step aside.

Bellowing a blood curdling roar to challenge metal beast before it.

"What do we do boss?" Asked the driver anxiously.

"Use the horn. See if you can scare that thing away." As though it were an oversize blow fly.

The driver sounds several loud long blasts of the horn. Only to aggravate the elephant and cause it to bellow back at them louder than before. The elephant stood its ground. Throwing dust into the air with its trunk.

Stomping a heavy foot to accept the challenge.

"What now boss? It doesn't look happy... I think we might have upset it."

"Can we shoot it?" Asked Marconi callously.

"Boss, we don't have an elephant gun." Informed the diver.

"Well, at least sting it... That should tell it who's in charge." Marconi grins contemptuously.

"You think?" Asked the driver.

Gingerly, a man steps out with the AK-47 and takes aim.

'Ratta-tat-tat! Ratta-tat-tat! ... Ratta-tat-ta! Ratta-tat-tat!' Firing a volley of warning shots over the elephant's head, then at ground at its feet. Kicking up dust and dirt. And deafening those inside the cabin.

The bull elephant stood its ground defiantly. It was not moving. Less so now. Angered, it sways its head side to side. Tossing more dust into the air with its trunk.

"I told you to shoot it! You have only made it mad.... Here give me your gun!" Instructs Marconi lowering his window.

And takes aim at the elephant with a pistol.

'Bang!'

The bullet glanced off a tusk just as the elephant raised its head, as though startled by something. Or someone suddenly appearing before it. Infuriated by the glancing blow, it trumpets another harrowing roar. The sound carried for miles on the still night air.

“Boss. I think you pissed it off.” Notices the driver, desperately trying to restart the stalled engine.

“You think? ...” Asked Marconi sarcastically, “... Get us out of here!”

“I can’t boss. The engine won’t start.”

‘Gurr-gurr-gurr_! Gurr-gurr-gurr_! Gurr-gurr-gurr_! ...’ Groaned the starter motor unable to get the engine to start.

Michael watched on, as though he had nothing to do with it.

‘Gurr-gurr-gurr_! Gurr-gurr-gurr_! Gurr-gurr-gurr_!’

Headlights flicker with each failed attempt.

Enraged, the elephant seizes its chance and lowers its head to charge. Thick legs and heavy feet pound the earth as it races towards the vehicle. Marconi fires frantically at the grey mass coming at him out of the darkness. Only to anger the elephant more. Suddenly the elephant was upon them. The impact jolts the vehicle and those inside. A tusk rasped against the side. Gouging a gaping elongated wound as though it were opening a can of sardines.

The elephant bellows another roar and stampedes away. Vanishing into the darkness.

“Where is it?” Asked Marconi, eyes search for large moving shadows in the darkness.

Then through the cloud of dust, it appeared.

Charging head first at Marconi’s door. As though it could scent the infidel inside. Fearing they would be impaled by the ivory spikes. Men brace themselves for the impact. Tusks shatter through windows. Lifting the vehicle in the air before tossing it to the ground. Bouncing on suspension. Men screamed in panic. Unsure where the next assault would strike. Tusks scooped beneath the vehicle and rolled the vehicle over like a child playing with a tin toy. Creaking loudly as it landed on its side with a heavy thud. And knocking the wind out of those inside.

Satisfied the challenger had been humiliated and defeated, the triumphant elephant lumbered ceremoniously quietly into outback to become one with the darkness.

Steam bellowed from the radiator like dancing lanterns, lit by headlights. Cannisters and supplies scattered across the ground. Marconi lay battered and bruised in the back. Laying atop of a man groaning in pain.

Wishing now he had stayed at home. Atop his mountain fortress.

“You okay boss?” The driver asked.

“What do you think?” Questioned Marconi, attempting to pull himself upright.

“Ow_ Ah_ Easy boss.” The man under him pleads.

“Get up you fool! And help me out of here!” Barked Marconi.

Heads poke out of windows like meerkats. Looking left, then right. Then to each other. Seeing nothing. Hearing only the sound of their own heavy breathing. And the sound of steam hissing from beneath the bonnet.

Eyes penetrate the darkness for danger.

“It’s gone boss.” A man calls back into the cabin.

Marconi poked his head out of the shattered opening to confirm the fact for himself.

Silence rang in his ears. Even the cicadas were asleep. To the east the moon was breaching the horizon. A glowing orb of crater lakes and vast seas. Shea trees silhouette the landscape. And

the elephant hopefully some distance away. But what other predators lay in wait? Marconi did not want to stick around to find out.

“Roll this thing back over and get going.” He commands his men.

Three burly gentlemen crawled awkwardly from broken windows. And wrestled Marconi’s overweight body through the tight opening. A one stage becoming stuck, before Marconi slid out like a new born baby. Bloodied and bruised. A man inspected the smoldering wounded vehicle laying on its side. Steam bellowed from beneath the hood. Cargo spewed across the ground. Water and fuel tanks dented but intact.

“Besides the radiator, I think we’re good boss. But I don’t know how we’re going tip this thing over. We need a winch.” Reports the man reluctantly.

“We don’t have a winch. I have you. Now get to it.” Orders Marconi looking down the road for the Scotsman.

Surely, he would not leave him stranded in the middle of a dessert...

Cupid's Arrows

The entire journey so far for Munro had been uneventful. A walk in the park.

Having conceded that Marconi had the jump on him, he had decided to ease off the throttle to conserve fuel. On checking his watch, calculated they would make Timbuktu by midnight as planned. Still another hundred miles away to the West. The air-con warmed the interior of the compartment, as men took turns driving. The flask of whiskey now as parched as he was.

The lights of Dire sparkled like stars in the distance.

A rising moon, as though it were chasing the sun, took its place in the heavens. A ghostly outback flashed by outside the windows. As though to be distracted, an itinerant thought of Ella appeared in his mind. A fatherly concern came over him. But knowing she was safe with his men would be watching out for her.

Or so he thought...

From the outside, it looked as though the Glenlabryn was under attack from within.

Window panes shook with the pulsating beat of cannons. Strobe lighting stuttered and stammered like tommy-guns. Adolescent delinquents danced like intoxicated zombies. Munros men stood at the bar watching over the inebriated youth. Their eyes fixed on one in particular.

Appearing and disappearing from view within the intermittent lighting.

Ella had caught sight of a young man, looking in her direction. Eyes had met and glances of temporal affection exchanged. Back and forth Cupid's arrows flew. Each finding their target.

Subtly tilting her head to say she would meet him outside.

'Give me five minutes.' She gestures.

One of Munro's men catches the gesture and scopes the dance floor for the feral recipient. Ella heads towards the restroom dragging another young lady in her wake as though for cover. The man dismisses it as a wave. A young man takes a swallow of beer and places the half-drunk bottle on the bar next to Munro's man who watched him leave.

Glad to see the back of him. One less to worry about.

Taking a heavy swallow of whiskey, the man leans on the bar and waits for Ella to reappear. It could be five minutes. It could be twenty minutes. He could never understand what took a woman so long.

Nor did he wish to know.

Stepping outside, the young man waits beneath a street light as though waiting for an Uber to arrive. Insomniac windows blinked relentlessly. The barking sound of what could have been music leaked onto the street. Barking louder as the door opened and closed.

From a darkened alleyway, Ella catches the young man's attention. She looks up and down the street for her father's men. Nowhere to be seen.

The young man walks towards the alley and steps into the darkness and Ella's arms.

"Hey." She breaks the silence.

"Hey..." He responds timidly, "... I'm Scott. But people called me Scotty." He added.

"Hello Scotty. I'm Ella... People call me Ella."

“Why are we hiding in here?” He asked curiously.

“It’s my father’s men...” She began, “... If they catch you...”

“Your father’s men?” Asked Scotty anxiously looking over his shoulder.

Perhaps he had bitten off more than he could chew.

“Don’t worry, they don’t know I’m here... Come with me. Quickly now.” She tells him.

Taking him by the hand she leads him over the bridge. Stopping midway to catch their breaths. She leans against the hand rail. His arms either side as though to pen her in. Above them a heaven lit with stars. A moon beginning to rise on the horizon. And for a brief moment she thinks about her father and wondered where he had taken himself on one of his expeditions. The thought is broken when Scotty leans in and kisses her. Taking her breath away. Hands grope his muscular body and primal urges ignite a flame within.

On hearing voices they look towards the bar. A group of young men stagger out drunk and rowdy. One retches and vomits into the gutter, holding himself upright beneath the street lamp Scotty had been standing just moments before. Her father’s men would soon be looking for her. It was time to leave.

The game of cat and mouse had begun.

“This way.” She leads him by the hand to the other side of the bridge and along an oyster shell path up to the Castle.

“You live up here?” He asked, seeing the Castle lit with lights.

“Yeah...” She replies casually, “... We can go in the back way. Quiet now.”

Ducking from view beside a hedge row, they made their way around back to the kitchen entrance. Doors opens, squeaking on hinges as though to tell-tale their presence. Scotty followed faithfully behind. Hearing only the sound of their panting.

“Shh.” She warns, leading him through the oversized kitchen.

Pots and pans hung on hooks like bats. Shelves glistened with silverware. There was a scent about the place. A scent that kitchens have of pine detergents and ambient cuisine. She leads him down a dimly lit ghostly hallway. Floor boards creaked beneath Persian rugs. Empty armored Sentries turn a blind eye to the trespasses. They had seen it all before. Their lips were sealed. No amount of clapping could save Tinkerbell from her father.

Arriving at a set of double doors. Ella looked back along the hallway for men. They were alone. The men would have discovered her missing by now. The last place they would look would be her father’s Drawing Room.

“Quick, inside. They won’t look in here.” She tells him.

Scotty follows her inside. For a moment, thinking he had walked into a medieval museum. Eyes adjusted to the hazy darkness.

“What is this place?” He asked looking about the array of sparkling glass cabinets.

“My father’s study... He collects... *Stuff*.” Informed Ella, opening the bottom drawer and find what she was looking for.

From another drawer she retrieves two crystal tumblers and pours a portion of the amber solution into both. Handling Scotty one, who sniffs the strong drink before taking a swallow.

“Hmm... It’s the good stuff.” Grins Scotty.

“I suppose.” She remarked indifferently.

“What is all this... *Stuff*.” Asked Scotty, making out clay tablets scribed with ancient texts.

“Dun’no really... Just old stuff.” She dismisses his curiosity, having more imminent interests on her mind.

Stepping closer and pressing her warming body against him.

“Like a museum?” Scotty continued.

“Yeah, I suppose.” Placing the tumbler on the desk.

The time for talking was over.

Taking the final swallow he places the glass next to hers and they embrace. Kissing heatedly. Awkwardly. Raising passions. Fingers fumbled with buttons. Hands groped for forbidden fruits. Breaths quickened and she found herself laying across her father’s desk. Half dressed. Half undressed. Her arms wrapped around Scotty’s muscular frame. He was everything she imagined him to be. And then some. The flames of youth flared. Again and again and again. And again. Until the two lovers lay limp beside each other across the desk. Exhausted and panting in unison. Staring up at the darkened ceiling.

Papers strewn about the floor.

“You better get going.” Said Ella standing and buttoning her blouse.

“But I thought...” Scotty began, only to have the relationship fade as quickly as it had started. Changing lovers as frequently as changing the color of her hair. Next week it would be a different color. A different Scotty.

“You know the way out.” She informed him coldly as though giving directions to a stranger on the street, “... Oh, and watch out for the dogs.” She adds at the last moment.

“The dogs?” Scotty’s ears prick up.

“Just joking.” She giggled teasing him.

A mobile vibrated inside her hand bag and noticed she had missed a dozen calls and messages.

“I wonder who could be calling me? ...” She giggled again, “... *Hello.*” She answered innocently to one of her father’s men...

What's Taking Him

“What’s taking him?” Asked Marconi looking down the road for Munro’s vehicle.

“Perhaps he flew?” Postulated one man.

“Bandits.” Postulated another.

“Bar-humbug...” Cursed Marconi, checking his watch showing 01:11AM, “... The plane was no-where near ready to fly, as for bandits... Maybe.” Entertaining the tantalizing thought, “...Less competition.”

“How do we get out of here?” Asked a man.

“I guess it’s time to learn your keep. Now get your shoulders into it.” Order’s Marconi standing back to watch.

But no matter how hard the men leaned into the heavy SUV it would not budge. Sturdy logs like twigs once placed under the strain when used as leverage. Men grunted and groaned in pain and in anger as the vehicle stubbornly held its ground.

And refused to budge.

“It’s not working boss.” Remarked an exhausted man. Wiping his sweaty brow with a handkerchief.

“I can see that...” Censored Marconi leaning against a tree watching on, “... At least check the radiator and engine so we can get going when we do.”

“Good thinking boss... Pop the hood Charlie.”

“We’ll just have to wait for someone to pass.” Said Marconi.

“That could be days.” A man complained.

“You got some place you have to be? ... We have enough water.” Warned Marconi pulling his jacket tighter about him and making himself comfortable beneath the tree nursing his bruised and battered body.

“Be careful Boss.” Warns the man watching him wary of what lurked in the darkness.

“Bar-Humbug...” Dismissing the man, “... Look about you man... It’s a desert. Nothing lives out here... But that damn elephant. Stand watch... And wake me in the morning.” He ordered, pulling his hat down over his face.

Above him, a deadly Tree Snake weaved quietly among the branches above him. Its fork tongue darting out. Tasting the air, catching the alluring odor of the infidel below.

Nearby, a deadly Puff-Adder slivers camouflaged. Its belly warmed by the sand. Moved stealthy around the base of the tree.

Beneath a rocky outcrop heated by the sun, a hideous devil horned Viper lay curled and asleep. Nostrils twitching at a tantalizing scent.

They would let Marconi sleep.

It was as though he was one of their own.

There may have only been a dozen of them, but the street lights of Timbuktu never looked so inviting thought Munro. It signaled the end of a grueling eighteen-hour drive. All he wished for was a wee dram for a night cap, and a bed to call his own.

“Find the nearest Hotel if they have one...” He instructs, “...Otherwise we’ll sleep in the vehicle.” Leaning back and sighing after the monotonous journey. Happy to have reached his destination unscathed. As no doubt Marconi had...

What Are You Doing Here

Phil leaned into the assailing gale. Sand stinging exposed skin. His head wrapped in a scarf. Eye's squint through a narrow opening. Wandering aimlessly like a blind man. Unsure how he had gotten there. Each grueling step taking him deeper into the Sahara. Each laborious step taking him away from salvation. Somehow knowing he was heading the wrong way. But not knowing. It all made no sense to him. Yet he knew had to keep going. No matter how painful or wrong it seemed.

Michael watched on unseen. Unaffected by the whispering wind blowing about him. As if stirred up by his imagination. Washing Phil this way, then that.

'Phil.' A woman's voice called his name upon the wind.

He stopped and looked about. Wondering if he were hearing things. Then he heard it again.

'Phillip.' The voice calls out.

Closer this time. Behind him. Or was it ahead.

The voice grabbed his arm and released it. Startled, he looked about for who was there. A shadowy figure appeared some distance ahead of him. Beckoning him. But with each grueling step he took, he never seemed to get any closer. Like a bad dream. The more he tried, the more he failed. Exhausted, he fell to his knees. Raising arms out, he closed his eyes. And surrendered to the flagellating elements.

Then, without reason, the violent tempest fell silent.

On opening his eyes, the sun shone bright. The sky was blue. And the air was perfectly still. The desert perfectly flat as far as the eye could see. And he wondered if he had died. Michael chuckled at the thought. Heaven was far more beautiful than this.

A woman stood before him. The woman from the train. Her head covered with a pale head scarf, a narrowing opening about her emerald-green eyes.

"You? ..." He asked, "...What are you doing here?"

But the woman just smiled and turned away.

Behind her stood a man in black. He looked familiar. Appearing pristine and perfect in every way. Polished black shoes untouched by sand. His robe neat and pressed. Unruffled by the wind. The man looked up at the brilliant unblinding orb suspended in the crystal blue sky. The mysterious woman looked up and smiled.

Phil's eyes follow.

About him, he heard a rooster crow.

"Eh?" Puzzled by the out of place sound.

The rooster crowed again. Louder. Startling him.

He sits upright gasping for breath. His mouth parched by the arid dream. The dream now slipping through his fingers like sand. Visions appear momentarily, only to vanish before he could make sense of them. A desert. With no beginning. No end. The woman from the train.

'Weird.' He thought.

The rooster crowed again, as tough it had been started by something, or someone.

Coming about, he finds himself in a foreign bed, in the foreign room. What was he doing here? It was almost as bizarre as the dream. Torn between two realities. And trusting neither. Eye

lids struggle to stay open. Like broken blinds that refused to catch. Outside it was still dark. Muffled voices slip into the room beneath the door. Coming from the direction of the kitchen.

The vanguard of dawn light crept through the window. The noisy fowl had detected its presence. Stretching his limbs Phil dressed himself.

'Tap-tap-tap.' Comes a knock at the door.

"Phil? ...", A gentle voice questioned.

The handle turned and the door opened, sending a shadow of light into the darkened room.

"Ah you're up. That's good." Remarked Francis.

"Only Just. What time is it?"

"Just after 4:00AM... Finish getting dress and meet me in the kitchen." Instructs Francis.

"See you soon." Said Phil rubbing sleep from his eyes...

Snake

Marconi stirred. Awoken by a sensation on his neck. It felt warm.

As though a creepy crawly insect had found its way there. Flicking a sleepy hand to shoo the pestering nuisance away. Weary and tired by the broken sleep against the now uncomfortable trunk digging into his back. And reluctant to open his eyes. The irritation continued. Again, the hand waves about as though it were conducting an unseen orchestra.

But to no avail.

His hand touched the side of his neck only to feel something more sizeable. Fingers jump back as though touching a hot surface. Eye's spring open. Paralysed with fright he sits perfectly still. A green Tree Snake had found warmth about his neck. And had nestled itself inside his jacket for the night.

His men lay sleeping. Barring one that was nowhere to be seen. Marconi hears sounds coming from behind the vehicle. Heavy footsteps scuffing of dirt. And then the sound of a zipper.

The man appears tucking in his shirt.

"Boss... You're awake."

Followed by a strange silence.

"Boss? You okay?" Seeing a strangled look on his face.

The question goes unanswered.

Marconi breathed slowly. Quietly. So as not to disturb the snake any more than he already had. Eyes shift to his shoulder. Then back to the man. Then back to his shoulder.

Then back to the man hoping he could read between the lines.

"S_n_a_k_e_" Marconi speaks softly through his teeth, as though he were a ventriloquist.

The man reaches for his gun and points it at Marconi as though he were about to shoot the unseen creature. Checking the ground for others.

Startled, Marconi glares at the man with contempt.

Then to the other men. The man backs away and kicks at the boots of the other two sleeping. Stirring them from their uncomfortable broken slumber. And reach for weapons on seeing the man standing over them with his gun drawn.

"The boss... Snake." He brings the others up to speed.

Adrenaline surged through the men, staring blankly at Marconi staring coldly back at them.

"Put your guns away..." A man informs the others, moving quietly towards Marconi to assess the situation, "... You been bit?" He asked crouching close by.

Eyes move side to side to say no. Then to his shoulder, as though to suggest there was something beneath. Then back to his man to do something about it.

"Okay boss. Don't move."

"R_e_a_l_l_y_?" Remarked the ventriloquist to the dummy.

"Keep perfectly still..." The man tells him, "... You two, get over here."

"I'm just going to lift this up boss." Informs the man.

Slowly, the man probes a stick gently under the lapel of the jacket. Lifting it up to reveal a snake laying upon Marconi's chest. Its tail nestled in a pocket. Alarmed by the chilling intrusion, the snake raising up and hisses at the man. Its head but inches from Marconi's face. Now

panting, his stale breath catching the snake's attention. The snake glared Marconi as if he looked familiar. And Marconi finds himself face to face with death.

The snake lurches backwards as though it were about to strike.

'This was it.' Thought Marconi.

Suddenly a gun fires and explodes the snake's head violently.

'Boom!'

Splattering blood and flesh over Marconi's face.

Its elongated body falls flaccidly to the ground. Startled and shaken and deafened by the shot, Marconi looked about for the man who fired. Unsure he should thank him or shoot him.

"You okay boss?" A man asked.

"Don't ever do that again." Warned Marconi thanklessly, getting to his feet.

Wiping pieces of snake from his face. And smearing the blood like war paint. His white shirt now stained red as though he were the one that had been shot.

"Yes boss. Sorry boss."

4:04AM and the sun's first rays crept over the eastern horizon. Like a massive bush fire behind distance dunes. Marconi looked down the road. Still no sign of the Scotsman.

'Perhaps he had been detained by bandits.' Grinned Marconi pleased by the thought.

Then as if fortune had turned in his favour, he heard voices. Summoning a train of camels burdened with bundled goods heading his way. Looking to the lopsided vehicle he pondered a solution to his problem. Raising a hand for the procession to halt. Dark bearded men in robes stare at the strange foreigner covered with blood. The scent of blood agitated the animals as jockeys fidget to restrain them.

Marconi's driver points to the vehicle on its side. Gesturing with hands it being righted by using the camels. The nomadic traders stared at Marconi's man as though they did not understand. Or that perhaps he was lacking something in his communication.

The man reaches for his wallet, and he pulls out several notes.

"Half now... Half after." Handing a note to the apparent leader of the group.

This he understood. Pocketing the money before shouting out in Arabic, for others to tie ropes to the foreigner's vehicle to help righten it. Effortlessly, traders scamper down from their camels and begin knotting ropes to the vehicle.

Whips cracked and camels groaned under the strained of the heavy load. On the other side of the vehicle, men put their shoulders into the roof to tip the vehicle back onto its feet. Until finally wheels crash back onto the earthen road. Bouncing heavily before settling.

Ropes are untied and the leader is paid. The driver turns the ignition, and the engine starts first time as if a miracle. Rumbling to life as though there was never a problem.

"Okay... Secure the load and let's get going. I want to make Timbuktu by 8:00AM. You hear? We've already lost too much time... Hopefully the Scotsman has been delayed." Marconi ordered, taking his seat in the back.

"Yes boss." The men call out.

Watching watch the lamed vehicle drive away, traders speculate what had caused the accident. Keen eyes notice elephant paw prints about the road. Sharp eyes notice the body of a decapitated snake beneath a solitary tree. Twitching as though it did not know it was dead...

Air Pierre

A white Fiat in the guise of a Taxi, pulled up to the gates of a small remote airfield south of Amantea.

A row of corrugated domed hangers lined the perimeter. Francis holds a piece of paper to the security guard in a control booth. Unfolding the page, sleepy eyes examine the document and then look to Francis for confirmation, now dressed in civilian clothes. Beside sat a young man dressed in Tee-shirt and jeans.

The document looked official. And he examined a clipboard of planes and hangars.

“Hangar Six... Just up there on the left. You can’t miss it. Have a good day Father.” Handing the document back to Francis.

“Thank you, my Son...” Francis replies as though to bless the man, “... Hangar Six.” He informs the driver.

Wary eyes watch from within the darkness of the hangars, as the taxi drove slowly past. Breaking the horizon, the sun sent strong rays of light across the air strip. Lighting the rounded hangars like tombstones in a massive graveyard. Large black numbers painted on the doors distinguished the one from the other.

“...Four... Five... Six... This must be it.” Remarked Phil eagerly.

The Taxi halts in front of the closed hangar doors.

With not a cloud in the sky, a crisp morning breeze drifts across the airfield.

“That will be all.” Informs Francis, paying the driver and watching him drive away.

“You sure someone is here? It looks pretty deserted.” Questioned Phil looking about for life.

“This is it...” Examining the piece of paper again, “...Let’s look inside.”

Opening a side door, they step inside. And are greeted with the smell of aviation fuel and oil. Light leaks through the small doorway, partially illuminating the darkened hangar. Exposing a twin prop aeroplane, pristine and polished, as though it were waiting for someone to fly it.

“When does the pilot show up?” Asked Phil.

“I thought he’d already be here. We were supposed to leave five minutes ago.” Remarked Francis checking his watch.

“I hope it’s fuelled up... Wouldn’t want to run out of gas over the Sahara.”

“I’m sure the pilot knows what he’s doing.” Reassures Francis, looking about.

Seeing an office to one side decides to look inside.

“I’ll open the hangar doors.” Said Phil putting his shoulder into large, suspended sliding doors.

Castors creaked and squeal as they turn over and over. A vertical gap appears, as though the dark clouds had parted and flooded the hangar in brilliant sunlight.

Followed by the other door.

A Piper Apache sparkled as the brilliant morning light bounced off polished surfaces. Phil inspects the plane and wonders if it would have the range to get them to where they were headed. Running its hand over the surface. Scars peppered the wings and fuselage. Some patched by duct tape, some painted over.

Rekindling memories of another plane looking quite similar.

“Nah, can’t be. Surely not.” He questioned.

“Found the pilot.” Calls out Francis, finding him asleep and snoring on a tattered couch.

An empty bottle of whiskey laying on the floor beside him. A nose twitched as though having a dog dream. Eyelid’s flicker, as light violated optical senses.

“*Grunt... Snort... Gasp.*” The man fidgets. Fighting the primal urge to awaken.

Suddenly eyes open fully, senses someone standing in the doorway.

“Pierre, I assume?” Francis asked scrutinizing the rough looking man.

“Oui...” Pierre rubs his eyes, standing upright and straightening himself, “... Father Francis I assume?”

“Oui... Are you sure you’re up to this? We can find another pilot if you like.” Suggested Francis.

“Of course. Of course...” Responds Pierre, “...Give me five minutes.”

“We’ll wait by the plane.”

“We? There’s more of you?” Questioned Pierre, concerned about the additional weight.

“One other... Let me introduce you.” Said Francis about to make the introduction.

“Phil!? What are you doing here? ... Where’s Alistair?” Exclaimed Pierre, surprised to see him standing there.

“Pierre! ... I should have known.”

“You two know each other?” Asked Francis feeling like a third wheel on a bicycle.

“We go way back...” Remarked Phil, “...We’re in good hands with Pierre.” Throwing out a hand to shake.

“*C'est bon de te voir mon vieil ami.*” Welcomed Pierre.

“You too...” Spouted Phil, unsure what he had just said, “... She all fuelled up?”

“I think so.” Scratching his head, trying to recall events from the previous evening. Nudging the bottle on the floor under the couch with his foot. Only to clatter against another empty bottom.

“That’s good enough for me...The sooner we leave, the sooner we get there.” Said Phil checking his watch. 4:37AM.

“Climb in... I just have to see a man about a poodle... Qui.” Grinned Pierre.

“Oui.” Chuckled Phil.

“Are you sure this thing can get us to Timbuktu?” Asked Phil through a headset.

“We’ll refuel in Tunis to make sure it does.” Remarked Pierre pressing a starter button to fire up the port engine.

The port engine it coughed and spluttered to life, before purring like a kitten. The starboard engine mimics the other as if they were identical twins. Filling the hangar with noise. Needles jiggled in dials before settling.

Pierre punched buttons on a central navigational computer screen.

“This is a bit flashier than the old plane.” Stated Phil noticing the interior.

“Courtesy of the Vatican... Thank you Father.”

“The pleasure is all ours Pierre.” Strapping himself in.

Propellers screw into the air, pulling the Piper Apache from the hangar. Piston engines scream and whine as the craft gained speed.

Pierre radios the two for clearance.

“Echo-Victor-Charlie-Foxtrot request clearance to take off... Over.”

“Copy that Echo-Victor-Charlie-Foxtrot, you are clear for runway two... Over.” Responds the control tower.

“Copy that Tower... Runway two... Over.” Parrots Pierre taxiing the Piper to the end of the runway as though he were in no unhurried rush. Then joked, “...Today we use the runway.”

“That will make a change.” Phil still looked over his shoulder for henchmen.

The joke going over Francis’ head, wondering what Phil could be looking at.

“Long story Father...” Quipped Phil, “... I’ll tell you later.”

Pushing the throttle slowly forward while still applying the brake. Propellers spin ever increasingly. Whining and whinging as though to complain. Vibrating the Piper and Francis wondered if it would hold together.

He crosses himself. Likewise does Michael sitting behind him with Francis.

Pierre releases the brake. Occupants are thrown back in their seats as the craft accelerated down the narrow runway. Outside the world flashed rapidly by in a blur.

Phil’s eyes set on the horizon.

“Pull back on the stick.” Instructed Pierre.

“Eh?” Phil looked to Pierre as though he had gone mad.

“You want to get off the ground, you better pull back on that stick... And pretty soon if I were you.” Inform Pierre sitting back with hands on his lap.

With hands sweating with anxiety Phil grips the control wheel and pulled back gradually.

“A bit more... A bit more...” Encouraged Pierre, watch the nose of the craft raise into the air, “... Hold it there.”

The shaking faded away and smoothness overcame the small sleek two engine craft as it climbed higher into the sky. The screaming engines lowering their tone to that of a harmonic drone.

Phil held the stick as though his life depended on it.

“Take her up to ten thousand feet Phil...” Instructed Pierre pointing to round dial with two needles. Looking much like a clock. The minute hand moving slowly round and round as they climbed, the hour hand moving with each successive rotation, “... Two thousand... Keep it going.”

“Are we heading in the right direction?”

“Near enough for now... Heading Sou-West. That should see us in Tunis within a few hours... We can make course adjustments as we get closer.”

“If you say so.” Peering out the cockpit window

“One day you might need to fly one of these things... Just like Alistair... How is he? I thought he’d be here.”

“He had a small *accident* in Naples... If you know what I mean. Nothing that bed rest won’t heal.” Informed Phil focused on the altitude dial.

Below them an ocean of the dark blue waters of the Mediterranean. Engines droned as the craft climbed to its cruising altitude.

“Hold her there...” Instructed Pierre, reaching under the seat to pulled out a bottle of whiskey, “... Drinks anyone? ... Father?”

“Ah... I’m fine. It’s a little early for me.” Holding up a hand.

“Phil?”

“A wee nip wouldn’t hurt, I suppose.” Reaching for the uncapped bottle.

Taking a swallow. Then another for good measure. Hoping it would settle his flayed nerves. And handed it back to Pierre, who took a heavy swallow as though it were mouth wash and swallowed hard. Recapping the bottle, gently slides it beneath the seat again.

Then leaned back to continue the nap he had been awoken from earlier.

“Hey... Who’s flying this thing?” Asked Phil anxiously.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be fine... Just hold her steady and follow the coastline... Wake me if you have any problems.”

“Oh_, you can be sure I will.” Gripping control wheel tighter than before.

His concentration shifted to the rows of jittering dials telling him the plane’s vitals. Blood pressure. Heart rate. They may just as well have been his. Any tiredness he may have felt earlier had been flushed by the adrenaline now surging through his veins upon take off.

The starboard propellor whined incessantly, appearing as no more than a blur. Vibrations reverberate through the control wheel and he begins to feel the pulse of the plane. An island appeared below.

Sicily. Shaped like a deflated football at the toe of Italy’s boot.

To the south stood the ominous Mount Etna. Nearly eleven thousand feet high. As if Italy did not have enough volcanos. The chronic insomniac festered like a boil on its eastern shore. Dwarfing its dormant sibling Vesuvius, in size and age. At its feet, inhabitants of Catania lay sleeping in their beds.

For the past twelve thousand years, anyone who was anyone had come and gone there. Phoenicians and Greek. Vandals and Goths. Arabs and Normans. Habsburgs and Bourbons. Napoleon’s French troops came and went. As did the Black Plague. Each leaving behind what could not be carried. Megalithic structures, and the bones of the dead.

Further south, lay an inconspicuous archipelago. An outcrop of rocks where Christianity had washed ashore half drowned and taken root some two thousand years earlier. The Italian province went unnoticed by Pierre and Francis as they slept. The craft gently rocking them in their seats. The monotonous drone of the twin engines sounding like a lullaby. Pierre snored loudly. Twitching his nose and whimpering intermittently as though he were having a dream. Phil chuckled, just how Phil remembered him from Istanbul. Nothing had changed.

Leaving Phil, the only one awake in the plane, bar one.

Michael looked down upon the birthplace of the Cosa Nostra.

He knew the place well. He knew every face. Every name. None would go unjudged. A bright flash of light appears behind Phil and looked over his shoulder as to the cause. Only to see the rising sun piercing the side window. Relieved, he focused on the dials on the dashboard. Needles jiggled within dials. A dotted line on a screen plotted their path.

Somewhere in the distance lay Tunis...

Don't Ask

07:37AM. A bruised and battered SUV limped into Timbuktu. Black faces turn and watch the foreigner's vehicle limp pass. A jagged tear along its flank. Shattered windows. The tail end riddled and marred with bullet holes. Steam leaking from beneath the hood. Foreign white faces peer back from within the shadowed interior.

Suddenly the vehicle stutters, as though choking its last breath. Falls silent. And dies. The driver turns the key, as though to try to resuscitate it with paddles. To no avail.

Slapping palms against the wheel in frustration.

"That's it, Boss..." The driver informs eyeing Marconi in the rear mirror, "... It's dead. How going to get out if this forsaken place?"

"The plane should be ready by then."

People begin to gather. Clotting in small groups on the sidewalk. Speculating the events that had led to the vehicle's appearance.

"*Bandits*" Deduces one to another, pointing to the bullet holes.

Ahead of him, Marconi spies a large vehicle parked on the side of the road, looking suspiciously out of character for the place.

"The Scotsman... He's here..." His eyes fixed on the Land Rover like a hawk on its prey, "... How did he get past us without us seeing him?"

"Don't know boss."

"The hotel must be there..." Marconi speculates, "... Find some locals and push this thing there... I think I'll walk." He instructs.

"Right-o boss... You heard him." The driver instructs the other two men to push.

Stepping from the vehicle to the light of day people gasp and turn away from the sight of the Marconi. His face speckled and smeared with dark dried blood. His white shirt, stained red. It was as though the devil himself had arrived in town. Wary of his presence. People step back within darken doorways and watch as the foreigner pass.

What brought the red-faced devil to this this mythical land? Treasure. It was always for treasure. The gold had long since been taken. Only the books remained. Scattered among families. Buried in unknown caves.

"*Foreigners.*" Locals whispered in native tongue beneath their breath, as if to give the devil a name.

Marconi cast a long shadow. Longer than his height.

Flies buzzed about him scenting blood and he waved them away as though he were saluting every building he passed. From within darkened windows the whites of eyes glare back at the foreigner. Looking back to the vehicle, he sees locals pushing the vehicle along the street. The driver behind the wheel steering, gesturing an arm from a window, encouraging them to keep going.

Overhead power lines suggested the twentieth century had reached Timbuktu sometime in the past half century. And there was a good chance of a hot water and relaxing bath. On reaching the Land Rover, he examined it for signs of trouble. Only to find it unscathed. Not a single bullet

hole. He turned and looked to the two-story unadorned building. Lacking the lavish features of western hotels. He prayed the interior offered more than what the exterior portrayed.

A rectangular sign erected above the doorway stated the less obvious...

HOTEL

As to what Hotel it was, did not seem to matter to Marconi.

If it were good enough for the Scotsman, it would be good enough for him. It would also allow him to keep an eye on him. The broken SUV squealed to a halt as if it were in pain. Parking just behind Munro's pristine Land Rover.

"Bring the bags inside. I'll book us a room." Ordered Marconi.

"Right-o boss... You heard him. Grab the bags." Instructs the driver.

A youthful local quickly clambered on top of the SUV like a gazelle and begins handing down luggage bags. Spying a full petrol can, stealthily hands it down to another on the far side of the vehicle unseen.

"That's it. You can all bugger off now." Informed the driver settling the group's leader in cash.

Marconi took himself inside.

Sensing an immediate coolness of the place. And stood before the reception counter. Void of life. A shiny brass bell cried out to be struck. Voices sounded from an office concealed by a large green fern. Daintily tapping the bell as if it were a triangle musical instrument. The head of a boy protrudes from behind the fern, and sounds audible *gasp*.

The sight of the foreigner's blood-stained shirt and face sent shivers up the boy's spine.

"You there... I need a room." Instructs Marconi, as though it were not an option.

The adolescent lad feared to step closer. Startled eyes stare at the foreigner's frightening appearance.

"*Father.*" The young man calls out.

"What is it? What is the matter now? ..." The father begins to berate the boy, "... *Oh!* ..." catching sight of Marconi who looked as though he had stepped out of a murder scene, "... Sir, are you okay?"

"Yes, yes. I'm fine... Just a small matter with a snake... Do you have two rooms?"

"Snake... Yes of course... How many rooms?"

"Two rooms should suffice... A few of days until the plane is repaired."

"Repaired? ... It arrived yesterday."

"Yesterday?! ... I've just driven a thousand miles for no reason?"

"You should have taken the plane Sir... Much quicker." He said grinning.

"I bloody know that..." Cursed Marconi shaking his head in disbelief, "... I've been chased and shot at... Run off the road by an elephant... And bloody near killed by a snake! ..." Splaying arms saying, "... Look at me!"

"Very good, very good..." Dismissing Marconi's ramblings, "... Just sign here..." Pointing a finger to a line in the register, "... My name is *Ach-med!* ..." Pronouncing it as though he were about to spit, "... If there is anything you need, do not hesitate to ask... Thank you. Thank you." Bowing his head. Lowering himself to Marconi's height.

"Yes, yes, whatever!" Marconi signed the register, stabbing the pen into the page in frustration. But not before noticing the Scotsman's name, etched just above his.

“This enough to cover everything?” Pelling several hundred Euros and pushing them across the page of the register.

“More than enough. Thank you very much Mister... *Mar_co_ni*.” Achmed reads the name aloud, “...I’ll have my son show you to your rooms.”

‘*Clap-clap!*’ Achmed clapped his hands twice to summon his son.

“Show the man to his room... Enjoy your stay Sir.” Handing his son the key.

“I see you may have another guest here... *Munro*?” Marconi inquired rising eye brows to show his interest in the man. The man had been well paid for three nights, suggesting a favor was in order.

Before Achmed could answer, Munro steps into the foyer.

“I am indeed... Good Lord man! ... What happened to you?” Exclaimed Munro catching sight of the man.

Munro, looking well rested and refreshed. Dressed in a bone ivory cotton suit and matching white shoes, looking every part gentry. The same could not be said about Marconi, looking as though he had slept in a slaughter house.

“Don’t ask... How did you get here?”

“As you so politely put it... *Don’t ask*... I must be off. Enjoy your sleep.” Suggested Munro grinning ear to ear.

Disappearing out the door with his men, chuckling at Marconi’s men looking tired and beat.

“There’ll be no time for sleep...” Warned Marconi, “... A hot shower and breakfast and we’re off... Understood?!”

“Yes boss.” Voices groaned.

“We need to find that damn *Letter* before the Scotsman does!” Riled Marconi, marching behind the young man leading the way up a stair case to the upper floor.

Obediently his men followed like ducklings weighed down with suitcases.

The word *Letter* did not go unnoticed by the Achmed. It was rumored the Letter had been taken out of the town. But now it seemed otherwise. He waited for foreigners to ascend the stair way and disappear from view. Before picking up the phone to dial a four-digit number.

And waited for it to answer.

“Omar? ... It’s your Uncle Achmed... Now listen carefully... The *Letter* is still here... No, no! Listen to me! Your Professor played a trick on everyone... Yes, yes. It’s still here! ... Two foreigners have just arrived to find it... Yes, yes, *two*... Stall them if they come to you... Yes, yes... And find that Letter!! The Professor must still have it! ... You understand? *Hm?!_* Yes, yes, good boy. Off you go now... *Al-Hamdi-Lil-lah*.” Achmed hung up the phone.

Reaching for a bottle beneath the counter, uncorks it as though to celebrate his good fortune. Pouring a swallow of the amber contents to a large mug. He would be rewarded handsomely if he found it before the others. Enough to buy another Hotel he fantasized. Somehow, he would need to frustrate the foreigner’s quest.

Perhaps he would have a quiet word with chef...

What do we have here?

Munro stepped from the Hotel to discover Marconi's vehicle looking somewhat different to his own.

Steam bleeding from beneath the hood. Sunken windows of shattered glass. Bullet holes peppered the sides. And a gapping tear as though a giant can-opener had taken to the vehicle.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear..." Tuted Munro, "... What do we have here?" Grinning to himself, imagining what had caused such damage.

Quarreling voices draw his attention down the street to a group of men wrestling over a heavy fuel cannister.

"Where to boss?" A man asked in a thick Scottish brogue.

"The local market..." Climbing into the back of the Land Rover and shutting the building heat of the day outside, "... We'll find our man there."

Marconi submersed himself into a steaming bath. Until only his head was visible. Feeling his aches dissolve. A bubble surfaced and popped. Then another.

Followed by smaller bubbles.

"Hmm." He sounded a satisfaction, grinning relief.

Through the window he could see the tops of the buildings and a hazy blue sky. As though it had been smudged. From a large open window a draft of dry desert drifted over him, before continuing on out another window. As though it were on its way somewhere and had stopped to asked directions. Overhead a fan rotating slowly above him. Captivating him like a fluttering butterfly. And he imagined himself back at San Michele. Perhaps it was all just a bad dream, and he would wake up in his bed on Capri.

Michael played with the thought.

On a small wooden table beside the iron claw footed bath, sat a crystal tumbler now drained of its contents. The whiskey seeped into Marconi's veins as though it were morphine. Numbing the past twenty-four hours from hell. A hand reaches for his neck and feels for a bite that never was. How close had he come to death? The thought sends a rush of adrenaline into his system, stifling the effects of the whiskey.

And he pours another into the glass.

'What was I thinking?' Feeling sorry for himself.

A vision of a Letter materializes in his head as though to remind him. The thought of possessing it made the pain tolerable. Rocking the ice in the glass, his mind formulating a plan that would have the letter in his hands by that evening. And a flight that would take him out of the forsaken city at the end of earth. He grins at the warming thoughts.

Which could not be said of the bath that had become tepid. As had his drink. Pulling himself from the water like an overweight submarine surfacing from the ocean depths.

'Knock-knock.' Sounds a knock at the door.

The door opened before he has time to cover himself. And the boy enters carrying a breakfast tray.

"Over there will be fine." Instructs Marconi, anxious for the man to leave.

“Will that be all?” The young man asked staring at Marconi standing naked and exposed. Prolonging his stay.

“Yes, yes. Thank you.” Hoping the boy was not expecting a tip.

The door closes behind him and Marconi steps from the bath dripping. Pulling on a bath robe, examines the fresh set of clothes laid out on the bed. Hoping that his men next door, were getting ready to leave. On examining the plate of eggs and toast and English tea.

Wondered how they could have forgotten the bacon.

8:00AM. The sun had been up for hours. The locals longer.

The market place hummed brisk with business. Voices haggled and hands flew about as though it were sign language. Before shaking and agreeing on a price. Anything and everything, was traded. Livestock, produce, and gold. And everything illicit in between. Wary eyes watch as the Land Rover approach and park some distance away.

“You two come with me... You, stay here. Watch the vehicle.” Munro instructed the driver to remain.

Sunglasses give Munro a menacing appearance. Securing a fedora, he looks every part a foreigner. Out of place, out of time. Two bulky men follow in his wake. Guns concealed beneath jackets should they be needed. Scoping hostile faces among the crowd. Wary of those seeking an opportunity. A small goat herd cross their path, halting them in their tracks. The smell rousing their nostrils.

The odor of the market place becoming strong with each step.

Native faces watch the foreign faces pass. Twice their size and well dressed. The driver watched on ready to accelerate into the crowd. Curious locals begin to gather about the vehicle. The driver roars the engine, as though to warn them not to step too close. Locals step back fearful the vehicle would pounce.

Munro searched the crowd as though looking for someone. Someone in particular. And in the distance spies a man raising a newspaper in the air to catch his attention.

“Over there.” Informed Munro making strides in the man’s direction.

Beneath the shaded canopy of a tea house, a man sits at a table with a small porcelain cup of coffee. He fidgets. Nervously looking about. As though he was being watched. Or perhaps had too much coffee.

Eyes were everywhere in Timbuktu. Eager to report back to those willing to pay.

“Mister Munro, Sir?” The man inquired respectfully.

“Ali?” Munro asked.

“Oui. Sit. Sit.” The man confirms in French.

“Do you have it?” Munro asked getting to the point.

“Ah... You see...” Ali began, “... There seems to be a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“Oman could not find the Letter.”

“What do you mean he could not find it? Do you tell me I came all this way for nothing?”

Riled Munro.

His raised voice beginning to attract attention.

“The Professor must have hidden it.” Beseeched Ali.

“What Professor? Where is he?”

“Professor Levi... At the University.” Pointing a finger in its direction.

“Hmm_... Professor Levi you say? ...” Munro looks to the direction of the finger, “... I suppose if I want a job done, I have to do it myself.”

“Sorry Mister Munro... I tried to call... Forgive me.” Ali begged, bowing his head in shame with failure.

“Hmm... Not your fault Ali... Go home. You never saw me here, understood?”

“Yes, Mister Munro... I not see you.”

“Good. Good. Levi... Hmm_... Think I’ll pay him a visit.”

Munro peels off several notes and pushes them towards Ali, who pockets them before anyone could see.

“Thank you, Mister Munro, you are most kind.” Ali stands and bows, scurrying away like a thief in the night.

“Gentleman, I was hoping this would be it, but our stay has been extended.”

“Oh_ boss.” A man grumbled, running a finger beneath his collar.

“Shh your moaning! ... Let us pay our friend *Professor Levi* a visit shall we...” Informed Munro, “... He has something I would like to acquire.” Grinned Munro.

Marconi picked up the phone and dialed a four-digit number and waited for it to be answered. Like Munro, he too had an informant. They were a dime a dozen.

And a dime would go a long way in Timbuktu.

“Abdul? ...” Questioned Marconi, hearing it being answered, “... Marconi here... Yes, yes, stop your babbling and listen... Do you have the Letter? ... Abdul?... You still there? ... Do_ you_ have_ the_ Let_ ter? ...” He asked more slowly, “... What? Why not?... Don’t *Sorry me Mister Marconi* Abdul. I didn’t come halfway across the world for nothing! ... Stop your groveling man... Tell me who has it? ...” Marconi listened carefully, “... Professor Arinze? ... Who’s he?... I see. At the University... Hmm... You better be right Abdul, or there be hell to pay! Understood? ... Your money? ... No Letter, no money! ...” Reminding him of the terms of their agreement, “...Good day Abdul! ...”

Marconi slammed the phone down as though it were an axe decapitating Abdul’s head from his shoulders...

You're not Father Francis

“Are you sure this is the place?” Munro stares up at the huge beige clay building.

Looking much like a medieval fortress. Constructed of mortared clay bricks. Wooden posts protrude from the walls like ladder rungs, up elongated pyramid towers. Stone steps lead to elaborate arched wooden gates. Braced with heavy iron studs.

Decorated with iron crescents and stars.

“That’s what it says in the brochure boss.”

“Doesn’t look like much if you ask me.” Remarked Munro eyeing the peculiar looking building.

“What’s the plan boss?”

“We need to find this Professor *Levi* jock and persuade him to part with the Letter... Everyman has his price.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Then I’ll make him an offer he can’t refuse.” Remarked Munro, stepping from the vehicle.

Feeling the heat of the sun strike him like a slap in the face. Nostrils twitched, detecting a strange odor in the air. Perhaps a dead animal up wind. His nose twitched again as though to detect the direction.

With hands on hips he stares up at the formidable wooden arched doors. Heavily braced with iron studs. Looking more ominous now than from inside the vehicle. His feet felt heavy with every step. As though something, or someone was holding him back.

Michael walked with him unseen.

After what seemed like an eternity, he had made it to the top. Panting. Turning to look back down the dozen shallow steps he had climbed. Having felt like Everest.

“You okay boss?” A man asked, seeing Munro exhausted.

“Just out of shape. I’ll be fine.” Examining the sturdy doors. Wondering how to enter.

A large iron hoop suggested a handle and Munro attempts to pull on it. The doors held fast. Turning it proved no more effective.

“Knock loudly on it will you.” Munro informed a man.

‘*Bang! Bang! Bang!*’ The man thumps a fist against the door.

Catching the attention of attention of passing locals who stop to stare at the foreign invader attempting to breach the gates of the University.

“Again!” Instructed Munro.

‘*Bang! Bang! Bang!*’ The man thumps again.

A voice could be heard coming from within. Talking in a foreign tongue. French perhaps. Getting closer. Or further away? Footsteps sound, then a scuff as though someone had stopped on the other side of the door.

‘*Bang! Bang! Bang!*’ The man thumps to hurry whoever it was.

‘*J’arrive! J’arrive! Sois patient!*’ An annoyed voice responded, wrestling with jingling keys.

‘*Clatter-clatter-clank-click.*’ Sounds the lock.

Warily, the heavy gate opens partially, squeaking on rusting hinges as though being awoken from a century old sleep. A scarf covered dark head protrudes from behind the door to inspect the cause of the knocking.

Munro is greeted by a black face and white eyes staring at him suspiciously. Gauging his presence.

“Mister Munro to see *Professor Levi*... He is *expecting* me.” Munro lied staring down the bewildered looking man.

Unsure if he understood a word that he had said.

“Professor Levi... Yes, yes... This way... Come, come.” The man bows and gestures for Munro to follow him, “... This way. This way.”

Munro turned to look at his men. Could it be that easy? Apparently so. And Munro followed the man inside. The interior looking somewhat different to the outside. A courtyard of vivid green grass surrounded by a covered cloister. The air seemed cooler. Fresher, as though the stench of death could not climb the walls.

Munro marched at his own pace.

His mind wrestling with what he would say to this Professor Levi. Students hurried to classes, books under their arms. Heads turn to watch Munro pass. What were foreigners doing inside these walls? One in a white suit. Two others in tweed jackets looking lost. Bulges beneath the jackets suggested trouble. The gate man stopped before a tired looking door.

And looked to Munro to suggest they had arrived.

‘Tap-tap-tap.’ The man knocks quietly so as not to wake the sleeping Professor.

Inside, Levi lay sleeping on the couch, covered by zebra striped shadows. A toppled mug laid on the Persian rug.

‘Sniff-sniff.’ Nostrils twitch as though they could scent an intruding noise.

‘Tap-tap-tap.’

There it was again.

‘Sniff! Sniff! Sniff!’ Nostril’s twitch and tic.

Annoyed to be awoken, eyes batter up and down like butterfly wings. Ears came to life. Eyes spy moving shadows seeping beneath the gap in the door.

“Who is it?” Moaned Levi sitting upright stretching limbs and sleep from his aging body.

“Mohamed, Professor... A gentleman is here to see you.” Informs the gateman.

“Just one moment...” Informed Levi standing and tidying himself, “... About time they arrived.” Brushing off the crinkles of his trousers.

Feeling the inside of his pocket for the Letter. Patting it with a hand. Soon the responsibility will be lifted from his shoulders. Sleepishly, he scuffled to the door and opened it. Squinting into the bright light surprised to see Munro and two heavy thugs standing behind.

Quickly realizing these were not the people the Cardinal had sent.

“You’re not Father Francis?” Questioned Levi hesitantly.

His eyes scanning the cloister for others about.

“I’m afraid not... Munro... George Munro. May I come in? ...” Asked Munro rhetorically,

“Thank you, Mohamed, that will be all.”

“Yes Professor, thank you Professor...” Mohamed bowed, “...*Al-Hamdi-Lil-lah.*”

Levi eyed the two gorillas with bulging armpits. It seemed he had no choice.

“*Al-Hamdi-Lil-lah...*” Responded Levi, “...Of course. Of course. Come in. Come in... Where are my manners? ... A drink?” Levi offered reaching for the bottom drawer.

If not for Munro, then most certainly for himself.

“Don’t mind if I do... You two wait outside while the Professor and I have a little *chat.*”

Disappointed to have been left out, the two men close the door behind them to stand rigid either side of the door. Their arms folded. Feet splayed. And menacing looks upon their faces.

Levi pours a generous amount of whiskey in to glass tumbler. Hoping it would quell his growing anxiety.

Placing the glass in front of Munro who lifts it to examine drink.

“You know a good whiskey Professor... Sláinte.” Comments Munro raising his glass in thanks.

“L'chaim.” Levi offers back in Hebrew.

Both men stared at each other. Each reading the other's thoughts. Before Levi broke the silence.

“You've come a long way for nothing... It isn't here.” Lied Levi.

“Is that so... I heard differently.” Munro lied back at him.

“Is that right?” Levi blinked first. His voice lacking conviction.

“How much would it take to take it off your hands? ...” Reaching inside his jacket, as though for a gun. Only to pull out a cheque book, “... Name your price Professor.”

“It's not for sale at any price... It is not mine to sell.” Levi qualified.

Like a high-stake poker game, neither man wanted to give away their hand.

'He's buffing.' Thought Munro.

He could have the place turned over, but it looked it already had been. Books and papers littered across the floor. Taking a swallow he holds the solution in his mouth. Caressing the flavors with his tongue.

Inhaling deeply through nostrils, before swallowing.

“I'm not a violent man Professor...” Informed Munro, sizing Levi up.

Levi was old man buried in books. Covered in dust. Living at an unmarked grave at the end of the earth. No one would notice him gone.

Michael listens carefully to the Munro's unspoken thoughts.

“Neither am I Mister Munro.” Countered Levi.

“A million pounds...” Munro watched Levi flinch with the sound of the vast sum of money. Perhaps he had hit a nerve, “... Imagine what you could do with that?” Tempted Munro, as though he were the Devil offering Eve the Apple.

Stunned, Levi was tempted.

A million pounds was a treasure beyond anyone's wildest dreams. More so in Timbuktu. He allowed himself the pleasure of wallowing in the imaginary money like Scrooge McDuck diving into his vault of golden coins.

Then it all vaporized, as though something, or someone, had popped the temptation like a balloon. The illusion dissolved before his eyes. And a strange scent of déjà-vu whiffed beneath his nostril like moral smelling salts. Bringing him back to the room. How would he explain the sudden wealth? How could he ever face the Cardinal? His fraternity?

The thought nauseated him.

“No...” Replied Levi, “...It belongs to the Church.”

“Church? ... What does an old Jew like you care about the Church?” Argued Munro.

“You of all people should know that Christ was a Jew. As was Peter. And as was Paul... Don't ever lecture me on the foundations of the Christian Church Mister Munro... No amount of money can buy the Letter...” Levi stares at Munro defiantly, “... Do what you must... But I will never give it to you.”

Munro takes a heavy swallow and feels it burn to his stomach. And sighed heavily in thought.

“Three million pounds.” Munro jests.

“You’ve heard my answer!” Levi rejects without hesitation.

“Fair enough... I tried... Boys!” Munro calls out to his men to enter.

Two intimidating looking gentlemen enter, puffed up like thorny blowfish. And looked down at Levi.

“Yes boss?”

“It seems we’ve come a long way for nothing. Pack your bags, we’re going home... Thank you Professor for the drink.”

“That’s it?” Stuttered the Professor, surprised to be let off the hook so easily.

“Like I say Professor... I am not a violent man... Unlike some others I know... It’s hard enough being on the right side of the law, let alone the wrong side.”

“Indeed.” Agreed Levi somewhat relieved.

“Is the Letter safe?”

“Safe for now.” Tapping his pocket reflexively. And freezing once he realized what he had done.

An awkward silence hung in the air. Levi had exposed his hand. A single ace. Levi braced himself. Palms sweating. Gripping the arm rests of his chair. And waited for Munro’s men to pounce...

May I?

“May I?” Asked Munro quietly, as though seeking permission.

To be this close. To have come this far. And not to have been rewarded.

Eyes burn into Levi who sat frozen in his chair. What choice did he have? Nervously a hand reaches inside the side pocket of his jacket and retrieve a set of keys and places them on the desk before him. The hand dives within again and fumbles with a torn lining. Fingers feel about and find what they are looking for. A softly folded parchment stained yellow with time. He places the Letter next to the keys.

A man reaches for the Letter only to be held back by Munro.

“Don’t touch it! ...” Munro halts the man in his tracks, “...May I?”

Levi nods subtly and pushes the pale leather cloth towards Munro across the wooden desk. Munro stares at the innocuous looking relic that had withstood the ravages of time. While others had perished, this remained. As though it had a purpose. A message that must be delivered.

A Word, that must be spoken.

From a pocket, Munro pulled out a pair of white kid gloves. He had come prepared for this moment. Delicately pulling them on, he lifts the animal hide and carefully unfolds it. Holding it as though cradling a wounded bird. Scrawled in a charcoal ink, ancient foreign text. Beyond his comprehension. Clear as the day they were written. At the base, he read a name.

A name that he recognized too well from his own archeological research...

Σαούλ (Saul)

It was authentic. The Devil whispered in his ear. Michael stood back and listened. And when the Devil was done. Michael stepped neared and whispered a thought to Munro, as though it were his own.

Drawing the Letter close. Nostrils flare and he breathed the cloth’s ancient scents as though it were perfume. And he finds himself catapulted back two thousand years. Like a lucid dream, visions of an ancient Roman villa appear. Mosaic walls and stone columns. Standing among a marauding crowd beseeching in foreign tongue for blood. Seeing an old man hunched on his knees. Hands chained to a pillar. Looking to the heavens as though for salvation. Knowing his mission on this earth over. A Centurion raises his sword in the air.

Munro calls out for it to stop.

But his words go unheard. Swiftly the sword falls. And a head is severed from its body. Topples to the ground and tumbles to Munro’s feet. Vacant eyes stare up at him. As though he were a friend.

Munro feels a sting on the back of his neck.

And a sudden bright flash of light returns him to Levi’s darkened office. Gasping for breath as though he had had a bad dream. Hands reach for his throat in search of a bloody wound. Wanting to distance himself from the Letter. He places it gently on the desk and leaned back from it.

And stared blankly at Levi.

“You okay? You look like you've seen a ghost.” Remarked Levi seeing a Munro in some distress.

“Look after it... Guard it with your life. Marconi won't be so... Generous.” Informed Munro.

His men look at him surprised. Had their boss gone mad? Munro stood and secured his fedora and sunglasses. And extended his hand.

“Marconi?” Questioned Levi.

The question goes unanswered.

No words could describe the barbaric lengths Marconi would go to possess the Letter. Munro lived by principles and the law. Paying handsomely when a relic became available.

The same could not be said of Marconi.

“When is this Father Francis expected to arrive?” Inquired Munro fearing the worst.

“Any day now.” Levi answered anxiously, looking to the door as though he would appear at any moment.

“Well for your sake, I hope it sooner, than later. Good luck Professor. I have a flight to catch...” Munro touches the brim of the fedora to bid farewell, “... Gentleman. To the Hotel.”

“Yes boss.” Trailing him and closing the door behind them.

Leaving the Professor alone again in the darkened room Bewildered by what that had just happened. He stares blankly at the folded yellow parchment before him as though it were kryptonite. His nerves frayed. Reaches for the bottle, pours a hefty glass. Swallowing half before placing it down on the desk.

Picking up the hand set, dials a number scrawled on his desk pad. And waits for it to be answered. Hearing a series of clicks, the hand set at the other end lifts and a voice of authority speaks.

Slowly. Economically.

“Cardinal? ... Professor Jacob Levi... Yes, yes... I am good, and you? ... Sorry to interrupt you... It's just that ah ... Someone has come looking for the...” He wondered if he should voice the word, “...The Letter... Yes... Introduced himself as Munro, George Munro... Oh, you know him? I see... No, no. No trouble at all... In fact he just left... I see... He spoke of another man... Marconi? Have you heard of him? ...” The line fell silent as the Cardinal is stunned by the news of Marconi's presence, that would explain his absence from the Villa, “... Dangerous? ...” Gaspd Levi, reaching for his glass and gulping the remaining contents, as he listened to Cassini's instruction, “... With my life...” Levi parrots, “...Father Francis this evening, thank God...” Thank you Cardinal.” And the line falls dead as though the call had never taken place.

Leaving the Professor hanging listening to a continuous disconnected dial tone.

Levi looks to the closed door. Feeling trapped inside like a cornered rat.

The dust covered wall clock displayed 8:47AM. The day had only just begun. The Father would not arrive until late afternoon, if then at all. In the meantime, he had to avoid Marconi, whoever and wherever he was. A nervous hand pushes the Letter carefully within the lining of the jacket again. Smoothing it flat with the palm of his hands. Patting it down as though it were a planted seed.

Hoping not to make the same mistake he had with Munro. There was no better place to hide the letter than on his own body. With nerves rattled, his hands shaking, he poured himself another glass...

Yusuf

Pierre and Francis are awoken by a sudden jolt. As if the plane had struck a speed bump.

Quickly they look about for apparent danger, only to find Phil firmly in control. Below, nothing but ocean. Sicily and the Cosa Nostra two hours behind them and becoming more distant with every revolution of the propellers.

“Nice sleep? ...” Asked Phil over the radio headset, “...How much further. I’m not landing this thing.”

“Oui... Ahh_! ...” Pierre stretches.

Eyes focusing on the instrument readings. Ahead a coast line comes into view. The morning sun striking the coast of Tunisia.

“I’ll take it from here, thanks Phil.” Gripping the control wheel, feeling the nervous fitches of the craft.

“What’s the plan?” He asked.

“Refuel here and get going again. In and out. Should not take any more than half an hour... Want to make Timbuktu before dark... We do not want to be flying across the Sahara in the dark. God help us... Sorry Father.” Pierre quickly apologizes.

“Nothing to be sorry about Pierre, I agree... We’re going to need all the help we can get.” Francis crosses himself.

Pierre presses forward on the control wheel. Flicking switching and fiddling with knobs on the radio.

“Tunis Traffic Control... Tunis Traffic Control... This is Echo-Victor-Charlie-Foxtrot request clearance to land... Over.” Calls out Pierre, hoping they were within radio distance.

“Copy that Echo-Victor-Charlie-Foxtrot... This is Tower... You are cleared to land, runway three... Repeat runway three... Over.” Responds an Arab voice.

“Copy that Tower... Echo-Victor-Charlie-Foxtrot... Over.”

“The Cardinal must have pulled strings in high places to get clearance.” Queried Phil looking back to Francis.

“And then some.” Informed Francis seeing the city scape of Tunis come into view.

The raising sunlight illuminated the morning haze. Of exhaust and smoke. Of a city coming to life.

A seaside city founded by the Phoenicians in the first millennium before Christ. Once the seat of the powerful Carthaginian Empire. And Mediterranean supremacy. Standing in the way of the ever-expanding Roman empire. Something had to give.

And two hundred years before Christ something did.

Hannibal marched an army of men and elephants North-East, through the Roman provinces of Spain and Gaul and over the Italian Alps. Laying sword to of anyone who stood in his way. But the strategic Romans curled up like a giant armadillo and closed its gates. And after fifteen-years of war and attrition and stalemate and sporadic fighting, Hannibal was forced home. To confront invading a Roman force who had taken the fight to his doorstep. Treaties of Peace were signed. Obligatory territories exchanged. Fleets reduced and indemnities paid. And this is where it should have ended. Only to have Carthage make the mistake of sacking a fleet of Roman supply ships.

Sparking the beginning of the end.

This time Hannibal's elephants could not save him. Riled by Roman trumpets, the elephants routed and turned on the Carthaginian cavalry. And at the Battle of Zama, the mighty Carthage Empire finally fell to the Romans. Spawning a series of conquerors who came and went. Muslims, and Spanish and Ottomans, and French. Tunisia would be the Nazi's Waterloo. Montgomery would give Rommel a bloody nose. Ending their game cat and mouse across North Africa.

The bones of ancient ruins and long forgotten conquerors now buried beneath the sleepy suburbs and industrial estates. If they existed at all.

The plane hits another air pocket. Jostling Francis and Phil in their seats. Pierre held the control wheel firm. A dial counting down their descent.

"Three thousand feet." Pierre calls out, "... Tower... This is Echo-Victor-Charlie-Foxtrot... Over."

"Copy Echo-Victor-Charlie-Foxtrot... Over."

"Making our approach to runway three... Over."

"Copy that Echo-Victor-Charlie-Foxtrot... Runway is clear for approach... Over and out."

Pierre banks the craft in a turn and lines up the runway.

"Take the wheel Phil... We'll take it down together... I'll have control."

"Copy that Pierre."

"One thousand feet... Seven-fifty... Five-hundred... Three-hundred..." Pierre calls out, and flicking a switch on the control panel, "... Wheels down..." Hearing hydraulics of wheels clunking into place. The runway ahead of them and getting closer, "... One hundred..." A hand reaches for the throttle and eases back, another adjusts the flaps, "... Easy now Phil..." Pierre coaxes the plane raising the nose slightly.

Outside, the runway flashed by as though in a hurry. Wheel's screech and contact the runway. Bumping the plane as it landed. Pierre laid the throttle off as engines quieten.

"Tower... Echo-Victor-Charlie-Foxtrot has landed... Heading to hangar one-niner... Over." Said Pierre, flicking an overhead switch.

"Copy Echo-Victor-Charlie-Foxtrot... Welcome to Tunis... Over."

"Copy that Tower... Won't be staying long... Refueling... Over."

"Copy that... Over and out." The radio goes dead.

About them an airfield looking not dissimilar to the one in Amantea.

A row of grey corrugated humpback hangars lined the side of the field. Several Cessna craft sat outside open hangar doors their interiors shrouded in darkness. Envious heads look up and watch the twin engine Apache idle by. And imagined the cargo they could smuggle if they possessed one of those.

Pierre focused on one hangar ahead of him to the right. One-niner. His hangar. One of several he had peppered about the Mediterranean. Its doors closed and padlocked. Looking vacant and deserted. Blackened windows stare back like eyes. Cobwebs like eyelashes. Tall brown grass grows about its base. Halting the craft before the hangar doors. Killed the engines to the relief of those inside.

Doors open and the warm air of the Maghreb washed over them as they step out.

Jumping down, Phil stretches his legs and looks about. And notices a market on the other side of the wire fence, behind the hangar.

The sound of voices and music and smell of food gets the better of him.

“You ah_ need me for anything?” He asked hoping the answer would be no.

“Not really... Don’t go too far. We leave in thirty minutes. Okay.” Ordered Pierre.

“Copy that Pierre... Just going to check out the market over there... You coming Father?”

“Think I’ll stay here... You go. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay. See you soon.” Spying a gap in the fence.

On one side of the fence, the airfield barren and vacant.

On the other, an assortment of tents making up a huge market. Alive with color and activity. Slipping himself through a gap in the mesh fencing, Phil found himself behind a large marquee of dark canvas. Moving along between two tents, he worked himself out into the opening. The sound of the market grew louder, and smell of tantalizing food grew stronger.

Dark faces briefly stare at him as he mulled about the open stalls. Tall marquees towered over him making the passage way seem narrow and restrictive. Bodies jostled for position. Gesturing hands and beseeching voices haggled for a better price. An aroma caught Phil’s attention. That of freshly baked bread.

Rousing the memory from the train.

‘*Sniff-sniff.*’ Nostril flare and twitch.

And like a blood hound he is led by the whiffing currents. Turning one way, then the next. Wandering wherever the scent took him. Screeching music wail through overhead speakers.

Looking about, he realized he has become lost.

Clouds conceal sun. Tents conceal the airfield. Marquees now all looked the same. The people all looked the same. Voices called out in foreign tongues, flooding his senses further.

“Oh boy... This should be interesting.” Now wondering how he would find his way back.

Checking his watch, he had still had fifteen minutes. Then by chance, he spied a child’s arm reaching for a loaf of bread from a table. Like a starving dog with a bone, the ragged boy gnawed frantically at the bread, as if he had not eaten in days. Suddenly a large hand reaches down and grabs the boy’s arm. Retching the street urchin into the air. Screaming obscenities of thievery at the boy.

The boy squeals and twists about to free himself from the storeowner’s grip. But to no avail. Holding the boy up the man pulls out a long knife. He would dispense his own market justice upon the boy. The crowd call out to make an example for the urchin.

Boney and dirty, he was worthless to them.

“Woah! Hold up here... You can’t do that!” Phil steps forward holding up his hand to put the knife down.

“Tubqi kharijaha 'ajabiun! (*You keep out of this foreigner!*)” Protests the storeowner loudly.

Not a word was understood by Phil. But he sensed it was not going to end well for the lad if he did not step in. Instinctively he reaches for the Glock. Only to discover he had left it in the plane.

“Shit! ...” He cursed. Weighing the few options he had, “... Plan B.”

People parted for the foolish Englishman stepping forward. The store owner dangled the boy like a carcass. A long silver bladed knife in the other. Phil had the advantage. Both his hands were free. Stepping closer, the man thrust the knife at him, just as he anticipated the man would do. Expertly he slaps the man’s wrist and throws a heavy punch to a hooked nose. Cracking it, and sending the man toppling back. The boy falls to ground and gets to his feet and begins to run off.

“This way!” He calls out for Phil to follow.

Dazed and angered the store owner staggers to his feet. Blood streaming down his face.

“*Aihsil ealaa alrajul!* (Get that man!)” Hollering a death curling command.

With no time to think, Phil rushes after the boy. Pushing people aside. Dashing one way, then the next. The boy knew the paths better than anyone.

“Down here.” He instructs, squeezing between two Marquees.

Suddenly the blade of a knife tears at the canvas. Stabbing frantically. Tearing gapping wounds.

“Hurry!” The boy calls out not looking back.

Running for their lives. An angry mob on their tail. Voices crying out for blood. Francis looks over to the market place and wondered what had stirred the people into a riotous frenzy. Pierre secures the fuel latch and closes the hangar doors. Like a tsunami, the voices seem to be getting louder and closer.

Pierre looks up from the cockpit.

“I hope Phil isn’t much longer. We have to get going.” Remarked Pierre, dismissing the raucous and went about flicking switches and tapping dials.

Just then a small boy pushes his way through the hole in the fence, followed by Phil closely behind.

“What the...” Questioned Francis seeing the pair rushing towards him.

Phil twirling a finger in the air to get air borne, and quickly. Francis watched on confused. Moments later an angry mob appeared. Waving daggers and shouting obscenities.

“We have to get going.” Exclaimed Francis Phil’s urgency.

“I know.” Said Pierre securing his head set.

“No... I mean *right now*... Look!” Francis points to Phil and a boy being chased by the murderous mob.

“Oh shit! Phil, what did you do?” Exclaimed Pierre, desperately foregoing the preflight check and ignited the engines.

‘Cough, cough, splutter... Cough, cough, splutter... Cough, splutter, splutter, roooooaar_!’
Engines fired to life.

“Get in Father! I’ll turn us about.” Engines whine loudly and Francis scrambles to climb into the back seat.

The Apache pivots on the spot and begins to move slowly forward. Phil runs towards the runway knowing what Pierre was about to do.

“Tower... This is Echo-Victor-Charlie-Foxtrot... Request urgent clearance for takeoff... Repeat, clearance urgent takeoff ... Over...” Looking over to Phil getting closer, “... Come on Phil!”

“Echo-Victor-Charlie-Foxtrot... You are not cleared for takeoff... Repeat, you are not cleared...Over.”

“Negative Tower... Proceeding to runway Three... Repeat runway Three... Over.”

“That’s a negative Echo-Victor-Charlie-Foxtrot... I repeat, that’s a negative... You have no clearance.”

“Negative Tower... You will have to take that up with the Vatican... Clear runway Three... We’re coming through... Over and out.” Instructed Pierre, shutting down the radio.

Suddenly Phil appeared beside the moving plane and lifted the boy onto the port wing. Deafened by the screaming engine and howling wake of air coming off the propellor.

“Get inside!” Exclaimed Pierre watching the kid clamber into the back to sit beside Francis.

Phil scrambled onto the wing and clambered inside the cockpit panting. Closing the door behind him. Shutting the deafening noise outside. Pushing the throttle forward, engines yelled louder protesting the sudden workload. Accelerating the craft and leaving the angry mob in their wake.

“And who might you be?” Asked Francis eyeing the boney dirt-stained boy, with big brown eyes and uncropped black hair.

“Yusuf.” He answered hesitantly, unsure what to make of the foreigners who had saved him from certain death.

Suddenly the plane leaped into the air. As though to escape a pouncing predator. With intrepid curiosity the Yusuf pressed his face to the window to see the market and the world that he knew grow smaller and smaller. And further and further away from him. And wondered where he was heading. As strange foreign faces stare back at him.

Wondering if he had jumped from the frying pan into the fire...

Professor Arinze

Marconi sat in the back of a dilapidated Toyota watching Munro drive away and waited for him to disappear from view. Unsure if he had the Letter in his possession. He certainly did not appear to be in any hurry to leave. He looked up at the formidable building with its prickly poles. Reminding him more of a balding oversized hedgehog than a university.

“Wait here.” He instructed the driver.

Two men step out of the vehicle with him. Both donning dark glasses. Marconi secures his Fedora. And took in the dozen steps to the front gates. Then down the road as though someone was watching him. The sun had shortened his shadow. The heat of the day was building, and he runs a finger beneath a collar for sweat.

“Let’s get this over with.” Instructed Marconi, as though he was having a tooth pulled.

“Right boss.” A man answered following him.

Two heavy gates stood side by side. Pitted with scars, perhaps from arrows. Menacingly braced with iron studs. Rusted and dark. As though stained with blood.

Thump! Thump! Thump! A man bangs a fist against the solid gates.

Grasping his hand as though he had hurt it in the process.

A voice resonates from the other side, annoyed to have been disturbed again. A key clatters and clunks in the old lock. Hinges squeak like mice and the gates slowly open. Mohamed protrudes his dark head from behind the gate. Large white eyes take in the rotund figure of Marconi and two men, dressed in dark suits and white shirts. Looking like Mormons who had gotten lost. Protruding his head further out expecting to see the other man who had just left.

Then focuses back onto Marconi.

“Can I help you?” Mohamed asked.

“We’re here to see Professor *Ar_rinze*.” Munro elongated the name.

Eyeing Marconi warily. Unsure if to let him proceed. The last visitor had come and gone quietly.

Mohamed relented and opened the gate wider.

“This way... Follow me.” Instructed Mohamed, jingling castle keys on a giant ring like a jailer making his rounds.

Sandaled feet scuffed on ancient stones as he led Marconi along shaded the cloister surrounding the quadrangle. Taking the men clockwise about the quadrangle, they arrive at a plain wooden door. A simple plaque marked the inhabitant...

Professor Arinze Department of Classics and Ancient History

“We’ll take it from here.” Instructed Marconi taking an authoritative tone, suggesting for Mohamed to leave them.

“But... I...Ah...” Protested Mohamed, before stepping back from Marconi’s men stepping forward.

“That will be all... Thank you.” Marconi eyed Mohamed menacingly.

And watched him walk away peering back over his shoulder.

'Tap. Tap. Tap.' Marconi knocked quietly on the door.

And waited patiently for it to open.

A handle turned and the door opened and exposes an elderly gentleman standing in the shadowed doorway. Hunched with years of study. Glasses pinched on the end of his nose. Squinting into the bright sunlight he makes out the silhouette of a short stout gentleman and two larger men standing behind him.

"Can I help you?" Arinze asked, trying to fathom the purpose of their visit.

"May we come inside... It's rather warm out here." Asked Marconi stepping inside uninvited.

"Yes, yes of course..." Remarked Arinze stepping aside and gesturing for the men to enter, "... Make yourself comfortable."

A man closes the door behind him and turns the key in the latch. Catching Arinze's attention. He was trapped. With no-where to run. Even if he could, run. Taking his chair behind the desk as if to put something between him and the men opposite.

His mind quickly realizing, they had come for the Letter.

"And who might you be?" Inquired Arinze eyeing Marconi warily.

"Who I am is not important... Who you are, is." Remarked Marconi cryptically.

"I'm sorry I don't understand."

"Let me get straight to the point... *The Letter*... Give it to me!" Commands Marconi.

"It's not here." Arinze blurts out.

"I hear differently." Calls his bluff.

"I don't have it." Arinze counters.

"Who does?" Asked Marconi leaning on the desk over him.

"I don't know..." Arinze lied, "... I don't know where it is. I swear!"

"He's lying boss."

"I know that... Search the place. It's here somewhere, I can smell it." Ordered Marconi, eyes scanning the shelves of books. Cabinets like treasure chests.

Books are pulled from shelves like teeth from skulls. Pages wrenched opened before being discarded. One by one shelves are cleared and cabinets emptied. Drawers upheaved and their contents spewed over the floor.

"Search him." Barked Marconi becoming frustrated.

Heavy hands tear at Arinze's clothing. Pulling away his jacket.

"Check his pockets. He's got it somewhere."

"It ain't here boss?" Informs a man coming up empty handed.

Marconi stare at the man. Sweating and fearing for his life.

"Beat it out of him." Marconi said coldly, indifferent to the man's frailty.

A man holds Arinze in his chair.

"I don't..." A heavy fist strikes Arinze in the face before he could finish the sentence. Breaking his nose, causing blood to run over his mouth and chin. Staining his teeth and shirt red.

"Again!" Ordered Marconi.

A fist delivers a hefty blow to his stomach. Making him retch. Spitting blood and gasping for breath. Winded, fazed eyes stare into space.

"Ah..." Arinze groans, "... I don't have it..." He groans, before mentioning a name, hoping for a reprieve, "... Cassini."

Marconi raises a hand, like a Roman Emperor seeking silence from the Senate. Stunned by the mention of the Cardinal's name. His mind formulating his presence. His nemesis. Eyes shift to the door as though he were about to step in at any moment.

"What of him!?" Barked Marconi like a savage dog, drooling from the corners of his mouth.

"He's sending someone to collect it."

"Is he now? ... When?"

"I don't know... I swear. Please don't..." Arinze pleads, flinching as another blow is struck to his head. Knocking him unconscious. His head falls upon his chest. Dark blood run like tears down Arinze face. His clothes tattered and torn as though he had been attacked by a lion.

"What do we do boss?"

"We wait... We haven't come this far to give up." Pulling himself from the couch.

Stepping around the pile of torn books and papers heaped about the floor as though the books were diseased. Looking momentarily at Arinze without pity or shame. His mind formulating the next step in attaining the relic.

He would wait for Cassini's man to arrive and follow him.

"Back to the Hotel... Lock this door behind you." Instructed Marconi stepping into the brilliant light of the day.

Donning sunglasses, he secures his hat as though out for an afternoon stroll.

Marconi pulled up outside the Hotel, just as Munro was about to leave.

"Leaving so soon?" Joked Marconi.

"Nothing here..." Remarked Munro, noting the blood-stained knuckles of the Marconi's man, "... The Professor doesn't have it."

"Yes, I know... I've just been speaking with Professor Arinze... Have a safe trip." Marconi lies, tipping his hat and bowing subtly to bid Munro farewell.

"You too..." Munro lies, touching the brim of his hat, "... To the airport." Glad to have seen the back of Marconi.

Marconi stepped into the shade of the foyer of the Hotel.

"Mister Marconi, it is good to see you... Lunch will be served very shortly. A local dish of seasoned fish... May I suggest an Italian white wine to go with that." Informed Achmed.

"Splendid, splendid. Give me a few minutes to freshen up... I'll be down shortly."

"Certainly, Mister Marconi."

"Why don't you boys find yourself a beer."

"Yes boss."

Marconi disappears up-stairs as the Achmed steps to the kitchen. Rubbing a nicotine-stained fingers beside a lengthy hooked nose. Giving Chef a subtle nod. From a pocket, Chef pulled a small envelope of white powder and sprinkled it over the plates of fish. Watching it dissolve like salt. Clapping his hands, and his son appeared beside him.

"Take these out to the table for Mister Marconi and his men... I'll bring the wine." Achmed grins turning a cork screw into a bottle.

Squeaking and squealing with every turn... *'Pop!'*...

The Sahara

Glassy brown eyes bulged as small strong jaws chumped up and down. Gnawing at a sandwich until it was all gone. Yusuf stared up at Francis as though he were God. Hoping there was another. He had not eaten in days.

His belly ached with starvation.

“Thirsty?” Asked Francis reaching for a plastic canteen bottle.

A head nods and he gulped at the fresh water as though it were wine. Spilling a portion from the corners of his mouth. Taking as much as his stomach could hold.

“Easy now. There’s plenty more where that came from.” Encouraging him to slow down.

Reluctantly he hands the bottle back to Francis who looked at the child already knowing the answer to the questions he was about to ask. He had seen children like this before. Living on the streets. Parents long since having abandoned them. No home. Surviving by their wits. Sleeping under bushes.

Or wherever they could find shelter.

“Your family?” Francis asked.

The question is met with a far-away gaze, as though it was a distant memory.

“Would you like to go back?”

A look of fear came across Yusuf’s face. Eyes shift to the departing city below. It was the only home he had ever known. Scratching a life from trash cans. Stealing what he could when the opportunity arose. If it had not been for the strange man seated in front of him, he would have been dead. Or worse still, crippled. Life was hard enough without a handicap.

He shakes his head frantically side to side. Hoping Francis would take him with them. Wherever that was.

“Don’t worry Yusuf. You’re safe with us.” Francis ruffled the child’s scruffy black hair.

Yusuf presses his cheek against the window in wonderment. The sound of the engines muffled within the cabin. The experience catapulting him into the twenty-first century. One moment he was on the ground. Like a barnacle. Next, he was flying like a bird ten thousand feet in the air. Effortlessly through the clouds. Oceans that extended forever to the horizon.

Was the world really that big? He thought.

It was though the hand of God had plucked him from the earth and pulled him to the heavens. Warm sunlight beamed through the window and blanketed him. Hypnotized by the spinning propellor, and the monotonous drone of the engine, the exhausted lad drifted to sleep. Folding his jacket, Francis gently places it under the boy’s head as a pillow.

Phil had taken control of the wheel as Pierre pointed out dials and readings to him. It would be ten hours before they reached Timbuktu. Barring no course deviations and head wind. Below them, the green fertile belt of the Maghreb. Behind them, the quenching blue waters of Mediterranean.

Determinedly, the plane pressed on.

An ocean of sand loomed ahead. Ripples from a mysterious stone dropped millennia ago stretched as far as the eye can see. Dunes raise like giant cresting waves. Moving as the wind took them. Shifting imperceptibly.

One grain of sand at a time.

“Bearing one-ninety degrees Sou-Sou-East... Hold that course.” Instructed Pierre.

“Copy that... Holding one-ninety degrees sou-sou-east.” Parrots Phil.

“Drink?” Pierre pulls the bottle from beneath his seat.

“If you’re buying.” Joked Phil.

Phil takes a swallow. Then another. It was going to be along flight.

“What happened back there?” Asked Pierre looking back to the sleeping child.

“Kid got caught stealing a loaf of bread... Must have been hungry poor little bugger... Stall owner pulled a knife...” Giving the abridged version, “...And here we are... You would have done the same.” He looks to Pierre for confirmation.

“I don’t know Phil, sometimes you have to let these people handle matters their own way... They probably would have only tried to scare him.” Dismissing the danger.

“Not on my watch... Look at him. He’s terrified.”

“You can’t save them all Phil.”

“I saved that one, didn’t I?”

Michael grinned, cradling the boy in his arms.

“You did...” Conceded Pierre, “... Just don’t make a habit if it... We can’t afford any more weight.”

“No promises.” Remarked Phil, taking another swallow.

The sun lingered on the port window as though it were watching them.

The clear blue-sky void of clouds for miles in all directions. The ocean of dunes drifted aimlessly by below. A billowing haboob raged across a region. Swirling sand hundreds of feet high. Rekindling Phil’s bizarre dream. Visions appear. A woman. A man in black. Only to suddenly fade. And with it the haboob dissipated and vanished to thin air.

Pierre had nodded off again. Leaving only Francis and Phil awake. Francis with his mind on an orphanage in Amantea for Yusuf. A place he would feel safe. He was sure the Cardinal would clear the paperwork for the young boy. With that pleasing thought he leaned back and began to snooze.

Phil had his mind on the instruments, trying to recall what Pierre had said about them. The spirit-level held steady. Fuel tanks read full. No tear drops from the wings. Eyes catch sight of the compass, slipping slightly off course.

“One-ninety degrees Sou-Sou-East.” Recites Phil.

So long as the plane held steady, he was happy. Checking his watch, having been in the air for some three hours. They still had another seven before they reached Timbuktu. Eyes glanced across the dashboard. A computer screen marked their position. The green tear drop was still a long way away from the red tear drop. Both blinked in unison.

He thinks of Arthur and calibrates the time difference of an hour. He reaches for his mobile only to find no service.

“Bugger...” He cusses.

There was so much he wanted to tell him. It would have to wait until he got back. Preferring this adventure over getting married any day.

“Not me...” Reaffirmed Phil feeling good about himself, “... You won’t catch me getting hitched.”

Michael grinned.

Looking down upon the arid desert landscape, he thought he could make out the outline of an ancient river bed. He could never imagine water ever flowing through this hospitable terrain. Never in a million years.

And he would be wrong on two counts.

Ten thousand years ago, the Sahara was once a plush green carpet of vegetation. Not unlike central Africa today. Crocodiles, hippos, and turtles. Grazing animals, like cattle and sheep. Like a wobbling spinning top God nudged the planet. The tilt and orbit changed. Warming one hemisphere, cooler the other. Stirring up powerful winds that pushed the African Monsoon further north over the Sahara Desert. Vegetation grew, where none grew before. Massive lakes and wetlands formed in natural basins. River systems stretched from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean forming the Niger and Nile.

And where there were animals, there was man.

Thriving civilizations of hunters and artisans. Until one day God gave the wobbling spinning top another nudge. Stirring up different powerful winds. And pushing the African Monsoon south again. Depriving the land of precious water. Lakes and wetlands dry up. Animals migrated south as vegetation died away.

Soon followed by man.

Within a few centuries the once humid green Sahara turned jaundice. Inhospitable and barren. Like a decaying corpse, its ashes would be lifted upon the air currents and scattered across the Atlantic.

And beyond...

Porcelain God

Marconi bowed to the porcelain God on his knees. Retching violently. He gasped for breath. And retches again. The bowl now splattered a kaleidoscope of colors.

“Ahh_ Damn this place!” He cursed loudly.

Only to aggravate another spew.

His men were fairing no better. They had to share a toilet. And resorted to throwing up where ever they could. The basin and bath. Flushing the contents of their poisoned bellies in time before throwing up again. Stomachs ached. Their bowels faring no better. What did not come out one way, came out the other.

At times simultaneously.

Exhausted and sweating. Dehydration sapping their Will to live. A man collapses on the floor, with no pity from the other two. Rinsing themselves with beer, they dare not swallow lest it provoked another ejaculation from their stomachs.

It had barely been three hours since they had finished lunch. A seasoned dish of fish. Unbeknown to them, Achmed had had an untainted serving and was feeling fine. It could not possibly be food poisoning.

“Perhaps your stomachs are not use to our food. No? ...” The Achmed postulates. Resisting a chuckle, “... Let me fetch you a jug of fresh water.”

A man lays on the bed. He had given up. Sweating and suffering stomach cramps, eyes rolled in his head. Leaving one man hunched over a toilet bowl. Asleep. His neck resting on the rim as though wishing to be decapitated.

Marconi rinses his mouth with a swallow of whiskey. His only saving grace. The alcohol alone would sterilize the vilest of bacteria. He wipes his mouth with white face cloth. Smearing the remnants of the lunch from about his lips. Splashing water over his face. Stares at himself in the mirror. Wishing now more than ever he were at home in his wicker chair sipping iced tea laced with vodka, over-looking the Capri. The thought quickly being retched from stomach as he found himself hunched over the toilet bowl staring into the abys.

“Ahh_ Damn this place!” Raising a fist in anger.

‘Tap-tap-tap! Tap-tap-tap! Tap-tap-tap!’ A frantic machine gun knocking sounds on Professor Levi’s door.

Fearful of who it could be, Levi opens the door partially, his foot holding it ajar at the base. And discovers Mohamed standing there looking nervous. Looking about as though the men would return and come for Professor Levi.

“Mohamed. What’s the matter?”

“Come, come Professor! It’s Professor Arinze!” Mohamed advised.

“What’s wrong with Professor Arinze?”

“You must come Professor. See for yourself. Come. Come.”

“Just a moment Mohamed.” Levi closes the door behind him.

Mohamed rushes off ahead of Levi picking up his own leisurely stride to keep up.

“What’s the matter Mohamed. Is he okay?”

The question goes unanswered as Levi stepped into the doorway to discover Arinze holding his head. Nursing a blacken eye a split lip. Coagulated blood staining his lower face and white shirt.

Looking very much worse for wear.

“Who did this? ... Munro?” Asked Levi looking behind him.

“Munro? Who’s he? ...” Asked Arinze confused, “... No... He didn’t say.”

“What did he look like? Tall? ... Short? Did he sound Scottish?” Quizzed Levi.

“Scottish, no... He was short and fat... Foreign... Italian I think.” Arinze informed, holding a sore jaw.

“Marconi?” Levi speculates by default.

“You know him?”

“I’ve heard of him... Where is here now?”

“Gone... Hours ago... Mohamed found me. *Shukraan lak. Shukraan lak.*”

“He came looking for the Letter?”

“Yes... I told him nothing... except...”

“Except what?”

“Except the Cardinal is sending men... I didn’t mention your name.”

“Hm... Then they know the letter is still here... They’ll come after the men once they have it. Not us. This is good.” Speculated Levi playing down the danger.

His eyes shift to Mohamed as though he was a spy.

“May Allah cut out my tongue.” Mohamed lowers his head in subservience.

“We trust you, Mohamed.” Acknowledges Levi.

“When do the Cardinal’s men get here?” Asked Arinze fearful of another beating.

“Not soon enough my old friend. Not soon enough... Now let me have a look at that... Mohamed, fetch me the first aid kit...” Inspecting the broken skin, “... You’ll live.” Cajoled Levi, wondering for how much longer the Cardinal’s men would take to arrive...

Timbuktu

Passing through the invisible barrier, the Apache crossed into Mali. Moving from one indistinguishable country to another. Unsure where one began, and the other ended. Below a vast canvas of swirling brush strokes with hues of red and yellow, oche and beige.

A solitary tree stands alone. As though it were waiting for a bus.

God nudges the small craft. Bumping it with a pocket of air. Jolting the inhabitants awake. Heads bobble and eyes flicker open. The day outside had passed, and the sun drifted to the starboard window.

Engines rang out like tinnitus.

“(Yawn) ... Where are we?” Asked Pierre stretching, eyeing instrument panel for vitals. Fuel needles danced the cha-cha. The computer screen now blank. The tears have run dry. Void of telecommunications.

It was as though they had flown into the twilight zone.

“No idea...” Said Phil looking out the window at the ocean of sand. Not a drop of water for miles, “... You wouldn’t want to be down there.”

Pierre checked his watch.

“Four thirty-seven... Shouldn’t be much further.” Tapping the compass as though it had become stuck, “... Holding one-ninety degrees.”

Fascinated by the dashboard of dials and lights, Yusuf leans forward to get a better view. Phil gives him a wink and a cheeky grin.

“Let’s hope we haven’t been blown too far off-course.” Warns Pierre searching for a landmark. But everything looked the same.

He taps the compass again.

“Over there.” Calls out Francis, thinking he could make out something on the horizon.

Pierre sees it to and banks the plane to the left to get a better look. It was like finding a needle in a haystack. Eyes fixated on the incongruent anomaly.

The dark band appears to glisten and sparkle in the sun.

“The Niger! The Niger! ...” Exclaimed Pierre as though he had found gold.

The river meandered, buckled, and bent. As rivers do. Splitting into two before rejoining again as one.

“I see a road... There!” Informed Francis. Eyes trace to see where it led.

A group of low beige buildings come into view, as though they had sprouted from the desert. Like flatten ant hills woven together by a labyrinth of streets. Some straight. Some buckled. Criss-crossing without rhyme or reason. An arterial road pierces the heart shaped commune.

To the south, Pierre makes out an airport.

And radios in their arrival

“Timbuktu Control Tower... This is Echo-Victor-Charlie-Foxtrot... Request permission to land... Over.”

The request is greeted with static and squawking as though it were a foreign language. Tuning to the tower’s frequency he tries again.

“Timbuktu Control Tower... This is Echo-Victor-Charlie-Foxtrot... Request permission to land... Over.”

“This Tower... Proceed to runway one... Over.” Responds an Arabic voice.

“Copy that Tower... Over.”

Pierre looks down and sees the runway and wind sock fluttering in the light breeze.

Propellers stuttered and engines coughed as the plane came to a halt. Exhausted by the sixteen-hundred-mile flight from Tunis. Weary occupants pulled themselves from the plane. Yusuf the last to climb out. Now a long way from home. Still pondering his decision to come with the strangers. Wary of his new surroundings.

Eyes behave his reluctance to leave the safety of the plane.

“It’s okay Yusuf... You’re safe here.” Comforted Francis.

Yusuf clambered out and hurried to stand behind Phil. Large brown eyes look up at the adults towering over him.

“You stay with me, okay?” Instructed Phil placing a hand on his shoulder.

A small head nods to say he understood.

“You don’t have much time before it gets dark... I’ll stay with the plane and refuel. You go do what you have to do.” Informed Pierre patting the wing.

“Which way?” Asked Phil.

“The University.” Said Francis.

“University? Out here?” Exclaimed Phil looking about the barren landscape.

“You’d be surprised... We’ll be back Pierre.”

“I’ll be waiting.” Raises a hand to bid farewell.

“We can get a taxi from the terminal.” Remarked Francis.

“Are you coming?” Phil asked Yusuf.

Marconi laid flaccid on the bed. An overhead fan rotated cold air down upon him. As though he were being fanned by a harem of maidens. The sweats had abated. The feeling of nausea passed. And the semblance of life as he knew it, was returning to his drained body. Outside the day had passed by unnoticed.

The sun had shifted to another window, as though it were spying on him.

His mind switched to Munro. The lucky Scotsman had escaped misfortune. And he wondered if he behind the food poisoning.

“Bah-Humbug!” He grumbled.

Gingerly he sat upright. Feeling light headed, he reaches for a bottle and unscrews the cap. And takes a swallow from the bottle.

“Aah_ that feels better.” Washing it about his mouth.

He hears the sound of a plane flying overhead only to have it smothered by a noisy vehicle rushing past his window outside.

“The Cardinal’s men?” Surmised Marconi looking at his watch.

4:50PM. Five hours had passed in a blink of an eye.

Wondering how his men were faring. Pushing the door open, discovered one man lay on the bed. Another had collapsed to an arm chair, and the third lay comatose on the floor. Shirts saturated with sweat. Stained with vomit. Hearts thumping in their chests. Wondering if the next would be their last. Michael stood over the fallen.

It was not their time, as close as they had come.

Marconi senses someone else in the room. He looks about. But sees no one. Suddenly a flash fills the room, and he steadies himself against the door frame. And he wondered if he were having a stroke. Sweat breaks out across his forehead. He waits a few moments for the feeling to pass.

Kicking a boot of the man on the floor to awaken him. The man stirs. Moaning with discomfort. In reflex, he reaches for his gun and points it at the man standing over him. Squinting through blood shot eyes he recognizes Marconi's rotund silhouette.

"Sorry boss... I just thought..." The man apologizes lowering the weapon.

"Get up you buffoon... Its time... They've arrived..." Giving the man another kick to hurry him, "...And wake those two. I'll be downstairs at the bar."

"Who's arrived?"

"*Father Francis*... Whoever he is... Now hurry up! Don't have all day! ..." Glancing at the other two incapacitated men stretched out unconscious, unaware of his presence, "... Downstairs in ten minutes!" Ordered Marconi.

"Ahh_ Mister Marconi, my dear friend... How are you feeling?" Achmed welcomed him, throwing his arms open as though it were a miracle the man was still alive.

"Like shit... How do you think I'm feeling... Whiskey! Hold the ice." Instructed Marconi taking a stool beside the bar.

Resting his elbows on it. His head supported on hands as though it had been severed and held out as an offering. Oh, how he wished. Cursing that he had ever stepped foot into Timbuktu. All but nine hours earlier. And the day was not over yet.

"Certainly, Mister Marconi... Right away Mister Marconi." Dishing ice cubes into a crystal tumbler before drowning them in a dark single malt.

"I said no ice! ... Oh, give it here you fool!" Marconi wrenches the glass from Achmed's hand. Gulping the drink whole almost without swallowing. Then regrets it with a sudden rush of brain-freeze, "... Ah! ..." He moaned with pain, "... I hate this place!... Another! No ice this time!"

"Yes Sir. Thank you, Sir." Achmed bowed his head grinning.

Pouring a generous amount to the same glass. And pushes it towards Marconi fearful of being bitten. The brain-freeze abated. Annulled in part by the warming antifreeze of the whiskey. And in part by his heated temper. This time sipping the lukewarm whiskey. Aromatic vapours acted like smelling salts.

And idea was germinating in Marconi's mind. There must be more than one Professor at the University. Arinze could not be the only one.

Perhaps he had misled.

"Achmed my good friend..." Marconi coaxed Achmed to step closer.

"Yes Sir... How can I be of service? Another drink?"

"No. No... *This* university you have here..." Stabbing eyes at him.

"Yes Sir. Thank you, Sir." Achmed bowed as though it were a compliment.

"This Professor Arinze... He has *colleagues*?"

"Of course. Professor Levi..." His tongue slipped before he could retract it. What had been said, could not be unsaid.

"*Levi* you say... Doesn't sound very Arabic?"

"Jewish... May Allah forgive him." Raising hands to Him.

“Indeed... Would you know what he lectures in?”

“Ancient History I believe.” Pinching thick black eyebrows together as though two caterpillars had become one.

“Really? ... You have been most helpful Achmed...” Peeling a note from his wallet and pushing it towards him, “... Most helpful indeed.” Offered Marconi grinning to himself.

Just then three hefty men appeared at the bar appearing pale and lethargic. Their will to live having flushed down the toilet. Their eyes set on a cold beer when Marconi catches their attention.

“Ah good you’re here... No time to sit around drinking... We have work to do...” He ordered, “... We’re heading to the University.”

“Oh Boss... We’ve only just come back from there.” A man complains holding a hand to his throbbing head.

“That was five hours ago. This time we’re going to knock on the right door.” Marconi grinned...

Finders Keepers

Levi paces back and forth. Looking at his watch every five minutes like the Mad Hatter.

“They’re late! They’re late!” He exclaimed looking out the window wondering what was taking them.

“If the Cardinal said they’ll be here, they will be... Now sit down. You’re making me nervous with all your pacing.” Arinze presses an ice pack against his face.

“How are you feeling my friend? I’m sorry I dragged you into this.”

“Nothing that time won’t heal... And besides, it was I who dragged *you* into this if you recall.”

“Hmm...” Levi conceded and sat behind his desk. Pulling out a bottle to steady his nerves, “... Want one?”

“*Al-Hamdi-Lil-lah*... I thought you’d never ask.”

Levi hands him a mug and the two Professors tried to read each other’s mind. Mohamed who had mysteriously disappeared from the campus and taken himself into hiding. Fearful of being interrogated and tortured. Leaving Arinze and Levi alone to face the henchmen in pursuit of the Letter.

The sound of the humming of the overhead fan distracting them from the imminent danger about them.

“Take yourself home my friend...” Offered Levi, “... You have done well today. As you say, the Cardinal’s men will be here soon, and they can handle this... *Marconi* gentleman.”

“Are you sure Jacob... I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll be fine.” Levi lied, sighing heavily.

Looking to the window expecting to see dark foreboding heads to appear.

Arinze drained the contents of his mug and having the desired nulling effect. Feeling calmer than when he had entered.

The pains now subsided.

“Call me if you need me... Okay?”

“I’ll call you.” Levi lied again.

“Good. You should head off too. Lest they come knocking here.”

“Probably right...” Levi swallows the last of his mug, placing the bottle to the bottom drawer, “... See you tomorrow.”

“Good night Jacob. Be careful.” Arinze warned.

“You too.” Levi stands as though he were to soon follow.

Watching Arinze leave and the door close behind him. Only to fall back into his seat and resurrect the bottle from its wooden sarcophagus. And poured himself another. Taking a mouthful of the amber anesthetic.

‘*Tick... Tock... Tick... Tock... Tick... Tock...*’ The clock on the wall ticked out the passage of time as though it were a beating heart.

Becoming mesmerized by the soothing rhythm. With each fleeting moment, the Cardinal’s men were one step closer.

Tick became tock and tick became clip and tock became clop. Was he imagining the sound?

The sound of footsteps. Fearfully he looked up to the doorway.

'Clip... Clop... Clip... Clop... Clip... Clop...' He hears the steps become closer.

Silhouetted shadows appear on the window. Levi freezes in his seat. The sound of angry voices outside the door. Betraying their menacing demeanor.

'Bang! Bang! Bang!' A heavy fist pounds against the wooden door, shaking it at its hinges.

Levi stares at the moving shadows at the foot of the door. Desperately trying to decipher who it could be.

Reluctant to open it.

"If it's a fight they want... It's a fight they'll get!" Levi reaches for a draw and pulls out a pistol. A relic from a long-forgotten war. Flicking the chamber open to reveal three bullets.

'Bang! Bang! Bang!' The fist pounds again.

Sounding like gun shots inside the small office.

Frightened, the Professor sinks further into his seat. Recalling Arinze's face, battered, and bruised. Was it worth it? A hand reaching inside a pocket and feels for the treasure they sort. A tingle rushes up his arm as though it were sending him a sign.

'Bang! Bang! Bang!' The fist pounds again.

This time followed by the door handle turned

Levi raises the gun and points it at the door as it is about to open. Bright sunlight streams inside, blinding him.

'Boom!' Levi fires a shot aimlessly.

Miraculously missing the man stepping inside. Who looked at the neat hole in the door. Then draws his own gun and takes aim at the Professor. Marconi pushes the man's arm down just as he fires.

'Boom!' Striking the bottle on the desk.

It contents all but empty. Glass shattered to the floor. The noise reverberates within the office.

"We need him alive you fool!" Snapped Marconi.

Shaken by the sudden invasion, Levi eyes the short overweight well-dressed gentleman standing before his desk.

By intuition deduced his identity.

"Mister Marconi, I presume?" Questioned Levi. Outnumbered, he tosses the gun on the desk as though to surrender.

"My reputation precedes me I see." Gloats Marconi taking the chair opposite where Arinze had been sitting but moments before.

"A Gentleman earlier paid me a more... *Cordial* visit." Informed Levi.

"Ah_. That would have been Mister Munro... Hm! ..." Marconi scoffs, "... Too soft for my liking. I assume he went away empty handed."

"What would have you say that?"

"The gun... Otherwise, what are you protecting?" Marconi grins like a Cheshire cat, pleased with himself.

"I don't have it." Lied Levi looking to the shelves, if only to buy time.

"We'll see about that..." Warns Marconi, "... Boys. Turn this place over."

Marconi sighed heavily. Frustrated having to go through the ordeal again. Books get wrenched from the shelves and the contents of cabinets and drawers spewed across the floor. His eyes fixed on the Professor, watching for the slightest inclination his men were getting close.

Not a flinch.

“Enough! ...” Marconi instructs his men, “... It’s not up there... Is it Professor?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Eyes shift to the door.

Sunlight penetrates the bullet hole in the door, creating a beam that stabs Levi in the chest.

“Are you expecting someone?” Marconi asked curiously shifting his eyes to the door way.

“The Cardinal.” Warned Levi.

“The Cardinal? Really? ... Then I guess we have no time to waste... Boys. Beat it out of him!”

“Yes boss.” A gorilla of a man steps forward lifting the Professor from his chair and restraining him. Then without warning another man suddenly throws a series of heavy blows.

“Aahh_!” The Professor let out a gut-wrenching cry. And gasped for breath.

Again and again blows befell him. Each feeling more painful than the last. Incapable of speaking if he wanted to.

“Where is it?” Asked Marconi picking up the gun, cocks the hammers, and presses it into the Professor’s chest.

The look in Marconi’s eye giving every intention that he would go through with using it. Michael watched on unmoved. To whom all things were known. And all things must come to pass. On whispering comforting thoughts, the Levi gives up the fight and reaches for his pocket. From within he retrieved the folded parchment.

With trembling hands, he passed it to Marconi.

“Put him down... *Gently.*” He instructed, almost apologetically.

Marconi sat quietly. Could it be that easy? In disbelief, he stared in disbelief at the holy relic. It was now his.

He had succeeded where Munro had failed.

“*Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!*” Marconi chuckled to himself.

But the laughter is soon stifled, and eyes shift to the door way. His nemesis the Cardinal could well be at hand.

There was no time to waste.

“I’d like to stay and chat. But I have a plane to catch...” Folding the parchment and sliding it into the vest pocket of his jacket, “... Gentlemen, we’re going home!”

“Thank God for that.” A man said relieved to be leaving the forsaken town.

Battered and feeling much like a rag doll, Levi flops himself into his chair. Pain pulsed with every breath. Thankful that he was still alive. He had bigger problems than a few mere bruises.

How would he break the news to the Father...

Dog Fight

Tick became tock and tick became clip and tock became clop.

It was as though Levi was having a recurring nightmare.

'*Clip... Clop... Clip... Clop... Clip... Clop...*' The steps become closer.

Shadows appear on the window. Muffled voices sound outside the door.

'*Tap! Tap!*' Knuckles knock against the wooden door.

A finger pokes through the bullet hole like curious wiggling worm. But is soon retracts and is replaced by a peering eye.

"Professor Levi!" A voice calls out.

The handle turned and the door pushes open in a hurry.

Two men and boy stand heavily shadowed in the door way. One crossing himself on seeing the Professor limp and bloodied in his chair.

Books scattered about the floor.

"Professor? ... Professor Levi?" Francis asked warily.

"Father Francis?"

"What happened? ... You okay?"

"I'll survive.... Marconi... That's what happened." Levi takes a hefty swallow from the mug. His hands still trembling.

"He's here?" Asked Phil looking about for him.

"Who are you?" Asked Levi eyeing him suspiciously.

"Phil... Just Phil. I work for the Cardinal."

"You have the Letter?" Francis asked knowing the answer.

"Marconi has it... *Him* and his goons... They're on their way to the airport... About half hour ago... You won't catch him. They'll be well gone by now."

"We'll see about that." Responds Phil dashing from the room.

"Phil! ... Phil!... Yusuf! ..." Francis cries out for the pair to stop, "... Meet me at the Church!"

Crashing open the University gates. The taxi still waiting. Phil throws himself into the passenger seat beside the driver, frantically tapping the dash board as though whipping a horse.

"To the airfield!" He instructed panting.

Praying that Pierre was sobber and not asleep. Yusuf jumps in the back seat and hinges himself against Phil's seat.

"What are you doing here?" Now noticing the urchin behind him.

"I come to."

"Too late now I suppose. Keep your head down okay?" He warns him.

"Okay." Yusuf nods excitedly.

The ramshackle taxi hurried along earthen streets, raising a dust cloud in its wake. Narrowly missing nomadic chickens and pedestrians that dared to cross its path. The sun nestled the horizon. It would dark be dark within the hour. The airfield was within sight. A plane is seen taking off in the distance.

Frantically Phil points to a hangar and sees the Apache parked waiting. With no sign of Pierre.

“Where was he? ... Wait here!” Phil instructs paying the driver.

Clamoring from the vehicle he goes in search of Pierre.

“Pierre! ... Pierre! ...” He cries out, “... Go find him Yusuf!” Dispatching the boy like a blood hound.

At a nearby hangar a commotion was taking place. Police were questioning people. As people pointed to the sky. Someone had commandeered a plane at gun point. Quickly Phil put one and one together and came up with, “... *Marconi*.”

Eyes search the sky for the plane, and he sees a faint speck heading west.

“Phil! ... You’re back. Where’s the Father?” Pierre appears at the hangar door rubbing eyes as if he had been rudely awakened by the commotion.

“The University... Or Church... Or somewhere... We haven’t got time to talk... We have to get going.”

“Where?”

“After that plane there!” Phil points to the speck in the sky.

Pierre squints and strains and is unable to see the rapidly fleeing object.

“Marconi has the Letter... We have to stop him.”

“How?”

“I have an idea... Hurry!”

“Oh boy, here we go again...” Recalled Pierre, “... Jump in.”

Yusuf climbed into the back and Phil climbed in on his heels. Pulling on the headset. Propellers cough and scream to life. Pierre flicks switches here and there.

Taking what seemed like an eternity before the plane started moving.

“We’re losing them.” Pleaded Phil.

“Don’t worry about them Phil. They’re flying an old crate... This baby...” Tapping the throttle, “... Was built for speed. Strap yourself in.” Grinned Pierre easing the throttle forward.

Acceleration pushed the occupants back into their seats. A deafening scream of the twin engines resonated within the cockpit. With the runway swiftly moving beneath them the Apache took to the sky, banked and headed west.

“Let’s see what she can do eh?” Pierre pushes the throttle further forward.

Needles jiggled and twitched. Faster and faster the plane sped along. One hundred knots... One twenty... One fifty... One eighty... One eighty-six knots. The speed topped out. In the distance ahead Phil could back out a small black dot.

And it was getting closer. Larger.

“Get above them... Hold their speed.” Phil points the plane coming into view.

“What you going to do?” Thinking he was going to jump.

“Eh? ... No. Don’t be ridiculous...” Pulling the Glock from behind him, “... I just need a few clear shots. Maybe we can force it down.”

“Oh boy.” Pierre crosses himself.

Yusuf presses his face against the window to get a better view.

“Easy now Pierre... Bring me in close enough to get a shot at the engine.”

Skillfully Pierre positioned the plane above and to the side of the Cessna. Engines quieten as air speed lowers.

The cabin door struggles to open. Air rushing over door surface pushes against him.

“I need something to jam in it to keep it open...” Eyes frantically search the cockpit for an object wide enough, “...There... Hand me the fire extinguisher.”

Levering his shoulder into the door secures the cannister in place. Allowing just enough room to squeeze his hand through and get a shot away.

Phil takes careful aim.

“Take us in Pierre.” He coaxes Pierre.

“Copy that.” Pierre grips the control wheel like a fighter ace in a dog fight.

Faces appear at the window of the Cessna. They had been spotted. Suddenly the Cessna veers away from the Apache before Phil could get a shot away. Pierre goes in pursuit of the prey. Only to have a bullet strike the Apache and ricochet off the fuselage.

Causing Pierre to make an evasive maneuver.

“Get below them.” Instructed Phil hoping to get a shot away.

The Cessna banks to the left, then to the right. Desperately trying to evade the stalking Apache. Rocking back and forth. The Apache descends causing Marconi to lose sight of the twin-engine predator. He knew exactly who was after him. The Cardinal’s men. He looked to the horizon to the setting sun. The growing darkness would provide protection. A thin blanket of cloud veiled the Apache.

Marconi’s men search the sky oblivious to the danger that stalked below them.

“We’ve lost them boss.” A man called out over the noise of the engine and rushing air sounding through a shattered window.

“I very much doubt that. Keep your eyes peeled... Shoot them out of the sky, you hear!” Warned Marconi.

“Easy now...” Remarked Phil taking aim at the engine, “... Closer now.”

Pierre pulled gently back on the control wheel easing the Apache through the cloud. Its tail fin appearing like a shark breaking the surface.

Recalling his training in the Vatican grotto he fires three shots in quick succession.

‘Boom! Boom! Boom!’

Then two at the wing’s fuel tanks for good measure.

‘Boom! Boom!’

A punctured oil hose leaks a trail of black smoke from beneath the engine casing. Pierre banks and ascends above the now crippled Cessna. Panicking, the pilot desperately attempts to keep the plane aloft. Losing power with every revolution of the propellor. The engine begins to cough and splutter. Descending lower and lower. Until finally the engine seizes and the propellor stutters to a halt and the Cessna finds itself guiding earth bound.

Pierre circles the crippled craft like a vulture watching its prey.

To the south, he makes out a road to land the Apache. Hoping the Cessna’s pilot had seen it too. But the plane was descending too fast.

“Pull up... Pull up.” Pierre radios the pilot.

Only to hear the sound of static. Its radio wrenched from its socket. The plane bounced heavily on the road. Collapsing the undercarriage and wheels. Sparking violently as the fuselage rasped its underbelly along the road. Before tipping over its nose onto its roof. Flames begin to flare from the engine.

A heavy cloud of thick grey smoke bellows into the air.

Pierre quickly lands and taxis the Apache a distance upwind from the Cessna. Phil jumps from the moving Apache and rushes towards the raging inferno. Shielding his face with an arm,

he sees Marconi crawling from the passenger door. The pilot crawling from the other door. Marconi's men thrown about the rear of cockpit. Concussed and confused. Climbing over each other to escape certain death.

Pulling Marconi clear of the burning wreckage, Phil lifts him to his feet before standing back.

"Where is it?" Phil barked pointing the gun at him.

"You wouldn't shoot me." Dared Marconi.

"Oh, wouldn't I?" Countered Phil, turning the ring on his finger.

Feeling its authority. He took aim. And fired.

Marconi collapses to the ground.

"You bastard!" Cries Marconi in pain clutching his leg in agony.

"You're welcome... Now hand over the Letter before I shot your other leg... Or perhaps you'd prefer a knee cap? Hm?" Taking aim again.

Marconi raises a hand in the air as though to surrender.

"Have your damn letter!" Pulling it out with bloodied fingers from a vest pocket and tossing at Phil's feet.

"That was not so hard, now was it? ..." Picking it up and examining the yellowed cloth. Unfolds it and tries to decipher it, "... All this trouble for this?" Shoving it deep into his pocket as though it were a handkerchief.

Yusuf watched the Cessna in flames in the distance. Henchmen lay groaning in pain on the side of the road.

Phil looked to Pierre assessing the Apache's condition.

"She'll fly... Let's get out of here." Informed Pierre.

"What about me?" Pleaded Marconi.

"That's not my problem... Get him the first aid kit from the plane." Instructed Phil feeling little sympathy for the man. "... The pilot can come with us."

Suddenly fuel tanks ignite in a violent explosion. Sending an enormous mushroom cloud into the air. Lighting up the now dimming sky.

"That should keep you warm for the night." Quipped Phil...

Tamara

The Apache lifted into the air like a phoenix from the smoldering ashes.

Stirring dust in its wake as though to rub salt into Marconi's wounds. Exhausted Phil sighed heavily and let the past forty-eight hours drain from his body. One moment he was in Watford, the next he was in Timbuktu. The adventure was over. He had done what he was called upon to do.

It was time to go home.

Closing eyes he imagined his bed and falling onto it. The harmonic drone of the engines sang in his ears. Michael placed a hand on his shoulder to ease his mind.

"Sleep." He whispered.

The plane jolted and wheels screeched as wheels made contact. Stirring Phil awake. Eyes flicker open. Outside darkness filled the sky. Inside, the dashboard alit with Christmas lights. Greens, and reds, and yellows. The sound of Pierre's voice talking to the control tower. Collecting his senses, he sees Yusuf had fallen asleep in the back next to the Cessna pilot.

"When do we head back?" Phil asked through the headset.

"Tomorrow morning... There's a storm brewing in the desert. I don't want to risk flying in it at night." Informed Pierre flicking switches, killing the engines.

"Copy that..." Agrees Phil, "... I'll go track down the Father at the Church. We'll meet you back here tomorrow morning."

"Sounds like a good plan." Confirmed Pierre.

"Will you be alright here?"

"Hangars are my second home... I've already prepared dinner." Pierre reaches for a bottle beneath his seat.

"Enjoy. You deserve it after today."

"You got what you came for?"

Phil had almost forgotten about the Letter. A hand feels for the soft bulge in his pocket.

"Yeah, we got it." He grinned pleased with himself.

"We're see you tomorrow at dawn." Reconfirmed Pierre.

"We'll see you then... Wakey, wakey Yusuf... Time to go." Giving the boy a gentle nudge.

Yusuf stirs to life, rubbing eyes and wondering what strange place he was in now. Finding himself back at the airfield from which he has just departed. Following Phil he jumped off the wing like a gazelle. Full of life, full of energy.

The taxi was still waiting.

"To the Church my good friend... To the Church." Hoping he knew what and where it was.

The Taxi moved away leaving Pierre and the Apache and the dazed Cessna pilot alone to exchange Vatican insurance details.

Streets passed by in a blur of flashing intermittent lights. Then Taxi comes to premature halt. Its path blocked by an evening market. The narrow street clotted by tents and marques alit with electric lamps. The Taxi was about to reverse when something catches Phil's eye. An agitation coming from one of the Marques.

A man pulling on a young woman's arm. The woman protesting his intentions for her to go with him.

"How far to Church from here?" Phil asked curiously.

"Just at the end of this street... You can't miss it." Informed the driver.

"I think I'll walk from here..." Paying the driver generously, "...Come on Yusuf."

Warily Phil pulls himself out of the Taxi and quickly assesses the escalating situation. A father pulling on a daughter's arm. Forcing her to go with a much older man she did not want to. As if she were being sold. But the woman seemed familiar. Where had he seen her before? Then he saw her eyes. Visions flash his mind. The train. The dream. And for a fleeting moment he thought he saw a man in black standing behind her looking directly at him.

Instinctively, he found himself pushing his way through the crowd towards the volatile scene.

"Hey! Leave her alone! Let her go!" He called out catching the father's attention.

The old man, on seeing him draws a long-bladed knife and waves it about menacingly to ward off the intruder.

"Keep out of it, foreigner!" The man curses in a native tongue.

The words meant nothing as the flashing blade snarled at him. Halting him in his tracks.

"Let her go!" Warned Phil staring the man down.

Defiantly, the man lunges at Phil. Only to be pushed aside and slapped for his troubles. Agitated and annoyed, he comes at him again. Stabbing and sweeping wildly. Only to miss his mark. Voices in the crowd grew louder. They wanted blood. Foreigner's blood. Some reaching for their own concealed daggers. Gradually the crowd surround them.

Encircled, there was no way out.

Like a rabid dog the man snarls and makes a final attempt to wound the foreigner before him. The woman cries out for help. Restrained by her father.

Clenching a fist clenching a thick roll of bank notes.

"You bastard! ... You'd sell your own daughter!" Fumed Phil angrily, filling him with rage.

The man came at him again. But this time Phil had had enough games. Knocking the knife and him to the ground.

In one swift motion he draws the Glock. And fires a thunderous shot into the night sky.

'Boom!'

Followed by complete silence. No one dared to speak.

Phil takes aim at the father. Who suddenly releases the woman's arm. Her head veiled by a blue scarf. An opening for her eyes. Reaching out his hand for her to take it. Fingers lock and he feels her begging him to take her away from this place. The crowd parts to allow the pair through.

Distancing themselves from the father. Voices begin to rouse and agitate. The mob begins to follow. Outnumbered, it was time to make a run for the church.

Yusuf now was nowhere to be seen.

"Quick, this way!" Phil pulls the woman by the hand.

The Church was in sight.

Francis stood at the gateway having heard a shot being fired nearby. Down the street he sees two people running towards him. One he recognized. The other a woman. And an angry mob on their heels heading his way.

"Oh Phil... What have you done." Shaking his head.

Phil and the woman get closer and closer. With the mob was almost upon them. Phil fires another warning shot. Momentarily slowing the marauding pack. Making it to the church, Francis slams the gates closed. Bolting it just in time. Heavy fists bang against the heavy gate. Angry voices call out from the other side.

From nowhere, Yusuf mysteriously appears to stand behind Francis.

“How’d you get here?” Asked Phil panting for breath,

“Shortcut.” Grinned Yusuf.

“Did you get it?” Asked Francis anxiously.

“Yeah... We got it.” Reaching inside his pocket he hands it him.

No words could speak of the wonder this dull looking cloth contained. It was as though he was standing before the Saints themselves. Trembling fingers gently unfold the yellow stained parchment. Stepping into the light to read it. He gasped at the ancient script. The reverence was too much for him. Eyes whelm with tears.

Refolding the precious Letter he gives it to the one man he could trust to protect it.

“Hold onto this.” Handing it to Phil.

“Hey, what am I supposed to do with it?”

“Don’t lose it for a start.”

“It won’t leave my side.” Shoving the parchment deep to his jeans pocket.

Outside the gates the mob had fallen silent. A few would stand guard. The infidels were going nowhere.

“And who might this be?” Asked Francis turning about to find a young woman veiled head to foot.

“I don’t rightly know...” Said Phil, “... Something I picked up at the market.”

The woman stood quietly by. Her head bowed as though in subservience to Phil for saving her.

Her emerald-green eyes look to the ground.

“Hey.” Phil spoke softly catching her attention.

“Hey.” Looking up to catch his.

“I’m Phil.” He points to himself.

“Ph_il.” She repeats.

“That’s right... Me Phil...” He points to himself, “... And you?” He points to her.

“Tamara.” She blushes beneath the veil.

“Ta_ma_ra... Tamara.” He repeated.

“This is ... Father Francis.” Making the introduction.

“Fa_ther_Fran_cis.”

“Welcome Tamara... You are safe here.” Welcomed Francis.

“Pierre said there’s a storm tonight... We leave tomorrow morning at dawn.” Informed Phil looking to darkening heavens just as a rabid gust of wind rushes over the yard.

“Assuming we can get pass the people out there.”

“Don’t worry about them... I’ll figure something out.” Remarked Phil.

“I’m sure you will Phil... I’m sure you will... Let’s get inside and get you feed. You must be hungry Yusuf.” Said Francis.

The suggestion of food made Yusuf’s eyes widen like saucers. Tamara takes Phil’s hand. Surprising him. Reluctant to let go, he leads her inside the church. Above them, the stars of the milky way began to fade, shrouded by a growing cloud of swirling sand.

The Parish Father served another ladle of soup into Yusuf's bowl. As Phil told Francis of Marconi's fall from grace. Yusuf told Tamara about Phil. She listened with fascination of his heroic deeds. Her savior. Exchanging glances as though cupid arrows. Michael watched on as though he had nothing to do with it.

Suddenly a violent gust of wind strikes the old church. Howling like a ghost over the roof top. Shaking its rafters. And rattling windows in their frames.

"Will she hold?" Asked Francis warily.

"The Church has been here five hundred years. It will be here another five hundred... Long after we all dead." Advised the Father, as though it were a fact.

"Well, that's comforting to know." Responded Francis...

The Haboob

Marconi limped back to town by commandeering the first passing vehicle unfortunate to pass his way. His leg heavily bandaged. And hired mercenaries to surround the church. The more sensible had found shelter and the sanctuary of their homes. Preferring their chances with their wives than the growing tempest. The Church was surrounded. There would be no escaping this time.

With his patience wearing thin and leg throbbing with pain he ordered the attack.

The riled mob cried out for vengeance. But their foul voices are carried away on the wind. A volley of bullets suddenly shatters the windows and pepper the heavy wooden door of the church. Those inside shelter behind overturned tables. Bullets fly over their heads and splinter into walls like darts. Phil draws the Glock and takes aim at the door. It would only be a matter of time before it burst open.

Nonetheless he fires blindly at the door hoping to deter those on the other side.

“Boom!” The bullet punches a neat hole in the door.

Striking an assailment on the other side, sending him reeling backwards in pain.

The attack falls silent momentarily. Incensing the men outside, as though he had stirred up a hornet’s nest. Fists pound on the doors. Voices cry out for blood. Phil rushes forward and pushes heavy pews to barricade the door.

“There’s just too many on them... We’re out numbered.” Informs Phil knowing he was low on ammunition. It would only be a matter of time before they broke through. He had to protect Tamara, no matter what.

Francis and the Father cross themselves and seek divine help.

Then as though to answer their prayers, a commotion erupts from behind them. As though someone was trying to break in from the back. Suddenly three men step out. Their guns raised. Standing like a man facing his execution. Phil raises his hands to surrender.

They shoot, nonetheless.

Bullets fly about him. Through windows and door. Not one bullet strikes him. The men step forward and keep on firing. Taken aback by the sudden assault, the men outside retreat behind the safety of the walls to lick their wounds.

Looking to Marconi for instructions.

“When does a Church have that much fire power? Who’s in there with them?” He asked.

“Who are you? ...” Asked Phil somewhat relieved he was still alive, “... Did the Cardinal send you?”

“Cardinal? ...” A man replied perplex, his boss was no Cardinal, “... Mister Munro.” The man informed him.

“Munro?” The name meant nothing to Phil.

“Told us to stick ago should Marconi showed up... He’s right outside.”

“Marconi is here? How did he? ... Doesn’t he ever give up?”

“We can hold him off while you make a run for it.” Informed the man.

“Where? ... How? ...” Asked Phil, “... We’re surrounded.”

It was hopeless he thought. He looked about the Church. Closed in by four walls. It was only a matter of time before the storm died away and entire town would be pounding on the doors. All seemed lost. In despair he collapsed on a pew and placed his head in his hands as though in prayer.

Michael listened to Phil's troubled thoughts. And grinned.

"I might have a way..." Said the Father stepping forward, "... But you have to hurry before the haboob stops and they find you."

Phil looked up with a glimmer of hope in his eyes. Whatever it was he was up what for it.

"This way... Quick... You men, give me a hand." The Father begins to push on the marble altar.

The three men lean into the altar with shoulders, and it begins to move. Rasping on the stone floor like fingers down a blackboard. Revealing a dark opening leading to a cavity below.

Steps lead further into the blackened abys.

"Go. Go... It leads to the outside. Go, before they find you." The Father pleads.

"Go Phil. Take Tamara. She knows this region better than any of us. And Phil..." Instructed Francis.

"What's that Father?"

"Follow the Star in the East." Informed Francis.

"The Star?"

"From the train..." Francis reminded him.

Phil's world came crashing down upon him. The dream was real. Tamara was real. The Star would be real.

"Take these... You're going to need them." The Parish Father hands Phil a nap sack of food and water. And hands him a lighter, "... There are torches down there."

"What about the Letter?" Phil asked looking to Francis.

"It's in safe hands Phil."

"I'll be back." Remarked Phil, unsure when that would be.

Tamara took Phil by the hand and lead him down the stone stair case. Light filtered through the opening. That grew dimmer and dimmer. Above them they hear the sound of the altar grating back into position. Now engulfed in complete darkness. Fingers fumble with the lighter. A small flame ignites like plastic candle. Throwing its meager light into the darkness about them. Down, down, down they stepped. The air became cooler. Drier. Unbreathed for centuries. They find themselves in a strange room. Something lined the walls.

This was no ordinary cavern.

Tamara spies a torch and Phil sets light to it. Suddenly the treasure trove is revealed. Thousands of books lined wooden shelves. Shelves that reached into the darkness. Books, large and small. Voluminous and leather bound.

"What is this place?" He asked stunned by the antiquity about him.

"Knowledge." Said Tamara.

The remains of what had not been stolen by those seeking wisdom. Or destroyed by those seeking to enforce their faith upon others. Shadows dance on the walls like ancient spirits come to visit old friends. Light that had not touched the walls for centuries.

Coming alive as though being freed from the darkness.

"This way." Said Tamara, as though she knew the way.

Her instincts telling her to keep going. Further and further into the cavern they hurried, unsure where it would lead or when it would end. Walls closed in on them, until they became narrow for one person.

Then a set of stair formed before them that stretched upward.

Above them, the sound of howling wind became louder. Intrepidly they climbed the stone stairs and found themselves in a small cave. Standing at the opening, they could make out the lights of the township some distance away. Being engulfed in wall of sand.

“This way.” Tamara tells Phil.

“Can’t we stay here?”

“They’ll find us... We must keep moving.” She tells him.

“Which way?”

She looks up and sees a bright star flickering through the cloud of sand.

“Of course...” Said Phil, “... The Star.”

Taking his belt, he ties it about Tamara’s waist. The other end he holds onto tightly. Ensuring they would not become separated. Wrapping a scarf about his head to shield his face from the stinging sand. Bracing himself he steps into the storm.

From all sides the wind buffeted and battered them. Unsure which way he was heading. Tamara following behind. Sheltering by Phil as he penetrated the assailing sand storm. Glimpsing up to the star that would lead him to safety.

Each step more arduous than the last. Each step a step further from danger. And further into the unknown. Where was he headed? He did not know.

Faith and Hope was all he had.

Minutes became hours. Finally succumbing to exhaustion they collapsed as one. Cocooning Tamara with his body, sheltering her from the blustering gale. The haboob blanketing them with sand. Blowing their footsteps to the wind.

As if they never existed...

The Search

Mournful light crept over the distant horizon, stirring a cock to crow. And wake the sleeping.

Inside and outside the Church.

Marconi had returned to the Hotel for treatment leaving his band of ragged mercenaries to stand guard. No was leaving the Church without him knowing. Numbed by morphine and rejuvenated whiskey, he made his way back to the Church with cane in hand. Hoping to end the standoff.

Upon his arrival he finds Church doors open and the Parish Father in full colorful regalia welcoming the faithful inside.

“What’s the meaning of this?!” Barked Marconi taken back by the turn of events.

“Welcome... The Lord has saved us.” The Father holds his arms out as though he were about to hug Marconi. The storm has passed.

“Get out of the way you damn fool!” Marconi limped inside to discover Francis and Yusuf on their knees at a pew in prayer.

He looked about for Phil. Nowhere to be seen. Like overgrown altar boys, three men stand to the side of the altar watching Marconi and his men carefully.

‘Munro. I should have known.’ Thought Marconi to himself.

“Where is he?!!!” Demanded Marconi, banging the cane on the floor to make his point.

“Where is who?” Asked Francis innocently.

“You know damn well know who.”

“Ah Phil... He’s not here.”

“I can see that... Where is he?”

Francis looks beyond the walls as though searching for him.

“Out there...” Casting his eyes beyond the walls. Praying with all his heart that Phil had survived, “... Its over Marconi... We’ve both lost.” Concedes Francis, resuming his prayer.

“Good riddance to him! ... That’s all I can say...” Curses Marconi turning about and limping out, “... To the airfield!”

“Boss, they say the plane is broken... They say it will be ready for a few days if that.”

“*Bar-humbug!!* ...” Cussed Marconi stomping the end of his cane heavily on the stone floor of only to break it, “... I hate this place!” And limped painfully from the Church.

“It’s no-good Father. We’ve covered the whole area twice already... There’s no sign of him.” Informed Pierre over the headset despondently.

“One more time!” Pleaded Francis, his eyes peeled for life on the desert floor below. Fearful the Sahara had swallowed them whole.

Pierre banked the Apache to make another run of the search area. They had already gone beyond the outer limits of where Phil could possibly be. Yusuf presses his face against the window. Keen young eyes scan the terrain below. In the distance he spots a procession of three camels. Two individuals walk beside the camels. A man holding a long stick and a woman, dressed in vibrant blue leading a camel by the rein.

“Look!! Look!!” He cries out excitedly.

Francis looked down and sees the distant camel train.

“That’s not them.” Informed Francis, dismissing the carriages of lumbering camels.

The trader looked up at the buzzing speck in the sky. Circling, as though it were searching for something. Or someone. He wanted no trouble. Waving his stick at the pestering white fly as though to shoo it away, he continued on his way.

Placing one foot in front of the other. Flat footed leather sandals, discolored and worn from time and sun, trod forward. One step at time. One less step. Of a long journey that laid ahead of him. A journey he had traveled a hundred times. And would again before the Allah took his weary soul from him. His cargo covered by a calico blanket, hunched over a hump.

Gently being rocked side to side...

The Wedding

The grass was green. The sky was blue. And the sun shone brilliantly in the sky. The day was perfect in every way. Except for one thing.

Arthur looks up to the sky feeling glum and melancholy.

“Cheer up Arty... Phil would want you to be happy. I’m sure he’s looking down on you.” Consoled his Aunt looking up just as an airliner flew above heading for Heathrow.

Three months had passed since Phil and Tamara had vanished in sandstorm. Not a word had been heard of them. Not a trace had been found of them. The Vatican spared no expense to find them. All to no avail. It was as though they had vanished into thin air. Buried beneath the drifting sea of the Sahara. Taking the Letter with him to his grave. He knew the risks, thought Arthur. Danger was his middle name.

And now he had paid the price.

“You okay champ?” Alistair places a heavy hand on his son’s shoulder and looking up to the distance airliner. How easy it could have been him. He sighed heavily, “... Right, let’s get you ready, first a shower and shave. Then a pie and pint.”

“Eh?” Questioned Arthur, confused by the pie.

“It worked for me. It can work for you... I can only imagine the pandemonium at Zara’s place... Up at the crack of dawn. Hair and makeup... Dresses and shoes. Flowers and cakes... Photographs and six hours of bedlam...” Alistair stopped to breath, the thought was exhausting, “... Like I say, just be thankful you just have to shower and shave and put on a monkey suit.”

“We can still have a pie and a pint?”

“It wouldn’t be proper if you didn’t... We can make it a McGee tradition... Even wrote my wedding speech on the back of the pie packet.” Alistair chuckled to himself as though it were yesterday, “... I wish your mother was here.” He reminisced.

“Let’s get you inside...” Instructed Alistair checking his watch, “... We still have another four hours.”

“Ladies and gentlemen...” A stewardess announces through overhead speakers, “...Please secure food trays upright and fasten your seat belts... We will shortly be landing at Heathrow International Airport... Have your passports and documents ready for inspection... Thank you.”

A flurry of activity erupts among passengers buckling belts and searching for passports. Animating after the long flight from Cairo. Phil peered out the window and caught sight of Watford below. Making out the terrace housing and gas works in the distance.

How cluttered it all appeared after months trekking across the barren Sahara. Following ancient trails. Sleeping under the stars. Eating exotic food and listening to stories of old. Of journeys that had taken the faithful on the sacred pilgrimage from the cross roads of Timbuktu to the heart of Mecca.

And back again.

With a little help from the Carinal, he stepped on to the first flight out of Cairo heading to London. Tanned and bearded. And still wearing the same clothes he had fled the Church that fateful night.

He would be cutting it fine to get to the church on time.

Tamara squeezes on Phil's arm as the drone of hydraulics lock wheels into place. Her fingers grip into arm rests. Wheel's screech and squeal. Bumping passengers and Tamara in their seats. Engines scream reverse thrust before softening to a purr.

Tamara opens her eyes again. Thankful to have survived her first flight.

They wait for the other passengers to leave before making their way off the plane. Stewardesses eye the odd couple. Phil looking very much like Indiana Jones. Roughed and tanned. And Tamara, her head covered. Mysterious emerald-green eyes peer from within the narrow opening. Stewardesses bow their head as though to acknowledge her beauty.

A waiting Vatican Official cleared their way through Customs and ushered them into the back of a waiting black Hagley cab.

"I'll take it from here." Remarked Phil settling into the back seat and relieved to be back home.

Taking in the cool English air. The clouds and sidewalks and buildings becoming one. It was much the same as the Sahara, only grey. How strange it sounded after all these months. No one but the Cardinal. And he tried to imagine the look on Arthur's face.

This would be the best wedding present ever.

"Where to?" The cabbie called out.

"The Church on Watford Terrace if you wouldn't mind ole chap." He replied.

London flashed by outside the window. Filling Tamara's imagination. A long way from Timbuktu. Tall building towered her imagination. Endless streets of shops. A river appears. Unlike the Niger, it was dirty. Muddy. Vehicles of every description congested cobble stone streets. Buildings made of brick and stone and large glass windows. People on the street going about their day.

She catches sight of a women dressed like her. Their eyes meet as though to convey an unspoken connection.

"You okay?" Phil asked seeing her staring at the other woman.

"What a strange place."

"You can say that again." Feeling weird about being back.

The Hagley slowed and pulled beside the cab. Parking itself outside a Church.

"Everyone must be inside... Come on... Its time you met the family."

About to pay the driver when he is told it has all been taken care of.

"Thanks." Remarked Phil, leading Tamara onto the sidewalk.

Sighing heavily, he brushed himself down. Sand falls to the ground. Thinking he had gotten much of it before he left.

"How do I look?" Asked Tamara, removing her veil from about her face.

"*Beautiful.*" Phil beamed a smile and kissed her unashamedly.

Tamara blushed.

Phil checked his watch. He was right on time.

And not a minute to spare.

Francis stands before the bridal couple. Arthur looking much like a condemned man about to be sentenced. Zara radiant in white, like a princess about to wed her Prince. Alistair stands beside his son as Best Man. The joyful day tinged with sadness at the loss of Phil.

The Cardinal appearing indifferent to Phil's absence.

"Ah-hm!" Francis brings the congregation to order.

The congregation falls silent. And all eyes look to Father Francis. On seeing a late arrival appear at the doors. He crosses himself as though he had seen a ghost. His prayers had been answered. Congregation heads turn in unison to see what had caught his attention.

Phil and Tamara stand silhouetted against open entrance.

Stunned silence echoed about the church as though they had witnessed the miracle.

“I came as fast as I could.” Said Phil looking homeless.

“What’d you do? ... Walk here?” Quipped Arthur.

“Something like that... What have we missed?”

“You’re just in time. We’re about to begin.”

“Who’s your friend?” Asked Zara curiously.

“Oh yeah. Sorry... This is Tamara. Tamara, this is Arthur... The one I told you about.”

“Ah hm_.” Coughs Zara.

“Oh yeah, that’s Zara... Looking beautiful.”

“Sweet tongue Phillip Arbuckle... Whatever happen to *never in a blue moon*?”

“What can I say... I took up stargazing.”

“He’s all yours.” Instructed Alistair to Phil handing him the ring and taking a seat at the front pew.

“How’s the shoulder?” Phil asked in passing.

“It has its moments.” Informed Alistair.

Phil sees the Cardinal dressed in civilian clothes, not looking out of place with those about him. Auntie sitting beside him completely unaware of his eminent position.

“How’s Yusuf?” Phil asked Francis before he proceeded to the ceremony.

“He’s doing well in Amantea. Eating like horse.”

“Yusuf?” Asked Arthur curiously.

“Just someone I picked up along the way.”

“You seem to be making a bit of habit of that.”

He turned to find at Tamara smiling back at him. Everything he knew about women before meeting her could be written on the back of a postage stamp. But when he looked at her, he knew he was going to need a bigger stamp.

“Ah-hm.” Interrupted Zara drawing their attention.

“Oh yeah... The wedding.” Said Arthur, remembering where he was.

All eyes focus on Francis again. And a hushed silence falls over the congregation. Glancing up the open bible to ensure no further silhouettes appeared at the entrance and began reciting the holy ritual rights of marriages.

“Dearly beloved... We are gathered here today...” He began...

People cheered and applauded as tin cans clattered and clanged behind the Hagley as it drove away down the Terrace.

‘*Just Married.*’ Scrawled across the boot. Rice and confetti littered the parish pathway. People disperse and make their way to the local hall for the reception. Leaving Phil and the Cardinal standing alone on the green grass outside the church.

“Cardinal.” Phil extends his hand to greet him.

“This is Tamara.” Phil introduced her.

“You have an eye for beauty Phillip...” The Cardinal bows, seeing what Phil had seen in her enchanting eyes, “... Welcome Tamara. If you need for anything, please just ask. You are among friends.”

“Thank you, Cardinal.” Bowing her head respectfully.

“Ah-hm...” Coughed the Cardinal suggestively to Phil, “...You have something for me?”

Phil looked at the Cardinal unsure what he was on about, then it twigged, the Letter.

“Ah... I almost forgot.” Shoving a hand deep into his jean fingers fumble for the cloth.

Hoping it still there.

Emerging from his pocket as good as the day he had first placed it there. Hands the ancient parchment unceremoniously to the Cardinal as though handing the Cardinal a folded handkerchief.

“Unbelievable.” The Cardinal marvels the relic now in his hands.

Tamara watched on. The Cardinal reads the Letter to himself. Mouthing ancient words unheard for two thousand years. In awe, he looks to Phil and sighed. As though a heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

“I don’t know how to thank you Phil...” Informed the Cardinal, “... If only you knew the meaning of this.”

“I think the thanks should go to Tamara...” Responds Phil, “...If it were not for her. I would not be standing here... It was though she appeared at the right time.” Catching himself connecting dots.

“Yes. Providence has a habit of that...” The Cardinal grinned, knowing greater forces were at play, “... Thank you Tamara for looking after Phil. The Church is forever in your debt.”

“It is I who thanks Phil for saving me.” She bowed her head.

“And what of our friend Marconi?” Inquired the Cardinal curiously.

“I sent him packing with a sore leg?” Chuckled Phil.

“I heard about that. Your aim is slipping.”

“I learnt from the best Cardinal... Munro’s men arrived in the nick of time. Without them we would have been done for.”

“I have sent my regards to Mister Munro for his *assistance*.”

“How about the Chalice? Was it real?”

“Complete fake... Carbon dating places it about the eleventh or twelfth century. I have returned it to him with a case of Scotch and a thank you note for him lending it to us to examine, and saying that whatever he had paid for it, was probably far too much...” the Cardinal grinned, “...As for the iron cross. We’ll be keeping that for safe keeping.”

“All in all a good haul.” Reflects Phil.

“Indeed... You did well Phillip...” Remarkd the Cardinal, then added, “... You know Alistair is talking of retiring?”

“Mister McGee? Retiring?”

“Seems he’s slowing down. Injuries catching up on him... Are you ready to fill those shoes?”

“I was born ready.” Phil steps up to the challenge.

“I thought you would say that. I will be in contact... I have a flight to catch.” About to step into a waiting black Vatican vehicle.

“Not staying for the reception?”

“I’m afraid not... The Vatican never sleeps.” Informs the Cardinal patting the Letter in his vest pocket.

“Phillip Arbuckle! Where *have* you been? ... I’ve been worried sick about you... Well? What have you to say for yourself young man? Hm?!” A stern motherly voice begins to reprimand him.

Turning about, he sees his mother coming towards him. His father standing back.

Dare he interfere with a woman’s scorn.

“I got ah_... *Lost*.” He quickly explained.

“*Lost*? ... In *Edinburgh*? ... You could have phoned!” She began to lecture him as though he were still only eight years old.

“*Edinburgh*? ...” Puzzled Phil. Then the penny dropped realizing she knew nothing of his misadventure, “... Yeah, that’s right... *Edinburgh*. Well you see... I ah_...” Stagnated Phil as he searched for an explanation that never came.

“*Edinburgh*?” Whispered Tamara confused by the strange name.

Clinging closely to his arm as though it would protect her from the distraught woman.

Phil realized there was only one way to defuse the situation, and that was to utter words he never thought he would hear himself saying in a month of blue moons.

Or a lifetime for that matter.

“Mom... Dad... I’d like you to meet Tamara... We’re getting *married*.” He proudly announced.

Putting his arm about her and smiled upon being squeezed.

The announcement halted his mother in her tracks. Stunned. Tamara places a hand on her belly at an inopportune moment. It seemed the meal she had eaten on the plane disagreed with her stomach.

Catching his mother’s eye.

“Oh! ...” Phil’s mother gasped surprised by the news, “... Come here my dear thing... Everything will be alright.” She consoled the girl.

Embracing her like an anaconda coiling about its prey.

Tamara looked to Phil to be rescued.

“Congratulation son...” His father extends his hand to Phil, “... I thought I’d never see the day.”

“Neither did I dad... Neither did I...” Hugging his father, “...Its good to be home again.” Grinning at Tamara, her bulging eyes like saucers.

Held captured by his mother’s loving embrace...

Ella

Pool balls clattered loudly about the brightly lit green velvet table. Scattering in all directions but the pockets. A four-piece band played what could have been music on an improvised stage. Lights flashed in time with Michael tapping his foot. The lightning engineer at a loss as the malfunction of the equipment. Raising hands in despair as the puzzled band looked on.

“Bugger.” Curses Ella failing to sink any balls.

Willing the balls to roll towards pockets. Michael watched on. Tempted to aid her desires but decides otherwise. Some lessons are best learned than gifted.

Besides, he already knew the outcome.

She hands the cue stick to her father sitting at a bar. Draining the short glass of single malt he takes up the challenge. Surveying the lay the balls as he slowly chalked the cue tip. Creating annoying squeaking sounds as he rubbed it back and forth. Like fingernails down a blackboard. Deliberately tempting Ella to bite.

“Take your time why don’t you.” She takes the bait.

George grins and leans over the table as though he were moving in slow motion. Riling Ella’s impatience further. Takes aim at a ball and strokes the cue ball awkwardly.

‘Clunk!’ Mishitting the cue ball.

Sending it tumbling slowly forward and after an eternity collides with the targeted ball. Ricocheting it towards a pocket. Only to have it stop on the lip.

“Bugger.” Lies George staring frozen at the intentional layup.

“Ha! Step aside old man... Watch how it is done.” Ella seizes the stick from her father hands and gently nudges him towards the bar to discover his short glass had miraculously refilled itself.

George takes his seat and grins. Taking a swallow and feels its warmth slide down his throat.

“Nice shot boss.” A man compliments him, knowing what he had done.

What he had always done.

“Yeah, I thought so.” George acknowledges the difficulty of the shot, attested by snooker trophies that lined the shelves of his study.

This was no place to embarrass his daughter. And he watched as his beautiful daughter sunk balls one after the another. Her rainbow-colored hair, much like the balls on the table. He had been to end of the earth and come back empty handed. Only to find the most precious treasure was standing in front of him.

Distracting him briefly, his mobile animates to life and vibrates about the bar. He glances at the caller ID. And sees *Unknown Number* displayed.

Curious, he answered it.

“Hello... Munro speaking...” He answered and listened to the authoritative voice on the other end, “...Cardinal. How are you. I hope all is well... Good. Good. Nothing a whiskey won’t fix... Marconi.... You’re most welcome... I’m sorry to hear about the young man... Oh? Really? ... Cairo? But how? ... I see... Thank God for that... Indeed... The Letter? ...” He curiously asked, “... Safe. That is good news... Thank you for the call Cardinal. Good night.” And pockets the pocket.

“Cardinal?” His man asked curiously.

“Yes. Cardinal Cassini. Wanted to say thanks to you boys for your help... Said the young man who disappeared in the sand storm... Made it to Cairo...”

“Cairo?”

“A long story involving a long walk by the sounds of it. He and the Letter are safe and well... Here is to you boys!! ...” And lifts his glass to salute the men, “... Cheers!”

Ella looks up to see her father engaged with his men at the bar engaged in humorous conversation. Then catches sight of a lanky fair haired young man in the shadows staring at her. Eyes meet and unspoken illicit desires exchanged. With subtle gestures, she informs the young man to meet her outside.

And continued to sink balls as though nothing was amiss.

George listened intently as his men retold the stories of how Marconi and his mercenaries had tried to storm the Church that fateful night. Only to be met with a hail of bullets. Of how Marconi had been shot out of the sky and wounded by the Vatican agent.

“God works in mysterious ways... *Ha.*” Munro chuckled, wondering what would have happened if he had not been there.

Michael places a hand on Munro’s shoulder. He senses a foul stench in the air. Rowdy voices beseeching vengeance. Saul’s eyes staring up at him, as though asking, *who are you?* A rush of goosebumps tingle over him as the hallowing visions came flooding back to him.

Michael steps away. And the visions fade as quickly as they came.

Confused, he looked up to find Ella had disappeared. Another game had commenced without her.

“Where’s Ella?” He questioned looking about darkened room for her.

“She taken herself to the restroom Mister Munro... You want me to go get her?”

“No, no... Let her be... She’ll be back when she’s ready.” He informed the man.

Outside, beneath a street light, a lanky young man with fair hair lingered. As though he were waiting for an Uber. Pub windows rattled in time with the beat of music. Colored lights spill over the sidewalk like tears. And into the gutter.

Ella poked her head from the darkened alley beside the pub. Looking about for her father’s men. Nowhere to be seen...

About the Author

Born a long time ago in the small township of Foxton, New Zealand, my first book was a Self-Help book *E is for Effort*. That led to the debut novel, *The Ring*. One book led to another, and as they say, the rest is history.

The books reflect my interest in comparative religion, spirituality, adventure, and romance. When not writing, I enjoy hearty workouts at the gym and spending time with my three amazing and beautiful children. Harry, Emily, and Rebecca. Then again, I could be found at *Vultures* enjoying a craft beer. Solving the world's problems one beer at a time. Inconspicuously profiling patrons. Would I do that?

I hope you enjoy reading my books as much as I have writing them.

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