

PURAMORE



THE LUTE OF PYTHAGORAS

A Novel By

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London

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For Marjorie Wood

They become like they behold! Yet immense in strength and power,
In awful pomp and gold, in all the precious unhewn stones of Eden
They build a stupendous Building on the Plain of Salisbury, with chains
Of rocks round London Stone, of Reasonings, of unhewn Demonstrations
In labyrinth arches (Mighty Urizen the Architect) thro' which
The heavens might revolve and Eternity be bound in their chain,
Labour unparalled! a wondrous rocky World of cruel destiny,
Rocks piled on rocks reaching the stars, stretching from pole to pole.
The Building is Natural Religion & its Altars Natural Morality,
A building of eternal death, whose proportions are eternal despair.

Except from *Jerusalem*, a poem by William Blake

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Prologue

Saqqâra Egypt, circa 2,700 BC

The tail end of the sandstorm that had lasted for nearly a week faded far off into the western horizon at sunset. Turning to face the nearly completed edifice, Imhotep said a prayer of gratitude to Re and proceeded toward the pyramid. We were fortunate, he thought, that only the draft animals perished during the storm. Nevertheless, he knew his army of workers were close to starvation and would thus require several days of feeding to recover their health before they'd be fit enough to resume their labours. Thankfully, the supply caravan carrying much-needed provisions would arrive from Memphis in the morning.

Upon entering his tent at nightfall, he sat down at his desk. Papyrus scrolls littered the entire surface. He unrolled one and began to read.

Several minutes later his chief engineer entered.

"My Lord."

"Yes, Meni."

"Pharaoh's messenger just arrived bearing this scroll."

He handed it to him.

"Thank you, Meni."

The old man exited the tent.

After reading the scroll, he directed his servant boy to bring him his supper. He would dine alone and turn in early for the evening. Tomorrow, Pharaoh would arrive with the supply caravan to inspect his mausoleum.

He fell into a deep slumber the moment his head settled on the sleeping mat. His unconscious mind soon felt a

familiar pull on his spirit to travel to another time and space.

He looked down at his sleeping body as his spirit departed and began to soar to the stars. In an instant the starlight shining all around him coalesced into a tunnel of light as he accelerated through space-time toward his final destination. He had grown accustomed to the experience as he had been there many times before in his life. He always assumed that he would never return to his body on Earth after each time his spirit passed through the Celestial Gate. And this time was no exception.

As he passed through the Celestial Gate, the scene all around him took on a truly heavenly form. He hovered in a sea of blue ether populated by wisps of clouds transporting angels and cherubs. His spirit expanded as he once again became one with Creation. Although he sensed the presence of others, most of whom were several times or more powerful than himself, they never revealed themselves to him. It had always been that way each time he visited the Celestial Realm to commune with Creation about earthly matters. This was his role as the High Priest of Re at Heliopolis.

Suddenly, a form began to take shape in his mind's eye. At first the outline appeared to be nothing other than a common lizard with wings. As the shape took clearer definition, which displayed a glorious golden dragon of immense proportions, a tinge of fear began to creep into his being. There was no mistaking its intention. He shuddered with fear for all beings in this universe. He realised that the natural order of this universe had experienced an abrupt and everlasting change with the intrusion of the malevolent deity from another universe.

He awakened from the dream as usual with no apparent ill effects. After breakfast, he walked to the pavilion that had been erected to receive Pharaoh. The thunder of hundreds of chariots charging toward him from the northern horizon disturbed the serenity of the construction site. Thirty minutes later the horde reached the mausoleum. Scouting parties were immediately dispatched to reconnoitre the surrounding countryside.

As Djoser stepped off his chariot, the throng surrounding him prostrated themselves on the ground. A Nubian slave quickly brought an ostrich feather parasol over Pharaoh's head to shade him from the intense mid-morning sun.

“Arise, my children, and greet the new day of Re.”

The assemblage stood and bowed before him as he made his way to the pavilion where Imhotep awaited him. Upon entering, he sat down in the throne in the middle of the pavilion.

“You may gaze upon me now Imhotep, my brother.”

Imhotep looked up to see Djoser smiling at him.

He returned the brotherly smile.

“May Pharaoh always bestow Divine Blessings and Providence upon your humble and unworthy servants.”

He briefly bowed.

“Of that you may always invite and receive, Lord Imhotep.”

His countenance changed to one of solemnity.

“Be away with you all, except Lord Imhotep.”

He waved the Was sceptre he held in his right hand across his chest to signify for everyone to exit the pavilion at once.

“Come closer, Lord Imhotep,” he said as the last of the assemblage exited the pavilion. “I fear that my time as Pharaoh is at an end. Last night Osiris came into my sleep and breathed into my mouth. What does that portend?”

“Pharaoh the omen does indeed portend that Osiris has begun to prepare your Divinity for the afterlife by bonding your Ba to your Divine Consistence.”

“How much time do I have to dwell in Egypt?”

“I must first consult the stars this evening for Providence, Pharaoh.”

He paused for a moment before resuming.

“I myself communed with Amun last night during my sleep. It was revealed to me that Nut has been invaded by a malevolent deity.”

“Where did the deity come from?”

“I know not, Pharaoh, but it possesses the power of Amen-Re”

“What is the deity’s purpose in invading Nut?”

“It can only have one, Pharaoh; that is, to rend the heart and soul from Nut and Geb and destroy Duat.”

“Then the prophecy is fulfilled, Lord Imhotep.”

“What prophecy?”

A magnificent eagle flew into the pavilion and alighted on the ground between Pharaoh and Imhotep whereupon it instantly shape-shifted into a tall young man dressed in a silk robe.

“Don’t be alarmed, Imhotep.”

“Is this Horus?”

He dropped to his knees and covered his eyes. His sheer terror of the sight of the apparition before him seized his psyche and body as a paroxysm.

The man took Imhotep by the arm and lifted him to his feet as though he were nothing more than an ordinary scarab beetle.

“Uncover your eyes, Lord Imhotep, and look into mine. I am only known as Eagle.”

Imhotep stared into his eyes for several seconds. He suddenly closed them again.

Eagle then took an object from the fold of his robe and placed it on his forehead. After he ceased convulsing and reopened his eyes, he returned the object to the robe. Imhotep stood before him with a sanguine expression on his face.

“You see, Lord Imhotep, you and I are from different worlds. Though we share essentially the same physical form and spirit as men, mine hails from this world whilst yours hails from another.”

Pharaoh interjected: “Eagle first presented himself to me just before I began my reign as Pharaoh. As you recall, I was then an innately strong and quintessentially noble at that time. My only weakness in achieving my goals for Egypt laid upon my innate youth and inexperience. Had it not been for him, my reign would have been short and unremarkable.

“This Was sceptre that I hold in my hand is my only memento of the time when I wielded the power of the Sword of Destiny that rendered me invincible during most of my reign.”

“But where is it now, Pharaoh?”

“Eagle, the Guardian of the Sword of Destiny, has it in his possession.”

“Why did he withdraw it from you?”

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“I had grown vainglorious with my success as ruler and thus became unsuited to wield it any longer ages ago.”

“Eagle, what is its purpose?”

“Its sole purpose is to preserve and protect mankind and all creatures on this planet.”

Part I – Genesis

A new human race is descending from
the heights of the heavens. - Virgil

Chapter 1 - The Road to Oaxaca

Ciudad de Oaxaca, Mexico, 21 June 1991

British Army Captain George Smythe dreamt about touring archaeological sites of the Americas as an amateur archaeologist for as long as he could remember. Although he never understood the reason for the fascination, he nevertheless sensed a spiritual attraction to pre-Columbian cultures of North and South America. He had the opportunity to first explore archaeological sites on a solo tour of central Mexico by during a two-week holiday.

After a week of visiting the important ruins located in and around Mexico City and San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, he set out from Oaxaca City early in the morning to spend the day touring Zapotec-Mixtec archaeological sites situated within the Valley of Oaxaca. Night had fallen as he drove from Mitla, the last stop of his tour, to return to Oaxaca City. He had supper just before dusk at a humble roadside diner.

As he pulled his rental car onto the two-lane paved road afterward, his stomach began to complain about the spicy Oaxaca cuisine. He should have waited to dine at his hotel restaurant, he thought, as he ingested several stomach medication pills in response as his vehicle gained speed.

Seemingly out of nowhere, a large stag mule deer appeared straight ahead of him in the middle of the road and suddenly charged at his car. Its eyes as reflected back by the vehicle's headlights became more and more demonic as he closed in on the animal. Before he could swerve to avoid the collision, the beast's heavily antlered

head crashed into the driver's side of the windshield. An instant before the collision, Captain Smythe slammed on the brakes and instinctively raised his hands to shield his face. He immediately lost consciousness, as his head and forearms crashed into the steering wheel.

He regained consciousness gripped by excruciating pain when he opened his eyes to gaze outside the empty windshield frame at the starry clear night sky that magically loomed over the moonlit valley. The ill-fated car sat upright at the bottom of a dry and shallow arroyo that ran beneath the roadbed. Hearing the sound of a solitary vehicle approaching overhead at high speed, he attempted to unbuckle his seat belt to exit the car and call for help. He was severely punished for the effort, as the report of searing pain from his mangled arms reached his brain. Looking down, he saw the front of his shirt and trousers soaked with a nauseating crimson sheen; the salty seepage stung his eyes as it flowed from the crown of his head. Turning his head slightly to the right, he saw the silvery moonlight reflect off the granulated windshield glass strewn all over the front middle console and passenger seat.

A moment later the approaching vehicle passed him. He looked out the windshield frame again to catch the sight of its tail lights fading off into the horizon. He knew at that moment that death was upon him as he continued to gaze into the moonlit desert valley. Suddenly he saw a pulsing glow approaching. Seconds later, the object flew through the windshield and hovered for several seconds not more than six inches away from his nose. It appeared to him that the firefly examined him before zinging away

toward the direction of the vehicle that passed him several minutes before. The effects of the loss of blood and the cold night air made him shiver.

The headlights of another fast-approaching vehicle ahead of him came into view. It eventually decelerated and stopped on the roadside above him.

He then heard the sound of a car door opening and closing. The passenger door of his sedan abruptly opened a few moments afterward, and the silhouette of a tall and thin man appeared outside. He opened the passenger door and knelt before it. He then placed a gas lantern on the passenger car seat and struck a match. The globe of the lantern came to life as the man lit the mantel and adjusted the gas flow to produce an optimal incandescence.

When the visage of his rescuer's face became fully illuminated, Captain Smythe finally began to lose consciousness.

"Fight it, Captain Smythe. Don't lose consciousness or you'll never return."

He pulled out a pouch from the leather satchel that hung from his left shoulder. After untying the strap, he poured out white powdery contents into his open right palm.

"You must look into my eyes immediately and open your mouth!" the man commanded with a roar of a lion that caused Smythe to flinch.

He struggled with all his might to direct his ebbing consciousness to open his mouth and turn his head toward the rescuer. As their eyes met, the man reached over and popped the substance into Smythe's mouth.

"Now, close your mouth and swallow!"

He brought a flat object he held in the palm of his hand into contact with Smythe's forehead.

Captain Smythe felt a warm glow pulsate through his skin and into his skull. Soon he regained consciousness.

He removed the object.

"Good. You're returning to the land of the living."

He continued to gaze into Smythe's eyes.

"My name is Juan Aguila. It's exceptionally fortunate for you that I took more than a passing interest in you after I saw your magnificent orb before you left Oaxaca for Monte Albán this morning. I've never witnessed anything even close to the brilliant luminescence and perfection of your orb, Captain Smythe.

"At first sight, I thought the Dalai Lama was in town paying us a visit. In fact, I was so struck by its magnificence that I decided to tail you, mainly to study you further and act as a rescuer if necessary. A man of your spiritual stature shouldn't be alone anywhere near where shape-shifters and other evil spirits abound, especially in this part of the Valley of Oaxaca at night."

Juan knew from his experience with extreme trauma victims that Captain Smythe would later only vaguely recall his comments at the accident scene.

He looked out the windshield and noted no trace of the shape shifter encounter anywhere on the hood of the car. Deer blood, flesh, and bone fragments that previously covered the bonnet and the interior of the sedan had vanished.

Smythe felt no pain whatsoever as Juan proceeded to dress his head and upper extremity wounds with butterfly and gauze bandages.

Afterward, he set and splinted his forearms and wrists and installed a cervical collar around his neck.

“It’s also fortunate for you that I served as a US Army combat medic during the Vietnam War. In turn, the experience served me well, as I act as an unlicensed physician to local indigents in addition to my regular sorcery practice.”

He wiped coagulated mass of blood from Smythe’s face.

“But I digress. I must directly transport you to the Oaxaca General Hospital since you are in dire need of a blood transfusion and further treatment. This elixir should last until we arrive there.”

He put the open end of a leather bota to Smythe’s lips.

“Drink all of it, Captain.”

A warm and salubrious but tasteless radiance flowed into his mouth. As it travelled down his oesophagus to his stomach, the warmth radiated throughout his body. He soon fell into a deep and restful sleep.

The man lifted the lantern in front of Smythe’s face, held it there for several moments, and then passed the lantern down to his left shoulder. He held his breath and intensely stared at whatever it was that caught his attention. Squinting intensely, he inspected the object that caught his attention in microscopic detail: it was the size of a midge. Before it could disintegrate, he spun a crystalline cocoon around the carapace of the bantam Golden Dragonfly.

“There. I finally have another one to add to my collection. And a soldier at that.”

He reached into his satchel and brought out a glass syringe. With surgical precision he gingerly placed the end of the syringe over the cocooned husk; and, little by little,

began to pull on the piston. As the cocoon lazily lofted into the glass barrel, he returned the syringe to the satchel.

Late in the afternoon the following day, Captain Smythe awakened from his slumber in the comfort of a hospital bed. His cast-encased arms dangled in front of him from ceiling wires.

A slender and attractive middle-aged nurse entered the hospital room.

“Gracias a Dios!”

She shot over to his bedside and studied the vital signs monitor.

“Señor, it’s a miracle that you are alive.”

She studied his eyes.

“Don’t try to talk.”

She lifted his head to fluff and straighten his pillow.

“We’ve never successfully treated a patient who sustained as much blood loss as you had by the time you were admitted to the emergency room early this morning. It’s also a miracle that your fractured arms and wrists were set and splinted with such skill and precision at the crash site. Otherwise, you might not have lived to enjoy full use of them again.

“The campesino who transported you here told the admission nurse that an American medico, who was touring the area by himself, attended to your wounds at the crash site. Unbelievable! What a stroke of luck for you.”

How, she thought, could anyone set a series of fractured bones so precisely and effectively from a roadside crash site? Not even our finest orthopaedists working with the best equipment in the world could

perform such a miraculous procedure in a fully equipped, state-of the-art operation theatre.

“Anyway, the campesino asked the admission nurse to tell you that there was no need for you to attempt to show your appreciation for his part in saving your life. He also wanted you to know that he and his family will dine luxuriantly on venison for the next month as a result of your mishap, and that was ample reward enough for him.”

She picked up the phone near his bedside and dialed a number. Turning away from her patient, she spoke to someone at the other end of the line.

“Yes, Doctor. I’ll let the patient know that you will arrive presently to examine him,” she whispered into the receiver.

“Dr Gutierrez, our chief of orthopaedic surgery, will be with you shortly, Captain Smythe.

“Relax. You’re going to be up and about in a month or so. The device in your right hand is for pain management. Simply depress the button on the end to receive a mild morphine dosage when you feel the need. I’ll visit you again in a few hours,” she said as she left the hospital room.

A few minutes later a tall, thin and handsome young man with long jet-black hair pulled into a ponytail entered the room.

At first, Smythe didn’t recognise him as his rescuer; he instead assumed that he was his attending physician.

“I’m sorry, Doctor, but I don’t recall your name.”

The man, who wore a shortly cropped mustache and a goatee, stooped down so that his face was level with Captain Smythe's. His piercing black eyes stared directly

into his. No wonder Quetzalcoatl targeted you for extermination at your current age, he thought.

At once he understood the spiritual providence of his encounter with Smythe; he is indeed a candidate as the Deliverer his Nagual master foretold he would discover in this dimension during this era. There's no doubt about this Omen to that effect. He's also far superior to the others in every respect. I must guard him with all my spirit powers, he resolved, until his Assumption. Not even the Great Spirit will be able to help humanity if the man before him doesn't wield Puramore as the Deliverer for the last time. From this day forth, he vowed, you and I are going to develop a fast and permanent friendship.

He continued his gaze into Smythe's eyes for a few moments.

"My name is Juan Aguila. Don't you remember me, Captain Smythe?"

Captain Smythe felt a smooth metal object come into contact with his forehead. A warm pulsation travelled through his skin and into his skull before its removal. All at once, the image of the man who saved his life the previous evening came to his beclouded mind.

"Juan? Is that you?"

He began to recall the man's efforts to rescue his life.

"Yes, it's me."

He groped for words to fully convey the depth of his gratitude to his saviour.

Finally, he said, "How can I ever repay you for saving my life?"

"I have only two requests in that regard, my friend."

“I shall do anything in my power to express my appreciation for all that you have done for me, Juan. I shall do anything at all.”

“Firstly, never mention my role in saving your life to anyone.”

“I shall not. Not ever. I promise that to you as a blood oath.”

“Secondly, ever since I was a small boy I’ve always dreamed of attending an Ivy League medical school to become a licensed physician.”

“But, Juan, how can I possibly assist you in fulfilling the dream? I’m only a soldier with hardly any means at present.”

“Trust me. Time is not an issue for me. And in no time you’ll possess the capability to provide me with that assistance.”

“Really? How can you be so certain of that?”

“Because it’s your destiny. One day you are going to be a very, very rich and powerful man.”

“I don’t believe it. Career army officers never attain immense wealth. It’s impossible.”

“Well, you will be the exception to that rule. Just put that in the back of your mind for now.”

He turned away from him and started for the door.

“From this day forth, you are on another path as a warrior, Captain Smythe. I am your spirit guide and guardian until you fulfil your destiny.”

“But I don’t understand any of that, Juan! Where are you going?”

“I’ll be in touch soon” were the last words Juan spoke before he exited the room.

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An elderly man dressed in a white coat entered the room several minutes later.

After examining Captain Smythe, he said, "I am Dr Gutierrez, Captain Smythe."

He paused to await his patient's response.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Dr Gutierrez. Will I be able to return to Britain fairly soon?"

"Yes. A British Army medivac team has already arrived to transport you to England this evening."

"I wish to thank you and your hospital for treating my injuries last night. The nurse seems to think I will fully recover."

"Your prognosis for a complete recuperation from the injuries you sustained is excellent.

"It's truly amazing that you're already well on the way to recovery given what you have been through. I've never seen anything like it in all my fifty years as a physician. It's really nothing short of a miracle."

"Dr Gutierrez."

"Yes, Captain Smythe?"

"Who was that man who left my room several minutes before you arrived?"

"No man has entered your room except me for the past eight hours. Only your shift nurse has been here during the last fifteen minutes. I am certain of that as I've been in conference with a fellow physician in the hallway just outside your room for the past half hour. Other than Nurse Ortega and a field mouse, you had no visitors."

"Are you familiar with a man who goes by the name of Juan Aguila?"

"No, señor, I am not. The surname, however, is definitely typical of local campesinos."

Chapter 2 - West Meets East

Hong Kong, 15 March 2019

The flight from London gave him the leisure to ponder over his life as a military officer for the first time in several years.

After resigning his commission only several months before, he had almost no time until then to reflect upon the only way of life he had ever known since his graduation from Eton College at the age of eighteen. For until his ceremonial release from military service the previous week, he devoted all his energies toward attending to severance minutia and executing the necessary arrangements to begin his new career in Hong Kong.

Comfortable and relaxed in his premier class-seat, General Sir George Smythe absently stared at the movie playing on the screen in front of him. He listened to a classical music programme through headphones as his mind wound through the collage of his military career.

He began to recall the day of his arrival at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst after his graduation from Eton College. The subsequent forty-four weeks he spent there as a cadet flashed through his memory. Although it was a time of intense personal growth and learning for him, it was also a time to be inculcated with the ritual of military duty and honour as an officer.

He fast-forwarded through his initial career posting as a second lieutenant and staff officer with the Intelligence Corps after being commissioned into the Royal Anglian

Regiment. Excelling in that post to such an extraordinary degree he was promoted to first lieutenant after only two years of service. Two years later, he advanced to the rank of captain as a result of his extraordinary contributions and leadership abilities.

In his first assignment as a captain, he served as a special liaison officer with the British Defence Staff office stationed in Washington D.C. Upon return to his regiment, he served as both an operations officer and adjutant commander in both the Northern England and Cyprus campaigns. In his eighth year of his military career, he was promoted to the rank of major. Several months after the promotion, he received the Distinguished Service Order decoration in recognition of his brilliant combat leadership contributions.

He savoured the memory of that phase of his military career. The experience was all the more memorable since he knew then that his career path was on a fast track toward advancement to the upper echelon ranks of military command.

After attending Staff College Camberly in his tenth year of military service, he returned to the Royal Anglian Regiment, headquartered at Bury Saint Edmunds, as adjutant to colonel of the regiment. Upon his promotion to lieutenant colonel four years later, he held several high-level staff appointments within the Ministry of Defence.

In his twenty-ninth year of service, he was promoted to the rank of major general and was later awarded both the Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire and Knight Grand Cross of Saint Michael and Saint George. After serving as commander-in-chief of NATO's Northern European Defence Group, he occupied the

Whitehall office of the Ministry of Defence as the chief of the general staff as he neared retirement age.

His military career had been his only mistress from the time he graduated from Sandhurst. Though he enjoyed a few diversions, such as stock market trading and general aviation, he mainly focused on the constant demands of his military duties. From his early teens, he knew that the military life would be his calling. His instructors at Eton College attempted to dissuade him from that career objective as they considered him an excellent candidate to matriculate at either Oxford or Cambridge. But his steadfast resolve to become a military officer finally overcame their objections when he enlisted in the British Army as an officer candidate several days after his graduation.

As he approached the fifth anniversary of his promotion to the rank of major general, he first met Lord Cedric Chamberlain at a social function he attended one evening in London. Unbeknownst to him at the time, the British lord was a senior partner of a staid and dowdy Hong Kong commodities trading firm. The firm, Oriental Winds Commodities House was one of the original British trading houses that specialised in oriental commodities and goods for export to the West. Established in the early 1900s, the firm flourished for nearly eighty years.

He vividly recalled Lord Chamberlain's first mention of OWCH soon after they were first introduced by the Minister of Defence the previous August. For some peculiar reason, he thought, at the time, the old man took more than a casual interest in him. He also thought it odd

that Lord Chamberlain would open his heart about the history and status of his firm to a total stranger.

Before departing, he invited Smythe to dinner at his private club the next evening. He accepted the invitation as he welcomed the prospect of breaking away from the Joint Military Intelligence crowd who were his only company for the past week, as he had been attending a conference with the top NATO military leaders.

* * *

The cab stopped in front of an ancient red brick and white marble building. Typical of that affluent and secluded section of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the edifice possessed a slightly garish but elegant bearing like all homes built in London during the late Victorian era. Aside from the polished brass house number posted discretely to the left of the massive front door, no other sign even hinted at the fact the building housed an exclusive gentleman's club.

After exiting the cab, he climbed the white marble steps to the front door landing and rang the doorbell. Peace reigned supreme in the neighbourhood on that balmy evening. The heavy teak door opened to reveal a distinguished-looking man dressed in an English butler suit and tie.

“Good evening, General Sir George Smythe. Please follow me.”

Smythe entered the dark wood-paneled foyer. He followed as the man proceeded down a wide corridor. The scent of tobacco smoke and exotic oil-treated oak permeated the stately ambiance. An unbroken line of portrait oil paintings hung on both walls all along the

entire length of the corridor. Smythe judged that the men portrayed in the paintings must have been past members, possibly former officers, who may have presided over the club since its founding. And, judging by the elegant attire worn in the earliest paintings, that might have been as early as seven centuries ago.

“Most impressive.”

They had arrived at the end of the hallway.

“This is one of the finest collections of portraiture I have ever seen.”

“Indeed, General Sir. It’s a tradition the order established over eight hundred years ago. Previously, the membership saw no need to render portraits of Grand Exalted Masters.”

This must be a Masonic temple, Smythe thought.

Turning into another hallway they continued their journey.

At the end of the corridor, they entered a large two-story-high library. Wood shelves filled from the floor to ceiling with books covering the four walls of the grand space, some thirty meters in length and width. At the start of the second-floor level, an ornate balcony ran along the entire perimeter of the library. Access to the balcony was gained from spiral staircases positioned at the corners of the library. Great ladders hung from overhead rails provided access to volumes in the upper reaches. On the ground level, sets of ornately carved wood desks occupied half of the floor space. Old-fashioned brass reading lamps set atop each desk.

The other half of the floor space contained large leather-bound chairs, each adjoined by a pedestal table and brass floor lamp. A monumental crystal chandelier hung

from the middle of the ceiling provided ambient lighting for the library. Most of the leather chairs were occupied by elderly men absorbed in reading. Many smoked cigars or tobacco pipes. No one, however, paid the pair any heed as they entered the regal book depository.

The butler started to walk across the middle of the library floor toward a hallway opening at the opposite end.

“This way, please, General Sir.”

Exiting the library, they proceeded through another portrait-lined hallway. Instead of pre-eighteenth century clothing, the men portrayed here wore modern garb.

At the end of the corridor, the butler halted and motioned for Smythe to proceed ahead of him.

“The maître d’ will show you to your table. Lord Chamberlain will be along presently to join you.”

He then made a military-style salute and marched back down the hallway.

Black-tie-and-coat-clad diners occupied nearly all the thirty or so linen-covered tables. The dining room was finely furnished with British period pieces dating back to the seventeenth century. An assortment of British heraldic emblems decorated its dark wood-paneled walls, one of which was occupied by an ancient and elegant bar.

A handsome young man dressed in a tuxedo arrived.

“Follow me, please.”

He led him to a solitary table situated at the far end of the dining hall. As the general sat, the maître d’ told him that a waiter would attend to him presently. A few minutes later the waiter took a cocktail order from him.

He continued to survey the understated elegance of the dining room as Lord Chamberlain approached the table. Dressed in formal attire, the standard black coat and tie

worn by everyone else, he appeared as hale and hearty as any man his age would ever wish to be.

“Good evening, General Sir George Smythe.”

General Smythe rose to shake his hand.

“I welcome you to the Ancient Order of the Blue Garter.”

They sat down.

“It is a pleasure to be here, Lord Chamberlain.. Though I don't believe I've ever heard anything about the Ancient Order of the Blue Garter. From what I have been able to ascertain since my arrival, though, the club must be steeped in ancient tradition. That was especially evident in the portrait paintings and other renderings I viewed on the way here.”

“Quite so. More on that at another time.”

He placed his linen napkin on his lap as the waiter served the general his martini cocktail.

“The usual for me, Crumley. And do try to make it extra dry this time, my good man.”

The waiter shook his head ever so slightly to acknowledge the command and left.

“Right. I trust you are enjoying your stay in London.”

“Yes, I am indeed, Your Lordship. I was born and raised in here, as you know.”

“Yes, I do know. In fact, I know far more about you than you probably presume. The order has always maintained a favourite community interest, unlike any other gentleman's club. Instead of engaging in furthering charitable and academic concerns, once in a decade, we select an outstanding young man to cultivate for purposes of future interest to the club. In your case, we followed your academic and social development from the time you

were thirteen years old. We later confirmed your suitability to receive the anonymous scholarship from the Ancient Order of the Blue Garter when you were aged fifteen. As a result, all other aspects of your life henceforth came under our anonymous and beneficial guidance.”

General Smythe took a slow sip from his martini as he considered the gravity of the revelation Lord Chamberlain had disclosed to him. In retrospect, there were times in his life, particularly during his early adolescence and adulthood, when for a reason, unbeknownst to him, he was cast in a mould well above the station of his birth. At the time he didn't realise the true significance of the largess he received.

The first and most notable of these benefits came in the form of an astonishing invitation from Eton College to sit for a qualifying entrance examination when he was aged fifteen. After passing the examination, he was offered a full scholarship by an anonymous benefactor.

A distinct social anomaly, given his relatively obscure social background and status, he nevertheless gained tremendous respect from his classmates, primarily based on the excellence of his academic performance. His athletic prowess and leadership capabilities further bolstered his popularity amongst his schoolmates, so much so, that his varsity football team mates elected him as squad captain in his final year.

“So, Lord Chamberlain, what you are saying to me is that my life has been influenced in no small measure by the benevolence of the Ancient Order of the Blue Garter.”

“I would not necessarily qualify our interest in your development as solely benevolent. I would rather prefer

that you regard our involvement in your educational and career development as an investment that promised to reap untold returns for both you and the Order.”

“I am not quite following you.”

He was flatly incredulous to the core of his being.

“Firstly, why would you have chosen someone like me when you could have done the same from your own social circle? Secondly, how am I required to fulfil the terms of your investment?”

“Fair questions, which I am only too happy to answer. Well, someone like you only arrives on Earth once every one hundred years or more. You are a natural-born leader of the highest calibre. I say that not to shame your modesty, but to reflect the fact that we, as astute students of history, have a keen and discerning sense about how men are destined to develop given the proper providence. As a youth, you exhibited all the attributes of the kind of individual that we continually to discover and develop.

“As you depart this evening, please take special notice of the portraits you saw on your way to the dining hall. Some of the men portrayed hailed from quite austere circumstances, whilst others were born into privilege and opulence. I dare say that upon closer scrutiny you shall also recognise at least a few of them as having played pivotal leadership roles both in public and private offices they held.

“With regard to your second question, you have already repaid our capital investment outlay for your education in spades, as established by your success to date. The stellar accomplishments that you achieved by virtue of your own initiative and leadership skills starting from the day you

entered Eton College have been a splendid victory for us as well.”

“As far as you are concerned, however, all of that experience is in the past.”

“You are giving me the impression that my career path is about to take an abrupt turn.”

“And an abrupt turn it shall be. Accordingly, we have decided that your talents shall be utilised to far greater effect in another capacity.”

The general’s eyes widened.

Before he could utter a syllable, Lord Chamberlain resumed, “Please hear me out before you comment upon our proposition to you. The years you have spent in the service of Her Majesty have been exceptionally beneficial toward the peace and prosperity of the nation as well as toward your own personal development. Yet, for all it was worth, that experience was merely a stepping stone onto the path of your true destiny.”

He took a sip of his cocktail.

“As you have undoubtedly noticed, the majority of the members of the order present this evening are in advanced stages of life. I myself am eighty-two years old. In this modern era, we as a group are a dying breed, both literally and figuratively.

“The noble charter of the Ancient Order of the Blue Garter that has lasted gloriously for ages is today only an anachronistic ideal cherished in the minds of us who survive at the very end of our time here on Earth. The younger membership, though fully capable of carrying on the club’s traditions indefinitely, shall never, I regret to say, be able to reshape the original charter to incorporate the realities of the modern world even if they possessed the

inclination and capability to do so. Perforce of that ominous realisation, we have no other alternative but to pass on the mantel of our leadership to the only man alive capable of refashioning the charter into a viable and thriving influence. And that man, General Sir George Smythe, is none other than you.”

Although there was something tantalising about his presentation, Smythe harboured an essential, almost instinctual misgiving about his motives toward him. He learned early in his military career that the success of an endeavour often depends upon a crucial command decision based on gut instinct. In this case, his gut instinct was sending him a message to beware.

“You are at the very pinnacle of your military career with nowhere to go but sideways. I think that you ought to agree with me that your options otherwise are virtually nought. That is not a bright prospect for a young man like you. You crave the continual pursuit and attainment of power as most men breathe air to exist. Recognising that you are thus at a stalemate, we propose that you forthwith resign your officer’s commission and begin a new career in industry, initially under our tutelage. We in turn guarantee that from that moment forward you will at least receive a lifetime pension and benefits equal to your entitlement under your current military rank and tenure.

“If you succeed, as we expect you shall, we will turn over the business to you for your complete control and ownership. What is truly at stake for you is the opportunity to realise your fullest potential as a leader and innovator, unfettered by any and all social or bureaucratic obstacles in the way of your ambition and drive to succeed. That’s a heady prospect, wouldn’t you agree?”

The general picked up his half-full martini glass with his right hand and swirled the contents as he carefully contemplated the proposition. Bringing the glass to his lips, he took a reflective sip and lowered it down on the table.

“I have been rather dreading serving the remainder of my career until retirement. It’s not that I do not enjoy the power and prestige of my current appointment, it’s more that I am no longer challenged by military intrigue and gamesmanship.”

“Of course you're not. At just over fifty years old, you are a young man on the verge of exploiting his leadership capabilities to the ultimate level. We also realise that you suffer career ennui when you are not constantly stimulated by the challenge of rising to a higher level of power and prestige. Whilst the opportunity that we are offering to you will likely make you a rich and powerful man, the prestige you derive from that success is yours and only yours to define. In other words, you can make use of it as you desire by either staying out of the public view altogether or electing instead to use it as a platform for political gain in the public forum. In any event, we shall not hold you to any standard other than the one you set for yourself.”

“And I shall be free to manage the company at my complete discretion?”

“Yes, as Grand Exalted Master of the Ancient Order of the Blue Garter, I assure you that from the day you ratify our employment and membership agreement the company shall be yours to manage at your total discretion. Thereafter, if and when you meet our performance goals for the company’s business expansion over the course of

the initial five years, 100 percent of the firm's ownership will be transferred to your name.

"I know you must have reservations concerning the changeover from public to private life, but you won't have any difficulty at managing the enterprise from the very day you set foot inside the chief executive officer's suite."

"And where may I ask is that located?"

"The headquarters office of Oriental Winds Commodities House is located in Hong Kong. OWCH owns the fifty-story building that houses its headquarters staff in the top fifteen floors. Your private office suite is located on the fiftieth floor of the building."

"This is really too good to be true. There must be some sort of a catch.

"You stated earlier that passing leadership of the Order to me was deemed a necessity. I clearly don't understand the nature of that responsibility, nor do I understand anything at all about the Order's charter."

"I assure you that there is none until the day you become a member and assume responsibility for developing a new charter. And there is no responsibility that you basically assume by accepting the Order's leadership position other than that. Otherwise, save for your obligation with adhering to the performance milestones during the five-year initiation period, we will transfer the business to your ownership without any encumbrance whatsoever.

The four senior partners, including myself, have owned the business for the past fifty years and have during that time made vast fortunes as a result. At this point in our lives, however, we have neither the time nor the inclination

to devote any further energy toward maintaining the business even at its present level of performance.

“It is a fine firm that only requires a goodly bit of attention to shift out of its current neutral gear and into higher and higher performance levels. That is your challenge, pure and simple. Should you decide to accept the challenge, you will be thoroughly briefed by me and the three other senior partners as to the current status of the firm as well as to how best to initially proceed with its management. After that, you will be essentially on your own.”

He paused for a few seconds before resuming.

“I suppose you need a few days to further consider the merits of our proposition.”

The general glanced across the dining room as though searching for divine intercession on his behalf. Nevertheless, he knew in his own mind that an opportunity like this would never present itself to him again. He also knew that he would be a fool not to take an early retirement from military service in order to take advantage of this mysterious kismet. Yet, the Omen had just presented itself to him as Juan predicted it would several decades earlier. He knew in his spirit The Path laid before him in his acceptance of this opportunity.

“Well, if there is an overriding strength in my character as a leader, it lies in my ability to properly assess situations and effectively direct immediate action to gain control over them. Accordingly, I herewith accept the opportunity which you have presented to me this evening, Lord Chamberlain.”

“Jolly good! Now let's order dinner, shall we? I'm absolutely famished.”

* * *

“Sir, would you care for a glass of wine with your dinner this evening?”

He instantly pulled out of his reverie. As he looked up at the flight attendant, he removed his headphones.

“Yes, I would care for a glass of wine. Burgundy would be preferable.”

“Very well, Sir.” She gave him an alluring smile before leaving for the galley.

The general adjusted his seat for comfort. He sat in the window seat; the aisle seat next to him was vacant. Having found a comfortable position, he laid his head back on the headrest and closed his eyes. No sooner had he done so than he heard the rustle of clothing in the seat next to him. He opened his eyes to see a well-dressed man of Chinese descent, a slightly sinister grin on his face, looking at him intently.

“General Sir George Smythe,” he said as though he had just found a long lost friend. “Please excuse the intrusion, but I couldn’t help but notice you as I passed through the first-class cabin. You probably don’t recognise me. My name is Huáng Xinghua.”

He extended his right hand to offer a handshake.

“My friends simply call me Wingtip...as do my enemies.”

His piercing dark eyes seemed to sparkle as he uttered the last word.

Accepting the handshake in a businesslike spirit, Smythe thoroughly inspected his unexpected visitor. He could tell Mr Huáng was about his age judging by the salt-and-pepper hair and the crow's-feet wrinkles around his eyes

set in high cheekbones. His slightly gaunt face and lean and muscular body frame, as outlined through the beige silk suit he wore, revealed him as being in exceptional physical condition, perhaps as a result of a long-established regimen as a long-distance runner. Smythe also judged him as about his same height.

“I don’t believe we’ve met before, Mr Huáng.”

He extended his right hand to accept the handshake.

“I’m usually perfect in putting together names and faces.”

The stranger chuckled. “You must call me Wingtip, as I don’t know who Mr Huáng is anymore, and haven’t since I acquired the nickname in my youth.”

His smile widened. “Actually, we haven’t been formally introduced. I am in the armaments trade as one of my many business interests. I make it my job to know key figures, such as yourself, associated with my potential customers...one of which being the British military armaments consortium.”

“Well, Mr Huáng, for your information, I no longer serve in the British Army. I resigned my commission a fortnight ago and am now embarked upon a new career in private industry.”

“I am well aware of that fact, General Smythe. Additionally, I know that you are taking over the reins of OWCH.” He maintained an inscrutable smile as his gaze bore in on the general.

Smythe looked quizzically at the man for a moment. “And what don’t you know, Mr Huáng?” This man, he thought, certainly has a lot of brass approaching me in this manner. He was nevertheless intrigued by him.

“Not much when it comes to you, General Smythe. Here’s my business card.”

He presented him with a card as he rose from his seat.

“I think you’ll find me a diamond in the rough when it comes to trade relations with the People’s Republic of China. Do give me a ring when you have a mind to. We shall meet again in the not-too-distant future.”

He shook the general’s hand and departed for the coach cabin section.

The general brought the white card closer to his face to read the embossed black print. All that was printed was

Wingtip

Phone Number: 03-594-8503

* * *

A year after taking over the helm General Smythe transformed Oriental Winds Commodities House from what was akin to a majestic British clipper ship into a world class, late 20th century America's Cup sailing yacht. The new course he chartered during this period of reorganisation almost immediately lifted the firm's bottom-line as its sails tacked into the fiercely competitive winds with aplomb. It had been a gratifying experience for him, especially since for the first time in his professional career, he could take full credit for his accomplishment, and personally, reap the bounty of his management style.

Having delegated most of the daily operation of the firm to the line and staff management, he was then at liberty to commence his next project, the cornerstone of which was his quest to discover the whereabouts of his

STEVEN WOOD COLLINS

soul sons, whom he only knew from one nocturnal dream
he had during his adolescence.

Chapter 3 – Enter the Fabulous Fletcher Brothers

East End, London, England, 13 April 2020

Born in East End, identical twins Ian and Robin Fletcher were orphaned as infants and spent their childhood in a local Catholic Church orphanage. So precocious and unpredictable during their adolescence, only a few of their peers, not to mention their elders, ever accepted them, either socially or otherwise. They may have spent the rest of adolescence as social misfits and nonconformists. They may never have realised their true potential for success as adults if not for a stroke of luck.

The twins' science fair project caught the attention of Oxford University Professor John Yates, who visited London to attend a professional confer at the time. After winning the intracity high school science fair competition, a local news programme aired a feature of their project. The project involved a connection of a simple electronic electrode implanted into the brain of a mouse, named Algernon, to a laptop computer. A computer programme transmitted electronic impulses to the rodent's brain that induced its body to dance in tune with the Macarena.

Viewing for the first time by happenstance from the television set in his hotel room, the comically bizarre routine caused the professor to bellow with laughter from start to finish. Most viewers appreciated the comedy of the macabre performance, but few truly understood its significant ingenuity as a high school science project. Only Yates, a don of the university's biology department,

wanted to know vastly more about technical aspects of the project and the minds of the thirteen-year-old boys.

The next day he spoke with the television station's feature editor. During their phone conversation, the editor related some basic background information about the boys to him, including the location of their residence.

He promptly called the orphanage and spoke with the facility's director, Father Seamus O'Malley. He identified himself to the priest and explained the purpose of his professional interest in the boys. His inquiry about the twins, however, strangely put off Father O'Malley. In fact, he tried his best to dissuade him from pursuing his interest in the twins any further.

Yates could tell from the nervous tone of the man's voice that the subject distressed him to the extreme.

"Sir, I advise you first off that they are not innocent boys...at least not of this world. They were literally left at our doorstep as infants. Ever since then we have done our best to provide shelter and sustenance to them as much as our meagre resources have allowed. Yet all we have received in return from them for our kindness is grief and humiliation at every turn of their whim. May the saints preserve us! I wish we had turned them away into the streets the first day I saw them!"

* * *

The church entryway bell tolled as it had from the time since the fundamental completion of the edifice during the late fifteenth century.

When the front doorbell rang, Father O'Malley had just finished arranging the sacristy for the afternoon mass. Weary, both of life in general and spiritually, he performed

the task like an automaton. As far as he was concerned, he pursued a rote path in life that a slug had the intelligence to pursue. Moreover, throughout his life, he patiently waited for some sign from God that would serve to confirm his faith and his conviction in the church.

After decades of devotion to Catholicism, his failure to receive any sort of augury from heaven gnawed away at his faith, particularly since he felt that he deserved that reward for the constant ecclesiastical drudgery he suffered as a priest. Perhaps that was all the church expected of him he often thought. Yet he yearned for a time in his life when he would be challenged to the depth of his soul to demonstrate his faith in God whilst he still possessed the fire in his heart for the church as a relatively young man. Next week, he thought, as he replenished the holy water cistern, I will submit yet another petition to the Holy See for an assignment to a parish post located in a faraway and exotic part of the world, such as South America.

As he mulled over that prospect, the ancient front entrance doorbell again rang.

“Brother John, please attend to the front door visitor. I’m simply too busy to personally attend to whoever it is,” he shouted.

He waited a few seconds for the corpulent and dull-witted monk to reply.

“Brother John, where are you?”

His patience with the world at large had worn thin. He looked at his watch. The monk is probably still eating his lunch in cloisters with staff and wards, he concluded.

The bell rang yet again.

“All right! All right! I’m coming! I’m coming!”

It took a full minute and a half for him to reach the massive double doors, which were always closed and locked at that time of the day. He unlocked and then swung open the right side only enough to allow him to peer out into the street. As he did, he saw an elegantly dressed young woman take the last step down the worn marble stairs that climbed from the street sidewalk to the church entrance. She wore a chic black dress and fashionable high-heeled shoes. A sheer black veil covered her face and raven-coloured hair that cascaded sumptuously to her exposed shoulders. Exceptionally tall and long-limbed, she possessed the stature of a high-class model.

He heard her sobbing uncontrollably as she fled from the church.

“Madame,” he shouted, “the church is closed. Please return to visit us after one thirty this afternoon before mass.”

The woman continued to flee from the edifice without displaying any acknowledgement whatsoever of the priest’s concerned outcry. He shook his head and started to close the door.

Before the massive wood door fully closed he heard the sound of babies cooing from the outside. He opened the door again, stuck his head outside. He looked over to where the sound seemed to emanate. Stationed just outside sat a rather large perambulator. He exited the church and walked over to the carriage.

He audibly gasped at the sight of the two rather beautiful identical twins inside. They squirmed as though they were attempting to free themselves from the swaddling cloth that bound them together, apparently

much too tightly for their comfort's sake. He estimated that the babies were no more than seven or eight months old. They cooed again in unison as he reached into the carriage and brought out an envelope that had been placed on top their covers. He opened the envelope and extracted the sheet of paper it contained. It simply read: Ian and Robin. You must baptize them at once!

“You poor, poor souls.”

He looked back down at the pair.

Then one of the babies looked him straight in the eye. In an infant's high-pitched voice, he said, “He is Ian.”

The priest's jaw dropped as he looked at the other toddler.

“And he is Robin,” Ian stated gleefully.

“Now, unwrap us. We're hungry!” they bawled.

* * *

Yates could almost sense the priest crossing himself at the other end of the phone line.

“I don't understand, Father O'Malley. How could two gifted thirteen-year-old boys cause you, an ordained priest, to hold them in such low esteem?”

His curiosity about the pair exploded after hearing the priest's story about his first encounter with them before their adoption by the orphanage. Nevertheless, given the fact that the priest should be imminently qualified to manage children and teenagers, a vexation with the twins' purported behavioural abnormality began to form within him.

“They are devilish pranksters and malefactors, and always have been! And they are becoming more and more pernicious every day, although no one has been physically

harmed yet. But there will come a day, you mark my words when someone will. We only wished they were old enough to set them on their way out of the orphanage so they can ply their diabolical trade elsewhere. They have tested my faith in God to the limit my spirit has the strength to endure. I want nothing more to do with the rascals. I actually become nauseous at the very thought of them.”

“Really, how could two thirteen-year-old boys be that vexatious to you, Father?”

“Well, you just let me tell you what they did recently to give you an example if their current science fair project isn’t testimony enough.”

“I’m all ears..”

“Two weeks ago, during supper served as usual in our communal dining hall, the boys played one of their typical pranks on the staff. Normally conducted in strict silence, the evening meal is intended to teach spiritual discipline and tranquility to the wards. However, the morning before they rigged whoopee cushions under the seats of each of the eight sisters’ chairs. Somehow remotely controlled by some sort of mechanism, the cushions started playing a rendition of Beethoven’s Ode to Joy during the end of the allotted mealtime period.

“Beginning with the Mother Superior’s chair, the first four beats of the piece sounded as flatulence emanating from her...ah...person. Then the individual notes of prelude emanated as flatulence from the other sisters’ chairs until its conclusion. I just cannot describe to you the look of utter humiliation on the face of the Mother Superior when the first two beats sounded. I thought she would die right then and there. And the look of