

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BLACK ORDER*

**JAMES
ROLLINS**

A NOVEL

**THE
JUDDAS
STRAIN**

THE JUDAS STRAIN

JAMES ROLLINS

 HarperCollins e-books

To CAROLYN McCRAY

*who read all my earliest scribblings
and didn't laugh too much*

The pestilence came first to the town of Kaffa on the Black Sea. There the mighty Mongolian Tartars waged siege upon the Italian Genoese, merchants and traders. Plague struck the Mongol armies with burning boils and bloody expulsions. Struck with great malice, the Mongol lords used their siege catapults to cast their diseased dead over the Genoese walls, and spread plague in a litter of bodies and ruin. In the year of the incarnation of the Son of God 1347, the Genoese fled under sail in twelve galleys back to Italy to the port of Messina, bringing the Black Death to our shores.

—DUKE M. GIOVANNI (1356), trans. by Reinhold Sebastien in *Il Apocalypse* (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1924), 34—

Why the bubonic plague suddenly arose out of China's Gobi desert during the Middle Ages and slew a third of the world's population remains unknown. In fact, no one knows why so many plagues and influenzas of the last century—SARS, the Avian Flu—have arisen out of Asia. But what is known with fair certainty: the next great pandemic will arise again out of the East.

—United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Compendium of Infectious Diseases*, May 2000

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NOTE FROM THE HISTORICAL RECORD

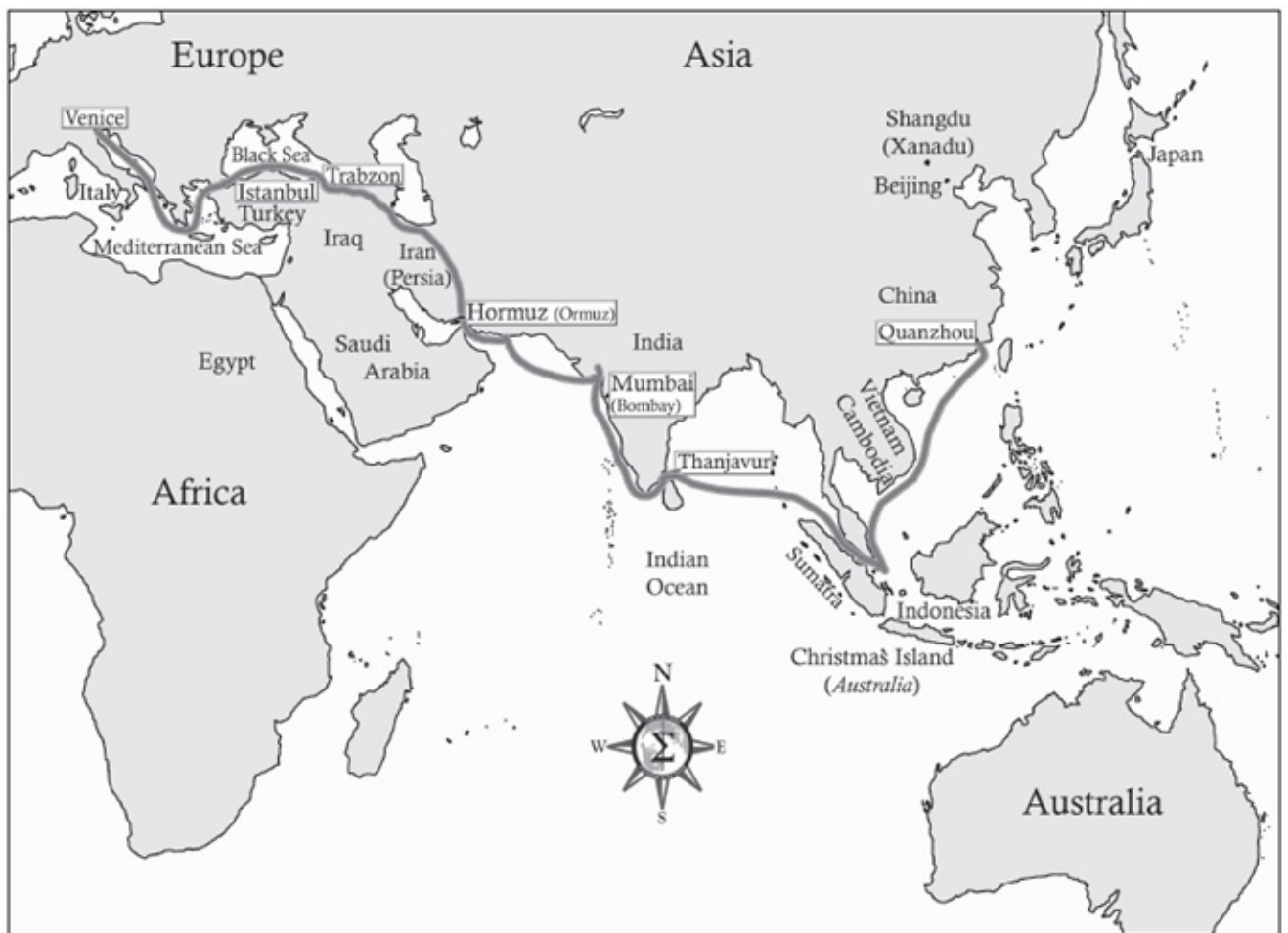
HEREIN LIES A MYSTERY. In the year 1271, a young seventeen-year-old Venetian named Marco Polo left with his father and uncle on a voyage to the palaces of Kublai Khan in China. It was a journey that would last twenty-four years and bring forth stories of the exotic lands that lay to the east of the known world: wondrous tales of endless deserts and jade-rich rivers, of teeming cities and vast sailing fleets, of black stones that burned and money made of paper, of impossible beasts and bizarre plants, of cannibals and mystic shamans.

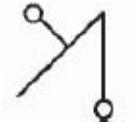
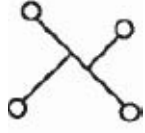
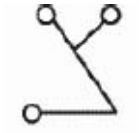
After serving seventeen years in the courts of Kublai Khan, Marco returned to Venice in 1295, where his story was recorded by a French romanticist named Rustichello, in a book titled in Old French *Le Divisament dou Monde* (or *The Description of the World*). The text swept Europe. Even Christopher Columbus carried a copy of Marco's book on his journey to the New World.

But there is one story of this journey that Marco refused to ever tell, referring only obliquely to it in his text. When Marco Polo had left China, Kublai Khan had granted the Venetian fourteen immense ships and six hundred men. But when Marco finally reached port after two years at sea, there remained but two ships and only eighteen men.

The fate of the other ships and men remain a mystery to this day. Was it shipwreck, storms, piracy? He never told. In fact, on his deathbed, when asked to elaborate or recant his story, Marco answered cryptically: "I have not told half of what I saw."

[Return Journey of Marco Polo \(1292–1295\)](#)





MIDNIGHT
Island of Sumatra Southeast Asia

THE SCREAMS HAD finally ceased.

Twelve bonfires blazed out in the midnight harbor.

“*Il dio, li perdona...*” his father whispered at his side, but Marco knew the Lord would not forgive them this sin.

A handful of men waited beside the two beached longboats, the only witnesses to the funeral pyres out upon the dark lagoon. As the moon had risen, all twelve ships, mighty wooden galleys, had been set to torch with all hands still aboard, both the dead and those cursed few who still lived. The ships’ masts pointed fiery fingers of accusation toward the heavens. Flakes of burning ash rained down upon the beach and those few who bore witness. The night reeked of burned flesh.

“Twelve ships,” his uncle Masseo mumbled, clutching the silver crucifix in one fist, “the same number as the Lord’s Apostles.”

At least the screams of the tortured had ended. Only the crackle and low roar of the flames reached the sandy shore now. Marco wanted to turn from the sight. Others were not as stout of heart and knelt on the sand, backs to the water, faces as pale as bone.

All were stripped naked. Each had searched his neighbor for any sign of the mark. Even the great Khan’s princess, who stood behind a screen of sailcloth for modesty, wore only her jeweled headpiece. Marco noted her lithe form through the cloth, lit from behind by the fires. Her maids, naked themselves, had searched their mistress. Her name was Kokejin, the Blue Princess, a maiden of seventeen, the same age as Marco had been when he started the journey from Venice. The Polos had been assigned by the Great Khan to safely deliver her to her betrothed, the Khan of Persia, the grandson of Kublai Khan’s brother.

That had been in another lifetime.

Had it been only four months since the first of the galley crew had become sick, showing welts on groin and beneath the arm? The illness spread like burning oil, unmanning the galleys of able men and stranding them here on this island of cannibals and strange beasts.

Even now drums sounded in the dark jungle. But the savages knew better than to approach the encampment, like the wolf shunning diseased sheep, smelling the rot and corruption. The only signs of their encroachment were the skulls, twined through the eye sockets with vines and hung from tree branches, warding against deeper trespass or foraging.

The sickness had kept the savages at bay.

But no longer.

With the cruel fire the disease was at last vanquished, leaving only this small handful of survivors.

Those clear of the red welts.

Seven nights ago the remaining sick had been taken in chains to the moored boats, left with water and food. The others remained on shore, wary of any sign among them of fresh affliction. All the while, those banished to the ships called out across the waters, pleading, crying, praying, cursing, and screaming. But the worst was the occasional laughter, bright with madness.

Better to have slit their throats with a kind and swift blade, but all feared touching the blood of the sick. ~~So they had been sent to the boats, imprisoned with the dead already there.~~

Then as the sun sank this night, a strange glow appeared in the water, pooled around the keels of two of the boats, spreading like spilled milk upon the still black waters. They had seen the glow before, in the pools and canals beneath the stone towers of the cursed city they had fled.

The disease sought to escape its wooden prison.

It had left them no choice.

The boats—all the galleys, except for the one preserved for their departure—had been torched.

Marco's uncle Maseo moved among the remaining men. He waved for them to again cloak their nakedness, but simple cloth and woven wool could not mask their deeper shame.

"What we did..." Marco said.

"We must not speak of it," his father said, and held forth a robe toward Marco. "Breathe a word of pestilence and all lands will shun us. No port will let us enter their waters. But now we've burned away the last of the disease with a cleansing fire, from our fleet, from the waters. We have only to return home."

As Marco slipped the robe over his head, his father noted what the son had drawn earlier in the sand with a stick. With a tightening of his lips, his father quickly ground it away under a heel and stared up at his son. A beseeching look fixed upon his visage. "Never, Marco...never..."

But the memory could not be so easily ground away. He had served the Great Khan, as scholar, emissary, even cartographer, mapping his many conquered kingdoms.

His father spoke again. "None must ever know what we found...it is cursed."

Marco nodded and did not comment on what he had drawn. He only whispered. "*Città dei Morti.*"

His father's countenance, already pale, blanched further. But Marco knew it wasn't just plague that frightened his father.

"Swear to me, Marco," he insisted.

Marco glanced up into the lined face of his father. He had aged as much during these past four months as he had during the decades spent with the Khan in Shangdu.

"Swear to me on your mother's blessed spirit that you'll never speak again of what we found, what we did."

Marco hesitated.

A hand gripped his shoulder, squeezing to the bone. "Swear to me, my son. For your own sake."

He recognized the terror reflected in his fire-lit eyes...and the pleading. Marco could not refuse.

"I will keep silent," he finally promised. "To my deathbed and beyond. I so swear, Father."

Marco's uncle finally joined them, overhearing the younger man's oath. "We should never have trespassed there, Niccolò," he scolded his brother, but his accusing words were truly intended for Marco.

Silence settled between the three, heavy with shared secrets.

His uncle was right.

Marco pictured the river delta from four months back. The black stream had emptied into the sea fringed by heavy leaf and vine. They had only sought to renew their stores of fresh water while repairs were made to two ships. They should never have ventured farther, but Marco had heard stories of a great city beyond the low mountains. And as ten days were set for repairs, he had ventured with twoscore of the Khan's men to climb the low mountains and see what lay beyond. From a crest, Marco had spotted a stone tower deep within the forest, thrusting high, brilliant in the dawn's light. It drew him like a beacon, ever curious.

Still, the silence as they hiked through the forest toward the tower should have warned him.

There had been no drums, like now. No birdcalls, no scream of monkeys. The city of the dead had simply waited for them.

It was a dreadful mistake to trespass.

And it cost them more than just blood.

The three stared out as the galleys smoldered down to the waterlines. One of the masts toppled like a felled tree. Two decades ago, father, son, and uncle had left Italian soil, under the seal of Pope Gregory X, to venture forth into the Mongol lands, all the way to the Khan's palaces and gardens in Shangdu, where they had roosted far too long, like caged partridges. As favorites of the court, the three Polos had found themselves trapped—not by chains, but by the Khan's immense and smothering friendship, unable to leave without insulting their benefactor. So at long last, they thought themselves lucky to be returning home to Venice, released from service to the great Kublai Khan to act as escort for the lady Kokejin to her Persian betrothed.

Would that their fleet had never left Shangdu...

"The sun will rise soon," his father said. "Let us be gone. It is time we went home."

"And if we reach those blessed shores, what do we tell Teobaldo?" Maseo asked, using the original name of the man, once a friend and advocate of the Polo family, now styled as Pope Gregory X.

"We don't know he still lives," his father answered. "We've been gone so long."

"But if he does, Niccolò?" his uncle pressed.

"We will tell him all we know about the Mongols and their customs and their strengths. As we were directed under his edict so long ago. But of the plague here...there remains nothing to speak of. It is over."

Maseo sighed, but there was little relief in his exhalation. Marco read the words behind his deep glower.

Plague had not claimed all of those who were lost.

His father repeated more firmly, as if saying would make it so. "It is over."

Marco glanced up at the two older men, his father and his uncle, framed in fiery ash and smoke against the night sky. It would never be over, not as long as they remembered.

Marco glanced to his toes. Though the mark was scuffed off the sand, it burned brightly still behind his eyes. He had stolen a map painted on beaten bark. Painted in blood. Temples and spires spread in the jungle.

All empty.

Except for the dead.

The ground had been littered with birds, fallen to the stone plazas as if struck out of the skies in flight. Nothing was spared. Men and women and children. Oxen and beasts of the field. Even great snakes had hung limp from tree limbs, their flesh boiling from beneath their scales.

The only living inhabitants were the ants.

Of every size and color.

Teeming across stones and bodies, slowly picking apart the dead.

But he was wrong...something still waited for the sun to fall.

Marco shunned those memories.

Upon discovering what Marco had stolen from one of the temples, his father had burned the map and spread the ashes into the sea. He did this even before the first man aboard their own ships had become sick.

"Let it be forgotten," his father had warned then. "It has nothing to do with us. Let it be swallowed away by history."

Marco would honor his word, his oath. This was one tale he would never speak. Still, he touched

one of the marks in the sand. He who had chronicled so much...was it right to destroy such knowledge?

If there was another way to preserve it...

As if reading Marco's thoughts, his uncle Masseo spoke aloud all their fears. "And if the horror should rise again, Niccolò, should someday reach our shores?"

"Then it will mean the end of man's tyranny of this world," his father answered bitterly. He tapped the crucifix resting on Masseo's bare chest. "The friar knew better than all. His sacrifice..."

The cross had once belonged to Friar Agreeer. Back in the cursed city, the Dominican had given his life to save theirs. A dark pact had been struck. They had left him back there, abandoned him, at his own bidding.

The nephew of Pope Gregory X.

Marco whispered as the last of the flames died into the dark waters. "What God will save us next time?"

MAY 22, 6:32 P.M.

Indian Ocean 10° 44'07.87"S | 105° 11'56.52"E

"WHO WANTS ANOTHER bottle of Foster's while I'm down here?" Gregg Tunis called from belowdecks.

Dr. Susan Tunis smiled at her husband's voice as she pushed off the dive ladder and onto the open stern deck. She skinned out of her BC vest and hauled the scuba gear to the rack behind the research yacht's pilothouse. Her tanks clanked as she racked them alongside the others.

Free of the weight, she grabbed the towel from her shoulder and dried her blond hair, bleached almost white by sun and salt. Once done, she unzipped her wet suit with a single long tug.

"*Boom-badaboom...badaboom...*" erupted from a lounge chair behind her.

She didn't even glance back. Plainly someone had spent too much time in Sydney's strip clubs. "Professor Applegate, must you always do that when I'm climbing out of my gear?"

The gray-haired geologist balanced a pair of reading glasses on his nose, an open text on maritime history on his lap. "It would be ungentlemanly not to acknowledge the presence of a buxom young woman relieving herself of too much attire."

She shouldered out of the wet suit and stripped it down to her waist. She wore a one-piece swimsuit beneath. She had learned the hard way that a bikini top had the tendency to strip away with wet suit. And while she didn't mind the retired professor, thirty years her senior, ogling her, she wasn't going to give him that much of a free show.

Her husband climbed up with three perspiring bottles of lager, pinching them all between the fingers of one hand. He grinned broadly upon seeing her. "Thought I heard you bumping about up here."

He climbed topside, stretching his tall frame. He wore only a pair of white Quicksilver trunks and a loose shirt, unbuttoned. Employed as a boat mechanic in Darwin Harbor, he and Susan had met during one of the dry-dock repairs on another of the University of Sydney's boats. That had been eight years ago. Just three days ago, they had celebrated their fifth anniversary aboard the yacht, moored a hundred nautical miles off Kiritimati Atoll, better known as Christmas Island.

He passed her a bottle. "Any luck with the soundings?"

She took a long pull on the beer, appreciating the moisture. Sucking on a salty mouthpiece all

afternoon had turned her mouth pasty. “Not so far. Still can’t find a source for the beachings.”

—Ten days ago eighty dolphins, *Tursiops aduncus*, an Indian Ocean species, had beached themselves along the coast of Java. Her research study centered on the long-term effects of sonar interference on cetacean species, the source of many suicidal beachings in the past. She usually had a team of research assistants with her, a mix of postgrads and undergrads, but the trip up here had been for a vacation with her old mentor. It was pure happenstance that such a massive beaching occurred in the region—hence the protracted stay here.

“Could it be something other than man-made sonar?” Applegate pondered, drawing circles with his fingertip in the condensation on his beer bottle. “Microquakes are constantly rattling the region. Perhaps a deep-sea subduction quake struck the right tonal note to drive them into a suicidal panic.”

“There was that bonzer quake a few months back,” her husband said. He settled into a lounge beside the professor and patted the seat for her to sit with him. “Maybe some aftershocks?”

Susan couldn’t argue against their assessments. Between the series of deadly quakes over the past two years and the major tsunami in the area, the seabed was greatly disturbed. It was enough to spook anyone. But she wasn’t convinced. Something else was happening. The reef below was oddly deserted. What little life was down there seemed to have retreated into rocky niches, shells, and sandy holes. It was almost as if the sea life here was holding its breath.

Maybe the sensitive creatures *were* responding to microquakes.

She frowned and joined her husband. She would radio over to Christmas Island to see if they’d picked up any unusual seismic activity. Until then, she had news that would definitely get her husband in the water in the morning.

“I did find what looked like the remnants of an old wreck.”

“No bloody way.” He sat up straighter. Back at Darwin Harbor, Gregg offered tours of sunken WWII warships that littered the seas around the northern coast of Australia. He had an avid interest in such discoveries. “Where?”

She pointed absently behind her, beyond the yacht’s far side. “About a hundred meters starboard of us. A few beams, black and sticking straight out of the sand. Probably shaken free during that last big quake or perhaps even exposed when the silt had been sucked off of it by the passing tsunami. I didn’t have much time to explore. Thought I’d leave it to an expert.” She pinched him in the ribs, then leaned back into his chest.

As a group, they watched the sun vanish with a last coy wink into the sea. It was their ritual. Barring a storm, they never missed a sunset while at sea. The ship rocked gently. In the far distance, a passing tanker winked a few lights. But they were otherwise alone.

A sharp bark startled Susan, causing her to jump. She had not known she was still a bit tense. Apparently the strange, wary behavior of the reef life below had infected her.

“Oy! Oscar!” the professor called.

Only now did Susan notice the lack of their fourth crewmate on the yacht. The dog barked again. The pudgy Queensland heeler belonged to the professor. Getting on in age and a tad arthritic, the dog was usually found sprawled in any patch of sunlight it could find.

“I’ll see to him,” Applegate said. “I’ll leave you two lovebirds all cozied up. Besides, I could use a trip to the head. Make a bit more room for another Foster’s before I find my bed.”

The professor gained his feet with a groan and headed toward the bow, intending to circle to the far side—but he stopped, staring off toward the east, toward the darker skies.

Oscar barked again.

Applegate did not scold him this time. Instead, he called over to Susan and Gregg, his voice low and serious. “You should come see this.”

Susan scooted up and onto her feet. Gregg followed. They joined the professor.

“Bloody hell...” her husband mumbled.

~~“I think you may have found what drove those dolphins out of the seas,” Applegate said.~~

To the east, a wide swath of the ocean glowed with a ghostly luminescence, rising and falling with the waves. The silvery sheen rolled and eddied. The old dog stood at the starboard rail and barked, trailing into a low growl at the sight.

“What the hell is that?” Gregg asked.

Susan answered as she crossed closer. “I’ve heard of such manifestations. They’re called *milky seas*. Ships have reported glows like this in the Indian Ocean, going all the way back to Jules Verne. In 1995, a satellite even picked up one of the blooms, covering hundreds of square miles. This is a small one.”

“Small, my ass,” her husband grunted. “But what exactly is it? Some type of red tide?”

She shook her head. “Not exactly. Red tides are algal blooms. These glows are caused by bioluminescent bacteria, probably feeding off algae or some other substrate. There’s no danger. But I’d like to—”

A sudden knock sounded beneath the boat, as if something large had struck it from below. Oscar’s barking became more heated. The dog danced back and forth along the rails, trying to poke his head through the posts.

All three of them joined the dog and looked below.

The glowing edge of the milky sea lapped at the yacht’s keel. From the depths below, a large shape rolled into view, belly up, but still squirming, teeth gnashing. It was a massive tiger shark, over six meters. The glowing waters frothed over its form, bubbling and turning the milky water into red wine.

Susan realized it wasn’t *water* that was bubbling over the shark’s belly, but its own *flesh*, boiling off in wide patches. The horrible sight sank away. But across the milky seas, other shapes rolled to the surface, thrashing or already dead: porpoises, sea turtles, fish by the hundreds.

Applegate took a step away from the rail. “It seems *these* bacteria have found more than just algae to feed on.”

Gregg turned to stare at her. “Susan...”

She could not look away from the deadly vista. Despite the horror, she could not deny a twinge of scientific curiosity.

“Susan...”

She finally turned to him, slightly irritated.

“You were diving,” he explained, and pointed. “In that water. All day.”

“So? We were all in the water at least some time. Even Oscar did some dog-paddling.”

Her husband would not meet her gaze. He remained focused on where she was scratching her forearm. The wet suit sometimes chafed her limbs. But the worry in his tight face drew her attention to her forearm. Her skin was pebbled in a severe rash, made worse by her scratching.

As she stared, bruising red welts bloomed on her skin.

“Susan...”

She gaped in disbelief. “Dear God...”

But she also knew the horrible truth.

“It’s...it’s *in* me.”

EXPOSURE

2πi

JULY 1, 10:34 A.M.
Venice, Italy

HE WAS BEING HUNTED.

Stefano Gallo hurried across the open plaza square. The morning sun already baked the stones of the piazza, and the usual throng of tourists sought shady spots or crowded the gelato shop that lay within the shadow of St. Mark's Basilica. But this most lofty of all of Venice's landmarks, with its towering Byzantine facade, massive bronze horses, and domed cupolas, was not his goal.

Not even such a blessed sanctuary could offer him protection.

There was only one hope.

His steps became more rushed as he passed by the basilica. The piazza's pigeons scattered from his path as he stumbled through them, heedless of their flapping flight. He was beyond stealth. He had already been discovered. He had spotted the young Egyptian with the black eyes and trimmed beard as he'd entered the far side of the square. Their gazes had locked. The man was now dressed in a dark suit that flowed like oil from his wide, sharp shoulders. The first time the man had approached Stefano he had claimed to be an archaeology student out of Budapest, representing an old friend and colleague from the University of Athens.

The Egyptian had come to the Museo Archeologico searching for a specific bit of antiquity. A minor treasure. An obelisk from his country. The Egyptian, financed by his government, wished it returned to his homeland. He had come with a sizable payment, bonded cashier notes. Stefano, one of the museum's curators, was not above accepting such a bribe; his wife's escalating medical bills threatened to evict them from their small apartment. To collect such secret payment was not untoward; for the past two decades the Egyptian government had been buying back national treasures out of private collections and pressuring museums to return what rightfully belonged in Egypt.

So Stefano had agreed, promising at first to deliver it up. What was one small nondescript stone obelisk? The object had remained crated for almost a full century according to the manifest. And its terse description probably explained why: *Unmarked marble obelisk, excavated in Tanis, dated to the late dynastic period (26th Dynasty, 615 B.C.)*. There was nothing unusual or particularly intriguing, unless one looked closer, followed its trail of provenance. It had come out of a collection that graced one of the Musei Vaticani in Rome: the Gregorian Egyptian Museum.

How it ended up in the vaults here in Venice was unknown.

Then yesterday morning, Stefano had received a newspaper clipping, sent by private courier in an envelope with a single symbol stamped into a wax seal.

The Greek letter sigma.

He still did not understand the significance of the seal, but he did understand the import of the enclosed clipping. A single article, dated three days prior, reported news of a man's body found on an Aegean beach, his throat slashed, his body bloated and nested with feasting eels. An especially fierce

storm surge had returned the body from its watery grave. Dental records identified the body as that of his university colleague, the one who had reportedly sent the Egyptian.

The man had been dead for weeks.

Shock had caused Stefano to act rashly. He clutched the heavy object to his bosom, wrapped in sackcloth and still prickling with packing hay.

Stefano had stolen the obelisk from the vault, knowing the act would put him, his wife, his whole family, at risk.

He'd had no choice. Along with the dire article, the sealed envelope had contained a single message, unsigned, but plainly scrawled in a hurry, in a woman's hand, a warning. What the note contended seemed impossible, incredible, but he had tested the claim himself. It had proved true.

Tears threatened as he ran, a sob choked his throat.

No choice.

The obelisk must not fall into the hands of the Egyptian. Still, it was a burden he refused to shoulder any longer than necessary. His wife, his daughter...he pictured the bloated body of his colleague. Would the same befall his family?

Oh, Maria, what have I done?

There was only one who could take this burden from him. The one who had sent the envelope, a warning sealed with a Greek letter. At the end of her note, a place had been named, along with a time.

He was already late.

Somehow the Egyptian had discovered his theft, must have sensed Stefano was going to betray him. So he had come for it at dawn. Stefano had barely escaped his offices. He had fled on foot.

But not fast enough.

He checked over his shoulder. The Egyptian had vanished into the milling crowd of tourists.

Turning back around, Stefano stumbled through the shadow of the square's bell tower, the Campanile di San Marco. Once the brick tower had served as the city's watchtower, overlooking the nearby docks and guarding the port. Would that it could protect him now.

His goal lay across a small piazzetta. Ahead rose the Palazzo Ducal, the fourteenth-century palace of Venice's former dukes. Its two levels of Gothic arches beckoned, offering salvation in Istrian stone and rosy Veronese marble.

Clutching his prize, he stumbled across the street.

Was she still there? Would she take the burden?

He rushed toward the sheltering shadows, escaping the blaze of the sun and the glare off the neighboring sea. He needed to be lost in the maze of the palace. Besides housing the duke's personal residence, the Palazzo Ducal also served as a governmental office building, a courthouse, a council chamber, even an old prison. A newer prison rose across the canal behind the palace, connected by an arched bridge, the infamous Bridge of Sighs, over which Casanova had once made his escape, the only prisoner ever to break out of the palace's cells.

As Stefano ducked under the overhanging stretch of loggia, he prayed to the ghost of Casanova to protect his own flight. He even allowed himself a small breath of relief as he sank into the shadows. He knew the palace well. It was easy to get lost in its maze of corridors, a ready place for a clandestine rendezvous.

Or so he placed his faith.

He entered the palace through the western archway, flowing in with a few tourists. Ahead opened the palace's courtyard with its two ancient wells and the magnificent marble staircase, the Scala dei Giganti, the Giant's Stairs. Stefano skirted the courtyard, avoiding the sun now that he had escaped it. He pushed through a small, private door and followed a series of administrative rooms. They ended at the old inquisitor's office, where many poor souls had suffered interrogations of the most pained and

brutal sort. Not stopping, Stefano continued into the neighboring stone torture chamber.

~~A door slammed somewhere behind him, causing him to jump.~~

He clutched his prize even tighter.

The instructions had been specific.

Taking a narrow back stairway, he wended down into the palace's deepest dungeons, the Pozzi, Wells. It was here the most notorious prisoners had been held.

It was also where he was to make his rendezvous.

Stefano pictured the Greek sigil.

What did it mean?

He entered the dank hall, broken by black stone cells, too low for a prisoner to stand erect. Here the imprisoned froze during winter or died of thirst during the long Venetian summers, many forgotten by all except the rats.

Stefano clicked on a small penlight.

This lowest level of the Pozzi appeared deserted. As he continued deeper, Stefano's steps echoed off the stone walls, sounding like someone following him. His chest squeezed with the fear. He slowed. Was he too late? He found himself holding his breath, suddenly wishing for the sunlight he had fled.

He stopped, a tremble quaking through him.

As if sensing his hesitation, a light flared, coming from the last cell.

"Who?" he asked. "*Chi è là?*"

A scrape of heel on stone, followed by a soft voice, in Italian, accented subtly.

"I sent you the note, Signore Gallo."

A lithe figure stepped out into the corridor, a small flashlight in her hand. The glare made it hard to discern her features, even when she lowered her flashlight. She was dressed all in black leather, hugging tight to hips and breast. Her features were further obscured by a head scarf, wrapped in a bedouin style, obscuring her features fully, except her eyes that reflected a glint of her light. She moved with an unhurried grace that helped calm the thudding of his heart.

She appeared out of the shadows like some dark Madonna.

"You have the artifact?" she asked.

"I...I do," he stammered, and took a step toward her. He held out the obelisk, letting the sackcloth fall away. "I want nothing more to do with it. You said you could take it somewhere safe."

"I can." She motioned for him to set it down on the floor.

He crouched and rested the Egyptian stone spire on the floor, glad to be rid of it. The obelisk, carved of black marble, rose from a square base, ten centimeters per side, and tapered to a pyramidal point forty centimeters tall.

The woman crouched across from him, balancing on the toes of her black boots. She ran her light over its drab surface. The marble was badly chipped, poorly preserved. A long crack jagged through it. It was plain why it had been forgotten.

Still, blood had been spilled for it.

And he knew why.

She reached across to Stefano and pushed his penlight down. With a flick of her thumb, she switched on her flashlight. The white light dimmed to a rich purple. Every bit of dust on his slacks lit up. The white stripes of his shirt blazed.

Ultraviolet.

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