

The Light Bearer

He rolled the match between his thumb and finger before striking it. A hiss, and a tiny flame sprang to life. Enthralled, he watched the glow and the heat creep down the match stick towards his hand. Curious, really, how fire had the power to light up the skies and bring life, yet at the same time could lay waste to that same life.

Putting the flame to its purpose, he held it to the cigarette hanging from his lips. A thin veil of smoke curled its way up. Just as the flame reached his fingertips he blew it out and dropped the charred wood on the saucer of his coffee cup. Then he straightened the pages of the book that lay open on the table before him and continued to read.

“Excuse me, sir?”

He looked up at the frowning waitress and blew a deliberate lung-full of smoke into her face. “Yes?”

“Sir, smoking is strictly prohibited in our establishment.” The woman stifled a fake cough to make her point. “Please extinguish your cigarette.”

Obedience was not in his nature, but age and experience had taught him when to pick his fights. Tempting as it was to vex the waitress, he had an appointment to keep. With exaggerated care he pulled the burning cigarette from his lips, held it up for her to see, and then dropped it in his half-full cup of coffee.

“Bring me another espresso while you’re at it, will you?”

The waitress gave him an acid stare, but took the cup and left. He chuckled through a still smoky grin and attempted once more to read the next sentence of his book. Although he was beginning to doubt if he was bored enough to continue with this drivel.

He didn't know whether to be angry or sad at what was printed on these pages. Nothing was sacred, that much he had long since accepted, but if knowledge were a fine wine, this kind of over-diluting would be prosecuted as a criminal offence. However, in this world that was losing both faith and religion faster than a gambler lost money, the gap left by the loss of wisdom and understanding was filled by cheap, mainstream occultism. Shallow, incomplete or outright wrong information got passed off as truth. And people wanted it.

This particular gem was about the Knights Templar: the extensive history and profound secrets of one of Europe's most prominent knighthoods explained in exactly one hundred and thirty pages. The only reason he had bought it this morning was because it was marginally more entertaining than gossip magazines and he had wanted something to occupy himself with while he waited.

Besides, if this new contact from London knew his business, he would have far more interesting literature to read later today.

The cranky waitress put down his espresso so hard the cup rattled on its saucer. He raised a brow at her as she stomped off, but then shrugged, took a sip and savoured the bitter taste assaulting his tongue. At last something was not watered down.

While he drank, he browsed through the rest of the book. Sensational and objective as the book pretended to be, the Templars' supposed devil worship received an inevitable mention. All of it lies, of course, but he had discovered at great personal cost that trying to correct nonsensical convictions was futile. People wanted an incarnation of evil, an image at which to direct their fears

and hatred at. Such was the very essence of mirrors, but that, too, was a truth people preferred not to know.

To that extent, truth was like fire: comforting in small doses, but all-consuming in its full glory. And despised for the same reason.

With a snarl he finished his espresso in one go and got up. He searched through the coins in his wallet, filtered out a Spanish doubloon that didn't have any business being there, and dropped ten Euros worth of change onto the table before striding out the door. The worthless book he left lying next to the abandoned coffee cup.

As he stepped into the busy streets of Amsterdam, he took out his sunglasses and lit another cigarette. The lukewarm spring sun on his face and the taste of nicotine in his mouth did a good job at washing away the bad vibes of humanity's idiocy, printed or otherwise. He blew a puff of smoke into the air and stared after it as it drifted up.

“TRRRRRRRRIIIING!! TRING TRRRRIING!”

The loud, angry bell of an oncoming tram broke his moment of bliss. His only consent to the situation was to take a single step back. A sudden rush of wind tore at his clothes as several tons of steel thundered past him within two feet. Once his way was clear again, he ran a hand through his short hair and headed towards the city centre.

His casual stroll down the long street downtown took him past people, shops, more people, and irate motorists honking for the crowd to let them pass. He rode the masses like a wave and let it carry him to his destination at the end of the street. The massive facade declared it to be a bookstore; his second today. Perhaps it was an idiocy of his own, but over time he had developed a soft spot for the written word.

Hence his interest in the manuscript this London contact had on offer.

The moment he set foot into the bookstore, the bells of the nearby church tolled the hour. The ground floor of the store was a perfect place to blend in with the crowd of shoppers. Only one man, of the bookkeepers' persuasion, stood out by his desperate attempts not to.

"Mister Taylor?" he inquired, peering over the edge of his sunglasses.

The man started. A whiff of nervous sweat emanated from him as his head slowly craned upwards. "Y-yes?"

"Luc Beaumont. We spoke over the telephone about something you wished to show me."

"Ah." A moment of blankness. Taylor clutched his laptop bag to his chest, but then his dull eyes widened. "Ah! Mister Beaumont! Thank you so much, so much for agreeing to meet me. Although maybe the airport..."

"I don't do business at airports, Mister Taylor. Too heavy on CCTV," said Luc, adopting the man's London accent as he went. "This shop has a coffee corner on the third floor that will suit our conversation fine."

Taylor threw a glance over his shoulder. "Isn't there somewhere more, ehm, private?"

"*En plein public* is rather more private than a soundproof room, you will find."

Without waiting for the mousy man, Luc climbed the staircase. A quick evaluation brought him to the conclusion that he should adjust his expectations of this meeting. Someone this inexperienced in the dubious business of black market antiques was not likely to find anything worth his attention. Had his time been limited to a mere fifty productive years, he wouldn't have bothered. But it wasn't, and so he could afford to play along. If nothing else, bullying Taylor might provide the entertainment that worthless book earlier had failed to.

The coffee corner on the top floor was the right kind of busy for conversations to go unheeded. About half of the tables were taken by people either chatting quietly or perusing their recent purchase over a drink. Taylor headed for the corner, where a small table was sandwiched between the counter and the wall. He sat down on one of the wooden chairs, still cradling his bag, and waited for Luc to take the opposite seat before settling the bag in his lap and producing the laptop.

Luc loved those clumsy devices. Their opportunities for amusement were boundless. In this instance, the circular table was far too small for a laptop this size. The real thrill, however, were its cables. It was a genuine treat to observe Taylor struggle with the Gordian knot in the power cord.

“I’m sorry. Just a moment,” the man muttered while he got down on his knees in search of something.

Luc smirked. How predictable. “There’s a socket in the wall, behind you,” he said. “Coffee?”

“Ehm, tea, please?” Taylor replied from somewhere near the floor.

Luc left the man to his toys and ordered their drinks at the counter. A pimply student with a vacant expression poured him two ridiculously oversized cups. He flipped the boy his due in exact change and carried the drinks back to the table.

“It’s almost done powering up, sir,” said Taylor from behind his now purring laptop. Beads of sweat glistened along his retreating hairline, which he wiped with a grimy gingham handkerchief.

“No hardcopy?” Luc asked casually while he positioned their cups amongst the cable cluster.

“I’m sorry, Mister Beaumont, I—”

“Luc.”

“Oh? Oh. Yes, ehm, I’m John, to friends,” Taylor stuttered. “Well, ehm... I do apologise, but the file was too big to print. A scan is all I have with me.” He hastily typed a few commands. The laptop

began to whir even louder as the DVD-player came to life. Not much later he turned his computer towards Luc, who only just managed to save his coffee from the twisting power cable.

“I have selected a page somewhere halfway into the collection,” said Taylor. “So you... so you can get an impression of the contents.”

Luc removed his sunglasses before examining the screen. The quality of the image it displayed was downright bad, but he suspected this had more to do with the hardware than with the original. What it showed was a yellowish piece of paper covered in handwriting that had become nearly illegible with age.

“Written in eighteenth, maybe nineteenth century English,” he said, scrolling down a few pages. “This isn’t as old as you suggested.”

Taylor’s face turned a new colour of grey. “But the paper?”

“Paper weathers. It changes. The words written on it don’t. They can only fade. Which they haven’t.” He continued to examine page after page. “Uniform handwriting suggests a single author. I take it you can give me a name?”

“I-I couldn’t say,” stuttered Taylor.

Not quite a lie, but not the truth either. Luc let it slide in favour of taking a closer look at the sketched symbols that interrupted the narrow, cursive letters at regular intervals. His frown sunk another notch when he recognised several of the more prominent ones. No doubt that if he tried, he would remember the others, too, but at his age memories that old were buried in the deepest recesses of the mind.

This was not the ‘quaint religious text’ Taylor had promised him. This was something far worse.

Ancient memories now surfaced rapidly, called forth by a large drawing that took up half a page. A crude yet detailed sketch of a human figure bearing a star on its chest. Surrounding the figure were more stylised symbols that fresh recollections told him had been

used by alchemists, centuries ago. And a word, like a written aura around the head of the central figure.

‘Light bearer’.

Luc swallowed the bile rising in his throat. Hadn’t he gotten rid of all such documents? He had been so thorough! This was fire - the undesirable aspect of fire. Nobody wanted to know these things anymore. Not since the birth of the Christ. And they had been wrong about that, too.

Either way, the manuscript was too recent for what it contained. It had to be a copy of an older document, and likely its original was a copy of a translation of a translated copy to begin with. The time when this knowledge was commonplace had died millennia ago. With good reason.

Sometimes, it was best to let the fire have its way.

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention,” Luc said, still staring at the screen. “What did you make of it?”

Taylor wiped his forehead again. “Well, ehm, it’s very religious. Dark religious... To be honest, I thought it pertained to Satanism.” He laughed nervously. “Not my thing. Not my thing at all.”

“Nor mine, John.” Luc leaned back in his chair. “Where did you say you found this?”

The mousy man coughed a few times. “I-I... Of course I can’t just reveal my sources...”

Luc sighed in exasperation. “Listen, you didn’t get your hands on this through any legal channels, and you hope to sell this to me for an insane amount of money. You might be new to the game, but I’m not, so stop wasting my time.”

“Shh! Not so loud, please!”

“In this business, credibility of the source is everything,” Luc continued without lowering his voice, “So, John. Spill the beans.”

Taylor looked ready to piss himself. Luc Beaumont was a notorious name in the illegal antiques business and Luc settled into

that role with a slight change of stance. It worked. Dark, wet patches began to show on the man's shirt. Luc glared at him for extra encouragement.

"I...I don't know," Taylor stuttered. "Should I tell you now? Shouldn't I wait until we, well, negotiate?"

"Now. I have no interest in things I'm unable to obtain." Of course, there were only few things in the world that he wouldn't be able to obtain, but that was beside the point.

Taylor twiddled his thumbs, staring down. "Oh. I see. Well, ehm, I found the documents in the attic of Winter Hall, in, ehm, in East Sussex, when I was appraising their assets for their insurance. The...the original is still there. The family isn't even aware of them."

Luc nodded, pleased with this little advantage. Kept in a neglected, stuffy attic, the documents would not have been accessed by anyone now alive, with exception of Taylor. "That is good to know." He leaned forward and held up his hand. "I'll think about it. The DVD, if you please?"

Wordless confusion spread on Taylor's bespectacled face.

"Of course it is only a copy you're giving me now," Luc said. "What I have seen so far has raised my interest, but I will want to know more before I decide to invest in obtaining the originals." He shot the man an intense glare. The word 'terror' gained a whole new dimension for John Taylor.

"Oh, you hadn't realised that eventually I would want the originals, had you?" Luc added for extra effect. It was immensely satisfying to see the man's heart hammer against his skinny chest.

"Should I...? Yes, the scans are also on the laptop," he stammered to himself, running a finger behind his collar as if it were too tight. "Of course... of course you can have the DVD! No problem!"

Luc smiled thinly. "Glad to hear it."

One shaky hand tried to open the DVD-player while the other was rummaging through the laptop bag for the case, but it was not a

great demonstration of coordination. When the disc and case finally met, the oversized teacup between the cables began to wobble.

Luc blinked once.

In the same moment, the full excessive content of the untouched cup of tea tipped across the laptop's keyboard. The computer made a hissing sound, creaked and the screen went black with a dull 'pop'.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no!" Taylor whined while he tried to dry off the keyboard with his cuff.

"That can be repaired, surely?" Luc said innocently as he put the DVD into the pocket of his coat.

Taylor seemed to have forgotten his more immediate problems and stared impassively at his computer. "The circuits are dead," he sighed. "And it's company property, too..."

"How.... Unfortunate." He made no effort to mask his contempt. "I do wish you good luck with it. I will be in touch." With that he rose and walked away.

Two flights of stairs later he was back outside. He put his sunglasses on and retrieved his packet of cigarettes from his breast pocket. Paying the traffic no heed, he crossed the two tram rails that ran down the centre of the street. In the shadow on the other end of the square, he found himself a quiet spot to lurk in.

As he waited, he ran a quick check in his mind. Rekindled memories confirmed that he had already dealt with the original that these documents were copied from. Now that the laptop was destroyed, and with it the scans, only two copies of the document remained, one of which had disintegrated the moment he put the DVD-case into his coat. The last remaining copy, the manuscript itself, was accounted for and tucked away in an English manor.

From his corner, he saw Taylor leave the bookstore. He watched as the man stopped to orientate himself. When a taxi pulled over on the far side of the square, the man ran towards it with a typical desk jockey gait.

An instant later, the oncoming tram hit him at full speed.

One.

The tram's brakes screeched metal on metal.

Two.

Onlookers screamed and pointed at the lifeless body on the rails.

Three.

The tram driver climbed out of his tram, face ashen, yelling for someone, anyone, to call for an ambulance. It had all happened so suddenly that poor man never had the time to ring that obnoxious bell of his.

Four.

A match flared to life and ignited his cigarette.

Luc quietly relished his latest victory. A perfect textbook accident. John Taylor was a Brit in a land where, from his point of view, traffic drove on the wrong side of the road. At least, that was what everyone would assume once the panic had dissipated.

Bringing his dealings with Taylor to this conclusion had been a necessity, but that made it no less enjoyable. Just as he was looking forward to enjoying the massive fire that would consume Winter Hall tonight, including everything kept in the manor's attic. He exhaled slowly, savouring the smoke billowing from his mouth as an appetiser. Anyone who claimed business and pleasure didn't mix was a damn liar.

"They can change, you know?"

He glanced up to find a thirty-something man with a dark beard and soft, brown eyes standing beside him. At the smile that greeted him, he nodded once in acknowledgement, but not in agreement.

"Humans resent whatever makes them uncomfortable. To them, that is all I am. And they're not wrong."

"Is that the real reason you did this? You are more than they make you out to be."

Luc shrugged, blowing smoke from his nostrils. “At any rate I’m what our Father made me to be.”

“Essential and irrefutable, among other things,” said the younger man kindly. “After all, you brought me light and strength when you challenged me in that desert.”

“A test of fire in more ways than one.”

“And I would not have become what I became without it.”

“True...” At a tap of his finger, his cigarette shed its ash on the pavement. “Still, you cannot explain that to them.” He gestured at the people walking by without noticing either of them.

The younger man sighed. “I tried.”

“So you did, and look how they treated you for your trouble!”

“They will learn. One day, however long away, they will understand that we are both our Father’s sons.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” Luc said.

The younger man smiled at him and walked on, disappearing into the melee of tourists, shoppers and people gaping at the dead man on the tram rails.

When his cigarette had burned up, Luc pulled another from the package and put it between his lips. With the other hand he struck a match against the brick wall behind him. It broke without flaring, but in the blink of his eye, the wooden stub caught flame.

Lucifer, ‘Light bearer’. Whatever else humanity made him to be, *that* would never change.

The End

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