

# BROTHERHOOD OF THE SNAKE



THEIR TIME IS RUNNING OUT

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A new fiction from the best selling author of *Gnosis* and *Secrets of the Serpent*

**Brotherhood of the Snake**

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## Introduction

I felt the need to write an introduction to this work of fiction because quite simply, I am not known for writing fiction. Instead I am better known for writing books on ancient mysteries, history, the occult and of course the worship of the serpent. It will therefore come as a surprise to those readers of my previous books that I have entered into the world of fiction in this way and even at all.

The truth is that there are often a great many things that one wishes to say in a factual book and yet are restricted from doing so. One publisher, whom I shall not name, actually forced me to remove whole sections from a book because it pointed blatantly towards the Catholic Church as aggressors, manipulators and downright liars in our history. This fact is not unknown to the Church itself who have often admitted that they have “in the past” been at odds with various parties throughout the world. They set up inquisitions and slaughtered tens of thousands of perfectly peaceful people; they aided and abetted nation states in the invasion of free countries and stole the land and riches from beneath their feet; they instigated wave after wave of Holy Crusade into the Holy Land and today we still have a war-torn land. The blood of millions is upon the hands of this rich, powerful and supposedly Holy Church. That said, I personally know plenty of Catholics who are members of the Church today because of their own inner spiritual quest and upbringing and much of the Churches past is that, past. But the issue I had was that this factual historical truth was taken out of a book through fear and to me there should be no fear of truth.

The truth is, that mankind’s history is not all about a strange preparation for the coming Messiah in Jesus Christ. This is a peculiar outcome of St. Paul’s influence on the early Christian writings and his allegiance to Rome. In fact, all the evidence of this particular period points towards Jesus being a pretty normal Rabbi, if he existed at all in anyway we would recognize today.

The history of the world is a massive subject and the religious history only part of it. It is this part that I have focussed upon in my books and what I have always seemed to find is that the standard text books never really tell the whole truth. All we have to do is dig a little deeper and we discover that there is more beneath the surface. The true religious history of mankind will be found in perfectly ordinary things and related entirely to survival, the evolutionary instinct and the struggle with consciousness. You see, ever since man began to think for himself and of himself he discovered that his consciousness caused issues of right and wrong, black and white. Over the course of thousands of years he grappled with this concept and his place in nature and developed language, symbols, structures, texts, art, music and religion to come to terms with it. In each stage of man’s progression the peculiar mystics would emerge who claimed access to the Divine (what some today may term the unconscious in touch with the Godhead). These mystics themselves were very often caricatured forms of the ultimate duality – being starkly good and bad and yet powerfully aligned. The rest of man listened to the intuitive sparks of light that seemed to erupt from this hotbed, wrote down the words and utterances and eventually did something very odd with them – they literalised them. By this I mean that man took the words and metaphors literally and in time we really do end up believing that a man walked on water.

Now, in the twenty-first century we have new Gods in the form of celebrities and stars, whether they be film stars or sports stars, they are held up as our new “shining ones.” This, to me is far worse than in times gone by, for we are worshipping flawed, divided and often, foolish humans. No longer do we at least have the moral guidance of a dogma and doctrine, of a Law or Commandments. Instead we have replaced them with an alpha dominant doctrine of dog eat dog; we have made idols of dragon chasing confused individuals who are themselves being manipulated and used by the power brokers who sit behind the scenes and unwittingly form a new world. These executive producers and boards of directors are forcing us all down a road where the few have and the many do not – and yet all the time they build the desire and inner turmoil in a Western capitalist society that simply must have a world of unseen starving masses to fund the show.

When will the world learn? Who knows, but the fact is that there has been a truth discovered by mankind and the producers and directors in robes who walk the corridors of Churches and Cathedrals has called it heretical. The truth was known for millennia and kept sacred by countless cults, secret societies and individuals. It emerged in time through the seeming nonsensical symbolism of alchemy, hidden and occult, from the unseeing eyes of the literalists. That truth was simple and yet profound in depths that take a lifetime to work through. Gnosis – the knowledge of the Divine in the self; the working through balance in every part of our lives and the discovery of the greatest secret known to man – the true Self.

The discovery of the Self is the greatest treasure hunt we can enter and it is the real core truth of all our fables and tales of journeys and quests. Those who wish to have power over us do not wish us to discover who we are, because it is the most empowering process an “individual” can do. The discovery that we are individuals will not feed the mouth of the gaping jaw of capitalist greed nor religious intolerance. Instead it gives us what we should have been allowed all along, and in fact had if only we knew it – freedom and will to do what we wish. The individual who thinks for himself is like a rogue particle refusing to be categorized by the quantum physicist.

Our ancestors had many thousands of years to think this process through and told us in many ways how to access this freedom, we just lost the will and knowledge to see it. Discovery of self, love and compassion in balance, these are true words, not buy now pay later or confess thy sins and say ten Hail Mary’s.

This book is a tale that may be taken literally or esoterically. You may see only the story of a man and his exploits or you may see the journey of the soul, but whichever way you take it, I hope you enjoy it.

At the end of the book I have included a Timeline for those who wish to look a little deeper into the history, which underlies this novel. Further reading on the subject may also be found in my books and DVD’s *Secrets of the Serpent*, *Gnosis: The Secret of Solomon’s Temple Revealed*, *Gardiner’s Forbidden Knowledge: Secret Societies*, *The Serpent Grail* and *The Ark, The Shroud and Mary*.

## Prologue

It was early morning and the sun was peeking ever so slowly over the tree-lined horizon and bringing the first vestiges of warmth back into the cool air. In just a few thousands years this beautiful island in the Mediterranean would have no trees left, as man in his drive to build would reduce the landscape to bare rock and rubble. But for now the trees swayed gently in the breeze and the birds on their way to Europe from Africa danced against the prehistoric skyline. Occasionally a predator would swoop down to the ground and take up a scurrying lizard for breakfast and a murmur would emerge from the woods as it gracefully and effortlessly flew out of site. Then all would fall silent again, leaving the faintest sound of insects in its midst.

The sun, even at its height would fail to penetrate the depth of the forest, but at this time of day it sent shivers of gold through the higher branches. Every now and then the golden threads were broken as something nudged the trees from within the dark places.

They had been here for millennia, living in peace and harmony with their surroundings. Taking only what they knew would soon return and returning care and attention where needed. They had no desire to destroy, overpopulate or dominate. They simply wanted to live in peace. Where they had come from, most had long forgotten, but they knew that this place was better. Their folk tales spoke of a violent past, of wars and famine. Their nightmares told them that they had escaped some distant land, evading a great hate. All they cared for now was to realise their hopes and dreams of living harmoniously with one another and their environment, in balance.

They were led by one known as Abraxus, a strong and patient individual, who metered out wise words and goodness. Nobody could argue with Abraxus, for he always knew what was best. It seemed to many in the community that he had always been there. Even the older ones remembered him from their childhood and tales of his immortality were strong amongst the ordinary minded. But recently he had appeared to be failing in his magical ability to fend off the ravages of time. His green eyes were growing pale and clouded. He ate less and less and would sleep more. There were rumours that soon he was to choose a successor and move on to the other realm. And yet in private he complained of nothing and spoke little that would give his position away. And so the community went on, as it had for longer than anyone cared to mention or even knew – except Abraxus. He knew, for he had been one of the originals. He had come as a child with the first settlers and established this place as home. Then as new children came along the originators split and wandered the world to find new homes. Eventually his parents died and he was left as the eldest, with the knowledge of his ancestors. They had come to a remarkable group decision – to forget the past and live for now. And this was how the history of this secretive race was lost; this was how they lived in harmony, because they knew no hate nor malice and resented nothing. Instead they had all they could eat and drink and never had to farm or trade. They were taught lessons of being one with the world around them from birth and they respected the power and beauty of nature.

But Abraxus knew things would change. He knew that a life so humble and perfect simply could not last forever. In the dead of night every year as the mid-summer sun

settled down to sleep, elders from the scattered remnant of a lost race would converge in the islands of the north. The journey would take them a matter of days from wherever they resided, for within their many secrets they held the power of navigation. To the others in the group this was called the time of rest. Great and wonderful celebrations would be had by all and the woods would be alive with joy. They would hum beautiful tunes and the young ones would dance around sacred ancient trees, singing in harmony to the great mother. But as the separated groups around the world all sang of love and peace, the elders gathered in a solemn mood this last time. A new life had emerged, a new consciousness and it was a divided mind that the elders were picking up. You see, this ancient race were in-tune with the vibrations of the very universe itself, just as a bird can sense the magnetism of the earth. They could sense the moods and changes of nature and they could sense imbalance. They knew that this was the greatest threat their race had faced since they had escaped their original home. But they also knew they had time to prepare. And yet what they would do to prepare was now simply beyond them. Any concept of fighting was out of the question. Nor would they try to stop this new emergence of life. And so they simply did nothing and watched the progress. But Abraxus did do something alone that nobody would ever know.

Thousands and thousands of years passed by. Abraxus was now long since gone and his memory a distant and mythical one. The final group of the forgotten race on the small island in the sun-trapped Mediterranean were only occasionally seen emerging from the waters or disappearing into the caves. The new violent life-form that their ancestors warned them about had taken possession of the earth and destroyed their natural habitats. They built great structures and ripped the earth apart to take out rock and metal. They sent species after species into the dark hole of extinction and now they hunted the children of Abraxus.

An old, fat, pale skinned man dressed in colourful robes stood on the edge of the northern shores of the small island with a great staff in hand. He ordered his men this way and that. Soldiers bearing the cross and wielding large swords dispersed along the embankment, cutting off any escape for the remnant. They could see them as dark shadows beneath the blue sea and they knew that it would be a matter of time before they had to surface. A dozen or so soldiers ran down to the shore and started to throw spears and stones; their fear of this ancient race showing on their faces. Fear, it seems, bred hatred and now hundreds of years later the hatred had grown to such an extent that secrecy and devil worshipping propaganda had taken hold. This ancient race were hated across the world and the Lords men would erase them from memory.

Suddenly a spear struck and a child of Abraxus raised his head above water and stared into the eyes of the one who delivered it. The soldier was transfixed, stuck to the spot like standing stone. He saw into the deep green eyes of the ancient race and he saw nothing but pity for himself. He fell to the ground and clutched his hands together, praying to his god for forgiveness. Before him the tall, elegant demon let out one final ancient hum of love and slowly sank beneath the waves. Around him his brothers and sisters let out a cry that sent shivers down the spines of the shocked soldiers. The water seemed to bubble with their loss. But the man on the hill raised his staff and

soon there were hundreds of heavily armed men thrashing around in the waves. Paul would have his way.

Further down the coast and later that night a bedraggled old man sat staring out to sea. He tossed stones in as he drank foul wine from his leather bottle. His eyesight wasn't so good these days, nor his hearing. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten, but he cared less. His wife had died some months before of a strange disease that made her skin boil and explode. He had sat and watched her die and in that instant he had both lost the will to live and aged decades. The only thing that kept him alive were his two children, Lazarus and Mary. They were hardly old enough to know what had happened and it broke his heart every time they asked when their mother was coming home. Little Lazarus, only just able to walk, would go to his chair before the window and look at his father with wondering eyes. Mary was now old enough to help around the house and she assumed the womanly role as if by pure natural instinct, but she too would still lay a place for her mother at the meagre table. Every time he looked into her eyes he saw his wife and it was all he could do to fight back the tears. And so he would settle them in bed and bring a bottle of consolation down to the waters edge – as if one day she would walk from the sea like some resurrected Venus.

Tonight was no different. Here he was drowning his sorrows in the cheapest wine he could find and ill afford. He stared blankly out to sea as the pale blue turned to dark blue and then black. The stars opened their eyes and watched their reflections dance on the simmering liquid landscape. But tonight the sea would set before him a surprise. As he took another swig of wine he noticed out of the corner of his eye the gentle waves break apart as if Neptune himself were coming ashore.

Startled he dropped the bottle and stood quickly to his feet as a large dark character emerged from the deep, drooping a little as if hurt. It was too dark to see his features, but he was very large and stunk like a ships rat. The old man's mind ran raced wondering what on earth this apparition was. Could it be Lucifer? He crossed his chest. Could it be some monster from the sea? He crossed his chest. Then he realised, it must be a sailor, shipwrecked out to sea – that, or he had simply drunk too much.

He decided on the shipwrecked sailor scenario and showing a kind of mercy few had shown to him, he ran down to help the poor man. Once there he placed his arm part way around the giant and struggled to help him up the shore and back to his humble home.

They moved slowly and silently, neither speaking a word. The old man assumed the giant to be exhausted or indeed foreign and so he simply got him into the little stone house and lit a fire of brushwood on the hearth.

Nobody knew the secrets of Lazarus and Mary. Nobody knew that they harboured a hunted vestige of a time gone by. They eventually buried their old father in the same plot as their mother and silently nursed their friend back to health. What happened in those years nobody was ever told, but eventually their friend died and was placed in a special tomb, built by the brother and sister in honour of his love, warmth and

peaceful nature. To them he had been a living god and now they had to go out into the world to live a normal life. Lazarus saw to it that his sister found a good husband – a blacksmith in a nearby town – and he, well, Lazarus took a ship and headed north to the land of Empire builders.

## Chapter 1

### **The Dead Man**

He held tight onto a scrap of white paper and the ink ran and smudged from the boiling sweat that dripped from his palm like blood from an open wound. The heat of the midday sun made him perspire from every pore of his body. His dark hair stuck like glue to his skin and his clothes clung in that familiar, irritating fashion. It was times like this that he wished he hadn't grown this stupid beard – a remnant of sadder days. Through blurred vision he noted that he was alone in the streets, bar a few stupid Englishmen who were staggering around from one bar to another. The locals were wise enough to stay off the streets in this heat. Millennia of living with the heat had ingrained sense into their genes. But they weren't chasing a secret.

This was Valletta in the summer, and this year the Maltese sun had decided to punish the pale skinned a little more than normal. Short sleeved, sweating tourists stumbled around like drunken fools, desperate to see everything and buy cheap gifts before their long awaited, and credit paid holiday ended. Malta had been a second home to the British for decades. Close connections derived from some minor shared history and the end of the age of British Empire building. The fact that Malta had been allowed to be overrun with Nazi's in the Second World War had soon been forgotten as the saviours in green arrived and freed the inhabitants. Now Malta was home to thousands of ex-pats who longed for Mediterranean sun and a more peaceful atmosphere. It was also one of the safe places that the British could come to. Safe in the respect that it understood them; it served the unique English breakfast of eggs, bacon, sausage, beans, tomatoes, fried bread and sometimes even black pudding – the dried congealed blood of pigs. It served English beer morning, noon and night by the barrel load and it cleaned up the mess afterwards. It was the perfect British holiday – fatty food, alcohol and a beach to overcome the hangover. In fact there were two sides to Malta. The typical British holidaymaker tended to spend their days and nights around Bugibba and St. Paul's Bay in the north, venturing south rarely on day trips. Gozo, a small island to the north was generally for the rich who wanted a more peaceful time and apart from Mdina or Valletta in the south there was precious little else that attracted the standard drunken white man. Only those with serious interest in ancient history ever ventured out to see the amazing temples that scattered the island such as those at Tarxien.

The capital was a cosmopolitan mixture of European influences; one minute reminding John of Paris, the next of Florence and then of Greece, Rome and even sometimes Germany and Spain. He had seen enough of the world and was knowledgeable in architectural intricacies and so he could spot the various traits of each nation stamped on the buildings like a calling card. It was indeed a fascinating trip down a historical lane and the whole island held a deep rooted interest for John. Last time he had been here was with his late wife. He had been holding her hand at this very location and the thought of that wonderful experience just served to bring on his recurrent sadness. He had spent months in solitude, drinking, burning pictures and then regretting it and of course allowing his facial hair to model him into the more sorrowful looking character that he was clearly on the inside. He banished the thought once more from his troubled mind and staggered onwards.

He was heading for the National Museum of Archaeology situated in the Auberge de Provence on Republic Street. It was a beautiful location that Hollywood would never be able to recreate. The buildings were old and weather worn. The shop fronts held behind them tales of a secret past and if one raised ones eye level just a little one would see the ornate stone carvings and peeling paint of the verandas and shutter boards. The museum in contrast was a medieval building, but this time severely modernised and contained some of the finest and most priceless artefacts from the prehistoric temples of Malta and Canadian born and British taught John Baptiste was on his way to view some quite specific items.

John was a loner. He shared very little of his research with others and spent many hours alone in his college room studying fusty old books and crumbling manuscripts. Occasionally he would let his mind wander off into some crazy conspiracy theory or alternative and so-called world of forbidden knowledge on the internet and fall asleep watching videos of aliens being chopped up on some unknown laboratory table. He always assumed this alternate ego was the part of himself that sought out truth and he never really took any of it seriously.

He was in fact quite normal and boring to the outside world. As visiting professor of anthropology at St. Lilith's College, Oxford, where he had held the position for just two years, following the sudden death of his wife Catherine, he was expected to keep a low profile on his own private x-files. But why did he leave Canada? Well he simply could not stay in the house, the street or even the town, where so many memories crippled his thoughts and drove him to such excruciating pain. Every tree, park, shop and even the people brought back the memories of his wife and the pain was agonising. And so he applied for work overseas and the peers and elders of his Toronto University found him work in Oxford, England, far away from the scar tissue that had been his previous life. John passed the tests, achieved the desired results and the secret handshakes of the college deans sealed his future. Little did he know that his future would hold dark secrets and high danger; little did he know that his future was already being planned.

Now in the heat of the Mediterranean sun John was on a mission that first involved seeing some peculiar artefacts. Finally John arrived at the large glass doors of the Museum of Archaeology only to find that it closed at lunch. This trap always caught John out. Every time he came to this part of the world he forgot that the shops were not open twenty four hours; that there were no great big malls and that the people couldn't care less how much money you flashed in front of them – it was too damn hot you stupid foreigner.

And so, following a short, sharp curse beneath his breath he decided to surrender and turned to find a café where he could relax and have a coke.

Taking a well-earned seat in a smoky hole opposite the museum where he could spot the doors opening again, he ordered his coke, lit a cigarette and the memory of his wife's outrage at his smoking habit haunted him like a spectre. He carried on to smoke regardless, wiped his brow and opened the scrap of paper he had clutched with religious fervour. He read it for the thousandth time.

*“Dear Prof. Baptiste*

*We are please to acknowledge your interest in our skulls and the letter of commendation from Professor Schonfield and can therefore confirm that we shall make arrangements for the artefacts to be taken from the security vaults upon your arrival around the dates you suggest.*

*Please accept this letter as confirmation and should I be absent when you arrive, then please show it to my deputies who will be only too pleased to assist you in your research. I shall copy them in on this letter for your convenience.*

*Yours truly,  
Mattia Presti  
Curate and Manager of the Museum of Archaeology,  
Auberge de Provence,  
Republic Street,  
Valletta,  
Malta”*

It was a simple answer to a simple question and John had been overjoyed to be allowed to follow up on his new lead. In fact, it was his only lead and the letter, following a wait of two months had been sorely awaited. John's new role at St Lilith's was to follow the work of Victorian researchers in their search for the ancient Ophites – the worshippers of serpents. The fact of the matter was that John had never heard of them in all his years of anthropological study and so this new avenue had re-inspired him.

What he found was quite amazing and a real eye opener. He began with the Victorian tales of serpent worshippers, from Hargrave Jennings study of *Ophiolatrea* to Clarke and Staniland's work in their published *Serpent and Siva Worship*. He discovered that the widespread worship of the serpent had been known of, but it was as if it had been covered up by the Christian fundamentalist craze of the Victorian age. This excited John's inner desire to uncover a conspiracy of his own and so, true to his new found form, decided to follow up each and every lead he could and to trace the cults both backwards in time and indeed forwards. He was no ardent conspiracy theorist, but he had to wonder what had become of these ancient and powerful groups.

And so, after just two years in the job, he found himself in Malta, on a trip fully paid for by his new employers, chasing a final lead. This time he knew the evidence he sought was real and physical. He had plenty of proof of the widespread nature of the cults on paper and in a few artefacts, but he had no actual serpent worshipper himself in the bag. If the skulls here in Malta proved to be what he believed them to be, then he would have a story to put St Lilith's on the map and re-inspire the sponsors to allow him to continue his research. He knew he had only a matter of months left before his money ran out and he was re-assigned, which simply meant lecturing dull history to dull students. He also needed to prove to himself that he was still alive and that his soul had not yet died and joined his wife on the other side.

Following three more cokes and six cigarettes in a seeming attempt to bring on an early death, the time was up. Lunchtime was over and he could see across the now steadily busy streets that the museum had opened its doors once more. He stood, took

up his black carryall and tipped the waiter. As he hit the street again the heat hit him back like a football player on speed. He hurried himself over to the glass doors and almost burst through them, making the guard inside turn swiftly.

There was a welcoming cool breeze from an industrial sized air conditioner and John breathed a sigh of relief. He stopped, put down his bag, wiped his sweating brow and looked around. The lightly furnished stone room was empty of humans but for the uniformed guard who had by now returned his gaze to the newspaper in his hands, happily oblivious again to the world around him. John picked up his bag and walked towards the guard who did his absolute Maltese best to ignore him.

“I have come to see Mattia Presti”, announced John as he held out the piece of paper towards the man in blue, who in response calmly glanced over his newspaper and nodded in the general direction of the grand white marbled staircase to the left. “I presume that means go up the stairs then,” John mumbled to himself and took the advice.

And so John headed for the stairs, noticing out of the corner of his eye that the guard had now stood, folded his newspaper and was walking away from his desk. Halfway up the stone marble ascent John casually looked down into the foyer and the guard had disappeared, the glass door coming gently to a close. “Strange place.” He thought to himself.

The stairs led to a scruffy looking second level of offices, which appeared quite simply, abandoned. There were overturned waste baskets and deathly silence.

“Is there anybody there?” shouted John to nobody but himself. He looked around the small landing at the top of the stairs and through the long window to the now bustling shopping street below. He noticed the same guard now walking down the street to a waiting green car, taking off his jacket and rolling it up, placing it under his arm as he got into the passenger seat. “Curious.” He turned back to the corridor of offices now and called again. “Is there anybody there?” He smiled at himself; it sounded like he was asking the spirit world to emerge. There was no reply from the alive or the dead.

So, he walked down the long white corridor, littered with boxes of paper and printer cables. The doors were marked with names and titles and so John presumed he would soon find Mattia Presti’s office. As is always the case with these things, it was the last office.

He knocked. Nothing. He knocked again. Still nothing. So he tried the handle. It clicked and the door fell open before him, creaking as if he were in some kind of cheesy horror film. A stench that he could not even begin to describe invaded his senses and he almost keeled over. “What the hell is that?” he thought to himself. He walked forward, taking tentative steps.

“Mr Presti?” he said firmly, as if to bolster his own sense of fear.

There never would be another reply from Mattia Presti and his family would mourn his death for years to come. His wife would wear the solemn black for the rest of her life and his two young children would never know their father.

Mattia Presti was lying on his own office floor, behind his own desk that he had been so proud of. The pictures of his family smashed upon the floor, mingling with a pool of warm blood. Around his throat was a cord and tied to the cord was a note.

John slowly edged forward, knelt down and in pure sick curiosity twisted the note in order to read it.

“Mattia Presti. Dead. Take notes Mr Baptiste. Brotherhood of the Snake.”

The world suddenly went dark, then black, and all John remembered was feeling very strange and falling backwards uncontrollably.

## Chapter 2

### Lies

There was a thumping pain in his head and for some reason his wrists hurt. He opened his eyes slowly and saw nothing but bright light. The blazing white fuzzy world around him gradually began to take form and the pain in his head increased. Then it all went black again.

The next thing he remembered was the sound of cars jostling for position, raising hell with horns and people talking, lots of people. There was the noise of a slight breeze, or was that the sea? He couldn't tell. This time he knew he was lying on his side and it felt like he was undressed but covered by a blanket. Again, he ventured to open his eyes and this time the reduced pain in his head allowed him to see more clearly. Although still hazy, the images around him seemed to make sense. It was a hospital of some kind and the noise of the streets came flooding in through the open window. There was the noise of sea gulls and now a definite sound of waves. He manoeuvred himself upright with difficulty because for some reason his hands were firmly clasped in hand cuffs.

“Oh no, they think I killed him” he thought to himself, not realising the full extent of his predicament, “stupid Maltese idiots.”

The room was small, stunk of urine and everything was painted white. There were bars on the windows and the door looked like something from a bank vault. “Not only do they think I killed him, they think I'm mad”, he muttered to himself as he tried to swivel out of bed. For some reason he couldn't move his legs.

Using his knees and wriggling like a snake he managed to uncover himself and found that his ankles were strapped in leather and chained to the bottom of the bed. This was the final straw and he let out a yell that would have made the Yeti proud. Suddenly in the distance he heard an alarm sound and chairs scrape across stone floors.

Within seconds there was a rustling sound at the vault door and in burst three burly looking male nurses, dressed from head to toe in white, with no belts or buckles in sight.

“You be quiet you murdering bastardo”, said the central and more authoritative character as he headed straight for John like a man on a mission. It seemed that the Maltese didn't take too kindly to having one of their own murdered. It was in fact a small island, just slightly larger than its neighbour Gozo, at only seventeen miles wide. John remembered the place fondly for the times he had spent with his wife and the friends they had made with the local fishermen in Sliema. His wife had loved animals and one morning they had been walking along the sea front before all the other tourists and spotted the fishermen feeding the stray cats. It wasn't long before John and his wife had been buying drinks at a local bar for the men and their extended families and even being invited back to their homes to partake of real Maltese food and hospitality. Now it seemed John was being entertained in a much different way.

The burly nurses quickly worked out that John wasn't going into a fit of rage or any other kind of fit and soon there was only one nurse remaining.

"What do you want madman?" he said in almost perfect English.

"I want to know why I am tied up and in here. I didn't kill Mattia Presti or anybody else", he replied indignantly.

"That's for the police to decide not me. I'll call them and tell them you have decided to wake up. Be calm now, you have a bump on your head." And with that he turned, slammed the door shut and locked it with as much hate as he could muster.

It seemed like hours slowly ambled by. With no distraction and no entertainment the noise of the street outside grew louder and louder and John thought to himself that the noise alone was enough to send anybody mad. Last time he'd been this bored was at his brother's wedding, waiting around for the whole thing to be over.

It had been a beautiful day and the sun had shone in glorious Technicolor. His brother had fallen in love with a young Englishwoman of no great descent, but even so, the wedding had been planned for a stately home in Derbyshire. The setting was perfect. The grey stone of the hall was beautifully offset by the red ivy that circumnavigated the windows and doors. The bride looked like a princess and dozens of people wandered about aimlessly wondering what to do and where to stand. The only problem was that John was anti-social and hated public speaking and at this event he had to be best man. Following several large brandies for Dutch courage John finally stammered out his speech and settled down for the long arduous task of seeing the festivities through. After a couple of hours he had developed a thunderous headache and made his excuses. Within minutes he was upstairs in one of the stark modern guestrooms with his wife and the pain in his head subsided. They had both stripped and made love for over an hour before falling into a deep sleep. The next morning they woke, endured the wedding breakfast and drove back to the airport. That was the last time he had seen his wife alive.

They had both flown to different parts of the world. John making back for New York and his wife for Ghana where she was to help set up a new animal charity. On arrival she had been picked up by a local taxi driver and all the police could say was that somewhere between the airport and her destination the taxi had been hijacked and his wife multiple raped and murdered. The culprits had never been found. Maybe the whole experience had driven him mad. Maybe he had killed Mattia Presti in some kind of unconscious rage. No, he would never do that, would he?

John's experience of the unconscious world from that time onward had been a strange one. Almost every night he suffered intense and painful nightmares. He was in the pit of human depravity, living alongside murderers, thieves and rapists. He stood by as those around him skewered children, decapitated grown men and sexually abused the women. Every sleeping moment was a hell he could not escape. Never once was there glimmer of hope. Never once did he speak up and put a stop to the terrible baseness. It seemed he was living his wife's torture again and again and simply could not overcome the intense misery of life without her. The cycles of his life were seemingly in a desperate downward path. For some reason he blamed himself for the horrible

death she had succumbed to. If only he had gone with her. She had pleaded with him to take a few weeks off from work, but he had insisted that his career depended on him getting back as soon as possible. She would be ok; Ghana was a safe country now. If only he had thought it through. It was his fault and now he was getting his reward, his karma was crucifying him both in sleep and now in the waking state. Even the good times were slowly evaporating and being replaced with visions of hell. His only lifeline into sanity was his focus on the serpent past and now it seemed even this was slipping from his grasp.

His thoughts were broken as he heard faint voices of officialdom outside the heavy door. He tried to breathe calmly, so as not to give the impression of an insane killer. He wriggled to try and sit upright, but the restraints on his ankles prevented him from getting into a comfortable position. His heart began to pound and beat out a rhythm like drums in the darkest jungle. Sweat broke out on his brow and he couldn't wipe it off. It trickled down over his nose and dripped tortuously like some kind of cruel torment from an invisible inquisitor. Finally the door opened and in walked two short, stocky Maltese policemen dressed in black suits and white shirts.

"Mr Baptiste?" said the one on the right who sported black stubble and a loosely fitting black tie.

"Yes" came John's weak reply. He needed a drink; the fear and stress had made him remarkably dry.

"Good" came the short reply, "get us some chairs Nicholas", he shouted to the nurse who had let them in.

Both policemen stood in silence awaiting the chairs, looking intently at John's face, like members of the Gestapo. The second policeman looked somewhat younger than the first, with the same dark, greasy, curly hair but clean-shaven and a well-done necktie. He held under his arm a sand-coloured file, wrapped in white cord.

The chairs arrived and placed either side the bed – a psychological trick John had read about in his files on secret police.

"So Mr Baptiste, or may I call you John?" said the elder policeman.

"Yes, sure, whatever you want. I didn't kill him, I'm not mad, this is all a terrible mistake" babbled John incoherently.

"Yes, I'm sure it is, and my friend here is Jesus", he mocked. "Now, we have some questions for you, and I'm sure, as an innocent man, you will have no trouble answering them?"

"No, not at all. Can I have a drink?"

"Nicholas", shouted the first policeman, "bring our guest a drink of water."

They waited, again in silence, the sweat pouring from John's brow and his fear rising like a demon from the flames. Eventually the water arrived in a clear plastic cup and

the nurse poured it slowly into John's parched mouth dousing the devil of fear. He gulped it down like a condemned man.

"There, now you have your drink. Why are you here in Malta Mr Baptiste?"

"I came to see Mattia Presti. The archaeological teams here had found some dolichocephalous skulls and..."

"What" the policeman interrupted, "is a what you call it skull?"

"Oh, sorry, yes, it's an elongated skull, like you see in images of the ancient Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaton. The skull extends backwards, kind of like an alien head. Its normally caused by a unique disease or by special moulding of the skull from birth with the hands or planks of wood", John replied, trying to make it as easy to understand as possible.

"Ok, please continue."

"Well, they had found these skulls on their new dig beneath the Grand Masters residence on Goo and didn't know what to make of them. But they also found some images of snakes and a snake goddess figurine, like the Minoan snake lady. Anyway, it was widely known in the field that I was on the look out for these kinds of things and so a colleague at Oxford passed the word. I quickly got on the phone and was told that the skulls had been placed in storage at the Museum of Archaeology in Valletta and so I wrote to Mr Presti, requesting a viewing. I have, or had, the letter somewhere", John was convinced his tale sounded reasonable.

"We found no letter Mr Baptiste. You were found on the floor of Mattia Presti's office two days ago with nothing but a blow to the head. In Mr Presti's hand was a statue of the Virgin Mary, with your blood upon it. It seems from the evidence before us that you strangled Mr Presti and before he drew his final breath he hit you upon the head. Your fingerprints were all over his neck, desk, door and in many other places", the policeman seemed to take great pleasure in laying this incredible version before John.

"But what about the cord and the note?" asked John, stunned at the twist of events he was hearing.

"What cord and what note Mr Baptiste?" smiled the policeman, intrigued by the similar twist in John's tale.

John closed his eyes for a moment and tried to remember exactly what he had seen. The memory was blurred and now being confused with his own inner self desire to be found guilty and to suffer for the death of his wife. The images inside his head were merging with his own imagined images of him strangling Presti and being lunged at by a dying man with a statue of Mary. How ironic, laid low by the Mother of God. He tried desperately to shake off the image and opened his eyes. He could see straight into the mind of the policeman and read his thought, "he's going to confess, I know it."

“There was a dark cord around Mr Presti’s neck, it looked like the means of death to me and blood was pouring from his mouth all over the floor. It was horrible. The stench was awful. On the cord was a note. I must have touched his neck when I read the note”, John was thinking the logical process out loud.

“And what did this note say Mr Baptiste?” said the policeman as he tilted his head sideways, attempting to look interested. His mind was already made up.

“It said, erm, let me get this right.”

“Yes, please do, take your time. We have plenty of time together Mr Baptiste.”

“No, I know it now, it said ‘Mattia Presti. Dead. Take notes Mr Baptiste. Brotherhood of the Snake.’” As he said the words John became as confused as the policemen. He could see their apparent disbelief, it was written all over their faces. “Its true, honest, you have to believe me. Somebody is setting me up here. I didn’t kill Presti. What possible reason would I have?”

“Well Mr Baptiste, we shall of course go and check out your story, but you ask for motive and I shall give you a motive. Three years ago Mattia Presti had been staying at the Golden Tulip hotel in Ghana close by the airport whilst on some minor archaeological digs under the auspices of the UN Ancient History Department. He was single at the time and quite a lover boy according to his colleagues. It seems he had triumphantly bragged about a sexual liaison he had with an American woman who had stopped at the hotel. It seems Mr Baptiste that your wife had stayed at the hotel when she flew into Ghana, on the very same night that Mr Presti claimed to have made love with an American woman. We have checked the records and indeed your wife’s credit card reveals that she did indeed stay at the hotel on the night in question and being a Canadian, it is easy to make the mistake of calling her American. There were no other Americans or Canadians at the hotel that night Mr Baptiste and the next thing we know is that your wife is found dead several miles away, having been raped and horribly murdered. In fact his wife has confirmed Mr Presti’s previously amorous ways and also his sometimes violent sexual rage.”

John sat and listened. It was just too incredible to be true. He felt sick to the stomach and started to feel light-headed. The silent policeman noticed him begin to sway and jumped to catch him before he hit his head on the bedstead.

The world had gone dark again and all the familiar noises of cars, sea gulls and people fell away into nothing. John was flying in a black soup, fearful of the unseen. Suddenly he was back in familiar territory. It was a garbled vision of an intensely hot African town wrenched from his own imagination. There was a mixture of mud huts and white gleaming palaces with roads of dusty earth and silent children chasing emaciated chickens. To his right was a saloon bar looking as if it came more from a Western movie than a town in Ghana. Outside were half-dressed old black men sat on broken chairs, smoking long white pipes and talking in some peculiar unknown tongue. On his left there was a white dishevelled Toyota pickup with two black policemen standing on the back thumping their palms with large white sticks. In the air was a strange music, like a sorrowful woman singing a long forgotten lament. For some reason he was drawn towards an immense white palace at the end of the street.

Its façade was made of marble and there were columns mocking ancient Greece and a garden that would have looked more at home in England than Africa. The sweet but sad music seemed to be coming from this stark place and so John decided to head for it.

As he walked the policemen jumped from their pickup and followed, muttering to each other in their peculiar dialect and thumping their white sticks harder and harder. The old men on his right mocked and jeered, puffing great plumes of grey smoke into the air, creating a sickly sweat smell like blood. John's heart began to beat faster and louder, in time with the thumping of the sticks. It grew so loud that he could even hear it above the jeers of the old men. He walked faster and faster, but the white palace seemed to get further and further away. Suddenly a strange figure, with an alien styled elongated head and a rope around its neck ran from out of nowhere towards John's destination, leaving a trail of dust, blurring John's vision.

John tried to speed up, but the palace seemed to move away even faster. He knew that this man spelled danger to whatever it was making that otherworldly music, but he could do nothing to increase his speed. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't move any faster. He was trapped in the horror of his own mind.

Eventually the alien character disappeared behind the white wall of the garden and all John could do was keep walking, feeling the pressure of the policemen behind. Then he heard the most gut wrenching scream. A woman's scream. His wife's. The lament had stopped abruptly.

Tears ran from his eyes and his legs went weak. He had failed again. He had failed to save his beautiful wife. He fell to his knees in the dirt and suddenly he was in the garden, surrounded by roses and lilies. It seemed that the moment he stopped trying to run he succeeded in getting to his destination. The harder he pushed the further was from his goal and yet when he relaxed he found what he was looking for.

The dust of the road had gone. The noise of the jeering had diminished and the thumping of the policemen's sticks was now a faint echo. He heard birds and the swaying of the willow trees. He felt at home; he felt calm and peaceful, but the sad singing now started again and grew in intensity and he knew that the source was directly behind him, in his past as well as his location. His heart stopped, his throat grew dry and a sense of foreboding invaded his mind. He had no wish to turn and see what he knew to be there, but he also knew he must. He had to face this punishment yet again.

Slowly he turned, scraping his knees on the sharp flint that was the base of this near perfect garden of dreams. The singing stopped and before him laid out like a pig on a butchers table was his naked wife. Her legs were so wide they almost split. Her hair torn out, her skin cut and bruised and her dead face sad. Her mouth gaped wide and her teeth were rotten. She was a corpse, a carcass that nobody cared for. He reached out for her one last time and pulled back in fear as a hissing noise emanated from the hollow of her mouth. Two green slits appeared in the black cavern and then a slithering tongue. A large black head of a snake emerged, staring straight at John and then it spoke.

“Take notes Mr Baptiste”, it said in an ugly hissing fashion.

## Chapter 3

### The New Girl

“Why don’t you send the new girl?” said Arthur Waite, the large, sweating and decidedly unhealthy assistant editor of the New York Herald. The new girl in question was a full-blooded American who had just come from some Portuguese newspaper where she had been training. Arthur had never worked out how to say the name of the specific location, but he did know that regardless of how glamorous this new dark eyed girl was, she was a pain in the butt. She had been thrust upon them from the powers above - namely the board. It was a normal process and for some reason nobody ever put up a fight. The board would suddenly decide to drop a new reporter or sub-editor on them and that was that. Everybody else had to either move posts or somehow accommodate the new member of staff. It was always a challenge to find something for them to do, but by coincidence within just a few days a nice far-off foreign job would come in and the new reporter would be sent. Often that was the last they heard of them. Nobody ever put two and two together.

“Yeah Waitee, what a great idea”, an overworked and stressed editor replied. Frank Watt was a thin man with no hair. Years of smoking had stained his fingers, lips and teeth yellow and unbeknown to him almost destroyed his lungs. He lived for his job and had lost everything else in the process – wife, children and even house. Now he lived alone in a Manhattan apartment near the Hotel Pennsylvania, overrun with rats and cockroaches. It simply didn’t matter to Frank; he lived in the office or at the small Irish bar on 8<sup>th</sup> avenue. Occasionally he would sleep in the apartment, but only on holidays and only if the bar was closed. His hero was the infamous writer of the James Bond novels, Ian Fleming, and in his youth he had written hundreds of spy stories – each one sent to the publishers and each one rejected. So he had decided to take up journalism and soon found himself carrying the post at the New York Times. He met a beautiful young girl there by the name of Brenda Fieldman and quite frankly he should have known better. One thing led to another and they found themselves in a closet making love. Three months later Brenda announced her condition to Frank and by this time he had also learnt that Brenda was in fact the daughter of the Political Editor. He had no choice but to marry Miss Fieldman and in so doing found himself on the ladder of one of the world’s most prestigious newspapers. Now, thirty-five years later Brenda had remarried twice and lived the life of luxury in LA, while his two children had families of their own – or so he was told. He hadn’t seen them for over fifteen years. The thought, when allowed to surface always made him incredibly sad and often he would kill the pain with a Whisky and a cigarette.

“You know Frank, she looks a lot like Brenda when she was young”, said Arthur knowing as he spoke the words that he should have kept his stupid mouth shut.

Frank stared at Arthur for what seemed an eternity, the hustle and bustle of the lunatic asylum they called an editorial office just a whisper in the background. Arthur was desperately trying to think of a way to backtrack, but his boss’s eyes were mesmerising. Frank on the other hand was simply trying not to show any emotions, his guts ached at the sound of her name and the thought of the life he had thrown away. He didn’t blame Arthur for making the comment, but he couldn’t help the desire to knock him to the floor. Maybe he was right, maybe she did look like Brenda.

In fact he was right and then a thought dawned upon him. A mad thought that he simply couldn't throw off. What if this was his second chance? He wasn't so ugly was he? He wasn't over the hill yet. Maybe this was his new Brenda?

"You know Waitee, I need a break too. I think I'll go with her. Yep, its time for me to get back into the field. I've been stuck in this godforsaken office for fifteen years and I ain't seen the sunlight in all that time." Frank ignored the stunned and whitening face of his colleague who stood speechless like a marble statue and picked up the phone. "Sandra, yeah, good, you? Now, get Nina up to my office pronto. Yeah, the new girl. Oh, and Sandra, get two tickets on the next flight to Malta. Yes Sandra, it's a real place."

Two days later a tall sultry looking female reporter going by the name of Nina Lamia and a thin bedraggled editor of the New York Herald were in JFK waiting for their flights to Heathrow airport, London. It seemed they couldn't get a flight direct to Malta airport and had to connect.

Nina was stood in a short black skirt and a tight white blouse putting on lipstick, while Frank feeling every part the Casanova tried to figure out where their boarding gate was. He had crammed his entire wardrobe into one small cabin bag, half of which contained cigarettes and two bottles of the finest Scotch whisky. His colleague on the other hand had two suitcases and a large personal bag, as well as an awful lot of distaste for her new found friend.

"Gate eight sweetheart", said Frank as he stubbed his last cigarette out before the long flight to the UK. "Better get going."

"OK Frank", smiled Nina and she slowly put her lipstick away, fastened her handbag and walked off, leaving Frank behind to pull the two large suitcases to check-in.

They checked in with no trouble and Frank paid Nina's excess on her luggage while she stood talking to a passing pilot. They then made their way to gate eight and bought a coffee from the scruffy looking café nearby. Nina didn't touch hers and sat reading the latest Dan Brown novel. Frank returned from the toilet and settled down to read the New York Times and gulp his coffee. Within minutes Frank was dead.

The coroner later said, when drawing a verdict of death by heart attack, that Frank's over indulgence in smoking and drinking had been his downfall. In the end he had gone the same way as his hero, but missed by nobody. While the medics pumped at his chest and blew into his lungs the tall, dark, sexy reporter from the New York Herald boarded the plane and made for London.

"You have a visitor Mr Baptiste", came the voice of the male nurse.

He'd been lying in this dirty bed for days, unable to get up and move about, tied to the horizontal prison like some kind of mass murderer. Two days ago he'd had another visit from his friendly Maltese policemen to inform him that they had checked out his story and that none of it made any sense. There were no skulls that he had described; there was no letter, no cord, and no note. Nobody knew anything about any of it. John

had argued and gave them the name of his colleague in Oxford who had passed on the word. They had already checked this and the gentleman in question had found himself sent on an archaeological dig in China. He was impossible to contact for at least three months. Until then, it seemed John Baptiste had no possible way of proving his story. It seemed he was doomed and so he had spent long hot sticky days lying on his side, then his back and then his side again to try and overcome the bedsores and the boredom. Every night he had succumbed to the same horrible nightmare and every morning he had woken into this very real hell. His own logic was quickly escaping and with each passing moment he was more and more convinced that he was indeed mad and may have actually created his story to evade the truth himself. It was in fact more logical to him now that he had killed Mattia Presti and that the whole nonsense about the Brotherhood of the Snake was a fabrication of his tattered imagination. He seriously considered that his research into the ancient serpent worshippers had finally twisted his unconscious world into this macabre world he now occupied.

“Mr Baptiste!” Shouted the nurse. “Do you hear me?”

“What? Oh yes, yes, sorry.” He finally emerged from the depths of his own mind and with bloodshot eyes looked towards the door. There, standing just behind the bored and impatient male nurse was an angelic vision of beauty. A tall perfectly formed dark eyed raven, dressed in an almost see-through cream linen dress with breasts that would make the mother goddess herself jealous. As she walked in the room John’s eyes were fixated on the movement of these obviously free male-killers. He quickly snapped his mind out of its transfix and spoke:

“Sorry, are you my attorney?” His voice was gruff and his throat sore. He wasn’t eating or drinking enough and his whole body ached.

“No Mr Baptiste, I am a reporter from the New York Herald. Miss Lamia, pleased to meet you.” Her voice sounded like his wife’s sorrowful tone in his dreams, her eyes bewitching and her elf-like hand outstretched to shake his own.

“Err, sorry, Miss Lamia, my hands are bound.” He held up as far as he could the two hands fastened like a mule.

She withdrew her hand and turned to look at the nurse who was engrossed in her behind. “Is this necessary?”

“Orders I am afraid Miss Lamia. I will go now and leave you two alone. Here is a chair.” And with that he slammed the thick heavy door shut and locked it from the outside.

“I see you are doing well Mr Baptiste?” It was an obvious lie as she looked around the empty whitewashed room and took out a perfumed handkerchief to hold to her nose.

“I’m glad you think so. I have lost track of how long I have been in here and am losing the will to live.” He replied, settling back down to answer more questions. “You are obviously here to let the folks back home what a mad Canadian has done to a poor Maltese man?”

“Something like that. Have you had a lawyer?” She asked, knowing that he had not, but wanting to judge for herself the reason why.

“No, I haven’t even asked for one and I did have a visit from a local government paid attorney who said he’d represent me.” He had been so low that he hadn’t even considered getting representation and cared less. They could crucify him for all he cared now.

“You know, you should. I can sort one out for you if you wish? Anyway, we can talk about that later. First I want to hear your story on what happened.” She took out a small digital voice recorder and placed it on the bed. “You don’t mind me recording this do you?” And with that she turned it on.

“Well, I don’t know where to start, but I will try, yet again. I came to this goddamned island to see Mattia Presti of the Museum of Archaeology. Some local archaeologists had uncovered some dolichoceph... Oh, elongated skulls that were a mystery to them. You see, skulls like this have never been found in this area and strangely they were found directly beneath the Grand Masters residence on Gozo..”

“Grand Master of what?” She interrupted.

“Grand Master of the Knights of St John,” he replied forgetting that this beautiful woman may look smart, but knew nothing of such historical tales. “They were an order of Knights now known more commonly as the Knights of Malta. They still exist to this day and have an office or commandery in the Vatican. They don’t go around on horseback or wear full armour the whole time. These days the members are politicians, priests or even businessmen. But in the old days they battled for Christendom and were rewarded with great riches, including this island. It’s a long story, but following being kicked off Rhodes and various other places they were given Malta and Gozo by the Emperor Charles the fifth and settled in for the long haul. There were several battles with Muslim invaders and the Knights came out on top and were eventually very wealthy through certain activities at sea shall we say. There were quite a few Grand Masters over time and a few of them built their own residences. One of these is the Grand Masters residence on Gozo and it’s now a hotel.”

“Please continue Mr Baptiste, this is fascinating.” She tried to look interested, but inside John assumed she was simply attempting to work out whether he was sane or insane.

“Well, anyway, this whole island was once known as an island of serpents and even now the people believe that St. Paul came here and subdued the snakes. The whole thing is a propaganda tool used by the Christians in fact and in reality it simply meant that the Christians had kicked the serpent worshippers in to touch. At least, that’s what most scholars believe. My research is revealing a much deeper undercurrent within the Christian or should I say Catholic Church and it has far reaching implications. Anyway, because this island was once occupied by serpent worshippers the discovery of these skulls in association with the serpent icons also discovered on the dig came to my attention and so I wrote to Mattia Presti for permission to see the skulls.”

“Why are you so interested in serpent worshippers Mr Baptiste?” She asked, taking out a note pad and jotting down a few extra words.

“Because my job at Oxford was to collate and uncover the truth of the serpent worship that had been started back in Victorian times. For some reason several researchers had uncovered this widespread worship and written books, but then nothing, total silence. I discovered that the Christian authorities had put a stop to the research and that was that.” Just saying these few words started to bring his mind back to its normal state. Thoughts began formulating inside his mind; thoughts that began to answer some disturbing questions.

“I see. So you were here to see some snake peoples skulls and next thing you know you are in a mental institute under suspicion of murder? Is that about right?” She scribbled away again and crossed her legs. John’s eyes darted to the movement and he saw the creamy smooth skin of her inside thigh and suddenly he lost his train of thought.

“Sorry, yes, that’s about right.” His eyes lingered. She swapped legs and this time he caught a fleeting glance of her white knickers. “Oh god John, stop it, you’re a married man. No I’m not. Oh, right.” His thoughts brought him back to the god-awful world he now occupied and the reality of his own insane life.

“Quite.” She had noticed his interest and for some reason slightly widened her legs in a subconscious act of tease. She remembered, she used to do the same to her old history teacher back in college while he was lecturing about the damned war of independence. It used to throw him off track too. “OK. So, this murder or whatever it was. What exactly happened?”

“Oh right, that. Well I went to the Museum and was ushered upstairs by the guard. When I got there the whole place was empty and so I walked down the corridor and looked for Presti’s office. I knocked but there was no reply, so I simply tried the door and went in. Presti was dead on the floor in a pool of blood with a cord around his neck and a note.” The blood was rushing from his face again as he remembered the sight and the stench of the dead.

“Now, the police say that there was no cord or note, but you insist there was right?” She turned the pages of her little black note pad and swapped legs yet again. John tried to look away.

“Yes there was a cord and a note. It was to me!”

“Mattia Presti. Dead. Take notes Mr Baptiste. Brotherhood of the Snake. That’s what it said isn’t it?” She read from a page in her note pad.

“Yes, exactly. What do you suppose it means?” he looked anxiously at this vision of beauty and hoped for an answer where there had been none before.

“Well, somebody is obviously trying to tell you something Mr Baptiste, may I call you John?” She relaxed a little in her chair and John couldn’t decide whether she was warming to the idea that he wasn’t in fact mad after all.

“Yes, precisely, but the police simply won’t believe me. They can’t add it up at all.”

“Well, they have their man John and that’s all they care about now. Let me see what I can do. Have you spoken to the consulate? Or the Canadian Embassy?” She stood, put her pad in her handbag and stopped the recorder.

“Yes, they have been in to see me, but they said there’s nothing they can do and that the course has to run. They asked if I wanted to contact anybody or get a lawyer. I told them to inform my peers at Oxford. That’s about it. Nothing else I can think of.” He moved sideways, his back ached and his butt was sore.

“I will do some digging John. I believe you. I don’t know why, but I believe you. I think there’s something strange happening here. You seem like an ordinary guy to me.” And with that she turned, pressed the red button near the door and waited for the nurse. John watched her go and watched as the cotton dress moved delicately against her perfectly formed behind. For the first time since the death of his wife he had an erection.

“John, wake up.” A soft whisper from an angelic being breathed words into his mind. He opened his eyes wide. He was in Africa again. The same dusty streets, the same huts, the same palaces. On his right the men jeered at him and on his left two policemen thumped sticks into their palms. The air was filled with a lament, but this time the single voice was more, it was almost a chord. The music filled his head and called him forward. Again he ran and again the great white palace, with the familiar garden and white wall evaded him. But this time he stopped dead, pulled his feet together and shouted at the top of his voice, “Nooooo. I will not do it anymore.”

Suddenly he was face down in the garden. He could hear the birds in the trees, the breeze in the willow and smell the roses and the lilies. He could feel the razor sharp flint beneath his fingers and naked body. The music had stopped and suddenly he was cold, freezing even. He drew in his legs and arms and hunched up like a baby in the womb. The cold was permeating every part of his being. His muscles seemed rigid and his bones like icicles. He shivered and rocked, his breath forming great clouds of red and white smoke to rise in the air. He watched as two dragons formed in the clouds, first a red dragon in the white cloud and then a white dragon in the red cloud. They writhed around like newborn worms until they finally saw each other and began to fight a duel to the death. He looked away, his eyes falling to the earth and then he saw the body of his naked battered wife again, lying on a bed of scented roses this time. Her body was pure white and quite still, but scarred and bruised as it always was. He scrambled to all fours cursing at the flint, which tore into his flesh, as he moved. He wanted to see her face, to touch her, to caress her, to lie with her. He drove forward through the pain of the flint and breathed a sigh of relief as he finally made it to the bed of roses. He grasped for the head and lifted it up gently from behind. The face was not hers, it was that New York reporter and her eyes were green slits like the serpent he had seen before. She opened her mouth and hissed into his face. He

dropped her head with a loud thump, keeled over into the sharp flint floor and everything faded into darkness.