

The Quest for Shambhala

*The Stone of
Destiny*

Part 1

BOOK ONE IN THE SHAMBHALA TRILOGY

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In loving memory of Tom Keeling

Forward by Author

Some time ago an unusual journal was given to me by an old acquaintance. It was delivered to me unannounced along with a letter in which he did not make it clear how the item had come to be in his possession.

After reading it, I understood its significance. After I read it, I understood that he meant for me to share its contents.

What follows is the largely unaltered content of that journal.

I ask you to read it for yourself.

DA

*(below is a copy of the letter I received along with the journal –
make of it what you will)*

David,

It is my fondest hope that this letter find you well. Too long has it been since we last spoke, but often I find myself reminiscing about that day you offered me a lift home from the hospital. Never shall I forget how in that time of sorrow you saw fit to offer help to a stranger.

Your counsel and friendship in the weeks that followed helped set me on the path I walk today; a path that has led to this very moment.

It is my recollection that you once told me of your dreams to become an author. Dreams that were made unobtainable by the absence of a story you felt passionate about. I pray that in the time since we last spoke success has come to you in a bolt of inspiration. If it has not then I believe I may now finally be able to return the help you once gave me.

Enclosed is a journal most curious in both its writing and origin – given to me as unexpectedly as it has now been to you. Its story does not yet have an ending, few stories in journals ever do, but I expect you will forgive the author this omission upon reading it.

There is inspiration here for the taking, a story that should be told. It is the beginning of a quest that is yet to fully unfold.

Read it my friend and read it well. What you do with it after that is a choice I leave to you.

Warmest Regards

A

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To You, the Finder of my Journal

If you are reading this, know that what you hold in your hands may be all that is left of me. I have carried this story, this adventure for as long as I could. My faith has been tested, my beliefs shattered, my life changed forever. These pages tell of a quest through the past and into the present, taken by those who sought the truth. The ripples of whose footsteps could still prove to affect the destiny of mankind.

My part in this story has been that of a bumbling observer, swept along on the wake of a man who dedicated his life to following a legend. It is a part that has unwittingly left me as chronicler, the one person who can pass on the knowledge and discoveries we found along the way. But my time ran out. Betrayed and taken from the light of the world, my part in this tale has now come to an end. All I can do is put my memories to paper in the hope that my story will not be lost.

If you are reading this, friend, the weight of this story must pass to you. You are my successor. You are the person upon whose shoulders I must place the great responsibility of picking up a trail that will have long gone cold.

At best guess it has been about twelve days since I was unjustly incarcerated and thrown into the dark cell I now call home. What I know of my captors and place of detainment will be revealed, but not yet. You must live this journey through my eyes and learn all you need to know the way I did.

In truth I am hoping that the writing of this journal will also help focus my mind. The abject loneliness of imprisonment is, I fear, beginning to take its toll on my sanity. The secrets contained within my memories cannot be lost to madness should I fail to escape.

The ending of my tale will no doubt contain my final words and as such I humbly request that, once you have read and used it however you feel best, you would see it brought to my family who will be, as yet, unaware of my fate. I do not wish to divulge my true identity here however. It is possible that my family and friends may already be in danger from those who imprison me. I do not wish to add to that chance should this journal fall into the hands of others who would seek to possess that which I hide. Therefore I must trust that, from the detail I do give within these pages, you will be able to figure out how best to complete this task.

I realise now that to you my words must sound somewhat incredulous and far-fetched, but please, allow me the chance to enthrall you the way I was so many years ago.

Now, where to start...

Day 2

A Night of Destiny

They've found me!

This single thought, this nerve shredding moment of realisation, was where my quest truly began. On a road between two castles, I fled a persistent enemy I had unknowingly attracted the day I offered help to a stranger. They came for a secret I carried, that much I knew. What they intended to do should they catch me, however, was a mystery I had so far managed to postpone finding the answer to.

Fear pounded in my chest as I imagined all the terrible outcomes that might await me, each one becoming more and more horrifying and far-fetched, all the while thinking how foolish I had been. With a desperate longing for excitement and adventure, I'd jumped blindly into something I had no business with.

I had left home barely two days previous to deliver a package to a friend of a friend I had only known briefly. It had been a foolish thing to do. On this day I should have been heading home. Destiny, it seemed, had other plans for me though.

Under the murky veil of a stormy summer night, the road before me seemed endless. The cone of light projected ahead by the vehicle's headlights penetrated but a short distance, leaving the dark to close in around me like a prison cell.

So dark and oppressive was this shroud that I almost didn't see the sign. With a sudden sharp turn that threw me hard against the door, I found myself heading toward an inevitable dead end. It was an action beyond my control, and the lights behind had been too close to have not seen the change in direction. The fear pounded harder.

The twists and turns of the serpentine road ahead were hard to follow. I could feel my heart beating behind my eyes, pulsing like a timer counting down to my doom.

The end to this futile escape attempt was now before me. To reach the causeway crossing that stood between me and the island, only to find that it had already been claimed by dark tidal waters, was to literally find myself caught between the devil and the deep blue sea.

I asked myself then....how had it come to this?

This is where my quest really began as I said. A traumatic wake up from the quiet life I had led before. However, it is not where my story must start. For that I need to go back two years ago to a night that was to change everything.

‘Through the stars | come. | bring the chalice
covered with shield. Within it | bring a
treasure, the gift of Orion’

Day 12 of my imprisonment

Day 64 away from home

Two Years Ago – Penrith, UK An Unexpected Friendship

It all began with a single twist of fate. I was 25, barely a man in the eyes of society, and yet my life seemed to have hit an immovable road block. In the years since leaving school at 18, I'd twice attempted to further my studies at university, tried just about every job available to someone of average qualifications and partaken in numerous volunteer projects out in South Africa. Out of a desire to find my way in the world I'd gone from shelf stacker to student to conservationist, and for the briefest of moments I was content and happy. Yet somehow, despite all this, I had ended up back home, working in a petrol station for little more than minimum wage, tied down by financial commitments to my family and constantly trying to avoid bankruptcy. Indecisive and easily bored with a tendency to quit anything that ever became too much like hard work; that was me in a nutshell.

Truthfully, I don't think I ever really knew what I wanted to do. I'd juggled so many grand ideas of how to achieve a life of worth, ignoring all sensible options in the process, that in the end I'd left myself with a worthless life. Instead of playing it safe I'd gone all in to find a job that would make me happy, only to find that I didn't have the cards to back up the gamble. Time was passing me by and I felt powerless to do anything but watch motionless; spiralling into depression with seemingly no way out. That was until the day I met a stranger with an incredible story.

It was late February and though spring was racing toward us on the calendar, winter had yet to release its icy grip on the country. Every day seemed to be cold, wet and devoid of any colour. I lived in a part of the country that was surrounded by mountains, lakes, forests and fields, and yet, whether due to the time of the year or simply my own hollow state of mind, all I could see were different shades of grey. To

make matters worse I had found myself foolishly agreeing to work night shifts for a while, desperately needing the extra money it paid. It wasn't a hard job, far from it in fact, but it was a very lonely one. The night crew consisted of just me rattling around the site with only the customers for company and, during the winter months, there weren't even many of those. Every night became the exact same bitterly cold and repetitively boring experience.

Occasionally though, someone would pull in for fuel or snacks and would stop and talk a while. They probably felt much the same as me in those early hours of the morning; grateful for a little bit of company. Some were travelling home, others to work, and some just seemed to be travelling for the hell of it. It was on just such a night that I met a man by the name of Archer.

Weathered would probably be the best way to describe his appearance, looking every inch the typical windswept traveller. Long scraggy hair framed a face impossible to age, he could have been 30 or 60 for all I knew, but his eyes suggested the experience and wisdom of advanced years. In seconds I had invented a whole back story for him based on how he looked. I imagined him to be an eternal nomad, never stopping long in one place, beholden to nothing and no one. Before ever having spoken to him I had made myself envious of the person I believed him to be. A side effect of working alone for so long I suppose; you start to make up stories for people just to give your brain something to do. As it turned out however, this time I wasn't far off the mark.

What first caught my eye about him was the fact that, unlike most customers I saw, he had walked into the forecourt, with bags hanging from every available part of his body. This admittedly may not seem such a strange thing for someone to do, except we were pretty much in the middle of nowhere sitting just off a dual carriageway on the edge of the Lake District National Park. Usually if a person came walking in it would be because they had run out of fuel somewhere along the road and they'd be carrying only a jerry can. This guy was carrying his whole life on his back, everything he owned, everything he needed looked to be packed inside those bags. He seemed to be the opposite of everything I was and yet everything I longed to be. This man was free.

During nightshifts at the petrol station the shop doors were always meant to be locked and customers served through the night hatch for

safety and security reasons. Hence when he first tapped on the window and asked if it was possible to come inside out of the cold, my first reaction was to say no. But then, for some reason, I found myself feeling that perhaps just this once I could make an exception. At the time I rationalised that this decision was due to the temperature outside having dipped below freezing (yet again), along with the fact that there was an almost visible layer of frost clinging to the poor man like an icy blanket.

However, upon opening the doors, I immediately chastised myself for doing so; fearing I had, out of pure stupidity, just let some kind of psycho killer inside who was going to murder me and rob the store. But, before I had chance to convince myself that this was true, the man gave me a warm smile that radiated kindness and somehow managed to put my mind at ease. A mere facial twitch gave me that familiar comfortable feeling you get upon meeting an old friend. In an attempt to convince myself that I wasn't being gullible, I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt for now whilst remaining wary and vigilant until he left.

'Give him a coffee,' I thought, *'let him warm up and he will be gone in no time at which point I can pretend that this odd situation had never happened.'* That's what I told myself anyway.

As he untangled his body from his bags I brought him out a chair from behind the counter and pulled the portable heater around as far as it would reach, making sure he would stay somewhere I could easily see him. Again I was trying to prove to myself that I was too savvy to be caught off guard should the man turn out to be insincere in his intentions.

As he savoured the warming effect of his coffee and stretched out on the chair with a sigh of relief, we exchanged the usual pleasantries and idle chatter of a civilised introduction before engaging in that greatest of British traditions; moaning about the weather. Truth be told it gave us plenty to talk about as already the country had experienced crippling blizzards, gale force winds, devastating floods and temperatures that dropped as low as minus twelve degrees Celsius. It didn't bode well for the rest of the year, but it did make for a very effective ice breaking conversation, if you pardon the pun.

As we talked I couldn't help noticing the strange manner in which he spoke. His tone was very relaxed and calming yet authoritative and charismatic at the same time, enriched by a vocabulary of words rarely

used by ordinary people. The combined effect made you feel that if he said the moon was made of cheese you would readily believe him, even if it was but for a few seconds until common sense kicked back in.

Eventually, I asked him where he had come from, to which he replied;

'That is a question whose answer begins a long time ago!'

I can't say why but the obscure way in which he had answered plucked at my curiosity and left me encouraging him to explain more.

He told of being born and raised in the area (although he never did say exactly where) and of how he'd grown up in a very dysfunctional family. His father was an abusive drunk at whose hands he and his mother had suffered greatly for many years.

'By the time I had reached my teens,' he went on to explain, 'I was an extremely angry and hot headed young man with no respect for authority and a complete lack of discipline. I hated my father so completely that I would rebel against him at every opportunity.'

This was something I could quite relate to, drawing certain parallels with my own childhood which dragged me deeper into his tale.

'I was forever in and out of trouble with the police, which always gave my old man a convenient excuse to beat me, not that he ever really needed one. But it was on one such occasion that my life took a turn that would lead me to the path I now walk. I suddenly realised, in an odd moment of clarity that came as but the calm before a great storm, that I was a man, bigger and stronger than he, and that I no longer had to take the abuse he gave. In a rush of emotion and painful memories, I snapped.'

He described how this confrontation had turned into such a vicious fight between father and son that there could have only ever been one outcome.

'Eventually my mother threw herself bravely between me and my victim begging me to stop. The fear and pain written across her face broke my heart, extinguishing the flame that had burned so fiercely within. In the lull that followed, my father, realising he could no longer control me, called the police and had me arrested for assault. He cast me out and told me never to darken his doorstep again. I ended up spending the night in police lock up before being released without charge on the condition that I found somewhere else to live. What hurt the most in the following days was just how little my mother

had seemed to fight for me. If not for my defiant nature, and the pure hatred I held towards my father, I do believe this moment in my life could have ruined me. Instead it served only to force me away from the place I had called home and out into the world.'

He paused at this point and a strange look came across his face, suggesting both acceptance and regret of time lost that could never be returned. What surprised me though was the fact that, despite having expressed the hate and anger he had felt for his father, there wasn't a single trace of it in his voice or on his face as he talked about the man who had failed so completely in his parental duties. This I struggled to understand as the scars left by my own father ran deep. Hating him is something I doubt I could ever give up.

When he continued he described how he had travelled the world over, stopping wherever and whenever he felt like, taking on casual work as needed to sustain himself, never staying in one place long enough to take root or form any lasting attachments.

'I was having the time of my life,' he exclaimed, *'experiencing every kind of emotion from unbridled joy to debilitating loneliness in some of the most amazing places on the planet.'*

Slightly puzzled, I asked him how he could class loneliness amongst his fondest memories, to which he replied;

'Times of hardship may not seem as great as those of happiness, yet it is through them that a man builds strength of both heart and mind.'

Curious about how he perceived such life events I asked him what was the worst experience he had endured during his aimless wanderings. He paused briefly, as if unsure what his reply should be, then somewhat cautiously said;

'What an unusual question to ask. Most people only ever want to know of a person's best experiences?'

There was a look in his eyes that unsettled me as, for the first time that evening, this seemingly all-knowing figure of calmness appeared to be ever so slightly rattled. The moment passed quickly as a look of understanding washed over him returning his previous state of composure. Ironically this actually unnerved me more as I felt like he had just looked right through me and seen something I could not.

'Well, in answer to your question,' he began, *'I suppose my worst experience would have come during my time in Asia. You see back then I was neither a considerate nor courteous traveller, holding a complete disregard and disrespect for the cultures and religions of the*

countries I visited. Being English I believed that everyone else should speak my language and accommodate my behaviour, a belief that generated some very interesting situations.’ In the back of my mind I felt a twinge of conscience for having once also held similar intolerances during my travels. ‘The more I travelled, the worse my attitude seemed to become, laughing at people’s beliefs and flouting their laws. I thought myself superior to all and untouchable for my sins. But that was all to change as I found myself travelling the border between China and Tibet. There it was that I set myself on a collision course with destiny.’

He explained how when visiting a small monastery with a girl he’d met, he decided it would be fun to steal one of their treasured statues of the Buddha, finding it rather pathetic how men would forego life’s pleasures to spend their days praying to a piece of metal.

‘I believe at the time it was a state of boredom that convinced me to do it, desiring the challenge of such a task. I didn’t want it to be a dash in and grab scenario either; that would have been too easy. No, I knew it would take planning and finesse to pull it off without being caught.’

As he described how over a couple of days he’d infiltrated the monastery as a man desperately in need of food and shelter, allowing him to scope out the place and wait for his chance, there was a genuine look of remorse on his face. If it hadn’t been for his eyes I would have been convinced that he truly regretted such an act, but there was an ever so slight twinkle of satisfaction and pride. It was something I could relate to.

‘Yet for all my planning and preparation,’ he continued, ‘the outcome of this childish prank was beyond my control; I was betrayed by the most unfortunate of timings. With the little statue, that I believe may actually have been made from solid gold judging by its weight, stuffed safely in my bag I took my leave and headed for the exit. I successfully escaped only to be confronted by a small Chinese army patrol that just happened to be passing by at that exact moment.’

There was an inference that fate had somehow orchestrated this, a concept I had to refrain from balking at.

‘Barrelling into the column of men at some speed, I found myself engulfed by a lot of shouting and pushing which resulted in me being thrown to the floor. Frantically I scrambled to retreat from the line of rifles aiming at my head; never before had I been so afraid. Hearing the commotion, a few of the monks came rushing to my aid, able to

communicate with the patrol where I could not. The rifles began to lower and I allowed myself a small sigh of relief, grateful for the timely intervention of these gracious monks. I had almost forgotten about that which I had been doing only moments earlier until one monk decided to kindly pick up my bag and pass it back to me. In a flash of panic I could see in my mind's eye what was about to happen. Not expecting the weight of the statue, the monk would be unbalanced by it and drop the bag, the flap would open, the statue would roll out, and all hell would break loose. With rifles back in my face I would be dragged away kicking and screaming by the patrol and thrown into some horrific foreign prison to await my fate...'

He left the story hanging on a pause, the strange anticipation of which had me involuntarily holding my breath. He painted such a vivid picture with his words that I found it hard not to get so caught up in the story.

'...and that is exactly what did happen,' he eventually continued. 'For two weeks I was beaten and humiliated, cast into a cell without any kind of explanation of what was to become of me. Frightened and alone, grief began to set in. I was in denial, believing what I had done did not warrant such punishment. I became angry and bitter toward the guards for my treatment, the monks for betraying me, and myself for having been so stupid. I tried bargaining with my captors for freedom. I would have done anything, given anything to be let out, but they took no notice of me. Eventually my futile efforts faded into a state of depression for knowing they probably couldn't even understand me or wouldn't have cared if they could. Finally an acceptance of my fate washed over me. I knew I was going to be either executed or left to rot. The Chinese have a very low tolerance for any crime, save those committed by their own government. My act of thievery no longer held the amusement I had anticipated and I knew my childish ignorance had this time cost me my life,' he paused, 'but that was not to be my fate...'

'FIVE, FIVE, FIVE!'

I was suddenly shocked back to reality, unceremoniously torn away from his story. It took me a few moments to realise that the voice shouting at me was that of my till indicating that someone had picked up a pump nozzle outside. Impatiently I set about serving this most inconvenient of customers, retrieving the snacks they kept indecisively

requesting from around the shop, wishing venomously that they would just go and bother someone else.

When eventually I turned away from the night hatch, I was caught by a blast of icy wind that cut straight through to my bones. Somehow it seemed to be getting colder outside and in response I decided to move my own chair around from behind the counter to join Archer by the heater. After taking a moment to absorb some warmth back into my body, I asked him to continue on, eager to hear the outcome of his story and learn how he had escaped.

'I didn't,' he stated quite simply.

A smile crept in at the edge of his mouth giving away the amusement he felt at seeing my face contort, trying to contemplate how his statement could be true.

'I was saved,' he laughed.

He went on to explain that, without warning one day, his jailers returned and dragged him out of his cell. Fearing his time had come, he was bewildered to find that he was instead being handed over to a monk. A monk he instantly recognised as being the same one that had tried to hand him back his bag.

'My mind was filled with a chaotic confusion. Why was this man here? Why were the Chinese letting me go? And why did I still feel resentment towards he who had just saved my life? The monk led me away from the prison, which for the first time I could now see was half built into the side of a mountain making it almost impossible to see by anyone who did not know it was there. As we walked he explained that, despite my betrayal of their trust, they could not have knowingly left me to die at the hands of the Chinese. His name was Ling and as we walked he told me of how he was relatively new to the monastery and to the Buddhist way of life. His family had been forced from their home by the Chinese during their initial invasion of the country. Left homeless and starving, they were eventually taken in by the very monastery he now devoted his life to in gratitude. It was only then that I realised just how badly I had abused their generosity with my story of being in need of shelter. Consumed by such guilt, I almost missed the well-disguised resentment and hatred he still held toward the Chinese for what they had done. Of course this was entirely understandable, but it surprised me nonetheless. Through what little I knew of Buddhism, I imagined them all to be a naturally peaceful and forgiving people who could rise above the common emotions that

weigh heavy in the hearts of others. It is sometimes all too easy to forget that you cannot judge the quality of a painting simply because it was painted with the same brush as many others,' I couldn't quite decide if his words were an eloquent insight or an ill-conceived attempt at one. 'Eventually I asked how he had managed to secure my release from that horrible place and, with a trace of smugness, he explained that he had simply told the commander of the patrol that they had been mistaken in their assumption of my thievery and that the statue had been a gift to me. Furthermore, he explained how I was to aid them in the renovation and upkeep of the monastery, which needed expanding due to the increase of homeless people arriving there. I realised then that, although they would never ask it of me, it was expected that I would now fulfil this role in thanks for my freedom,' he looked mournfully distant as he talked of this moment. Despite feeling that there was more that Ling was not telling me about my release, I asked no more questions and happily offered to work for them as implied. It was, after all, the least I could do considering they had gifted me a second chance at life.'

That whole experience had changed him forever. He had been a broken man in the prison and a re-born one in the monastery. He told of how being truly humbled by the pure generosity and un-questioning selflessness of the monks had eventually lead him to learn their ways and become a Buddhist himself. Six years he lived there, feeling a sense of peace and belonging that had until then been missing from his life.

Eventually I asked him what had made him leave such a place and he answered thusly;

'In my last year there I had begun to have strange dreams. Dreams of people and places I had never seen nor been to before. I discussed these visions with the head of the monastery on a number of occasions. He was a great man, both wise and compassionate, and together we agreed that these dreams were a sign that the time had come for me to leave the monastery and find their meaning. He believed that through doing so I would begin to heal the wounds of my earlier life and eventually bring peace to my soul. And so, for the second time in my life, I left my home and the people I called family to travel the world once more. This time, however, I was no longer filled with anger and hatred. This time I was setting off with a tranquil mind and a

determination to do good in the world whilst ever expanding my knowledge and understanding of Buddhism and the spirit of man.'

And that is exactly what he did. From aid work in Africa to conservation work in South America, he travelled the world on a shoe string helping people in any way he could and only taking money for it when the time had come to move again. Occasionally he would meet other travelling Buddhists on their own journeys of discovery and join them for a while to learn from their knowledge. It was during these times that he began to discover many of the old legends of Tibet and the Buddhist religion. He repeatedly heard talk of a fabled place called Shambhala and a great power that resided there, along with an ancient prophecy that seemed to describe the world as it currently was.

'When the earth seems lost to greed and materialism, terrible battles will engulf the nations of the world. The age of man will reach its climax of bloodshed and the people of Shambhala will rise up to cleanse mankind's corruption,' he recounted it to me.

'Wow!' I said, feeling it was an appropriate response, despite my scepticism of such things, 'So, when is this "climax of bloodshed" supposed to come about?'

'Many dates have been suggested for the time of the great rising,' he replied, *'but all seem to agree that the countdown will begin with the ending of the ancient Mayan calendar in 2012.'*

'2012?' I said with modicum of genuine surprise, *'That's next year. When was the prediction made?'* I asked curiously, *'It's quite eerie really if you think about it, the prediction for the state of the world is already sounding alarmingly accurate.'*

'I am inclined to agree with you there my friend, its words do seem to ring ominously true,' he replied. *'As for when they were first spoken, I have not been able to clarify. Do not give this cause for doubting its authenticity mind, in Tibet such foresights are seen only by the wisest of the Lamas; men who do not waste words frivolously.'*

It was an interesting idea and there was an intriguing accuracy to the prediction, but believing that people could see the future was too far-fetched for me. Not because I cynically believe that people who claim to see the future are just peddlers of cheap parlour tricks designed to con the gullible (even though I do by the way) but rather because I cannot stomach the idea of there being a future to see. To believe that there was a future meant believing that my life had already happened and that there was nothing I could do to change my

“destiny”. If I believed this then what point would there be in ever trying to make my life better? If it did get better in the future then I might as well sit back and just wait for it happen, if it didn’t then there was nothing I could do to change it so why bother trying?

Anyway, all that is beginning to make my head hurt so I think I should just get back to my story. You can at least understand now why I was so sceptical of what Archer was saying.

‘This is but one of many prophecies regarding the rise of Shambhala as I said,’ he continued on. *‘Some give different dates, and some seem to differ on their opinions of just what such a time will bring, but all are in agreement that it will happen this century and that it will herald in a new age of man. Of course, the coincidence with the ending of the Mayan calendar has led some to believe it is in fact a prophecy of Armageddon.’*

‘I don’t usually go in for that whole “End of the World” stuff if I’m really honest,’ I said, trying to hide a returning scepticism. *‘I mean, in my time alone there have been umpteen predictions that have come and gone without even so much as a change in the weather.’*

‘Initially I too was somewhat sceptical as to the substance of such predictions, but the stories of Shambhala piqued my interest regardless and I found myself wanting to know more; intrigued by the idea of an undiscovered civilisation lost in time. Thus I began my own research into it.’

Curiously I asked him why this legend was not known in the West; we knew of others such as the lost city of Atlantis so why not this one? He fixed me with a look of one about to drop a bombshell....and then did.

‘But my friend you almost certainly have heard of it. You just know it as Shangri-La.’

My mind raced! I had heard of it, most people have, Shangri-La, Heaven on earth, a place where all is good. It couldn’t really exist could it?

A feeling came over me that I can’t quite describe. It was almost as if a piece of my life had fallen into place, like I was meant to be here on this night. Long had I dreamed of having been born back in the days when there was still uncharted places in the world. When blank areas on the map cried out to those willing to set off into the unknown in search of great treasures and perilous adventure. And now there I was, standing on the edge of those dreams made real. Excitedly I

wanted to know more but, before I could ask him about his research, a look of sadness drifted across his face.

'Unfortunately,' he began, 'my journey was prematurely cut short. During my time at the monastery, finding a degree of inner peace, I forced myself to write a letter home. Much to my surprise, about a month later, I received a reply from my mother. After much apologising and bridge mending we began to keep a regular correspondence going which was a real comfort, especially during some of the more difficult times of my travels.'

There was warmth in his voice as he talked about his mother that warned me of what was to come. It was the warmth of remembering a loved one passed.

'Then one day I received a strange letter. At that time I was living and working in an Ethiopian aid camp that, rather fortunately, had quite a regular mail supply all things considered. The letter was addressed in a hand writing I did not recognise. As I held it in my hand I could feel the weight of news I did not wish to receive. Somehow I knew something bad had happened and the opening of the letter proved this to be true. It was from a friend of my mother apologising for telling me what she was about to tell me in a letter and not in person but that she had found no other contact details for me in my mother's things. My heart sank. As I read on she described of how my parents had been in a serious car accident and were both critically ill in hospital. Without a second thought I gathered my few possessions, made my apologies for such a sudden departure and set off on a long journey to the home of my youth. I hoped and prayed to any gods that would listen I could make it back in time to stand at my mother's side.'

His eyes were glazed with tears and a catch in his voice told me that his emotions were still quite raw. I knew before he continued he had not been granted his wish.

It had taken roughly a week for the letter to get to him and, due to his lack of money, it had then taken him nearly two weeks to get home. In the end he was just too late. They told him his mother had been a fighter, as if she was holding on for something, but her injuries were just too severe.

'I was inconsolable; filled with both sadness and rage. She had held on knowing I would be coming but I had taken far too long. I had failed her. Through my faith I would eventually find solace. In the

teachings and mantras of Buddha I would find the strength to pull through. But there in that terrible moment, I simply wished I could have seen her one last time.'

There fell an uncomfortable silence between us as he seemed to reflect on the memory and I sat not knowing if I was meant to offer condolences, try to lighten the mood or just keep my mouth shut. Social etiquette in such situations has never been my strongest trait.

'It was then that I was told of how my father still lived,' he at last continued, bringing an welcome end to my indecisive battle. *'A million and one emotions and thoughts raced through my mind, twisting my soul into two halves. One side still held all the resentment of old joined now by blame for the death of my mother, yet on the other side came the monk I had become pushing me to make things right with this man to heal the wound in my heart that had been the greatest of all. The doctor told me that, whilst he had survived his surgery and was now conscious, they had not been able to repair all the damage and it was only a matter of time until he too passed on. I think it was this knowledge that made me realise, should I not attempt to right things with him, my only chance of true redemption would soon be gone. In her letters to me, my mother had tried to explain that he was no longer the tyrant I had known. For all his spilt anger at the time, my disappearance and complete lack of contact had broken him. He realised too late the error of all he had done,'* a pained smile crossed his face as he talked of this.

'She said he had been delighted at the sight of my first letter. His relief at knowing I was alive and well had apparently given him a new lease of life. I had never responded to anything about him though, and sitting here now I cannot think why.'

Archer told me of how he eventually plucked up the courage to go and see him and of how his mother had been right; he was not the man he remembered. They talked for hours, convincing the nursing staff to let him stay well after visiting hours were over, but he wouldn't go into any detail about what they talked about. He simply said;

'After some painful tears, difficult apologies, hard truths and time catching up on each other's lives, we finally embraced as a father and son at peace. Later that evening he drifted off into a sleep from which he never woke.'

He said it had been a liberating feeling, unloading the baggage he had carried all his life. Despite the sadness of losing both parents, and

of never having the chance to speak to his mother in person again, he felt truly happy in himself for the first time in as long as he could remember.

For many years he went back to live in his parents' house. He spent much of his time initially sorting out all the things that need sorting after someone dies. But eventually he returned his concentration to the furthering of his research into Shambhala and his studies of Buddhism. He said he had ended up staying far longer than he originally wanted, but there had been something keeping him. Almost a need to make peace with the home he had once hated as he had done with his parents.

'And that basically leads us up to date my young friend, sat here as we are on this night,' he said with an endearing smile.

I sat back in my chair, mentally exhausted by the intensity of my engrossment in his story, and looked at Archer in amazement. It was only then that my eye was caught by a necklace he wore around his neck.

'Where did you get your necklace from?' I asked him.

I realise now that it was an odd question to hit him with, one that had nothing to do with our previous conversation, but I couldn't help my curiosity. It would later prove to be an important observation.

In response to my query, he looked down to where the necklaces pendant rested upon his chest.

'This here?' he said lifting it up against the back of his hand, *'I made it myself many years ago'*

'The pendant looks like a claw. What's it made out of?' I inquired further.

'Well, that is an interesting story all of its own,' he replied enticingly, *'Alas I fear we have not the time to talk of it. The time has come for me to be back on my way, I have kept you from your work for too long already.'*

I sat for a moment in stunned silence as he started to get up, feeling as if someone had just ripped the next page out of a good book before I could read it. I had to think fast; think of a way to make him stay a while longer.

'Wait, it's still below freezing outside,' I enthusiastically pointed out. *'I don't know where it is you are heading, but nowhere is going to be open at this time of the morning. You might as well stay here a little longer and keep warm.'*

'Are you sure? What about your work?' he asked considerately.

'Hell, all I have left to do really is clean the floor and, to be honest, at this time of year it's like pissing into the wind anyway. Come five o'clock when I open the doors it'll take all of ten minutes for the farmers and workmen to muck it up again with their dirty boots. Seriously, sit yourself back down and let me fetch us some more coffee.'

'Thank you my young friend,' he said whilst making himself comfortable again, *'I will not turn down such hospitality.'*

With warm cups in hand and the quietness of the night falling around us once more, I subtly suggested he continue with his story about the necklace.

'So, you were about to tell me about your necklace?' I prompted. It had sounded subtle in my head at least.

'Ah yes,' he replied with a knowing grin, *'Well, during my travels I spent some time in Southern Africa,'* he paused briefly, *'a part of the world I would say you too have visited by the way your eyes just light up.'*

His assumption was correct. I had travelled there a few times after leaving University on various conservation projects, mostly in South Africa. From the very first time I set foot there, I'd felt an affinity with the place that has stayed with me ever since. When I told him this he simply smiled and nodded, allowing me to reminisce about my own adventures there. It had been a long time since I'd had someone to talk to that wasn't already bored of my stories, so I revelled in the chance to do so. Eventually I realised that I had rudely interrupted his own story and apologetically urged him to continue.

'It is in Zimbabwe where the roots of this tale lie,' he started, *'must have been late 1984 I think it was. Time for me past very differently then, a day's length was judged by how long the sun stayed above the horizon and not by the hands on a clock. I had no use for modern time measurements, no need to record the days of the week or even the months of the year.'*

I knew the pace of life he talked of, I had experienced it myself. It is pace at which you can actually enjoy time as it passes rather than spend your time chasing after it.

'I was working as a missionary of sorts, much as I had been everywhere else I travelled, offering aid and assistance to whomever could find use for it,' he paused briefly, *'actually, that's not entirely*

true. My time in Zimbabwe had a more deliberate purpose. Early on in 84 food supplies to Matabeleland were disrupted by President Mugabe's Army and much of the Ndebele population who lived there suffered food shortages. Upon hearing of this I decided to cut short my travels in neighbouring Botswana and join an aid caravan trying to get over the border with food packages and in an attempt to scout out a safe supply route into the area. It turned out to be a very gruelling trip that tested my faith and my will to their limits. The things I saw became nightmares burned forever into my waking mind,' at distant look of pain appeared briefly on his face before he continued, 'For the most part our mission was successful in that we managed to establish a sustainable aid supply into the Lupane District, a rural area of Matabeleland, which at that time was reasonably peaceful. I spent my day's travelling between the small villages and providing the aid caravans with "shopping lists" of what was needed and where. It was upon one such day that the finding of this pendant occurred. I was walking a road between two villages that had become quite familiar to me with a family whose hospitality I had recently been enjoying. Counting many of the locals within the number of my friends I had come to learn of many useful shortcuts along those roads, one of which I intended to use that day. Arriving at the start of the shortcut I had to part ways with the family to take it. You see, although convenient, travelling that path was a risk a father would not make with his children for it involved leaving the relative safety of the well-used road for the wildness of the untamed bush. I respected his reasons and likely would have been just as cautious had I been in his position. However, I had already used the trail a number of times before and felt confident that the respectful traveller could walk it with relative safety. Needless to say I was somewhat startled that day to then find myself happening upon the freshly killed remains of an antelope lying at a turn in the trail. Judging by the size of the animal, and the size of its wounds, I deduced that the owner of this hardly touched meal was probably quite large and almost certainly still close by. Realising the potential danger this find had put me in I quickly made the decision to about face, return to the road and take the long way round to my destination. Rather stomach the extra distance, I thought, than find myself being stomached by a wild animal.'

I'd had experiences like this myself and therefore knew exactly how dangerous the situation would have been. You never want to disturb a wild animal on a kill.

'Before I left the gruesome scene however, I noticed something imbedded in the hind quarters of the poor creature. An admittedly ill-advised closer inspection revealed it to be a rather large claw that must have snapped off during the hunt. Yet another reason to make a hasty retreat one might say, the predator in question likely to already be of a foul disposition as a result of its injury. But for all the warnings in my head, I felt an inexplicable desire to retrieve the claw and take it with me. It was a task, however, that proved to be quite difficult, so deeply hooked into the hardened hide was it. When finally I managed to dislodge the claw, I stood looking at the fruits of my labour. The foolishness of this action was revealed by a low rumbling growl vibrating through the ground behind. I had lingered too long. Slowly turning, I found myself locking eyes with the cold, unyielding stare of a young male lion. As a primal fear of the savage beast awoke inside me I stood unmoving, terrified by the sight of the sheer untamed force of nature staring me dead in the eye. As clichéd as it may sound, in the moments that passed I felt my life pass before my eyes as I waited for the inevitable attack and the sinking razor sharp fangs into my soft flesh. I closed my eyes in acceptance of my terrible fate.....but it never came. With time seeming to have stalled before me, I opened my eyes believing for a moment that I may have now been but a disembodied spirit about to look upon the ending of my mortal life. Instead what I saw was the regal beast eying me with a complete disinterest having judged me no threat to its meal. With a dismissive snort it proceeded to simply walk past me with an air of indifference and returned to his kill. Whether by luck or fate, I had been spared a horrific death. Maybe it wasn't my time to go or perhaps it was simply the fact that the lion had no reason to attack me with an already caught and killed meal waiting behind me, who knows? What I do know though is that it wasn't the only lucky escape I had that day,' he paused for a moment staring off into the distance as he rubbed the pendant with his thumb. When at last I unfroze enough to cautiously back away from the scene, knowing that it is never wise to turn your back on a predator, I suddenly heard a series of rapid gun shots off in the distance. It came from the direction of the road! I ran back along the trail and arrived at the road side with just enough time to duck down behind a bush as a truck full of machine

gun wielding troops drove past. Praying they wouldn't see me, a sickening feeling rose up from the pit of my stomach upon catching a glimpse of the red berets the men were wearing. The most distinguishable feature of the Fifth Brigade, Mugabe's personal death squad, is not something you easily forget. Watching them pass, praying that I wouldn't be spotted, I broke from cover as soon as it felt safe and I ran in the direction they had come from. Though I desperately wished it was not so I was now unable to deny the truth...Mugabe's dark hand had finally reached Lupane,' the paling of his face as he prepared to continue came as a warning of what was to come. I ran like you would through treacle, a part of me knowing I would not want to see what lay before me, yet on I plunged preparing myself for the worst. Never could I have been ready enough though for what I found. Lying at the side of the road where the bullet riddled bodies of my former host and his family, murdered in cold blood. Ever shall the image of a father lifelessly slumped over his wife and young children, in a futile attempt to shield them from the searing force of the bullets that pierced their bodies, be burned into my soul. Dropping to my knees I was without words or cries that could express my pain. Death is a sight you cannot un-see.'

His eyes stared off into a memory so vividly painted by raw emotion that it felt as if I too had looked upon that harrowing scene.

'Had I not stopped to retrieve the Lions claw,' he continued, whilst noticeably trying to re-bury the sorrow that had come flooding back to him, 'and subsequently had the run in with the Lion itself, chances are that I would have been out on the road as those bastards drove by. After that day my time in Zimbabwe was short. The presence of the Fifth Brigade made it too dangerous for aid workers to stay in the region and so we had little choice to pull out. I left Southern Africa within the week never to return, for a part of me died there in the blood soaked sands of Zimbabwe. A part of me I have long since tried to forget,' with that he fell silent, and out of respect I made no attempt to push him any further.

'So!' he said eventually with a deep intake of breath that startled me, 'I shaved the lion claw down like this and have worn it ever since as a symbol of luck and as a reminder that things always happen for a reason.'

The sudden abruptness to the end of his story left me feeling a bit disorientated. As reality slowly fell back into place around me, I found

myself staring upon the necklace with wistful eyes. I had become fascinated by lions ever since having had my own encounters with them out in the African Bush and would have given anything to have a necklace like that. Were it not for the strong emotional attachment I now knew that he had for it, I think I'd have tried to buy it from him. It was one piece of jewellery that I would never forget.

Archer's Necklace^[1]

