

By: Troy Tieuel

To: M,

*I was delighted to have met you along the river, young M.
The food was excellent and the conversation intriguing.*

Malik read the note. His eyes traced the delicate letters and his fingers felt the soft texture of the gold leaf parchment. He remembered what his friend Shalom had told him, “That man is rich. So rich that he could make you rich and not care, or destroy you and not notice.”

They had met through sheer coincidence. Malik was fishing when the man stumbled through his secret fishing spot and asked Malik to assist him on a leisurely cruise in his boat. The price paid was much more than Malik would have asked for even if he was being greedy, but he accepted as if it was charity, and they sailed down the river.

The air surrounding the tiny man was touched with regality. His speech was clean and knowledgeable. His cloths even seemed to be made out of the sturdiest materials. He was a foreigner, a European whose fair skins and Christian Culture became a staple in his African community many generations before either was born. This man was a poster child for the ideal European lifestyle: Adventurousome, free-spirited, and rich beyond belief.

After some sailing, and as more fish filled their buckets, they decided to stop along the bank and the man made a fire. Malik helped him clean and gut the fish. He seemed very interested in mostly everything Malik had to say; even down to the way he split the fish’s side and allowed the innards to fall back into the bucket. “Why don’t you toss that?” the man asked with his face twisted.

“That will be our seasoning”, Malik said, “to add flavor as we cook.” The man didn’t seem too impressed with using the entrails of the gutted fish as seasoning and insisted that they also use some salt and pepper that he had in his pack.

We discussed an item for a price not yet agreed.

For the young, heritage means nothing. Children are born, with no cares other than their own needs, and it usually remains that way until they grow older. “For an item like that,” Malik remembered the man saying while they ate fish by the silent river, “I’d give,” he paused to swallow, “a hundred thousand gold...at least!” The man twirled his fancy mustache and the rate of his chew slowed. He adjusted his hat to the bright sun, its rays seeming as surreal as the conversation, “But can you get it?” he asked as his unblinking eyes studying every part of Malik’s reaction.

If you are not interested, do not respond.

Malik read the lines again. His reading and writing in that foreign tongue was good. His father had insisted that he learned the foreigner’s language. “They control the world,” his father said to him after his first year of schooling, “Their language is the language of business in the New World. The days of the old Heshep Tribe are done. The Europeans are changing our culture, blending it with theirs...” At that time Malik was at the point of quitting and it gave him the inspiration to complete his studies. In the process he had accepted this new culture as his, and began to look down upon his own.

For a second he thought to trash the letter and be done with all the stringy haired Europeans. “They smell like dogs!” his mother had said, “They bring with them diseases never heard of. They are a dirty, filthy people with evil ways. They will pollute your mind, just as they polluted our beautiful forest.”

If you are, then tell no one,

He read the next line. As he did, he viewed the valley that spanned the difference between his native village and the rich European community that had erupted from the woods spreading across the far hill and framed the sunset. Once its trees became a silhouette before the stars for long gazes, and now they were matched by the European gas lanterns that lined the rows of mansions and houses. Still, the view was inspirational, as if the very stars had fallen in place to guide the Europeans home. The stars convinced him that his path was wise.

“Once you start doing business with them, and the first deal is good,” his school buddy told him a little later in their conversation, “Your good as gold. In for life...or until you mess up!”

When Malik received the letter through personal messenger, his first thought was to consult his friend, but had decided to not show him the letter, and to delicately word his questions. He knew his friend would eventually pry the truth out of him or make up something that he had assumed and then all of Heshep would know.

*But quietly arrive at
Three Hundred and Twenty-Four
Fairview Street, Inglewood*

Malik felt underdressed for the occasion. He wore his fathers old Dashiki with the families warrior class crest on the back, and not the close fitting pants suits with the jackets and handkerchiefs that the Europeans prided themselves on wearing. Neither the leather shoes with the buckles, but the cloth sandals that tied to the knee, and the pants that flared out at the calf. At any Heshep Function he would be considered to be dressed like royalty, but to the Europeans he was dressed like a jester.

Fairview Street was the widest street in the area, and made up the view from across the valley as it winded around what was left of the Talisharoe Forest and bisected the Inglewood Settlement. As Malik walked down the wide street, he marveled at the craftsmanship and the engineering that had come with the European explorers so many years ago. Now their ‘Ports’ dotted the coasts and the people who worked for them seemed to be all very successful.

On the first night of the Marti-Gra.

The Marti-Gra was an event unlike any other. For one, there were parades every day for two weeks leading up to the weeklong event. The port of Inglewood played host to the mass party that inaugurated the beginning of the festivities. Now that Malik was nearing the far end of the street, he could see down the hill towards the huge Port.

The docks were ablaze with lights and activities. There people strolled too and fro, some drunk, some in groups, but all with the brightly colored jewelry that marked the

symbol of the event. How anybody could just throw jewelry to the wind like that, he thought. Are they so rich that they could just be reckless and carefree?

The people crowded the streets and in the buildings, all of which were multiple stories high with people hung off the balconies, cheering, and throwing beads. The entire Port was a huge party with both European, and Heshep musicians entertaining the crowds.

*Come Disguised under the mask of night,
Not past Eleven. Not before Ten.*

The funny thing about this holiday celebration was that some of the people wore masks. They disguised themselves and did all kinds of unspeakable things. Usually the people wore masks that had something to do with some spirit or angel, so Malik wore his father's ceremonial war mask, as some of his people did, to give praise to the spirits of their Heshep forefathers. He didn't know much about the historical meaning of the event, but Malik knew that it had something to do with the spirits and religion, because all the Europeans went to church on the day following and acted like the party never happened.

Malik looked forward to it and couldn't wait until he could get down there and participate, especially after the business with this European made him a rich man. For now that could wait, Malik thought as he stood in before the front yard looking down the arcing drive and reading the address that was written adjacent to a gas lantern, "Three Hundred and Twenty-Four," he said.

*Come alone. Come alert, ready to barter.
Bring only One bag, in it place the prize.
Come to the front door marked: "Grand Entrance"
Enter, the door will be unlocked.*

The building was immaculate, fine furnishings and every type of unique item lined the walls, sat on dressers and along thin ledges that stood just at eye level. The sheer vastness of the building was awe-inspiring, unfathomable that this was someone's home. Unbelievable that anyone could live here alone and keep it so tidy.

Down the hall Malik slowly strolled. He had never been here before, but followed detailed instructions immaculately hand written on the piece of fine parchment.

*Walk left, down the entryway to
The second grand door marked 'Librarian'.
Enter, and Wait until the tones sound.*

This was the home of Sir Theodore Specton, Philanthropists, and fine arts dealer. His riches were sung of in song, and whispered like legend. An old man, Sir Theodore had become eccentric, reverting into his home and taking long global voyages around the world. He communicated only via written messages and meeting in secret. It was pure luck to befriend someone so rich, Malik thought, as he studied the imported oak columns and the fancy moldings on the clearstory stain glass windows.

Malik looked at the grand painting of the man he met and read the name that was stamped into the metal molding 'Sir Theodore Specton of Great Britain'. In the painting Theodore stood with three great dogs, one spotted black and white, one reddish brown, and one gloss black. In one hand he held a golden chain linked leash the split to the three dogs. In the other hand he held a hunting musket known as an elephant gun.

"We did all this fishing and you've paid me well, but," Malik said to Theodore on that first day before they parted ways, "you never told me your name."

"What is in a name?" Theodore said, "Just call me Sir."

Malik passed by several doors before coming to the one marked 'Librarian'. He fearlessly pushed the large door open. With a low-pitched creak it slid revealing a room filled with more books than Malik had ever seen in one place.

Malik looked back to the parchment.

*Go through the door and sit in the smallest chair.
Wait there.*

'Door?', Malik thought looking around and passed the books that lined the walls and many shelves. Compared to the other rooms, this one felt smaller. The fine crystal chandelier that produced the light for the room sat so low that Malik could touch the crystals that hung like loose ice sickles. There were plenty of books, but no doors. He walked around the room, adjusting his long shoulder bag.

After going in circles for about fifteen minutes, Malik gave up and sat in the center of the room frustrated. The room contained, in addition to books, trinkets that

marked Sir Theodore's travel and heritage. One of the biggest was a replica of Big Ben, a great clock built in Europe. The clock struck eleven and sounded off in the low tunes of Bach's Air of G-Minor.

A sliding sound commanded Malik's attention. He jerked to attention noticing a small door in the wall that he hadn't seen before.

He rose and ventured through the small door. Inside was a smoky room that was set up like an office but with two chairs one larger than the other, both immaculately detailed, split by an oak table that supported a steaming teapot.

The larger chair swung around and sitting in it was Sir Theodore, smiling as he had done when Malik caught the first of their fish. From the nose up, his face was covered by a black mask with silver and gold frills that matched the beads around his neck.

"I am delighted that you had taken me up on my offer. Did you bring the item?" Theodore asked.

"Yes." Malik said feeling nervous, but not moving to show it.

"Did you have any trouble getting it?"

"No," Malik said, "It is mine. My father is very sick and fears his death. He gave it to me when he saw me looking at it yesterday."

"An air loom?" Theodore asked poring himself some tea, "Tea?"

"Yes, please," Malik said remembering all the politeness he had learned in the mission school, "What is an 'air loom'?"

"This tea is from China," Theodore said purposely changing the subject, "It is called Cha." Theodore poured a cup full for Malik. "It's full of flavor. Do you smoke?" Theodore handed Malik a fresh cigar and Malik lit it on the candle that centered the table.

"Can I ask you a question, Sir?" Malik asked exhaling fine smoke from his chiseled jaws.

"Sure, young Malik, ask me anything."

"I was told that your people were here to pillage our land and destroy our culture. Is that true?"

Theodore choked on the smoke. "You were educated at the Queen's Mission School correct?"

“Yes.” Malik said.

“Do you think that if we were here to pillage and destroy that we would build schools and spread civilization? Oh no son, someone has been feeding you lies. But I will say this,” Theodore ashed his cigar and pulled out a bottle from under the table, “There are evil people in every community, from the lowliest savage village, to the wealthiest British settlement. Hateful people that don’t want to see others prosper. I like a little Brandy in my tea, you?” Theodore poured some of the brown liquid into his tea then into Malik’s.

“My family is in my community what you would call: royalty.” Malik started but was interrupted.

“You come from good stock, yes.” Theodore inhaled deeply tasting his smoke.

“Before the Europeans came, my grandfather was a Chaotic Warrior for our King Mazula. The first settlers came and he allowed them to settle along these very coasts, but soon the settlers overwhelmed the coasts and demanded more land. When King Mazula refused, your Great Britain sent troops and the war began. Ten years that ravaged the coast and destroyed our cities. When it was all over, Mazula had died and the Heshep Counsel was disbanded and in its place was the ‘Democratic Elections’ that we have today.”

*There we will eat, drink, socialize,
And come to an understanding
That should be profitable for both of us.*

Theodore sipped his Cha and allowed Malik to speak for some time before he interrupted, “Change. Change is inevitable. What you said is true. Those things happened, the European Settlements became over populated and your King refused to be flexible. Your great King brought forth his military against the interests of Great Britain; a pity the war resulted in his death. But that is all over now. Done by or too neither one of us, but these are things that our fathers and grandfathers went through before we were born. Now, both our people live in peace.”

“Yes! The banner of Great Britain flies high above Heshep!” Malik yelled feeling the Brandy, “and the royal family is in poverty.” He finished his cup and placed it clumsily on the table. “And the richest man in Heshep wants to buy its history as a, how

did you say, 'souvenirs'." Malik laughed, "You laugh at my culture, mach us for our trusting stupidity."

"I didn't know you felt that way. When we talked, you seemed rather unpatriotic, even pro-British." Theodore refreshed Malik's drink. "The tobacco in your cigar is from a place called India. They are a lot like your people, because they too allowed British settlements into their lands, but their Kings didn't set up unfair trade agreements or attack us with their armies, and now they are prosperous. The Indian that rolled these cigars father is rich. They want nothing but extended profits, and for us to smoke good."

"That man we spoke of by the river," Malik began, "The one that beheaded your British General."

"Yes, General Pasalt."

"The man that killed your general was my grandfather."

"I figured as much when you told me your father gave you the item." Theodore refreshed his own drink adding extra Brandy, and leaned back. "I hope that doesn't make you uncomfortable, now that the Chaotic Warriors were...disbanded." Theodore really wanted to say killed, but held his tongue.

Malik said nothing but finished his Cha and placed the cup down for it to be refilled.

"Your grandfather, Mustafa, was a great warrior. His legend is known all the way back to Great Britain. This is what makes art valuable. The legend." Theodore blew a smoke ring, and tossed Malik a folded bunch of papers tied with some string. "Open it."

"What is it?" Malik asked picking it up from his lap and unfolding it.

"It's called the 'Gold Coast Bulletin' it's a report of what's going on here in Inglewood."

"Heshep," Malik corrected him.

"Well it focuses on the Inglewood Settlements. There's something about your grandfather written there on the back page. They detail the whole story."

"This drawing does not look like my grandfather." Malik said.

"That doesn't matter," Theodore, said with a chuckle, "What's important is that the Museum of Great Britain is ready to give a substantial amount for historical artifacts."

"What is a 'substantial amount'?" Malik asked.

“One thousand gold for you and your family, and if used intelligently, it should be more than enough to pull your kin out of poverty.” Theodore took away the Cha and poured fresh glasses of Brandy.

Malik pulled around his large leather bag and prepared to open it.

“Is that my prize?” Theodore sat forward with delight and greedily sipped his Brandy.

“Possibly, but where is mine?” Malik smiled as Theodore pulled out a case and opened it exposing a multitude of golden coins.

Malik unraveled the leather straps and exposed his grandfathers Kumale’ Blade. The golden brown hilt curved slightly and was fitted to the proportions of the owner. Malik lifted the steal and stood, holding it high above his head as the Heshep Warriors did on the day of their inauguration, the clean blade glowing in the candlelight. Theodore looked closely at the engravings on the curved hilt, and noted the leather sash that marked the highest rank of a Kumale’ Warrior, the Sect of the Chaotic. It’s real, Theodore thought as Malik stood above him, they’d give me at least a million in gold.

“For pride in country. For honor of our family. For the advancement of the Nation of Heshep.” Malik began translating the Kumale’ code in English, as he had done so many times before in school. Theodore cheered, guzzling the last of his glass, and as he finished the gleaming curved steal came down upon him and he screamed.

I hope to see you soon.

Sincerely,

Sir