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(Sample Excerpts from Book 2 Chapters - Please note excerpts are not full chapters and may be subject to change.)

THE PRIEST'S SECRET

Book 2 of the Tomb, the Temple, the Treasure

By

BEN HAMMOTT

Jon Creed's Home, France - 2010

An antique armchair covered in a tapestry type design had been placed by the fireplace. Next to the chair stood a low table on top of which Creed had placed a small decanter of whisky and a crystal glass tumbler. Reaching across the bed for the suitcase he had placed there earlier, Ben dragged it towards him. Releasing the catches, he lifted the lid and took out Rivière's journal. Carrying it over to the fireplace he slouched in the armchair and poured himself a drink from the decanter. Taking a large sip of the smooth liquid, he savoured the sensation of it warming his throat.

I must ask Guy where he gets this.

Ben traced a finger over the gold embossed inscription on the cover, Father Jean Rivière.

Opening the journal to the first page, Ben stared at the handwriting of Father Rivière, which was neat and readable. He wondered what secrets l'Abbe Rivière would reveal. Would it reveal the Mystery of Bérenger Saunière and the true source of his sudden wealth? He started reading to find out.

I will never forget the words that spewed forth from the dying Saunière, a fellow priest and a good friend who I am now unable to forgive. He has taken away everything I held dear, my faith, my Lord, My God. Though Saunière's confession has I fear ruined my life, I feel the secret he confided in me is of too great importance to be lost with my dying breath. I write faithfully here in this journal, those words etched on my soul. Maybe in the future Saunière will be proved wrong, or times will change and the shocking secret I now divulge will be shocking no more.

God rest our souls.

Ben paused to take another drink of whisky before turning the page eager to read on.

It was a stormy night, unusual for the time of year, June. Saunière said he remembered the day as if it was yesterday. He remembered thinking at the time, that he hoped the villagers would be more welcoming than the weather.

A flash of lightning lit up the page. Ben glanced at the window as it again rattled with the force of the loud crack of thunder that filled the room. Turning back to the book, he continued reading...

Couiza, France – June 1st 1885

The narrow road that ran through the small village of Couiza was typical for France in the 1800's. Lined with houses whose windows were covered by closed shutters that gave the impression that the town was deserted. The only signs of life to shatter this illusion came from the dim orange light escaping through the small arched windows of the old stone built inn and the muffled sounds of voices drifting out from inside. The owners of the voices just shapes of colour through the dust grimed windows.

The sounds became louder as the door suddenly opened flooding the street with a yellow rectangle of light with the stretched shadow of a lone figure cast at its centre. Stepping out into the street the man casting the shadow let the old weathered door swing shut behind him. It banged against the frame to which it surprisingly still fit snugly. The man was dressed all in black. The only splash of colour came from the light brown holdall held in his left hand. Fashioned from leather, the scuff marks that covered its surface were evidence of its well-travelled use. He pressed the wide brimmed hat that shadowed his face tighter onto his head in an effort to prevent the gusting wind from whipping it off. Tugging the collar of his long robe tighter around his neck in an attempt to ward off the chilly wind, he strode purposefully along the deserted street. Behind him the sounds inside the inn became fainter with every step. Turning onto a simple dirt track he walked between the two ruts worn into the ground by the wheels of the many horse drawn wagons that had traversed to and from the village that lay out of sight high above the town. The track immediately began to slope up gently, but as yet gave no indication of how steep it would become further along.

Swapping the bag that contained all his worldly possessions into his other hand, the man began his journey along the winding track that rose up the hill. Any warmth he had gathered from inside the cosy log fire warmed inn was quickly chased away by the cold seeping through his long black robe. Before he had travelled very far, to his dismay, the first few drops of rain began to fall. He glanced up at the large black cloud above him that seemed to have been following him. Suddenly the heavens opened to let forth a deluge of rain that fell onto the hill beating like a drum on the brim of his hat. The track soon became awash with dirt stained water running in twin rivulets along the wagon ruts. In no time at all the hoof churned track turned to a path of mud. Keeping to the centre of the track he trudged through its slippery surface. The mud sucking at his feet made the steep journey even harder.

His clothes soon became sodden and heavy as they became soaked with the pouring rain but he had no choice but to carry on if he wished to reach the object of his travels before nightfall.

About halfway up he felt the need to empty his bladder of the cheap bottle of wine he had enjoyed drinking earlier. Stepping to the side of the track he took refuge under one of the few trees that grew alongside. Protected briefly from the rain by the tree's thick foliage, he placed his bag on a rock to keep it out of the flow of muddy water. Lifting up the front of his long, and now mud stained robe, he urinated. He watched as it mixed with the fast flowing torrent of muddy water in the small overflowing drainage ditch dug alongside the track.

Looking back down the hill he could just see the dim lights from the inn he had left a while ago. He saw the smoke from the chimney being whipped into a mad dance by the wind, reminding him of the cosy fire flaming at its base. He could almost feel its warmth as he had when he sat by it to eat his meal and drink the wine he had purchased with a few of the meagre francs he owned. He regretted for a moment he had not lingered longer at the inn, perhaps then he could have waited in the dry until the rain had passed. But looking at the dark clouds in the sky, he thought that yet may be a while. He had a feeling the rain would linger for the rest of the night at least. A shiver brought him back to reality. Finishing his toilet, he picked up his bag and again stepped out into the deluge falling from the heavens above. Trying to ignore the water running in rivulets down his back, now soaking his clothes from the inside, he carried on up the hill. Within the hour, cold, wet and tired, he finally reached the entrance of the tiny village that was to be his new home. He paused to stare at the seemingly deserted houses before him. His thoughts then dwelled on the reason he was here. This small remote hilltop village was he knew punishment for his outspoken views back in Narbonne. He could only imagine the Bishop's pleasure at finding such a place to banish him.

The Bishop, his hands clasped behind his back, stood gazing out of the large ornate window as the rain beat against its decorative coloured panels of stained glass. A smile briefly appeared on his lips at the misfortune of a young priest running across the courtyard. Eager to get out of the rain the unfortunate young priest tripped in his haste and fell onto the wet grass. The armful of papers he had been carrying shot out of his grasp to be blown by the wind and soaked by the rain. The Bishop's smile faded as he turned, his long shadow cast across his desk fell on his clerk sitting nervously on the other side on a hard wooden chair.

'Well?' He said accusingly to his clerk. 'It was your idea to promote him to professor at the seminary of Narbonne.'

The clerk squirmed in his uncomfortable seat; desperately trying to think of some way he could get back into the Bishop's good favour again.

In October of 1885 the State elections were taking place and to the astonishment of everyone, Bérenger Saunière, began openly campaigning for the people to cast their votes against the

Republican Party. This from a man who had barely began his career in the church. Unfortunately for the newly ordained priest, the Republicans were successful in their campaign and won the elections. Saunière would soon come to regret his actions. Obviously angry with the priest who had actively encouraged the electorate to vote against them, they went out of their way to seek retribution. He was promptly denounced to the authorities of the region for inciting public disorder and trying to influence the electoral system.

‘But your eminence,’ pleaded the squirming priest, ‘I had no idea he would start causing trouble. His career in the priesthood, though short so far, had been exemplary. How could I know he would start preaching anti-Republican comments?’

The Bishop waved his hand dismissing his excuses. He knew it was not all the clerk’s fault. He himself had been in favour of the appointment. But it did well to make those under him squirm every now and then to remind them of their position.

‘Yes! Yes! So you keep saying,’ said the Bishop leaning forwards, resting his hands on the large oak desk. ‘The question is what are we to do with him now? I want him put some place where he can’t cause any more trouble.’

‘I have been thinking along the same lines, your eminence,’ replied the clerk eagerly. ‘I have just the position for our troublesome priest, I have the paperwork here.’ The clerk passed the papers he had been clutching to his Bishop. ‘It just needs your approval and signature.’

‘What is this place like?’ enquired the Bishop reading through the papers.

‘It is in the middle of nowhere with a very insignificant population,’ replied the nervous clerk.

Plucking an expensive looking ink pen from its ivory holder on the desk, the Bishop signed the papers. As he handed them back he kept hold as the clerk tried to take them. ‘You had better be right, and understand this, if I hear of him stirring up any more trouble, it will be you who will also be punished.’ The Bishop let go of the papers.

The clerk, not wishing to risk the wrath of his superior again, had searched long and hard for some remote location to place the priest who had put him in this position. Finally he had found such a posting in a place he had never heard of. Making enquires it had turned out to be perfect.

‘I am confident we will hear no more from him,’ he stated with certainty. ‘After all, what possible trouble could he cause in such a remote village with such a small population?’

The Bishop was inclined to agree. It did seem ideal. Unlike his clerk he knew of the village, he could vaguely remember visiting it once although he could no longer remember the reason. What he did remember was the hideous journey up the steep rough track, one he had no wish ever to repeat.

‘You had better be right! Now go, I want him out of the way as soon as possible.’

‘It will be done your eminence,’ replied the clerk, grateful the matter had been sorted and hopefully before long, forgotten.

The Bishop turned back to face the window, dismissing the clerk with his action. There was no sign of the priest that had tripped a few moments earlier, but a few papers he had been unable to snatch back from the wind still blew around the large courtyard. He heard the door close as the clerk left.

Well, hopefully that will have sorted that little problem and I will hear no more from this troublesome headstrong priest, thought the Bishop, little realising what train of fateful destiny they had just placed, as yet, this virtually unknown priest. Not only would their paths cross again, there would be repercussions. In the years to come even the ears of the Vatican would hear of the priest Bérenger Saunière and the tiny hilltop village of Rennes-le-Château.

Walking over to a sign all but hidden by an overgrown bush, Saunière pulled it aside to reveal a weathered wooden sign announcing the name of the village that was to be his home for the foreseeable future.

He remembered well the satisfied smile on the Bishop's clerk's face as he delivered the news of his new posting. It was a village he knew as he was born only a few kilometres away in Montazels. But if they thought they had silenced him, they were very much mistaken.

He stared at the words long ago painted, the black faded letters verifying what he knew but had almost prayed that somehow he had taken a wrong turn or climbed the wrong hill, but it wasn't to be so. Although it had been many years since his last visit, he had only been a boy; the sign was confirmation he had arrived. Letting the branches spring back into place he entered the small village of Rennes-le-Château.

He walked past the weathered and worn ancient buildings that stood either side of the track that passed for the village's main street. Then passed by the ruins of the once proud château that in times gone by had belonged to the d'Hautpouls who had links to the Knights Templar.

A few more metres and he reached his destination. He stopped. Nestled amongst some old store buildings and a stable was his new church. Walking nearer he observed the boarded up windows that prevented him from knowing if any glass still remained in the openings. Raising his face to the heavens, he opened his mouth to drink in some of the falling rain. He wiped the water from his face with his hand and scanned the rest of the sad looking building. Dedicated to Mary Magdalene, the small church, like most of the buildings in the village, had suffered from the ravages of time and neglect. Unlike the houses he had passed where some evidence of repair and upkeep had been undertaken, no such signs were evident on the neglected church.

Saunière headed towards the entrance having no illusions that the interior would be in a better state. The door of the church had long ago warped to a different shape than the frame that it once fitted so snugly, explaining why it stood ajar. Gripping its rusty iron handle he pulled it open. The equally rusty hinges squealed in protest as they were forced to carry out the job they had been

made for. He entered the ancient church, pulling the groaning door shut behind him. Immediately the smell of damp invaded his nostrils.

It is colder in here than it is outside, observed Saunière shivering. He glanced up at the rain pouring through the holes in the roof. And not much drier either. The ancient looking Holy water stoup just inside the door had a steady drip of water falling into it from the leaky roof causing it to overflow. Nevertheless, Saunière dipped in a finger and made the sign of the cross. Heading down the nave he knelt down in front of the altar and said a small silent prayer. Finished, he stood and studied the altar. A stone slab rested on two ancient stone pillars. One plain and one covered in carvings that looked almost pagan. The altar, like the rest of the church, had seen better days. He then noticed some withered flowers in a simple glass vase that stood on its weathered top. Placing his leather bag on a pew not being rained upon, he removed his soaked hat and placed it on top. After brushing his hand through his damp hair, he climbed the few steps up to the pulpit. The whole wooden construction creaked and wobbled with his every step. Saunière gazed around his church from the slightly elevated position.

‘Welcome to your prison Bérénger Saunière.’ He said aloud and listened to the words echo around the small dark church.

The windows were small; the church had been built when glass itself was a treasure, this meant that the church would never be flooded with light even on the sunniest of days. It seemed destined to remain shrouded in gloom. Some of the windows had been damaged, probably by the strong winds that were common in the area. Others seemed to have suffered by the ravages of time. The few windows that had survived intact had also been boarded up to protect them. Only one window, buckled by the strong winds and with much of its glass missing, (some of the smashed remains still lay on the church floor where they had fallen,) remained uncovered to allow any light to penetrate the dimness of the church, it did little to banish the darkness.

Saunière turned towards the sound of squealing hinges. Someone was entering the church. Shrouded in shadow, his black priest’s clothing made him all but invisible as he stood watching the small figure enter. The lone person, well wrapped up against the wind and rain, walked towards the altar. Unlike him, this person tried hard to avoid stepping in the puddles. Side-stepping some and jumping over others. Stopping in front of the altar they made the sign of the cross before throwing back the hood of their cloak to let free a mass of long dark hair. It was a young woman, the church too dark to see her age. He continued to watch as she took a small bunch of fresh flowers out from under her cloak. Their bright colours seemed out of place in the depressing atmosphere shrouding the church.

Saunière smiled. ‘So you are the one who brings some colour to my gloomy church.’

The girl, startled by his voice suddenly breaking the silence, gasped in fright and dropped the flowers. The pulpit creaked loudly as Saunière climbed down. He walked over to join the young girl before the altar.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ he said reassuringly as he bent down to pick up the dropped flowers. ‘I am the new village priest.’

He held out the flowers to her but the nervous girl just stared back at him, a frightened look on her face. Now he was closer he thought she was about eighteen years old and pretty. He thought what a sight he must look. Drenched from head to foot, his shoes and clothes splattered in mud. His hair damp with rain had become plastered to his head and face. No wonder she was nervous.

'Please excuse my appearance. I have just walked up the hill and as you know, it is not exactly hiking weather out there today.'

The girl stood still staring at him, making no attempt to speak or take the flowers from his outstretched hand. Saunière turned to the altar to replace the dead flowers with the fresh ones but turned back when he heard the sound of footsteps. He watched the girl fleeing from the church, her feet splashing in the puddles as she fled. Saunière smiled. He dropped the dead flowers on the ground and then noticing there was no water in the vase he picked it up and bent down to scoop some out of a puddle on the church floor. As water flowed into the vase he noticed that water he had disturbed that overflowed the worn slab, seeped in-between the joint and he thought he could hear it splashing. He wondered where it was draining to but before he could ponder it further he heard someone else enter. Looking up he saw a man walking towards him. It seems the girl had wasted no time in reporting his presence.

'Hello, you must be father Saunière, our new priest? I am Monsieur Dénarnaud.' He said smiling, offering his hand. 'My family and I are only visiting friends in the village but I was asked to look out for you as the mayor has not yet returned, probably waiting for the rain to stop before he climbs the hill.'

Saunière stood and shook his hand 'Hello Monsieur Dénarnaud. 'Yes that would be the sensible thing to do but alas I was already halfway up when it started.'

'Please call me Alfred and don't worry we will soon have you dried off.'

'Thank you Alfred, I was beginning to think the village was deserted.'

'No father, not quite, though we are few. The weather has chased everyone indoors to seek shelter.'

Realising he was still holding the vase, Saunière put it on the altar and placed the flowers inside.

'So that's what Maria was doing in here,' said Alfred noticing the fresh flowers.

'So her name is Maria? I think I must have frightened her.'

'Do not worry yourself father, my daughter has led a sheltered life, strangers are a rarity here. Not many can face the climb up the hill and there is nothing in the village to encourage many to make the journey if you do not live here. But first things first, I was meant to take you to see the mayor when you arrived but as he is not back, and seeing the state of you, I think we will leave that until morning. Let's get you somewhere dry so you can change out of those wet clothes.'

'Yes I would like to get settled in the presbytery,' replied Saunière picking up his hat and bag.

'Presbytery? No father, have you not been told? The presbytery is a ruin; no one can live there in its present condition. You are lodging with Antoinette Marce, she has a room she rents out. All has been arranged, come I will take you.'

Saunière, cold, wet, tired and now with no place of his own to stay, followed Alfred out of the church in silence. Maybe upsetting his superiors had not been such a sensible thing to do after all.

A clap of thunder brought Ben back to the present. He closed the book and stretching out, yawned. It was time to get some sleep. Placing the journal on the table, he drained the last of the whiskey from his glass, stood and walking over to the bed pulled the covers back and slid under them. He was asleep five minutes after turning off the light.

Two men, sitting in a black car, peered up at the window where the light had just gone out.

'About bloody time,' complained Abbott, more than a little bored from sitting in the car for the past few hours. 'Now we can piss off back to the hotel.'

'We were told to stay here all night in case they go out,' argued Ross lighting up another of his low tar cigarettes.

'Fuck that, I'm off. Look at the weather numbskull, where the fuck would they go?'

'I'm only saying what we were told. It sounded like an order to me.'

'It's all right for him tucked up nice and warm in his bed in some fancy hotel. We are the ones freezing our arses off. I only agreed to come to France 'cause I thought it would be fun. I wouldn't have bothered if I knew we would be stuck out in the middle of nowhere. For Christ's sake we are nearer to Spain than Paris. What a fucking dump.'

'Yeah I know what you mean. This is my last packet of Silk Cut and they don't sell them around here. But all things aside, maybe we should wait a while longer.'

'Look, if you want to stay, then stay, I aint stopping you, but I'm driving this car back to the hotel where I plan to drink the mini bar dry before falling asleep in a nice warm dry bed. It's your choice.'

Ross stared out of the window at the weather. It showed no signs of abating. It seemed to be getting worse if anything. Perhaps Abbott was right. Loyalty to his boss was one thing but standing for hours in the rain, getting soaking wet and cold, was another thing entirely. If Abbott was leaving with the car then he had little choice. If it blew up in their faces he could always blame Abbott. 'Yeah, maybe you're right, they aint going anywhere in this weather. We can be back by six in the morning, at least then we'll get a few hours sleep.'

Abbott started the car, the engine purred.

'You might be back at six but I won't be here until seven.'

'Whatever,' sighed Ross, 'let's go. That mini bar sounds awfully inviting since you mentioned it.'

'Hallelujah. Finally, something we agree on.'

Abbott drove the car slowly out of the driveway entrance opposite the house they had been watching and did not switch the headlights on until he was driving off along the road.

The figure, who had been shrouded in darkness in his hiding place between the trees lining the drive, stepped out onto the road to watch the car recede into the distance. Now out of the shelter of the leafy branches, the rain drummed incessantly on the large hood of his black waterproof PVC coat. He wondered who they were working for. A flash of lightning highlighted the man for a second; its bright light briefly glinting off the gun held in Creed's hand. He had thought about killing the two men there and then, but he knew they would have reported his position, so if they disappeared more would be sent and this time they would be more alert to danger. No, he would bide his time, for now. Creed guessed they must have followed Ben from England, evidence of his lack of experience in such matters. He would need to learn fast or suffer the consequences.

However, with the danger past for now, he slipped the gun into his pocket, then turning, he walked back along the driveway towards the house.

Saunière's Confession - Sample Excerpt 2

The church was dark; the only light came from moonlight penetrating weakly through the single grimy window not boarded up. Locking the church door, which now shut properly thanks to the carpentry skills of Ellie Bot, I lit the two lanterns I had placed inside the church earlier. Using the masons' tools I easily lifted the flagstone floor. Digging away the earth underneath was hard work; the soil was heavy with water. Then I struck something hard, stone. When I had cleared away the muddy earth I saw that it was a large gravestone. The few words that had been chiselled into the stone over the top of its original inscription, that someone had taken time to all but remove, could just be made out faintly, but the newer inscription stood out starkly, the grooves of the words being filled with dark wet soil, REGALIS CRYPTA. Royal Crypt. The gravestone was old but what royal's could possibly be buried here? I knew Rhaeda was what some thought was the ancient name of the village. If the bodies of the royals were interred here then perhaps they were the royals of Rhaeda. Their treasure, or a portion of it, may have been buried with them. The map I had found was created and hidden for a good reason and I believed that a few old bones were not that reason. I was sure with the mention of royals that something of great value lay beneath the gravestone.

The slab was too heavy for me to lift, so using some lengths of timber and a mason's pry bar I managed to lift and slide the slab to one side revealing a dark opening underneath. I knew by the smell of decay that wafted out that it was as the inscription suggested, a crypt...

Like many living in the area at the time, I had heard the rumours that Saunière had found a crypt under the church, but he had always refused to confirm this. His late night excavations, like many of his unusual activities, had been the source of much speculation. Looking at Saunière as he remembered, I knew by the expression on his face it was only his body lying ill in his bed, his mind had left him to travel back in time, back to the church, back to the crypt. He was reliving the moment.

Though it was cold in the church the air that rose out of the hole was colder still. Saunière shivered as a chill swept through his bones. Shining one of the lamps into the opening revealed stone steps leading down into darkness. Noticing they were green with dampness and therefore probably slippery, he carefully placed a foot on the top step and slowly started his descent into the royal crypt.

The smell of dampness and decay was strong. The air, trapped down here for so long, was musty and stale. It was so cold every breath he exhaled was visible in the chilled air. Though he was not sure what to expect, when Saunière reached the bottom of the steps and held up the lantern, the disappointingly small crypt highlighted was not it. Water, seeping through the church floor above, dripped slowly from the vaulted ceiling to form small puddles on the cobblestone floor.

Four decaying coffins occupied the four alcoves set into the damp slime covered walls. There was no sign of any treasure. Walking over to the nearest alcove he examined the decaying casket that had become so weak it had collapsed revealing the yellowed bones of its occupant. The skull had rolled onto the floor, its eyeless sockets seemed to be watching the priest. Fluffy spores of wet rot were in abundance and covered what little wood of the coffin remained. Sending out creeping fingers of mould it had crept over the fleshless bones to spread over the damp brickwork just reaching and covering some of the inscription carved into the stone lintel above the alcove Raising the lamp higher he saw parts of the name, Baron and Blanchefort. Underneath this the year of his death was still visible, 1752.

Moving along to the next alcove he saw no sign of a casket, just a covering of furry spores. If the body had been buried in one, like the burial clothes it once wore; all had become food for mould and decay. With no skin or muscle left to hold the carcass together all that remained were a heap of bones. But what really caught Saunière's attention was what was missing, the skull.

He looked on the floor to see if it had fallen from the alcove like the previous one, but it was nowhere to be seen. Turning his attention to the inscription above he saw that it had been removed; all that remained were the chisel marks that had struck it from the stone. Saunière was puzzled. Remembering the skull he had found buried under the carved flagstone, he wondered if it had come from down here, from this skeleton. But if so why?

Shining the lamp over the bones he noticed something lying beside them. The long rusty reddish stain on the brickwork and the remaining rust cankered hilt was all that remained of the sword that had been placed next to the body.

The third coffin was much more interesting. The inscription above it informed Saunière it belonged to Marie Darles Dame d'Hautpoul De Blanchefort. The inscription further informed him that she had died on January 17th, 1781 aged 67. She must have been the last person to have been buried down here, thought Saunière.

This coffin was in far better condition than the previous two. Although some of the wood had rotted away, enough remained to keep its shape. Saunière reached out to touch the lead lining of the rotting casket showing through. As far as he could tell it was still sealed so there was a very good chance that whatever was preserved inside would have stood the ravages of time.

Having brought no tools down with him he climbed the stairs and grabbed the pry bar from the church floor. Returning, he placed the lantern on the alcove shelf and gripping the foot end of the coffin he slid it forward, meaning to rest it on the floor to make it easier to remove the lid. It was heavier than he had anticipated. The slime on the alcove shelf caused the coffin to slide. Unable to hold back the unbalanced weight the casket slid to the floor with a crash. Any remaining bits of wooden shell shot off, some so rotten they turned to dust. The lead casket burst open to reveal the mummified body inside. The sudden strong smell of ancient corpse mixed with old stale air enveloped him, taking away his breath, making him gag. Stepping away to recover he stared at the grisly remains of the dead body thrown half out of its box like a gruesome rag doll. At the taught dry skin stretched over skull and hands, at the brown shoulder length hair draping the face. At the once white burial gown, though yellowed with age, still looked in fair condition. Splashes of colour could still be seen on the small-embroidered flowers across the chest and around the end of the sleeves. Noticing something glinting, Saunière knelt down and pushed away the wispy hair from around her neck. He saw the glint of gold and smiled. Pulling back the collar he saw a small gold chain, a necklace. Through the material of the dress he saw an unusual shaped lump hinting at the object fixed to the chain. Pulling on the chain he dragged the object out and stared at the ugly piece of jewellery. Crudely shaped like a spider, being crafted from gold was the only thing in its favour. Letting it drop he left it around the corpses neck. Searching the rest of the corpse, he found nothing more.

Disappointed, he stood and placing all his hopes on the final coffin he walked over to examine it. There was no inscription carved into the lintel. Lifting the lid he soon realised it was just a rotten shell. Jumping back as bits fell to the floor, he watched as it collapsed into a heap of decomposed wood revealing the dirty brown skeleton inside. He searched the remains for anything of value but found nothing.

Thinking the treasure might be hidden in a secret room or cavity, Saunière searched the walls for any sign of a loose piece of masonry or a bricked up opening. He even tapped the walls with the metal pry bar listening for any hint of a hollow space behind. After an hour of unsuccessful searching he gave up. There was no treasure.

He prepared to leave. The lamplight glinted off the spider necklace still around Marie d'Hautpoul's neck. Saunière stared at it and then at the face of corpse that now seemed to be smiling at him. At

his fruitless search for treasure. Bending down he grabbed hold of the necklace and snatched it from around her throat. Placing the necklace in his pocket he turned to leave. Reaching the bottom of the stairway he stopped and looked back at the body. Feeling a pang of guilt he walked back over to the corpse. Reverently he placed her back in the lead coffin and sealed the lid back in place as best he could. Too heavy to lift back onto the alcove he had no choice but to leave it on the floor.

With one last look around the cold musty crypt he climbed the stone steps leaving the dead alone once more, well almost.

In the far corner of the crypt where the walls met the floor, there was movement. A rat, a large ugly brown thing, emerged from a gap in the wall Saunière had failed to see.

Walking across the floor it stopped to drink some of the puddle water. Sniffing the air it walked over to the skull that had fallen to the floor. Poking its head inside it pulled out a piece of parchment, that then unravelled. Gripping it in two of its small paws it began to eat. Caught in the lamplight shining down through the opening above, the markings on the parchment showing where the Royal treasure of Rhaeda was hidden meant nothing to the rodent. Suddenly startled by the sound of the gravestone being levered back in place it scampered hurriedly back into its hole. Back to the nest it had made in a golden jewelled crown amongst a pile of dusty golden objects.

Returning to the present Saunière had turned to look at me. He told me he had been confused. He had wondered why someone would go to the trouble of creating and concealing a map showing the crypt's location when all it contained were the dead, that as far as he could tell were not royals. So why had someone marked it as a royal crypt? It just didn't make sense.

I had shrugged my shoulders. I was fascinated by his story and was more than a little intrigued to see where it was leading. I encouraged him to continue and after a few words he had drifted back in time again.

Disappointed as I was that night, the following day I was back on the trail of the treasure. It was Maria who pointed me in the right direction. I was in the old cottage looking at the ugly spider necklace when Maria entered; she had as was usual brought me a hot meal. As soon as she saw the necklace she recognised it...

'It's just like the one on the gravestone,' said Maria nonchalantly, placing the plate of rabbit stew on the table in front of the priest.

Saunière stared up at her. 'What did you say?'

Maria took the necklace and looked at it before handing it back.

'It is the same as the one carved on a gravestone in the cemetery.'

'Are you sure?'

'I think so, it certainly seems the same. You must have walked past it many times.'

'You must show me Maria.' Saunière stood heading for the door.

'Sit down and eat father. There is no rush. It has been there for hundreds years it will wait until after dinner.'

Saunière glanced at the meal. It did smell delicious and he was hungry. Maria was right; it would still be there after he has eaten.

'You are right as usual Maria, first I will eat then we will visit the graveyard.'

Maria, as was her custom, sat down at the table to keep him company while he ate. Picking up the necklace she looked at it again. 'Where did you get this?'

Saunière stared at Maria wondering if he should tell her.

'Can you keep a secret Maria?'

Maria nodded excitedly. She had become infatuated with Saunière and knew that a secret shared between them could only bring them closer together.

So I told her everything, what I found buried under the church floor and the crypt. To my surprise Maria was not shocked and from that day onwards she was always by my side. She knew all my secrets, well nearly all; there were some things' she was better not knowing. She never revealed them to anyone. Anyway, after I had eaten she took me to the graveyard...

'There it is,' said Maria pointing at an old gravestone.

I stared at the slab of stone by the wall of my church just inside the entrance to the graveyard. She was right; I had passed it many times without giving it a second glance. But in my defence, through many years of neglect the weeds had encroached over the grave. Stepping nearer I pulled aside the tall weeds and looked at the spider carving situated at the base of the stone. It was more or less identical to the necklace. It too was crudely depicted. I read the inscription on the tomb, finding it unusual. The date of her death was wrong and the inscription seemed to be labelling her a whore. Something was wrong.

If she was buried in the crypt why was there a gravestone marking her grave here?

Letting the weeds fall back into place Saunière turned to Maria. She had lent forward to read the inscription. Her face was close to his, almost touching. He stared into her eyes then leant closer. She became breathless and did not resist as their lips found each other's. It was not a kiss of passion. That would come later; it was a kiss of two people in love for the very first time. A love that would endure for many years to come and would only end when they are both finally laid to rest.

They parted their embrace.

Marie smiled sheepishly. Her cheeks flushed. It had been her first kiss.

'Well done Maria you were right. Somehow the necklace and this tombstone are connected. I have a strong feeling it is a clue.'

'A clue? A clue to what father?'

'I am not sure Marie but we must return when it is dark so we will not be seen and do some secret digging. I think we are on the verge of an amazing discovery.'

'It is all so exciting,' said Marie following him out of the cemetery and back to the cottage.

That night we made love.' Saunière paused and turned to Rivière, 'does that shock you, a man of the cloth?'

I told him that it did not. He had hardly kept his relationship with the girl a secret. Like most people who knew them it was obvious Maria was much more than just his housekeeper. Saunière had just confirmed what I already knew.

I am glad. I know Maria will miss me when I am gone. As well as my lover she has been a dear friend and companion. I love her dearly. That we shall finally be parted by my death is my only regret, otherwise I should die a happy man. Maria would do anything for me, even grave robbing. Like Burke and Hare, later that night we crept into the graveyard.

Having removed the gravestone I set to work digging. Before long my spade struck something. At first I thought it must be a coffin. After brushing away the soil I saw that whatever it was it was encased in lead, just like Marie d'Hautpoul's body in the crypt...

Saunière dug around it to find the edges. It was too small to be a coffin, even that of an infant. Eventually he had freed it enough to lift out. Because of the lead it was heavy for its size. After placing it to one side he dug a bit deeper to see if anything else was hidden but found nothing. After filling the hole back in and replacing the gravestone he picked up the chest and joined Maria at the churchyard entrance.

'What have you found?' Asked Maria seeing something stuffed under his arm but it was too dark to see what it was.

'A chest. Let's go home and find out what is inside?'

They quickly made their way back to the cottage.

Placing the lead box on the table, Saunière lost no time in opening it. Using a knife he prised up the edges of the lead lid until he could lift it off. Inside was revealed the top of an ornately carved

wooden chest. The lead had been used to protect the chest, preventing it from rotting away in the damp earth. After pulling the lead away from the wooden box where the weight of the earth had crushed it, he was able to lift out the small chest. They both examined the carvings decorating the box. It looked old. The chest had three scenes from the bible carved on it. The front panel was of the last supper. The back panel depicted Jesus being taken down from the cross. Saunière sensed something was wrong with the image but couldn't see why. The carving on the lid was the strangest of all, it showed an empty tomb. The two smaller end panels were the same, each decorated with the symbol of the Knights Templars, a red cross pattee. The red of these crosses was the only colour on the chest. The box had no lock but a simple brass clasp. Saunière released the clasp and then looked at Maria.

'What wonders shall we find hidden inside do you think Maria?'

'I have no idea. Open it and we shall soon find out.' Replied Maria excitedly. She had never done anything like this before and she was enjoying every single minute.

Saunière ran his fingers over the carvings and then onto Maria's hand. He stared into her eyes as he spoke. 'This chest has probably been buried for centuries. Everyone who has ever touched it is dead. We are probably the only two people alive who know of its existence. Who knows what treasure or secrets are hidden inside but whatever we find it will be ours. We are together now Maria, our fates are as one. I love you now and I will love you always.'

A tear of happiness rolled down her cheek. The man before her had just made her the happiest woman alive. She leant forward and kissed him gently. 'I love you too so very much. I will always be yours whatever happens, where ever this takes us.'

They kissed again and embraced, holding each other for a while, enjoying the moment. Finally they parted.

'Now I suppose we had better see what's inside.'

Maria nodded.

They both gazed in anticipation at the chest as Saunière raised the lid.

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