Murder on the Mall:

It had been a long time since Dan Smith had gone a day without running a 5k. His limbs were stiff as he trekked up the dusky pathway to the African Art museum. It was merely 5:00, but the sun was already setting in D.C. Smith rushed up the steps, eager to make it in before the museum closed at 5:30. His stomach rumbled, it was hard to say whether from the third cup of coffee or the nerves.

He passed a sign welcoming him to “The Only African Art Museum in North America.” *About* *time*, Smith chuckled to himself. He was, after all, an African art historian at Yale. (And quite a bit more seasoned than the rest of his colleagues).

“Afternoon,” the guard greeted at the door. Smith returned the jovial smile and turned toward the entrance way in which there was an exhibition from a modern Zimbabwean textile artist—Smith unfortunately did not have the time to leisurely peruse it.

His lean, hundred-eighty pound, 6’4”, traditionally stud-like build strode up the staircase, accidentally glimpsing down the four story round staircase. His body momentarily froze in fear, back in the military chopper, falling, falling, falling. The gleaming azure acrylic mural dazzled with the exhibition lights.

Smith gulped and turned back to the next exhibit.

Smith spotted a sign for restrooms and eagerly strode toward it. His bowels churned. As much as he’d wanted to see the exhibit on ancient Africa, his stomach had other plans. Smith crouched in the near stall in pain. He placed his feet on the rim as he curled in silent, yet internally tortured pain.

After about twenty minutes, the door pushed open. “Anyone in here?” the voice of a nonchalant black man inquired. Smith assumed it was the guard. He watched his feet march past for a scan of the urinals and past the stalls. It seemed he was listening to music and too preoccupied to even glance at the stall. Smith, to some degree likewise, was in too much pain to acknowledge his existence. After all, this obscure museum was probably not the top spot for security.

Twenty-five minutes later, Smith dabbed off his hands with a paper towel and strode for the doorway. It was locked. “Hmm” he muttered. “I could have sworn…”

With his lanky yet muscular arm, he tugged it open in one swift go.

As he reached into his back pocket with his leathered, experienced hand that had seen horrors of Korea and entitled Yale students, fished out his burner phone. Just as he thought, 5:35 p.m. and wouldn’t open again until the next morning at 10:00 a.m. The museum was closed. There was one message. Without opening it, he pressed delete. If he was caught with that, the repercussions would be disastrous.

As he delicately slipped it into his Levi back pocket, he heard a muffled bustle from above. He decided to follow the jarring noise, maybe it was a guard who could show him the way out, and perhaps he could glimpse the ancient collection on the way.

Following through the dim lengthy hallways and exhibitions, Smith found himself face to face with the largest and most predatorial piece of art in the Smithsonian: a large, divine, and cyclically circular rotund, undulating “Rainbow Serpent” fashioned out of used metal jerry cans and which carefully modeled the 7 elements of art. While his imagination had strayed for the moment, he refocused his collegiate mind.

Smith donned his glasses to take a closer look at the industrial serpent before him when he felt a blow of pain from his left ankle. Letting out a guttural roar, he wheeled around and instinctively swung his fist out. Expecting to see a professional, hooded murderer, Smith was shocked when he laid his eyes on the mess of red before him. On the ground lay a masculine body with a scarlet tinted robe draped around his lean and slender frame. In the split second his collegiate brain had to think, it chose the ever favorable “flight” command to send to the body.

Pivoting to his right, Smith tore into the smaller exhibit and placed himself next to a large statue next to the entrance. *Who is this man? Why does he want me dead?* When the assailant came through the entryway, Smith leaned on the glass display case. It toppled onto the man shattering glass and blood everywhere. Preparing to run again, Smith caught a glimpse of a full length spear. Hastily, he groped out and wrenched the weapon from the stunned assassin.

Wasting no time from his brief victory, he scrambled back through the main exhibition entrance. He could either go forwards, but he would most likely be dead ended in the bathrooms. He could go up, but the door was still locked. Finally, against all better judgment, he jumped down onto the acrylic mural.

For a moment he couldn’t think. Falling, falling, falling. The memory of that day started flooding back into him, one face at a time. As he fell from the chopper he was staring back at the faces of guilt. Of betrayal. Had he chosen the right side? Were they really his friends? As he activated the parachute his eyes lit up with the explosion from the plane. *What have I done*, he thought as he passed out 3,000 ft in the air. His team found him knocked out in a tree with four broken bones and seventeen puncture wounds three days later.

“Fuck!” he bellowed as he landed on his stabbed foot. He threw his head back in unparalleled pain, only to realize he was staring into a pair of black, dead eyes. “This bitch won’t give me a damn break!”

While he was in pain, he wasn’t stupid. Cheap, clumsy killers like these followed their targets like a moth to a light.

As the African terminator lunged off the top railing into the pit below, Smith grabbed the spear and poised it vertically, blade up. Not having enough time to switch directions mid-air, the man had no choice but to fall to his death and relieve all that he had in this life. *The final equalizer.*

Braced for impact, the sturdy spear stabbed through the ass and all the way out the head of the man. Blood spewed everywhere as chunks of flesh tore away from their host and shot into the sky like a sickening fireworks show of celebratory success. The once azure acrylic was stained with a dark, crimson red.

Soaked with guts and bleeding out quickly, Smith’s world began to flutter as his eyelids drooped, lulling him into a horrifically peaceful slumber.

“You’re going to Africa?!” His father yelled at him. “And how do you expect to get a well paying job there?”

“I’m going to Cape Town to study African art and culture,” responded Smith. “And whether you’re racist or not, I’m going!”

“Cape Town my ass! I don’t give a damn about why you’re going! You either stay here in the states to become a lawyer, or I’m not your father.”

“But it’s the [Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa](https://www.google.com/search?safe=active&hl=en&rlz=1CATAVM_enUS966US967&cs=0&q=Zeitz+Museum+of+Contemporary+Art+Africa&stick=H4sIAAAAAAAAAFWTSWgTYRTHZwIJydcGk4lVCQpjoDbkkswkmUm8tKUWKbQqbRUp4jD7JLMv7SyXohc9iodeBU8qgjdBQQ16EIOIKOhBkNabC3pVXNN0Zoqnj9_b_u89vpdOlrJVsYphbJORzLrD4QdZ2uBRR3c1lBasDksPXstB1VWbX1X78P_RfRhU1WoNJz1GwSMgFLIr9eHMNjB1qjbIGtnOcrgm4zXaoYfVGh4WplgCZ6r1EIimhxNipCTWMMdhMCNmIqBcbI3tw6M7HIhsoHCRm3ExqS1xVlhrrS62RXdbfwAYprRcubtLpKYKYSDHiSQl7Y5HWKLgkTHbJiHVmWYoKokNN7BtP5pLaHUNqRsFS60aI3tiELfEqKbSNiIlStFsoxWCQ7GkYsUyik3JvsbE--q2anUiVrFNMgii7eEYFQ2Je0TAeXER1ZZNrtYNnTIhmGvxekTNwmqWEoTOhmj5lPsB7iVGch-_vy8U7yau3n72Br6TALl5Xbd5xV_kFdrhuWUdOQFSs5rTcXxktAhAerhDv4sX0RLIvvaffh67OfcTVJDM269HLu859fxQ_tKtcvnX1rqE7wU76jIhsxLXMnLXNjdg5AwYWeKdZX1B5zqCjxxHZkFmgVcZ3rJPCsg4ADO6ovCs09E1ZH9xDBSqbGyo7nxHu5RdHDbSZlWzByeOJspwycTP33-18SJ1Nn-uBEHz40tTxXIlD1LHdJXuaPnT_JfJJ3-_TVYKIL1Me7qmq37-wsS-3ubAWDqcSfMvHxXanybzWw_-rLu_G1MHkihUhrC5e1no3Y9krwINhC4-vPE4lU7DOQhPpKEAGr2enFjhO06ALgwbQ3UBndE1h1cN3aItH50enND08JyupOB_epNNAHUDAAA&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiE6d7mt6f8AhX8M1kFHeOLDFcQ7fAIegUIABCKAg). The 9,500sqm museum consists of nine floors with 6,000sqm of dedicated exhibition space. Studying African art and culture is my passion, and serving sentences isn’t. You could want me to lick my ass in the circus for all I care…it doesn’t matter. I’m becoming an African art history professor and I’ve already gotten offers from top schools like Harvard, Yale, and Stanford. And when I-”

“Get the fuck outta my house. I’ve always known you were never good enough. Look at you. You’re a 40 year old virgin living in my basement, using hand lotion, and obsessed with Africa. Go ahead and do what you wanna do, but don’t come back to me. I hear the women are nice over there, although they probably won’t go for you, but hey, maybe you can fuck a zebra while you’re there!”

A bright light. A throbbing pain. *Where the hell am I?* Putting a hand to his throbbing head Smith slowly sat up and stared at the scene before him. A man lay impaled on the spear in the middle of the room, frozen in a grotesque pose. Smith looked down at his left foot. There was a pool of blood and it didn’t seem to be stopping. *I have to stop the bleeding immediately or I won’t make it.*

Tearing off his shirt and ripping the back, he started to wrap his ankle. Each time he pressed down to wrap it it felt like firecrackers were being sent off inside him. *Everything is impermanent. Even pain.*

Smith took one more look at the man and decided he’d had enough. He began to army crawl until he tucked behind a column about 10 feet away putting him out of view of the man.

Taking shallow breaths he fell back, his bloody hands sprawled behind him. *I can make it to the morning.* He tried to call 911 but his phone had been broken during the fall. He glanced at his Seiko. The glowing digits hauntingly blinked back at him. 7:00. *Fuck. Another 15 hours until the museum opens again.* Exhausted by the evening’s grisly events Smith was pulled into another deep sleep.

“Hello? Is anyone there?”

The voice awakened Smith, who groggily sat up and massaged his damaged legs.

“Hello? I heard a crash. Is someone there?”

*Is there another one?* He tried to get up but putting any weight on his feet would send him crashing down again. *I’m dead.* A shadow turned the corner entering the dark hallway. *Please Lord. Don’t let me die a virgin.* But as the figure rounded the bend Smith’s eyes caught the sight of a woman dressed in a black dress with flowing brown hair. A split second of psychoanalyzation told him that she was a watered down facade of a surprising successful woman. Spending an evening at an art museum was no layman’s hobby and she probably had a distinguished taste for flavorful culture brought on by a wealthy and rather supercilious childhood.

“Oh my god! Your foot! Are you alright?”

“I’ll be fine for now.” Smith had had much worse and the pain was even starting to numb away. He offered up his hand, “Professor Dan Smith of African art history at Yale.”

The woman looked so bewildered he hadn’t thought she would have taken it. “Vanessa Rothschild,” she returned as she shook his hand. “Independent businesswoman and CEO of the largest private equity and venture capitalist firm in the world.”

“Ms. Rothschild—”

“Please, call me Vanessa.”

“Alright, Vanessa, can I ask how you’re trapped here as well?”

Her eyes shifted and she took a hard swallow. *Could be lying. Could be genuine. Could be trying to throw me off…Stop thinking so hard dammit!* He relaxed his smile as she began to talk. “Well, I was looking at this amazing Nigerian Sowei mask in one of the back rooms on this floor and I guess security forgot to check if anyone was there.”

The smile faded from his lips as he began to search the symbols again. *Nigerian Sowei mask, eh? Must’ve had high security because the rest of the world says that Sowei masks are only in Sierra Leone. And if you’re looking for the Nigerian exhibition try the third floor, not the first. They moved it this Spring. If you had been there you would’ve known.* Vanessa Rothschild wasn’t telling the truth. But then again, neither was Smith. *She’s not supposed to be here, but neither am I, so don’t press it.*

“Now, do you mind me asking what happened to your foot in a *museum*, Mr. Smith?” Smith gestured towards the main hall. *Take a look for yourself.*

“Holy hell, what happened?!” Her eyes bulged and here hands laced her cheeks in a way so complimentary to Munch’s specimen that Smith couldn’t help but reflect a pseudo-cordial smirk towards the $119.9 million reenactment, but even he knew the wealthiest tycoon at Sotheby’s couldn’t pay to see something so cliche even if they opened up the largest petroleum rig in the Middle East and sold it at an outrageously high mark-up.

“What, you don’t like the newest installment here at the National Museum of African Art?” He carelessly waved his hand towards the unlucky imaplee as he made his way over towards the woman.

“Wha-what the hell *is* this?!”

“Oh, just your average spear fight. I’m not sure exactly. I was looking at some art and this man came at me out of nowhere trying to kill me. I was mearling defending myself…and I guess it worked.” He stared at the scene for a moment, taking in the idea of his win. “I’m lucky it wasn’t a Karambit fight or I would’ve been slashed in seconds. Studying can only get you so far for that technique.”

“Well how about we study a little more and find out what you were up against if you’re good to walk.” They made their way towards the speared man. Odd markings riddled his body: shapes, lines, words, objects, but none of them were quite discernible through the blood stains.

“Hmmm…” He gazed at the face of the man with an intense, burning stare. “Moderate glabella, projected nose, less prominent chin…If I didn’t know any better I’d say this is a Southeastern Nigerian man belonging to the Igbo people.”

“You just looked at his face, how could you know that?”

He faced Vanessa, “Well, I’m a professor at Yale, but in my free time I work for a team of archaeologists. My group and I are really anthropologists, though. We analyze bone structures of modern-day African natives and compare our data against our knowledge of geographical history and domestic dispersal of certain societies. By analyzing modern evolution we can fill in the blanks of antediluvian and pre-sapien evolution.”

She gave him a look. “So your job is to study all types of people from Africa and instantly know where they’re from?”

“My eidetic memory helps.”

“And you study human origins, and yet you cannot tell me why this strange man is here?”

Smith continued to circle, looking for clues, “I study *where* things come from, not *why*.”

“Well then can you tell me where this came from?” She was pointing at the man’s left tricep. As he got closer he saw a small black tattoo of a masterfully crafted cross on the man’s arm. Arched above were the words “ịmụgharị ọzọ” written in such a worn out pen Smith could barely read it.

Smith ran his fingers along the tattoo. “The Templar Cross? And the writing? It-it—”

“Dr. Smith.” Vanessa’s words cut through his thought. “Where is his face paint?”

Smith was taken aback. “I’m sorry? I-what do you mean, he didn’t have any.”

Vanessa gave him a hard look, but even without his 20 years of facial recognition skills he could see the fear. “Then we have to go. *Now*. There’s another one.”

Smith tore through the halls of the National Museum of African Art as his new partner in crime shouted over their breaths. “I was looking at some art when, just like you, this man with a spear came at me. I guess I’m not as good a fighter as you are, so I just ran. I thought I was going to die but all of a sudden he just left.”

“Here, bathroom.” They shuffled into the bathroom where Smith had originally been holed up in. “Maybe he heard the fighting.”

“Well, we destroyed a whole bunch of artifacts during the chase and I didn’t want to get in trouble so I lied to you. It was a bad one, too. Anyone knows that they don’t use Sowei masks in Nigeria!” They were at the sinks now, trying to wash off Smith’s puncture. “Long story short, that man’s whole face was covered in red paint, so he must still be out there.”

“Of course.”

“Mr. Smith, you look…confused.”

He most certainly was. He was confused about the text message, the man, and Vanessa’s story, but that wasn’t what was bothering him. “Yes, yes. I was just thinking about that tattoo. The words ‘ịmụgharị ọzọ’. In Twi, a language spoken in southern and central Ghana, it means ‘uncomfortable plan’. But that just doesn’t make sense. Not with the Templar Cross.”

Vanessa eyed him, “And you speak Twi?”

“I was doing a lot of work there a couple years ago and I learned the language in order to communicate with the natives.”

“Well that seems like a dead-end. Any ideas on the cross?”

“A cross isn’t too crazy considering 98.80% of Igbo are Christian, but why the Templar?”

“Maybe it was an homage to the past? Like he’s starting his own crusade.” She looked over at Smith but he was lost in thought. An old memory had come back to him from one of his old professor's lectures at Harvard.

*“When understanding modern symbology,” Professor Langdon began, smoothing over his Harris Tweed. “One needs to understand where modern symbols come from. Oftentimes they are stolen from older civilizations. It’s believed the Christian’s stole the Ankh from the Egyptians. They didn’t even try to hide it, they took the meaning too!” The students let out a small chuckle towards the audacity of the theft.*

*“The Christians did it again with their vision towards Jesus and his flowing hair and white cloth. Sounds a little similar to the Greek god Zeus. And of course, the Swastika. All the Germans had to do was rotate a symbol of peace to create a symbol of destruction.” He paused and ran a hand through his wet hair, “It’s this simple rotation that makes symbology so difficult. Sometimes you think you are looking at something when you are really looking at the exact opposite. And sometimes, you don’t even know why it’s there!” The screen at the front of the room switched to an image of the Harris Tweed logo. Smith took a sharp breath as he made out the famous Orb and Maltese Cross that took up the screen. Christ’s dominion over Earth brand-washed through a clothing company?*

The memory now came to him not because of the Harris Tweed shock, but because of what Professor Langdon had said earlier. *It’s this simple rotation that makes symbology so difficult.* Of course! He had been looking at it all wrong. He wheeled towards Vanessa, “I need to see that tattoo again.”

“Woah woah woah! Slow down.” Vanessa tried to calm Smith down from his manic spiel about “rotating the symbol”. Those were the only words she could make out after he broke out of his stare and launched his conspiracy.

Smith took a few, well trained, deep breaths and smoothed out his suit jacket. “Well, I was just thinking about an old lecture about symbology. Long story short, we may not have been looking at it correctly. He was on a spear for God’s sake! His arm wouldn’t have been as it normally is and, I thought it was just a bad tattoo artist, but that cross didn’t look too geometrical to me. I need another look.”

They slowly crept their way out of the bathroom and towards the main hall. Sure enough, just around the corner, was the other red-faced man Vanessa had seen.

“What’s he doing?” whispered Vanessa as she stared at the two. Red-face was holding up some oddly shaped rock towards the speared man and chanting in such a foreign and archaic tongue she could hardly believe he was human.

“I…I don’t know.” It was true. In his 20 years of African experience Smith had seen nothing of the kind. Sure, he had studied theology, but not theosophy! Perhaps he wasn’t supposed to know about such an antiquarian ritual. Perhaps it was for the better. In any case, he had to get to the other side to see the symbol. “See that railing over there? How about a little Bond action?”

Ten minutes of lobotomizing argument based heavily on the terms of weight, ocular deceit, and the reliability of anthropomorphic trust later, Smith was looking over the railing at the repelling Vanessa. She was fastened to a suitable length of rope which had been thieved from a rather undaunting and ill-pragmatic exhibition perimeter by the hands of Smith. Dangling now three feet from the rail, Smith was beginning to work up a sweat supporting her weight. Meanwhile, the fearfully taciturn Vanessa eyed the enchantment which lay just a few feet from her aerial position. Red-face had far from terminated his enchanted speech and, to the opinion of Smith, had increased to such a biblical enthusiasm that his feet barely brushed the ground in between his extensive leaps of lore.

A tug of the rope snapped Smith out of his stare and forced him to haul up the body of Vanessa Rothschild. They silently slipped away from the balcony and back into the exhibition room. “Did you see it? What did it look like?”

“Well, when I oriented it correctly it looked like an ‘X’ with small bulbs on the end.”

“I’ll be damned! It’s the Nyame Nwu Na Mawu!” Vanessa stared at him like he had cracked an egg over his head. “‘God won’t die for me to die.’ It’s an Adinkra symbol expressing the immortality of the human soul!”

Vanessa’s shock hadn’t returned to normal, but rather turned to a state of confusion.

“Adinkra symbols are a relatively recent collection of around 120 African symbols created by the Bono people of Gyaman, which is now present day Ghana. The oldest surviving ones can be traced back to a cloth from 1817 and resides in the British Museum today.”

“Ghana? Isn’t that where they speak Twi? You know, that tattoo you were trying to translate.”

“That’s true, they do. That’s why I’m confused.” He tugged at his Harris Tweed collar.

“Why would an Igbo have something in Twi on his shoulder? Is there another clue we’re missing?”

Smith gave a nibble at his fingernail before jumping up with wide eyes. “Of course! Don’t you see? There’s no more clues because there’s *no damn puzzle*! ‘Imụgharị ọzọ’ in Igbo means ‘rebirth’. I had the wrong language! He probably just tattooed the first African rebirth symbol he could find on his arm and called it a day. That’s why I killed him so easily. He’s a recluse amateur, possibly fundamentalist verging on psycho.”

“So he’s out here for rebirth?”

“Well, if he’s looking for rebirth in an antiquarian collection of esoterically African artifacts, maybe there’s a piece of art he’s looking for.”

“Like the Philosopher’s Stone!”

Smith’s face twitched as he forced a head cock. “*Loosely,* yes. Something like that. Something *exactly* like that.” He stuck out his open hands in front of him. His hands had impossibly touched the answer in a small study of Miskatonic University nearly 20 years ago.

Something in a modern African novel had peaked his interest. It talked of a magical object capable of reincarnation—the iyi-uwa. Mere fiction, he thought it was, but recent endeavors had proved this idea unworthy. A very casual—and quite habitual—thumb through of ancient African textbooks in the Miskatonic library had yielded a rather unnervingly lucrative kernel of fact. While reading *The Art of Africa*—coddled between other Miskatonically safeguarded works such as *Alone I Stand* and *Avenues of Action*—Smith had come to a section about mystical objects that had long before been crafted by Nature and adopted by native tribes. One such object was a totem called an iyi-uwa. *An iyi-uwa is…binds the spirit of a dead man to…causing it to be born again.* Even now, 20 years later, Smith could recall running his forefinger along the line of text; haunted, yet intrigued. To harness immortality is to harness the Universe, as nothing is that never was, and nothing was that never will be.

“He’s looking for an iyi-uwa. A statue, necklace, stone, mask, whatever, that will allow him to be reborn again. If he finds it, ultimate wealth will have been achieved and the poverty gap will be too unsustainably large that society will crumble. We’ll be pushed back to the bronze age if we’re still alive in the next 15 years.”

Vanessa was certainly jarred at that one and took no effort to conceal it. “Okay…and that stone he was waving around? That’s not it?”

“Well—I—*The Art of Africa* prescribed the ritual to not take as long. But if that’s not the iyi-uwa—”

“Then maybe we still have time to get to it before he does!” Interjected Vanessa.

“He’s going to kill us.” Smith stared off into the emptiness of the floor. “Red-face, he’s going to kill us.”

“What do you mean Mr. Smith?”

“What I *mean*, Ms. Rothschild, is that in order to test if they had found the iyi-uwa, they needed to use it on a dead body.”

“But why not try it again on the dead man? I mean, he’s already dead!”

Smith heaved a sigh. “It’s not so simple. The legend of the iyi-uwa and its usage is riddled with nuances. Things like personal bonds, special purpose, third-party execution, repetitive infections, and believe me when I say many, many more. A resurrection stone is not to be dealt with lightly.”

“I see. And what do you suppose they’re doing now, then?”

“My best guess is that red-face is a native, if not subjectively royal, shaman that understands the rituals of the iyi-uwa and its hazily unknown summoning charms. To be succinct, he’s trying to *find* the iyi-uwa through a complicated ceremony.” His muscles were tense and sweat was latching onto his skin in areas he didn’t even know were possible. “I'm sorry, will you excuse me for a minute while I wash up? Just stay here, I won't be long.” Smith then began his speed walk towards the bathrooms which would prove to be his last calm moments before the rest of the horrific night.

Several wads of paper towels had proved to Smith that he wasn’t just sweating on the outside, but on the inside as well. He couldn’t possibly be more excited that such an object existed, nor fearful of the power that it yielded to unimaginably hideous outcomes. He was gasping now. Reach for air he would never find; reaching for meaning he would never find. His mind was falling again. Falling all the way down to his abscondence of loyalty 3,000 ft. in the air. Could he abandon his loyalty again for a totem? Look where his perfidy had gotten him. Ever since that jarring night he had searched for answers in anthro-archaeology, and yet the hydra of conclusion had always bred several more unknowns. Suddenly, his slushy thoughts instantly coagulated in response to a shrill scream from out in the museum.

Taken aback for only a moment, Smith rushed out of the bathroom and down the hall towards the balcony. The scream was Vanessa, no doubt. He would have time to dabble in his mind later, but right now he had to figure out a way for them to make it through the night safely, and Vanessa’s capture was certainly not part of the plan. When he arrived at the balcony, though, Vanessa was nowhere to be seen.

*He’s taken her. I’ve got to find the iyi-uwa before he does. Maybe I can use it to bargain.* Smith knew he had to find this legendary ancestral totem, but it proved no easy mental task. He ran lists and lists in his head of obscure African symbols and yet not one of them made any sense.

*Sepow? Too unrefined. Owuo Atwedee? Not enough. Tamfo Bebre? Too obsolete. Damnit! I’m thinking too esoterically. Too…modern.* Smith rubbed the collar of his Harris Tweed and took a sharp breath. Then, he ran as fast as he could towards the main staircase. He was thinking *way* too modern.

Five minutes and several layers of sweat later, Smith arrived at the bottom of the main staircase at the National Museum of African Art. Above him on the ceiling shone too gigantic overlapped squares tilted in such a way as to create a megalithic octagram. And to a professor who dabbled in religion every now and then, it sure as hell looked like the famous octagram of the Bethlehem Star. However enlightening this was, it was nothing compared to the realization that he was looking at the true iyi-uwa just behind it, also on the ceiling. His mind rushed back to his rapid thoughts during the run.

*It’s got to be something older, like the Ankh or the Cross. But the Cross isn’t African. Of course some could argue that it came from the Ankh, which represents life and thus naturally death, but the Ankh wasn’t quite African either. Ancient Egypt wasn’t really considered part of Africa, more like its own further developed continent.* But then his genealogy side kicked in. *Convergent evolution says common traits can be acquired in two completely unrelated places, and so can symbols. Maybe, maybe the Ankh wasn’t a necessary link to form the Cross. Maybe it was already* made.

His mind spun back to an old textbook about ancient African art. Suddenly, he could envision one of the oldest known pieces of art in the world—a South African crosshatch design etched into Blombos Cave an estimated 70,000 years ago. Many researchers had argued over the exact meaning of the crosshatches, but now Smith was concernedly theorizing that they almost too closely resembled the Cross.

His mind’s eye now envisioned the dozens of straight lines sporadically intersecting one another in a seemingly random design. *Maybe it’s not about the cross shape. Maybe it’s about the* intersection. *Maybe our ancestors found that the essence of being was not a circle of life and death, but rather a semi-perpendicular crosshatch of both dimensions with an unknown intersection capable of entertaining both existential dichotomies.*

At first, Smith had thought he would be looking for some old, African crosshatch-like artifact, but then he remembered a couple of old newspaper articles he read nearly 20 years ago.

For some reason or not, he had had his eyes set on scanning a New York Times article about Jean-Paul Carlhian—the famed architect from Harvard, and who had subsequently designed the very museum he was in at the moment. The article spoke to the fact of how Carlhian had paid $30 for a yellowed and unknown painting. He had occasionally shown the picture off to friends that came and went.

All this knowledge would’ve been wastebasketed had one of these friends not been a well-respected Renaissance art professor. Upon seeing the old painting, he had guffawed at the sight of the Virgin Mary and Child. Supposedly the painting was a lost Dürer work and could’ve been worth millions. Not only that, but Smith had heard through the Ivy League grapevine that Carlhian had dabbled quite often in ancient Christian cults, and perhaps was money laundering Christian artifacts. In this way, Smith theorized, Carlhian could’ve had more influence than intended on the design of the museum, and could’ve added a few tricks of his own. This of course included the six domes that eerily resembled that of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, simultaneously metonymizing that something holy had been “buried”, or stored, there.

Now, above Smith in the dark stair chamber shone a large cross hung from the ceiling in a smaller annex hallway. Of course it had always represented resurrection, but Smith hadn’t found it viable towards the history and region of the cultists he had found.

All this irreverent dabbling had exhausted his mind as a chatter of voices came bending around the hall. Quickly, Smith tucked behind a corner.

To call the next few minutes merely a mesmerizingly hororrsome spectacle would be to call the Roman Empire solely sizeable—undutiful, ill-conceived, and most certainly insolent; the corrugated, bloody, and hard to read tapestry that unfolded was demonically incongruent and dissimilar to any species of earthly indulgence. The scope of the future actions was to Smith—and any other man in a secure state of mind—ocularly, victually, tangibly, and above all cerebrally displeasing far down to the point of causing aches and pains deep into the crippled man. To such a morbidly disentangling caricature of fatality could no individual—weak nor strong—hope to internalize and jettison his primitive response; rather, this vehement display of undaunting mental disfigurement and sensible dismemberment proved by Smith to be an ill-receivedly raw interpretation of morbid ambiguity in which unparalleled vexation and lunatic gesticulation seemed to be the only notable short term treatment.

Cowering behind the protection of a jutting corner did Smith only dare to watch what would continue to haunt his visions; could he only feebly manage to see Vanessa tied to the cross by the assailant; could he only weakly eye the murderous arrow and bulging heart that the man so strangely carried; could he so decrepitly convulse upon glimpsing the fatal arrow pierce the woman straight through the chest and into the cross; and so failedly could he perceive that this was the true intersection necessary to obtain a double-life—piercing, and subsequently fusing, the living with the dead, and allowing the vital variables to complete the equation of resurrection.

No longer could Smith harbor the ghastly emotions that gnawed at his heart and nipped at his mind; no longer could he entertain the diseased image of the irreverently ironic impalee and the splanchnic rain from its heavenly heights.

The guilt had laid claim to his heart from the moment of his perfidious dive—away from the pandemonium of peace, and into the calmness of chaos. The guilt had only festered innumerably to the point of eating out a hole in his chest where both his sympathy and sanity escaped in response to the aforementioned desolation.

In such a state of mind, as the reader can only begin to imagine, did Dan Smith rise from his protected crouch and forthwith stride towards the assailant. With undulating satisfaction and rather little surprise, albeit displayed through appearance and not the mind, did the African wheel around and eye the mentally pathological offering that stood before him. And with seemingly less hesitancy did he plunge his hand deep into the bosom of Dan Smith, extract the hollow heart out from its skeletal cage, and squeeze out what blood was left of contentment, determination, and hope for the modern world.