

**THE
GENESIS RESOLUTION**

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By T.D. Freiberg

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Northwestern Italy
Sunday, November 19th
Late Evening

The creature appeared out of nowhere. Its black eyeless sockets were caked with dried blood and bone fragments. Flesh peeled away from a broad gash carved across its forehead. The exposed bone, dull with age, was peppered with patches of dark brown and black decay. Shredded, charred flesh hung off the right side of a face frozen in horror. Fragments of an ear dangled around a void that should have been a skull. The mouth gaped open in a soundless scream under pieces of red cartilage that had been a nose.

Only its head and shoulders were visible above the car's bonnet. Two hands clawed at the paint, trying to pull itself toward the driver. Fractured bone protruded through the tips of its fingers. There were no fingernails on the yellowing skin. Flesh and muscle ended in shreds on the left hand where a thumb had been ripped away.

The car had become bone chilling cold. Father Constantine couldn't feel his fingers on the steering

wheel or his foot as it stomped the brakes of his aging Fiat. The car careened to a stop on the Alpine road's narrow shoulder—but it was too late. The creature had already disappeared under the car. Slipping two shaking fingers under his white clerical collar, Constantine composed himself by repeatedly inhaling slowly and deeply.

Fearful of the creature reaching out from underneath the car, he lowered his window and listened. The wind carried the howl of a wolf. At least he hoped it was a wolf and not something unearthly. He listened a minute longer, but all he heard was the rustling of nearby trees. He wiped his perspiring hands on his slacks and opened the car's door. The mountain air was cold and thin but not as frigid as the air inside his car. A sudden blast of wind carried the pungent scent of pine and decaying vegetation. He didn't step out.

When the gust subsided, his nostrils filled with the coppery, metallic stench of napalm mixed with the charcoal-like, sulfurous odor of burning flesh. It was the disgusting, repulsive smell of death. Battlefield death. He put a handkerchief over his nose and mouth to keep from vomiting.

Shivering, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. That smell. Who could forget that smell? He couldn't. It never leaves you. Never. No matter how long you live.

The fresh reek of burning human tissue conjured up images that he had spent decades trying to forget. Horrific memories from Vietnam flooded his consciousness. Eighteen and fresh out of Union High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the war

was making insatiable demands for young men. Rather than wait for the draft, Constantine enlisted in the army. Shipped to Saigon eight weeks later, he was assigned to the 1st Battalion of the 28th Infantry, part of The Big Red One. Scrawny—but determined to prove his bravery—Private Constantine volunteered to be a tunnel rat.

Thirty-six years later, he still did not know if the apparitions he first encountered in those tunnels were real or a fabrication of his mind. He did know the demon always preceded a companion: Death.

Summoning his courage, he stepped out of the car. His ankles froze. Constantine's eyes went to the ground expecting to see mutilated hands gripping his feet but it was just slush that had smothered his loafers. Another burst of wind ripped through the narrow valley, smacking him like an invisible fist. The vile smell disappeared. He fought his way to the front of the car. There was no damage to his car's grille or its rust-spotted bumper. The dirty film on the bonnet was undisturbed. Shaken by the appearance of the wraith—and the memories it evoked from his service in Vietnam—Constantine was about to get back into his car when a vehicle pulled up and parked behind him. Adding to the glare of the car's headlights, a powerful blue-white light blinded him.

"Ha bisogno di aivto?" a woman called out in Italian. *"Est ce que vous avez besoin de l'aide?"* she asked, this time in French.

He raised his left hand to shade his eyes. The gesture forced his jacket open, displaying his black clerical shirt and white clerical collar.

“Sorry Father,” the woman responded. The blinding beam lowered off his eyes, but his hands and torso were still illuminated.

Constantine recognized the intense beam as a military or law enforcement grade halogen light and was still seeing spots when he located the source of the voice. The woman was standing behind her driver’s side door. She held a flashlight far to her left, away from her body. Constantine knew the procedure. It was by-the-book tactical training. Her right hand was hidden from view. He guessed that she would be holding a weapon.

“I saw you skid off the road in front of me. Are you okay, Father?”

“Do you smell anything?” Constantine asked, removing his hand from his nose and mouth. His resonant voice carried over the churning wind.

“Like what? Are you having car problems?” the woman asked.

“No, I am okay . . . I think. I thought I hit an animal, then I smelled something burning . . . but I cannot find anything.”

“Are you well enough to continue?”

“I am a little tired. I left Rome this morning . . . I have been driving nonstop.”

“I drive this motorway all the time,” the woman said. “Lynx, red deer, even wolves find their way to the highway. I am staying up the road in Courmayeur. If you need a place to rest, I know the hotel has rooms available.”

Her voice didn’t display any anxiety, but she stayed behind her car’s door. “Thank you. I planned to drive all the way to Geneva, but I am too fatigued

to continue. If it is not an inconvenience, I will follow you to the hotel you mentioned.”

“Not at all,” the woman said, turning the flashlight off.

Settling back behind the wheel, Constantine eased the Fiat onto the road and slipped behind the woman’s black Volkswagen. He glanced at his rearview mirror just long enough to see the car’s taillights illuminate a hideous, bloodied torso. He pushed harder on the accelerator. The abomination faded into the blackness of the night.

“Why have you come back after all these years?” he asked aloud.

He heard no reply.

Snaking another eight hundred feet higher in elevation, both vehicles pulled into the parking lot of the Hotel Courmayeur. Constantine was glad that he made the decision to stop. Courmayeur was the last exit before the Mont Blanc Tunnel that connects Italy with France. The four thousand foot elevation and November winds had changed the light drizzle to a howling icy-snow. He was too tired to drive in such hazardous conditions. He trudged toward the VW Golf with his hands in front of his eyes. Crystals of ice assaulted his unprotected face. He held the driver’s door of the VW open, allowing the woman to exit.

“I am Thomas Constantine,” he said, extending his hand. A blast of icy air blew his silver-gray hair into an Einsteinesque caricature. “May I repay your kindness by helping you with your luggage?”

“Nadia Kanatova,” the woman said, offering her hand. “Nice to meet you, Father Constantine.”

Taken aback by the firm grip from such a petite woman, he guessed her to be in her mid-thirties, about five feet three, and maybe a hundred fifteen pounds. She looked well dressed in the pale lighting of the parking lot—brown knee-high boots over fashionably tight pants, a short leather jacket with a fur collar, and a matching fur hat. The fur didn't appear to be mink, but it wasn't imitation either. A designer handbag hung on her shoulder.

“Thank you, but I can manage,” she replied. “I travel light.”

Constantine detected a Russian accent when she introduced herself, but her Italian was flawless. Had she given him an Italian surname, he would have missed the accent entirely. He blocked the wind with his body while she opened the car's hatchback and extracted a small overnight bag that matched her handbag.

At the hotel's entrance, Constantine opened the door. The charcoal aroma of a wood-burning fireplace welcomed them. He couldn't help but watch her stride to the registration desk. Her hips mimicked the sway of a catwalk model, but her posture was military-erect with shoulders back and eyes straight ahead. A wisp of blonde hair worked itself loose and fell in front of her eyes. She pushed it back behind her ear.

The glint of a gold wedding band caught Constantine's eye. He stepped back a discrete distance, allowing her to fill out the hotel's registration form. Something about her persona told him not to get too close.

Turning away from the counter, the woman

stopped and extended her hand. “Goodnight, Father Constantine. I hope your journey is successful.”

“Goodnight, *Signora* Kanatova. Thank you for stopping and offering your help.”

Constantine stood for a moment, mesmerized by her countenance. The cold had put a pink blush on her cheeks. She was trim but not skinny, more of a runner’s body. Her facial features were not as etched as the Italians nor as rounded as the French but would turn heads anywhere. A winsome, up-turned nose didn’t quite match her deep, almost black, eyes. She wasn’t wearing lipstick. She didn’t need it.

Constantine realized that he had been examining her all the way to the elevator and flushed with embarrassment.

“*Che bella ragazza,*” the young night attendant whispered. He pushed a registration pad over the counter.

Yes, very beautiful. Constantine signed his name to the register. His hand trembled ever so slightly.

My other demon.

A smile creased his tired face. He remembered the bottle of Jack Daniels in his suitcase.



Medieval Palace, Vatican City
Monday, November 20th
Mid-Morning

A bitter, wet, cold front was sweeping through Italy. A thin layer of frost coated the bricks in St. Peter's Square. The ancient fountains, normally surrounded by tourists, spewed ice-cold water in silence.

Cardinal Secretary of State Benedetto Capponi was in his office on the second floor of the Medieval Palace. Smaller than the Pope's private library and lacking the centuries-old frescoes, the office held a lifetime collection of old books and manuscripts. Nearly a thousand volumes adorned the shelves. Cardinal Capponi had absorbed all of them.

Looking at the thesis on his desk, the veins in his neck pulsed with every heartbeat. *Constantine—again*. For the second time in eighteen months, this man's teachings at the Pontifical Biblical Institute had deviated from established doctrine.

He did not like this American priest. He did not like the way Constantine questioned everything and

especially did not like the way he challenged Church dogma in his classroom.

Dripping wet, the man entering Cardinal Capponi's outer office put his overcoat and umbrella on a rack near the door. His shoes slogged on the terrazzo floor as he passed two rows of large, overstuffed leather chairs to face a young man behind a century-old desk. "Daniel Vaughn. I have an appointment with Cardinal Capponi."

"Your Eminence," the Cardinal's assistant spoke into an archaic intercom, "Grand Chancellor Vaughn is—"

"Send him in," the speaker growled.

Vaughn approached two chairs facing the Cardinal's desk and bowed. The Cardinal knew he was waiting for an invitation to sit down. He left him standing. Technically, the Pontifical Biblical Institute does not report to the Secretary of State's office, but he wanted Vaughn to understand who was in charge. He knew his adversary well.

Last year, Father Constantine had postulated in his classroom that the story of creation . . . as told in Genesis . . . was poetry that carried a divine message. Written for simpler people in simpler times, Constantine had argued that the story could not be supported in a universe known to be thirteen billion years old and should no longer be accepted as a literal truth. He concluded that it was time for the Church to reject intelligent design and accept evolution as a scientific truth.

Preparing for a confrontation, Cardinal Capponi had ordered a complete background check on Chancellor Vaughn. Born in South Wales, Vaughn

came to the Biblical Institute from the unlikely arena of Coca Cola where he was head of European distribution. Known as a brilliant administrator and a savvy political player, Vaughn had a remarkable talent for analyzing and understanding complex relationships. Neither a pushover nor a bully, he fully understood the implications of being autonomous from the Holy See yet dependent on the Vatican for nearly all of its funding.

That first encounter had ended with both Chancellor Vaughn and Father Constantine being issued stern letters of reprimand.

“I thought we had an understanding on this matter,” Cardinal Capponi said, raising his voice to a near shout. “You told me you could control Constantine. Now this...” The Cardinal threw an inch-thick treatise to the edge of his desk. It landed with a solid thump, shaking a miniature urn filled with antique writing instruments. “This goes beyond heresy. This is public blasphemy. I will see Constantine defrocked over this.”

The Cardinal sat back in his chair while Vaughn thumbed through the document.

“Your Eminence,” Vaughn said, returning the Cardinal’s icy stare without blinking, “I arranged the loan of the Chaldean Flood Tablets from the British Museum and appointed Father Constantine to translate and interpret them. I attended Father Constantine’s lecture on these tablets. His research, translation, and interpretation are beyond reproach.”

“Blasphemy! This is blasphemy. The Church will not tolerate this.” Cardinal Capponi’s nostrils flared.

Vaughn stood his ground. “Carbon dating has confirmed that these tablets predate the Christian era by twenty centuries. They—”

“I do not give a damn how old they are,” the Cardinal said. “The story chiseled in the tablets supports the biblical account of a God who punishes mankind with a worldwide flood.”

“But—”

“There are no buts.”

“With respect, Your Eminence,” Vaughn said in an unwavering voice, “Father Constantine did trace the origins of this story to a much older period, as much as 10,000 years before the Christian era.”

“Blasphemy.”

“Father Constantine’s research does document, beyond any reasonable doubt, how this story was passed down from generation to generation as oral folklore. It became fully accepted by the early Christians and ultimately found its way into Scripture. The account of the flood given in Genesis was rooted in an ancient Babylonian myth. While the story has spiritual significance, the actual event NEVER HAPPENED!”

Cardinal Capponi raised his hand, ending the discussion. “This paper is to be withdrawn immediately. Any conclusions published by your Institute *will* be consistent with the Sacred Scripture. Are we clear on this matter?”

“Yes, Your Eminence,” Chancellor Vaughn said through clenched teeth.

“I want Constantine terminated. Send him back to America. I do not want him in Rome. You are dismissed.”

Vaughn bowed and closed the door on his way out with just a little extra force.

Cardinal Capponi unlocked the top right-hand drawer of his desk and unplugged the latest model Nokia Mini Smartphone. This phone was equipped with the newest encryption technology, as was its mate. He pressed the *C* key, engaging the encryption software, then the memory 1 button. A number was displayed with a Vienna, Austria city code but no name. “What is the status of your current assignment? Excellent . . . I look forward to a successful conclusion of this matter.”

Capponi pressed the phone’s END button, stood up, and looked into a full-length gilded mirror set between floor-to-ceiling dark wood bookcases. He breathed in the aroma of the old books and manuscripts. They were survivors, like him. At seventy-six years of age, his furrowed brow and facial wrinkles gave an impression of fatigue that belied the fire in his soul.

His destiny had been determined before the beginning of time. He closed his eyes and whispered, “God is my strength and power: and he maketh my way perfect.”



Hotel Courmayeur, Courmayeur, Italy
Monday, November 20th
0537 Hours

Under a down comforter, Constantine was lingering in that state between sleeping and waking. Unsettled and regretting the second drink he had consumed before going to bed, Constantine squinted at the clock on the nightstand. The red numerals displayed 5:37 a.m. His mouth tasted of whiskey. He got up, shaved, showered, and rubbed his hands on his stomach. His paunch was getting bigger. Decades of teaching were taking a toll on his body. He did walk five minutes every morning to the train station where he would catch a bus to the institute. At the other end, there was another ten-minute walk to his office. He always lectured standing up, but it wasn't enough. *Too much pasta. Too much wine. Too much Jack Daniels.*

He dressed and made his way to the hotel's lobby for the complimentary continental breakfast. The smell of freshly baked brioche, pastries, and cinnamon rolls filled the small alcove off the main reception lobby. As tempting as the pastries

appeared, he remembered his expanding girth and selected a fruit cup and an apple. He poured himself a cup of coffee from a pot labeled *caffè Americano* and sat at one of the small tables.

Conversations of business deals, the weather, and skiing filled the air as he sipped his hot coffee. Guests came and went but the woman he encountered the previous night never appeared. Constantine sloshed around the last of his second cup of coffee and downed it in a single gulp. The caffeine cleared the fog in his mind.

The sun was still behind the eastern mountain peaks as he pulled his worn fabric suitcase through the fresh snow of the parking lot. The wind coming off the mountains carried the scent of various woods and frozen earth. He used his bare hands to brush the snow off his car's windows. Seldom driving in Rome, he had never bothered to buy a snow brush. He made a mental note to at least buy a pair of gloves.

The little Fiat sputtered to life on the second attempt. Just an hour and a half from CERN, the world's largest center for scientific research in fundamental physics, Constantine's thoughts turned to his old university roommate, Bae Lee, the reason for this journey.

He had met Bae Lee during spring break of his sophomore year at the University of Michigan. He was answering a newspaper ad for a roommate to share a two bedroom flat. He had driven to the apartment's address but almost didn't get out of the car. It was in a suburb that he knew he couldn't afford. The ad didn't mention a price.

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With nothing to lose, he marched to the front door and rang the bell. “I’m here about the apartment . . .” An Asian man with brown eyes and black hair opened the door. Flashing back to Vietnam’s tunnels, Constantine’s right hand instinctively went to his side, but he had no weapon. He felt embarrassed.

That would have been 1971. The war wasn’t going well. American casualties were escalating. The man behind the door had probably endured years of prejudice and abuse because of his race.

“You were a soldier.” The young man bowed to him. “My name is Bae Lee. I would be honored to have you as a roommate. Let me show you to your room. Please.” The rail-thin man made a sweeping gesture with his arm.

Constantine followed the man through a spotlessly clean living area with leather furniture to a large bedroom with a king-sized bed, two night tables and a massive armoire.

“This will be your room. My room is across the hall.”

Constantine noticed that the other bedroom was much smaller. “I cannot possibly afford—”

“Then I will accept whatever you offer. I am Korean. You saved my country and my family many years ago. It is I who am indebted to you.”

“I . . . I didn’t . . .” Constantine fumbled for words.

“I am a mathematics major and hope to find a career in nuclear physics. I can’t tolerate alcohol and I don’t do drugs. I am shy and don’t mix well with other people. I think this was meant to be.

Perhaps we can help each other overcome our . . . issues.”

That was the beginning of a three-year friendship. Constantine helped Bae become more confident in social situations and Bae educated him on various Asian cultures. By the time they graduated, thanks mostly to Bae, Constantine had stopped drinking. He had last seen Bae on graduation day at the University of Michigan. Bae had received a Bachelor’s degree in Nuclear Engineering and had been accepted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Constantine wasn’t surprised that he ended up at CERN.

They had exchanged a few letters over the years but eventually lost contact. The prospect of seeing Bae after all this time was exciting, but Bae’s frantic phone call Friday—and the appearance of the apparition last night—darkened his mood.

Bae had literally begged Constantine to meet him at CERN.

“I have made a discovery, Thomas. A big discovery—a Nobel Prize discovery—and someone wants to keep it a secret. I am afraid that I will be killed over this.”

Constantine had asked what Bae discovered.

“Not on the phone.” Bae said. “I need you to come here . . . to CERN, in Geneva.

I will explain everything when you get here. Please!”

Constantine had four days before his next class. He had agreed to meet Bae at CERN, got his car serviced that Saturday, and set out for Geneva yesterday morning. Last night, the wraith that had

haunted him during his entire tour of duty in Vietnam reappeared after thirty-six years. He had no idea why it was back, but it scared the hell out of him.

The morning sun reflected off the fresh snow as Constantine eased onto the motorway. He lowered the windshield visor to keep from squinting. The thin crust of ice blanketing the motorway crackled under the Fiat's tread worn tires. Constantine followed signs to the Tunnel du Mont-Blanc and Geneva. Behind him, puffy clouds obscured the mountain's peaks.

An hour and a half after exiting the Tunnel du Mont Blanc, fumes coming from the car's dash vents caused Constantine to turn the heater off and roll down the windows. Cold, fresh air flooded into the car as it crossed over the Pont du Mont-Blanc, the first of eight bridges spanning the Rhône. He was now in Geneva. Compared to Rome's musty, old book smell, Geneva had a lighter, woody feeling with scents of pine and evergreen. It was fresh . . . enticing . . . seductive. The city smelled like money.

Constantine was immune to the call of the elegant shops and lively markets that he passed. He had renounced worldly possessions decades ago. Ten minutes later, he arrived at the main gate of CERN.

A security guard at the gate motioned him to stop.

"I have an appointment with one of your scientists," Constantine said. "I was told to pick up a pass at Reception Building Thirty-Three."

The guard gave the Fiat a long inspection. Constantine knew that his car was the type of disposable vehicle a terrorist would use, but it was also the kind of car a priest could afford. Constantine watched the guard examine the undercarriage with a mirror on the end of a long pole. After a final glance into the back seat and cargo area, the guard motioned him through.

“Follow the signs to the Visitors Parking Lot, opposite the Globe,” the guard said, pointing to a large spherical building. “Reception Building Thirty-Three is across the street from the parking lot.”

Inside the reception building, a three-dimensional map of the world highlighted contributing countries. A middle-aged and very professional looking woman, wearing a chocolate-brown business suit and wireless headset, greeted him.

“I have an appointment with Doctor Lee. My name is Thomas Constantine.”

The receptionist gave him an awkward smile and handed him a clip-on badge printed with the word: VISITOR. “Please keep this visible while you are in the complex.” She motioned to a security officer stationed near the reception desk. “Please show Father Constantine to Conference Room Four.”

Constantine followed the guard to a double glass door. A lock buzzed and both doors parted. He wondered if the guard’s security badge had activated the door or if some unseen camera was observing them.

The conference room was hospital clean and

flooded with natural light. An oval table sat in the middle of the room with three modern office chairs on each side. A white projection screen had been pulled down in the middle of a wall-to-wall blackboard. Constantine had just settled into a chair when two men entered the room.

The first was shorter and olive-skinned with dark, wavy hair going gray at the temples. A bushy, black moustache under thick horn-rimmed glasses drew attention away from a chubby Middle-Eastern face and a frame carrying an extra twenty-five pounds. The second man was older, over six feet tall, wiry, and muscular. His cheap-looking suit was past the point of just needing pressing and reeked of tobacco. The man's fish-like face was engraved with a permanent frown. Olive skin spoke first.

"Father Constantine, I am Karim Alami, the director-general of CERN. Doctor Lee worked under me on the ATLAS Project."

As Constantine rose to shake hands with the man, the words registered. "Worked?" he said, emphasizing the past tense.

Karim removed his glasses and looked into Constantine's eyes. "I am very sorry to be the one to tell you, but Doctor Lee was found dead in his apartment on Saturday afternoon. A housekeeper found his body."

Constantine collapsed on his chair. "I assume his death was not accidental."