

LEAD CHAMBER

(Approx. 4,900 words)

Hello, Sylvan. I don't have much time. It's 6:30 AM. At noon the monster will hit the island dead on. One way or another this big fiasco must be concluded. Otto is a Category 5 now—sustained winds over 170 miles per hour—they started calling it a super-hurricane. Three thousand people have been evacuated. Only us, them and the usual scattering of old fools are left. Soon I'll go hunt them down, if they don't come looking for me first. Whoever is left standing will crawl in a hole somewhere and face the wrath of God.

I'll write as fast as possible. I have a lot to tell you but it's hard to focus when you haven't slept for ages and you've just been shot at for twenty minutes.

First and foremost: the Brotherhood. I urge you, for your future and for your immediate protection, to seek admission without delay. You have been Under Scrutiny by the Edinburgh's Chamber for six months now, so you are entitled to take the next step.

Therefore I, Julian Cazzaniga, Master of Lead, certain of your confidence, hereby unlock for you the Portal of the Chamber. Beware, you are still at liberty not to join, but you're bound to hail, conceal and never reveal what I shall now impart to

you. Betraying the Brotherhood is final: it would cost you the only thing you really own. I now open the Portal.

The Mystic Brotherhood of the Lead Chamber is a secret guild established in 1949 by Sublime Brother Juan Batista Olivares, the Spanish theologian, chess master and poet. It is based on a simple axiom: Clever actions by clever individuals open the path to a better human race. There are now thirty-seven Chambers in the world. The Brotherhood, which operates with the constant blessing of the Great Engineer of the Universe, Sublime Holder of the Truth and Shielder of the Clever, proffers guidance, safeguards the welfare of the members and promotes all their noble endeavors. All candidates must be highly recommended men of superior character and impeccable integrity, willing to abide by the orders of each Chamber's Grand Rector.

Memorize the following words: "Six fingers has the Mystic Hand. Twelve trumpets the Shielder's band. Eighteen dogs to guard His Land." You must be able to declaim these words without faltering. Don't worry about their meaning, just memorize them; they'll make sense later. I have just made you a Lead Apprentice, which entitles you to request initiation as a First Shield.

Now, as far as family finances are concerned, we don't own anything on paper. All our properties and accounts are fronted by RJS Brokers Ltd., a division of Samina Handels Anstalt of Lichtenstein. Officially I am just a junior officer. A gentleman by the name of Juergen Beckman will get in touch with you shortly. Trust him completely.

Our assets here in Grand Burk consist of my house on the North Creek, some land and a liquor store—at least six hundred thousand dollars. Look, these Burks and Daicos Islanders are a bunch of losers, only good for laughing, dancing and drinking rum under the stars; add to that this awful Caribbean weather and there's nothing worth keeping. Ask Juergen to liquidate quickly whatever survives the hurricane. In Lugano we have a three-suite office building on Via Nassa. Definitely keep that, it produces a considerable income. In Edinburgh we own your flat on Warrender Park Terrace. As you know, it belonged to your Grandpa McGraw. The furniture, artwork and silverware there are exceptionally valuable.

I'm sure you realize chances are slim that your mother will ever come back to Scotland. She always hated Edinburgh. I wouldn't lose sleep over it. Poor Jane was adrift in her private ocean from day one. After ten years in the jungle intermingling with cannibals she's probably lost to the real world for good. In case her lunacy rolls the other way, you'll deal with it. She receives 3,000 Swiss francs every month from the building in Lugano, so don't worry about her.

We have five bank accounts with about sixty thousand pounds among them. Most of it is in euro and dollars. In general, try to spend the dollars and keep the euro. Some guy in Argentina owes us thirty thousand dollars for a land deal I brokered. We owe nineteen thousand euro to a guy in Egypt for a consignment of Helwan pistols—a clone of the Beretta 92—that I haven't sold so far. Juergen will be more precise and tie up the loose ends.

He will also give you a key. It's for a safe-deposit box at Banca del Gottardo in

Lugano. In it you will find eighty thousand dollars in fifties, eleven high-quality one-carat diamonds and a Canadian passport of mine that you can destroy. There's also a little Mauser 6.35 with one hundred rounds. Look, one never knows, I recommend you keep it right there. Should you need to sell a diamond, Juergen can give you the address of Jacques Vermer in Antwerp, an old schoolmate of mine. Save what's in the box for a rainy day, that's my suggestion.

There's something else in there, Sylvan. It's a zip-lock bag with seventy grams of hashish. This is nothing to make a big deal about. I haven't smoked that stuff in a long, long time. It was just a phase. Life is strange; sometimes you do things that in retrospect appear totally foolish. I'm not sure why I kept it, probably it's no good anymore anyway, just chuck it.

Rely on Juergen Beckman without reservation; he has taken care of RJS for twenty years. Do you know what RJS means by the way? Considering what's going on, it's essential that I tell you. Things don't always go exactly the way you plan, Sylvan. Sometimes you must contend with wrong decisions or opposing interests. Or fate. But it's the nobility of the purpose that probably counts in the end, that's what I'm driving at. I don't know, really. My nerves are worn-out. I see everything like I'm in a foggy phone booth at the moment. What I have done and what I wish I'd done is all mixed up in a dreadful haze. However, for what it's worth, R stands for your grandpa Roman, J stands for Julian and S stands for Sylvan. I always hoped there would be some continuity in the Cazzaniga name—in the spirit of our actions, aspirations, values. I don't know right now if there is any. But it would be nice if there

were. Anyway...

Being as brief as possible, I'll tell you the whole story; it's only prudent that you know names and facts. I've worked at this deal for a full year. It could be—or have been—the coronation of my career. But it doesn't look good right now. There's a strong chance I won't make it, Sylvan.

Through a cigar dealer in the Dominican Republic, I connected with some Colombian investors who are willing to purchase from the government of the Burks and Daicos Islands the islet of Great Zand Cay, at the very south end of the Burks Bank. It's not particularly big but it's very pretty and its exposure is excellent. They offer one hundred million dollars in cash, plus thirty million under the table to whoever makes the deal possible. I arranged it so that half of that would go to the Brotherhood and half to the Premier and his cabinet. My cut would be five million. It's a wonderful deal for the Government; they sell an uninhabited little island for ten times what it's worth. All that money could go in infrastructure and education, God knows how much this country needs it. It would produce jobs too.

The Colombians plan to invest another two hundred million to turn it into a mega-luxury resort. It would be connected to Grand Daico and Puerto Plata via helicopter, and from there to the States and Europe via jet. Of course they have their own agenda as well. What do you expect? There's no free lunch, these are business people. The central idea is to use this venture to move a lot of cash around. Think about it, who in his right mind would put down three hundred and thirty million

dollars just to build a one hundred-room hotel, no matter how exclusive? How long would it take them to get that kind of money back? But I introduced them carefully, setting them up as a Lichtenstein investment company with Venezuelan and Swiss capital. They come across as very legit. You can look at it any way you want, this is an intelligent deal for all the parties involved. And it's all going to hell.

The moment this affair got to the Executive Council, the British Governor, Merlyn Brown, started asking questions, demanding data, projections, environmental research and all sort of bologna. Mind you, the project was perfectly presented, with all kinds of supporting documentation, models, financial statements, expert opinions, the works—I know because I'm the one who put the whole damn thing together.

Well, after two or three meetings it became obvious that his reluctance was just a delay tactic. He was refusing to sign. We all started scratching our heads trying to figure out what was going on and here's what surfaced. When this item was presented to the Legislative Council, Derrick Baker, who's the Leader of the Opposition, had this brilliant idea: Since the General Elections are six months away and Derrick's party, the Progressive National Movement, is bound to win, why not get Brown to stall the deal so they can be the ones to close it? I've known this guy for years, a first class snake. Whenever there's some trick to play here comes Bakey.

It's a wonderful move if you think about it. After four years of gross mismanagement there's no way the People's Democratic Party will be re-elected. They are well aware of it themselves. Throughout this term they have acted like a bunch of

drunken teenagers at a free carnival—zero concern with appearances.

Merlyn Brown is so corrupt that for a million bucks he would ship the whole stinking country to China if he could, so when the other guys offered him three million, he jumped on it like a cat on a lizard. Of course we tried to lubricate his wheels too. We offered him four million. Apparently though he was feeling more comfortable with the idea of taking three mil from them than four from us. We couldn't prevail. What were we supposed to do, complain to the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office? First, it wouldn't do any good; those people are the most inept bunch of paper shufflers you could imagine. Second, we definitely couldn't afford to invite too close a scrutiny on this affair; if you really want to scratch and scratch till you get to the bottom of it, it's pretty obvious that this is nothing but a fancy money-laundering scheme. We discussed it at length. We didn't really have many choices. In the end, old Merlyn Brown had a scuba accident. He was an avid diver, but old and overweight, and the owner of the dive shop happened to be Cedrick Ingram, our Chamber's Junior Rider. What can I say? Unfortunately sometimes there's really no way to avoid these things. Basically, he just asked for it.

Naturally we knew in advance that it would take the Brits several weeks to appoint his replacement. In the mean time the Chief Secretary, Cleo Forhsteel, was going to be Acting Governor. She was a sympathizer, her husband Theo being one of our Third Shields. We offered her four million and she gave us the nod. All went smoothly, except that at the very first meeting of the Executive Council after the accident it became obvious that she had suddenly switched sides. They'd offered her

five million. Theo conveniently disappeared on some business trip or another and any further attempt to negotiate failed. We got screwed. But it didn't end there.

The Premier, Jim Simmick, who's the brother of our Mystic Shield, Dallas Simmick, was caught with his pants down. Cleo set him up—not a difficult thing to do since the idiot is famous for trying to corner any living female that passes within a mile from him. She convinced a sixteen-year-old Canadian tourist to claim he raped her. They were actually in her hotel room together and there are witnesses who saw her running away disheveled and in tears while he was chasing her with his shirt hanging out of his pants, so the episode is rather damning. After the fact, Cleo called him at his palatial home in Grand Daico and told him straight out that if we backed off the girl wouldn't press charges, if we persisted he would be prosecuted and kicked out of office.

Then, yesterday evening, as they were performing the final evacuation flights—people yelling, cars honking, suitcases, bundles, children crying—Theo emerged all smiles from the very last plane in. Taking advantage of the chaos, Police Commissioner Peter Hargrove, who's our Senior Syllogist, took charge of our counterattack. As Theo was leaving the airport, the Police stopped him and found one pound of cocaine in his suitcase. He was beaten to a pulp and thrown in jail for drug trafficking and resisting arrest.

Next, Peter went to see Cleo at her home—I guess she's too tough to evacuate—and told her that if she doesn't sign the damn thing, not only will they indict Theo,

he'll personally make sure that she ends belly up in the town salina. Cleo apparently smiled, reached under her desk, pulled out a sawed-off side-by-side shotgun and pointed the barrel at Peter's nuts, like in a mafia movie of the Seventies. She proceeded to inform him that she was firing him for insubordination and appointing Algarve Wilson as Acting Police Commissioner. Algarve is the firearms instructor, a non-commissioned officer whose only prerogative is that of being her first cousin. It ended up with Cleo chasing Peter out of her house and firing on his car for good measure.

Peter, who is not particularly smart, although as the Senior Syllogist he should be, fortunately had the presence of mind to zip by the Police Station, whisk Theo out of the holding cell and shove him in the trunk of his car before coming to see me. He was a nervous wreck, stammering like an idiot, his clothes and hair all discombobulated. After chaining stupid Theo to the rafters in my garage, I calmed him down—it took half a bottle of bourbon—and we tried to figure out how all this could pan out.

As I said before, we can't go public and neither can Cleo. If we want this deal to go through we must make sure the Brits stay out of it. So? What's she going to do, have us prosecuted? I don't think so. The only ones left on our side are the Chamber's Officers and two of the Shields. The island is virtually empty. Everybody's eyes are on this damn hurricane Otto. Cleo's going to try to get us out of the picture permanently. She could use this scenario: The corrupt Police Commissioner, after being fired, mounts a small-scale armed insurrection in defense of the rapist Chief Minister; to

protect law and order the Acting Governor has no alternative but to quell it in blood. If I were her that's what I'd do. Who's going to know? So the best move for us is to turn it around: The crazed Acting Governor, in an attempt to get her sleazy husband off the hook, mounts an armed insurrection soldiered by mutinous police officers captained by the corrupt Algarve; the Police Commissioner backed by a handful of honest citizens must intervene to save the Country from irreparable harm.

Normally here the Police don't carry side arms. The weapons in the local armory were shipped to Grand Daico yesterday. Algarve was in charge of that and he could have easily kept a number of short guns. Cleo wouldn't have played it that way without the force to back it up. However, Peter is the proud owner of a nice collection of revolvers, with plenty of ammo to go with it. And of course I have my pistols. We have decent firepower. We can handle a confrontation.

So we made a round of phone calls to the Brothers and arranged for an emergency meeting at 5 AM this morning at the house of Henry Charles, a police inspector who's our Mystic Sentry. Theo is our trump card now. On his way home, Peter will stop by the Lighthouse and lock him up there.

I passed the night eating pistachios, drinking Coca-Cola, peeking out the window and readying my weapons. I have six of those Egyptian Helwans, with extra mags, my Derringer 45/410 and a ten-inch BFR 500 Magnum, a five-shot single action revolver, still new in the box. I always thought of it as a toy. Who wants to shoot something like that? It weighs seventy ounces—a hand-held cannon. Well, I'm

very glad I bought it.

At four this morning, crawling along with my lights off, I drive to Henry's. I park one hundred yards away, by the side of an overgrown lot next to his house. That will prove to be a very smart decision as well. All is calm. The house is lit by candles and a few dim lights. Kelly and Tyrone Abbott, who are the Senior and Junior Mace, are guarding the perimeter. I am among the first to arrive. Soon the others start trickling in, alone or in pairs. There is a bit of tension initially but little by little it dissipates completely. Any attempt on my part to address our predicament fails—they all would rather talk about the weather.

Lindsay Forsteel, who's our Mystic Marshall and the first cousin of Theo, produces salt cod and grits for breakfast. Leslie Robertson, our Junior Sylogist, amiably sips tea with Elrond Bouncyn who's the Master of Silver and the half-brother of Bakey. Dallas Simmick is totally fascinated by Henry's collection of Calypso CDs. Peter distributes all sorts of Colt, Smith & Wesson and Ruger revolvers like they are wedding favors, joking with Stu Francolin, the Senior Rider, who follows him passing out boxes of ammo. I give them four of my Helwans and a bunch of 9 mm rounds. The Brothers start arguing about who gets what, pushing each other around, laughing and playing with the guns. We have a slumber party in progress. To top it off, our Grand Rector, Eustace Rivers, shows up all shaved and good smelling wearing patent leather boots and the customary dark gray suit. I discover that in a room on the second floor they have arranged the chairs in a hexagon. I am mesmerized.

Dawn is almost breaking when we finally get on with our meeting. Well, I'll be

damned if Rivers isn't starting the whole routine as if this were a regular monthly meeting of the Chamber: the Bonding Wine, the Lighting of the Eastern Flame, the Silver Monologue of the Mystic Sentry—at least twenty minutes of bullshit. I let it go on for a few moments paralyzed by such a grotesque display of stupidity, then I stand up and clap my hands. There are only two Officers who can stop the proceedings, I may as well tell you: the Mystic Shield, for issues concerning adherence to the Ritual, and the Master of Lead, yours truly, for security purposes. So I start yelling that this is an extraordinary meeting and we can't do business as usual because we have zero time for cuteness and we should just get real and come up with a plan. And they are all there looking at me like "Well, there is no reason to blow a fuse," when all of a sudden the door bursts open and Tyrone runs in. Algarve and a gang of about fifteen have materialized out of thin air and are surrounding us. In three seconds flat all the Brothers are at the windows shooting like madmen as I run around extinguishing candles and switching off lights.

I have never experienced such a volume of fire. And they are returning it big time. When our eyes adjust to the darkness the shooting becomes a bit less hysterical, but I admit I got caught in the frenzy myself, darting from window to window blasting away with my monster revolver. When I bought it, just to be silly, I got 440 grains Cor-Bon, the heaviest round available. The recoil is so massive it catches me by surprise. When I fire the first shot the gun almost flies out of the window. It's louder than thunder. I'm unable to shoot accurately but I scare the hell out of them and certainly ravage their cars—they shake when I hit them.

As the light increases, I notice Cleo peeking carefully from behind a car with her funky shotgun—and Theo suddenly pops up next to her all bandaged shaking his fist at us. He must have found a way to escape from the lighthouse. Good job, Peter! I empty a whole cylinder in their general direction and they hit the ground in a hurry.

Then I find myself next to Owen Francolin, Stu's father and our Senior Sixth Shield, who's eighty-eight years old and can hardly stand. He has a Ruger Redhawk in each hand and is firing away with astonishing grit. Lots of emotion all around. I'm thinking, this is Shoot Out at the OK Corral, we need to be a little more pragmatic than this. At that very second down goes Owen with a hole in his forehead. As Stu jumps around yelling "Oh, papa, oh, papa", it starts raining cats and dogs. They are getting soaked to the bone out there and the volume of fire decreases all around. Good, because my wrist hurts and my arm is numb.

I try to use this lull to talk some strategy with Peter but our valiant Police Commissioner is completely out of it. He keeps telling me "Yes, yes" while he yells like an idiot out the window "This is mutiny! Surrender! You're loitering!" and similar nonsense. Rivers instead continues to shoot, indifferent to the pandemonium, aiming his Colt Diamondback with the coolest aplomb like this is some kind of target practice, then he takes a scraper wound to the arm and starts shrieking like a pig to slaughter.

Soon it appears obvious that we must break this siege or eventually we are going to get it—four or five Molotov cocktails when the rain stops and they could fry us all to a crisp. So I congregate for a quick powwow with the Abbott brothers, Henry Charles and Cedrick Ingram, who seem to be still functioning semi-normally. We must

use this rain to make a run for it, every man for himself. We'll bust out of the back of the house; those who make it will re-group at eight at the South School Pavilion. Tyrone, Kelly, Cedrick and Henry go downstairs and position themselves by the backdoor. I stay on the second floor by a side window and carefully remove the screen. I put the cannon in my backpack and grab a Helwan in each hand, cowboy-style, just like the late Owen. Then Henry yells "Go!" and we storm out of there.

I land on the roof of the pump shed, six feet below. After unloading the guns on two constables taking cover behind a truck twenty yards away, I jump down, vault over a low wall and run through the empty lot next door, half-concealed by the shrub and trees. As I crouch to change magazines, a constable emerges from the bushes and rushes me. He's holding a Glock by the barrel like he wants to club me. I flick out my Derringer and blast him a .410 in the face from one yard away. Not a pleasant experience, Sylvan, believe me. I run to my car, dive in, burn rubber through a maze of alleys—almost running over old Mrs. Bouncyn, Elrond's grandma, who apparently has not evacuated and is checking out the commotion—and here I am, drenched, all scratched up and covered with mud and blood.

It's 7:30 now. Soon they'll cut off power and phone. Then Otto will come to blow this little island away. It's not raining at the moment but it's getting very windy. I must wrap this up. We never communicated much you and I. You're the dreamy kind, a bit like your mother. Now I feel a duty to leave you with some words of wisdom. If I possess any. But I don't know where to start.

Last time we talked I mentioned Eric Dolphy and was delighted to learn that you love his music as much as I do. You'll agree that music is probably the only thing we have in common. I've played twice a week with my little band at the Burks Head for the past eight years. I'm crazy about my alto sax, but I never even dreamt to make it my profession. How many musicians become the Beatles, Sylvan? What happens to the rest? Old Eric, blowing his multitude of horns with the splendor and ease of a singing bird—he lived with his parents, did you know that? Never made a buck. A few months back I talked with Mr. O'Regan at the Faculty of Music there. He said nice things about you. You are pretty good. But name one person who plays the bass clarinet and makes any money at it. Do you intend to become the first pop star to do that when you finish University? You must see that the odds are against you. And money is not the only issue here. Do you want to be an obscure line musician in some classical orchestra? Or is it teaching that you have in mind? Don't you find both ideas a little dreary? Maybe you don't now, but try to imagine how you would feel after doing that for ten years. I realize there are cowboys and homesteaders, just don't jump in blindly that's all I'm asking.

Who am I to give advice, you might ask? I made some money in my life, Sylvan. I am a well-respected man. I closed some very difficult deals. People enjoy my company. Obviously the current situation is a bit shaggy, but it can't change that. I have achieved. I've been happy.

You're probably thinking about my rapport with your mother now, our years in Los Angeles. Women are difficult, Sylvan. The only thing that really matters to them

is getting married and having babies. Sad but true. I discovered it too late. I truly hope you won't get trapped like I did. I'm not sure what love is, but I can tell you that it's not a common occurrence. Tiptoeing with my sentiments right now would be ridiculous, so I'll be very frank and admit that I always had a fondness for prostitutes. They provide an unproblematic association. But I have some tender memories too; don't think that a woman who's paid to proffer her graces is incapable of warmth. If you think about it, you end up paying for your wife's graces as well, and dearly so. I should add that a man gets sick of a woman rather quickly. Even Jennifer Lopez loses her spark if you wake up next to her three months in a row. Well, changing a prostitute is as pleasing and easy as buying a new pair of shoes. Changing a wife is an unspeakable ordeal.

You don't have to agree with me, just lock my words in your chest of treasures and pull them out before making the hard decisions that sooner or later you'll be forced to make. I guess that for the first time in our lives I have opened my heart to you. It feels good.

Honorable Brother Cameron Griffith from the Edinburgh Chamber will bring you this fax. He will leave you his business card. When you go to see him—very soon I hope—make sure to wear cuff links, of any kind. The moment you are alone, put your right hand on your heart and tell him these exact words: “I believe you know MY BROTHER LEA CHAM”. He'll take it from there.

Memorize carefully what I told you and then destroy these pages. We all need

some help in this world. Without a power group behind us our chances are appallingly limited. And the Lead Chamber is tops. Mark my words, Sylvan.

Time to go. The wind is something else now. Let's see if we can get close to Cleo. If we win this final battle you'll hear from me again. If we don't, you shouldn't feel bad. Benito Mussolini was a pompous ass, but I always found this saying of his captivating: "Better one day as a lion than one hundred as a sheep."

I love you, my son.
