

“Unveiled Face of a Woman No. 133” *by Thomas T. Thomas*

Ministry of Culture, Paris, June 19, 2052

Michael Smythe waited in the outer office, trying not to fidget. The Minister of Culture had kept him cooling his heels for two hours, which was now looking to be more like three, and the guest rite be damned. The smooth young assistant—a man, of course—did not look up as he keyed into the computer on his desk. He wore a western-style three-piece suit with a checked *kaffiya* and black *agal* cords. All very modern. All very businesslike.

Sooner than Smythe expected, however, the phone burred and the assistant took it, listened for a moment, and looked at him. “His Excellency Sheikh Abdul ibn Fuad al Haddad will see you now.” He rose and led the American through into the inner office. “Mr. ... Smite, Excellency.”

“Actually, it’s pronounced ‘Smith,’ Your Excellency,” Smythe corrected him.

The Minister of Culture studied him with an owlish gaze, giving no indication that he understood the language. This was a man of another sort than the assistant: older, gray bearded, and wearing full, flowing black robes, with immaculate white linen at throat and wrists, a snowy head cloth, and gold braided cords. A prince of the desert. He glanced back down at the Koran that lay open on the desktop. “Mr. ‘Smith.’ ” The Minister gave the faintest of smiles. “It would seem all Americans are named Smith these days, are they not?”

“That actually happens to be my name,” Smythe said, producing a card.

The Minister waved it away. “And you come to buy one of our paintings.”

“Yes, I’ve been corresponding with your office for some months now.”

“But you are not a collector.” The Minister seemed unconvinced.

“I work for the National Science Foundation. I’m a scientist.”

“Buying a painting for a collector,” the Minister persisted.

“Buying for a research lab. The artist of this particular work was a master colorist, one who experimented in compounding pigments. This acquisition is being funded by a corporation that makes house paints. They want to study the materials, to understand why the colors have endured so faithfully over the centuries.”

“I see.” The Minister still sounded as if he did not believe the story.

Smythe went to stage two. “Our benefactors have a theory that the paints were actually mixed with rare earths, endowing the pigments with faintly fluorescent properties, and they wish to test this. Of course, in the past, asking for chips from the original, just to melt them with solvent and run them through a mass spectrometer, was considered by the previous owners as a sacrilege. And now there are so few examples of the painter’s work still to be found. But by great good fortune, and the diligence of your ministry—”

“You want to pick it up for scrap value?”

“Yes, in a nutshell. For its scrap value.”

“As an historical, not a cultural, artifact.”

“Absolutely. Only for scientific study.”

“The price is fifty million,” the Minister said. “Dollars, not euros.”

Smythe gulped. “That is a price one asks for a work of art, Your Excellency. I’m surprised you set the value of *scrap* so high.”

“There are other interested parties, of course,” the Minister said blandly. “Other *house painters*.”

“Still, that is more than our correspondence had led me to believe.”

“The Republic needs money, Mr. Smith. This is a poor county, as you know, with almost no natural resources and no worthwhile—no *acceptable*—exports. We must make do with what Allah provides.”

“I am authorized by the Foundation to pay so much,” Smythe assured him. “But then I must have guarantees.”

“As to authenticity?” the Minister smiled.

“That, of course. Also that the product is undamaged.” There had been rumors, after all. “And then I must have an export license, signed by your own hand.” There had been those other rumors, too.

The Minister nodded, still smiling. “Do you want to see it?”

“You have it here?” Smythe could not believe it possible.

“We retrieved the painting, as a courtesy to a guest.”

The Minister waved to the assistant, who left momentarily and returned holding the small, poplar-wood panel. Smythe noted that the man was now wearing white cotton gloves, although whether to protect the unframed painting from the oils in his skin, or his skin from the unspeakable contamination of a beautiful woman, was uncertain.

Smythe stood and approached the masterpiece. He discovered that he was actually holding his breath. The overall effect was of more green in the background than he had remembered. The skin was all the smoother and paler for it. He peered closely, to study the brushwork once more. And that was when he noticed the tiny cracks.

“It has been damaged,” he said succinctly.

“Ah,” the Minister sighed. “The result of my people’s enthusiasm during the ... transfer of ownership.”

Through Smythe’s mind flashed the image of a rifle butt impacting bulletproof glass—or perhaps it was the concussion of a grenade—and the glass shattering, the fragments rebounding away from the panel but leaving their marks. That would explain the network of crazed scars he could so plainly see on the painting’s surface. He moved his head to get a better angle, and then he noticed the discoloration in the lower right-hand corner, where the shadows were deepest. But this area showed a dull bubbling, as from the heat of a flame, not the mottled sheen of natural pigments.

“And burned, too,” he said accusingly.

“What can I say? Not everyone on the scene at the time recognized the potential ... scientific value of this object. You understand, of course, that there are other works, no less notable, that did not survive.”

“I know. But in this condition—”

“If you do not want the thing ...”

“No, no. I am authorized to acquire it. But fifty million—”

“Dollars,” the Minister prompted. “Fifty million dollars. Come! Let us not haggle. You know that is a fraction, a tenth of the price the previous owners would have set, had they been willing to negotiate at all.”

“Yes,” Smythe agreed. “Of course.”

“And with it your benefactor can paint a lot of houses.”

“Yes, houses.” Smythe straightened. “I must have that export license.”

“Certainly, Mr. Smith. You do us all a favor by taking this *scrap* off our hands.”