

As Burke began a careful scrubbing of the hidden patch of skin, the nature of his mystery was revealed. But just like the old parable about a tree falling in a wood where no one is present not making a sound, no one was present to see the ornate group of jet-black tattoos that were now exposed and soaking up the shower water. The major tattoo was predominated by a star pattern; a pattern of a pentagram surrounded by swirls the loops of which touched the recesses of the pattern and points touched a small loop in the supporting lattice. The star, perfectly symmetrical, always had the left side of the point crossing the corresponding right line from the adjacent point. Although the shape was of one continuous line, it could not be opened nor formed if it was a model. It was just a paradox of geometry, a design meant to challenge the thought of the observer. But since no one would be observing the design it was a therefore a paradox within a paradox.

This pattern was also known as the Pentagram of Brisngamen. In mythology, earth spirits gave the Brisngamen to the Viking Goddess Freyja, whereby she gave it to Odin, a God who could foretell men's futures and shaped the destiny of all mortals, at least in the legends. This pentagram is reputed to bear upon the wearer irresistible beauty and charm. Burke always laughed at such notions of his tattoo's "meaning," or mythology, and never paid it another thought.

Above this recognizable diagram was a series of smaller figures, if one could call them that. They looked like nothing previously seen on this planet. In fact, these combinations of figures are only found in 13 places in the entire earthly realm. They are found on the forearms of 13 men which make up an exceeding secret society that goes by no name other than one given to them by a separate select band on men and women as the "Choosers."

This group of men is well written about, at least in certain old scriptures of earlier human times. They are referred to as the Aesir in older Norse mythology and by other names in ancient Egyptian, Chinese, and other cultural texts. Why was such a pattern present on a 21st century Canadian?

Burke got dressed in a fine business suit consistent with his position as a prominent and wealthy Canadian businessman and the principal of one of Winnipeg's largest investment firms. He tied his blue and pink tie, his road tie, and walked over to his nightstand to pick up his wallet. As he moved it to his pocket, a lone credit card and his Manitoban driver's license fell to the floor. As he picked them up, the name, "Burke Timmins" starred back at him. Even after 37 years, the name he had given himself when he had met young Ruth in Mexico still seemed strange. Timmins was from a town he had seen once on an Ontario road map and Burke was taken from his favorite 1960s rock-and-roll singer songwriter, Solomon Burke. His song, Everybody Needs Somebody to Love, was made famous in it's 1964 release by the Rolling Stones and seemed appropriate to him as he introduced himself to a young girl named Ruth Holdimann near the Aztec

Temple of the Moon. Oddly, “Burke” had never been to Canada prior to his initial visit but as it was a clear mandate from the “society” of his need to choose a wife and live a seemingly “normal” life. The prairies of Canada were ideal for such a charge.

Burke worked his way to the kitchen where his wife was still wearing nothing more than a smile with a red glow to her face and upper chest. She cooked him breakfast as he watched her naked butt; he knew well the ritual of her remaining unclothed until he left and he liked remembering her that way. Her “full moon” reminded him of his trip, since it was soon the 7th full moon and as tradition had it, it was time for the summer gathering, and he would be gone for some time. When he was finished with business, he would call her with enough warning so she could meet him the same way when he returned. He smiled at the thought: he may be older but he had the hormones of someone much younger. Opening the door to a house with a naked willing wife was a pleasant thought to get a man home as soon as possible.

He ate and then gave Ruth a parting hug. “Tell the kids when they call that I love them very much. Ruth, you are without question the best woman I could have ever married. If I die tomorrow, rest assured I died a happy man.” They gave each other the open-mouth kiss of young lovers and she—keeping up tradition—waved to him from their step, fully exposed as he drove out the driveway in a brand new Volvo S-80.

Burke went directly to the airport where the corporate jet awaited his departure. An aide took the Volvo back to the corporate garage. He boarded the multi-million dollar Gulfstream and was soon headed east toward London. He gazed down at the waiting jets at the passenger area, appreciating the life of affluence. Having his own jet with a cook, a bed, and leather seats was a definitely useful tool for both his business and other private activities.

Burke had an uncanny way to make profitable bets on the company’s investment portfolio, rarely missing an opportunity to buy or to sell. Treating his employees with respect, he also shared financially with them a piece of his success. In general, Burke Timmons was one of the brightest lights to shine on his adopted hometown of Winnipeg, steadfastly refusing to move his corporate juggernaut to the financial centers of Bay Street in Toronto or Wall Street to the south. Burke watched as the plane gained altitude over the numerous islands of the Lake of the Woods as his travel hostess offered him the finest brewed coffee money could buy.

As the trip wore on, Burke reflected on his humble beginnings. He remembered delaying on the Ripon College campus an extra day after graduation in 1964. He had enrolled at the college in Wisconsin for no other reason than the name looked

interesting to him on a map. He graduated second in his class, but the only real noteworthy event during those years was his option his freshman year of rooming with either a guy named Harrison Ford or someone named Skip Taylor. Fortunately or unfortunately, it still wasn't clear to him, he chose the latter. Who knew then that the other gentleman would later have such fame as a Hollywood actor? It was a small school, and he knew Ford at school casually but had no significant memories of his college antics. Like Burke, he was an English major, but the movie superstar-to-be never graduated. He had planned to ask his advisor, Professor Martz, what had happened but he never had the opportunity.

The honest answer as to why he never left on graduation day was because he had no place to go. His dad died in a farm accident during his senior year. His mother died during his birth. Being without any significant family and alone at graduation made him very lonely, and he lacked direction. His only plan was seeing the world, maybe settling down later to some sort of career, but fate intervened. Burke was walking down the gentle hill that warm May Sunday that led away from Middle Hall past Bartlett Hall towards Hughes House. His plan was to gaze one last time at Hughes House, his old hangout, and load his 1962 Ford F150, the old vehicle from the family farm, and drive away.

As he continued on his journey, absorbing the surroundings this last time, only one other living soul was in sight. This unfamiliar man approached him and they struck up a conversation. He was well dressed, in his seventies, and looked somewhat German. He spoke perfect English, which was strange for that part of Wisconsin as many still had a Germanic inflection in their speech.

The man offered him a job or—better put—tapped him to become a member of a secret order. At first he really didn't believe the man's story, but despite his suspicions, he followed the man—probably foolishly—to lunch. The man made his pitch, and Burke, with really nothing to lose, in the end agreed to take a further look at the proposal, mostly because it beat being drafted into Vietnam. The decision to accompany the man to lunch at a scenic restaurant overlooking nearby Green Lake turned out to be a one-way avenue into a new life and he became old "Johan's" apprentice. He later learned that once initiated, he couldn't leave and would be a member for life.

It wasn't a bad choice. His was a life of excitement with great responsibilities, learning the secrets of the world as they actually were. To a curious intellectual, hidden knowledge was a powerful drug. He remembered the first time he journeyed with the old man to the Aesir Temple hidden on the faraway north Atlantic island named Fugloy, one of the Faeroes. The tremendous sheer rock cliffs of the island were like something in an epic legend, as was the discernable profile of an Egyptian Pharaoh between a lighthouse and a natural stone arch in the cliff, but seeing this strange out-of-place figure was just the beginning. They landed the little boat at a hidden mooring spot in a false cove appearing out of nowhere at the base of the five-hundred-meter-high cliff. He helped the old man

climb a hidden set of stairs up the cliff, leading them to a perfectly hidden doorway just to the left of the “Pharaoh.” It was a big rush to have the rocky crevasse open up into a simple, yet ornately decorated ancient temple hidden beyond in a cave. It was definitely a temple that one wouldn’t find by accident.

Dominating the interior of the temple was the biggest block of pure amber that Burke had ever seen. Although it looked like neither, he thought the structure was some sort of table or altar. Initially Burke thought he was to be some sort of sacrifice, but soon he met the others. They were twelve; counting Johan, and they treated him with respect. And except for the surprisingly extreme pain of having his right forearm tattooed, the trip to the temple was a positive experience. In fact, the whole event of his initiation was the highlight of his life.

Like the other twelve, Burke was now making his required annual pilgrimage to Fugloy. He would not fly to the Faeroes directly as that might give the location away to anyone watching him. No, he would take his time and randomly work his way through Europe. He would go to Switzerland by train, then work his way to Denmark, later catching a ferry to Torshavn on the island of Streymoy where the society kept boats. He would make the twenty-two-mile crossing alone, disguised as a local fisherman, past the village of Svinoy to the secret meeting spot tucked into the cliff. As always, it would be an enjoyable journey.

He looked forward to the prospect of soon recruiting his replacement as “Johan” had done with him. He also reveled at the thought of his final end, with his colleagues setting his body on fire on the ceremonial funeral pyre on top of the Pharaoh’s head. His kind, however, could not always determine their manner, time, and place of death. Having foresight of their own death was not in their powers and more often than not; they would die of natural causes away from sanctity of their temple. Then, a remembrance pyre would be set on the evening of the new moon following the seventh full moon of the year, the last day of their annual gathering, with all the chosen men in attendance.

This full moon was still seven days away and according to tradition, not showing up by the moonrise of that night would indicate that you had died. If you were tardy, you were expected to take your own life. It was an absolute rule of the society.

Burke’s plane landed at London. He bid his aircrew farewell and took a cab to the train station. He passed through the Chunnel into France and by the next day was in the heart of Switzerland, enjoying the Swiss scenery and especially the Brown Swiss cattle. They reminded him of happier earlier times from his youth at his family dairy farm in Wisconsin. They were his father’s favorite milking cow. Burke missed his father and those simpler times.

He made his way into Lucerne, checking into a Eurotel under a different name, using a different passport. He signed the name, Hans Miller from Innsbruck,

Austria, to the register. Burke—now Hans—spoke perfect Austrian German and was as much at home here speaking German as he was in Canada speaking Canadian English or for that matter speaking Mandarin Chinese in Beijing. His other commonly used persona was of an Australian named Smythe; Burke was a man who could talk and walk just like any citizen from Down Under. He had visited Australia just six months previously on business, but in general he rarely got to that part of the world.

Burke ate a filling meal of pasta and veal, washing it down with a fine Italian red wine. Experiencing jet lag, he went to bed early. The next morning he arose refreshed, so he went on a walk to see the city. Burke enjoyed watching the awakening city. It was a gloriously sunny morning and, feeling very energetic, he made the climb to one of his favorite world landmarks, the Löwendenkmal or in English, the Lion Monument.

The Swiss, although historically neutral, had a long tradition of supplying mercenaries into various wars and conflicts. These Swiss guardsmen had a reputation of fierce loyalty, and never in their history did they turn on their employers. In 1792, King Louis XVI and his family, trying to escape the French Revolution, were at the Tuileries Palace in Paris when a mob of French working-class men stormed the palace in search of aristocratic blood. They slipped out of the palace while more than 700 Swiss officers and soldiers died defending the palace without knowing their royal employers had escaped. The statue, depicting a severely wounded lion dying on his Swiss shield, serves as a memorial to those fallen by honoring their responsibility and meeting their fate.

Burke looked at the carving for nearly twenty minutes. He felt the animal's pain, the broken spear in its side, its paw still clinging to the fallen shield of the country. The deeper meaning moved him to even shed a tear. If only I could die so patriotically, he thought. He was unknowingly prophetic, as was his major power.

Burke turned to leave and noticed a man now next to him. This European-looking male removed his shirt to fully expose a series of tattoos. The first, on his flank, depicted a striking lynx, the sacred animal of the Vanir. An arm with a mighty broadsword extended from his right shoulder and disappeared below his belt. His right cheek bore the mark of two kissing birds forming a shape of a heart, the Brisingamen. His right forearm, almost like Burke's, bore a simple ten-pointed starburst mark, with half of the points filled in, half not. These marks and this man were instantly familiar to Burke. He was one of the Vanir, a keeper of the peace, a Defender of the Earth.

Burke was now at a loss to speak. He was well versed in the ancient writings of his kind and he knew the absolute law of contacts between the Orders. If a member of the Aesir were to meet one of their counter parts, the Vanir, it would mean certain death. Therefore, Burke faced this, his certain end, without any

emotion and stood unfazed and without speaking as the heavily tattooed man produced an eight-inch knife. This tattooed man paused as if to allow Burke to fully absorb the gravity of the situation.

Burke was instead thinking of higher needs and his past. Why such a powerful being was using an earthly weapon for such a grizzly task, didn't strike him as odd. The man approached Burke carefully and directly as undoubtedly he had killed many before. Burke would just be a simple execution for him. Without hesitation, he slipped the knife into the Choosers neck and left it there, blocking the flow of oxygen into his lungs and severing his larynx.

Burke didn't fight to remove the knife from his neck. What was the use? The legends were very clear that on such a meeting he was to without mercy die. He accepted his fate; this was his time to die. He just turned to look for one last time at his beloved statue. He didn't remember sitting down nor lying down on his side. He thought of making love to his beautiful Ruth, her naked breasts and ample hips. He thought of his three children—two daughters and a son—his life as a Chooser, the temple in the far-off land of the Faeroe Islands, and his funeral pyre. He saw his twelve colleagues standing next to a funeral pyre—his funeral pyre—above Pharaoh Rock. They stood facing the sea with a noticeable gap in their ranks with the space for member number eight ceremonially left open while they burned his purple robe for the entire world to see. He couldn't tell now if he was seeing the future or simply fantasizing. His brain was beginning to starve for oxygen. He wished he could have met his replacement, but that was not to be.

He heard the man shout at him in a language only a few on the Earth understood: the language of the ancients, the Old language. Was he cursing me for giving him his tattoo or thanking me? It must have been the anoxia. Certainly he was thanking him for giving him the charge to accept the great power of the Defender. He would miss his chance to select the new Volva and hoped his wife would understand. He saw her now, grieving at the side of his coffin, his children at her side. He knew his society would take good care of her. It was the charge of his group to support his widow until her death and to help any child until they were through school. He hoped she would burn his body in the tradition of the ancients, but it wasn't up to him any longer. She had promised him, but what could he do now? He had chosen a fine woman and he smiled at the thought of sharing her love and fathering her children.

His brain cells were dying. The image of the dying lion was only in his mind as he couldn't move or open his eyes. Thoughts of his life now complete, he made peace with his God. These discussions were of a personal note and in the end God forgave him of his frailties, his sins of omission, and the sins he had committed. He knew that his life was just and that God could forgive even a simple farmer's son from southern Wisconsin. He had one final thought to form. He wanted to think of his given name so that his mother would know he was coming; she was a woman he had never met, but he thought of her often. She had paid the ultimate

sacrifice; giving her life so that he could have life. He anxiously looked forward to meeting this beloved woman for the first time.

He searched for the name his mother had written on a scrap of paper and given to his father in her final act on this earth. She died of a massive blood loss shortly afterwards. He hadn't used this name for so long that it was hidden deep in his memory stores. His brain cells were dying quickly and he couldn't concentrate. What was it? Please name my son.... Please, name my son... The tunnel was coming closer now. Finally it was clear to him. Please name my only son...Jubal.

The tattooed man kicked the lifeless corpse until the body rolled over face up. He used the knife to cut away his long-sleeved shirt and the Lycra covering, revealing a tattoo. Without hesitation, he filleted the skin containing the tattoo whole and removed it en bloc. Finished, he spat on the body of Burke Timmins, Jubal Tabor, or whatever his name was, but he never knew his real name. He didn't care. All he cared was that the man was dead and that he had died a miserable death of suffocation.

He had expected this man of mythology to put up more of a struggle, much more. He had anticipated him to use some of his supposed powers, but for some reason he just accepted his fate and died. This tattooed man still understood little of what he had become and what he was a part of. The tattooed man stood up and threw the piece of skin into the deep reflection pool in front of the statue. He quietly watched it sink out of sight, never again to be seen by human eyes.

He sneered at the lion. "Fucking Lions!" he said out loud in English. "You should all die; be glad I wasn't your executioner!" He walked off confidently without fear of retribution and had no further concern or thoughts about the dead man's body, now lying in a pool of blood in the middle of the sidewalk.