

Te Amo Parum

A lost lamentation at the
belly button of the world

Paulus of Sinae

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“Whoever kills, kills himself;

Whoever preaches murder

will be murdered.”

— Elie Wiesel in *The Oath*

Faith itself is very beautiful, but when the

name of God is manipulated in justifying

oppressions or murders, the earth simply

bleeds in tears.

All the footnotes concerning the literary and
historical references of this book are real.

Except Dror, Bethany and Maria, other
characters within the soliloquies are also real.
Yet the sequence of events and the depiction of
characters do not fully reflect historical facts.

Thank you

Mother, father and John for your great
support.

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Prologue

The Choice of a Scientist

“If you cannot get a paper published in *Nature*,

Try to get a paper published in *Antiquaries*.”

June 25, 2025 AD

I looked at him. There he was, under the spotlight, behind the rostrum. He looked spectacularly dazzling in his new spectacles. I could recall how he described that titanium rim, "You see the thin metal rim around the lens. Now that is handcraft!"

The clapping from the audience had died out. I saw him smiled, a smile that could charm many, but gave me this eeriness.

"I am very glad to be at this conference today. I am a Bioinformatician, which means I deal with biological data, like DNA genome or protein databases. I need to deal with massive amount of DNA data every day," he pushed his glasses up a bit. "Yet what's most scary to us isn't the massive data we need to handle, but the overwhelming and so loosely defined technical terms. Sometimes even my colleagues and I cannot understand these alien words. I believe most of the audience today are not scientists, but Archaeologists and Historians, so I will spare you the pain and drop the technical details," he grinned. Some of the audience laughed too.

"Before I begin, let me ask you something philosophical: What is time?" he paused a bit. "They say time is like a flowing river. But does time really look

like a river? Some say, 'Just look at the clock.' Yet what the clock is showing is simply a form of representation, a representation of time. We can never define time as a definite object, but only as a concept. So I say time is a code, waiting to be decoded. When it is decrypted, we can have the glimpse into the past. It is a history written within our body, within our DNA. And today, we are making history!" The audience clapped their hands again.

What the hell was that! The research on MeDNA has already been all over the media for a few years! How can we make history 'today'? I told him not to include anything stupid into the speech.

"We all know that our DNA is our blueprint. It codes for proteins which are basically what make of us. Proteins can be like little machineries to carry out various biochemical reactions in the body. For example, to release energy for us. It can also build up our body, like muscles. But in our genome, there is only about 2% of DNA that actually codes for proteins. For the others, they are all non-coding DNA. This kind of DNA can perform other functions, like regulating the production of other proteins; or they can even involve in the immune response towards infections.

"But still far too much of these non-coding DNA is simply junk. They have no identified function. They

cannot be transcribed into proteins. So why? Why do they exist? There is more junk DNA than coding DNA in our genome. Why do our cells make room for the junk DNA? Or are they really junk?"

He paused and quirked his lips, which always irritated me.

"Now please look at this part of the DNA." The screen behind him lit up. It showed a group of typical DNA code: ATTGGCTCCCCGCTTTTCG... The DNA code contained all the four nitrogenous bases that can be found in DNA: adenine(A), thymine(T), cytosine(C) and guanine(G). And through different combinations of these four bases, different proteins are made.

"It means nothing to either you or me. Well it means amino acids to me, but not important." Then the image of the DNA codes zoomed out, revealing a larger portion of the code. The whole screen was covered in DNA sequences. It was like staring at the green screen of the matrix.

"Now it is getting even more dizzy right?" he smiled again, revealing his row of perfectly white teeth. "Let's see what will happen if I press this button."

The DNA code started to vanish. The alphabets started to mingle together and lines of words appeared gradually:

Treason! Treason!

Now this armour of mine,

Is stained in the betrayal of yours!

And restless shall your souls forever be...

“These are the words of Richard III, the famous English king. Well, we have tuned down the old English a bit here. Richard III was the last English King of the Plantagenet dynasty. He died in the Battle of Bosworth Field, fighting the rebellion. It wasn’t until a few years ago, his body has been recovered.

“These few lines are probably his last words or last thoughts, before he died. The lines are translated from his DNA, in regions of the genome where the DNAs are not having active functions. We, scientists, label these DNAs containing the information of memories as the Memory DNA. Usually we call them MeDNA. And we also know that the date when the MeDNA was recorded — 22 August 1458.” He gave the audience a sly smile. “Because when we look the DNA map:”

The screen zoomed out back to the DNA matrix. Part of the DNA lit up in blue. “These are the MeDNAs for

the four lines of memories of Richard III. When we look down not too far from the MeDNA in the map, there are regions representing the time when the MeDNA was recorded.” Not far under the blue lit DNA, a group of DNA lit up in green. “And we call them Time DNA, abbreviated as TiDNA.”

I was getting sick of listening to my boss’s irritating voice. *I wrote the bloody script! I designed the PowerPoint slides and animations! Who gives him the right to hijack my research!* Every second I heard his voice amplified through the microphone, every second my heart pumped out louder.

I walked out of the hall and leaned on the glass curtain wall, and sighed. The breath condensed onto the glass surface. There was a small little pond down below. The lotus leaves sat still quietly on the water, as if they were indifferent to the ever changing world. Suddenly I heard loud footsteps from behind. A stocky guy came over to me.

“Excuse me, is the conference over yet?” He was panting and sweating heavily. The crescent wet stains under his armpits were unsettling and his shirt wasn’t even tucked in.

“No, feel free to go in.” He seemed relieved and he smiled. The smile forced his eyes into slits. However that was not a faithful portrayal of his eyes. They were

actually quite big, when his wasn't smiling. His face was round, probably due to his chubby chin and cheek. He was fair and white, and he looked innocent in his smile, but his stubble and thick black brows projected his masculinity. He looked like a proud boar. Yet his big eyes shone with uncertainty and insecurity. He thanked me and pulled open the door to the hall. As for me, I sat on the bench by the glass curtain and closed my eyes.

I was woken by the noise. I resisted pulling up my eyelids, but eventually I got up.

The hall way was already full of people. *There are still quite a number of people this year.* The crowd was pouring out like torrents. MeDNA isn't a big topic within the science world. Although the research on MeDNA was relatively new: just made public 5 years ago, not many Bioinformaticians are focusing on this. Most of them are more interested in Proteome, since the tide of fashion turns to protein research these few years. It's just so ironic when I was in my undergraduate, DNA always got the attention. Well what's worse is that MeDNA does not have any medical application so far. Funding goes where the money flows. Unlocking the memory of a few people cannot generate more cash than pills. Yet, obviously, MeDNA is big for

non-science disciplines. It arouses the interests of many Historians and Archaeologists.

I finally saw my boss. Again he was surrounded by Historians, who, in his own words, were the “annoying bookkeepers”. That insulting remark, ironically, was how the other Biologists referred Bioinformaticians as, a few years ago.

“David!” he hurried towards me. “Take these documents away. I need to talk with the scholars here.” He winked at me and raised his voice at the word ‘scholars’. I grabbed his black document file and turned away. Then I swiped the screen of my watch. A familiar ringtone could be heard at my back. “Excuse me. Hello? Oh yes!” he murmured some inaudible words. He turned towards the Historians and Archaeologists. “I am so sorry! I would love to have a fruitful discussion with you great people. But I have to leave now.”

“But Dr Wong!” One man yelled. It was that late comer with the boar face.

“No worry! I am sure my assistant here will be happy to answer your questions.” *What!* I nearly dropped my jaw. He grinned warmly at me. I forced a smile, and cursed him deep inside.

“My assistant, Dr Lau, is one of my best students! He

took part in my MeDNA and other researched 10 years ago, so I am sure he is able answer your questions. You can always write me emails.” He patted my back and pulled the file out of my hand. And I saw him walking away in a rather swift pace.

It is always a headache explaining DNA to non-science experts. They ask much, but they usually do not have the basic knowledge to comprehend it, so I have to explain from the basic and trust me, it takes a lot of time; though it is still very amazing that they can often grasp the concepts within a short period. Molecular biology is, after all, filled with thousands of weird terms to them. Finally I managed to satisfy them. I had got a number name cards. They wished to work with our research team. But our dear boss only worked with the best. That’s why he worked on the king, Richard III. And it was often me who wrote and turned down the invitations from other Historians and scholars.

Finally! I can have some rests. But then I realized there was someone sitting on the bench afar. When he noticed others were gone, he walked towards me.

It was the late comer. “Yossi Montefiore. Nice to meet you!” He extended his right hand.

I shook hand with him. “David Lau. Well, you have known my name already.” I looked down, at my name

card, which was hanging on my neck. It said 'Dr David Lau'.

He smiled, showing his pointed canines.

"I think my name might have come across your boss's inbox for quite a number of times. I represent the Museum of Medieval History of Jerusalem."

Ah Yes! The name of that Museum was indeed quite familiar. I saw that name popping up at least 30 times and it eventually ended up in the spam mail box. At first I replied with a long polite rejection, but it just kept coming. "Really? Well I am sorry. Probably Prof. Wong was too busy to reply." That old troll would kill me if I ever called him "Dr" Wong.

"Oh he did reply, in a very polite manner too," said him in a humorous tone. "I wanted to talk with him, but now I want to talk with you."

"Me?" I must have frowned at that moment. "Do I know you, Mr Montefiore?"

"No, my friend! You have been working for Simon Wong for 10 years right? You finished your PhD under Wong?"

"Yes I did. But I don't think that's your business."

"He has not published your paper yet?"

“Hey! How did you —” I sensed a chill down my spine.

I started to touch the golden ring on my middle finger.

“From the way how you talked to the other Historians, I know you must have the potential to leave Wong and do your own research. The only reason you still remain in his lab is probably that he refuses to publish your paper. Since you did the research in his laboratory, you cannot publish the paper without his permission — you were using his resources from HIS laboratory. So you remain there to be his cheap labour, as a research assistant.”

I stared at him. He was grinning. Now I no longer found his smile innocent anymore.”Not entirely true. I do have a few papers published.”

“Are you the first author?”

I kept my mouth shut for a while. Being the first author of a scientific paper means a lot to any scientist in their science career.

He was good! But I hate people prying at my past. “Tell me, what do you want?” I said coldly.

“Don’t be alarmed! We shared the same fate. I was a researcher too. I was involved in a Neuroscience research in drug development for Huntington disease.

And my research was held up by my boss.”

“Huntington disease is such a heat topic. If he doesn’t publish it soon, someone else will publish it.”

“Well firstly, it was a ‘her’. And secondly, she published it immediately after I left, two years after I finished the research, under her own name. I guess it was personal.” He raised his eyebrow. “After I left, I went for Forensic Anthropology.”

“Ah that’s how you ended up in a museum. But from Neuroscience to Forensic science, that’s a tremendous shift!” I exclaimed.

“Yes it was. And you can do that too.” He drawled a bit at the word ‘you’.

“You think I can easily be bent to your will?” I looked at him quizzically.

“Well! You don’t have a future staying here. You are the horse that needs to leap! You need to have your own research; else you will just be someone else’s shadow in the academia.” His voice rang truth into my ears. *But I just want to resist!* “Do you really want to be jerked around? Come to Jerusalem with me! And join my project! You will just be doing the same stuff in the museum: decoding DNA as usual.” The pitch of his voice started to escalate. He was really enjoying himself. “And I promise you can write so many papers

with the DNA database at our museum.”

“And publish my paper in a Historical journal?” I quirked my eyebrow. Like every scientist, I dreamed of publishing my paper in a famous scientific journal, like *Nature*.

“If you cannot get a paper published in *Nature*, try to get a paper published in *Antiquaries*.” He laughed, “I am currently working on a project about Crusader in the medieval Jerusalem.”

Crusade and Jerusalem! That caught my attention and I was pulling on the golden ring again.

He slipped a name card into the front pocket of my shirt. “Call me if you have made up your mind. And I am not here to hire you, just to recruit you. You are hired by the museum, not by me.” He smiled and walked away, turning his back on me. “I will be back to Jerusalem this Saturday. But the offer still stands. Still, I wish to hear from you soon. Shalom!” And his shadow disappeared at the end of the corridor.

June 26, 2025 AD

I stood before the office door. There was a little panel by the door, with the name ‘Simon Wong’ displayed in

a flashy digital 3D hologram. I knocked.

“Come in!”

I turned the handle. The door was slowly pushed open. Wong was sitting in his cosy chair at the middle of the office, looking at the computer screen. “David! Why haven’t you sent me my schedule for next week yet? Keep this attitude up and you will not take part in the next project.”

I reached out for the golden ring in my pocket. “I am sorry. But I really wish to ask you: when can I publish my paper?” I could hear my voice trembling a bit.

He didn’t look at me. “There are already a few papers with your name on them. Don’t be greedy, young man.”

“I mean my research on the algorithm for MeDNA identification and decoding. I want to be a first author of my own research.”

“You need more time to perfect your skill. You do want to have a brilliant paper that doesn’t look amateur right? ” He eyed me through that pair of shimmering lenses. “I think you know thousands of papers are rejected every month.”

“I studied my PhD under you for 5 years. After I finished it, I have spent another 5 years with you. And I am still amateur?” I was calmer and my tone was firmer.

“With that attitude, you are just an amateur,” he grinned, showing that row of white teeth again.

“Attitude!” He sounded as if he had ever taken any part in any research that I had been working on. “May I kindly remind you that you were simply a Molecular Biologist to begin with. You may know how to temper with DNA database, but you have no idea how to write a computer program, let alone all the mathematical models. It was I who wrote the algorithm which decodes and translates DNA.” I crossed my arms and laughed coldly, “Is that how you defend your title as a scientist? By diminishing other’s effort?” I knew I had lost my temper with him, finally.

“Mind your attitude! Is that how you talk to your boss, your senior? Where’s your respect? We are Chinese; we respect our seniors,” he roared.

“Don’t pull out that crap about Chinese traditions. The Chinese tradition of absolute servitude to their teacher suffocates scientific critical thinking. I have done wasting my time here! I quit!” I could not believe my own ears. *I really said that?* The movement of my lips seemed so mild, but I could certainly feel the weight of the words on my tongue.

“Ha! Youth and arrogance! Go! Let’s see where you can go. You know you are just expendable to me.” He shrugged and dismissed me. I was sweating heavily

but I felt a bit relieved. Finally, my days with this slaver were over. I turned and stomped out of his office...

Act 1

The Curse of Jerusalem

What is faith?

A few heads of the infidels?

Or the souls you have claimed?

**And then you can make believe of your own
salvation?**

June 28, 2025 AD

I rubbed my hand wearily on my forehead and bit into my lower lip. The plane was a bit shaky and I was still dizzy of the airplane ear.

“Not feeling well?”

I turned. It was that unsettling boar face again. Yossi laughed, “Airsick? You should take more plane trip.”

I frowned, annoyed by his tone, “Just to be clear: I have not yet accepted your offer. I am just here for ‘A’ vacation.” I looked at this Yossi fellow. He was chomping away on a cup of salad. I narrowed my eyes.

“So you have other offers already?” He spat a bit of juice as he spoke, which fortunately didn’t land on me. Immediately he held up a tissue paper and wiped his mouth. “Oops. Sorry! By the way, tell me how you ditched Wong.”

“I just told him I quit and walked out of his office,” I murmured slowly. *And I don’t know much about this Yossi yet. I have just known him for 3 days! He can be a scammer. Why have I become so irrational all of a sudden?* And even worse, I agreed to stay at his place for the first few days. I tugged at my golden ring again.

“Don’t think too much. You are already on the plane now. You can’t open the airlock and jump now.” His smiled. I was uncertain whether he was amused by the airlock “joke”, or by the fact that I was on his “hook” now. *Yes, he certainly has fooled me into his scheme.* He then put his hand on my shoulder. “Just take it as a game. Life is a game. Don’t be so boring. Surprise yourself sometimes.”

I sighed and chewed on my pasta salad. He shrugged and went on with his meal. It seemed that he had given up on the idea to ease my mood.

“What’s that ring on your finger?” suddenly he asked. I kept my mouth shut. I was so annoyed by his nosy attitude that I just turned away from him and looked at the folding clouds glistening under the morning sun outside.

“I’m sorry. Because it just looks so old and odd to me. The craft does not look modern. It is not finely crafted either. It looks like gold right?” His tone appeared to be very sincere.

“Yes it is gold and aged. I inherited it from my grandma.” I answered and handed him the ring, but I was still facing the airplane window.

“Your grandma? But the ring is no way Chinese! Look at the joining hands here.” We both examined it closely.

The ring was actually very poorly made. It was like handcrafted by amateur or probably even children. The thickness of the band was uneven. The whole ring was soft since it was made of gold, nothing else: no gem or other precious rock. At the front of it, there was a coarse sculptural relief of some kind of sigil: a pair of clasped hands.

“You see the joining hands?”

I nodded and he continued, “It was a symbol of marriage for the ancient Romans.”

“What?” I never thought this little ring would have that long history. *Almost two thousand years! I will be rich!* I could not deny that thought slipped through my mind once, probably twice.

“Wait! There’s more!” He tugged on my shirt and shouted. Every passenger looked in our way. Yossi bent his back slightly and whispered “sorry”.

“Look at the inner band!” He yelled in a much suppressed voice and he dropped the ring on my palm. I held the ring up close to my eyes and examined the inner band very carefully. There were faint carvings into it. It was so faint that I could not even feel the carvings when I was wearing it.

“Can you read it?” I asked.

"No it's too faint to be figured out. I can see the first two words... Te Amo... Damn, I need a microscope for that."

"Ted... what? What does it mean?"

"Not 'Ted', but 'Te', T-E, 'Te'. Amo, A-M-O. 'Te' means 'you' in Latin, while 'Amo' means love."

"Well it is a wedding ring, as the symbol has suggested." I shrugged. I was expecting something special.

"True, but there is still one more word. Well, I need the microscope."

"Like a specimen microscope?" I asked

"Yeah," he said, stifling a yawn. "Okay I need a nap now. What's better than food and sleep?" Having said that, he closed his eyes; and within a minute, he was snoring.

I fixed my gaze on the golden ring. It reflected the blinding sunshine outside. The morning sun was high above the horizon. The folds of clouds were like satin under the sun, oozing away under the wings of the plane.

I just realized I had started my voyage through this sea of glitter.

The air of Jerusalem was all the same. It did not feel holy at all, but perhaps a bit dusty. As an atheist myself, this “holiness” meant nothing to me; but the dusts and sands masked the city’s architecture with a hue of yellow. There wasn’t a sandstorm here when I arrived, but it seemed that many buildings of the city were built with blocks of huge stones which, when eroded by time, add a vintage yellowish touch to the cityscape, not to mention that most of the buildings were relatively lower in height. But of course, I am from a modern urban city — my perception might be delusional.

We didn’t go to Yossi’s flat right away. Instead we took the bus to the museum. Yossi insisted going there first. He said, “It will be exciting.”

What Yossi led me to, was a house, a very old small mansion. There was a metal plate by the main door. It was carved in with some Hebrews and a line of English “Museum of Medieval History of Jerusalem”. Yossi pushed open the golden brass door. I looked closely. The door surface was decorated in high relief of olive leaves and stems. When stepped inside, I saw a purple holographic woman right at the reception.

“Good afternoon. Welcome to the Museum of Medieval History of Jerusalem. We aim to promote

understanding of medieval Jerusalem to the general public. This museum is built in a very similar way as the Siebenberg House. Although up on the surface, the museum appears to be a living complex, underground it is a crypt built in the Byzantine period. If you wish to know more about a particular section of this museum, please press on the panels on the reception desk. We wish you a happy visit!"

Then I noticed the desk was a big monitor. Decks of virtual cards were rolling out from the top of the screen. Each card represented a section of the museum. It seemed that the museum extended several floors down underground.

Yossi's voice broke out at my back. "It's freaking amazing right?" True. It was the first time I saw such a big holographic virtual intelligence. "Israeli technologies are second to none." He said in his proud bellows of laughter.

I shrugged, "What is Sie-ben-burg House?"

"That's another museum in Jerusalem. The Siebenberg house was just a simple mansion originally, but later under a private funded expedition, large area of ancient dwellings, aqueducts and burial chambers are recovered underground. The oldest site underneath can be dated back to the era of King Solomon!"

“So was this museum also a plain mansion originally?”

“Nah! The underground was a big archeological site. The government wanted to promote History education, so they built a mini town upon the site, with all the public housings and retail markets. The whole neighborhood gradually became a community within just two decades.”

“Impressive!” I was amazed by the idea of injecting new life into old heritages. Hong Kong government should definitely learn from this.

“All the offices are located upstairs.” He was leading me up the stairs. I stepped on the red carpet and scanned around. The interior design was a bit oriental, in a sense a bit similar to the Persian palaces I saw in documentaries, though the design was far less lucrative, refined and colourful. The walls and ceilings were white, garnished with yellow spot lamps. The hall was furnished with beige couches and glassy side tables; the bookshelves were all walnut brown though. The whole interior was spacious and open. There were very few doors, but several arched doorways, coarsely made and without any frame. The rough and coarse textures felt like clay when I touched it. The whole inner space gave me this washed white, comfortable

feeling. It felt much like a sitting room than a museum. “Of course the big DNA server room is down underground,” Yossi added.

Then he led me to a door. “This is where I work, and it will be where you work too,” he grinned. “No worry, the door is thick and can isolate the room from noises very well. We won’t be troubled by the guests!”

“Thank you! I will consider if I really want to work here within this month.” I threw a smile back. “But for now, let’s leave that aside. By the way, where are all the guests? It is a museum right?”

“Oh it’s closed for today. The museum closes in the Shabba — Umm — Saturday afternoon.” He was pushing open the office door.

“But you just pushed open the main door. I didn’t see you unlocking anything. Not even swiping or showing any card!”

“Biometric sensor.” He could not suppress the proud within that smile. “Sorry, dude. The door just recognizes me.”

“And the V.I. hologram just can’t?” I raised my eyebrow. *And please don’t dude me.*

“Well, we are not good at programming. We lack the human resources to write the program for that! For now the V.I. program just register all people as visitors.” he paused for a second, then turning to me. His face glowed, “That’s why we desperately need talents like you!”

I smiled but kept my mouth shut.

There were two old styled PC in the room. I switched on one of them. The screen lit up with that disappointing Microsoft Windows flag. Yossi, meanwhile, was searching for something within the cupboards.

“Ah yes!” He lifted up a microscope, very much like a specimen microscope. “Many Historians just use magnifying glass. Perhaps I just want to cling on to my past.” He licked his lips. “Could you give me your ring, please?”

I handed him the ring and left him to work. The sunbeams were gleaming through the blinds. I could see the dusts drifting within the light. I approached the window and pulled up the blinds. There was a courtyard with a giant olive tree in the middle. Its leafy branches waved with the breeze. The thick cuticle of the thin elongated leaves gleamed under the afternoon sun.

"Parum," suddenly Yossi said.

"What?"

"Parum. It means little, insufficient in Latin," he said passionately. "The whole line means: I love you not enough, insufficiently; or perhaps, I cannot love you enough."

"Wow. That's very unusual for a wedding ring," I started to get intrigued.

"Wait! Te Amo Parum." His gaze drifted up, as if he recalled something all of a sudden. Then he darted out of the room, but returned within just a minute, with a thick gray document file under his armpit.

He began to turn on the pages until he reached one small yellow worn paper, with a small memo attached to it. "Go ahead. Read the memo."

Interesting! Very Interesting!

This ring I got from his majesty

The words "Te Amo Parum".

"I love you not enough!"

Must more than 500 years

From Roman....,

~~Steamed in history and wonder.~~

Perhaps to a pagan god

This ring

.....husband

To his wife as it might also seem.

Lo,..... craft of gold

Has struck in my ~~mind a hole!~~

.....

But a pity I should return this to his majesty.

“Oh mine. That’s the line!” I read out the words slowly, the vowels swirled on my tongue. “Te Amo Parum. I love you not enough.”

“Yeah, but the original texts are incomplete,” he sighed. “This Latin text was written by the famous chronicler and bishop, William of Tyre; probably in 1184 to 1186, before his death.”

"1184? I thought it was an ancient Roman ring."

"Well perhaps it came to Jerusalem hundreds years later," he lowered his voice, "or it was actually made in the medieval Jerusalem." Then his lips flitted into a sly smile. "Latin was commonly used by scribes in the medieval age."

"Okay. How can you be sure this is the exact ring in the text? Is this kind of ring common in the ancient Rome?" I asked with doubt.

"No," he answered sharply. "Not with these carvings. *Te Amo Parum*. This sentence itself is already very unusual."

"So this ring actually existed in the medieval Jerusalem..." *Oh my God!* It was big, so big for me. I felt like I was hopping into the past, dashing on the horseback and swinging my sword in that knightly metal armour. "Oh and they talked in Latin in the medieval Middle East."

"No. Actually the ruling Crusaders in the Kingdom of Jerusalem had a strong connection to Normandy in France."

"French!" I exclaimed. "My grandmother was actually French!"

“That’s what I call fate!” He started his endless mumbles, “You see. Your root is here. Fate leads you to here, from the Far East to this Middle East. You cannot turn away from fate, my friend! It’s CALLING on you.” Rather to me, it was him who called on me. Yet I could not conceal my excitement. For a moment I was really seduced by the idea.

“Stay here, and let’s uncover the story of this ring.”

He was still pushing his plot. Yet I really wished to know more about my ancestors. I decided to investigate more, “So tell me about this Kingdom of Jerusalem.”

“Do you know the First Crusades?”

“Yes I do,” I was hesitating. I did not want him to know I knew nothing about history. “But not very familiar with it.”

“After Jerusalem was conquered by the Islamic empire in the 7th century, Pope Urban II of the Roman Catholic Church called for actions from the Western Roman Empire to recapture the holy land, especially Jerusalem, in 1095.”

“They waited four hundred years to reclaim the land?” I murmured.

“Yeah but the situation was complicated, because Jerusalem was under Byzantine Empire’s territory, not the Western Roman Empire. Byzantine Empire appealed to the west in the 11th century for help and the Pope officially responded to it, in order to liberate the Eastern Orthodox Christians and regain territory of Jerusalem and Jaffa. And the Crusades succeeded in retaking Jerusalem in 1099. However the Crusaders refused to return the lands to the Byzantine Empire, instead they formed the Kingdom of Jerusalem.”

“Ha! Clever,” I laughed. “Might as well take over the whole empire.”

“The Crusaders did attack the Byzantine Empire for a few times, though some of the Crusaders felt the attacks were a kind of betrayal to God. Although all of them were Christians, the church of the Byzantine Empire was Orthodox Christianity while the west was Roman Catholic, so they had a history of disagreement. Anyway, the Kingdom of Jerusalem lasted for about a century and Jerusalem was recaptured by the Muslim Sultan, Saladin, in 1187; and that particular note we read was estimated to be written by William of Tyre in the year 1185.”

“Right before the fall of Jerusalem...” I paused a bit.

“So who was this ‘majesty’ in the note?”

“That’s the famous young, tragic Leper King, Baldwin IV.”

“Leper King?”

“Haven’t you watched *Kingdom of Heaven*? That’s the king with a mask in the movie.”

“Why a mask?” I was puzzled.

“He was a leper. You know leprosy? It is a bacterial infection that causes skin lesions and damages to nerves, eyes and limbs. Patients are usually numb and cannot feel a thing. Secondary infections may cause tissues loss of fingers and skins.”

I frowned, “You mean the fingers can fall off?” It got depressingly graphic in my mind.

“In some extreme cases, yes, and it also causes blindness.” he went on. “Effective treatments were not discovered until 1940s. You can understand that it was a death sentence in the ancient times and medieval age. This disease was considered to be a curse to the sinful, and you can always find miracles of curing leprosy in the Bible, which symbolizes the forgiveness from God.”

“That’s why he needs a mask—“

“Ahem!” he cut through sharply. “No, that’s how Hollywood butchers actual history. Baldwin IV was not ashamed to show his leprosy to his enemies, so he did not wear a mask. He was young, after all. He was crowned at 13. He was about 24 in 1185 and he died later that year.”

“Okay,” I shrugged. “You do have the DNA data of Baldwin IV, right?”

“Yes!” He sounded surprised by my eagerness suddenly. “But the data is damaged. It’s so difficult to extract DNA from long dead remains!”

“How do you do so, by the way? DNA should have been degraded very soon after death.” I never saw how they extracted DNA from Richard III. I was just the tech guy.

“Some of the organic materials are mineralized within the bone marrows. And BANG! We find the DNA debris, damaged, but useable,” he smiled. My ear was still experiencing trauma from his sudden burst of the word “BANG”. “Well but we have a massive DNA database on the corpses dug up in the 1180-1210 period; and of course many DNA data of the nobles, both Christians and Islamic, so we are bounded to discover something.”

“That sounds terrific,” I pulled a transparent mini USB out of my wallet and stuck it into that PC. “Show me the file and I will get down to the DNA cracking.”

Yossi was cracking up like a pistachio.

Baldwin IV, the King of Jerusalem, March 2, 1185 AD, the King's chamber, Jerusalem

This ring I found today

Within that family chest.

I can barely tell the scripts

Engraved beneath the inner band.

But to me it's just another big lump of gold

Glistening between my withered fingers.

It glistened of the orange water-coloured sky.

The stain chased away the light of the day,

Pruning back the sunlight to its end.

My end perhaps.

I can always feel my end.

My breath fails me.

My voice fails me.

My senses fail me.

Since when have I not felt

The warmth of the gracious sun?

The cool of the desert night?

Was it when William¹

Found the scratches² on my arm?

Or was it when the crown set upon my head?

Now the golden crown of the sky

Is being drawn away,

Along with my days.

And I remember the days

¹ William of Tyre: As the King's counselor and Baldwin IV's personal mentor, it was him who discovered Baldwin IV's leprosy.

² When Baldwin IV was a little boy, he played with a group of aggressive children in the garden. When he was back to the castle, his arms were full of scratches, but he could not feel any pain. Numbness is a sign of leprosy, so William, who was the prince's mentor, tested him and confirmed the young prince had contracted leprosy.

When the world wasn't a haze,
When I could set my feet firm,
And to the cursed Saracens³ I roared,
“Glory for my Lord!”

Oh but now my legs melt before me.

My skin peels off before me.

Into the mirror before me

I dare not to look.

But perhaps I can't.

The sandstorm veils my sight,

³ Saracens: Another term used to call the Muslims during the Crusades.

And it has been lost

Within the blurred darkened sky.

Why do I deserve this?

Why this wrecked soul?

To be condemned to die

At my most innocent age.

To rot away in slow pain

At the peak of my youth.

To be corroded in faith

At the tyranny of the curse.

My soul may ascend to heaven,

But my flesh still rots while living!

Why not choke me as an infant!

Why not wring me in my mother's womb!

Why set on this candle of life?

Just to be blown off,

By Your sacred breath?

Haven't I repented enough?

I've killed for Your sake!

Heads of infidels piled up

To show my loyalty.

To show my determined faith!

It is the Kingdom of the God I am defending!

And this blood washed holy land.

These blood thirsty crusaders...

These selfish robbers...

Am I defending?

Oh this leprosy is eroding my faith!

William! Come!

I need your assistance!

Tell me about this ring!

And my soul needs your counsel!

**William of Tyre, the
Archbishop and the Counsellor
to the King, March 2, 1185 AD,
Jerusalem**

Interesting! Very Interesting!

This ring I got from his majesty

The words “Te Amo Parum”.

“I love you not enough!”

Must have transcended more than 500 years

From the former Roman empire,

Scratched in history and wonder.

Perhaps to a pagan god

This ring was offered.

Or a gift from the departing husband

To his wife as it might also seem.

Lo, this tiny craft of gold

Has struck in my mind a hole!

How I long to know

More of the tales behind.

If only it's mine to keep,

But a pity I should return this to his majesty.

**Baldwin IV, the King of
Jerusalem, March 4, 1185 AD,
Jerusalem**

Oh my Lord!

"I love you not enough!"

Condemned by these words I am,

Which You have shown me

In such a peculiar way.

Please do forgive me!

How my head was burnt

With that accursed anguish.

All those words of blasphemy.

All those thoughts of heresy.

Please purge me of them!

My weariness weighed me down!

But in my weariness You I found!

You made me King,

Despite my corroding curse.

You gave me victories in battlefields,

In times when I could barely stand.

My quiver should have overflowed with joy,

For Your presence is always within me,

From the day I drew the arrow on Saladin,

Up to this day no longer can I lift up the bow.

With this ring I shall be buried.

With this blessed ring

I shall perish in Your embrace.

“That was quick!” Yossi was so excited. “Just 5 hours! And we have even found the full message from William’s DNA.”

“Wait! So Baldwin just died?” *No! The clues can’t die here.*

“Yes, I believed I have told you that. He died on March 16 in 1185, aged 24,” he gave me a wicked smile. “And you are holding a ring worn by a leper.”

I raised my eyebrow. “If the bacteria were that persistent, and could live for more than nine hundred years, I suppose all human would have been annihilated by leprosy now; or perhaps all human would have the resistant gene to leprosy.” I paused for a while then said, “The ring could not have stayed within the coffin.”

“It’s been more than nine hundred years, anything could happen. And Baldwin IV did not have any children, so he is not your ancestor.”

“I need to perform a keyword search on all the memories you have. Damn!” I yelled grumpily. “I have to convert all the DNA data into texts first!” I turned towards Yossi, “Could you help me scan through William’s memories first? Perhaps there are some clues there.”

“Sure, but let’s call it a day, shall we?” he begged. His voice was like a puppy howl. “It’s over dinner time now.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “By the way, where did you learn Latin?”

“I knew it since I was 8.” He was lifting up that heavy microscope. “It was part of the family education; and not all of those are Latin, but Norman French... Have you read the footnotes I put in the passage?”

“Nope.” I said sharply.

“Hey! Those are the hard work I have done for you.” He bellowed. I realized I had got used to his noisy, pushy and rough way. “Without those, you cannot fully understand the historical contexts.”

“Okay! I will read it.” I was a bit annoyed — he treated me as if I knew nothing. “Do you have to translate the memories into a v— Umm... that poetic?”

“They used poems as news broadcasts in the Ancient Greece.” This time he was annoyed. “So learn and live with it.”

I quirked my lips, “So where are we going now?”

“Drop the luggage at my place first. Then let’s hit the bars.” His face glowed at the word “bars” and unconsciously I glanced at his 48-inch belly.

Act II

Queen Sibylla

What's left to the widow,

When her only son is gone?

Gone with her son, her compassion,

And she starts weaving of her hatred in her lonely

 nights...

1 July, 2025 AD

“Have some of this!” Yossi was handing me over a plate of crumbled cheese.

I gave it a sniff and immediately said, “No, thanks.”

“You Chinese really don’t like dairy.” He was scraping the plate with a spoon.

“Nope, we are just less enthusiastic about it,” I replied and continued working on my algorithm. I really found this Yossi fellow very irritating sometimes. Though he was polite, he loved pushing people around, forcing his own passions on others.

“Too bad! It’s feta!”—he took a few seconds stressing on the “f” sound—“most delicious stuff in the world.”

Having licked his fingers, he dropped a piece of paper right at my keyboard. “Well, you were right about double checking William’s memory.”

**William of Tyre, the
Archbishop, March 17, 1185
AD, the Church of the Holy
Sepulchre, Jerusalem**

I have sinned!

Robbing the dead!

From that scorched hand I removed the ring.

And a curse it descends onto me.

My greed condemns me...

And it already has.

Guy has seen my transgression,

And relieved me of my precious possession.

My Lord please forgives me of this betrayal!

A traitor I am as your servant.

“Aha!” I smiled. “So this Bishop stole the ring from a dead body!”

“And Guy took it from him.”

“Who is Guy?” I asked. I felt embarrassed as I thought that was a “guy”, not a name.

“Guy was the husband of Queen Sibylla.” Before I wanted to ask again, he continued, “Queen Sibylla was the sister of Baldwin IV. Her son was Baldwin V, who you could say was the successor of Baldwin IV.”

“Could say?” Sometimes to me, Yossi was too pedantic to details.

“Baldwin IV made Baldwin V a co-king with him before he died. Baldwin IV was crowned only at five, so technically they ruled together for about two years. But of course, how could a 5 year-old boy rule.” he added.

“So Guy was the father of a King,” I muttered softly to myself.

“No, no, no!” Yossi raised his voice, “Baldwin V was the son of the first husband of Sibylla, not Guy.”

“I see,” I shrugged. “So Sibylla was a widow and she remarried Guy, and her son was made king by Baldwin IV. Anyway I propose we run the program overnight first and decode as many DNA as we can. Then I can make a database of the decoded memories, which we can easily perform keyword search on.”

“Yes, do that, and please give me the memories of Sibylla and Guy first. I just cannot wait to look at this famous couple’s memory!” And he started humming.

**Queen Sibylla, Mother of King
Baldwin V, Sister of King
Baldwin IV, March 17, 1185 AD,
Jerusalem**

Fast asleep in the middle of a story.

My boy lay under the sun,

Upon the green pasture.

I stroke his golden hair,

And his eyes opened,

Irises reflecting the high blue sky.

An innocent smile floated on his sleepy face.

“Mama! Please continue!

What happened to Arachne then?”

His voice is still of a girl!

I cannot believe this boy of eight

Is already the King.

My King!

“Oh! Well as you remember

Arachne⁴ challenged the Goddess Athena.

So a contest was held for them,

For these two brightest weavers of that era.

Athena weaved of the miseries and calamities

When mankind abandons the Gods.

Arachne weaved of the joy and glory

When mankind leaps out from the grip of the Gods.

Not up to Athena's expectation,

The tapestry Arachne weaved

Was so mesmerizing that

None,

⁴ The very famous story of Arachne, who became the mother of all spiders in the Greek mythology.

Not even the Gods,

Could damn her work.

But Athena was furious.

'How dare you defy the Gods!

Now you should pay for your foolishness!'

Just as Athena raised her voice

Poor Arachne started to shrink.

Her beautiful limbs started to multiply.

Her gracious face started to twist.

And finally she vanished,

Leaving only her clothes behind.

Under her garment

A little spider crawled out.

And the little creature weaves

The webs of regret

For its whole life eternally.”

His eyes rolled big.

I laughed at the horror

In that pair of sapphires

Glistening of the blue deep sea.

Clear, naive and innocent,

As the breaking dawn

Of the Eden.

Then he looked at the ground,

Sat there for long.

"Will...Will the Lord turn me into a spider?"

"No! No! My dear!"

I smiled,

"Though your father⁵ died so early,

The Lord hasn't forsaken us.

He made you the King!

Along with your uncle!"

"But uncle is dead now right?"

"He is back to the Lord's embrace.

We should pray for his soul

⁵ Baldwin V's father, William of Montferrat: He died before Baldwin V's birth, leaving Sibylla widowed and Baldwin V fatherless.

At his funeral tomorrow.

Now hurry. Let's go back to the castle."

There ran he ahead of me,

Hopping like a deer

Full of spirit and joy.

Still untouched by this secular world.

Will the child be fine?

I frowned.

I always frown.

Brows twisted in sorrow,

Wrinkles lifting up worries.

My dear brother...

Pray for us in the heaven.

Your little nephew needs your blessing.

The court of Jerusalem is unsteady again,

Since your death.

I already have to keep my alliance with Guy⁶,

To gain the army for my son.

Also not to mention my sister,

⁶ Guy of Lusignan: the second husband of Sibylla. After her first husband, William Longsword of Montferrat, died, Sibylla married Guy. William Longsword was also the father of Baldwin V. As for Guy, he was a Poitevin knight, a very important noble in the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

Isabella⁷! Only God knows

What her followers are plotting now!

My Lord! Save us all,

Secure my son!

I beg of you!

**Guy of Lusignan, Husband of
Queen Sibylla, March 17, 1185
AD, Corridor of the Castle,
Jerusalem**

⁷ Queen Isabella: the half sister of Queen Sibylla and Baldwin IV, who was also a legitimate heir to the throne after the death of Baldwin V.

The ring shimmers in my hand.

"Te Amo Parum"

Sorry my King.

I never love you.

I am the needle in your heart.

You are the sand grains in my eyes.

Look at yourself!

Don't accuse me with that horrid face of yours!

Don't question me with that withered tongue
of yours!

Don't open up that hollowed eyes of yours!

For your iris has gone white!