

Prologue

The jungle was alive. Screeches from unseen birds pierced the night air, air that was already thick with the thrum of blood-thirsty mosquitoes. Monkey howls and big cat growls punctured the nerves of the rotund, roly-poly man who was doing his best to hack through the undergrowth. He and his machete were having a hard time of it.

Alphonse Poulet loathed jungles. He was a man of city streets, of cafes and galleries. The rainforest heat had brought his skin out in the most horrendous rash. His armpits were swampy swimming holes, and the state of his underpants did not bear mentioning. But Alphonse had to go where the work took him. And as the Falcon—the world’s premier art thief—his work had brought



him to the depths of Zimbabwe.

Could that night's target even qualify as art? Alphonse sniffed at the indignity. But no matter. The bills must be paid. When Sir Mason Green called, Alphonse Poulet answered.

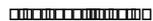
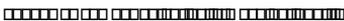
Africa.

The Dark Continent.

It was certainly dark enough around the remote homestead that Alphonse was hacking his way towards—he could barely see a metre in front of his face. Alphonse took another swing with his huge bush knife and failed to make any impression on a net of vines. The blow sent a judder along his arm. He leaned against a tree trunk and wiped a handkerchief across his face. Then he took a water bottle from his belt and drank deep.

The Falcon was not impressed. But Sir Mason Green had promised an extraordinary sum for the target of the night's labours, and if there was one thing that registered with Alphonse it was money. He stowed his handkerchief in his pocket and wrenched the knife free from where it had become lodged in the foliage. The Falcon would not be beaten, not by man and not by a very large vegetable.

With considerable pain, and after losing several litres of perspiration, he broke through the last of the jungle and stumbled, breathless, into a large clearing. On the other side of a manicured lawn sat a low-set homestead, dark and unwelcoming in the silvery moonlight. The hum of an air-conditioning plant harmonised with the



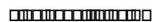
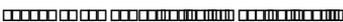


jungle chatter that surrounded him. Alphonse scuttled across the grassy expanse, his moon shadow bobbling before him. He crouched under a broad veranda and rested against the cool of a concrete-rendered wall. With the faintest of tickles, a fat scorpion emerged from the collar of his shirt and crawled onto the plateau of his shoulder.

‘Eep!’ Alphonse squeaked. He flicked the creature onto the ground and stamped his boots as if trying to put out a grass fire, flailing his hands about his head and neck to make sure there were no other beasties on board. Finally satisfied that he was not about to be stung, bitten, poisoned or eaten, Alphonse pulled a folded square of paper from his shirt pocket and flattened it on his knee. From inside the false belly strapped to his front he retrieved a torch and shone a light onto a rough floor plan of the homestead. Sir Mason Green had provided him with only the vaguest of details, but the large red X drawn in one of the rooms was plain to see.

Alphonse glanced both ways along the length of the building. All was quiet. The homestead was usually reached only by helicopter, and the owners were supposed to be on holidays in South America. Sir Mason had assured Alphonse that they relied on the kilometres of surrounding jungle as their primary security system. Alphonse would have the place to himself.

He fished inside his belly pouch and produced a contraption with a large suction cup on one end and a





metal arm that protruded from the centre. He rolled onto his knees and pressed the cup onto the pane of a window by his head. He bent the metal arm across until the point touched the glass, then rotated it in a slow circle. A diamond-head cutting tool sliced a hole sixty-centimetres across with an ear-wincing *SCRRRRREEEEEEEEE*. The glass section popped through. Alphonse smiled. Even deep in the Zimbabwean jungle on a steamy night, the Falcon could still soar high.

Then the circle of glass popped from the suction cup and shattered into a thousand pieces on the floor inside.

‘Eep!’ Alphonse squeezed his eyes shut, bracing for an alarm to pierce the still night.

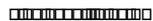
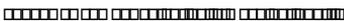
Nothing.

Just the low hum of the air conditioning, and the sound from a nearby tree of something large devouring something small.

Alphonse peered through the hole in the window. Apart from the floor being covered with shattered glass, everything appeared as he had expected. It was a good-sized lounge room, furnished in colonial chic: elephant tusks crossed above the fireplace, a lumpy cheetah-skin rug in front of the hearth. And a motion detector in one corner of the ceiling.

The edges of Alphonse’s mouth curled upward. *Is that the best you can do?*

The Falcon burrowed a hand deep into his belly and unfurled a white bedsheet. He draped it through





the hole in the window and then, rather awkwardly, squeezed himself through the cut pane. Finally, he stood inside with the bedsheet held out in front of him like a curtain. Glass crunched beneath his boots as he inched his way across to an adjoining hallway. It was the fourth time Alphonse had used the bedsheet defence against a motion detector and he was yet to set off an alarm (not counting that one time he had blindly wandered onto a balcony and over a railing, tumbling two storeys into a swimming pool).

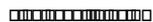
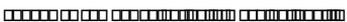
Once he was safely into the corridor, he dropped the sheet and tiptoed to a closed door at the far end. He crouched and once again shone the torch onto the map. If he was right, and he was *always* right, the room marked by the large X was on the other side. He cupped his hands around his eyes and rose to his knees to peer through a glass panel in the door.

A security guard sat in an armchair in the middle of the room.

‘Eep!’ Alphonse dropped to his backside and slapped a hand across his mouth to stifle the sound.

A security guard was not in the plan.

Alphonse rose to his knees and again looked through the glass. The guard had his back to him and could well be asleep. But Alphonse could not take that chance. Luckily, he always came prepared. With one hand he pulled a glass bottle labelled *Chloroform* from his pouch, and with the other he retrieved his sweaty handkerchief.

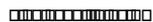
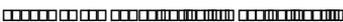




Then he cracked the door open a centimetre. It swung silently on its hinges and Alphonse crept into the room. The top of the guard's head was just visible over the back of the chair. A pair of wires as white as the man's hair trailed up either side of his neck and disappeared into his ears, the tinny sound of muffled music wafting into the air. Alphonse cocked an eyebrow. The guard appeared to be as old and feeble as his grandfather. Alphonse unstopped the bottle and poured a good amount of the contents onto his handkerchief. His nose wrinkled at the sickly floral aroma. Then, slick as a sumo ninja, he slapped the sodden hanky over the guard's nose and mouth, wrapping his arms around the back of the chair to hold him tight.

The guard may have been old but he was far from feeble. He launched out of the chair like a neurotic cat, dragging Alphonse with him. Together they crashed to the floor. The bottle flew from Alphonse's grasp and smashed on the boards, spilling the noxious liquid onto a zebra-skin rug. Alphonse clung to the guard as if he was the star showing at a rodeo. They flailed about the room, bucking and pitching, sweeping the legs from under a side table and upending a chunky ashtray.

Alphonse struggled to keep his hanky over the thrashing guard's face. At last, the chloroform did its job and the guard crumpled unconscious to the floor. Alphonse released his grip, took in a deep breath, and wiped his handkerchief across his sweaty face. His eyes





rolled back in their sockets as the chloroform wafted up his nose. He rattled his head to regain his senses.

It was time for the Falcon to get to work. Alphonse took a moment to scan the room. The walls were hung with some of the most valuable artworks on the planet, masterpieces pilfered from the world's great galleries and held in this secret collection in the heart of the Zimbabwean rainforest. Alphonse recognised several that he had stolen himself. Hundreds of millions of dollars worth of paintings, sculptures, rare jewellery, coins, vases...

Alphonse's fingers itched. He longed to explore this Aladdin's Cave. But Sir Mason Green had only one item on his shopping list, and Alphonse spotted it hanging under a display light a little further along the wall: a simple black frame bearing a single glass-winged butterfly.

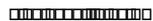
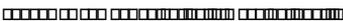
The Xerxes Blue.

Alphonse took the frame in both hands and unhooked it from the wall. He gazed at the insect, pinned to a buff-coloured card behind the glass, and grunted.

This was *not* art.

With a shrug he stowed the frame inside his belly pouch. A second later the security guard appeared behind him and smashed a vase over Alphonse's head.

'Eep!' Alphonse clamped his hands over the back of his skull and stared in horror at the shattered pieces of priceless porcelain on the floor. He looked up to find the

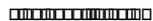
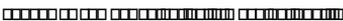




guard about to hurl a Greek figurine at him.

Alphonse caught the statue in one hand and a flying Ming Dynasty bowl in the other. He managed to place them on an antique table but the guard tackled him, and Alphonse, the figurine, the bowl and the table crashed to the floor. The two men wrestled in a tangle of flailing limbs across the zebra skin, coating themselves in the spilled chloroform until Alphonse managed to roll the guard onto his stomach and hold his face to the rug long enough for the man to succumb again to the fumes. Alphonse sat back on his rump and surveyed the damage. The room looked like a wrecking ball had been through it. Giddy from the chloroform that had soaked into his clothes, Alphonse stumbled into the corridor, past the bedsheet where it lay rumped in the doorway and barged straight into the lounge room. The blinking red eye of the motion detector stared down at him and a whooping siren shattered the night. Alphonse was on autopilot. His head was swimming and the floor moved in ways that were not at all helpful. He made it to the window but rather than open it, he poked his arms, a leg and his head through the hole in the glass, and got Winnie-the-Pooh stuck.

The fresh air outside washed some sense into his brain. He blinked away the fog and tried to squeeze his way through. But he was wedged in tight. Alphonse looked back over his shoulder into the room only to see that the lumpy cheetah-skin rug in front of the





fireplace appeared to be waking up. The big cat yawned, spreading a formidable set of jaws that housed an even more remarkable set of teeth.

Alphonse's eyes popped as the cheetah stretched, and started prowling the room, moving ever closer to the strange creature that was stuck in the window. The beast sniffed at Alphonse's backside, and creased its brow.

The art thief held his breath. Maybe the chloroform in his clothes would be strong enough to knock out the cheetah. The big cat sniffed at the bulging backside once more, then blinked. It yawned wide. Its front legs gave way, and as it was collapsing to the floor, as if by instinct, it clamped its jaws like a bear trap around Alphonse's buttocks.

The Falcon launched out of the window as if he had been fired from a cannon, and even the night creatures in the surrounding jungle were shocked into silence by the sheer intensity of his screams.

