



Free excerpt from “The Last Temple of Apollo” by Ivan Fenech

The Last Temple of Apollo

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Chapter 1

Giuliano’s Favourite Book

Giuliano sat fuming at the kitchen table, biting the end of a pencil. Writing compositions was such a bore and titles like “Write 200 words about your favourite book” were enough to put you off writing for the rest of your life. How was he ever going to explain his favourite book? He had never read it, he couldn’t read it, but he would not exchange it for anything. It was written in Italian and he barely knew the language. It was a history book of sorts, except that it did not contain as many dates as one would expect in a normal history book. There were just stories and pictures of famous people from history.

It didn’t bother Giuliano that he couldn’t read it. What he cared about most was that had belonged to someone very special who had written his name – *Antonio Tosta* – on the inside of the front cover. Antonio Tosta was not one of the famous men mentioned in the history book, but for Giuliano he was the most important man that ever lived. Antonio Tosta was his father and like all the other important men mentioned in the book, Giuliano had never met him.

His father had been an Italian sailor with the merchant navy who emigrated from Sicily to England in the late eighties, got married and would have lived a long and happy life had his ship not ran aground off the ragged coast of Cornwall one stormy night. Shipwrecks off the dangerous coast of Cornwall were nothing new. The strong winds, the heavy seas and the tricky coastline with its sharp rocks have provided a constant stream of wrecked vessels off Cornwall. Giuliano was just two years old when he lost his father at sea. His mother kept a whole boxful of newspapers with reports on the shipwreck. The news of the sinking had made the front pages of all the newspapers of England. Sometimes, on cold winter evenings, or when they had guests, Giuliano’s mother would bring the box out and rummage through the yellow pages with tears in her eyes. Giuliano had seen the newspapers so many times he knew the dates by heart.

On Tuesday, 18th February 1984, an unexpected storm had battered an old iron ship against the rocks near Land’s End. All seventeen sailors on board, including Giuliano’s father, had drowned. The ship’s captain, a Norwegian father of two, had been reputed to be one of the best captains in the whole of England - at least, so they said after he was dead. The newspapers of 19th February 1984 (newspapers always report events the day after they

happen) carried old film photos of when the ship was still berthed somewhere safe and happy. No one had any photos of the ship being twisted around at sea or sinking. There was no one watching as the ship went down. It was far too cold, wet and windy. Everyone was huddled up at home and the sailors were left all alone to battle with the wild waves.

Two days after the tragedy, the newspapers carried black and white photos of all the 17 men who had drowned. Some of the big newspapers had them on page two while the Cornish papers preferred to place them on the front page like they were local heroes. All the sailors looked very much alike in black and white, except for their Norwegian captain who had a beard and a matching hat. Giuliano's father was shorthaired and grim looking. The only thing Giuliano could say about his father was that he looked bored.

On the third day, some newspapers reported that an investigating committee, chaired by a retired judge specialised in maritime law, was holding a formal inquest on the tragedy. By the fourth day, the tragedy was entirely forgotten and there was no mention of the shipwreck in any newspaper. It's the sort of thing newspapers do. They get very enthusiastic over something that happens, publish as many details as they can and then suddenly forget all about it.

It took the old judge four months to complete his inquest. By the time he had collected all the facts, spoken to all the people concerned and prepared a long detailed report with route maps and diagrams of the ship, everyone had forgotten about the tragedy. Everyone that is, except the families of the drowned sailors.

Giuliano took great care of his father's history book because the pages tended to come off if you turned them too hard. He never went further than page five where there was a beautiful picture of an old man and a boy around Giuliano's age. They were both dressed in long white robes and were sitting and talking on the roof of a building. All the flat-roofed houses around them were painted in sparkling white and the sun was shining brightly overhead. To the back, not too far away, he could see a very dark blue sea, the kind of blue that summers are made of. An old Greek ship was sailing smoothly across the water and there were bright white spots in the sky that looked like sea gulls. The old man was Aristotle, a very important and intelligent man who wrote many books in Ancient Greece. The boy's name was Alexander. When he grew up he was called Alexander the Great because of the many countries he conquered - but that is history and this is not a history book.

Young Alexander did not attend a normal school like Giuliano. In Ancient Greece there were no rickety school chairs and no wooden benches with a year's supply of bubblegum stuck underneath. Alexander did not have to endure the putrid smell of lunch boxes or rotting apples, to stand in line with other children on cold misty mornings or to carry heavy books to school. All he had to do (or so it seemed from the picture) was to sit on the sunny roof top and listen to his teacher Aristotle talking about animals and rivers, the stars, the gods and old

battle stories from Greek history. If Alexander got bored, he could look out at the dark blue sea and fancy himself swimming, collecting seashells or exploring caves.

On grey winter days, when homework never seemed to come to end, Giuliano would open his favourite book and look at Alexander’s blue sea. The picture always brought back fond memories of summer, of its salty taste, the endless afternoons and the sound of the slow evening swell. Just the thought of summer made everything seem so much more bearable. Giuliano would then attack his homework with renewed vigour, just like a conquering hero.

But how am I going to explain all this in a 200-word composition, Giuliano kept asking himself, as he took deeper bites at his tattered pencil.

“Aren’t you finished with your homework, *caro*?” asked Giuliano’s mother.

There she goes again with her Italian, he thought. Giuliano did not have many friends in school because of a strange Italian accent he had picked up from his mother. When his father had drowned, she had insisted on speaking Italian at home. “It’s like your father was still here,” she used to say. Giuliano’s Italian never got further than a few useless phrases and he secretly suspected that his mother’s Italian was probably not as good as she tried to make it sound. In the end he never learnt Italian and instead ended up speaking a queer kind of English, much to the annoyance of his English teacher and to the humour of some of the other children in the class. They called him the *Italiano* and left him very much alone.

The *Italiano* had to spend most of his lunch breaks and afternoons with Nigel. It was quite a sight to watch the two boys strolling aimlessly around the school grounds together. Giuliano was very tall for his age and very thin, with quiet blue eyes and spiky brown hair that made him look like he had a porcupine lying on his head. No matter how much he tried to flatten out his hair, it always seemed to spring back up defiantly. So he wore a baseball hat most of the time as he shuffled around the school grounds with his shoulders hunched and his hands in his pockets.

Nigel was very short and very dark and unable to keep still for a moment. He lived in a world all of his own, spoke very fast and excitedly about everything, and never realised that Giuliano was not listening. Usually he would brag about some magnificent experiment he was planning and which never seemed to work. You could say he was a scientist without a laboratory. He just carried around bits and pieces of pipes and wires and a hundred other loose ends that never seem to come together to be of much use. Giuliano could only just stand Nigel because he didn’t want to be seen walking alone in the schoolyard.

Giuliano’s only real friend was his older brother Silvio. He was dark, well built and similarly tall for his 13 years. Although two years older than Giuliano, the two got on very well together and for them summer was one long adventure. Silvio was fearless. He could stand up to grown-ups and talk himself out of the most difficult situations. He was rough, tough but fair. And the most important thing of all was that he was loyal. He would never let a

friend down, never tell on you and never reveal a secret. Life for Giuliano would have been so much easier had Silvio been in the same school as he. But Silvio attended a boarding school in St Ives and only came home shortly in Christmas, Easter and for the summer.

If Silvio had been here now, he would have written the composition for me in no time, thought Giuliano. Shrugging, he took another nervous bite at his pencil and painfully tried to remember the last book he had read.

Chapter 2

Summer Camp!

When Giuliano had just turned 11, the most extraordinary thing happened - for the first time in his life, he was dreading the coming of summer. His mother had signed him up for a summer camp.

She casually dropped the idea of a summer camp one afternoon as Giuliano was engaged in near mortal combat with a blue mathematics book on the kitchen table.

“I’ve been talking to Mrs Williams, your friend Nigel’s mother,” she began.

“He’s not my friend,” growled back Giuliano, not looking up from his book.

“Oh yes he is, such a *carino*. Well, his mother thinks it would be a good idea if you and Nigel went to a summer camp this year.”

Giuliano felt some hard suddenly rise to his throat and stick there.

“Summer camp!”

“Yes, your headmistress, Mrs Hera Gibbons, is organising a summer camp in Linapoll, that’s a little fishing village near here. She was kind enough to write to me suggesting that I should send you. Apparently last year’s was an enormous success.”

Giuliano had spoken to some boys at school who had attended the summer camp and it had not sounded like a success at all. There had been some long breaks and afternoon play but there were many lessons, many educational visits and lots of report writing on “general knowledge” subjects.

“I don’t want to go to summer camp mum, I want to stay here with Silvio,” he said.

“Oh come now, Giuliano, it’s only for four weeks, so they’ll be plenty of time.”

“Four weeks!”

“And there would be Nigel too, he’s really looking forward...”

“But I don’t want to be with Nigel, he’s so childish!” protested Giuliano.

“You shall. And anyway, I’ve already told Nigel’s mum.”

“You didn’t!”

“We’ll have to buy you some new bed clothes and underwear. We can’t have you sleeping there in your old underwear.”

“Sleep there? Oh no mum, I won’t. I don’t want to sleep there.”

“There’s a whole list of things you shall need,” continued mother, ignoring Giuliano’s pleas. “Camp starts in the second week of July. Mrs Gibbons has listed everything here in her letter. Such a wonderful lady she is, so organised. Anyway, I’d come every Sunday to collect your dirty clothes and bring you clean ones. Parents may only visit the summer camp on Sundays and phone calls are allowed on Wednesdays.”

“It’s a prison. I’m being sent to prison!” moaned Giuliano.

“They’ll be Nigel... ”

“I don’t want to be with Nigel!”

“Then you can make new friends,” replied his mother flatly.

“I won’t!”

“Giuliano *basta!*”

“I’ll never go, never!”

Silvio was dismayed to find out that his brother Giuliano was being sent to summer camp. There was quite a row in the kitchen as Silvio battled it out with Mother. Giuliano remained upstairs, secretly crying on his bed. In the end all that Giuliano could hear was his mother screaming “*Basta, basta!*” at Silvio, who must have stormed out of the house because there was a loud bang followed by silence.

The first week of the summer holidays passed like a dream. The two brothers left home early in the morning and returned just after dusk, exhausted and hungry. They explored the ragged seashore, the coves and the caves and went on boat rides with the fishermen. Silvio always did the talking and was never shy to ask for a ride. He told Giuliano not to tell mother about their boat rides because she didn’t trust the sea, not after what had happened to their father. Giuliano never said a word, not even that day they returned home two hours after dark because the man they went out fishing with was a bit of a beginner and it had taken him two hours to get them back to shore.

But summer seemed to be over as soon as it had started. On Sunday evening Giuliano was silently packing up his rucksack for the summer camp. Silvio didn’t speak much that day and even their mother was in an apprehensive mood. She kept telling Giuliano he will have a great time and that he would want to go again next year. But she seemed more to be trying to convince herself than Giuliano.

Monday morning came and it was grey and drizzly. Silvio packed Giuliano’s bag in the back of their mother’s rusty, blue Ford and the three drove off to the summer camp.

“It’s a half-hour drive to Linapoll,” said Mother, sensing the unease in the car. “It’s a little fishing village, a bit like ours, only smaller. It would be *like* home.”

None of the boys spoke. They just watched the trees teasingly wave them by as they sped along Cornwall’s ragged shore.

‘Have you got everything?’ asked his mother as she pulled up in front of the summer camp. It was a silly question as there was no turning back now. But people always tend to say silly things when they are nervous.

Giuliano looked into his new rucksack. There was a packet of dry biscuits (not to go hungry), three sets of clothes, underwear, a spare baseball hat, spare shoes, copybooks, colour pencils, a history book and, thankfully, no mathematics books. There was also his favourite book tucked neatly in the bottom next to a new packet of tissues, his new toothbrush and a leaking toothpaste tube. Giuliano looked sadly at the faded cover of his favourite book and wondered if young Alexander may after all have been attending summer school with Aristotle when the beautiful picture on page five was painted. Somehow, the world he once knew seemed to have fallen apart and its last remaining scraps were lying in the bottom of his rucksack.

The “summer camp” was a drab, three-storey Victorian building, with a huge arched door in the middle and rectangular windows all arranged neatly in a row. The lower windows had rusted iron grinds.

“It’s certainly does not look much like a summer camp,” said Silvio.

“Now don’t you start putting things into Giuliano’s head,” scolded mother. “I’m sure it’s very pretty inside. And after all, they only opened the summer camp for the first time last year.”

“They’re probably some old soldiers barracks which they didn’t know what to do with, so they turned them into a summer camp.”

“Silvio, *basta!*” snapped mother.

“Well, they do look like barracks,” insisted Silvio.

“Or a prison,” added Giuliano dryly.

Mother ignored them both and looked back up at the building. Admittedly, it did look rather shabby and derelict. There was a long grey wall that went around the grounds and an arched entranceway that once had a gate. Someone had cleared up the place and piled the rubbish in a corner. A narrow path lined with slate stones and withered flowers led to the main door.

“Shall we go in?” asked mother encouragingly.

The two boys followed silently.

“Oh, good morning, Mrs Tosta!” said Mrs Gibbons, the headmistress, appearing suddenly from behind the main door. “Or should I say, Signora Tosta? Ah, my Italian is getting rusty these days. Not much practice.”

“*Buon giorno,*” replied Mother, somehow elated by the attention.

"Ah, and here is young Giuliano," said Mrs Gibbons, eyeing Giuliano like a prize. "Looking forward to four weeks of work and play, I'm sure. We have a wonderful programme prepared for you. We cannot spend our summers lazing around now, can we?"

"No," replied Giuliano. He wanted to be polite but the meaning of the word came out differently.

Mother glared at him and Mrs Gibbons huge cheeks flushed suddenly.

Mrs Gibbons was one of the most ugly women Giuliano had ever seen. She was big, very fat and she walked around with a wobble that shook the whole of her body at the same time. She had black, wire-like hair that was cut so short it that made every feature of her face seem oversized. She had round, pig-like ears that extended outwards like antennas, deep black bushy eyebrows, a round wrinkled nose, flaring nostrils, a wide mouth and big yellow tombstone teeth. But the most fearsome of all were her bulging eyes that seemed to look everywhere at the same time.

"So, Mrs Tosta," said Mrs Gibbons, putting her hand around Giuliano's neck, "I think Giuliano can come with me now."

Mother spluttered something nervously and tried to look inside the building over Mrs Gibbons' fat shoulders, but it was just too dark to see anything. Then she looked down with half-pleading eyes at Giuliano who was obediently picking up his knapsack and about to walk inside.

"Come now," Mrs Gibbons said as she turned Giuliano round roughly to face his mother. "What are we meant to say, boy?"

"Thank you mother for bringing me," said Giuliano. He had never said a bigger lie in his life. He turned around slowly and waved half-heartedly over his shoulder as his mother cried out "*ciao, ciao* Giuliano".

"On Sundays, Signora Tosta," Mrs Gibbons shouted back, "between 10 and 11".

Silvio was right - the building had been a soldiers' barracks in the last war. They were not what barracks normally looked like and there was no large parade ground for drills and training. But then again, the soldiers who had been stationed there in the war had not been normal soldiers either. They seemed to resemble city people who had been hurriedly put into uniforms as soon as the war had started. They kept much to themselves and did not mix with the Home Guard from Linapoll Village. They rarely went outside in the small yard, always ate in their canteen and spent the day in the top floor of the building. It was only after the war that it emerged that the place had been a secret signally station. Linapoll had been chosen because it was the most improbable place that the enemy would look for it.

For several years after the war the building lay abandoned until a young carpenter from Devon, who married a local girl, rented the ground floor and turned it into a workshop. Like his marriage, the enterprise was short-lived and he returned home soon afterwards. The building remained in neglect until Mrs Gibbons came up with the idea of turning it into Linapoll’s first Summer Camp.

It took some time for Mrs Gibbons to convince the local mayor of the usefulness of her project and even more time to get the local council to finance it. Linapoll’s Summer Camp project was eventually launched on the eve of local county elections. The mayor, an ambitious, meat seller with an equally ambitious wife, thought the project would win him back some of the popularity he was losing to a bright, new upstart – Linapoll’s first barrister. Politicians are often in the habit of launching big projects on the eve of elections.

The mayor lost the election but Mrs Gibbons won the building and had it refurbished in no time. With no family or friends of her own – Mrs Gibbons was divorced – the headmistress had nothing else to do in her spare time but to work on the project with maniacal zeal. She spared no money in refurbishing the top floor of the building for herself, turning it into an apartment complete with a study, a shower, a bedroom and a small living room overlooking the main gate. The little funds that remained went into refurbishing the rest of the building.

Mrs Gibbons proudly recounted Linapoll Summer Camp’s short history to the 23 arrivals - 10 miserable looking girls and 13 equally miserable boys - all still clinging tightly to their bags inside the damp assembly hall. It was a poor turnout and Giuliano couldn’t help thinking that they seemed to be there for one purpose only - to keep Mrs Gibbons busy, if not also happy.

The children were divided into three groups, each headed by a young apprentice teacher. The teams were called the *Titans*, the *Gaias* and the *Olympians*, all names the headmistress had picked out from a book on ancient mythology and which she displayed proudly to the children as their names were being called out. Giuliano thought it was just his bad luck when he heard Nigel’s name being called out to join his team, the *Olympians*. It was only later that he found out that Nigel’s mother had secretly contrived with the headmistress to have Nigel in the same group as himself.

“The theme for this year’s summer school, as some of you who read books may have already noticed, is ancient mythology,” said Mrs Gibbons. “I trust that we shall all be very happy here and that this will be an educational experience for you all. Now the teachers will take you up to your dormitories so you may settle down and maybe change into something more comfortable. Assembly is in 30 minutes sharp!”

The children silently made their way up the freshly cemented staircase like criminals going to the gallows. The dormitories about which Mrs Gibbons had written so much in her letters to their parents, turned out to be two cold rectangular rooms (one for boys, one for girls) with

wide windows and frosty glass panes. A smell of dampness seemed to seep out of every crevice in the cracked walls. The beds, old rusty frames that the soldiers had probably slept on, lay scattered haphazardly around the room. The mattresses were stained, very low and hard.

Giuliano did not waste time. He had long resigned to his fate and while most of the other boys stood at the door staring with indignation towards their dormitory, he rushed to a corner-bed next to a window overlooking the front yard and threw his rucksack on the mattress.

“Mine,” he declared proudly.

“Mine,” said a squeaky voice behind him. Giuliano turned around with horror. Nigel was standing next to an adjoining bed grinning happily at him. “Now we can sleep next to each other,” he said.

“Yeah,” replied Giuliano dryly.

The other kids began to scramble frantically around the room, each claiming his own territory. Two boys, who looked like twins, were wrestling over a bed that stood right in the middle of the room.

“Easy, easy,” said the assistant teacher at the door, “there are plenty of beds for everyone and a few to spare too”.

The dorm teacher was a tall, young man with curly brown hair parted at the middle, and kind brown eyes. His name was Herman Nicholls, and he did not look like the sort to be mixed up with the likes of Mrs Gibbons. The children called him Mr Herman. He spoke softly and politely to everyone and patiently waited until they had all settled down before telling them to do their beds “like they were at home”.

Giuliano unpacked his clean bed sheets and sat on his bed. The sheets smelt so much of home it made him want to cry. Nigel was fidgeting noisily next to him, speaking excitedly about all the things he had not managed to pack into the one rucksack they were permitted to bring along.

“I would have loved to bring my toy soldiers along to play with them on the bed. It’s just that I had no space left in the bag,” Nigel said.

Toy soldiers! Giuliano looked with horror at Nigel’s small frame, bent double as he rummaged through his bag.

“Did you manage to get any toys along?” Nigel asked, his head still inside his bag.

“No,” replied Giuliano with shock, looking around to see if anyone had heard. “I don’t play with toys anymore,” he said.

Nigel shrugged. “I don’t think we’ll have time to play here anyway. Not with Mrs Gibbons!” He smiled happily at Giuliano.

“No, we won’t.”

“You’re not already homesick are you?” asked Nigel, who was now looking strangely at Giuliano. “Mom said all kids get homesick when they’re at camp but it gets better after a few

days. She said it's worst in the evening around bedtime. But I don't think I'd be homesick here," said Nigel, gesturing stupidly at the cold, bare room.

"No, I'm not homesick. I just didn't want to come."

All that Giuliano wanted was a few minutes peace so he could unpack slowly. But Nigel wouldn't stop talking.

"I wonder if there are any guns still hidden around somewhere."

"Guns?" asked Giuliano, stupefied as ever.

"You heard what Mrs Gibbons said, about the soldiers and their secret mission here. It must have been an important military base so they must have had a good supply of guns hidden somewhere, just in case there was an enemy attack. Maybe there's still an arms cache hidden somewhere which they forgot behind when they left after the war. We could explore the basement and look for secret trap doors."

Giuliano was about to say that that was the dumbest idea he'd heard in months when Mr Herman suddenly popped his head through the door again.

"OK, its time to go back down stairs. Don't want the girls to get there before us do we?"

There were nods all around. While no one looked forward to the prospect of meeting Mrs Gibbons again so soon, they were all anxious to leave their damp dormitory in the hope they'd get some free time to roam around and explore the grounds.

The headmistress was impatiently marching up and down the assembly hall when the boys' dorm group arrived. She met them all with an impatient frown and told them to divide themselves according to their respective teams. The girls arrived soon afterwards and Mrs Gibbons proudly read out a long detailed programme that she had prepared for them.

Breakfast was at sharply at 8, assembly at 9 and general knowledge lessons at 9.05. A 15-minute break was allowed at 10.30 a.m. after which they would have project work or an excursion. Lunch was at 12.30 p.m. unless they stayed out on their excursion, in which case they would all be provided with a packed lunch. Weather permitting there'd be organised hikes with educational stops in the afternoon. This would be followed by tea and a one-hour 'revision session' on the day's lessons. Free time was between 6 p.m. and 7.30 p.m. Dinner would be from 7.50 p.m. to 8.30 p.m. and bedtime at 9 p.m.

"Lights out is at 9.45 p.m. I will personally be checking out each dormitory to make sure you are all in bed. Any questions?" asked Mrs Gibbons. It sounded more like a challenge than an invitation.

Giuliano had a hundred questions reeling through his mind. What about television? When could he make phone calls? Were visits to the village out of bounds? What if he didn't want to do sports? He thought it would be best to ask Mr Herman on the more detailed aspects of the programme.

“And now,” said Mrs Gibbons finally, “you can all get acquainted with one another while lunch is being prepared. Each team will be taking turns to do the dishes and to help in the cooking. Every dormitory is responsible for its own cleaning and for the cleaning of the toilets. I will be leaving it up to the other teachers to organise that.”