



The Ring

BRADLEY PEARCE

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Dedicated to:

Michelle Knight,
For being a candle in my darkness.

And to:

Zara.
The coffee shop girl that inspired a love story.

“... when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted;
but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will
dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”

John 21:18



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Simon of Antioch

In a dark grotto beneath an imperial palace lit only by a few torches, an old man is dragged from a cell to a place of his execution. An old man weathered by the years and the elements of nature. Weary from the countless footsteps that had gotten him to this glorious day. An old man once arrogant and cocky, now humbled and an obedient servant even at his time of death. Roman guards that dragged his broken body and threw him beside a heavy wooden cross.

“Stand up Christian!” Barks a guard in disgust, kicking at the old man laying flaccid.

Too weak to protest the old man staggers slowly to his feet. There would have been a day he would had seen to the guard and toppled him. But those days had long passed, not from old age for his mind was willing, but from by the seed of faith that had been planted so many, many years ago. His mind drifts to a fishing boat and his brother Andrew, wondering what had become of him. Suddenly a sharp blow from guard snapped back him back to the reality of darkened cavern.

Stripping the old man to his soiled loin cloth the guards and laughed to themselves.

“Where is your God now?” A guard asks inspecting the frail prisoner standing hunched with age.

Small dark beady eyes peered back through bushy grey eye brows at the guard. Through parched lips now covered with a long grey beard the old man mutters a reply.

“He is within you...” A soft voice informs the Guard

The reply is met with a heavy punch to the old man’s stomach, buckling him over but not to the ground. The old man stood defiant. An instinct told him to lash out, but another told him to forgive him and offer the other cheek.

How often had his preached these words? Countless, perhaps more.

The old man straightens himself expecting another blow that came by way of a heavy wooden shaft of a spear across the back of his legs. Falling to his knees looks to the guard’s dirty feet. Vague memories surface and he smiles recalling his reluctance to have his master wash his feet. What would he give to be there now to recall the journeys of years to come? But he was not there. He was in a Roman prison. About to be executed. The guard’s feet would remain dirty, stained with sin.

Looking up to the guard before him, as though to beg for his life, but

knowing there would be no reprieve. A quick death was the privilege of the few Roman Citizens that had professed their alliance to the new faith that was spawning itself across the Roman Empire. Christianity. In Rome where all things hideous and shameful flourished Emperor Nero had proclaimed it a mischievous superstition, and those caught practicing it would be executed.

Those who were citizens would be beheaded. Those who were not would be tormented by a prolonged agonizing death. Tied to poles and set alight as human torches, feed to wild beasts and in the case of the old man, Simon Peter of Antioch, crucified. The guard examines the scroll in his hands and looks down at the old man with his head bowed.

“Simon of Antioch?” The guard barks again at the old man.

“Petrus...” The old man humors the guard for his oversight.

“Hmm... Whatever... You are charged with being a Christian, a crime against the state of Rome... You are sentenced to die... Any last words?” The guard asks.

“I have said all that needs to say... All that needs to be heard... All but one...” Petrus leaves the guard intrigued.

“What’s that old man?” The guard asks keenly.

“I forgive you...” Petrus disgorges a final absolution on the guard, his last on this earth. “... but I seek one request of you...”

The guard is taken back by atonement, no one had ever forgiven him for killing them. What is this strange religion that forgives the enemy at their door? The guard looks over to the other guard unsure what to make of it, only to see him shrug his shoulders in ignorance. He had heard other guards mentioning such words to them. This superstitious religion that had gathered interest among Roman citizens, preaching love and glory. Of one God? How was that possible? The Guard looks at the old man wondering if he should hear him out or simply run his sword through him and end both their miseries now. But he softens.

“What is it old man? ... What do you seek of death?” The guard asks, staring into Petrus’ eyes, now glaring brightly back at him in the flickering flames.

“I am not worthy to die as my Lord had... I beg of you to crucify me... upside down...” Petrus asked, lowering his head exhausted.

The guard looks again to the other guard and again is greeted with another shrug of shoulders and he examines the parchment again to confirm the edict. The thought amused the guard. A crucifixion was a crucifixion, upside down or otherwise.

“Shame you are not a Roman Citizen old man and your death a swift one... but my orders are orders...” The guard reminds the slow death to be inflicted.

His mind perplexed by the growing interest in this new religion that was

infecting Rome and its Citizens. Spreading its tentacles through the Empire. Tentacles that wrapped itself around Gentiles and Jews alike, offering salvation beyond death. Dare he spoke words aloud and find himself on the wrong end of a sword about to remove his head. The grotto offered no ears other than his own, curiously he wanted to know more.

“Say be your master’s name?” The guard asked eying the other guards own curiosity.

Petrus looked up to the guard, perhaps he had heard a curio in the guard’s voice. A fertile mind that cried out for a seed. To his last breath he would preach.

“Yeshua Bar Abba... Taken before your time... Yet he lives... I have seen him after death...” Petrus spoke reverently recalling that glorious day he appeared to him on the mount.

“He survived? ... How can this be?”

“He is the Son of God... He who have faith, will join him in paradise.”

“Which God? ... Zeus, Hercules? ... Mars?”

“The one and only true God.” Professes Petrus has he had a thousand times before.

“What is your God’s name?” The guard persists.

“His name cannot be spoken...” Petrus’ head droops.

“Hmm...” The guard ponders the significance and power of such a God who’s name cannot be spoken. That brings the dead back to life again.

From the shadows where he is playing, a small boy, watches on. A son of the guard. Watching with interest the coming and going of prisoners, wondering of their fate and the magic they spoke bringing people back to life. Were the really cannibals as his father suggested. Did they really drink blood?

The small boy crashes the two wooden horses in his hands together as though playing out an ancient Greek battle. Every so often looking up to the old man, about to die. He had seen many over the past months. The Emperor had an insatiable appetite for Christians, and for crudity. And the boy wondered where it would all end or who would be next. The Jews seemed to escape the emperor’s attention this time. These were troubled times. He had heard rumors and stories from other boys of these Christians and their strange beliefs that defied the Roman Gods.

Young ears listen, overhearing the old man’s soft spoken words. The boy’s mind a sponge for news beyond the walls of Rome, of the barbarian world outside. Questioning if Christians were as dangerous as everyone said.

Petrus catches a glimpse of the small boy’s blonde head in the flickering torch light. Curious as to what a child was doing in such a place and not playing

in the light of day. Perhaps a son. He looks to the guard standing over him and compares the similarities of the two.

“Your son?” Petrus asks with a distance stare.

“Rufus.” The guard replies caring for the boy.

“I had a child once...” His mind struggling to recall her face.

Having cured her of palsy became a convert, a spiritual child as if she was his own blood.

“Petronilla!” He calls out to her as though she had appeared before him to save him.

His eyes lit with delight and a smile grows on his face. The guard looks about for anyone who had approached, but saw no one and assumes the old man had lost his mind.

“Hmm.” The guard grunts ending their brief conversation.

It was time to get on with the execution, there were others and the day was long enough without delaying it further. Clearly the old man was a Christian and deserved to die. The scourge on the Empire, disrupting businesses, involved in immoral practices professing love between brothers and sisters. Atheists, refusing to honor the Roman Gods angering them and inflicting flood, famine and other disasters upon the people of Rome. Christians were dangerous and needed to be exterminated before they corrupted the populace with their superstition.

“Give me hand...” The guard calls out to the other.

Levering and pushing the old man onto the rough wooden cross. The old man willingly allowed his body to be pushed and shoved about as the guards positioned him. His eyes fixed on his daughter, shining unseen behind the guards. Beside her stood someone in black he did not recognize.

Rufus also sees to the man standing in a halo of light. The boy’s innocent eyes witnessing what his mind could not comprehend.

From a wooden tool box the guard pulls out an old iron nail, stained with blood. Reaching for the heavy hammer feels its weight knowing it would do the job. Pulling the old man’s arm out, stretching it for tension, presses the sharp tip of the heavy nail into the old man’s wrist. Without warning slams the head of iron mallet onto the nail. The sound echoed around the grotto.

Petrus grit his teeth and took the pain his Lord had borne decades before as though it were pleasure on his flesh. Again the mallet slams down, and again. Penetrating flesh and bone and wood. And not a word, a cry or a tear. He would not give the Roman the satisfaction of the infliction. The guard looks at the old man staring into space. At something or someone. Only Rufus, now standing

beside Michael watching on curiously.

Rufus had witness his father nailing many Christians to crosses, but this one was different. Captivated he watched on. His father thinking the boy was enjoying the sight of pagans being tortured. As he should. Not wanting his boy to go soft on him and convert and he too be crucified.

“Watch carefully how it’s done.” The father calls back to him. “Come closer... Watch.”

Michael nudges the boy closer. Lest he misses anything.

One arm complete, now the other. Pulling on it to gain tension, sweating muscles strain in the torch lit space. Pressing another large nail into the wrist.

‘Slam, slam, slam’, came the repetitive blows.

The old man flitches in discomfort and remains silent. His breathing quickened as his heart anxiously awaited the next blows, more painful than the first. Placing the old man’s feet on a knob of wood, crosses them over and takes a longer larger nail reserved for the purpose. And takes aim at the nail head with the mallet and drives the first massive blow through the first foot.

“Ahhh!” Petrus grimaces.

“Like that one did you?” Muses the guard.

‘Slam, slam, slam.’ The repeating blows fall, each less painful than the last.

‘Slam’. One final strike to complete the task.

Petrus’ eyes roll in their socket. The man in black stared back him emotionless, unable to interfere with the will of man. The guard stood back and inspected his handy work. Looking at the old man as if he were piece of carpentry.

“Should hold.” He informs the other guard.

Then recalled the old man dying wish.

“Upside down did you say?” He asks seeking conformation.

Petrus closed his eyes to acknowledge what words could not. The pain of the punctured limbs growing by the moment. Blood seeping over the wood and earthen floor.

“A crucifixion is a crucifixion...” The guard iterates.

A hole was already prepared for the post to slide into.

“Come on you... Give us a hand...” The guard instructs the other as they pushed and shoved the heavy cross now burdened with a body nailed to it, “... a bit more! ...”

The guard grunts with exhaustion.

“Why we simply don’t burn you... or feed you to the lions... You like that wouldn’t you Rufus?”

But no answer came. Hoping the torment would end there. His view of the

world may have been restricted to the grotto, but somehow what his father was doing was not right. Speechless he watched as his father and the other guard levered the cross and the old man into air and allowed it to slide into the hole.

'Trud!' The vertical post of the cross strikes solid earth.

"Ahhh!" Cries out Petrus, jerking him from a delirium of thoughts.

Eyes open widely as pain recoils down his arms and legs. His world now upside down, he orientates himself and sees Rufus looking at him confused. The man in black beside him, his hand on the boy's shoulder. He was speaking to Rufus, telling himself the old man could not hear.

Michael sees Petrus looking back at him. And suddenly a brilliant light filled the grotto, leaving the old man, Rufus and guards alone. The guards look about wondering the source of the lightning. Gods were not happy with something. The sooner this Christian was dead the sooner the Gods would be pleased.

Only Rufus stood undeterred by the light. Protected by the innocence of youth. His mind a sponge. His appetite had been whetted.

Rufus

Reluctant to leave the old man, Rufus remained behind to play in the shadows hoping to avoid his father's attention. Leaving his son unnoticed in the far corner shrouded in darkness. Clashing his two wooden carved horses together. Uttering battle cries with each assault on the other. Every so often looking over to the old man suspended inverted on the other side of the cavern. Wondering if he was dead or when he would die. A sadness came over him as though it were his grandfather hanging there.

He eyes the old man suspiciously, restrained by heavy nails. His body broken and grey. Trickle of blood seeped down his arms to his neck and dripped onto the ground. Blood from his feet trickled down over his body and gathered on his loin cloth. Staining it red.

The child's mind grappled with the old man's imminent death. For someone so young, death was a daily occurrence. But what happened after death. Was it true what he had heard? You lived again? No, not possible. He had seen the dead. And they dead stayed dead.

Caught in a curious conundrum his mind got the better of him and he approached the old man and sat before him. Petrus could sense someone or something was close. He heard the roar of a lion from a distant cell and feared one was on the loose. Opening his eyes sees not a savage lion with golden mane, but a placid young boy with blonde hair. Clear pale blue eyes looked back at him. In his hands two small wooden horses.

With neither wishing to begin a silence fell between them.

"Lord... Give me strength..." Petrus begs.

With his world inverted and blood filling his brain. There was nothing comfortable about being upside down, but then being crucified never was. And he allowed himself a grin at the thought, if only to divert his attention briefly from the pain straining at his wrists and feet.

"Rufus? ... Your name? ... Rufus?" Petrus reaches out with words.

The boy nods, hearing strength in the old man's voice.

"Who are you?" Rufus asks softly wondering if anyone else was listening.

He should not be talking to the prisoners, little alone a Christian one. If his father caught him he fear the beating he would receive. Confident they were alone he awaits the old man's reply. Perhaps the old man could confirm the rumors he had heard first hand.

"Who am I?" Petrus echoes back unsure if he knew the answer himself

anymore.

The man he once knew had been no longer existed. Angry, arrogant, aggressive to mention his more subtle traits. How had he changed from the roughed fisherman he once was with his brother on the Sea of Galilee?

“My name is Simon... I am but a fisherman...” Then added, “A fisher of men.”

“You fish men?” Rufus’ eyes light up with thoughts of cannibalism, “Is it true you eat them?”

“No, no my dear boy... Never.” The old reassures the boy in a gentle voice.

“It is said you eat bodies and drink blood...” Rufus asks eagerly.

Petrus grins as if he found Rufus’ innocence appetizing. Rufus leaned back afraid the old man would lunge at him at any moment and bite at him.

“Bread and wine... Only bread and wine... To remember Him.”

“Oh...” Whimpers Rufus, “...Remember who?”

“The Son of God... Yeshua.” Declares Petrus, the name bringing make more distant memories as life drained from his body.

“Yes_hu_a...” The repeats boy. “He is the Son of your God... We have Gods like yours.”

“I know... But this God is the One true God” Petrus gasps with growing pain.

“Only one God?” Rufus asked confused. “Where is Yeshua? ...Why is he not here to save you?”

“God sacrificed him so we our sins can be forgiven.”

“What is a sin?”

“It is something we do that we know is not right...”

“Has my father sinned?” Rufus asks curiously.

“No... He has sinned in innocence, he too is too young to understand what he does... He is simply following orders...” Petrus wondered if he had said too much watching Rufus’ taking it in.

“Yeshua will come back? ... To save you?” Rufus’ eyes light up with hope.

“He will be back... But not to save me... My days on this earth is over... It is up those we feed with the body and blood of Christ that will carry on His Word to others...”

“The bread and the wine.”

“That’s right... The bread and the wine... Remember that next time you eat... But not a word to your father I fear.”

“What is the Word you speak of? ... A message?”

“Your ears are keen Rufus... Are you sure you wish to know? ... Your young life will be in danger... Are you prepared to risk your life for the Word?”

Without thinking his head nods up and down at the inverted man before him. Intrigued by the mystery of unfolding before him.

“What is it? ... I will keep it a secret... I promise.”

“No, this is no secret we keep... But a message we spread...”

“Oh...” Rufus wavers with conviction, “...Tell me.” He pleads having gone too far to go back.

“That the Son of God walked on this earth... That God gave up His only Son for us... And that he who believes in Him will live forever in eternity...”

“Do you believe in Him? ... Yeshua?”

There is a pause as the old man recalled how he had failed his Lord.

“There was a time I denied Him three times... And I wept in shame.” The old man’s eyes begin to welt with tears of that day.

“But you believe in Him?” Rufus asks again confused by the old man’s answers.

“With my all life I believe in Him... With all my life... That is why I am here.”

“Why did you deny Him?”

“I was afraid... Afraid of what the Roman’s would do to me... ha....”

The old man chuckles looking over to the nails protruding from his wrists.

“...And that was after all the miracles Yeshua performed... All that He gave me.”

“Magic?” Exclaims Rufus.

“Nay Magic... These miracles were by the Son of God.”

“What miracles? Tell me... So I can believe too.” Pleads Rufus looking to the opening of the stairwell.

“Too many for young ears to hear... But to say that He walked on water... cured the deaf, dumb and blind and...”

“And? ...” Asked Rufus.

“...and raised the dead.”

“The dead?” Rufus gasped.

“The dead... I have seen this with my own eyes...” Asserted the old man.

Rufus sat stunned by the claims unsure whether to believe a man nailed on a cross before him. The bread and wine made sense, but raising the dead. His young imagination spun with questions.

“What did he give you?” Rufus recalls.

“Ah yes... I almost forgot... The Keys.”

“Keys... Keys to what?” Rufus face screwed up as to why a dying man would need keys.

“Heaven.”

“Heaven? ...” The small voice parrots back. “...Don’t you mean Hades?”

“Christians call it heaven.” Corrected the old man kindly.

“You have the keys? Would you let me in when my time comes?”

“Do you believe Yeshua was the Son of God?”

“I don’t know...”

“Do you believe in Miracles Rufus?”

“I don’t know...”

“That man you were standing with... He spoke with him...” The old man asked taking Rufus by surprise he had seen him as well. “...That was your miracle.”

“You saw him? I was afraid to say...” Rufus looks back behind him hoping the man in black was still there.

“What did He say?” The old man asked inquisitively.

“He said you had something for me... Something to keep safe... A *Ring*?” Said Rufus looking out to the old man’s fingers now covered in blood.

“Hmm... Did he say his name?”

“Michael... Who is He?”

Petrus grins and a peace came over him. All pain at the moment left his body as the divine thought raced through his mind.

“More what is He ... He is an Angel Rufus... an Angel... You have been truly blessed and chosen.”

“Chosen? ... Why me?” Rufus’ eyes search for answer in the old man’s eyes.

“Why are any of us Rufus? ... You are young... Di you believe now?”

A small head nods. He cannot refute what his own eye had seen.

“Let me baptize you... before I go.” Asked the old man feeling weaker, knowing the end was but words away.

“Baptise? Will it hurt?” Asked Rufus hesitantly wondering what was to be asked of him.

“Not at all... Get me that cup of water and place it in my hand.” He directs Rufus.

Fetching the cup the boy places it in the old man’s hand and Petrus blesses it. Then told Rufus he was about to pour some water over his head. Telling him to lean his head back. As he had performed so many times before, Petrus repeated the scared words of baptism.

“Rufus... With this water I baptize you in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit.”

As he tilted the cup and allowed the water to wash over his forehead, and with a blood strained forefinger made the sign of the cross on Rufus’ forehead.

“Go my son... In the name of Christ.”

“Is that it?”

“That’s it I’m afraid... How do you feel?”

“No different.” Wiping the water from his face and his fingers like a comb through his hair.

“Good... Then it worked.” Mused Petrus feeling a pain in his chest and letting it pass.

From the damp shadows a putrid colored snake slide silently and hissed in disgust at the ceremony. The boy was lost, but there would be others. His master would not be pleased.

Michael watched on as the snake slivered into the darkened abyss of the grotto from sight.

Petrus looked to the Ring he had been given by Yeshua decades earlier. And how He had told him he was the rock on which the Church would be built. He did not feel like a rock at that moment. Feeling for the Ring on his finger, gestured for the boy to remove it lest the guards steal it when stripped him from the cross. Rufus struggled to remove it, and pulled it free. Stained with blood, leaving a silhouette on the old man’s finger.

The boy examined the dull looking ring. Its relief showing the two crossed keys the old man had spoken of. Unsure of its significance.

“Do I have the keys now?”

“In some way you do... I should rename you Petrus... *The Rock*... As my master had done when he gave me the keys.”

“I don’t think my father would be pleased with that.”

“No... I don’t think he would be... Let it be our secret shall we?” Winked the old man to the young boy.

“Okay.” Rufus promised. “What do I do with it? The Ring?”

“Keep it safe... You were chosen for a reason Rufus.”

“How?”

“*Ah*... there’s the mystery... Only you will know... Now go... and let an old man die in peace.” Asked Petrus feeling sharp pains in his chest growing more intense.

This was no place for a young boy to witness the death of an old man. His time was over. The boy’s had just begun.

“You’ll be okay? ... Do you believe?” Asked Rufus as if to test Simon one last time.

“I believe, Yeshua is the Son of God.” Petrus told the new Apostle Rufus.

Rufus looked back at the old man suspended inverted. His chest now heaving as the spasms took hold. Wanting to stay he tore himself away and disappeared

quickly up the stone stairwell from sight.

Alone, Petrus took in the dimness of the grotto, unsure if it was that dim originally or if it was him. To one side he saw the man in black watching on.

“You...” The old man asked looking at Michael staring back at him.

“Tis time...” Spoke Michael.

With that Angelic command a brilliant light radiated from the grotto up the stairwell into the Imperial Palace and over the city of Rome. Citizens looked up to the heavens expecting thunder that never came. Then resumed their persecution of Christians.

An empty darkness befell the grotto. There would be a new star in the heavens that evening.

Rufus returned home and found his father napping on a wooden bench. Exhausted having crucified half a dozen Christians that morning. Climbing to the attic takes the two wooden horses and the dull silver ring and places them in a small wooden box. Staring at the ring laying within, he touches his forehead. Wary of the dangers and death he faced if discovered. Knowing that in time he would seek out others of the new religion and spread the Word. Of the One true God.

Closing its lid he tied the box off with string, and shoved it into a dark corner from sight. That evening at supper Rufus broke bread and sipped on his watered down wine. Recalling the words the old man had spoken to him.

“Yeshua.” Rufus mutters to himself before thinking.

“Yeshua? Who's Yeshua?” His father asked curiously.

“Just a friend Tata...” Rufus grinned to himself. “...Just a friend.”

The Call

Somewhere in the Vatican, some two thousand years later. In a very large lavishment office assigned to a man of rank and position. An office void of sound and movement other than the fluttering lace curtains in the morning breeze. Sat a man behind a large ancient wooden desk, just as his predecessors had. Deep in thought. And allowing the early morning rays of light to capture him. Imaging its warm embrace as the fingers of God.

He had sinned. But it was his job to sin. To do what was required of him. Killing was never easy. He had served the Church devoutly for decades, perhaps his whole life. Wondering how God would judge him when that day ever came? Did his transgressions in the name of the Church transcend the Original Sin?

The telephone rang un-expectantly. Echoing its alarm off polished marble surfaces. Filling every square inch of the large room with its incessant ringing as though pleading to be answered. Breaking the impasse of the silence and the man's thoughts, or prayers. The man eyes the defiant phone with suspicion, who would be calling at this early hour? Who would be calling *him*? The man reluctantly lifts the handset from its cradle to annul the intrusion. Filling the large room with a deafening silence once again.

"Hello." The man spoke softly and economically.

Words were never spoken unless they needed to be. Words could kill if spoken carelessly. Ears could be listening. The man listened carefully for subtle crackles on the line. It was not the first time the two men had spoken.

"Tell me more." The man asked wanting specifics.

The informant continued to dispatch the details of the treasure. A concerned look came over the man's face as he in the news of the discovery of a forgotten Holy Relic in Istanbul.

"The First? ... Are you sure?" The man asked as though he questioned the find as true.

This was a unique find, unheard of until now. Yet if true, would exalt the word of God. The informant had been reliable in the past, there was no need to begin to doubt him now.

"I understand my friend..." The man said in a grave voice pondering the significance of the discovery.

Deliberately pausing, the man weighed the situation with an urgency building in his mind. There would be others very interested in the relic. His mind filters through the names of those in the immediate vicinity. He had men on the ground

that could assist if the situation escalated, or deteriorated. He needed resources, his Organization had resources.

“How can I help?” Asked the man dismissing his competitors.

Listening carefully to the request being asked by the informant.

“Yes I see... The son... I understand... Follow the son... To the Ring... I see... Rest assured my friend... I will take care of the son.” A grave voice promised as the man listened to further instructions.

And the phone goes dead as the informant hangs up leaving the dead signal on the line ringing in his ear. The man listens carefully for un-expectant clicks that never came. Replacing the handset he contemplates the relic’s repatriation. There would be competition also with their eyes on the prize. Men that would kill to attain it. The man knew them all too well. His mind calmly thinking out a strategy to obtain the Relic.

The treasured relic must be re-appropriated by the Church. It was too scared to be left in hands of relic collectors. Grubby little men who scavenged for personal gain and boasting rights. He who possessed the relic would be king among kings.

He would have to inform his superior. There was only one, unless you counted God. The man lifted the handset of the old phone and dialed a simple three digit number. Scrolling each digit deliberately. Unhurriedly. And listened patiently to the dial tone waiting for it to be answered.

“Please excuse the intrusion your Holiness... But I have some very important news.” Cardinal Cassini started to disclose to his Superior, His Holiness the Pope.



Arthur McGee

Some days later in East London, a sunny autumn morning broke upon Watford Terrace. The cold north breeze blew, carrying with it a postman whistling an unrecognizable tune to himself. Much to the annoyance of Arthur McGee waiting at the mailbox, who believed no one should whistle unless it was in tune. And preferably a tune one could recognize. Arthur waited for the annoying whistle to arrive.

“No mail today Arthur!” The Postman called out as he cycled by.

The north breeze pushed the annoying whistle on its way again. Arthur returned inside the terraced homestead. Closing the door in time to keep out the cold breeze that was following him inside.

“Any mail today Arthur?” His Aunt called out from the kitchen.

“Not today Aunty.”

Not that he was expecting any, other than the gas bill. Arthur slumped his father’s comfy arm chair and allowed it to engulf him. As though to hold him prisoner. And he contemplated his existence, as he did most days since being laid off. He was twenty-nine years old and successfully unemployed, after yet another global recession had sent shock waves around the world and with it redundant ripples through the local council at which he had once worked. Staring out the lace curtained window onto the suburban street outside. Lined with identical terraced houses.

Michael sat quietly unseen in a chair opposite, eating what he imagined was Ginger cake and drinking what he imagined was tea. Taking in the manger that was Arthur’s home. Watchful of the young man sitting opposite.

The morning sun’s rays filtered through the curtains, diluted and straining to reach him. Surrendering to its warmth, as though it would re-inflate his deflated self-esteem. The days blurred as they rolled over themselves and into months. He could see no change on the grey horizon of his life as he stared blankly out onto the terraced street.

Collecting the mail and watching football matches over a pint and a packet of Walkers crisps at the local bar, was the highlights to his day. That and catching up with his best mate Phil who had also been laid off from the Council.

Arthur’s father Alistair would be away for weeks travelling peddling his company’s stationary products over Europe. He would return and tell Arthur exotic tales of his travels, of places and foods and equally exotic people. Rousing Arthur’s sense for adventure. Adventures he had read about in

Michener's books. To escape the capture of the arm chair as his father had done. To escape Watford Terrace. Sensing something was calling him. He could smell it, and it was not the Gas Works down the road.

Arthur's mother had died when he was young. Old photographs reminded him of her beauty. Vague memories of her love would flash to mind, imaginary, but real.

'Everything happens for a reason.' He had told himself trying to reconcile her premature death.

But what that reason was, was beyond him. Believing she was with him in spirit, somehow watching over him. His Aunt had moved in after his mother's death, to look after him while his father travelled. And she was the closest thing he had to a mother and after a while she had become a part of furniture. Something one could not throw out.

His Aunt was a lovely lady as anyone who did not live with her could attest. Taking a daily dose of medication, he thought there were more drugs in her medical cabinet than there were on the streets. It would not have surprised him if she turned out to be head of an East End drug cartel. Taking in stray cats and naming them Dizzy, Lizzy, and Cuddles. She would often be heard humming an unrecognizable tune and for as much as Arthur detested whistling, humming was second on his list of objectionable reverberations. Calling it her fairy tune for he was sure she was humming along with the fairies that only she could hear. Arthur preferred not to enquire and would not begrudge her these few comforts.

When not at the local bar with Phil, Arthur could be found drinking incalculable cups of tea, eating Ginger Cake and watching re-runs on the television with his Aunt. Feeling himself slipping slowly into his Auntie's medicated world. And he wondered how long it would be before he too would be making involuntary grunts and humming a fairy tune to himself.

Sitting in his father's large comfy arm chair and Arthur took stock of Watford Terrace and the world outside. It might have been the chill in the late autumn air that had unsettled Arthur that day. It could have been the postman's annoying whistle. But something did not feel right. As though something was about to happen and he could not put his finger on it.

In the evenings Arthur would retire to his room to read. His Aunt would stop by and wish him good night and turn off his light, as though he was still nine. Before sleep he would recite a quiet prayer to himself, giving thanks and asking for a decent hand. Having faith that God believed in him, more than he believed in God.

And that was a typical day for Arthur, as it had been since being laid off from the

Council. But the cogs of Arthur's world were turning. Cards were about to be dealt, and Arthur was about to be dealt a very strange hand that would set in motion the End of Days.



The Letter

Dawn broke on Watford Terrace and Arthur awoke to the new day stretching his tired limbs. The universe had shifted overnight, stars were aligning and forces were at play beyond his control. Like a dream he could not remember, a feeling of déjà vu struck him, as though something had crept insidiously into his soul. Sending a chill over his body.

“That’s weird.” He said to himself shaking himself of the peculiar feeling.

“Breakfast Arty.” His Aunt calls out from the kitchen.

“I’m coming Aunty.”

The same cold breeze still blew from the north. Chasing the same whistling Postman who peddled frantically trying to keep ahead of it, as if it too wanted him to stop whistling annoying tune. Slowing down, he reached into the basket of letters and pulled out two envelopes.

“Two today Arthur.” Declared the postman who had momentarily stopped whistling.

Passing them skillfully to Arthur in one continuous motion. Before carrying on his annoyingly whistling way. Only to be chased again by the rabid breeze snapping at his peddles.

“Two? ... That must be a record.” Arthur said to himself.

Trying to suppress his excitement, Arthur examines the envelopes and gauged one as a Gas bill he had been expecting. Recognizing the cheap brown envelope and the Company’s logo in the corner. Shuffling the letters he examined the second of the envelopes. A white envelope, a letter and not a bill. It was addressed to him and was hand written. The writing looked strangely familiar. But he could not place it.

“Hmm.” Arthur thought to himself taking in the oddity of receiving a letter.

Arthur had not had a letter from anyone in what seemed like a hundred years. Perhaps two. The foreign stamp a siren as to its origin. European he surmised, but he could not place it. Flipping it over hoping to gleam the sender’s name. But this was blank.

“Hmm, strange... Who would write to me?” Asked Arthur himself.

Hoping to avoid his Auntie’s inquisitive questions from his nosy but loveable Aunt he folds the envelope and shaves it into his pocket hoping she was not watching from the window.

“Any mail today Arthur?” His Aunt enquired.

“Just the Gas bill Aunty.” Arthur half fibbed placing it on the dining table.

Arthur had an idea that would avoid his Auntie's prying eyes and questioning.

"I'm just popping down to the cafe..." He called out, "... do you need anything from the shops?" He asked, hoping the answer would be no.

"Ohh... Pick us up some more Ginger Cake... we're getting low. And some tea... the loose kind... Would you be a dear?" Asked his Aunt heading to the laundry.

"No worries Auntie." Arthur called back reaching for his coat.

Wrapping an old blue university scarf about his neck, he headed out the door. The day was nippy. Arthur hated a lazy breeze that preferred to blow through him than around him. He scans the street outside as though he could see the lazy breeze to avoid it. Pulling a red woolen beanie over his ears he buries his hands deep into his pocket.

The excursion to the cafe was half a fib to be able to read his letter in private. He would pick up his Aunt's grocery items afterwards. The cafe was three blocks from Arthur's home and a refreshing walk to stretch his legs. Taking him away from the solitary confinement of his bedroom and ever prying eyes of his Aunt. There was another reason he wanted to visit the café, Zara. You could say Arthur was smitten with her, but lacked the courage to ask her out. Wondering if he should ask Phil for his advice, then quickly decided otherwise.

Zara was about his age, with long dark hair and hazel eyes, with a seductive smile that made Arthur smile. He was hoping Zara would be working that day. And she was. The small bell above the café door announced a patron's arrival. Zara looks up to see Arthur and smiles. He smiles back half blushing. Arthur begins with small talk about the inclement weather hoping it would bond their momentary romantic relationship.

"Regular latte... one sugar, right?" Asked Zara just as Arthur was about to order.

"That's right." Replied Arthur taken back by her personal interest in his particular coffee.

A thought passed through his mind that could be more between them. Time slowed down and more thoughts about the status of their *relationship* ricocheted at the speed of light about his mind.

"Take a seat... I'll bring it over." Said Zara with an infectious smile drawing Arthur back to from his dazed delirium.

Arthur found a table by the window and waited for the coffee to arrive. Staring out the shoppers and passersby. One day he would have the courage like Phil to ask her out, maybe for a coffee. But then wondered if that was a good idea given how she served it all day?

'One day...' he thought. '...One day.'

Remembering why he had come to the café, he pulls the envelope from his pocket and re-examines it again. Just then, Zara arrives with his coffee and places on the table beside the letter.

"Thank you Zara." Said Arthur using her name as though it would personalize her, and watched her return to serve waiting customer.

Taking a sip of the coffee he savored the bitter caffeine against the sweetness of the sugar. The English cup of tea had its merits, but it could not match coffee. His veins pumped with the elixir of life now invigorating his senses and resurrecting his spirit.

Picking up the envelope looks at the familiar hand writing. But still could not place it. The date stamp like all date stamps was illegible and from a country he could not make out from its markings.

'East European perhaps?' He thinks to himself.

A large building was portrayed in dark red ink. Not a church, more like that of a government building of some kind? Much like Westminster. Only grander. Transfixed by the oddity his mind running through the possibilities of countries and wondering who he knew in Eastern Europe that write to him. His father was in France. Or so he thought. Turning it over, the sender's name had still not appeared.

Running the handle of a teaspoon along the inside edge of the envelope to tear it open to reveal a single piece of paper, folded over. Removing the page Arthur opened it and began to read words he was not prepared for...

"Arthur, if you're reading this, you may in danger."

That wrenched Arthur to attention more than the coffee had. Quickly looking to the bottom of the letter he was not prepared for what he was about to read there as well...

"Dad."

Now he recognized his father's handwriting. A chill came over him, unsure what to make of the short letter.

'This must be one of dad's jokes.' Arthur thought, looking outside the café for his father who might be laughing at him.

But he was not, just passersby and ordinary people going about ordinary lives. The taste of the coffee in his mouth was not feeling as pleasant as it had when he took his first sip. Nevertheless, he took another sip. Hoping to buy him time before he would have to read the contents that would hopefully explain why

he would be in danger. His eyes shifting the café and exterior for suspicious eyes watching him. Instinctively he sank lower in his seat, as if this would avoid an assassin's bullet. His heart quickened with anxiety, beating delexically in his chest.

What was this all about? There was only one way to find out. Taking another sip of coffee to calm himself. Arthur's eyes went to the top of the letter again.

"Arthur, if you're reading this, you may in danger.

I will explain all when we meet. I need you to go to the attic and in the far corner you'll find a shoebox. Take the contents and go to Budapest University and find a Professor Almesh. He will tell you where to find me. There are people after me, and they may well be after you. Don't tell anyone, or you'll endanger them. We don't have much time.

Trust me.

Dad."

It made no sense to Arthur. Budapest? That's in Hungary, if he recalled his geography correctly. That explained the stamp. Other than a few years in Edinburgh to study engineering, and a weekend to France, Watford was the size of Arthur's world. Hungary was half a world away.

Arthur's mind was swamped with constipated questions. Who was Professor Almesh? What's in the shoebox in the attic? Was his father on the run from the law? Did Arthur want to get involved? Was he already involved? All these questions went unanswered. Then there was his Aunt, what would he say to her?

'Oh by the way Auntie... I'm just popping off to Budapest for a few days... Yeah, right.' He thought to himself.

His life was already in tatters being unemployed. How was he going to get to Budapest? He barely had enough money to buy coffee and ginger cake. Strangely enough, the thought of forgetting to buy his Auntie's ginger cake was more fearful than the assassin's bullet that was about to explode his brains all over the cafe walls. Not leaving a good impression for Zara. Nor himself for that matter. Looking outside for a grassy knoll, Arthur decided it was safe for the time being.

Carefully re-folding letter he returned it to its envelope hoping to deny its existence and eminent danger. He rocked quietly in his chair as tough to a tune in his head. But this was no tune he recognized. Perhaps he had wished to hard for the adventure he had longed for. Finishing his coffee he stood up and waved to

Zara as he was leaving.

“See you again soon Arthur.” She called out with a smile.

Infecting him and causing him to smile back.

“Let’s hope so Zara... Let’s hope so.” Arthur replied unsure if anyone would see him again.

Arthur headed to the Shopping Centre and grabbed a shopping basket from the stacked pile.

“What did Aunty want me to buy?” He asked himself trying to recite the shopping list.

‘Ginger cake... Tea... Loose... Anything else?’ Thought Arthur unable to concentrate.

His father’s letter causing him mental indigestion. He would have Google the Professor when he got home. Hopefully somewhere among the few cryptic clues his father had given him he would see a picture of what it was all about.

But the universe does not work that way. You cannot Google God’s grand design. You can only experience it one moment at a time. There are the chosen. Those with a divine purpose that keep the order from becoming chaos. Arthur, an unemployed civil engineer from Watford Terrace, had been chosen.



Box in the Attic

"I'm home Aunty." Called out Arthur closing the front door behind him.

Depositing the small shopping bag on the dining table. Placing the ginger cake away in a tin with the remains of the last cake. Refilling the tea tin with a fresh supply. His Aunt appeared just as he finished unpacking.

"Did you get the cake? She enquired.

"I've already put it away Aunty." Indicated Arthur.

"That's a good boy..." She replied as if he were still a child. "... I'll put the kettle on".

Keen to know what was in the shoe box Arthur had a thought of how to get into the Attic.

"I'm just popping up to the Attic Aunty... I need to find an old text book... I won't be long... I think I know where it is." Said Arthur.

"Don't make a mess up there... And brush the dust off before you come down... I've just vacuumed!" His Aunt warned.

"Will do Aunty."

Content he had a plausible excuse to venture into no man's land. The Attic. No one actually knew what was up in the Attic. A forgotten graveyard of possessions and keepsakes. It had been years since anyone had been up there. Arthur had no interest in those boxes, but there was one particular box he did have an intense interest, the shoe box.

Opening the ceiling door Arthur pulled down the attic stairs. An amount of dust floated in the air. Descending on him and his Auntie's clean carpet. Checking the stair's sturdiness he climbed apprehensively through the opening into a semi-lit room. Light filtered through the large round grilled vent and he reaches for the light cord.

'Click, click.' The bulb was dead and the small room remained stained in darkness.

'Must change that while I'm up here', Arthur thought.

There were spare lightbulbs on a shelf on the other side of the attic if he recalled correctly. Finding his way between the boxes in the dimly lit room, he eased his way to the shelf. His eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness. Making out the likely box that contained the spare bulbs. Reached inside and fumbled for a bulb. Arthur exchanged the bulb and placed the deceased bulb into a cardboard coffin for later burial.

Returning to the light cord.

“Let there be light!” Arthur pronounced to himself.

‘*Click!*’ He tugged on the cord.

“And there was light!” Arthur glorified the known universe with brilliance, albeit the Attic.

Darkness was replaced with the illuminated radiance of the single bulb. Stacked boxes confronted him. Each covered with years of thick dust. Boxes containing old photo albums and nick-nates. Memories of his mother. Boxes that would never be opened ever again. Boxes one could never part with. Their contents were their souls.

In a corner of the attic. Behind several stacked boxes. He made out the faint outline of the shoe box his father had indicated his in letter. Dark shadows shrouded its presence. It had been shoved into the dark corner. Covered in dust, but not as much as the other boxes in the room. This had been a recent addition. Arthur reached into the corner and carefully pulled the box out. Unsure of the frailty or its contents. Feeling an unusual weight it contained. Not shoes.

Arthur’s curiosity deepened.

String had been wrapped repeatedly around the box and had been tied off in a knot. Not a bow. The box was meant to remain closed and not opened. As if to keep what was inside from escaping. Or those on the outside peering inside. Nervously he untied the knot and unwound the string from around the box. Placing the string next to the box of bulbs as though performing a surgical autopsy. The attic breathed a gust of air through the open vent from outside, stirring up the dust. Skeletal fingers of sunlight reached for him, illuminating the suspended dust particles. Was it trying to prevent him from opening the box?

But these thoughts never entered Arthur’s mind. His curiosity had gotten the better of him.

“Arthur! ... What are you doing up there... Your lunch is almost ready.” His Aunt suddenly hollered from below the opening.

“It’s okay Auntie... I’m just changing the light bulb... I’ll be down in just a couple minutes.”

“Hurry up... Before it gets cold.” The prying voice ordered.

Hesitantly he lifted the lid of the shoe box and was shocked to see what he saw. His mind took a moment to register it.

A gun.

More questions filled his head. Multi-choice would have been useful. What was a gun doing in this box? Who had put it there? Whose box was this? The immediate answer was his father. But his father was a travelling salesman. When does a salesman need a gun? What sort of clients did he deal with? Gangsters need stationary and tissue paper? Perhaps. His Aunt was hardly a double agent.

Head of a local drug cartel of East London, he could accept. But a gun? It appeared familiar, but then guns do when you see them enough on television.

The single bulb threw a dark shadow of Arthur's body and over the box. There was something laying underneath the gun. Carefully lifting the gun from the box. It had weight. It felt awkward in his hand and he placed it carefully on the lid beside the box as though it was sleeping bird, not wishing to awaken it.

Arthur reached for what had laid beneath the gun and discovered bundles of cash. British Pounds and Euros of fifty and hundred denominations.

'There must be tens of thousands in here.' he thought.

So much for not affording coffee and ginger cake anymore.

"Arthur!" His Aunt called out again.

Her voice carried up the stairs so clearly it sounded like she was standing behind him.

"What *are* you doing up there? Your lunch is ready, come down at once!" His Aunt ordered.

"Yes Auntie... Sorry Auntie... Coming now Auntie." Arthur answered flustered by the coercing voice.

Carefully replacing the gun on top of the bank notes he replaced the lid. Rewinding the string around the box. And finishing it with a secure knot like his father had done. And slid the box back into its deep dark hiding position. He would have to come back later. Was he really about go to Budapest? He still did had more questions than answers.

Returning to the opening Arthur switched off the light and darkness fell again on the attic. Only the thin boney fingers of sun light reached into the room illuminating the suspended dust now dancing on the drifting air. Climbing cautiously down the stairs, he brushed away any dust that may have hitched a ride.

"Did you fix the bulb? ..." Auntie asked wondering why he had taken so long. "...Did you find the book you were after?" She machine gunned him with another question.

"Yeah fixed the bulb... But I couldn't find the book... It must be buried in one of the boxes somewhere. I'll have another look later." He half lied hoping that would end her inquisition.

His father's letter and now shoe box added to his indigestion such that lunch was not as appetizing as it usually would be. If the gun had not disturbed him enough, the amount of cash that laid beneath certainly had. Desperately his mind tried to rationalize the contents to his father's behavior, but finding no connection. His Aunt could sense something was amiss for Arthur.

"You feeling okay Arty? You've barely touched a bite. You're not coming

down with something are you? ... You look flush.” His Aunt asked with concern for her nephew.

“I don’t think so Aunty... I think I must have had too much for breakfast. This is a lovely lunch. Thank you very much.”

And he forced himself to take another mouthful. Then another.

“A cup of tea would be lovely.” He suggested.

A cup of tea was the British answer to everything. Especially when it came to settling stomachs. That and Ginger Cake. Tea had gotten them through several world wars. Though they had lost the American continent because of it. Perhaps things would have gone differently had it have been coffee.

Calmly sipping on his tea he sat quietly with his Aunt and watched the midday news.

“Ginger cake Arty?” Aunty asked.

“Oh that would be lovely.” Arthur replied.

Somewhere between the tea, the ginger cake and the re-run on the television, Arthur had formulated a story to tell his Aunt as to how he could escape for a few days and not arouse her suspicions. It is amazing how the subconscious mind compensates for the deficiency of the fearful conscious mind. Planting ideas we think are our own.

“I had an email earlier from a friend saying that one of our old Professors had just died... I was thinking about heading up to Edinburgh for the funeral... To show my respects...” He began to lie.

Hoping she had not been reading the Scottish obituaries in her spare time, as old people habitually did.

“But I don’t want to leave you here all alone.” He added, baiting the hook.

“That’s nice of you Arty, how thoughtful.... It will do you good to get out of the house for a while... Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine... How long will you gone?” She asked.

Arthur was taken back by his Aunt’s unreactive response to him leaving. Stunned he quickly calibrates the number of days.

“Oh... I thought I might stay about a week...Catch up with some old classmates and all that.”

“That’s a lovely thought Arty... Make sure you pack something warm... It will be getting cold where you’re going.” She advised.

“Yes it will.” Arthur replied wondering. “I’ll start packing this afternoon... I want to catch up with Phil before I go.” He added to embellish some truth to the lie.

“Will you have enough money? ... I can spare you some if you need.”

“Ohh... I think I’m good for money, thanks Aunty.”

'Very good', he thought.

Michael sat opposite, unseen enjoying his tea and ginger cake and watching a re-run of an old Monty Python show.

"I like this one." He chuckles to himself unheard.

The cogs of Arthur's life were turning, and forcing other cogs to turn with them. Was he really going to Budapest? Any doubting thoughts that crept into his mind were silenced by forces beyond his control sitting nearby. Any action he takes must be by his own freewill. The decision would always be his.



Deck of Cardinals

Several days earlier. Somewhere in the Vatican, in an opulent office void of sound a second telephone rang a short interval after the first had been laid to rest. Interrupting the man's mind from his thoughts, or prayers. A humble man of the most importance sat behind a large ancient wooden desk, just as his predecessors had centuries before him, deep in thought. Allowing the creeping early morning rays of light to capture him, imaging its warmth as the angelic fingers embracing him. He had not sinned, it was not his job to sin. He had served the Church devoutly for decades, perhaps his whole life in one capacity then another. Now anointed to the highest office, God's representative on earth.

The man let the intruding phone ring. The man did not to answer to anyone but God.

Echoing off worn polished marble tiles. Filling every square inch of the opulent room with an incessant ringing as though asking, '*why do you forsake me?*' The man eyes the defiant phone with suspicion. Who would be calling at this early hour? Who would be calling *him*? The man reluctantly lifted the handset from its cradle to terminate the intrusion. Filling the opulent room once again with a deafening silence.

"Salve." The man quietly answered in Latin.

"Please excuse my intrusion, your Holiness. But I have some very important news." Cardinal Cassini began to explain to his boss, the Pope.

"Please go on." Replied the Pope now recognizing the Cardinal's voice.

"We have a situation I think you should be aware of." Advised Cardinal in a grave tone.

"Ire placet" The Pope repeated, slipping back into Latin.

The Cardinal relayed details of the relic's discovery he had received from the informant. The ecclesiastic significance recognized immediately by the Pope. It was without question that it would need to be returned to the Church.

"A relic... The first? ... I see..." The Pope repeated to confirm what he had heard. "...go on my friend." The Pope requested hoping the call was not being monitored by *outsiders*.

The Pope nodded to himself acknowledging the importance and taking in the steps that would have to be undertaken to secure its return suggested by the Cardinal.

"Do what you must do to return the relic to the bosom of the Church... *Sit angeli custodiat te* (May the Angels protect you)." The Pope blessed the

Cardinal before hanging up.

The early autumn morning light shone through the tall open arched windows. Embroidered lace curtains projected twirling shadows of angels across the black and white marbled floor. The Bishop of Rome sat at his stately desk, tapping his fingers tapping on the ancient surface, as if to keep beat to the dancing angels on the floor.

'Tap-tap-tap, Tap-tap-tap.'

His mind was deep in thought. Like the Cardinal he knew there would be others who would seek the holy prize, more for prestige than its intrinsic value.

'Braun...' A name surfaced among his thoughts. Wondering how far he would go to possess such a relic. Other names bubbled to the surface, each as devious and ruthless as the other.

"Hoc non est bonum." Muttered to himself. "This is not good at all".

The holy fingers continued to tap upon the holy desk of the holy predecessors. Then the tapping stopped. Silence once again filled the room, as a decision came to mind. He would summon the Cardinals and advise them of the situation. He would take whatever measures that were necessary to repatriate the founding relic to the Church. Be it by an Act of God if need be. Cassini would be provided all resources and means to coordinate the relic's return.

"Ita sit. (So be it.)" Vocalizing the thought and crossing himself.

Within the hour of the second phone call, Cardinals had gathered in the large meeting room. Long dark purple drapes, trimmed with gold braids, hung heavily from the tall ancient windows. On the walls hung portraits of former Cardinals and Bishops of Rome. The room was cool with the early morning air still lingering. Cardinals mingled among themselves. Moving slowly about the room as they conversed and nodded to one another.

Large heavy wooden doors slowly opened. Nothing moved very fast at the Vatican. Even the sun's rays were taking their time to reach this room. Haste was not in the holy vocabulary. Urgency on the other hand was. But never the two shall meet. His Holiness entered the room to a series of ritual bows and nods. Like the Red Sea, Cardinals parted as the Pope walked to the head of a large table. The Cardinals waited for His Holiness to be seated before sitting themselves.

"Thank you for coming at such short notice... I have had word of a pressing matter that concerns the Church". The Pope began solemnly, his tone betraying the significance of the meeting.

He paused to gather his thoughts, then continued.

“I have been informed that a certain English gentleman will soon be in possession of a unique Holy Relic.” Stated the Pope as if to wet the Cardinal’s ecclesiastical appetites.

Causing an immediate mumbled chatter among themselves as to what the other may have heard, before returning their eyes to their Bishop for confirmation.

“I have this on good authority from Cardinal Cassini, whom you all know very well for his *services* to the Church...”

Accentuating the word *services* as if it did not need further qualifying. They all knew of the Cardinal. They all knew of his *services* to the Church. None of whom wished their paths to cross.

“Cardinals...” The Pope began again, “... I understand the Holy Relic is a *Fishermen’s Ring*... The first of its kind... Saint Peter’s.” Confessed the Pope relieved to have lifted the burden from his shoulders.

An audible inhalation of a gasps circulated the large table as the significance of the founding Ring sunk into aging minds.

“What can we do?” One Cardinal asked.

“Let us pray!” Exclaimed another.

Ritual nods circulated the large table among the novice Cardinals. Countered by a shaking of the heads among the more senior Cardinals.

“Yes, prayer would be helpful... But I am thinking of a more earthly solution.” The Pope advised looking down to Cassini sitting passively beside him.

Cassini eyed the dilapidated deck of Cardinals about the table, wondering which to keep, which to throw out. Not all Cardinals were created equal. He had been in the *service* of Church longer than he cared to remember and would remain so until summoned by a higher being. His eyes scan for Cardinals appeared out of place. Stopping at an elderly Cardinal. Sitting quiet, as though frozen in time. The only Cardinal that had not to make eye contact with him. Cardinal Dovizi. His senior years rising him above suspicions of recent Vatican scandals. But not above Cassini’s.

“I have placed Cardinal Cassini in charge of returning the Ring to the Church... You are to give him your full support if called upon. This was not a request... But a direct Holy Order.” The Pope promulgated the authority.

Heads nodded in ritual bows, smudged voices discussed their concerns. The Pope stood and blessed his deck of Cardinals before dismissing them back from whence that had come. A sea of red regalia parted again to allow the Bishop of Rome to pass through the slowly opening wooden doors.

Swiss Guards stood either side in their vivid uniforms. Their polished halberds ready to fall on the necks of those that trespassed the ancient hallow halls. Cassini remained behind, watching the other Cardinal's leave. Eyeing the solo individual that lagged behind the others. Reluctant to pair up with another. Cardinal Dovizi.



Phil

Sitting in his father's chair he stared out the window onto the Terraced Street outside contemplating the journey that laid ahead. He had often wished for an adventure like his father's travels across Europe, but had never expected it to be so sudden and dangerous. But then what adventure is not dangerous? Could he go blindly into the unknown? His mind was a blank canvas as to what laid ahead of him. By the tone of his father's letter it would be sooner rather than later.

What was the danger his father spoke of? Dangerous enough to require a gun? The reality of the gun slapped Arthur across the face. Awakening him to the seriousness of his father's words. But how would he get to Budapest? Money was obviously not an issue anymore.

Plane or train? Security checks and X-Ray machines would detect the gun followed by a lot of questions for which he had no answers. Flying was out of the question.

Trains? They would take longer, but would work if he concealed the gun well enough. They would give him more room to maneuver, more places to hide the gun. Allowing more opportunity to exist the train if required. It would take an extra day to get to Budapest, but if it meant not getting caught with the gun. Settled, trains it would be. But should he buy his tickets online or as he went?

Who were *these* people that were after him? Were they sophisticated enough to trace tickets like the CIA? He was Arthur McGee, not Jason Borne. His life was in Watford, not in some remote Indian coastal village. Were they watching him now, waiting for his next move? He looked towards the curtains of the window. The afternoon sunlight filtered through the white lace curtains.

'Nah... Not in Watford', Arthur thought to himself.

But if Arthur had looked more closely outside his window, he would have spied a small grey Humber that blended into the curb. Much like the driver who seem to blend into the upholstery of the seat he was sitting on. Unnoticed. Invisible. He was a patient man. If anyone stopped to question him, he would say he was clergy from Italy to visiting their English brethren. If troubled further he would speak Italian or Latin, and any conversation would be abandoned. If troubled further, the Cassini had a solution in his pocket that would silence any further questioning. He would appear of no importance to anyone. And so would passed under everyone's the radar. Even the prying eyes of Arthur's watchful Aunt could not detect the Cardinal's presence.

Arthur Googled '*Budapest University Professor Almesh*' and waited less than half a second before the search listing came back. Revealing that the Professor was connected to the Department of Historical Antiquity.

"Hmm... That doesn't sound like office supplies... Unless he's a client..." Said Arthur to himself desperately trying to make sense of his father's clues.

But then neither did the gun in the box.

Arthur was in two minds as to whether he should visit Phil and seek thoughts about his father's letter, and perhaps help cement his alibi with his Aunt. Wondering how much to tell him about his father's letter summoning him to Budapest despite his father's warning not to tell anyone. But this was Phil, not just anyone. They had been mates since Edinburg and were like peas and carrots. It would be wrong not to tell him.

Phil lived two streets over and like Arthur, lived at home with his parents. Arthur knocked on the door.

"Hello Arthur..." Said Misses Atkinson, Phil's mother, "... how have you been? I haven't seen you in ages."

"I'm good Misses A..." Arthur replied cheerfully, "...I was wondering of Phil was home?"

"Come on in Arthur... Would you like a cup of tea?" She inquired. "Phillip! Are you up there?" She hollered up the stairway.

"What's up mom?" A holler came down the stair way.

"Arthur is here to see you!" She relayed back.

"Send him up thanks Mom!"

"Thank you Misses A... I'll go on up."

"Call out if you'd like a cup of tea." She offered again.

"Will do Misses A." Said Arthur climbing the narrow stairs to Phil's room.

Arriving at the door of Phil's bedroom, a room was unchanged from since he was a teenager. Which was questionable how long ago that was. Heavy metal rock posters adorn the walls. A well-arranged shelf of old vinyl LP's. Phil sat a desk surfing the net.

"What you up to?" Trying to peer over Phil's shoulder.

"Nothing much... Just surfing."

The page quickly changed as Arthur got closer.

"You?" Asked Phil ricocheting a back question to Arthur.

"Not much..." Arthur paused as he thought of what he wanted to say or how to say it, "...Well actually... Something has come up and I need your help".

"Sounds interesting... What you been up to? ... Is it a woman?"

Phil hoping to expel his wisdom upon Arthur. The amount of which could be written on the back of a postage stamp. Which not to be unfair to Phil, was generally more than most men knew about women.

“Interesting yes... A woman? No...” Said Arthur reluctant to continue.

“Come on... Spill the beans...” Said Phil ribbing Arthur to get on with it.

“I don’t know how much I *can* tell you... I shouldn’t be telling you any of this! ... I’ve been told *not* to ... It could put you in *danger* as well...” Arthur advised cautiously before realizing he already said too much.

If ever there was a hook to catch Phil’s attention it was the word *danger*.

“*Danger*? ... How can *you* ever be in *danger*? ... You live in *Watford* for God sake man... Besides... Danger is my middle name.” Joked Phil.

“Yeah... Though sometimes I wonder if it should be your first.” Replied Arthur, not joking.

Phil had a reputation for being handy with his fists. And not afraid to step up to anyone twice his size if they crossed the line with him.

“So what’s happened to get you in all this so-called *trouble*? ... You haven’t robbed a bank have you?” Asked Phil hoping Arthur would say no.

“Well actually... I don’t know...” Arthur thought about the money in the box. “... If I tell you... You have to swear not to tell anyone okay?”

“What do you mean you don’t know... You either did or you didn’t?” Responded Phil.

Realizing something was troubling Arthur he went to the door and closed it quietly. And looked at Arthur with a solemn look on his face.

“Alright big guy... Spill the beans and don’t hold anything back... Half a story won’t do okay?” Said Phil taking a more serious tone.

“I had a letter from my father.” Arthur started.

“It’s a woman isn’t it?” Phil surmised the problem.

“No, it’s not a woman... Not everything is about women Phil.”

“Sorry Mate, I just thought... Go on, I won’t interrupt again.”

“I had a letter from my father... He said I may be in danger... Said I should go to Budapest...”

“Budapest?” Phil exclaimed taken by surprise.

“Wait there’s more... Said I should see a Professor there... Almesh... He told me to tell no one... Or I will put them in danger.” Said Arthur relieved to have told someone.

Arthur reached into his pocket and pulled out the letter to corroborate his story. Passing it to Phil who opened it and read it to himself. Phil’s face became solemn again and he lifted his eyes to Arthur’s.

“Shit... You’re not joking.... So what was in the box?” Phil enquired.

“A lot of money...” Arthur paused, “... And a gun.”

“A gun?!” Exclaimed Phil again. “Fuck... The money sounds well and good... But what is your father doing with a gun?”

Phil became entangled in the same knotted thoughts Arthur had had. And the two sat looking blankly at each other taking in the obscure facts.

“What you going to do?” Asked Phil handing the letter back to Arthur.

“I have to go. My father wants me there... He seems to think I’ll be safer there than staying here.” Reasoned Arthur aloud.

“Who’s this Professor... Almesh?” Asked Phil.

“I did a search for him on the net and it seems he has something to do with History and Antiquity at Budapest University... So I guess dad is tied in with him somehow.”

“I thought your father was a travelling salesmen. When did he become a secret agent? ... Cool!” Joked Phil.

Arthur tried to restrain himself from laughing but could not help it. Phil managed relieve the anxiety that had been building within Arthur.

“Yeah...” Chuckled Arthur with a grin forming on his face.

“How you going to get to Budapest without your Aunt knowing?”

“I’ve told her I’m heading up to Edinburgh for a funeral of an old Professor.”

“Oh that’s a good story mate! ... I’d be proud to think of that one... So... when do *we* leave?” Asked Phil never to left out of an adventure.

“We?” Arthur looked at Phil, “You can’t come... I can’t get you caught up with this.” Pleaded Arthur.

“Danger is my middle name remember... Besides... You’ll need someone handy with a gun ... I’ll be your wing man ... Four eyes are better than two... They won’t be looking for two guys travelling together... I can watch your back while you’re watching mine ... Safety in numbers mate ...” Said Phil exhausting most of the clichés he knew and waited for Arthur to accept his invitation.

“I suppose you’re right... If you don’t mind being killed along the way.” Arthur half joked.

“Mate... They have to get through me to get to you.” Stated Phil.

And somehow Arthur knew he meant it. No one got pass Phil without a bruising to show for their troubles.

“You won’t regret it mate.” Grinned Phil excited by the journey.

“Yeah... That’s what I’m afraid of... We leave tomorrow morning. There’s a train leaving St Pancras for Brussels at ten tomorrow morning... Don’t worry about money. There seems to enough for several round trips ... I’ve sorted a rough itinerary that should see us in Budapest in a couple days... Bring your Identity Card and Passport for the border checkpoints and any hotels we may

need to stay at along the way.”

“Can’t we simply fly there?” Asked Phil.

“Not with a gun as hand luggage mate.” Reminded Arthur.

“Oh yeah... Security doesn’t like that sort of things these days. I forgot.” Said Phil correcting himself.

“It will take longer... But we’ll get there... You sure you still want to go? You don’t have.” Asked Arthur checking again.

“Mate... I wouldn’t let you go without me.” Responded Phil.

“Yeah... Somehow I thought you’d say that... I’ll see you tomorrow morning. My place by nine okay? We’ll get a taxi from there to the station. Cover story you’re coming to Edinburgh for a week for a funeral of an old professor.” Instructed Arthur.

“See you tomorrow morning mate.” Grinned Phil keen to get going.

“I’ve got to get back for dinner before my Aunt calls out a search party.” Said Arthur heading down the stairs.

Arthur got home just before the alarm be raised and settled in for dinner with his favorite Aunt, before leaving into the unknown, to a man he did not know in country he had only ever read about half a world away. Informing his Aunt that Phil had decided to accompany him to Edinburgh.

“That’s nice... Safety in numbers.” She suggested.

“Yeah... Safety in numbers... And who better than Phil right Aunt?” Arthur replied playing alone.

After the habitual cups of tea, ginger cake and television reruns Arthur excused himself to bed. Usually he would read a few pages before he slept, but tonight his book would serve another purpose. Placing the letter between the open pages he re-read his father’s brief letter. Hoping there was more than what he had already had read. Perhaps there was something he had missed between the lines, between the words.

‘Go to Budapest. Find Professor Almesh.’

His mind erupted with fantasies of spies and espionage, but soon evaporated when his Aunt appeared at his door.

“You okay Arty? You look tired.” Asked his Aunt.

“I’m fine thanks Aunt, just getting into the book.” He half fibbed.

“Don’t stay up too late... You have a big trip tomorrow. Get some sleep... Sweet dreams.”

“You too Aunt.”

He could hear her going down the hallway. Floorboards creaking underfoot.

‘I don’t think I’ll be having sweet dreams tonight’, thought Arthur.

Had he made a mistake telling Phil, going against his father's directions? Arthur's weakness was Phil's strength. They complimented each other. Phil was coming along wanted or not. Closing the laptop and book he switched off the lamp.

The room flooded with a darkness illuminated by the growing full moon outside, tinged with a faint red glow. That night Arthur would not sleep well at all. Somewhere between the puzzling thoughts and searching questions, tiredness overcame him.

"Sleep." Said Michael.

And Arthur drifted into a peaceful sleep, deeper than he had ever slept before.



Cardinal Dovizi

Heads nodded in ritual bows, smudged voices discussed their concerns. The Pope stood and blessed his deck of Cardinals before dismissing them back from whence that had come. A sea of red regalia parted again to allow the Bishop of Rome to pass through the slowly opening wooden doors.

Cardinals moved unhurriedly through the large doorway. Discussing amongst themselves the implications of the finding. The deck shuffled, split itself and dealt the Cardinals in different directions of the Vatican compass. Paired off as if by some primal mating ritual. Except for one lone Cardinal.

Cardinal Bernardo Dovizi.

As within any society, there is good and evil. Moral and immortal. The Vatican was no exception. Dovizi was no exception. Though well past his expiry date he clung to his elected position as he did to life. Over the decades he had made associations with people and organizations around the world. Some reputable, some less so, and some had grown into friendships. The line between good and evil had become blurred. Perhaps smudged at times. We all have friends less moral than ourselves. Yet we still find ourselves associating with them. Somehow they complete they us.

Dovizi too had friends less moral than himself.

While the Pope and the Church fulfilled the one half, his less moral associates fulfilled the other. Dovizi was too old to be concerned moralities anymore. He may not be Pope, nor ever would be and so allowed himself with a few digressions from his ordained position during his final years on God's earth. Having served many Popes in his time, this tenure may well be his last. An opportunity had presented itself on the silver platter. He had friends that would reward him favorably should the relic fall into his possession. Would it would take would be a silent word to point them in the right direction. There would be no blood on Dovizi's hands.

Dovizi shuffled unhurriedly to his office along a labyrinth of marbled passageways. There are no escalators in the Vatican, no elevators. Just eternally long corridors. Large winding stairways, each draped with a royal red carpet held in place by polished brass bars.

Beams of morning sunlight shone through the towering windows that stood like Sentinels looking down upon the diminutive figure shuffling along the corridor. They had been watching him for many years. But there was an unspoken code, what happens in the Vatican, stays in the Vatican. The Sentinels

allowed the Cardinal to pass. His secret was safe. For now.

Before closing the door of his ancient office Dovizi looked down the corridor to ensure his privacy. Staff would not arrive for another half hour and he would have the office to himself. Lowering himself gently into his chair surveyed his desk of neatly stacked arranged piles of paper. Dovizi was a thorough man and he like things in their place.

Opening a drawer he removed a small plastic box of business cards. Then reached for an old pair of reading glasses and wedged them on his nose. Hooking their bent wire limbs behind his large ears. Removing the cards he thumbed through them as if he was playing bridge. Wondering what to keep, what to throw out. He was searching for two cards in particular. Hesitating, he read the card in front of him. The voices in his head debated what to do next. Would he, would he not?

But the question as to *should* he? Never entered his mind. Minutes had passed in what seem like a moments as he stared in contemplation at the card. Taking a deep breath to annul his anxiety Dovizi reached for the telephone and lifted the heavy large green hand piece.

Dovizi was confident the call would not monitored. In all his years at the Vatican not once had he heard a case of a telephone being monitored. But that was a risk he was prepared to take. The man on the other end of the line also took risks. Dovizi punched the numbers of the illicit card into the green phone, and waited for it to be answered. It rang several times before a voice answered by a man enjoying his breakfast in the shade of the pergola hanging with vines.

Large stone lions watched on from each corner of the courtyard.

“Cardinal Dovizi... how are you my good friend? What can I do for you?” Came the reply.

“How did you know it was me my good friend?” Enquired the Dovizi apprehensively.

“Caller ID my friend... Isn’t wonderful? ...” Laughed the person on the end of the phone. “...I can tell whose calling. It is good to hear from you... *You have something for me today?*” Asked the voice eagerly.

The voice was that of Don Marconi. A notorious relic collector. In particular, religious relics. Already holding several of Dovizi’s informed pieces in his collection and was always interested in more. Although highly illegal, Marconi’s connections with authorities had afforded him a level of protection from meddling righteous eyes.

Marconi resided on a remote hilltop hideaway, Villa San Michelle. On the Isle of Capri, Naples. The former chapel, dedicated to San Michele, was reputedly built on the ruins of Roman Emperor Tiberius' villa. But was now a

forgotten relic to the outside world. A fitting place of residence for the illicit relic collector. Towering three hundred meters above sea level with over a thousand steps to each it few ever ventured there. Panoramic views of the town of Capri and its harbor. The sleeping Mount Vesuvius in the distance. It had been rediscovered by a young Swedish Physician named Munthe at the turn of the last century. It is said Munthe made a pact with the devil to acquire the property. The hilltop hideaway had passed through a series of socialites and eventually onto Don Maroni. Maroni had not made a pact with the devil to acquire it. But he was about to make a pact with the next best thing, Cardinal Dovizi.

"I have news there is a Relic... The *first* of its kind." Dovizi served the appetizer. "*We* will need to act quickly to secure it."

"Hmm, most interesting... Do *we* know what it is?" Marconi asked curiously.

"A Fisherman's Ring..." Dovizi paused to allow its significance to register. "... The Church is very, very keen to have it returned." Dovizi added, baiting Marconi further.

"I understand they would.... The *first* of its kind you say?" Repeating the significance of the Ring.

"Saint Peter's himself." Dovizi qualified the find.

"Cardinal Cassini is charged with its return." Dovizi added as if to warn Marconi who he would be up against.

"*Cassini* did you say? ... Hmmm." Marconi groaned his disgust.

Having crossed paths with Cassini in the pass and barely escaping with his life. The relic must be prized by the Church to send Cassini after it. This time they would not encounter each other. Marconi had men that would settle his score with Cassini.

"Thank you my dear friend... You won't go unrewarded." Marconi enticed Dovizi. "Keep me informed."

"I'll be in contact again soon." Replied Dovizi.

There was a click on the other end of the line and two men hung up their phones.

'*Caller ID? What was that? I must be more careful*', thought Dovizi.

The electronic age of the internet and smartphones had overtaken Dovizi who never had the time nor energy to catch up. Strange words and jargon associated with the new technology and he wondered if his Latin was slipping.

He would find out more for his friend Marconi on the Isle of Capri. Having never visited the place, he thought it would be nice to go one day. Maybe when all this was over. Before he got much older than he already was. The thousands steps to the top may well be his last.

Dovizi had work to do if he was to locate the son that would lead Marconi to

the father. And to the Ring. Nothing moved quickly in the Vatican, not even the paper work. Vatican secretaries talked to each other and it would not be too difficult to know what was happening in another Cardinal's in-trays.

What happens in the Vatican, did not always stay in the Vatican.

Cardinal Dovizi replaced Don Marconi's card among the deck of other cards and thought. Cassini was a formidable opponent against the most determined relic collector. If Don Marconi should fail, then Dovizi would miss a valuable opportunity that may not present itself again in his life time. Dovizi needed insurance. Thumbing the cards in his hands Dovizi shuffles them until he encounters the one he was in search of.

Julius Augustus Braun.

Marconi and Braun were fierce rivals. Competition will lift their game thought Dovizi, ensuring his payday. Dovizi examine the number carefully on the card as though to memorize it and dialed it slowly.

The man he was calling operated outside the law. Braun was a mysterious man of substantial wealth with tacit connections with many of the industrialists, and their wives. Having an origin into which no one dared to inquire. He rose from the ashes of the Second World War. Braun whose father was unknown or unspoken, had taken his mother's maiden name.

Undeclared family wealth, amassed in Swiss bank accounts and vaults. Providing the capital to amass even greater fortune from the less fortunate. Ruthlessly Braun climbed from the rumble left by the Allied bombings and forged a dynasty of industrial wealth and power. A new order was forming and his family name would be among the elite. His son Augustus being groomed to succeed him. Braun had an insatiable appetite for Religious Relics. As if to possess them would make him closer to God. As if to possess them would absolve his father's unforgiveable sins.

The phone sounded in Braun's spacious office. The polished wooded floors and high ceiling amplified the sound. Distracting Braun from reviewing the day's stock prices and trades. He had two phones on his desk. One for business, the other for private. Only a select few would have the privilege of the latter. Braun answered the latter.

"Braun speaking." Wondering who had called him.

But knowing it was important enough to be answered. Few had his private number, and those that did were important people connected to power. Wealth is nothing without power to protect it.

"My apologies if I have disturbed you Senior Braun." Dovizi began hoping

Braun would recognize him.

“Cardinal Dovizi... What a delightful surprise. It’s been a while since we last talked ... Hope you are well.” Braun began.

The Cardinal’s distinctive Italian accent and aging voice placing him among a few of Braun’s close circle of friends. Braun knew Dovizi’s call could only mean he had a treat on offer for him.

“I am well thank you for asking... As are you I hope? How is Augustus?”

“I am well... Though the years are catching up... Augustus is well. Too much energy for me to keep up with I’m afraid... You bring me good news my friend?” Braun came to the point.

Intrigued by the surprised call from his Vatican informant.

“I might have news that would interest you Senior Braun.” Dovizi began.

“Go on... You have my attention my friend.”

“There has been a recent discovery of a Ring... The *first* of its kind... Saint Peter’s Ring.” Dovizi waited for Braun to respond.

A silence fell over Braun as he registered the relic’s importance. He had known of the Fisherman’s Ring. Unaware Saint Peter ever having one. A chill ran over his body at the thought that Christ Himself had given the Disciple the Ring. Bestowing him with the Keys of Heaven. Braun held several questionable relics. Alleged nails from Christ’s crucifixion. A sliver of wood from the cross itself. Saint Peter’s Ring would be second only to the Holy Grail.

“Tell me more.” Braun spoke restraining the flame of desire that burnt fiercely inside him.

“Cardinal Cassini has been charged with its return... There is a son that will lead us to his father and to the Ring... I will know more by the end of the day.” Dovizi advised what he knew.

Cassini’s name always arose fear in Relic Collectors minds. None less so than Braun’s.

“Cassini... Damn... Forgive me Cardinal.” Braun cursed, knowing Cassini’s abilities.

Wishing Cassini worked for him and not the Vatican.

“I understand Senior Braun... Cardinal Cassini can be... an *annoyance*... But nothing we can’t keep a few steps ahead of...” Dovizi soothed Braun’s doubts.

“Yes, yes... Of course.”

“I’ll be in contact once I have the son’s location... He will lead you to the father.” Dovizi simplified the path to the Ring’s repossession.

“Thank you Cardinal... I look forward to your next call.” Braun hung up the phone to contemplate the worth of the Ring’s finding, both financially and

spiritually.

He contemplated Cassini's involvement. Their paths had crossed before. With Braun's men had always come away worse for wear, or dead. Cassini was a torn in Braun's side that needed to be removed. Braun to see to it personally this time.

Dovizi hung up the phone. Pleased he had satisfied his two masters. Reshuffling Braun's card among the others returned the small plastic box to his drawer, just as his office doors opened and staff arrived for the day. Dovizi advised his servants of the mission Cassini was to undertake and that they should provide whatever assistance was required. They were to gleam from Cassini's staff details of location of the son and report back to him. Suggesting that he would be assisting the Cardinal in his quest to repatriate the ring. As to whom the Ring would be repatriated to, was another matter.

Sunlight beamed through the tall windows illuminating Dovizi like a spot light, as though the finger of God had caught him trespassing. Feeling a little uncomfortable Dovizi shuffled his chair into the shadows. Looking back to window as though someone or something was watching him.

"Quod enim tale facere potui? (What have I done?)" Dovizi mutter in Latin before crossing himself, a twinge of guilt in a form of a chill ran over his body.

"*Indeed.*" Said Michael watching him unseen sitting in the chair across from his desk.



Ginger Cake and Tea

Arthur had sent Phil a text instructing him to distract his Aunt to the garden. Giving him an opportunity to access the attic and retrieve the contents of the shoe box. Despite her habitual routines Arthur's Aunt was a highly unpredictable creature and at any moment she could change flight like a sea gull at Brighton Beach on a windy day. Although not a seagull she was however a passionate gardener. Arthur had arranged for Phil to ask to see her garden before they left. Unfortunately for Phil could not tell a weed from a chrysanthemum. Which he knew enough about gardening to be dangerous.

With the distraction in place Arthur finalized their itinerary. Hotels visited would need to be cheap so as not to attract attention. They would travel as backpackers and eat on the go. Keeping a low profile from whoever may, or may not be following them.

Arthur was beginning to realize he knew very little about his father. The slate had been wiped clean with the discovery of the gun and a new identity was being etched. But what that identity would be known when he got to Budapest and spoken to the Professor. Wondering if his father would be there as well. But it seemed unlikely by the way the letter was written. Where was he if he was not going to be there? The question only perplexed Arthur further, deepening the mystery as to what he had gotten himself into.

Phil arrived earlier than expected keen to get underway. Allowing more time to maneuver Phil into position. He had brought a cutting from his mother's garden as an incentive to distract Arthur's Aunt.

"Good morning Aunty..." Said Phil affectionately. "...My mother asked me to give you this." Offering a cutting of an unknown specimen.

"Why that's lovely Phillip... Tell your Mother thank you very much... Just put it down over there." Aunty replied pointing to an old newspaper on top of a box in the corner.

"She told me you have a lovely garden. I would so like to see it before I headed off with Arthur." Asked Phil sounding slightly awkward.

"Oh the garden is a bit of a mess at the moment... I've just pulled much of it out... There isn't much left to see really ... Not until next spring." She responded.

The rejection spoiling Arthur's plans to distract her. Arthur watched on in shock as his strategy fell apart. His mind went blank. There was no plan B, just plan Phil. Meanwhile Phil was thinking he had been shot down again, by

Arthur's Aunt of all people.

'Women.' He thought.

Then like any unpredictable regulation issue Aunt would ask Phil...

"Be a dear help me carry the washing basket out back for me. The clothes won't hang themselves".

"Yes of course... I would love to." Said Phil.

Pulled from the depths of despair looking over his shoulder to Arthur who had a growing smile on his face, shaking his head in disbelief.

"You're a sweet boy aren't you?" Said Aunt as if Phil was eight years old.

Phil followed her out to the clothes line in the back yard. Tilting his head to Arthur suggesting he should get moving and retrieve the contents of the box.

Watching them disappear through the back door he rushed up the stairs and pull down the attic ladder and climbed quickly to the attic. Morning sunlight beamed through the vent providing dim visibility. Through the grills he could see his Aunt and Phil below chatting and hanging up the washing. No time to stand around he thought. Without turning on the light he found the box and quickly untied the knot and opened it. No surprises this time. He took out the gun. Feeling its weight. Was it loaded? He could not tell and would have to assume it was. Phil may know, he was gun savvy. But he was also supposed to be women savvy too. Doubts crisscrossed Arthur's mind. Carefully placing the gun in a duffle bag he had brought up with him. Soon followed by the bundles of bank notes.

For some unknown reason after closing the box Arthur retied the box and returned it back to its hiding place. Nothing was to be out of place except an empty shoe box. Looking out the vent he could not see Phil nor his Aunt. Throwing the duffle bag over his shoulder and scampered down the stairs quicker than he climbed them. Returning the ladder to the ceiling he closed the attic door. Hurriedly catching his breath turned about just as his Aunt appeared from around the corner.

"You okay Arty? You looked flushed..." Aunt enquired. "...You feeling okay?"

"I'm fine thanks Aunty... Just a little tired... I didn't sleep well last night..." Then added truthfully. "...About the trip."

"Don't know what you are so worried Arty... You lived up there for years doing your degree thingy... You sure you're not coming down with something?" His Aunt asked with concern.

"I'm good thanks Aunty... Phil and I must be off soon... Our train leaves at ten. We must get a taxi to the Paddington Station." Wishing to get away quickly.

"Don't we need to go to St Pancras?" Corrected Phil accidently. Then

realized where he was not going. And corrected himself, "... No... that's right, Paddington... Silly me... It's been such a while since I caught a train". Hoping that the confusion cover his accidental slip of tongue.

Arthur looked at Phil in surprise then realized the crisis had been averted. Would they ever be able to escape the house and the clutches of his Aunt? But Arthur's Aunt was not really listening. She had put the kettle on and was reaching for the ginger cake.

"You got time for a cuppa Arty before you go?" Asked his Aunt hoping to prolong their company.

"Let me help with that." Phil offered.

It was the least he could do for his slip up.

"We could stay for a cuppa Arthur." Playing along with Aunt.

"I suppose we could have a quick one while we wait for the taxi to arrive. That would be lovely Aunty... Phil you must try the Ginger cake... It's to die for." Jested Arthur.

"I would love some." Replied Phil boldly.

"Thought you'd say that." Said Arthur.

Aunty poured three cups of tea and offered Ginger cake to the two unlikely lads about to embark upon a mysterious journey across Europe. To a country they knew very little about. That did not worry Phil, nothing really did. Between Google, Wikipedia, and a few dating sites Phil was a wealth of knowledge. So long as he had his laptop he could Google himself around the world. His knowledge of women however was limited, as was Wikipedia for that matter.



Cardinal Cassini

Cardinal Cassini was an unnoticeable Cardinal. He liked it that way. Few questions are ever asked of someone who did not exist. Cassini belonged to a forgotten arm of the Vatican that no one thought actually existed.

As the world's oldest organization, the Vatican, has used a secret spy service to carry out its holy will. The Entity. Sometimes called the Holy Alliance. It has shaped world history for the past five centuries. Popes have played an invisible hand over the centuries by using this scared holy organization to assassinate kings, kidnappings, launder money, protect war criminals, persecute, colonize, financing civil and world wars. All in the name of God. But in recent times they had softened its position on wars, assassination, persecution and colonization.

The Entity's motto: "*With the Cross and the Sword*".

Cassini was very familiar with the earthly justice the Vatican's Secret Service dispensed. Having seen service in many countries, he was protected by diplomatic immunity should he ever be caught. To date he had yet to be caught. Though now into his sixties, he is still called on from time to time for special assignments that required his *expertise*. Blending into a crowd was what he did best. No one noticed an old man. Yet the old man noticed everyone and everything around him. Carrying a Berretta was as comfortably as carrying a Bible. And he was prepared to use both to excise demons that threatened the Church's dogma.

Cassini liked to operate alone. But on this assignment he had been directed to take an assistant to travel with him. A novice. Their duty was to assist the Cardinal in his task and dispatch reports back to Rome. Any blood would be spilt would be on the Cardinal's hands. And not the innocent.

The choice of recruit came from the Cassini himself. As we have seen, not all choices are our own. The Cardinal had several candidate in mind, then at the last moment, a candidate came to mind from no-where, as if it had been planted.

The thought became so firm in the Cardinal's mind, that he possessed it as his own.

"Father Francis of Amantea." Cassini ordered his secretary to dispatch the invitation immediately.

Then realized he knew very little of the Father from the far southern parish. But something told him it was the right decision and that he should not refute the selection. And like a dream, any lingering doubts faded. A sealed letter had been

personally dispatched requesting the assistant's presence at the Vatican.

Cassini patiently waited for the arrival of the new recruit. Michael sat quietly beside him. They had had their differences over the years. Both serving their master in their own ways. Both deeply devout. Both would die for their master. But only one could make that ultimate sacrifice.



Father Francis

In a small southern Italian town of Amantea, the parish bell rang. It rang to signal midday, as it had for the past five hundred years. And would continue with God's grace, for another five hundred years. Father Francis was preparing a sermon when a Papal Dispatcher appeared at old wooden church gates requesting to see him immediately.

The Dispatcher had a personal letter from a Cardinal Cassini. The dark blood red wax seal stamped with a relief of a cross and sword.

This meant little to Francis and who reluctantly broke the seal and opened the envelope. Unfolding the embossed parchment and read the hand written message. The letter instructed Francis to come to the Vatican immediately. It stated he had been chosen to assist the Cardinal with his travels to London, England. And that he should also pack civilian clothes. A train would soon be leaving from the local station within the hour. Further instructions would be given when he arrived.

"England?" Francis thought. "*Cardinal Cassini?*"

He had never been to England, nor had ever wished to go. Having heard from tourist passing through his parish as being a cold damp place. He preferred the warm dry climate of southern Italy. But this was a rare opportunity for him. To be chosen by the Vatican nonetheless. One could overlook a bit of dampness to please a senior Cardinal. And the Pope himself. To be called to the Vatican, to be among his peers was an honor few clergy ever got to experience in a lifetime. It was as if being asked to step closer to God Himself.

Francis began to pack his clergy garments, but remembered the letter had instructed him to take civilian clothes. Unable fathom why and unable to protest, he packed his small leather suitcase with what little he had.

01:05PM A ticket was waiting for Francis at the tired station as had been instructed. Climbing aboard an old train that would take him on the five hour journey to Rome and found himself an empty compartment. There was the sound of a whistle and a voice that called out the train's imminent departure. It had been a while since he had been on a train and Francis acquainted himself with the compartment's interior.

Sliding his leather suitcase on the upper luggage rack he took a seat beside the window and looked out onto township that was Amantea. He had never seen it from this vantage point and took in its simplicity and beauty. Spying the belfry

of his parish in the distance. And he pondered when he would be returning. There was no mention in the Cardinal's letter.

Michael grinned having read Francis' thought.

"All aboard" A voice called out from the platform.

Pressure released a hissing sound and steam bellowed its relief into the air outside. Sending a cloud of white fog onto the platform. Francis shifted in his seat as the train lurched forward, shuttered, and then lurched again. Composing himself again as the train steadied its motion.

Bewildered by why he had been chosen for the assignment and could only speculate that his work at Amantea had been recognized. That somehow they thought him worthy to assist the Cardinal. But who was this Cardinal? Francis had never heard of him before. Nothing had appeared on the search he had made on him before he had left the Parish. Francis guessed there some places even Google's robot spiders could not find their way into. The Vatican servers being one of them.

Francis would be in Rome just after six that evening if the train to timetable. Pulling out a paperback he had been trying to finish for months. He settled in for the long journey north. The Italian coastline rushed unhurriedly pass his window. The sun shone its brilliance upon the idyllic coast line that was ordinary to him, but of spectacular to the droves foreign tourists. The old train's carriages rattled and rocked gently side to side. Somewhere between the rhythmic rocking and the pages of his paperback Francis drifted to sleep.

The conductor came to the cabin and found Francis sleeping with the book on his lap. His head leaned against the window. Spying the edge of the red train ticket Francis was using as a book mark. The conductor quietly leant over and punched a neat hole in a corner of the ticket. And let Francis sleep uninterrupted.

The train continued its journey northwards. Along the seaside tracks. Through long dark tunnels. All the while rocking Francis in his cradle. He would need his rest for the mysterious assignment the Cardinal had install for him. As the train travelled north stopping at the routine stops along the historic roman route, a passenger boarded the train. Entered Francis' compartment and sat opposite. He too was clergy, of a sort. He too was on his way to the Vatican.

Michael would sit patiently for Francis to awaken.



Saint Pancras Station

It was a typical dreary autumn day in a typical dreary north London. Grey streets seamlessly smudged with the grey buildings that seamlessly smudged into the grey autumn skies above them. A lazy cold breeze blew from the north. The sun was trying to breach through the blanket of thick grey clouds, but it was having little success. It reminded Arthur of Scotland. A place he was not going today. But now wished he was.

With ginger cake and tea in their bellies Arthur and Phil stepped out of the black London Hackney and stood at the entrance of Saint Pancras Station on the busy Euston Road. Wanting no unnecessary delays Arthur paid the driver and told him to keep the change. The traffic on Euston Road was like a box of chocolates with a continuous assortment vehicles rolling by.

From the outside Saint Pancras Station could be mistaken for an old red brick cathedral. With towering gothic steeples and arched windows. Only the large clock towers gave it away to be otherwise. Behind the huge red brick facade, high arched wrought iron ribs raised a hundred feet high and twice as wide and seven times as long. The interior housed the train station complete with shops, cafés and cultural displays of every kind imaginable.

In its day it had been the largest single spanned roof in the world. Its design would be copied around the world, including at Grand Central Station in New York. When one stepped into Saint Pancras one was stepping back a hundred years in time. The Chunnel had modernized it as an international terminal for European destinations. Blending Victorian architecture with contemporary design to accommodate the incessant foreign passengers and ever faster trains.

Arthur and Phil shouldered their packs and headed into the opening. Negotiating their way through the crowd of people that were coming and going. Tourists stood like sticks in the mud and stagnating other frustrated travelers. Taking photographs of the old Victorian wonder. Like London the station was cosmopolitan. Contaminated with every nationality from every continent and beyond. Encapsulating every occupation, ethnicity, and every religion. As it should. It was a gateway for international travelers.

If you look closely enough, you may even have seen an Englishman.

England had been invaded many times in the past by Europeans and this was simply the latest invasion. Legions of foreigners coming and going at will. The European Union had seen to that. Though the Chunnel and the European Union had happened fifty years too late for Hitler, the latest generation was taking full

advantage of the economic benefits the United Kingdom provided.

Arthur and Phil went with the tide of people entering the station. Drifting their way through the tidal eddies of those departing before merging with the crowd and becoming part of the whole. The Cardinal followed at an unnoticeable distance behind. Francis who had been with the Cardinal at the entrance had now become separated and was struggling to keep up with his master.

The sound inside the railway cathedral was surprisingly quiet. The high roof did not allow sound to condensate. Train engines contributed an accompaniment of musical tones periodically punctuated by conductors' whistles to signal that an imminent departure.

Arthur vaguely knew his way around the grand old station and headed to the ticketing counter. A long queue of equally anxious passengers waiting with a colorful array of scarred travel bags by their sides. The large display board indicated they still had time to catch the train to Brussels. The Eurostar would not leave for another half hour.

They could afford to miss a train here or there, but not too many Arthur thought. The queue grew gradually shorter and they shuffled their way forward. Phil kept looking around as though he was in imminent danger. Thinking the assassin's bullet meant for Arthur would take him out. He thought he saw someone staring at them. But dismissed it when he had lost sight of the old man. Then pondered if the old man had been looking at him or at the departure board behind them. Everyone seemed to be looking at everyone. Dismissing the paranoia he turned around to discover Arthur was about to secure the Eurostar tickets to Budapest, via Brussels and Vienna.

"First Class I hope?" Enquired Phil, hoping he would be travelling in luxury.

"You keep dreaming my friend... It cost enough just to get the cheap seats. I would hate to think what First Class would cost." Arthur replied dampening Phil's enthusiasm and adding. "It's not really our money... So I better not be too reckless with it. I don't want to draw attention to two backpackers travelling First Class, right?"

"Yeah... I suppose you're right... Best keep our heads down." Thought Phil, imagining an assassin's bullet sending his brains flying all over the First Class upholstery.

Arthur felt a little relieved now he had the tickets in hand. They were on their way. He wanted to grab a coffee at nearby Café stand, but this only reminded him of Zara and he imagined her in the Café and her smile. That only made him smile.

"What's with the smile?" Enquired Phil.

“Nothing much... Just a girl I know.”

“Do I know her?” Asked Phil hoping to divest his knowledge.

“I don’t think so.” Dissolving Phil’s enthusiasm a second time in as many seconds.

Arthur changed his mind about the coffee. And decided he would get one on the train and headed for the platforms. Arthur was only interested in one. The Eurostar. Phil climbed aboard ahead of Arthur and went to find their assigned seats. Arthur hesitated a moment before he boarded. Looking back behind him. Not so much as to see if anyone was following him. But to take one last look at the grand old station.

Wondering if he would he ever see it again? How much danger was he really in? Had he placed Phil’s life at risk? He would not know until he got to Budapest. Hoping the puzzling situation would be solved by a Professor of History and Antiquities. Arthur could feel the weight of the duffle bag pulling down on his shoulder strap. Reminding Arthur the gun that was still there and that the danger to him and Phil was very real.

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He felt like he was being watched. Looking about he saw nothing suspicious. A carriage further back, two clergy gentleman were boarding. Unnoticed.

A whistle blew, long and hard.

“All aboard!” Called out the platform conductor to the tardy stragglers who were now running towards him.

He would not be so cruel to leave them behind. This was of course still England. Unlike European trains which ran precisely on time. English timetables were more like guidelines. Blowing his whistle again, long and loud. The doors of the Eurostar closed smoothly with an assuring clunk. Entrapping the swallowed prey within its long silver intestines, to be digested swiftly across Europe.

The Eurostar crept soundlessly out of St Pancras Station and headed smoothly along the tracks to Brussels. It would travel at speeds of over three hundred kilometers per hour and arrive in the ancient city in just over two hours.

Phil had found his seat and crammed his pack into the overhead locker. Arthur arrived soon after. Taking his seat and placing the duffle bag next to him. Both stared out the window, neither speaking. Neither having ever travelled to where they were going. Budapest. The journey would be into the unknown. They sat stationary while the Saint Pancras Station moved swiftly past their window. The rusting dark railway yards of the station disappeared from sight and were replaced by the rusting golden autumn colors of the English country side.

“Idyllic.” Said Arthur taking in the rare unseen beauty that was England at its

best.

“Divine.” Said Michael to himself taking in the earthly wonderland.

England slipping from their grasp, leaving everything behind all for the sake of a letter, a duffle bag of money and a gun. It was a little too late to change their minds.

The train swiftly sped east with the intermittent sound of the wheels passing over track partitions. Arthur calmly checked the carriage for people who were out of place. A couple, a few seats ahead of them. A businessmen, a few seats behind them. People had sporadically spread themselves throughout the compartment. For as much as people sort to be socially accepted to belong to group, they had an uncanny way of keeping a distinct social distance from each other when not among that group. Trains, cinemas, restaurants, bus stops... and cafes.

Had Arthur looked another carriage behind him he may have noticed two men. Or not.



Father Michael

Several days earlier on a train much slower than the Eurostar. Francis had dozed off soon after leaving the station at Amantea. Held in position by the sun's rays. His paperback still open on his lap. The old train gently rocked and waltzed its way along the coast line. A scenery that was all too familiar to Francis.

The train would pass through ancient roman villages. Some little more than sleepy lanes filled with sleepy charm and sparkling coves of clear waters below. On the cliffs above the Amalfi Coast the train would pass under the Rifugio degli dei, Refuge of the Gods. Francis had visited it in his youthful years, younger than the modest years he was today. But these days wondered if his legs could take him the seven hundred steps required to get to the top. And like most wishful people had wished they would install a cable car making more accessible.

But sometimes Gods, like some people, did not like crowds. Preferring to be left alone in solitude. Like a hermit, sitting on top of a mountain. The cliff with its villas stacked one upon the other like Meccano bricks. Awash in brilliant colors of orange, blue or green. The Italians had a gift for making the simple Villa incredibly spectacular and which would go unnoticed to Francis, as would the crystal blue waters, golden sand beaches below.

It would take the entire afternoon to reach Rome and his meeting with the Cardinal. The warm sun, the rocking of the carriages, and the romantic adventure of his book had put him into a hypnotic trance called sleep. The conscious mind had given way to the subconscious, and the subconscious to a higher realm.

The mind switches from analogue to digital. You are no longer in control of the horizontal. Francis was at peace and could not have gotten closer to God than at that moment. As though he were bathing pure love. With no concept of time he found himself standing in a field of vibrant green grass. An endless field's horizon touching a brilliant blue sky. Pure white clouds illuminated like angels by a sun. This was no ordinary sun. It did not hurt his eyes when he looked directly at it. At peace with himself and the world he did not want to wake up. But something was pulling him back to the two dimensional world. He was not allowed to stay in this scared place. This was a foretaste. As if passing a bakery and smelling the seductive sweet yeast of the freshly baked bread. He took one last deep inhalation through his nostrils.

The train gave a sudden lurch forward as it came to a stop at one of the many

stations on its journey north. The paperback on his lap slid forwards onto the floor of the compartment. The red book mark, with its neatly plucked hole, still wedged firmly into its back pages. Francis' eyes opened instinctively. Bracing himself for an apparent impact that never came. Opening his eyes, his mind returned to the compartment about him. He felt like he was being robbed and the candy had been taken away from him. Suddenly he feels a sharp pain in his shoulder. Reaching his hand up wondering what had struck him. Then the pain disappears as quickly as it had arrived. Taking deep breaths he settles himself from the passing discomfort.

Francis looks out the carriage window and sees a small railway station and an oversized sign.

"SAPRI." The sign read.

This was about a third of the way to Rome. A small town of barely four thousand souls on a good day. And like many coastal towns these days, a popular tourist destination. The cove lined with moored fishing boats and their nets hanging in the mid afternoon sun.

'Idyllic.' thought Francis.

But then he noticed someone sitting opposite him staring directly at him. And he was also clergy.

"Divine, isn't it? ... Are you alright?" Enquired Michael seeing the sudden stop had shaken Francis from his slumber and dream.

Michael reached down and picked up the book that had slid from Francis' lap, handing it back to him.

"Yes I fine... Thank you for asking." Francis replied.

Francis thought he had had a dream, but like all dreams it was soon forgotten. There was a vague memory of something nice.

'Like freshly baked bread.' He thought.

"Allow me introduce myself... I'm Father Michael." Michael extended his hand.

"I'm Father Francis." Francis replied extending his hand.

Their grips were identical. Though Michael's grip was firm his hands were soft and smooth. There was no roughness one would come to expect from a man who labored gardens and helped the poor. It was warm grip and Francis felt a peace suddenly come over him and was distracted. It reminded him of his dream.

"What brings you to travel today Father?" Enquired Francis.

"I'm heading the Vatican... I haven't been there for so many years." Replied Michael.

'You barely looked in his late twenties', thought Francis.

Michael's complexion was flawless. Untouched by the harsh Italian sun that

stains the most hardened of parishioner's hides.

"I'm heading to the Vatican as well... I have been summoned by Cardinal Cassini." Hoping to qualify the importance of the invitation.

"Ah... Cardinal Cassini... I know him well... I know him *very* well." Michael answered with a quiet reservation in his voice.

"You do?" Asked Francis, "I know nothing of him... I tried to search him on the Net but there was nothing about him... I would have thought a Cardinal of his importance would have been listed." Francis sounded with some confusion.

"No... I wouldn't think one would find the Cardinal..." Started Michael. "... They like to keep him off the radar... So to speak."

Pausing before considering next statement, which made Francis more attentive.

"It would be best not to get too acquainted with the Cardinal. He is thorough and don't be surprised by his *methods* ... Show him great respect and you might..." Michael paused to consider his words, which he already had in his mind. "...return home with a great honor of having served his Holiness the Pope, and the Church." Michael concluded, holding back the explicit details.

"Thank you for your words of advice." Replied Francis.

'Cardinal Cassini was obviously a very important person at the Vatican' thought Francis.

"Indeed." Responded Michael having overheard the thought.

After the train had dispatched its human cargo, a whistle blew. An old man wearing an old railway uniform, both of which predated the last war waved an old red paddle to signify the train's imminent departure.

And the train lurched abruptly again. Jerking Francis, but not Michael in his seat.

Michael looked at Francis and smiled. It was a smile that was infectious. Radiant. As though he belonged to a special congress of people doing God's Work and Will. Michael then looked out the window and Francis' eyes followed. The small town with its oversized sign and four thousand souls moved slowly past and then from view.

As though suspended by the hand of God the afternoon sun shone through the window. And the train continued its slow waltz north. With the rhythmic rocking of carriages Francis drifted back sleep to resume his dream. The train continued along the seaside tracks. Through long dark tunnels and rocking Francis in his cradle. His conscious mind soon re-connected to subconscious mind which soon re-connected to a dream world and the smell of baked bread. Francis was in a state of bliss again when suddenly the train lurched forward.

'Not again' Francis thought annoyed by the second intrusion.

The aroma of freshly baked bread drifted into his nostrils and he sniffed in a deep satisfying inhalation.

'I must have dozed off again', Francis thought.

Looking out the window to see a small seaside town. A population four thousand souls on a good day. A cove lined with moored fishing boats with their nets hanging to dry and tourists taking photographs.

An oversized sign that read "*SAPRI*".

Francis looked to the opposite seat to where Michael had been sitting. But he was no longer there. Francis looked about the compartment and to the platform outside. Seeing the same old man wearing the same old uniform predating the same old war waved the same old red paddle. And blew the same old whistle to dispatch the same human cargo.

The paperback was still in his lap. Still open at the page he had last read. It had not fallen to the floor as it had in his *dream*. Between the open pages lay a small elegant white feather. Outside he heard the sound of birds, and thought one must have drifted through the open upper window while he was asleep. Closing the paperback with the feather still inside.

'It must have been a dream.' He thought trying to recall it.

What was the conversation he had with... who was it? Father Michael? What had he said? Not to get too acquainted with the Cardinal? Then recalled the sharp pain in his shoulder. As if he had been punched hard. Reaching up he felt his shoulder. It felt normal. Maybe he had pulled a muscle and had not known.

Opening the paperback to continue reading. The feather now lodged with the red ticket book mark which now appeared to have a neat hole punched in the corner. He could not recall having had it punched. Had he been sitting in the sun too long? Francis repositioned himself to the shady side of the carriage and made himself comfortable.

The afternoon sun sank lower towards the horizon. Its rays crept deeper into the compartment reaching for Francis. Michael sat quietly watching on, enjoying the divine sunlight that soaked into His eternal soul.



Roma

Francis' train rolled its way North. Through ancient Italian townships of Pisciotta, and San Marco. A stretch to Salerno would take him past the multi-level multi-colored buildings lining the beach front. A short hop to the infamous town of Pompeii with its buried Roman ruins. In the background the snow-capped beast Mount Vesuvius slept. Waiting to stir from its two thousand year snooze. Thirty kilometers to the north sat Naples, the central hub of Italy. The half way mark of Francis' journey to the Vatican City.

There he would encounter a small delay before the connecting train to Rome. A chance to stretch his legs with a walk about the station. He had not been that far north for years. There really was no necessity as Amantea satisfied all his earthly needs. Places were all much the same to he had reasoned just labelled with different names.

3:00PM and the old train shunted into the Naples station. Talking back to itself as it came to a halt. Sighing steam over the platform relieved it made it had delivered Francis this far. Francis had slept most of the way. The sinking sun's rays had managed to reach Francis' feet on the far side of the compartment. But not enough to secure a hold.

Gathering his bag Francis made his way through arcade of stores that terraced the walls. Finding a café that looked quiet he joined the queue of patrons waiting to be served. Before finding himself a table with a view of the platform and the large electronic departure board. He made himself comfortable.

It would be another twenty minutes before his next train left for Rome. Plenty of time to enjoy a bite and marveled at engineering feat of the Napoli Centrale Railway Station's architecture. Its roof of large stain glass windows replicating a giant cathedral. A flood of natural sunlight filtered upon the steady stream of commuters that moved about below.

In a life before becoming a Priest he had wanted to be an architect. But he was also torn with the passion to serve the Church. Conceding the world was full of architects and his Faith in God was stronger. He forsaken the dream of being an architect and went on to become a Priest. For twelve years he held the position of parish Priest in Brescia before eventually being transferred to Amantea.

All that seemed a life time ago.

Having served his time Francis was being paroled and with good behavior he could serve his time out under the watchful eye of the Cardinal Cassini. Francis

felt he had been chosen. In some ways he had. But not by the Cardinal.

Francis pondered the encounter he had had with Father Michael, or not had. Trying to recall the conversation. Taking the book from his pocket he opened it and stared at the white feather between its pages. Unsure what to make of it, the event seemed so real. Yet he had found himself re-living the arrival to Sapri.

'God works in mysterious ways', Francis fired the warning across his own bow.

Recalling Michael's soft hands, his firm grip. He had never experienced the sensation of touch in a dream before. As with most things that defy belief, Francis simply put his faith in God and accept he had met Father Michael. Whoever, or whatever He was.

A whistle sounded pulling him from his doubting thoughts.

"All aboard!" A voice shouted before blowing the whistle louder and longer.

It was time to board the train to Rome. This would not be on the old train Francis had travelled from Amantea. This was streamline high speed luxury or so the brochure had read. The locomotive appeared more like a rocket on wheels. Assuming it had wheels. A silver metal beast with a pointed nose and five nostrils that breathed beams of white light. A large central rectangular eye in its elongated forehead. An orange-red streak down its side and along its metallic skinned back.

On the platform opposite stood the train on which he had arrived. Francis compared the two. It was like comparing chalk with the cheese. Both serving their passengers well, taking them from A to B. One in comfort, the other in style. As Francis deliberated the differences a conductor blew his whistle and waved a red paddle about. His uniform did not belong to any prior war that Francis recognized.

Italian trains ran precisely on time. Any English stragglers would be left behind cursing the efficiency of European timetables. Francis stepped inside the belly of the metallic beast and was swallowed by its narrow intestines to his allotted seat. The snug seats were unlike the thinly padded wooden benches of the first train. The seat captured him and held him in place.

The modern train moved from the station. Francis watched as the station's platform glided past his window. The train accelerated smoothly from giant cathedral's canopy. Sunlight desperately tried to penetrate the window's tinted glass. But in vain. Of the photons that succeeded only a few could lock onto Francis. With an hour and a half hours to Rome Francis opened his paperback, *'The Fires of Spring'*, by an author he had never read before. A romantic adventure of a young man travelling across America in the depression days, by

train. In many ways Francis identified with the adventurous traveler of the book.

The train would arrive precisely in Rome at 6:00PM. Arrival times, much like their counterpart, were always precise. Taking a coastal route the train sped north, slipping unseen through Monte San Biaggio renowned for its dishes of shrimp wild asparagus pork sausages mixed with chili pepper and coriander seed. These would pass un-savored by Francis' palate. After Monte San Biaggio the train would deviate in-land before heading north to Rome.

Or Roma, as the Italians referred to it.

Roma was the home to some four million soles, nestled on the shores of the Tiber River. Derived from the ancient Etruscan word Ruma, which meant teat. Referring to two of the Seven Hills of Rome. The Palatine and Aventine Hills and the fabled wolf that had adopted and suckled the fabled twins Romulus and Remus. Then again, it could easily have also referred to the city's founder and first king, Romulus.

From humble villages the Romulus acorn would grow into a mighty oak the world would revere, the mighty Roman Empire. But today the Roman Empire had crumbled and was less so revered. All that remained were the ancient ruins of the Forum and the Colosseum that provoke thoughts of Gladiators fighting and Christians being feed to the Lions.

The Vatican sat on its own hill, isolated from the other Seven Hills of Rome. While Roman Empire fell apart from political erosion, the Vatican was still in its manger. Seventeen hundred years later it is now the world's oldest institution. And it was this ancient institution that Francis had come to visit. A corporate head office, The Holy See. The ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Catholic Church. Headed by the Commander and Chief, his name sake Pope Francis.

Arriving at the Roma Terminal was an emotional experience for Francis. Just four kilometers to the west lay the Vatican City. The chair released Francis from its grip and he stretched in unison with the other passengers getting to their feet. With darkest descending outside the sun had been defeated today and would allow Francis to walk free. Tomorrow it would try again. Francis had travelled almost the length of Italy, some five hundred kilometers. In less than five hours. Ancient Roman Legions would take a week to cover the same distance on foot.

'The known world would have been conquered sooner had the Romans had had such a train.' Mused Francis.

Francis headed to the rest rooms to make himself more presentable. He was heading to the Vatican and wanted to look like an ordained Priest and not destitute. Those that had seen Francis enter the restroom would not have recognized the Priest that existed it. As though lead had become gold, Francis

had become Father Francis.

Making his way through the incoming tide of commuters. Francis had two choices, take the Metro and five minute walk to the Vatican City, or a Taxi that would take him directly there. Electing the Taxi he headed to the Taxi rank outside. The last thing he wanted was another train ride. It was getting dark and he wanted to be dropped as close as he could to the Vatican gates.

Outside the station several ques of white taxis waited to devour the never ending supply of foreign souls. Upon climbing into one he closed the door and the noise of the station fell silent. The taxi's interior smelt of cigarettes. Francis detested the smell. Opening a window to allow fresh air and sounds to circulate.

"Where to Father?" Asked the driver.

"Vatican please." Replied Francis proud as punch.

"Yes Father." The driver responded reverently.

The Taxi pulled out into the congested flowing traffic. There was a method to the madness of Roma traffic. Those that drove it daily knew its pulse. It was like the mind of a woman, wild and unpredictable. The driver cursed at the other drivers and then sort absolution from Francis who was not listening and as though in a trance stared out the window into the growing darkness and the chaos on wheels unconcerned. He was not driving thank God.

"Where you from Father?" Enquired the driver detecting Francis' Italian accent.

"Amantea." Replied Francis.

"You've come a long way Father." The driver observed.

The driver could not take the Father the long way as he would the foreign tourists and so charge more. Perhaps double on a good day. His place in heaven would be assured if he took Francis directly to his destination. Without delay, without digression. And without sin.

Driving in Roma traffic was like swimming in a crowded pool of colored metal fish. There were minnows. Scooters that darted between the other metal fish. Sharks were everywhere, taxis on the lookout for unsuspecting foreign prey. Double decker whales, pushing their way through the smaller metal fishes that moved out of the way in fear of being crushed and swallowed whole.

The gigantic synchronized eddy washed around the large round-about, pizza. Twirling layers intertwined and then dispersed in dyslexic directions. What appeared to be chaotic madness was a continuous glorious coordinated waltz. Sound of engines provided a musical accompaniment. Scooters the soprano. Cars the tenor. Buses the base. And tooting, the horn section.

'Utter madness', Francis thought.

But it had a rhythm. A holistic heart beat that said it was alive. It was *Roma*.

He felt safe in the belly of the shark that was taking him home. Michael sat unseen quietly beside him in the back seat. Marveling at the divine chaos outside. He was going home too.



The Vatican

The taxi pulled up to the large black iron gates that marked one of two main entrances to the Vatican City. Two brightly colored Swiss Guards stood rigid. Their vivid blue, red and orange striped uniforms glowed brilliantly in the dying light. Looking ominous their tall menacing spiked halberds hooked for grappling mounted combatants. There would be no mounted assailants today. Just endless foreign tourists with digital cameras. Capturing photographs but little less.

Swiss Guards had served as guards at foreign courts since the fifteenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century the Swiss Constitution was revised and outlawed their service. The only exception being the Pontifical Swiss Guard. Bodyguard of the Pope and de facto military of Vatican City.

The gates would soon be closed and locked for the evening. Leaving the public stranded outside until normal shopping hours resumed the next day. Inside the gates however the Vatican machinery operated twenty-four-seven.

As it did in Heaven, so would it on Earth.

Through the large arches of the gate Francis could see the familiar structures. At the center of Saint Peter's Square stood the ancient Egyptian obelisk surrounded by the Basilica. A Renaissance church within the Vatican City. The Basilica was an enclave and residence of the Pope and a trove of iconic art, sculptures, and Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. But more importantly to Francis, it housed Cardinal Cassini.

Francis stared at the smallest country in the world. Taking up less than half of a square kilometer with a population of nearly eight hundred and fifty. Tens of thousands of daily visitors and ten-fold as many pigeons. Tourists still lingered about the entrance hoping for a chance glimpse of the Pope. The Vatican itself was not open to tourists. Only the ordained and invited dignitaries were privileged enough to access the Vatican section of the Basilica.

Tentatively Francis approached the imposing Swiss Guards and introduced himself. Showing them the letter and envelope from the Cardinal. Recognizing the blood red wax seal Francis had broken. They looked at Francis with intrigue and interest. But not suspicion.

"We've been expecting you." One guard quietly advised Francis and directed Francis to step inside the archway with him.

Locking the large iron gates behind them. Francis was escorted across the immense square. One guard lead, the other followed. He cut a lone solitary

figure between the two tall guards. Feeling and looking like prisoner being taken to his execution. The guards in their colorful historic uniforms. Francis in his historic black clergy robes. Francis marched awkwardly out of step. Unable to match the towering guard's strides. Skipping at times to keep up. Occasionally looking up at the large marble statues of Saints that rimmed the Basilica that were looking down on him. Watching him. Assessing him. Scrutinizing him.

'Is this Him?' One Saint asks of another.

'Aye.' Replies another.

'He's the last one?' The first Saint enquires, unsure what to make of Francis.

'Aye.' Confirms the Saint.

'Doesn't look like much.' The first Saint comments.

'They never do... They never do.' Responds the second Saint taking in the divine inequity.

Feeling not worthy to look into their eyes, Francis lowered his head and uttered a silent prayer. His suitcase swaying in time with the orderly march. The Basilica grew closer and larger with every step. The evening sky providing a celestial backdrop to the looming building.

Michelangelo had helped design the Basilica. It is regarded as the holiest of Catholic shrines. Tradition holds it is the burial site of Saint Peter, an Apostle of Christ. The first Bishop of Rome. It is said, His tomb supposedly lays directly below the high altar. Hundreds of thousands of Christians from around the world make the pilgrimage to the Holy City of Faith.

But at this exact moment in time it was the pilgrimage of one chosen person, Francis. The Swiss Guards lead Francis up the long stone steps to the Vatican. Francis was standing on hallowed ground reserved for a select few. Huge magnificent doors opened for him and he entered a glorious light filled hall. A ceiling befitting a Cathedral of which it was not, appeared above him. A large crystal chandelier suspended from its center appearing as a gigantic star lit orb. An opulence that would have Christ turn in his tomb.

A Guard instructed Francis to take a seat and that the Cardinal would be out to see him shortly.

"Oh." Said Francis feeling insignificant in the immense hall.

Taking a seat on a large wooded arm chair gilded with rich red and gold upholstery. Francis had sat on many seats today but this was the most lavish. Looking about the great hall and realized everything in the Vatican appeared lavish. Over the millennia the Vatican had acquired immense power. And with it immense wealth. The disparity with the empty stomachs of the poor caused a chill to run over him. Perhaps it was guilt. Perhaps it was a draft.

Sitting quietly, Francis looked about the great hall in which he found himself.

Pairs of clergy could be seen wandering around inaudibly talking to each other. As if they had learnt to confine their voices to their immediate proximity. A grand stairway lead to a second level much higher up. Francis wondered what or who was up there.

Walls adorned with large oil paintings of Popes in their ancient holy regalia. Some wore the triple tiara, with three crowns, others the decorative Mitre. Modern Popes bore the Papal Ferula topped by a crucifix, while others bore a Crozier styled after a shepherd's crook. All wore the Fisherman's Ring. Each with a relief of Saint Peter in a boat casting his net. Each would have their names engraved around the relief. Each would be destroyed with a hammer when they died symbolically signifying end to the late Pope's authority.

Again Francis found himself surrounded by superior eyes looking down at him. He lowered his head and prayed. Satisfied he had humbled himself before his peers. Francis quietly recalled the day's journey and encounters. Reaching for his book but then remembered where he was.

'Probably not the most sensible thing to do', Francis thought.

And takes out another book, his Bible. His mother had given it to him upon his entry to the Seminary. Reading in silence for a period of time. Then Francis heard voices. Looking in the direction of where the sound was coming from and saw a Cardinal speaking to someone who appeared to be the Pope. Immediately Francis stood to attention. The voices were indiscernible, not that he was trying to eavesdrop. He would wait patiently should the Cardinal to walk his way.

The Bishop of Rome briefly looked towards his name sake. Then returned his attention to the Cardinal and spoke a few words before walking away accompanied by others. The Cardinal saw Francis standing alone and walked unhurriedly towards him.

On approaching Francis the Cardinal extended his hand to introduce himself.

"Father Francis? ... I am Cardinal Cassini..." Cassini said in a confident voice that came with age and position, "...How was your trip?"

"The trip was good. Thank you." Francis replied with a dry voice.

"Let me show you to your room... You will need your rest after a tiring day. I will have arranged for a meal to be brought to your room." Instructed the Cassini.

"Thank you Cardinal."

"We will discuss more tomorrow when you have a rested body, mind and soul... If you would like to come with me... I will show you your room." The Cardinal gestured Francis to follow him.

Walking hallways and stairways that constituted the scared labyrinth of the Vatican. Francis thought he would never find his way back. Barely had he landed

in Rome and tomorrow would be heading to London. Wondering now if he had packed enough warm clothes.

“I see you pack light.” Added the Cardinal as if he could read Francis’ thoughts. “That’s good... We will be doing a bit of travelling... Best travel light”.

Arriving at Francis’ room.

“Ah... Here we are... A meal will arrive shortly for you. There is a telephone should you require anything... Simply lift the receiver and speak.... I will return tomorrow morning at 8:00AM... Be ready to leave. Tomorrow we have long day ahead of us...” Then Cardinal added, “...I wish we had more time... But should we return... I will give you a personal tour of the Vatican.”

With those final instructions, the Cardinal opened Francis’ door and revealed another glorious room. Fit for Christ himself. Unsure if the Cardinal had the correct room, but accepted the disparity with grace.

“Thank you Cardinal.” Responded Francis.

On closing the door behind him Francis placed the small leather suitcase down and stood looking out of place in the oversized room. Adorned with carved angels and painted ceilings. A far cry from his humble dormitory and clay walls of Amantea.

“What am I doing here?” He asked himself looking about feeling like a fish out of water.

His mind flooded with unanswered questions. What was in London? What did the Cardinal mean by ‘*should we return?*’

Michael stood beside Francis and silently took in the opulent room. Perhaps he would have a word with his superior.



London

Time was of the essence for the Cardinal if he wanted to catch the son. The Euro-Star was fast, but it could not match the speed and comfort of the Vatican private jet. From a height of thirty thousand feet Cassini and Francis had taken the more direct route to London.

Having visited London on several occasions on Church business, the Cardinal was very familiar with its streets and dreary weather as it passed from autumn into winter. He had travelled to many countries in his life and found London the most bewildering. It was a city one either loved or hated, possibly simultaneously.

He often wondered how the Church had lost this Anglo-Saxon archdiocese so many centuries before. But he accepted they had made better Protestants than they did Catholics. Perhaps they were not ready to be Catholic, he had conceded.

Arriving at the four star Mayfair Millennium Hotel in the heart of London. The Hotel afforded the Cardinal a privacy from public view. It was a dwelling place for those that wished to go unnoticed. The Doorman complete with a Bowler Hat, recognized regular guests but never referred to them by name. Simply acknowledging their return with a small nod. Francis had read somewhere about the hotel as being involved in a poisoning of a Russian seeking political asylum in England. The event had made it into the local paper of Amantea. But that was years ago now and the Hotel had long since forgotten the unfortunate event and was operating as if nothing had happened, if it had at all.

Francis stood staring at the magnificent building like a bewildered tourist. He was familiar with Roman-Italian architecture that belonged to no particular period. But now he stood before a very different architecture. Georgian-Victorian. The latent architect within him looked up at the grand façade of the Hotel. Its columns reminded him of the classical architecture of Greece. The English had stolen it, and made it their own. Much as they had done with his religion.

“Hurry up Father please... try to keep up.” Cassini insisted.

Through the large gold revolving doors they entered a foyer that was as spectacular as the façade. Spacious and luxurious.

‘Fit for a Pope’, Francis thought. *‘What am I doing here?’*

Then recalled he was with the Cardinal who was checking them in. The Concierge had been expecting them. Words were rarely spoken at the Mayfair. Guests preferred it that way. A well-groomed Bellboy wearing a red uniform

took their bags to their room. A suite very familiar to the Cardinal. Francis was expecting the Cardinal to tip him, but was not done in England, and less so at the Mayfair. The Bellboy turned and walked away before fading into the richness of the distance.

A magnetic key opened the door and Francis entered an elegant room with tall ceilings and long laced draped windows. A sparkling crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling and illuminated the room. The Cardinal excused him to make further arrangements regarding a vehicle and would return shortly for dinner. Informing Francis that he should make himself at home. Advising there was a mini-bar should he prefer something stronger than the weak English tea that was on offer.

Francis did exactly that. He made himself at home. Or as closely as he could.

It was a far cry from his humble Parish and the English tea would have been a luxury. It was highly improbable that he would ever see the inside of such a beautiful residence again. Second only to that of the room at the Vatican. Opening the mini-bar he spied a small bottle whiskey. He liked a wee-drop once in a while medicinal of course. Or so he would justify to himself. Scottish whiskies were rare in Southern Italy.

Removing the cap the aroma of fruit flavors, distinct spices and honey notes filled his senses. Not that Francis could tell one from the other. Taking several cubes of ice he placed them deftly into the crystal tumbler. Pouring the golden spirit over the frozen crystals before easing his travelled beaten body into a large lather armchair he made himself comfortable. Turning on the large screen television Francis flipped through the numerous channels before settling on a program all television stations had in common. The news.

Wars and storms, death and tragedy filled the headlines. In the Seminary he had been taught of God's Will. But he wondered how much of what he was seeing was of Man's Will. What he had not been taught was that tragedy sells advertising and that was good for business. Francis continued to watch. It was a glimpse of the outside world. A world which for him started and ended at his parish in Amantea.

The Cardinal returned to the room and saw Francis watching the latest news and current affairs. It told him that Francis was a man interested in world affairs. Cassini poured himself a whiskey the favored drink as the Concierge knew very well. It was his job to know his guests' indulges and this was one of the few the Cardinal had. Pouring it neat into a tumbler identical to Francis' he took a seat beside him content for the time being to resurrect his soul after the lengthy

journey.

“You managed to arrange the vehicle?” Enquired Francis breaking the silence.

“It’s all been arranged. They’re very good here.” Cassini replied quite openly.

Maybe the whiskey had softened his tempered inhibitions.

“We’ll discuss more of why we are here after dinner... I have arranged for meals to come to our room. You may select something from menu if you like...” Indicating the black leather folder on the large glass coffee table, “...I’ll be having my usual.” Cassini added.

Not identifying what the usual was.

Taking a sip from his glass Francis savored the strong essences in his mouth before swallowing whole. Picking up the Hotel’s menu he opened the cover. The selection listed half a dozen meals, but showed no prices. This was not a place you asked the price. Francis narrowed his selection down to a very English dish. Roast Beef, roast potatoes, Yorkshire pudding, with gravy and greens. Which included Brussel sprouts. He had heard much about Roast Beef and Yorkshire pudding from the English tourists that passed through his Parish and was keen to savor the Anglo-Saxon delicacy.

The meals arrived and the Cardinal gave grace before they began. Both ate in silence. Holding conversations only between themselves and their meals.

The Cardinal enjoying his Fettuccine Alfredo. A fettuccine tossed with Parmesan cheese and butter. Melting cheese emulsified with the liquids to form a smooth and rich sauce that coated the pasta. It had been one of the Cardinal’s favorite dishes since he was a boy visiting relatives in Rome. When his parents would take him to a restaurant that belonged to the great Italian Chief Alfredo Di Lelio. After which the dish was named. To savor it, brought back many childhood memories. It was heavenly in more than the culinary sense.

Francis on the other hand was being tantalized by the Yorkshire pudding. Quite peculiar he thought. With surgical precision he separated the variety of items on the plate as if undertaking a culinary autopsy. The beef was tender with the gravy only adding to the gastronomic pleasure. He was unsure what to make of the Brussel sprouts with their unusual texture and taste. But these could be tamed with a little added butter and salt.

Sharing a bottle of red wine. Francis found it exquisite and enquired where it was from.

“New Zealand... The Marlborough region I believe.” Responded the Cardinal lifting the bottle and checking the label. His knowledge in wine was as

extensive as it was with whiskies.

Though New Zealand reds were revered by the French and Italian wine makers. They were relished by the Cardinal. Francis had heard of this foreign land called New Zealand from the passing tourists. The name Jackson surfaced in his mind.

'Something to do with hobbits', Francis thought.

He could not place it the country geographically but knew the luxury would not last he savored every last morsel and every last drop. Letting New Zealand, Jackson and the hobbits slip from his thoughts. If this was how Cardinals lived, then surely he was on the right career path. Befriending the Cardinal would open doors.

Then recalled Michael's words of warning, *'not to get too close'*.

The dream was still lingering long after the train ride to Rome. It was a haunting memory and Father Michael seemed such an Angelic ghost. Francis eyed the Cardinal suspiciously as to his darker side. The Cardinal appeared self-assured, wise and old as one would expect an elderly statesman to be. Unable to detect any sign of danger about the man, Francis dismissed Michael's warning for the time being.

After dinner, feeling very full and satisfied, the Cardinal discussed their mission in London. And beyond if need be. This came as a surprise to the Francis who thought their business would simply be confined to London. The Cardinal advised Francis of his intentions to follow the son of the man who held the Fishermen's Ring. Follow the son, find the father and find the Ring. Preferring to keep the ulterior motive to himself. Such dangers are not meant for practitioners ears. The less Francis knew the safer he would be while in with the Cardinal.

The Cardinal advised that tomorrow he would take the hire car and watch the son's movements. The informant was very explicit, they must take the upmost precautions not to be seen. The Cardinal would teach the inexperienced Father the art of being stealth. The Cardinal would mold him gently like clay. There was no rush and nothing happened very fast at the Vatican. And this assignment was no exception. In time Francis could become the Cardinal's successor when it came time for him to retire. Not that Cardinals ever really retired. Francis would be filling a dead man's shoes.

Cassini dismissed Francis to make ready for bed. As he sat finishing his glass of fine red wine. Savoring the textures of the fruit and spices his mind began to drift. The Fettuccine Alfredo had reminded him of his childhood in Rome. On this rare occasion he began to reminisce of his long journey to where he found himself today.

Born Antonio Mario Cassini ten years after the last war.

In the small town of Portacomaro in Italy's North West. He was the eldest of five children. His father was an Irish immigrant Engineer and his mother was an immigrant from Buenos Aires. Only his sister Maria survived a traffic accident that took the lives of his other siblings. By fate, or divine choice, he was not in the car that day. Their deaths and possibly his, had weighed heavily on his mind ever since.

Attending technical secondary school, Cassini graduated with a diploma in chemistry. Working for a few years as a laboratory technician. Holding down a variety of other odd jobs that included being a janitor and of all things, a bouncer.

At the age of twenty-one he suffered from life-threatening pneumonia and had part of a lung removed. As he lay in the hospital bed he experienced what some would describe as a near-death experience. While others would say an outer body-experience. Either way, he found himself floating looking down upon himself. Feeling unafraid, a pure white light appeared and drew him closer. He knew, without knowing why, that he had to make a choice between staying, and leaving his earthly corporal body.

Despite the pain that his decaying mortal human body below was suffering. There was a destiny that needed to be fulfilled. In the moment between heartbeats, where death resides. He found himself back in his body. Life again filled his senses and pain filled his chest. Cassini knew he had touched the hand of God. As soon as he was well enough resigned his jobs and joined the seminary. To serve God.

Pope John Paul would ordain him. And so began his internship as Cardinal under one of the greatest Pontiffs that ever live. If he had touched the hand of God, Cassini had also touched the hand of a Saint.

But that was a long time ago and he had come a long way since then.

'Was it all just a dream?' Cassini would ask himself when doubt crept into his mind.

He sometimes wondered about the white light. What if he had decided to go? Just as he had been pulled back to his crippled body he knew instinctively he had made the right choice. Not that he had made the decision. Perhaps one had been made for him. His consciousness drifted back to the room's consciousness and they became one again.

Cassini oriented himself to the surroundings and focused on the purpose for why he was there. Inhaling deeply as air reached the extremities of his one and

half lungs. Finishing the last of his wine Cassini stood and readied himself for bed.

Tomorrow he would begin the surveillance of the Englishman's son. Wondering where it would lead him. Follow the son. Find the father. And find the Ring.

The first of its kind. The Holy Ring of Saint Peter himself.



The Gun

The Eurostar speed swiftly through the Kent country side swiftly towards Folkestone, the south-east British portal of the Chunnel. It would take the Eurostar twenty minutes to reach the French portal at Coquelles. Arthur knew as much about Coquelles as he did about Folkestone.

Settled centuries earlier, the port town of Folkestone laid in a valley between two cliffs. A monk led by Saint Augustine had passed through to bring Christianity to this Pagan land. Although the King of this Anglo-Saxon region was Pagan, his Queen was Christian and allowed a church to be built there. Places have history to them, much unspoken, much forgotten.

Arthur stared out the window and saw a sleepy fishing port passing by.

'Nothing much happened here', he thought to himself letting the town slip from view.

Arthur could feel the reduction in speed as the train approached the entrance. Sliding into the open mouth of the mega-structure. They had entered the thirty-eight kilometers long Chunnel. The idyllic vista changed from quaint white cottages to sterile grey concrete walls. Arthur had read about the Chunnel in a brochure. There were actually three tunnels. Two for trains heading in opposite directions and one for vehicles. As an Engineer, albeit drainage for the local Council, Arthur appreciated the wonderment of the engineering that must have been involved. The Chunnel would descend to a depth of one hundred and fifteen meters below sea level. Or some seventy five meters below the sea floor.

They were now passing under the English Channel. Where the Spanish Armada had been sunk on their disastrous journey to conquer England four hundred years earlier. Darkness filled the exterior cavity. Like sudden a sudden lunar eclipse. Lights flashed by at regular intervals by the windows hypnotizing Arthur as he sat there transfixed. His eyes unable to focus. His mind drifted in and out of the darkness.

"Let's see it then." Asked Phil startling Arthur to the cabin again.

Arthur focused his eyes on Phil who had been on his lap-top since leaving London.

"You get reception down here?" Arthur asked curiously.

"Of course... everything is WiFi these days." Sparked Phil.

"I knew that... I just didn't think you'd get it a hundred meters below sea level!" Exclaimed Arthur recalling the brochure he had just read.

"Let's see it then." Asked Phil again like a broken record.

“See what?” Wondered Arthur.

“The g-u-n.” Spelt out Phil so as not to speak the forbidden word aloud.

Arthur hated people who spelled in front of him. His Aunt had use to spell in front of him sometimes when speaking to his father when he was a child. Less so these days. But this time he managed to decipher the word.

“What for?” Asked Arthur.

“I just want to see it... I did some territorial training before I entered university you know.” Informed Phil proudly.

“I didn’t know that.” Responded Arthur.

‘That might explain a few things’, thought Arthur.

“Maybe it was a good you did come along.” Arthur suggested.

“Come on then....” Pleaded Phil keen to see the gun.

“Okay. But not here? ... Take the bag to the restroom. And don’t let anyone see you... I want a full report when you get back.” Ordered Arthur.

“Yes Sir!” Responded Phil sharply as though to his former Warrant Officer.

“Phil... Keep an eye out for anyone suspicious. You don’t know who is following us.” Advised Arthur watching Phil walk down the aisle towards the restroom.

Arthur looked about the cabin again. Everyone were behaving normally. The only person not behaving normally, was him.

‘Relax, just relax... Breathe in, breathe out.’ He told himself.

His eyes shifted again and out the window into the darkness and the lights flashing by at one hundred and sixty kilometers per hour. His mind drifted in thought as to what lay ahead. The answers he searched for were in Budapest. And Budapest was still a continent away.

Phil found the restrooms and latched the door. Placing Arthur’s old duffle bag on the bench in front of him. There was a large mirror and Phil could see himself.

He stared at himself. On the surface he appeared calm. Underneath he was anything but. Why had he decided to come along? He knew in his heart this was something Arthur could not do alone. Something told him he had to be there. He had been Arthur’s wing-man for the past seven years since they had worked at the council together. They were complete opposites, a pair of unlikely lads. Yet they seem to complement each other.

‘Arthur would do the same for me’, he thought.

Phil took a deep breath, pulled back the cords that held the bag closed and opened it. And peered in. The cubicle’s overhead light shone on the contents. One word came to Phil’s mind. Though technically it was two. But it made no difference.

“Oh shit!” Phil said to himself, hoping no one had heard him.

Phil was unsure if it was the gun, or the amount of money that surprised him most. Maybe Arthur’s dad really had robbed a bank. Reaching into the bag pulled out the gun. And immediately recognized its rudimentary box-ish features. It was a Glock.

Having seen them advertised in the newspapers for sale. Hopefully to people with hand gun licenses, he had hoped. Wondering who bought these types of guns and for what purpose. His mind came back to the gun. Looking for find the safety catch. But it did not appear to have one. Was it loaded? Pressing a latch at the base of the handle the magazine initially popped, then slid out.

Anyone watching Phil would have thought he had handle the gun before. And they would be wrong. Though the gun was growing on him. His territorial training gave him a basic understanding and confidence with weapons. The Glock was new to him. Examining the magazine, it appeared fully loaded. He would Google more about gun when he got back to his seat.

Quick thinking said there might be a bullet already in the chamber. Sliding the magazine back into the handle and giving the base a strove with his palm. It clicked back into place. Gripping the handle securely, Phil slowly pulled the top of the gun backwards to reveal nothing in the chamber.

‘That was a good sign’, he thought.

At least it would not go off accidentally. Satisfied with the gun Phil now checked the amount of cash in the bag. Opening the bag further and letting the cubicle’s light reach into the bag to reveal several rolls bank notes, Euros and Pounds.

‘Arthur was not joking about several round trips.’ Phil knew who was buying the beers on this journey.

Placing the gun back in the bag Phil pulled the chord tight. The journey had become all too surreal. He would normally be at home right now, surfing the net with a cup of tea and not staring at himself in a mirror on a train with a gun and bag full of money, heading to Budapest. For no other reason than a letter from Arthur’s father. There was still the issue of having to go through several checkpoints coming up in France and Belgium. The last thing they wanted to be caught with a gun and load of money and unable to explain either. Phil did not fancy himself as someone’s bitch in a French jail. The Watford Pub was only place to he had ever been incarcerated for short periods.

Looking about the restroom he spied a ceiling panel. Phil had a thought, which was rare, but it did happen from time to time. Taking out a roll of Euros he pocketed it. Then secured the bag for a second time. Climbing onto the basin bench lifted the panel to reveal a small ceiling cavity. Large enough to conceal

the duffle bag. He could hide the bag up there and hopefully it would go undetected until it was time to disembark the train. Carefully he shoved the duffle bag an arm's length away into a darkened corner.

It was a simple plan. But it was the simple plans that worked. Closing the ceiling panel to its original position he climbed down. Feeling pleased with his cunning plan and relieved having unburdened themselves of the incriminating bag. Splashing cold water on his face, Phil stared at the reflection in the mirror staring back at him.

"Think Phil think." He said to himself.

'Clean up the area. Can't have dust or footprints over the bench to arise suspicions and have people only to look up at the panel'. Instinctive thoughts fired in his mind to cover his tracks.

After skillfully wiping down the bench he looked about the washroom and was satisfied it was as it was before he had entered. String momentarily at the reflection in the mirror to re-gathered his composure.

Unlatching the door, Phil was startled by an old man waiting outside.

"Sorry." Phil said apologetically.

Their eyes met, locked momentarily and disengaged. And brief smiles exchanged.

"That's alright young man..." Replied the old man dressed in civilian clothes. "...That's alright."

The Cardinal entered the restroom and latched the door behind him.

Phil looked back, suspicious of the sudden encounter. Hoping he had done enough to cover his tracks. Making his way back to his seat only to find Arthur had disappeared. Phil looked up and down the aisle. No sign of him.

'He could not have gotten off. So he must be still on the train', he thought logically.

Taking his seat again, all he could do was wait. This was probably a good time to search the net about a Glock. A result listing appeared and he clicked on the Wiki-link. Reading the specifications in his mind.

'Made from an advanced synthetic polymer. Semi-automatic with a short recoil. Austrian made. No safety catch.' That explained why he could not find one.

'File note, keep the finger away from the trigger', thought Phil.

'The number of rounds varied with each model.'

'It could have been any of them', thought Phil.

But most likely a Glock 17. Which had a standard seventeen rounds.

'Effective firing range fifty meters.'

'Good to know', he thought.

Five million built as of 2007.

'That was scary to know.'

'Preferred weapon of choice among the US military and FBI, as well as the Austrian Police. The synthetic polymer construction meant that it could circumvent metal detectors in airports.'

'That was handy to know.'

"What you up to? ... Surfing dating sites again? ... We haven't got there and already you're planning ahead." Said Arthur surprising Phil.

Returning with two cups of coffee and sandwiches.

"I like you're thinking mate... But alas no... Just doing some homework on that *g-u-n*." Responded Phil quite pleased with himself.

Then Arthur noticed something, something was missing.

"Where's the bag?" Arthur exclaimed in a half-lowered anxious voice.

"Don't worry... I've taken care of it... I've hidden it a ceiling cavity until we get clear of Brussels. Here, I took out some cash." Handing Arthur the wad of Euros he had taken from the bag. "Too many check points for my liking." Phil conceded quietly.

"Good thinking I guess." Conceded Arthur. "Let's hope no one bothers to look up there... I was a little worried myself how we would get through the border checks with the *g-u-n*." Arthur continued to spell the offending word.

"What'd you find out?" Asked Arthur curiously.

And Phil proceeded to tell Arthur the skinny on what he had just read.

"No safety?" Exclaimed Arthur. "What sort of gun is that?"

"I guess it's one where if you pull the trigger, you mean to pull the trigger... Bottom line Arthur... Keep your bloody finger away from the trigger unless you intend to use it okay?" Phil informed Arthur with a tone of authority on the subject.

Which for the past ten minutes, he was. Then added.

"The good news is that the chamber is empty... So no chance of accidental discharge."

"Think I'll let you hold the thing from now on." Offered Arthur.

"Good idea... You hold the cash... I'll hold the *g-u-n*... That's a lot of cash Arthur. You sure your old man isn't a bank robber?" asked Phil.

"Yeah... I had the same thoughts. But I guess we'll find out in Budapest."

"Maybe he's got a bank job for us there?" Teased Phil.

"Did you see anyone suspicious?" Asked Arthur.

"Nah, nothing... You?"

"Nah... No one that end. Hopefully we've escaped *their* attention... Whoever *they* are." Responded Arthur unaware of the prying eyes.

But they had not escaped their attention. The Cardinal and Francis had settled into their seats at a watchful distance. The Cardinal was an expert of surveillance. Not only was he invisible. He was also astute as to others on the train that may also have an interest in his assignment. There were two gentlemen travelling alone. Without luggage. Neither seem to be aware of the other.

The gentlemen were incongruent with their surroundings. And did not belong in the picture. Yet there they were. The more the Cardinal watched on, the more he assessed the men was following Arthur. The Cardinal speculated as to their origins and quickly surmised that at least two Relic collectors were in pursuit of the son.

'How would they know about the son?' He asked himself before questioning a possible leak at the Vatican.

He would plug the leak on his return. He would watch these two gentlemen and the son. And would remedy the conundrum at a suitable time. He loathed completion.

The Cardinal would not be sharing the bounty.



Border Control

Arthur had travelled to France before albeit for a weekend with other students and tried to recall the procedure they would go through at the border control. Assuming they look like two weary backpackers, which they were, they should not raise suspicions. The trick was to stay calm and not to attract attention to themselves. That was easy for Arthur. His whole life he had been invisible to people. The same could not be said of Phil. Any attempt to change Phil's behavior would immediately draw the attention of security to him. If Phil louted about, then hopefully he would be dismissed as just another adolescent delinquent. Albeit at the age of twenty-nine. Arthur decided to let Phil be Phil. His plan to hide the money and gun was a good one. Though not original. It could well work.

The Eurostar crawled on its hands and knees into Coquelles and eased to a cessation. Hissing a release of modern steam over the tracks beneath the train and not over the unsuspecting people waiting on the platform.

Passengers stood from their seats and gathered their bags. Then formed an orderly queue in the aisle to disembark the train. Following each other like sheep towards the processing pens. Bags would be X-rayed and bodies scanned for offensive items.

One passenger appearing like a fanatical extremist was pulled aside and questioned. Only to turn out to be a Syrian returning home after visiting relatives in Britain. The Cardinal and Francis joined the queue but were instructed to go through once their documentation had been sighted. Had Phil paid more attention, he would have noticed the old man as being the man he had bumped into at the rest room. But Phil had more on his mind with g-u-n buried in the restroom ceiling. Phil and Arthur looked as they should, two English backpackers, benign. They were of course British and barbarism had been breed out of them a millennia before.

One by one the passengers were be processed and re-boarded the Eurostar. The doors closed behind them, sealing them within the metal cocoons and smoothly accelerated north-east to Brussels. The two young men resumed their seats and talked about what would happen when they arrived in Brussels. Both had differing priorities. Phil was keen to taste the beers and Arthur suggested they would not have time. Their time table was tight if they were to make it to Vienna by that evening.

“Vienna?” Exclaimed Phil.

“Yeah... We’ll stay a night there and make our way to Budapest tomorrow morning. I want to catch the Professor by midday...” Advised Arthur then qualified, “...So there’ll be no time for sightseeing, pub crawls... Or chasing skirt!”

“Oh mate... Where’s the fun in that?” Desponded Phil.

“There isn’t any... We here to find my father...Not find you a girlfriend.” Arthur added.

“We’ll see.” Said Phil, trying to have the final word.

Both young men stared out the window and contemplated the unknown. Their reflections staring back at them also contemplating the unknown. On the other side of the aisle sitting unseen, Michael stared out his window. But he had no reflection staring back at him.

Soon they would be at the French-Brussels border and another border check. The duffle bag would remain its hiding place until they disembarked at midday. Until they reached the Professor, Arthur’s main task was to keep an eye on Phil. How hard could that be?

In the next carriage back the Cardinal had been keeping an eye on the nomadic men that were watching Arthur and his friend. In London, Francis had been informed of their assignment to follow Arthur and the Cardinal was taken back by how quickly the Father adapted to his incognito and inconspicuous character. It seemed to come naturally to him. Perhaps he may not be a burden after all the Cardinal thought.

Francis was unaware of the men the Cardinal had detected. And had been sent on the arduous assignment to retrieve sandwiches and coffee. The Cardinal could only surmise that the men sent relic collector’s henchman. But who’s? Braun’s, Marconi’s, Levi’s? Were their others on the train he wondered? He would watch the two gentlemen until they got to Brussels and would see if they re-boarded.

The henchmen no doubt belonged to criminal underworld organizations. The Cardinal was from one above ground, and much larger. He had been involved in other assignments that required his unique skill, and this would be no different. This was another routine assignment for him but it would be a first for Francis. Care must be taken to protect his fledgling underling.

“*Indeed.*” Thought Michael overhearing the Cardinal’s concern for Francis.

The Cardinal was already a few steps ahead of Arthur and Phil. He knew about the concealed duffle bag, the gun and the money. It was his job to know these things. He had seen Phil go in with a duffle bag and saw Phil come out without one. It did not take much imagination to know something had been left behind. Hidden. Phil may have thought he had tidied the rest room, but the

Cardinal's astute observation detected anomalies and worked backwards to their cause.

Looking upwards to the ceiling panel unraveled the puzzle.

He would leave the duffle bag where it was hidden. Not wanting to arouse panic in his quarry. He must tail them to the father and to the ring. He had his own weapon and was well versed in self-defense and would handle the henchmen in his own time. In his own way. No doubt they would be reporting back to their masters wherever and whoever they were. Perhaps he would inquire if they did not do anything silly, like get themselves killed.

God had dealt him a good hand, and with any good hand you never let your opponent know what you're holding. The Cardinal resumed his poker face sat quietly reading the morning paper. In just over an hour they would arrive in Brussels. The Cardinal watched the henchmen, whom together with Francis watched Arthur and Phil. Whom in turn were admiring the French autumn country side passing them by. Unaware of the eyes tracking them.

Arthur had Phil check the timetable from Brussels to Vienna on his laptop.

"There's one that leaves at 1:00PM... That's the first available... But there is another an hour later." Phil added. Hoping he could stall Arthur into staying for a Belgium beer.

"Nice try mate... But we're not staying any longer than we have to. I want to make it to Vienna by this evening okay?" Trying to get Phil to focus on the urgency at hand.

"There might be a bar at the station. We still have an hour to kill...Excuse the pun." Phil suggested.

"Okay... But we're staying in the station." Arthur repeated.

"Okay." Phil conceded.

"Once we clear the border control, go get the bag okay?"

"Okay." Accepted Phil having scored a beer.

No sooner had the pair left the British-French border control the Eurostar crawled into the French-Belgium border control. An almost identical sequence of events occurred again. The two men with special papers were shuffled through with no search of their bags or bodies. The suspicious Syrian terrorist was stopped and searched and questioned once again. Only to be released on parole until the next check-point. Arthur and Phil went with the flock of people and were soon returned to their pen.

The Eurostar accelerated slowly and resumed its high speed journey north to

Brussels. Had Arthur and Phil looked more deeply from the Eurostar window they would have seen a country once named Gaul, and once occupied by Celts. Roman took control of the country in the first century. Only to be supplanted by Germanic tribes known as the Franks in the fifth century followed by Charlemagne in the ninth century who would seed a lineage of Kings that reined a thousand years. The French Revolution would lead to The Massacre of Swiss Guards. And a young French General Napoleon would dismantle Charlemagne New Holy Roman Empire that was neither holy nor an empire. Germanic tribes would twice return, only to be repelled by allied forces.

A carpet of blood red poppies covered the romantic rolling countryside. Killing fields. Fertilized with the blood and bones of the young men who came from around the world looking for adventure. Only to find an early death. The two young men stared out the window, oblivious to the innumerable souls staring back at them.

“Beautiful isn’t it.” Said Arthur.

“Lovely.” Replied Phil. Enchanted by the sea of blood red flowers.

“*Tragic.*” Said Michael remembering the loss of young lives and countless souls he had gathered from those killing fields.

Looking about the cabin and blindly seeing nothing untoward Phil ventured to the restroom. From his cloaked seating position the observant Cardinal watched Phil enter the restroom without a duffle bag, and as expected existed with one. It was obvious to the Cardinal that the henchmen had not paid attention to this anomaly. They were too busy watching Arthur to be distracted by Phil.

‘Amateurs.’ The Cardinal thought. “Hmm!”

“Got it... Everything’s there.” Phil advised, passing the bag over to Arthur who opened it on reflex to confirm it was.

“Well done Phil... I guess I owe you a beer for that.” Said Arthur to reward Phil.

A smile came across Phil’s face. Content they had made gotten away with hiding the bag, but more likely he was to going to get his precious beer.

“Let’s just hope for your sake there is a bar at the station. Or just outside... I’m not marching all over Brussels to find you a damn beer okay?” Ordered Arthur.

“We’ll see.” Responded Phil getting in the last word.



Belgium Beers

Moving through the Belgium country side was not much different that of France. Fields covered in blood red poppies. Fields that morphed into villages, which morphed into towns, which morphed into suburbs of the ancient city, Brussels.

The capital of Belgium. Home to over a million souls and as many waffles. Also home to the Brussel sprout. Very popular in the sixteenth century, but less so these days. Just as with France, the Romans had come and gone. Brussels began as a mere chapel being built on a small island in the middle of the River Semen and over the centuries had grown into a center of international politics. Art Nouveau architecture, waffles, mussels, chocolates, pralines. And of course Lambic style beer. Something which Phil would soon be acquainted with.

The Eurostar slowed its speed into the Brussels-South Station and came to a seamless stop. Hissing a relief after the short sprint from the border. And stretched its metallic limbs before the next event.

As the station name suggested it laid south of the bilingual city center that spoke both French and Dutch. As did the sign posts. Arthur and Phil were on foreign ground. Neither could speak Dutch and their French was limited to a few elementary words. Looking out the compartment's window, Arthur took in the station's architectural features. It appeared quite modern, absent of the high arch ceiling that he had witnessed at Saint Pancras. It was designed to be functional for the sixty thousand souls that commuted every day through it.

With an hour before their train departed Phil pulled his backpack from the overhead locker. Arthur threw the duffle bag casually over his shoulder and felt the weight of the gun and money. And the pair disembarked into the tide of swirling people on the platform. After breathing the train's temperature controlled air for the past two hours, the fresh air of the continent filled their lungs and shocked their wakening senses.

From a brochure map of the station Arthur had a rough idea where to find the nearest Belgium Beer Bar and he headed in the general direction. Phil had already studied the brochure's map beforehand and was several of steps ahead of him. Any thought of being followed had been lost in the mass of people coming at them. Creating an information overload and crashing any recognition cognitive processes they may have had. Faces were meaningless, nonthreatening strangers. That all looked the same.

Two thugs followed the two young men discreetly not too far behind. Both unaware of each other. And unaware of the Cardinal and Francis following them.

The Cardinal already knew where Arthur would be heading from his informant and had booked open tickets to Budapest. The Vatican had immense resources and its fingers in many pies, and waffles. More so in the capital of political affairs, Brussels.

The Cardinal's assignment was to observe and not lose track of the package.

'Follow the son. Find the father. Find the ring.' The Cardinal thought to himself.

"Barabbas... Son of the father." Cassini muttered to himself upon reflection of the thought.

"What was that Cardinal?" Asked Francis, catching what the Cardinal had said but unsure what it meant.

"Nothing Father... I was just talking to myself... Best we not get separated. I'll meet you on the train if we do... You have your tickets?" Cassini asked Francis.

"Yes Cardinal... On the train." Repeating his instructions.

"We'll keep back... You watch those two..." Indicating Arthur and Phil. "I'll watch the other two." Instructed the Cardinal.

"What other two?" Asked Francis thinking he had missed something looking about for the others.

"The two gentlemen ahead of us... One in the fawn trench coat and tweed hat... The other with the beige jacket..." Cassini directed Francis' attention to the men. "...We've got competition if my suspicions are correct."

He had been in the game long enough to know the subtle differences in human behavior. Those who belonged. And those who did not.

"We can afford to lose the other two... We know their next move. But these gentlemen might require me to make a personal introduction... We'll give them the benefit of the doubt for now and let them swim about for a while... Shall we?" Informed the Cardinal formulating a plan how it could play out.

Francis observed the two men and gathered the impression that the men were indeed following Arthur and Phil. The two men were completely unaware they were being followed. The Cardinal held the upper hand for now and always had an ace up his sleeve. Or in this case, his pocket.

Arthur and Phil went with the flow of people. Looking at different eateries and cafes embedded into the station's walls. Phil's sharp eyes soon spotted what he had been going on about since leaving London. Large windows with frosted in elaborate lettering on them...

'World famous Belgium Beers served'

Phil's eyes lit up with the discovery. A heavy plum colored velvet curtain concealed the entrance. Providing some insulation from the autumn chill. Pushing this to one side Phil entered the bar. The room was crowded as he worked his way to the bar. Colorful badges adorned each beer handle. In England, craft beers were becoming popular. But Belgium had perfected the beer industry, crafted by monasteries and handed down through the centuries. Phil guessed the monks had nothing better to do than make home-brew.

'Perhaps I missed my calling.' Phil thought.

Then wondered if he could really shave his head. Not to mention a vow of celibacy and abstinence.

'Perhaps not on second thoughts.' He thought again.

Phil scanned the tap selection and the many more bottles enticing him from the glass refrigerators. Arthur found them a table and allow Phil to do what he did best. Buy the beers. Phil had narrowed his choice down to Leffe Brune for Arthur and a Leffe Blonde for himself. He always preferred blondes.

Carefully Phil carried the large bulbous glasses over to Arthur's table.

"They give really good head here." Phil exclaimed placing two very frothy headed beers on the table. Arthur shook his head and grinned.

"Cheers mate." Replied Arthur quickly neutralizing that baited comment.

Lifting the glass Arthur briefly to inspect the beers dark color and the large white foamy head. Then raised it again towards Phil.

"Here's to a great adventure mate... Thanks for coming." Arthur said showing his grateful appreciation for the risk Phil had voluntarily taken upon himself.

"No worries mate. You know I wouldn't let you go by yourself... Remember the time we went travelling before you decided to do that design studies?" Phil reminded Arthur not knowing the nerve it would strike.

Arthur's decision to travel with Phil had cost him a position at the design school. And no matter how many times he reapplied, the school refused to accept him again. He had turned them down to go travelling only have the school now turn him down. It was a decision he had regretted ever since.

"Yeah... It cost me a place at the school in the end. Never was able to get back in after that." Arthur replied despondently.

"Sorry about that Arthur. If I'd known..." Responded Phil now realizing the ghost from the past he had summoned.

"Not your fault mate... It was meant to be I suppose... Otherwise I wouldn't be sitting here with you... would I?"

Arthur weighed his life choices. It seemed he was pulling one way and the universe was pulling the other.

"They say that life has a funny way of working out in the end... If it hasn't worked out... It isn't the end... Right?" Responded Phil offering some consolation.

"When did you become so philosophical?" Asked Arthur starting at Phil in a new light.

"I Googled it." Joked Phil.

"In some way it worked out okay didn't it... Engineering is more fun." Arthur confessed in that moment of clarity feeling the burden being lifted from his shoulders.

And grinned to himself.

"You okay Arthur?" Asked Phil seeing a faraway look in Arthur's eyes.

"Yeah I'm good thanks mate... Couldn't be better." Lifting his glass again and taking a savory mouthful of beer. "I glad I didn't do that silly design course in the end."

"Bit late now." Suggested Phil in retrospect.

"Yeah... It is isn't it? ... Thanks mate... You saved me from something I was never meant to do." Arthur declared. Conceding defeat, or claiming a victory.

"I did?" Asked Phil curiously.

"Yeah, you did."

"If you say so mate... Cheers!" Phil toasted to Arthur's new found salvation.

The beer tasted sweeter with each successive sips. Arthur finally understood the hand he had been dealt. And that life really did have a funny way of working itself out.

For now it told him to enjoy the moment. Raising his glass to his best mate Phil who was grinning back at him proud as Punch. Oblivious to the hidden danger around him. Arthur pondered the situation in which they found themselves. Barely two hours into their journey, and they had made as far as a Belgium bar drinking beer. A great start to hazardous adventure across Europe. A long way from Watford. A long way from the safety of his father's armchair. A long way from his prying Aunt, but he looked about the bar nonetheless in case she had followed them.

Where was going and what would he do when he got there? He had no idea. The journey was a blank canvas being painted by the moment. Each hour another brush stroke. He would not know the answer to his father's brief letter until he got to Budapest. Until he had spoken with Professor Almesh. They had just under an hour to unwind and enjoy a couple beers before they had to get back to the train to continue their journey to Vienna.

Sitting on a tall stool in the corner sat a short squat man in a fawn trench coat

sipping on a weak beer. Reading the Guardian newspaper he had brought from London. Sitting at a table not too far away was another gentleman in a beige jacket sipping on a red wine. His eyes were fixed on Arthur and Phil. Unsure who was who. The Cardinal could detect the man's subtle uncertainty.

'Amateur', the Cardinal thought sipping on his drink.

Standing at the bar with their backs to everyone were two other gentlemen. One enjoying a Stella. The other a short glass of Whiskey neat. The mirror on the wall in front of them would provide ample observation for now. The room filled with the amalgamation of chatter and music.

After a second beer and feeling a little lightheaded Arthur decided it was time to get back to the train. Gathering their packs they made their way out of the bar. As did several other passengers that were taking the same train. But as Phil was turning to leave. He noticed a man at the bar looking at him in the mirror's reflection. Their eyes made brief contact. Not for the first time Phil recalled vaguely and a feeling of Deja-vu came over Phil.

His recollection dampened by the beer, his subconscious mind was unstained by the alcohol and was busy trying to place the face. Where had he seen him before? Looking past the man in the mirror and followed Arthur out the doors towards the waiting train. It would come to him eventually he thought.

The Cardinal did not entirely dismiss the encounter. The moment had been brief, but held. What mattered was that The Cardinal was following them and not the other way around. The short squat man in the fawn trench coat soon followed Arthur and Phil some distance behind. A moment later the beige jacket man joined the line of people making their way back to the train. The Cardinal finished his whiskey. There was no rush he knew where to find Arthur and Phil. He also knew where to find the two other men.

He would keep them under observation until an opportune time to assist them off the train.

Finding their seats, stowed their packs in the overhead lockers again. Making themselves comfortable for the eleven hundred kilometer journey to Vienna. Briefly stopping at Frankfurt, Nuremburg and Munich to pick up additional passengers. It would take nearly eleven hours before they would arrive at Vienna just before midnight where they would to find a cheap hotel to stay at before heading to Budapest the next morning.

Budapest would be the end of the line. No more trains Arthur thought, never again. Flying is the only way. That was the plan.

But plans have a habit of changing.



Cracking Eggs

About the time Arthur and Phil were having early morning ginger cake with Arthur's Aunt in Watford, Alistair McGee was about to meet a colleague of a colleague at a coffee shop opposite an historical market place in Istanbul. The Grand Bazaar. Located in the Fatih district on the southern Balkan side. It catered to over two hundred and fifty thousand daily visitors with four thousand stores trading wares of every description from every corner of the world on sixty one covered streets. Its walls punctuated with twenty two ancient gateways. For the past five centuries, seven days a week, twenty four hours a day the Bazaar went about its business of trade.

Alistair could hear the perpetual drone of the place as if it were a hive of bees making honey. Or in this instance making money.

To say Istanbul is a massive city is an understatement. Being the largest city in Europe it is resident to some fourteen million religiously tolerant souls. The country in which it laid Turkey, is a transcontinental country with a small foot hold in the Balkan and much larger foot hold in East Asia. Separated by a straight stitched together by bridges. Turkey borders eight countries and three seas. Its claws dipped into the Black, Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. A single suspension bridge joined the two land masses.

Turkey had seen the rise and fall of mighty empires. Alexander the Great, the Romans, the Byzantines, and the Ottomans. All came and went. All falling to the next mighty empire and to the sands of time. With great power came great abuse. Massacres and genocides. The Silk Road stretched as far East as Korea and Japan. Crusaders stretched from England to Jerusalem. The Ottoman Empire had chosen the wrong side during the Great War and paid the price with dissolution of its empire.

High rise buildings, electricity, and automobiles supplanted camels to bring in the modern age. Dusty flea bitten citizens were brought kicking and screaming and itching into the twentieth century. Much like Cardinal Dovizi, Turkey was indifferent as to whether it really wanted to catch up. The back streets a testimony of this reluctance.

Looking about the Bazaar, it would be difficult to ascertain the century one was in. An astute time traveler would spot an out of place Rolex, a Smart Phone to chronologically date stamp the period of their arrival. Looking at Alistair McGee casually reclined in a rattan chair. One would have taken him for a local enjoying a peaceful Nargile smoke. Taking shallow puffs on the pipe and not

looking out of place with the surroundings. Despite his placid appearance, partly brought on by the relaxing fragrant smoke, his mind was sharp. He had been in Turkey over the years and had grown accustomed to the pulse of the marketplace around him. And blended into the surroundings as if he was one of them. For which he was not. Evident from the beads of sweat were forming under his fedora hat.

11:50AM. Two small coffee cups sat waiting on the small table waiting to be consumed, waiting on a gentleman. A colleague of Professor Almesh. Though they had never met before, Alistair would recognize him when and if he arrived. Having arranged to meet at the café just after noon that day. Before the day became unbearable with the harsh mid-afternoon sun. Alistair was English and the turquoise shell sunglasses that rested on the bridge of his nose could not disguise his English intolerance to the East Asian heat.

Taking another puff he insouciantly scanned the market place for people out of place. People looking at him. People standing about doing nothing. For no reason. People wearing sunglasses, like himself, that did not wish to be identified.

Reaching to his jacket pocket felt the reassuring cool steel of a snub nose thirty-eight special. Very effective at a short distance. And very, very loud. If there was a gun with a bang for the buck, it was the thirty-eight. Guaranteed to disperse a crowd. Or anyone standing in front it. And serving him well when persuading people to part with treasured relics. Glancing over his newspaper Alistair studied a suspicious character on a mobile on the other side of the street. Looking his way. Then glancing away as their eyes met.

'Hmm?' Questioned Alistair's thoughts.

Quickly assessing the man's clothing as not local. He was dressed too neat, too sharp. Someone on an affordable salary. Few people around here could afford what he was wearing. Without a camera he was not a tourist. Alistair lowered his eyes and pretended to look elsewhere. Then glanced back again. The man was still on the mobile talking to someone on the other end.

Their eyes met again and momentarily locked. Then disengaged. Now Alistair was certain he was being watched. Were there others? Glancing to his left, then casually to his right. If there were, he could not see them. He would have to assume there were others in the shadows watching reporting back to their masters.

'Word must have gotten out about the Ring', Alistair thought. "Hmm."

Dismissing his predicament, he had been in tighter spots than this. But this was Istanbul. Sometimes the rules of engagement did not apply. And the police

were as much of a problem, than a solution. Alistair assessed the situation and how it could play out. They would not move on him until they knew he had the Ring. They obviously did not know about the colleague, or they would not be bothering watching him.

At that moment he thought of Arthur, and wondered if he was safe. Hoping he was on his way to Budapest and not detained by his Aunt. Alistair chuckled at the thought. Lifting his newspaper he checked his watch so as not to give away that he was expecting someone. There was still another five minutes before the colleague was expected to arrive. Assuming he could find the café. There were hundreds of cafés. One on every corner. And all looking the same.

The man on the other side of the street reached inside his jacket. Alistair thought the man was reaching for a gun, only to pull out a pack of cigarettes. The man lit one while and continued to talk on the phone. A series of small nods suggested he was getting instructions. Perhaps to stay back and wait for reinforcements. Then the man ended the call and pocketed the cellular phone. Taking a long draw on the unpleasant Camel cigarette glanced briefly to look at Alistair. Then turned and disappeared into the moving crowd of people on the pavement.

'He'll be back', Alistair thought.

The prize was too formidable to let go so easily.

Reaching to his jacket pocket he touched the metal of gun again for assurance. And waited. Where was the colleague he wondered? He would allow him a window of time to arrive before making his next move. Nothing ever ran to perfectly schedule in this business. Improvisation and adaption were the keys to survival. Experience had taught him to be patient, to have faith in the plan. Fear and hasty decisions would undo the best of plans. Which would only lead to dire consequences for everyone involved.

'Stay relaxed. Stay calm. And carry on.' Alistair thought to himself.

12:10AM And a small yellow taxi pulled up outside the café. Looking fazed and lost, an elderly gentleman pulled himself from the cab. Paying the driver with several Lira above the fare before it drove off along the dusty street. The gentleman had tipped him well and the driver was making sure the gentleman would not get any change.

A straw hat covered the gentleman's balding head of thinning grey hair. Wearing a lightly colored cotton suit. Albeit for the dust and dirt that had been attracted to it and looking more like a lost professor, than a tourist. Out of place. Out of time. For which he was. A camera suspended around his neck, as instructed by Alistair earlier that morning adding little to his impromptu

disguise. The Professor looked about the café and checked the tattered sign.

Peering through the café's haze of smoke the Professor made eye contact with Alistair. The Professor was about to raise his hand to acknowledge his arrival, but Alistair shook his head discreetly in time for the professor to withdraw the gesture. The Professor made his way through the chairs of hallucinated smokers. The smoke was not too unpleasant and he found himself inhaling more than he originally intended.

"Please have a seat Professor... Thank you for coming." Said Alistair quietly and the two men discreetly shook hands.

Keeping his conversation to a minimum from prying ears. Alistair's hands fell to his lap and he calmly fidgeted with his fingers under the table. Ears and eyes were everywhere in Turkey. Morals were in short supply here and easily sold to the highest bidder.

"I was a little worried I would never find the place..." Responded the Professor anxiously. "...I am sure the Taxi driver took me the long way here." He added.

"It wouldn't be fair for business if he hadn't." Alistair added to calm the Professor.

With the Professor's back to the street Alistair scanned the horizon from the café. Inhaling deeply on the smoke and nodded a small nod of approval at the Professor all while looking behind him. There was a little time for chit chat, but he still had to give the semblance of a chance encounter with an old friend.

Their business had been concluded the moment they had shaken hands. The exchange had been seamless in its execution and undetected by the prying eyes. A magician would have been proud of them.

Alistair had already secured the ring on his finger and turned it face down to conceal the relief on the crown. As far as anyone could tell he was wearing a simple dull silver ring. But it was far from being a dull silver ring. It was an ancient holy relic belonging to the very first guardian of the Keys to Heaven. The first Bishop of Rome, Saint Peter. The relic was now currently residing securely on Alistair's wedding finger and it felt uncomfortable to wear a ring after all the years of not wearing one. This was not the time or place to examine the Ring nor contemplate its significance. His job was simple, collect the ring and deliver it.

'Stick to the plan', Alistair minded himself, 'Don't be distracted.'

"Would you like a coffee while you're here?" Asked Alistair pushing one of the two small coffee cups towards the Professor.

"Thank you." The Professor replied.

Taking a sip from the now cold coffee, which was refreshing in the growing

heat of the rising midday sun. After small talk of the weather and current affairs it was time for the Professor to leave and be lost again in the fog of the multitudes. Alistair hailed a yellow passing taxi that was circling. Ushering the Professor into the back Alistair instructed the driver to take the Professor back to his Hotel. And handed the driver enough money for a round trip. Instructing him not to stop for no one. Stressing *no one*. The driver nodded and understood the importance.

This was Turkey, life was cheap. And where money talked. Advising the Professor to return home and stay there. The Professor settled into the back seat and the taxi slipped into the congested traffic orbiting the Bazaar. Alistair watched the Taxi depart and be consumed by the other traffic around it and returned to his seat to finish his coffee.

Inhaling deeply again on the long pipe to help him relax for what was to happen next. He never smoked cigarettes, but the Nargile was different and he found it sooth him. Just as he wondered if Arthur would enjoy one, his the world came flooding back to him, Arthur. And he wondered where he was on his travels. Assuming he had decided to go. He would call the Professor when he got back to the safe house.

Lifting the newspaper again he scanned above the top edge towards the street opposite. The cigarette man had returned. And he had a friend with him. They had seen the meeting. But how much had they really seen he wondered? Inhaling deeply on his pipe one last time, exhaled a large plume of smoke into air about him. The predicament did not faze him. He had a friend in his pocket. And his friend was very loud when it needed to be.

'It was time to crack some eggs', Alistair told himself patting his friend lightly.

Alistair stood and left a generous tip for the attractive Turkish waitress. And walked to the road side as if nothing was the untoward. Looking for a gap he made his way through the chaos of moving rusting vehicles. Casually Alistair walked towards the two men. His hand resting in his pocket. Confusing them momentarily, they stood stunned unsure what to make of it. Was he about to attack them? At the last moment Alistair turned and headed into a gate of the Bazaar. He knew the Market well enough from his previous visits. The numerous streets and countless visitors would offer sufficient room to evade anyone following. If the two men following wanted to make a scene, Alistair was prepared to give them an audience.

The Bazaar was alive. A giant pulsing heart beating twenty-four seven, the size several large office blocks. Through its arteries, veins and capillaries, flowed human corpuscles. Haggling preceded the osmosis of foreign currency.

Money talked in the Bazaar, defying the rules of modern finance. It answered to no one but itself and any disagreements would be settled within its walls.

Alistair had a dispute that needed settling.

With High arched decorative mosaic ceilings and walls dripping with colorful merchandise of every kind imaginable. The covered boulevards smelt of the aromatic herbs, pungent spices and the seasoned dishes. Human corpuscles circulated in all directions before ejecting themselves through the major valves of the giant beating heart onto the brightly light sun drenched dusty streets. Leached of their Lira, laden with their replica Aladdin lanterns and fragrant teas. Crafted jewelry and Persian tapestries.

Losing the men would be one thing, only to have them followed him again later. Alistair knew he had to eliminate them from the equation. As they would him, if he was caught. Gauging his bearings he quickened his pace and made his way deeper into the Bazaar hoping the men would follow him. The hunters were about to become the hunted.

Michael kept his distance and had stopped to examine an exquisite Persian rug.



Hunters become the Hunted

The hunters would become the hunted and Alistair set about to divide and conquer. Some distance into the main street Alistair stopped at one of the thousand carpet stands to casually examine a rug. Looking back towards the two men that lingered in pursuit. Their garb made them difficult to blend into the ordinary tourist standing about. Still a good thirty meters behind him they appeared in no rush to jump him in the crowded street. Resuming his walk along the stalls Alistair abruptly turned down a busy street and after several more planned turns he headed down a narrow alley.

The alley was dark and dusty and the air stained with the stench of urine. Half way down the alley was a doorway set into the wall and Alistair quickly stood in it. Hoping the men had not seen. Closing his eyes he allowed them to get accustomed to the darkened alleyway. Alistair waited. He needed to be in control and to anticipate the men's next move. Taking in deep breaths to slow his heart rate. And calm his mind. But the pungent air would not allow that.

Alistair had gambled that the men following would spilt up. One go around the other side to cut him off and that one would come down the alley. Not suspecting that Alistair would be hiding waiting to pounce. Reluctant to use the thirty-eight, it would be too loud and would attract attention. A silencer would have been nice, but that was wishful thinking. If both men ventured down the alley way, then Alistair would be in trouble. And he would *have* call upon his friend in his pocket to assist.

He waited.

Taking shallow breaths, he felt his heart thumping in his chest. It was not the first time he had found himself cornered. He could make out soft footsteps approaching. One set he thought. No voices. A good sign, but no guarantee. Pressing himself deeper into the murky corner. A darkness appeared on the ground approaching the doorway. The man would assume someone could be hiding there. Or not. Either way Alistair was going have to surprise him. Then silence him. The man hesitated before the door way as he had anticipated and raised the barrel of his gun. Surprise was Alistair's best defense and he rushed the at hand holding the gun. There was a shot and the bullet ricocheted off the dirt floor into the side wall. The percussion was lost in the chaotic drone of the bazaar.

Alistair twisted the man's hand upwards and to the side. The gun fell to the ground. Alistair's elbow came up and connected with the man's jaw. Briefing

disorienting him. The man lashed out with a wild series of punches catching Alistair's ribs and temporarily winding him. The next move was Alistair's. Sending his knee into the man loins and buckling him over before delivering a heavy fatal blow to the back of the neck. A distinct crack was heard. And the man fell lifelessly to the ground. Unsure if the man was dead or alive Alistair dragged the man into the doorway and positioned him to appear to be sleeping. With no time to exchange Facebook details Alistair had to get out of there before the other man arrived.

Pocketing the gun, Alistair checked over his shoulder for any sign of the other man that had may have gone around to cut him off. The last thing he wanted was to lead him back to his safe house. The thought of being in a fight with the Ring on his finger troubled him and checked if it was still secure. It was.

Continuing down the alley Alistair went in search of his prey. Leaving his friend sleeping in the doorway behind him. If anyone had seen the incident they had not stuck around to file any paperwork. There was an unwritten law, what happens in the Bazaar stayed in the Bazaar. As it had for centuries.

Alistair needed to lure the second man as he had the first. And it was not hard to spot him standing on a corner with a cigarette in hand. His loud colored shirt a siren to any female on-heat. He could not lure the man down the same alley as his sleeping friend. But there were other sordid alleys that would serve the purpose. If the first man had a gun, then likely this one would too. Taking a deep breath Alistair turned his back on the man hoping he would follow without concern for his fallen comrade.

People wandering aimlessly between stalls, haggling over prices. Alistair pushed his way through the crowd. The first man was relatively easy to dispense. The second may not be as easy as he headed down another dark alley way.

The familiar smell filled his nostrils.

There was no doorway down this alleyway. And worst of all, it was a dead end. Of all the alleyways, he had chosen this one. He was trapped.

"Shit." Alistair cursed himself.

The man followed some distance behind him. Alistair could see his silhouette in the light of the street behind him. The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a stick, flicking it professionally into a flick-blade knife. No noise to attract attention of others.

Alistair had brought a gun to a knife fight which seemed a little unfair. But then knife fights never are. The gun would attract the attention, something he was hoping to avoid. That and the paper-work that would come with using it.

Hastily removing his jacket. Alistair wrapped it around his left arm as a shield. He would have to be swift to avoid the man's blade. The width of the alley way would limit each other's movements, as would the darkness their vision.

The man grinned with pleasure having cornered him. Lunging at him with the blade only to be deflected and slapped abruptly across the ear by Alistair's right palm. Like an agitated bull the man snorted and growled at the frustration of missing its target. Like a matador Alistair turned around only to have the assailant lung at him again. This time the blade caught his arm. Causing a small incision that bled through Alistair's coat. Flinching as the blade etched its wound.

The enraged bull had tasted blood and came quickly at Alistair again. Raising his arm as a shield. Knowing he would incur the damning wound. Alistair grimaced with pain as the knife imbedded itself in his forearm. Momentarily disorienting the agitated bull and allowing Alistair to throw a massive right fist into the bull's nose and breaking it with a cracking sound. Causing it to bleed worse than Alistair's arm. Off balance, the man stuttered backwards wrenching the blade free from Alistair's impaled arm.

Spitting blood the maddened bull came at him again. Making wild sweeping blows with its sharp metal horn hoping to make contact. Alistair's defensive left arm went up again and pain resonated within as his right fist swung in full fury. Connecting with the man's jaw and sending it sideways and breaking teeth. Causing the man to fall backwards onto an exposed metal protrusion on the wall behind him.

With the full weight of his body falling against it the metal spike penetrated his back and exited through his chest. The man gasped for breath. Looking down at the protruding fatal bloody wound. Then looked up bewildered by the brilliant white light and someone standing next to Alistair. Arms fell flaccid to his side and he surrendered his soul.

Only he and Michael saw the divine light.

The man's eyes rolled upwards. And then nobody was home. The metal horn still frozen in the man's grip. Darkness again filled the earthly realm of the alleyway and the pungent bitter sweet smell of urine returned Alistair's nostrils. His heart beating fast. His arm throbbing with pain.

A cold sensation of blood trickled down over Alistair's hand and fingers and over the Ring.

Alistair looked up the alley towards the street for any curious observers. None. Just people passing by. Anyone who did look would only have seen a darkened alley. There was no time to lose, there may be others in pursuit. And he was not about to stick around to find out. Leaving the soldier where he had fallen.

Or hung. It could days before anyone would discover the man. And Alistair would be long gone. The knife in the man's hand, the only clue as to the events that led to his demise.

His arm needed attention. He knew a doctor that would not ask too many questions for the right money. Taking a handkerchief from his pocket, tied a dressing around the leaking bloody wound. Then draped his jacket over his arm. Bloody side down. Composing himself strolled onto the street as if he had just relieved himself. Which in some way he just had. And fused with the tide of people exiting the Bazaar.

Waving down the first available taxi Alistair fell low into the back seat. Sweat building under his fedora. Ordering the driver to take him to Taksim without stopping for anyone. Taksim was a rabbit warren of dusty uneven alleys some five kilometers to the south of the Bazaar. Rife with unemployed, crime and prostitution. It would be the last place anyone would look. Or wish to visit.

Alistair looked about to see if anyone was following. If they were he could not see them. He still had his friend in his pocket. The taxi driver's eyes peered at the rear vision mirror. He would be rewarded handsomely for this ride he thought. And for any information about this mysterious Englishman. The pain in his left forearm beginning to pronounce its presence.

Alistair examined the ring around his finger. Now baptized with his blood.



Frankfurt

The skyline moved majestically past the motionless passengers seated in the Eurostar as it left the Brussels-South Station. Next stop would be Frankfurt. It was not long before the two young men fell under the influence of the beers and began to snooze as the historic Deutschland rolled past their window. If Arthur had thought he had been dealt a rough hand, he need only look out the window to Germany to feel better about himself.

Humans first arrived there half a million years before the Eurostar. Followed more recently by the soon to be extinct Neanderthals. Julius Caesar would be unable to tame the peoples east of the Rhine and would call the land and its barbarian people *Germania*. With the fall of the Roman Empire, the Germanic tribes amalgamated over time to form the foundation of France and Germany.

The Frankish King Charlemagne resurrected the Roman Empire and called it Holy. Martin Luther would challenge the Catholic Church with his Ninety-Five Theses and ignite a powder keg of the Protestant Reformation debate that would continue for another hundred years followed by another thirty years of war that would slaughter half the male population.

What man could not kill himself, the Black Plague would provide assistance.

Like a rash of small pox, the Empire erupted with over eighteen-hundred principalities, palaces and summer houses. Napoleon marched through and systematically dismantled the Empire. The Archduke of Austria would be shot by a Yugoslav Nationalist that resulted in paperwork being completed before war could be declared and young men could be called up to die needlessly in a war that would capitulate into a truce. The League of Nations would tallied the cost and present Germany with the bill. But not before by partitioning its territories amongst themselves and light the fuse for the next great war.

The Eurostar's regimented carriages marched softly over the German countryside so as not to disturb the bones of the dead that lay beneath. Germanic tribesmen, Roman Legionnaires, French infantry. Young men from foreign lands who gave their lives for King and country. Two young men sat sleeping in a carriage riding above. Unaware of the horrific historical events that had taken place beneath them.

They awoke to find the train arriving into Munich. Phil suggested it would be a good time to stretch their legs and check out the local bars. Arthur agreed reluctantly. Having spent the past six hours sitting down, it seemed a good opportunity to get the circulation moving again. Leaving their packs on board.

Arthur grabbed the duffle bag. Feeling the awkward and uncomfortable weight of the gun and money inside. Arthur and Phil went in search of the nearest bar unaware of their unseen surveillance.

The beige coat man followed. While the short squat man decided to stay on board and watched from his window. Cassini instructed Francis to stay on board to keep an eye on him. He would follow the beige coat man at a distance.

Germany is ranked third in the world for beer consumption per-capita, so it was not hard for Phil to find a bar. Spotting the first tavern, Phil left Arthur and the man in beige in his wake. Disappearing through the open doors and straight to the bar. A beautiful full breasted buxom blonde behind the counter asked if she could help him. Phil was immediately distracted by the attractive Fräulein's buxom bosoms erupting from her low cut top and for the first time in his life lost for words.

"Two lagers thanks love." Said Arthur coming to the rescue.

"Thanks mate... I got distracted." Stammered Phil in embarrassment.

"Yeah I could see that... unlike you." Arthur winked at the bar maid who smiled back.

"I vill bringen dese ova to you... Danke mein Herrke." Instructed the Bar Maid, suggesting they should take a seat.

"Come on Phil... Let's grab a table by the window." Arthur called out to Phil still distracted by the Bar Maid's breasts. "We'll have a couple here and get dinner on the train... Figure we can get a taxi to the nearest hotel when we arrive in Vienna... How's that sound?"

"Good plan Arthur... Here comes the beers... I'm starting like this adventure you have me on."

"One... I don't have you on it... You invited yourself." Corrected Arthur factually.

"Good call... Have to concede that one Arty." Phil pleaded guilty to the charge.

"And two... This is not European Pub crawl... okay?" Reminded Arthur.

"We'll see about that..." Responded Phil lifting the large stein of golden beer with a large frothy head. "...cheers mate!"

"These are quite large aren't they? Maybe we'll stick to one." Warned Arthur.

"We'll see how this one goes down first." Qualified Phil before committing to any rules of engagement.

Braun's man ordered a large dark stein of ale. Drinking it as if it was water and ordering another. Cassini watched on from a distant corner, sipping quietly on a

coffee. His mind would need to clear should he need to engage the beige coat man. Every now and again glancing up to ensure Arthur was in sight. Francis remained on the train and read his paperback, every now and again glancing up to observe the short squat man read his Guardian. It was a game of cat and mouse. But who was the cat and who was the mouse?

After the first stein Phil headed to the gents to relieve himself. Moments later the beige coat rose to his feet and followed. Not unnoticed by the Cassini. He would keep a watchful eye on Arthur. Cassini had assessed Phil and reasoned there was something about the young man that said he could handle himself.

Phil entered the restroom and took his position at the urinals. Giggling his equipment in time with the overhead music. The beer had made him feel light headed. Still he sensed there was someone watching him. A proximity that made him uncomfortable. Braun's man stood two urinals over flaccidly going through the motions fruitlessly. Phil finished up and headed to the basins. Splashing water on his face to awaken his dulled senses. Looking up he saw the man's reflection in the mirror standing behind him. A hand reaching inside his jacket for something.

With no time to think Phil turned around suddenly and did what he did best. Threw a massive fist into the man's face and sending him onto the floor. And the gun that he was reaching for sliding across the tiled floor. Taking Phil by surprise at the sight of it. The man scrambles to reach for the gun only to be kicked in the ribs.

"Oh no you don't you bastard." Said Phil quickly realizing how close he had come to being shot.

Standing to his feet the man stood over Phil. But Phil had toppled taller trees.

"Bring it on." Encouraged Phil eagerly, keen for a fight.

Stepping forward the man swung wildly at Phil. Connecting with one with little affect. Phil returned the punches knocking the wind from the man who fell to his knees. With a final upper up Phil connected with the man's jaw sending him backwards into the porcelain urinals. After slamming the man's head against the urinal Phil dragged the man to one of the cubicles. Shoving his head down a toilet and flushed it. Wanting so much to drown the man who had tried to pull a gun in him. Hearing someone enter the restroom Phil dropped the man to one side. Thinking an accomplice had followed him in he peered from the cubicle to see who had walked in.

Just an old man. One of the passengers.

Dismissing any recollections of earlier encounters Phil returned to the hand basin and splashed water again over his face. Looking up to see the old man still at the urinal. Phil headed back to inform Arthur of the encounter. The Cardinal

finished up at the urinal and noticed the gun laying against the far wall. Pocketing it, and surmised the events that had just taken place. Spying a faint trail of blood leading to a toilet cubicle. He followed it. Only to find the beige coat man lay in a semi-conscious state and worse for wear.

'I'm impressed... That young man can handle himself', thought the Cassini.

Closing the cubicle door behind him. The Cardinal knelt beside the man and removed his biretta and secured a silencer. Placing the barrel against the man's forehead. The Cardinal spoke and with each word he tapped the man's forehead with the barrel.

"Who... Do... You... Work... For?" Cassini asked politely finishing with a fake grin.

But the man remained silent, panting and struggling for breath after Phil's beating and attempted drowning.

"Who do you work for? ... Last chance." He asked politely again placing the barrel against the man's leg.

But the man remained silent.

"I commend your loyalty... Perhaps this will help you remember."

Cassini fired a muffled shot into the man's thigh.

'Thud.'

The man screamed loudly.

"Shh!" Soothed Cassini tapping the heated barrel on his forehead.

Having shown his willingness to use the gun.

"Now... As I was saying... Who is your boss? ... Last chance..." Cassini pressing the barrel into the man's groin... Raising an eye brow and tilting his head as if to say, "...Well then?"

"Braun... ah." Came the struggled reply.

His breath ragged and panting, fighting back the pain in his leg.

"Hmm... I should have known." Responded Cassini not surprised by the name.

Their paths had crossed before in the pass and no doubt would again in the future.

"Tell Mister Braun that The Cardinal says to keep away... The boy is mine... Understand me?"

The man nodded anxiously knowing his life had been spared. But confused why he had said Cardinal.

'Must be a codename', the man thought.

"I don't want to see your face again... You know the consequences if I do... Don't you?" Cassini warned.

The man frantically nodded to confirm the Cardinal's order and hoped his

master would be as lenient. Flinching in pain and Cassini pressed the barrel of his gun near the bleeding wound.

“Cell phone... Wallet!” Ordered Cassini. “...You can explain the authorities how you were robbed... Wait here until the train leaves... If I hear one word about this before the train leaves... I will be back to find you... Understood?” Cassini instructed calmly.

The man nodded repeated hoping the Cardinal would leave. Closing and securing the door behind him. The Cardinal returned to the bar to see Phil explaining to Arthur the ordeal he had just encountered.

“You for real Phil? ... So where’s the gun?” Asked Arthur doubting the close encounter of the Phil kind.

“Didn’t have time to pick it up... Someone came in... You can go and have a look if you don’t believe me... But I’m not going back in there. Best we get out of here and back to the train...” Phil said with a panic in his voice. “...I’m not sticking around for another beer!”

“Wow... Never known you to turn down a beer.... You’re serious aren’t you?” Arthur looked about for suspicious faces.

And to only saw placid intoxicated faces drinking beer and chatting. An old man in the corner sipped on his espresso. Blending into his surroundings. Invisible.

“Mate... The sooner we get back to the train the better I will feel.” Said Phil said indicating now rather later.

His eyes also scanning the faces in the bar. Wondering who else would try to jump him.

“Why would they jump you? I thought it was me they were after?” Then Arthur had a thought. “They thought you were me... Dad said I would endanger others if I involved them... Shit! ... Sorry man.” Arthur looked about again. Everyone was now looking suspicious.

“That’s what I signed up for. We’re in this together mate... We have to be more vigilant okay?”

“Okay... So what about the man in the toilet?” Asked Arthur worried the walking dead would walk out of the restroom blazing.

“I beat the shit out him... I don’t think he’ll be back on the train... And if he is I’ll personally throw the prick off!” Warned Phil looking over his shoulder to the toilets.

“Let’s get out of here.” Arthur instructed grabbing the duffle bag.

Now happy to feel the weight of the gun it contained. Cassini followed some moments later. Allowing other passengers to buffer the distance between himself

and the two young men. Taking his seat on the Eurostar he noticed the short squat man was unmoved.

“Any issues this end?” The Cardinal enquired.

“None... How about you?” Francis asked curious not to see the man in beige return.

“Not really.” Responded Cassini. “Seems the man has left the train... Don’t think we will be seeing him again.”

“Oh that’s good... One less to worry about.” Replied Francis innocently.

“Yes indeed... One less.” Cassini contemplated the thought.

But he knew the extent to which Braun would go and suspected it would not be the last he would see of Braun’s men knowing how far he would go to secure the Ring. For now the Cardinal had sent a bloody message to Braun to keep away from the boy.

The boy was his.

Arthur and Phil took their seats. Arthur passed the duffle bag to Phil who needed it more than he did and was more likely to use it than he would. Self-defense came natural to Phil. Undaunted by an altercation. Arthur had come to accept he was more of a lover than a fighter. Up until now they had been dismissive of being followed but now had to accept the treat was real. As real as the attack on Phil. As real as the gun in the duffle bag.

“Perhaps he was the only one?” Suggested Arthur hoping to put a positive spin on the matter.

“Mate... These guys don’t come alone. There’ll be others... We won that round... Next time we may not be so lucky... It’s not like we have a Guardian Angel looking over us?” Suggested Phil.

Michael smiled when he heard Phil’s comment.

“*Guardian Angel? ... Ooh I like the sound of that.*” Michael declared to himself.

And at a moment the carriage was suddenly engulfed with a flash of brilliant divine light.

“You see that?” Asked Phil peering about the carriage searching for the source.

“Probably lightning.” Suggested Arthur about to read his paperback.

Pondering what Rosalind Steed would do in their situation.

“Lightning?” Responded Phil now looking about outside the window up at the cloudless sky.



Nuremburg

From the humble beginnings of an Imperial castle a thousand years ago. Nuremberg grew to become the unofficial capital of the Holy Roman Empire. By the late thirteenth century Jews were already being persecuted for their lands. Albeit to unify the north and south of the city. Those that were not burnt at the stake would be ravaged by the plague over next hundred years.

Huge Nazi Party conventions called the Nuremberg rallies milked the wanton despair of the German people during the great depression. Reparation payments had crushed the country's economy and through skillful rhetoric of propaganda, Adolf Hitler riled the people into a frenzy with renewed nationalism. This would only led to another world war and another humiliating defeat. And another senseless waste of young lives.

As once the Legislative Body of the Holy Roman Empire, the Imperial Diet. It seemed only fitting that Nuremburg over saw the heinous war crimes of the Nazi Party tyrants and their lap dogs. Tyrants that forced their ideology onto peaceful citizens. An ideology that amounted to little more than self-actualization of their own insanity. Many of whom would find redemption for their sins at the end of the hangman's noose.

Phil gazed out at the historical city as it slowly rolled by his window. Beside him sat Michael. Recalling those unforgiving years. He had watched over the trials and subsequent hangings. Having gathered the lost sheep that had wandered too far from the Good Shepard. The city wounds had healed and the gallows had long since been dismantled and replaced with Cafes. Children played on the ancient streets unaware of Nuremburg's dark secrets.

The Eurostar rolled quietly unnoticed into the Nuremburg station. A bygone dust settled upon the train as it came to a halt. Brakes sounded a release of pressure relieved at last to have come to a momentary rest.

"Hold this." Said Arthur throwing Phil the bag to hold.

Phil caught it feeling the lethal object it contained.

"Careful there Arthur." Responded Phil aware of the gun with no safety catch.

"Oh sorry mate. I forgot... Just need to *see a man about a dog.*" Informed Arthur wanting to relieve himself. "Stay here okay."

"No worries mate... I'm not going anywhere." Said Phil still gazing out the window watching the passengers moving about.

Foreign faces, going about their lives. In all directions. Then contemplated their own direction. Budapest. The Cardinal watched the two men ahead of him. Francis had nodded off and was enjoying a dream of the young man venturing across America. The Cardinal lowered his eyes and read his newspaper. Unaware that he too had also lowered his guard. Behind him, a third set of eyes had boarded in Brussels. Waiting for the opportunity to make his move.

This set of eyes was aware of the Cardinal's identity and had intentionally stayed out of sight. Having had encounters with him in the past. The Cardinal remained seated and focused his attention on man ahead of him. Discreetly pulling a gun from brief case Braun stands and stretches his legs. Concealing the gun under the overcoat on his arm. Timing would ensure the Cardinal would remain on the train. Looking like a sharp businessman with a brief case Braun headed to the restroom and waited.

On trying to exit the restroom Arthur found himself confronted by a businessman standing in his way.

"Sorry... Excuse me." Asked Arthur, hoping the man would let him pass in the narrow corridor.

But the man just stood there and looked at Arthur with a cold unaccommodating face that said, *'I'm not going anywhere'*. Looking down at the overcoat and the barrel protruding from it. A panic came over Arthur at the thought that he had been cornered.

"Keep quiet and you live... This way." Braun pointed the barrel in the direction of the exit.

Hesitantly looking back towards Phil's direction, but feeling the gun pressing his back encouraging to walk the other way. Stepping onto the platform the chill of the German wind slapped Arthur's face.

'Wake up Arthur'.

But this was no dream. Phil was seated back in the carriage. Michael watched on from a distance. Unmoved.

"Walk! ... This way." Braun indicated the nearest station exit.

A car would be waiting for them.

Whistles sounded and brakes released their pressure. Protesting loudly and relieved to be moving again. Cabin doors closed gracefully sealing the occupants within. Phil gazed out the window and for a moment thought he saw Arthur. Then looking to Arthur's seat realizing he had not returned. Scanning the crowded platform again. His eager eyes extrapolated from his last sighting. There! A distance away. It was Arthur! What the hell was he doing off the train? Clutching the duffle bag Phil rushed to the nearest exit. The Cardinal watched on unsure what had excited Phil.

Then quickly came to the same conclusion. Arthur must be off the train.

The Eurostar moved slowly through the station. Phil reached the sealed door. Searching for a handle. Nothing. Then spotted the large red emergency exit button. Without thinking he pressed it and a loud warning alarm sounded and slowly the door slide open. The train was gathering speed. And Phil had no time to contemplate the consequences. Stay and leave Arthur behind. Jump and possibly kill himself.

He jumped.

Tumbling onto the platform and rolling several times before crashing into a rubbish bin. Sending its contents flying. Passengers watched in horror as Phil crashed onto the landing. The Cardinal watched on from his seat. Incapable of following. Trapped within the accelerating speeding train. Francis is awoken by the sudden alarm and looks about as to the cause of the commotion. The Cardinal explains to him what had just occurred assuring him that all was not lost. A minor setback perhaps. But nothing he could not handle.

Dwelling on the person responsible. One name came to mind, Julius Braun. Who else would it be? This was Germany. This was Braun's turf. And now Braun had the Cardinal's prize. The son. The train would be in Munich within an hour. The Cardinal could double back but that would only consume valuable time. But the Entity had resources in Germany. A phone call would have the Cassini's men on Braun's residences within the hour.

"Excuse me while I make a call Father." Advised Cassini.

"Of course Cardinal." Said Francis.

Bystanders had gathered around Phil curious to his condition. The duffle bag still secure in his arms. Phil staggered to his feet, shaken by the fall. Brushing off the abrasions from the tumbled landing he felt for any acute pains.

'Nothing broken', he thought.

Looking up he could see Arthur disappearing through the exit. Followed closely by a man pressing his arm into Arthur's back. Desperately Phil pushed his way through the bystanders and ran as fast as he could to catch up. Only to see Arthur being pushed into the back of large black Limonene. Spotting the nearest taxi Phil pushed aside the waiting passenger and climbed into the back.

"Follow that Limo!" Phil called out trying not to lose sight of the vehicle ahead of him.

The driver froze hesitant what to do, confused by the sudden demand. Phil opened the duffle bag and pulled out a fold of Euros. Peeling off a couple of notes and passing them to the driver. Money was an international language and the taxi drove off to follow the Limo.

“Keep your distance... I don’t want them to know we’re following them...” Phil began, “...My mate has just been kidnapped... By the man in that car!”

“Why didn’t you say?” Responded the driver happy for an adventure in his otherwise dull day.

Arthur looked about the spacious Limonene and then to the man sitting opposite who had abducted him. An ice cold chiseled face stared back at Arthur. The dark business suit gave Arthur no confidence as to the man’s respect for human life. The gun and overcoat resting on the man’s lap.

“What’s this all about? I know nothing.” Pleaded Arthur innocent of all charges.

Braun remained silent. They would talk when he was ready and not beforehand. The limonene drove south. Weaving its way through the ancient narrow streets. A while later arriving alongside a row of terraced stately manors. A wealthy neighbor with exotic cars that lined the quiet street. And the limonene stopped in front of one the manors.

The large black front door opened and Arthur was nudged by the gun in his back to step inside the brightly lit entrance. Priceless paintings hung from the walls. A massive crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. A rich Persian rug layered the length of a wooden hallway. Immense wealth bought immense power and immense corruption.

Moments later Phil’s taxi idled up down the street. In time to observe Arthur going into a house.

“Drive pass the house.” Phil instructed the driver. “I want to get a look... park just up there.” Indicating a space on the side on the road.

“You want me to wait? ... It will cost you.” The driver looked at Phil in the rear vision mirror.

“Money’s not an issue mate.” Said Phil tapping the duffle bag.

“Then I wait.” Responded the driver.

Without raising suspicion the taxi drove casually pass the manor. Phil scrutinized it features. Hoping to see life behind the lace draped windows. But seeing nothing. The lights were on but it seemed like no one was home. Only Arthur and the man.

‘Less to deal with.’ he thought to himself.

“These places have a back to them?” Phil asked the Driver.

“Of course... Kitchen delivery... Rubbish disposal.” Advised the driver.

“Good.” Responded Phil.

He had two plans. Plan-A, go silently through the back entrance. Or Plan-B,

simply knock on the front door with the gun.

“Stay here. I’m going to check out the back... Be ready to go at any moment... Okay?”

“Okay.” The driver agreed knowing if shooting begins he could always drive off.

Phil climbed from the cab taking the duffle bag with him and casually made his way around the corner to investigate the back entrance.

Nudging the barrel into Arthurs back, Braun directs him towards the den.

“Sit there.” Braun commanded.

A log fire blazed to the side. Filling the room with a warmth that did not match Arthur’s comfort. Arthur fell into a large leather chair. Its armrests coming almost up to his shoulders. And he wondered what formidable giants sat in such chairs. Feeling himself restrained by the armrests walling him in.

“What do you want?” Arthur pleaded again with again with no immediate response.

Looking about the enormous den he found himself. It dark wood features as dark as the man glaring at him. Glass cabinets lined the walls with odd shaped items. More like archaeological than art thought Arthur struggling to identify the objects.

“You are Arthur... Arthur McGee” Braun began to ask.

“Yes...” Arthur replied hesitantly as if being cross examined.

“Your father is Alistair McGee?” Continued Braun’s cross examination.

“That’s right... Do you know where he his?” Arthur asked confused the before him knew his father.

“I was hoping you would tell me.” Braun asked now wondering how much the young man before him knew.

Perhaps he had been premature in apprehending him.

“Where’s your father Arthur?” Braun asks more directly.

“I don’t know...” Arthur replied. “...How do you know my father? Where is he?” Arthur asked hoping someone would throw light on the mystery of his father.

“Your father and I are close... Acquaintances, shall we say... We have had a number of dealings in the past... And I am very keen to transact another very soon with him.”

“Why don’t you simply contact the company? I am sure they can supply your stationary supplies.” Arthur responded innocently.

“Stationary supplies? ...” Retorted Braun. “...You really have no idea do you?” Braun was beginning to understand that Arthur knew very nothing about

his father's secret life.

"Know what Sir?" Arthur asked.

But Braun did not answer.

"Where are you heading Arthur?" Braun enquired, curious as to why Arthur was on the train.

"Budapest... My father told me to head to Budapest and wait... Someone would meet me at the station." Arthur lied suspecting Braun knew nothing of his father's letter.

The letter was in the duffle bag with Phil. On the train heading further away by the minute. Leaving him further behind.

And he wondered what Phil would be thinking at this moment.



The Great Escape

The only thing Phil was thinking at that moment was how to get inside the mysterious building. Cautiously he made his way down the narrow alleyway behind the terraced manors. Hoping none of the residents would call the police that would haul him away. Stopping at the back entrance he thought Arthur was held. Peering over the fence Phil sees a hive of activity in the kitchen with servants preparing meals.

“Bugger.” Phil exclaimed.

Plan A was off the menu. It would have to be a frontal assault and he cautiously retraced his steps back to the taxi hoping to avoid detection by prying neighbors.

“You okay?” Phil asks the driver.

“Yeah... All good here... Funny thing though...” The driver began.

“What’s that?” Asked Phil.

“Don’t look now... But I saw a car park up down the street... The small grey vehicle.”

Phil discreetly looks about and sees the vehicle parked to the side of the road. The man behind the wheel was looking directly back at him. Unafraid to let Phil know he was watching him.

‘Who was he?’ Thought Phil. *‘And how is he involved with the man in the house?’* Phil had no answers.

“He’s been sitting there watching that house your friend went into.” The driver advised unsure of the situation that was developing by the moment.

Arthur was in danger and he would have to wing it and see what happens.

“If you want to take off... I understand.” Said Phil. “But if you stick around I can make it worth your while... Keep your head down... And get ready to leave at any moment... Okay?”

“Okay.” Confirmed the driver looking in the rear vision mirror.

“Back way is crowded... I’m going to have to use the front entrance... See you soon.” Said Phil heading to front door of the manor.

“Good luck.” Calls out the driver.

“Budapest you say?” Questions Braun with eager ears listening.

Braun’s mind wondered what was there that would cause the son to head there. Word had surfaced on the grapevine that Arthur’s father was in Istanbul. Could he have made his way to Budapest to rendezvous with his son? Braun

stared at Arthur looking confused and innocent. What to do with him. Release him and follow him, or detain him and use him as bait. Assuming his father had not already relinquished of the ring to others in the chain. Braun was faced with an expected dilemma, had he pounced too soon?

There was a knock at the front door. Aware that his father was entertaining a guest in his den, Braun's son Augustus went to answer it. The door opens and on the doorstep stands Phil looking a little worse for wear from his tumble from the train. The battered duffle hanging from his shoulder looking equally worse for wear.

Augustus eyes Phil over and assesses him to be a beggar looking for food.

"Perhaps the back entrance might be able to help you." Augustus responds to the Phil's appearance and begins to close the door.

"Funny thing is I looked there... But it seemed a little busy for my liking... So I thought would try the front door." Joked Phil understanding that he was being told to bugger off.

"Then we really cannot help you." Responded Augustus and closes the door abruptly in Phil's face.

Phil knocks again. And Augustus opens the door to find him still standing there.

"I have already told you... We cannot help you... Now *please* leave before I call the *police*."

"I think you can, you see... My friend is here... And I would like him back." Phil informed Augustus who was unaware of Arthur's captivity.

But then wondered who his father was talking to.

"Your friend is not here... Now please leave before I call the police." Warned Augustus.

"Perhaps this might jog your memory..."

Phil draws the gun from behind his back and points it directly at August.

"Inside... now!"

Phil enters the same spacious hallway Arthur had found himself. Blinded by the richness. Phil could hear voices talking. One of them was Arthur's. Raising the gun to Augustus' head and nudges him towards his father's den. Braun looks up to see his son standing in the door way. With a Glock pointed at his head.

"It seems we have a visitor father." Augustus announces calmly.

"I see..." Responds Braun as calmly as his son. "Why don't you have a seat Augustus?" Encouraging his son to step away from the gun.

"And who might you be young man?" Braun begins to enquire.

"No one you need to know about... More importantly... Who are you?"

Asked Phil keen for some answers.

"I am a good friend of Arthur's father." Deflecting the question. "We were just discussing him... Weren't we Arthur?" Braun played with Phil.

Phil looked to Arthur to confirm the discussion. Arthur looked up at Phil stunned by his miraculous appearance and the sudden turn of events.

"How the hell did Phil get off the train? ... How did he find me?" Arthur asked stunned by Phil's sudden appearance.

"I'll explain later over a beer..." Exclaimed Phil wanting to get moving.

Unsure where Braun's gun was.

"Keep your hands where I can see them." Phil's eyes searching the desk and room for the weapon.

"Actually... Arthur was just leaving... I hope I haven't caused you too much alarm Arthur. I am as eager to find your father as you are." Coaxed Braun's cryptic reply.

"Stay away from Arthur's father... And stay away from us... I warn you." Warned Phil pointing the gun as though it was a finger at Braun.

"Unfortunately I don't scare too easily young man... But thank you for that piece of advice." Braun replied.

Braun could sense Phil's his nervousness. Sweat was appearing on his forehead and his breathing had become short and shallow. The way he was holding the gun suggested he was uncomfortable with it in his hand.

"It was very nice to meet you Arthur. Perhaps we'll meet again." Braun casually walked to the liquor cabinet and poured two short glasses of whiskey.

Handing one to Augustus who sat composed watching on unafraid as his father was at having a gun pointed towards them.

"You know your way out gentlemen." Braun instructed suggesting it was time for them to leave.

Arthur stood and regained his balance after being walled in by the large leather arm chair. Confused by his abduction. Confused by Phil's sudden appearance. Confused by his sudden release. Confused even more of his father's secret life and the man who apparently knew his father.

"Let's get out if here... I have a car waiting." Phil told Arthur.

Arthur took one last look at the man who had abducted him at gun point. Burning his face into his memory. Phil followed at the rear with the gun at the ready.

"Over there! ... That taxi!" Called out Phil.

Shoving the Glock down the back of his trousers. They walked calmly to the taxi hoping no one had noticed. It was a wealthy street and wealth bought

corruption and corruption brought silence. Phil doubted anyone would lift a receiver too quickly. Looking back at the large black front door. Anticipating a fire-fight at any moment. Arthur fell into the back seat of the cab. The driver was astonished that his friend had rescued him. Phil looked up at the small grey car still watching them from a distance.

'Who the hell are you?' Thought Phil now unsure to the players involved.

"Let's get out of here." Phil patted the driver on the shoulder.

"Where to?" Asked the driver accelerating away.

"Munich." Instructed Phil. "Munich."

"It's going to cost you."

"No worries mate... We've got the money." Said Phil holding up the duffle bag to the rear vision mirror.

"Sweet as." Replies the driver, it was going to be a good pay day.

"Munich?" Asked Arthur.

"You're a wanted man Arthur... Others could be waiting for us back at the station... Best we get the jump on them." Phil surmised. "We need to get to Budapest... And going backwards is not an option."

"I see what you mean." Agreed Arthur keen to get moving again looking over his shoulder expecting a car to be following.

"What was that all about back there? ... You know the guy?" Phil asked curiously.

"Never seen the guy before in my life... But he seems to know my father though ... Not sure how. Nothing to do with office supplies... There's something bigger at stake here Phil... Something that could get us killed if we're not careful." Arthur tried to fathom his father's secret life.

What was he trading if it was not stationary products? Then wondered if it had something to do with the strange objects in the man's glass cabinets?

"So how did you get off the train?" Asked Arthur curiously.

"I jumped." Explained Phil in the only way he could.

"You could have killed yourself!" Exclaimed Arthur.

"Nah... Dangers my middle name remember... I'm starting to like this adventure." Said Phil pumped.

"It's quickly becoming your first name." Said Arthur. "But thanks mate... I owe you big time."

"You can buy me a beer." Suggested Phil of a reward.

"Don't push your luck! ..." Replied Arthur, then added. "...well perhaps one." And conceded, relieved to have escaped.

Then remembered.

"What about our packs? ... They're still on the train." Asked Phil.

“We’ve got the most important bag here.” Said Arthur patting the duffle bag now back on his lap. “I’m sure they’ll put our packs to lost property or something once they find them... Especially after seeing you jump from the train.”

“Yeah I suppose you’re right... We can get the next train out of Munich.” Suggested Phil.

“We have to be more vigilant. Dad was right about people being after us.” Arthur looked out the window at the parked cars.

Wondering if one would come to life and begin following them. Phil looked out the rear window in search of the small grey car. Speculating who they were and why they had been watching.

“This is bigger than we think is Arthur... Keep an eye out for that grey car.” Phil called out to the driver.

“Will do.” The driver responded his eyes scanning the rear mirrors for anything suspicious.

The Cardinal’s mobile vibrates indicating he had an incoming call. And he listens intently to the series of events and smiles.

“Hmm I see... Thank you.” And disconnects the call.

“Is everything fine Cardinal.” Asks Francis curious to the call.

“Good news Father... It seems Arthur’s friend has managed to rescue him. They are heading to Munich as we speak.” Chuckled the Cardinal amused that Braun had been scripted of his prize possession.

“That is good news.” Responded Francis.

“We should be expecting them back on board any moment.” Advised the Cardinal. “Fortunate for them the train has been delayed here in Munich... Otherwise they would have missed it.”

The Cardinal pondered why the Eurostar had suddenly malfunctioned. It was the first time in its history that it had ever been unable to keep to a scheduled service. Straggling English passengers relished in the delay.

Engineers were dumbfounded as to the reason for the malfunction. The Eurostar simply refused to move. Like a stubborn mule it had dug its toes in. Everything appeared to be in order. Fuses were intact, lights showed circuits were flowing. There were no warning lights flashing indicating a fault. Test after test came back as successful. Yet the engines refused to come to life.

What the engineers had failed to notice was Michael standing in the corner. Looking innocently on as if He had nothing to do with it.



Munich

“Get the Helicopter ready...” Braun calls out instructions over the phone.

“Is there a problem father?” Augustus asks.

“Nothing I can’t handle. Hold the fort here... I won’t be long.” Advised Braun.

Wanting to get to Munich before Arthur and his friend. Braun’s Limousine headed to a private air strip. A small grey car followed some distance behind.

“I see... keep me informed.” The Cardinal instructed.

Then disconnected the call. Contemplating Braun’s next move.

“Seems Mister Braun does not know when to let a good thing go.”

“Oh dear...” Responds Francis unsure what to make of Braun’s perpetual interest in Arthur.

“The prize is too great for him... I will need to have a word with him personally.” Said the Cardinal thinking out his next step.

While the train remained stranded, so did Arthur and the risk of Braun apprehending him again increased.

“I’m going for a walk.” The Cardinal suggested, as if about to go for a leisurely stroll. “Stay with these two. I suspect they won’t go anywhere without Arthur and his friend.”

“Yes Cardinal.” Said Francis turning his attention to the two gentlemen looking confused as to where their package had disappeared to.

Gathering his overcoat the Cardinal made his way off the train and blended into the people shuffling about the platform. And disappeared into the shadows. Waiting for Braun to appear and make his move. Arthur was *his* prize and he was not about to share it with Braun. Calculating that Arthur would arrive in just under an hour and Braun half an hour before that. Assuming Braun had nothing up his sleeve. The Cardinal uttered a short prayer, calling upon unseen forces to rupture Braun’s plans.

“Ita sit. Amen.” The Cardinal dispatched his prayer before crossing himself hoping to keep the bloodshed to a minimum.

The taxi raced along the narrow country road, hidden by tall trees that lined the shoulders. Phil searched the road behind them. His eyes failed to see Braun’s corporate helicopter keeping pace with the taxi hovering some hundred meters above them.

“Down there!” Pointed Braun to a clear section of road.

The Helicopter moved ahead and lowered itself to hover but a meter above the road. Armed men opened the side door ready to fire. An intimidating sight awaited the taxi as it rounded the corner.

Phil pulled the gun from behind his back on seeing the hovering helicopter.

‘If it’s a gun fight you want... It’s a gun fight you get!’ Thought Phil ready to step up to the giant hovering ahead of them.

“Keep driving! ... Don’t stop whatever happens.” Asserted Phil calling Braun’s bluff.

Having assessed the Braun’s bold maneuver and done the math. Five thousand euro Taxi. Five million euro Helicopter. And five thousand goes in to five million as many times as it likes. Braun would not risk the helicopter, little alone his own life for a taxi.

“Faster!” Phil pleaded the driver now running on adrenalin. “Trust me... They’re not going to stick around with us coming at them. “They want to play chicken... Well guess what? ... I’ll give them chicken!”

The taxi rallied recklessly towards the hovering helicopter. Automatic fire rang out spitting bullets into the road hoping to deter the driver. But the taxi kept coming as bullets pitted the road. Causing the small grey car to back off to avoid any collision and bullets. Arthur gripped the front seat in panic and waited for an impact at any moment.

“Again!” Shouted Braun over the headset. They were proving stubborn.

Another round of automatic fired punched into the road. Sending stones and dust flying. But leaving the taxi unscarred. Braun wanted his prize alive not dead. The taxi sprinted closer and closer. Now it was Braun’s turn to blink. The pilot, sensing a collision was imminent pulled frantically up on the control stick. Straining to regain the meagre altitude required to avoid a devastating collision.

It was going to be close thought Phil. But what the heck. Phil could the whites of Braun’s eyes. Braun glared at him knowing he had outwitted him again. Arthur and the driver closed their eyes as the roof of the taxi slid under the helicopter skids. Missing it by millimeters and raced into the distance. Shrouded again by tall trees that edged the road.

“That was close! ... Great driving!” Phil called out to the driver. “How much further to Munich?”

“Another half hour... Better we get on the autobahn and avoid these back roads.” Suggested the driver. “Might keep that helicopter away.”

“Yeah good idea.” Said Phil.

“Your friend must be very important.” Said the driver.

“Yeah he is.” Reflected Phil realizing the number of encounters he had that

day.

And the day was far over.

"You okay?" Phil asked Arthur looking traumatized by his abduction and miraculous escape.

Arthur stared out the window of the taxi into the distance. Unable to focus on the untamed Germanic country side that rushed violently by. Braun's cold face etched into Arthur's mind. Wondering if it could get any worse.

'Safety in numbers', he thought thankful Phil had invited himself.

"Let's just hope this Professor Almesh has some answers for us after all this." Said Arthur.

Time was up. Braun would arrive any moment with Arthur would not be far behind. The Cardinal had his men blending in as passengers. Watchful of Braun's arrival and his henchmen in tow. The mobile vibrated alerting the Cardinal of Braun's had arrived six o'clock to the Cardinal's position. Lowering his hat the Cardinal lifted his paper. Turning around to peer over his shoulder to see Braun and two henchmen approaching the train. Braun sent his men in different directions in search of Arthur and his friend. But Braun and his men stood out in their dark business suits among the tired commuters.

'Fish out of water...' Cassini thought. *'...and it's time to go fishing.'*

"Take the men... Braun's mine." Cassini messaged back to his men, watching on some distance.

The train was still mysteriously delayed and it seemed it would be some time before it would ever get moving again. Michael watched on as the engineers investigated the unexplainable fault. The circuits showed everything was operation, yet for some heavenly reason, the engines refused to turnover.

A taxi cab pulls up to the curb of the station. The passengers looked about the commuters walking about the sidewalk. No one stood out.

"Time to pay the ferry man." Said Phil reaching into the duffle bag as a luck dip.

Pulling out a roll of Euros and peeling off a handful of notes and handed them to the driver.

"That enough?" Phil asks the driver.

"More than enough. Thanks... You boys take care... Keep an eye on that one." The driver indicated Arthur.

"Will do... You too." Said Phil throwing the bag over his shoulder and heading inside the station.

The gun shoved down the back of his trousers and at the ready should it be

required.

“We can catch the next train out of here... We’ve got open tickets.” Said Arthur walking tentatively into the station.

Arthur looked about for gentleman with overcoats on their arms fearful of Braun, his face still fresh in his mind. Then seeing the Eurostar motionless beside the platform.

“That’s not our train is it?” Asked Arthur curiously.

“Nah... Can’t be. Must be another one.” Responded Phil not looking too closely at the elongated locomotive.

“I think it is...” Said Arthur inspecting the familiar looking beast. “That’s out carriage there... There! ... Number forty-two! I remember that!”

“Nah mate. You’re dreaming... Our train would have long gone...” Exclaimed Phil, but was now beginning to see what Arthur was seeing. “...It can’t be? Can it?” Asked Phil confused at the sight.

“Only one way to find out.” Said Arthur heading to the doorway.

Braun spotted the two young men and was about to follow when he felt something press against him from behind. The Cardinal nudged the concealed biretta’s silencer into the Braun’s back.

“Stay where you are Julius.” Cassini warned.

“Ah_ Cardinal... How nice of you to stop by.” Braun said calmly.

It was not the first time today a gun had been directed at him.

“This way...” The Cardinal suggested they should talk in his office, the restroom.

Braun scanned the platform for his men then realized they too may have be preoccupied by the Cardinal’s men. They waited for the restroom to clear before they would continue their discussion.

“Keep away from the boy... He’s mind.” Warned the Cassini.

“The prize is too valuable to give up so easily Cardinal... I’m afraid there is already a price on his head. Word is out... You have competition. Besides... What are you going to do shot an unarmed man?” Braun lifted his arms as if to show his innocence.

“Now there’s an idea.” Said Cassini raising his gun.

“You wouldn’t?” Braun asked apprehensively, unsure how far the Cardinal would go.

“Oh... Wouldn’t I?” Asked Cassini.

The Cardinal steadied himself, took aim and fired a single shot.

‘Thud!’ A soft sharp echo resonated off the tiled walls.

Watching Braun fall to the ground like a rag doll. Clutching his leg.

“You bastard!” Braun cursed aloud.

“That should slow you down... Now back off... The boy is mine... I won’t warn you again.”

Braun clutched his leg in agony at the burning flesh wound. Watching on as the Cardinal calmly walked from the restroom. Braun’s men had been captured and momentarily detained to be watched over until the train departed. The Cardinal returned to the train and took his seat beside Francis.

“Is everything alright Cardinal?” Asked Francis innocently, unaware of the Cardinal’s intervention. “Arthur and his friend have returned... That was fortunate.”

“Yes... Very fortunate.” Said Cassini.

A loud whistle blew. A voice called out for all to board. English stragglers would be left behind cursing the efficiency of European timetables. And the large carriage doors closed gracefully. Sealing the occupants within the locomotive’s belly. Brakes sighed at the relief. Releasing the train from its eternal bondage. The cause of the malfunction was never found. As if by a miracle the engines had resurrected themselves to life.

“Can’t believe this is our train. Our packs are still here!” Said Phil looking about the carriage.

“Can’t believe a lot of things today mate.” Said Arthur reflecting on his abduction and miraculous rescue.

Only to find themselves back on the same train. Arthur struggled to reconcile the day’s events. Thinking only that morning they were having ginger cake and tea with his Aunt.

“Don’t know what I would have done without you Phil... Thanks for coming.” Said Arthur.

“I know you’d do the same for me.” Deflected Phil.

Michael took his seat and the Eurostar moved slowly from the station.

For some unknown reason thoughts of Zara at the café entered Arthur’s mind. As if to distract him from danger around him. Wondering what she was doing. Her smile made him smile as he gazed at the tranquil Germanic countryside rolled harmlessly by. He was cocooned in the belly of a metal beast that refused to leave him behind. That was taking him deeper into the heart of Eastern Europe.

Further away from Zara and further away from Home.



Vienna

Morning broke and beams of sun light rained through the hotel windows. Filling the hotel room with the new light. Arthur opened his eyes, disoriented by the plastered ceiling. This was not his room back in Watford. Looking about he saw Phil sleeping in the bed opposite.

Sheepishly he pulled himself upright and gathered his thoughts. Piecing together the events that had got him there. As his mind re-calibrated the new surroundings Phil stirred and animated himself to life again and stood lethargically and scratched his crotch. Stretched his arms and wandered towards the bathroom as if he had always lived there.

'Nothing fazes him', thought Arthur.

Over sixteen hundred kilometers from home and Phil was already operating on autopilot. A few moments later Phil reappeared staggering back into the room frothing at the mouth. Mumbling what could have been words. But sounded more like pain.

'Nerve agent', thought Arthur.

Assassins must have poisoned him.

Arthur sat frozen helplessly watching his best mate about to die before his eyes. Reaching for the telephone and begins to dial 111. Phil's distorted face twitching his eyes rolling in their sockets. Struggling, searching for his final words that would not come.

"Hmm!" Responded Phil in his dying breath.

Tilting his head back to resume brushing his teeth. Gargling and gurgling his way back to the bathroom. A voice on the other end of the phone could be heard through the ear piece.

"Sorry... Wrong number." Arthur answered and quickly hung up the phone.

Sometime later Phil reappeared looking a more alive than having been poisoned. Totally unaware of the near death experience he had just survived.

"Morning Arthur... How'd you sleep?" He asked chirpily.

"Not bad... I must have been tired... Went out like a light." Replied Arthur still disoriented. "What were you trying saying when you came out before?"

"Oh I was just wondering what our plans were today... But I could see you were on the phone." Said Phil more coherently than before.

"Oh that was just a wrong number..." Explained Arthur. "...We need to get to Budapest and visit that Professor... Almesh... And get some answers to what's going on with my father... The train leaves at quarter to ten... We should get to

Budapest just after midday... See if your laptop works over here and check out the location... We can catch a taxi there from the station.”

With that Phil booted his laptop to life to help find the University. But also to check his emails.

“I’ll take a quick shower and freshen up... We can grab a bite on the way while we’re waiting for the train. The sooner we leave the more time we’ll have with the Professor...” Arthur said grabbing a towel. “...No time for sightseeing I’m afraid... Maybe after the University... Then we can all go home.” Called out Arthur heading to the bathroom.

The Cardinal and Francis stayed at a much more luxurious hotel. And were awaking to even more lavish surroundings. The Vatican spared no expense when looking after its top employees. Though the Cardinal had long ceased being an employee the moment he was initiated into the fraternity of the Holy Alliance. Francis found the Hotel a little extravagant for his humble tastes. But surrendered to the Cardinal’s will and that of the Church. There would be no rush for them. They knew Arthur’s destination before he did. They would rendezvous incognito at the station. The Cardinal had a short squat matter to attend to before they left that morning. Nothing that would implicate Francis, other than by association.

Feeling more alive than dead, Arthur and Phil made their way from of the hotel and waved down the first passing taxi. Throwing their packs into the backseat Arthur kept the duffle bag close. Instructing the driver to head back to the railway station. They sat back and saw the beauty of Vienna as it passed them by.

They had arrived in the dark but now they saw Vienna in all its imperial glory. What they could not see they could only feel. The artistic and intellectual legacy of former residents. Mozart, Beethoven and Sigmund Freud. The Danube River divided the city. Imperial palaces and grand summer residences scattered on either side. Scars left by the pox riddled Holy Roman Empire. It is said that Hitler, Trotsky, Stalin and Freud all lived within central Vienna and had frequented the same coffee houses. It is said that even the humble Croissant owes its shape to Vienna and that it had been created to celebrate the victory over the Ottoman siege and their crescent moon flag.

But the City of Dreams would have to wait another day thought Arthur. There was a train to catch and Vienna would still be here when he got back. As would the coffee house ghosts. Whether he would be was another matter.

The Cardinal had arrived an hour early at the station. Hoping to catch the short

squat man alone. He was sure the man would appear. And as if by the clock work of God he did. The Cardinal would wait for his opportunity. Pulling down his grey hat then pulling up the collars of his grey overcoat to protect himself from chill of the morning air and the chill from the CCTV cameras. The fine Italian grey leather gloves were for warmth. Black rimmed glasses distorted his appearance further.

The short squat man sat at a café with an espresso coffee and the latest copy of the Guardian and waited for Arthur to arrive. The Cardinal would wait and watch for his prey to make his elementary move. To the restroom. The Cardinal was a patient man, he had been his whole life. Allowing the man a final coffee.

The short squat man stood and predictably headed in the direction of the rest room. Apparently unaware he was being followed by the Cardinal. What had to be done, had to be done silently. However the Cardinal may have given the man too much of a head start. For when he reached the restroom the man had disappeared from sight. The Cardinal's intuition whispered something was amiss in his ear

Suddenly the Cardinal felt a sharp blow to his rib cage from behind. Winding him and sending him to the ground. The short squat man began kicking at the Cardinal's body. Softening him up before the kill. Pulling a concealed hunting knife the man lunged down at the Cardinal. Only to roll away in time. The knife's tip striking the hard tiled floor and sending a sharp metallic sound echoing about the walls of the tiled restroom. The Cardinal rolled again and again to avoid the repeated stabs and allowing him time to reach for his Beretta, affixed with silencer.

The Cardinal rolled on his back and aimed directly at the short squat man. Three sharp shots rang out quietly.

'Thud! Thud! Thud!'

Death was instant. Death was silent. Michael stood nearby to pick up the pieces of the fallen soul. The short squat man fell to the ground. The knife falling from his hand onto the polished tiled floor. Making more noise than the shots that had been fired. The Cardinal picked himself up and pulled the man into an empty cubicle. Turning to close the door saw the short squat man sitting there. Deceased. The Cardinal crossed himself. Muttered a quiet prayer under his breath. A final absolution forgiving the man of his sins. God might understand the man's transgression. But the Cardinal could not.

Closing the cubicle door behind him. Securing it the best he could. The CCTV cameras would have them both going in and only the Cardinal coming out. Along with numerous others that would come and go that day.

Calmly the Cardinal composed himself. Pulling up his collars of his large

grey coat. Adjusting his grey hat and finally his glasses. And existed the restroom just as two other gentlemen entered. It had been a nasty affair but then affairs always are. It could well be him sitting in the cubicle right now.

The Cardinal questioned how the short squat man knew that he was on the trail of the son? Someone, somewhere must have told him.

'A leak at the Vatican.' he thought.

A name came to mind, Dovizi. He would keep until his return and he would plug it personally. But who had the dead man been working for? Braun had been silenced back in Munich. Unlikely to be one of his. This was another relic collector who had shown his hand and now were holding one less card.

It would be a comparatively short ride from Vienna to Budapest in heart of Hungary. There Arthur hoped he would find the answers to the questions that had been haunting him since he received the letter from his father. They had formed a relationship with the Eurostar and were becoming attached and becoming familiar with each other. But soon the relationship would need to be broken off. This would be their last dance together.

Arthur and Phil found their assigned seats and resumed their positions staring out the window as people walked by on the platform outside.

Then Phil noticed someone.

"I think I know that guy." Phil exclaimed to Arthur quickly before he disappeared from sight.

"Who?" Arthur asked.

"The old man in that grey coat... Grey hat, dark glasses... over there!" Phil said trying hard to describe him.

But the more he tried the less he could. It was as if the man was incapable of being seen.

"I think I see him." Arthur said who was having trouble to focusing on him. "How do you know him?"

"I thought I saw him at the Belgium Beer Café back in Brussels... And in the Frankfurt restroom. But I don't think he had glasses then." Phil said with some doubt.

"Maybe it's a different guy?" Suggested Arthur unconcerned by the man's appearance that had blended into the platform then lost sight of him.

"Or maybe he's *following* us?" Claimed Phil sounding paranoid.

"He doesn't look like the following type of guy... He looks more like a *Priest*." Said Arthur accidently. "Keep an eye on him anyway... I'm going to read my book." Dismissing the sighting.

Arthur pulled out a large paperback and continued to read. It would take a

couple of hours to reach Budapest he may as well enjoy the ride.

Phil watched the man in the grey coat board the train and take his seat in the carriage behind them. Now it was Phil's turn to have a moment of clarity. It was coming back to him again. Outside the restroom on the train, Brussels. It was him, he was certain.

Arthur was absorbed by his book. A story of the rise and fall of a family dynasty, of slavery and civil war. And an island slowly dissolving around them. The sooner they were be in Budapest the sooner they would be moving away from the man in grey coat and grey hat and black glasses.

Francis arrived with the bags. Unaware of the ecclesiastical justice had just been dispensed. The man in grey coat took his place in the bright orange seat opposite his apprentice and like a Chameleon blended into the upholstery. The Cardinal advised Francis that the short squat man would be remaining behind in Vienna unable to continue his journey. The cleaners would eventually find him in time. The knife being the only clue to the course of events that led to his death. Any suspicions of the Cardinal being connected to the death would be summarily dismissed. A Cardinal with Vatican credentials. Travelling with a Father to Budapest on papal business. The Cardinal refocused his attention to the newspaper in front of him and his quarry just on its horizon.

The Eurostar moved speedily across the country side. If one took the time to glance out the large windows they would have noticed they had crossed into Hungary. They had crossed into a murder scene.



Hungary

Hungary had seen its share of bloodshed over the millennia. The Romans had come and gone. The Crusades had come and gone. Attila the Hun had returned home after years of plundering Europe only to die from a nose bleed on his wedding night. The Mongols would pass through offering to help the Christians fight the Persians. Only to be declined and to slaughter the Persians anyway.

The twentieth century brought weapons of mass destruction. Social unrest fueled by Marxist ideals of freeing the working class from oppression under the capitalist yoke. Europe was a tinker-box waiting for someone to light a match or shoot an Archduke. Wars would be fought by proxy and young men from around the world would be conscripted to die in foreign fields on their behalf. The only neutral parties in a war are those that make money from it. And when it was all over and dividends distributed, Kings would return to their country clubs and continue their extramarital affairs. Young men would lay beneath fields of blood red poppies. A cheap memorial for their widowed brides.

In Russia communism would take root and spread its obnoxious vines. Indiscriminate as to what it strangled or suffocated. But history, much like Nature, always kept anomalies in check. Decades later another social unrest would uproot the socialist weed and return Hungary its former freedom.

The Eurostar train rolled theatrically into the massive Hungarian Budapest station. Everything in Hungary was massive. Monstrous and grey. Arthur was engrossed by the melodramatic events playing out in his book, unaware that his own life was already surrounded by equally dramatic events and death. Forces were at play to ensure the acquisition of the relic. Forces that had resources and credit around the world. As did the Vatican.

Finally, they had arrived in the fabled lands of Budapest.

“Now let’s find the Professor and finally get some answers.” Said Arthur keen to get going.

Grabbing their packs they exited the train for the last time and made their way out of the massive railway station. If anyone knows their way about a city it would be a taxi driver. Money was an international language. With a duffle bag full of British pounds and EU Euros. Arthur and Phil were bi-lingual. Making their way down the long steps of the Station and they looked about for a taxi. Not seeing one and wondered if Budapest even had them. Then one appeared, soon followed by another.

Waving one down as it pulled to the curb. Throwing themselves into the

backseat.

“Where tou?” The driver asked in his best English.

“The University please.” Instructed Phil.

“You tou studunts? Nol?” Asked the driver curiously.

“Yes... But former students? How about you?” Phil asked to get the driver talking.

“Nol nol, I just ae taaxi driva.” Happy to practice his English.

“How far is it?” Asked Arthur curiously.

“Ohh, nalt daat faar... Maaybee... Hoaw you say... Ton muntutes... Nol?” The driver replied with a smile.

“Ten minutes. Sound good, thank you... Your English very good.” Phil offered to commend the driver for his efforts.

At least the driver spoke better English than they could speak Hungarian thought Arthur.

“Danka You... I trie too leaurn eacha daay... Danka You.” Quite pleased with himself.

The driver’s large dark eyes appearing large in the rear mirror. Not so much to look at Arthur or Phil but to the taxi that was following them suspiciously. The driver would say nothing. It was none of his business. Hungary was still a dangerous place. What was a few more drops of blood? But he did not intend it to be his. He would drop these so called *students* at the University gates. Take the fare and ask no more questions and go home to his family in one piece. Nobody asked too many questions in Hungary.

The old regime may have collapsed. But there were always revolutionaries conspiring in the shadows waiting to make their move. Crossing himself as he drove away. Hoping that would be the last he would see of the two young men.

The two young men stood at the entrance to Budapest University. Located in the banks of the Danube. Considered to be one of the oldest Universities in Europe. Offering a considerable range of faculties but the only faculty that interested Arthur was History and Antiquities. Phil however found his own faculty and was heading over to a group of young ladies that had gathered on the grass for lunch.

“Oh_ I’ll be fine mate... Don’t worry about me.” Arthur called out to Phil as he was walking away as if some magnetic attraction.

“Go find your Professor... I’m going to practice my Hungarian...” Suggested Phil focusing on his targets, “... You know where to find me”.

“Yeah... That won’t be too hard will it?” Called out Arthur. “... Stay here okay?”

But Phil was already engaging with the young ladies already giggling at his

charm and his English accent.

A short while later at the same gates. Another taxi pulled up and two gentleman waited before they exited the vehicle. Phil was too distracted to notice the man in the grey suit. His attention had been drawn to a long legged brunette with a short grey skirt. The Cardinal and Francis strolled about the campus looking very much like an old Professor and his protégé. They would maintain their distance until Arthur was with his father.

Arthur found the central Administration block and enquired where he could find a Professor Almesh. Professor of Religious History and Ancient Antiquities. The receptionist informed him of the direction and building he should head towards. Adding that the Professor may be having a nap between tutorials as he often did. Being a senior academic had its benefits and afternoon naps was one of them.

Following the directions the receptionist had given him it lead him some distance from where he had left Phil. Walking a gravel path that ran beside the Danube River. Captivated by the beauty of its ancient architecture and the romantic river flowing by.

'What an amazing university', he thought.

Arriving at the entrance of a building. Arthur entered the darkened hallway. Adjusting his eyes to the dissolving darkness he found himself in a long wooden hallway. Aging pictures of academics in heavy wooden frames hung from its tall dark walls. Doors on either side suggested offices. But which one belonged to Professors Almesh? Slowly making his way down the hall looking at each door in turn. Students walked by holding books in their arms reminded him for his time at Edinburgh. Also an ancient and historical university.

'We had our share of blood shed too', Arthur reminded the hallowed walls. Though strictly speaking he was English, his academic heart was Scottish.

And then it appeared before him.

The door he had travelled the width of Europe in just over a day to visit. Frozen he stared at the door. Not knowing what to do next. Reading the sign on the door to confirm he was at the right place...

Professor Ali Almesh
Religious History and Studies in Antiquities



Professor Almesh

Arthur stood frozen and looked at the plaque on half open door that stated in small concise lettering:

Professor Ali Almesh Religious History and Studies in Antiquities

He knocked so as not to move it unnecessarily. Peering into the room. Hoping someone was at the desk he could see from the door way.

“Come in! ... Come in!” Called out a voice as if calling out to a student late for their tutorial.

The voice barely matched the owner’s nationality. Years of lecturing at Oxford and sabbaticals in foreign countries had diluted his Albanian accent. The Professor’s office was what Arthur had expected. A desk covered with open books. Cluttered with stacks of paper on any spare available space. It reminded him of an old black and white picture he had seen in a magazine of Einstein’s desk at Princeton University. Only this office was in living color. Shelves upon shelves of dust covered books. Academic studies long since graded and forgotten. And what appeared to be scrolls of maps stacked in an umbrella stand in the corner of the office.

The Professor was dressed as any absent minded Professor would be. Mismatched clothing and a fashion sense that had no place in his vocabulary, nor faculty. His grey hair was in need of combing. His chin in need of a razor. And his were eyes in need of sleep. A large coffee mug occupied one hand and the Professor signaled with the other for Arthur to enter the office.

“Come in young man... Come in... Hurry now.” Ushered the Professor as if Arthur had actually come for a tutorial or to discuss about his studies.

The Professor examined Arthur’s face. He knew most of the students about the campus but Arthur’s was unfamiliar.

“You’re not one of my students... Are you?” The Professor asked peering over his reading glasses.

Inquisitively the Professor could see something was troubling Arthur.

“No sir... I didn’t study here.” Replied Arthur as though trespassing.

“Oh really... What University would that be? ... What did you study?” The professor enquired calmly sensing Arthur had graduated somewhere.

But also engaging him in conversation to connect to him.

“Edinburgh... School of Engineering.” Replied Arthur proudly and adding his own intellectual authority.

“What’s your name son?” Asked the Professor becoming more direct.

“Arthur... Arthur McGee.” Replied Arthur.

Unsure what to say next, or how to say it. His visit was uninvited, an intrusion. And wondered if the Professor knew of his father.

The Professor angled his head slightly. His eyes opened a little wider and his thick dark eye brows lifted from their static horizontal station. Creating frown lines on the Professor’s large forehead. If there was such a thing as body language. The Professor was now speaking several languages at once.

“McGee you say?” Pausing before asking the next question. “Any relation to Alistair McGee?” The Professor probed further.

“He’s my father Sir.” Answered Arthur unsure whether this was a good thing.

“Well then son... Welcome... I’ve been expecting you.” Said the Professor standing to walk to the door.

Peering up and down the hall way for lingering bodies that were out of place. On closing the door. Pulled a key from his pocket and locked it.

‘Clunk, clunk.’ Sounded the heavy lock.

Clearing aside a stack of papers from the well-worn leather couch. Offered Arthur to take a seat.

“You’ve been expecting me? ... You’ve spoken with my father?” Asked Arthur keenly.

“Yes... He called just the other day... Said you could be on your way. From London... How was the journey?” The Professor asked.

“Good... We came by train to avoid flying. It was slower... But we got here eventually.” Replied Arthur wondering how much to say.

“We? ... Someone else came with you?” The Professor asked with concern in his voice.

“Phil... My friend... It was difficult to stop him... We work together back in London. I feel better with him watching my back... And just as well...” Arthur stammered pieces of information that he thought would help the Professor understand.

“I guess you’re right... Safety in numbers.” Offered the Professor. “Where is he now... Your friend? ... Phil was it?” The Professor asked.

“He’s admiring the University.” Arthur half fibbed.

Which would no doubt end in disaster for Phil. Though suspected the east European women might find Phil’s quaint English accent and pickup lines more palatable than the more resilient English women.

“Would you like a drop of whiskey son? You father sent me a case last

Christmas.” Professor Almesh offered Arthur to steady his nerves.

“I’m good... Thank you Sir.” Said Arthur.

Then found himself re-thinking the offer after a kaleidoscope of butterflies had suddenly taken flight in his stomach.

Pouring a large single malt into his large mug before settling into the adjoining arm chair. Slowly rotating the mug in his hands. He gazed towards Arthur as if an old dear friend who had just paid him a visit. But this was no dear old friend. This was the son of man whom he had talked to barely a few days earlier. A man risking his life to fetch a relic and now his son’s life was endangered because of that bequest.

“You know my father then Professor?” Asked Arthur hesitantly.

“I do indeed. I do indeed... I know him very well”, Repeated the Professor adding “We’ve used his services on several occasions... He’s very good at what he does.” Then asked, “How much did your father tell you?” The Professor reclined deeply in the leather arm chair.

By Arthur’s apparent demeanor he had intuitively assessed Arthur knew very little of the immediate danger he was in. Taking a large sip from the mug to settle his own butterflies.

“Two days ago...” Arthur paused wondering how to proceed, “I received a letter from my father instructing me that I should find you... He said people were after him... And they may well me after me too.” Arthur advised. Hoping some of this was making sense.

“Do you think you were followed?” The Professor asked curiously. Looking over his shoulder to the window.

“I am pretty sure we were... We’ve had a couple of close calls so far...” Arthur began. “...Thankfully Phil was about to sort them out... No one crosses Phil... If you know what I mean... He thinks there’s an old man following us... But I think he looks more like a Priest.” Arthur regurgitated the facts.

“Really. Hmm... A *Priest* you say... I *suspect* he would be.” The Professor grinned nodding his head. “Go on son.”

“My father said that he couldn’t explain it in the letter... Said I should find you.” Arthur continued, “I don’t understand Professor... My father is a salesman... What is he involved in that could possibly involve me?” Asked Arthur hoping someone would explain the conundrum in which he found himself entangled.

“You don’t know do you son? Do you?” Asked the Professor sensing Arthur’s innocence in the matter.

“Know what Sir?” Echoed Arthur back.

“Are you sure don’t want a drop of scotch? I think you’re going to need it.”

The Professor suggested wisely.

“A small one wouldn’t hurt I suppose.” Arthur replied hoping to settle his nerves.

This gave the Professor time to gather his thoughts as to where to begin in his own story. As well as a chance to find a clean mug before dispensing a shot of the rare whiskey into it.

“You’ll appreciate this one having lived in Scotland... Your father got me this.” Handing Arthur the mug of scotch coffee.

Returning to the arm chair the Professor stared for a moment out the window. The partly closed venetian blinds not only kept out most of the strong sunlight. But also any unwanted eyes. Unsure who was watching or listening. Himself in danger, but less so than the young lad sitting opposite him.

“Let me give you the skinny on the matter at hand.” The Professor stated academically. “Firstly son... Your father is not always a travelling salesman. Travelling yes... Salesman sometimes.” The Professor paused to let it seep into Arthur’s understanding.

The truth was not always gentle.

“His role as a travelling salesman is a convenient cover... Allowing him to travel across Europe without suspicion”.

”Cover? ... Without suspicion of what? What is he then? ... A secret agent or something?” Which would explain the money and gun thought Arthur.

“No_... He’s not a secret agent... Not that I am aware of... Hmm.” He chuckled wondering if Alistair could be a secret agent but quickly dismissed the thought. “...He’s a Relic Hunter. Do you know what a Relic Hunter is?”

“They hunt relics?” Replied Arthur hoping not to sound silly.

“In a roundabout way. Yes... Do you know what a Relic is?” Enquired the Professor. Probing Arthur’s mind further as if sapping intellectual thought from a reluctant student.

“Old and ancient... Antiques. But special.” Replied Arthur drawing upon a TV documentary he had seen one evening a year earlier with his Aunt.

“That’s right... Antique... Moreover of ancient times... Antiquity... The time before modern time and usually of an historical importance... In this instance it is ecclesiastical... Put simply it relates to the Church... More specifically. The Catholic Church... Are you with me so far?” Asked the Professor not wanting to flood Arthur’s mind with unnecessary information.

“Okay... So my father hunts for relics ... Indiana Jones and all that. What makes this one so special? Why is he in danger?” Asked Arthur with some doubt now.

“There are certain elements of the Church that may not be happy with the

Relic being in the possession of *private collectors* that would like to get their hands on this particular Relic.” Advised the Professor accentuating the words to suggest a dubiousness nature about them.

“Okay... So sell it to them and we can all go home.” Whipped Arthur naively.

As if this would solve the dilemma.

“I wish it was that easy Arthur. But there are International Laws that prohibit the sale of Relics. Especially ecclesiastical relics... The Catholic Church has the resources and the authority in many countries around the world to ensure its return... As a Professor of Antiquities I too am very familiar with the laws and regulations of Relics.”

Hoping that would halt any thoughts of selling the Relic and heading home with the bounty.

“And I don’t think the private collectors have any intention of paying for it... That would leave a trail which would lead back to them... These people don’t leave trails for the authorities Arthur... They leave *dead ends*... If you know what I mean?” Wondering how much Arthur was taking in.

“Dead ends are not good are they?” Now taking in the seriousness of the situation.

“No... They are not.”

“What is this Church Relic?” He asked.

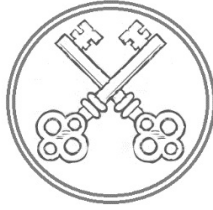
“It’s a Ring. Specifically... It’s a Fisherman’s Ring... There have been many over the centuries... Normally they are destroyed at the death of a Pope, but this particular ring was the first of its kind... Do you know what a Fisherman’s Ring is Arthur?”

“A Ring for Fishermen?” Arthur replied slowly completely unaware of the ring’s significance and wondering if should have paid more attention at Sunday school.

“That’s right... But in this case it belonged to a very special fisherman... Saint Peter... It’s called the Fisherman’s Ring because Peter was a fisherman... Each pope as a ring made for them. Most have a relief image of Peter casting a net from a boat... Symbolizing the tradition that the Apostles were the fishers of men... It was once the official seal of that Pope.”

The Professor explained as simply as he could.

“But in this instance, Saint Peter’s Fishermen’s Ring has two crossed keys... The symbol of the Keys to Heaven which Jesus bestowed on Peter as the first Bishop of Rome... The first Pope of the Catholic Church... Unlike other Fishermen’s Ring that were made of gold his was made of silver.



“If ever you find your father. You will see the ring.” Then questioned his choice of words.

“Why does my father have this Fishermen’s Ring?” Enquired Arthur further.

“The Ring was thought to have been lost for centuries... That was until recently... A colleague of mine found the ring by accident at a market place in Istanbul and immediately recognized it as the scared Ring of Saint Peter... Inside the ring was scribed a single word in ancient Hebrew, ‘*Petrus*’ Peter.” Taking another sip of whiskey from the coffee cup he continued.

“It was not the first time your father has picked up relics from foreign countries... Unfortunately word must have gotten out about the ring and certain people are trying to trace its where about.”

Taking another sip of from the coffee cup.

“It may be too late... If they have already spoken to my colleague.”

Another hesitation as though to contemplate the implications.

“Even if he doesn’t talk they may soon find a connection to me as a fellow Professor in Antiquities... But then I am Muslim... What interest would I have in such a Ring?” Taking a generous sip of courage from his coffee mug.

“Where do I find my father?” Enquired Arthur as to the next clue in the maze he found himself.

“Istanbul.” Replied the Professor.

“Turkey?” Questioned Arthur.

“I think that is where it still is.” Humored the Professor.

“Sorry... I forgot I was on this side of the continent and not in Watford... Istanbul you say? How can I find him?” Arthur asked.

“Don’t worry son... I’ll give you the address of his safe house ... You just have to get yourself there. You and your friend... Phil.” The Professor advised. “You believe in Werewolves Arthur?”

“Of course not.” Replied Arthur puzzled by the question.

“I would if I were you.” Warned the Professor. “There are dark creatures after your blood.” For want of an appropriate analogy of the danger Arthur was in. “Would you like a gun Arthur? ... You will need one where you are going”.

“No thank you Professor... I already have one.” Arthur replied tapping his duffle bag. To the Professor’s surprise.

At that moment as if by coincidence, or chance or both. The phone rang. Startling them both as they sat in the quiet office. The Professor lifted the large black handset.

“Hello... Professor Almesh speaking.” He answered the call.



Werewolves

“Professor... It’s me, Alistair. Has Arthur been to visit you yet?” The voice on the other end asked anxiously.

“Your timing could not have been better my dear friend... Arthur is sitting in front of me as we speak.” Replied the Professor.

The Professor’s words caught Arthur’s attention. Who was on the other end of the line he thought. Was he in danger? Could he trust the Professor. Perhaps it was all a trap? Looking about for Braun to enter the room.

“How are you holding up my friend? Have you got the Ring?” Then wondered if he had already said too much over the phone.

“I am well enough considering what I been through here... I have the Ring... I’m looking right at it... Had to crack some eggs... if you know what I mean.”

“Cracking eggs is what you do best Alistair.” Responded the Professor giving Arthur a clue who was on the line.

“How’s Arthur handling it all? I’ve seemed to have put him in a bit of tight spot.” Alistair asked with some apprehension.

“He’s handling it surprisingly well... Him and his... Friend.” Dropping a bomb shell on Alistair.

“A friend? I told him to tell no one.” Rifled back Alistair.

“I’d better let him explain it all to you.” And gestured a worried looking Arthur to come to the phone passing him the headset.

Arthur lifted it to his ear and spoke.

“Dad... Is that you?” Seeking confirmation the person on the other end of the line was his father.

“Yes it’s me Arty. You okay? You bring everything with you?”

“Yeah... I found the box. The money. And the gun ... Why is there a gun dad?” Arthur asked seeking an explanation.

The Professor had already filled in most of it but he still wanted to hear it from his father. He trusted his father. But his faith in him had been questioned.

“I assume the Professor has told you about the Ring?” With some difficulty in his voice, fighting back pain growing in his wounded arm.

“Yes he told me... Are you okay? You sound like you’re hurt.”

“I’m okay ... Just a small accident ... But I’ll be fine. As for the gun... Sometimes I need it for protection.” Alistair sounded out of breath.

“Protection? You’re a salesman Dad.” Questioned Arthur hoping to erase the confusion.

"I still am... But certain people recruited me to help repatriate relics shall we say. Museums and the like." Hoping that would be enough to deflect his questioning. "Did you think you are being followed?" asked his father.

"There's been a few close calls... But nothing Phil can't handle." Informed Arthur.

"Phil? I thought I told you to tell no one." Exclaimed his father.

"I couldn't stop him Dad... You know what he's like... It was all of a sudden and the gun sort of spooked me". Hoping his father was not going to say what everyone else had said.

"He's sensible enough I suppose. And handy with his fists. Keep the gun close and don't use it unless you really have to, okay?"

"We've had a couple of close calls... But nothing Phil didn't settle... There was one man... had a son called Augustus? ... Said he knows you."

"Julius Braun... How did you meet him?" Asked Alistair.

"Abducted me off the train... Told him I was meeting someone who would be waiting at the station... Then Phil busted in and spoiled the party."

"Thankfully Phil came along then... Braun will be back... Our paths have crossed in the past... Expect to see him again."

Arthur recalled the objects in the glass cabinets. Relics, so that's what they were and explains Braun's interest in him.

"I heard the Professor say something about you cracking eggs... And I know you're a lousy cook Dad."

"Sometimes one has to crack a few eggs to make an omelet." Hoping Arthur would understand the inference. "But don't worry about me... I will tell you more when we meet up in Istanbul."

"I was hoping this would be the end of the line... Guess we have some more travelling to do."

"Where's Phil now?" Asked Alistair.

"Have a guess... Chatting up some women on the campus here."

"Sounds like Phil... You better go rescue him before he crashes and burns again." Alistair suggested. "Keep an eye on him. Wouldn't want his mother to go looking for him."

"Yeah... I just have to keep him away from every bar and women on this side of the continent. How hard can that be?" Arthur humored back.

"I see what you mean... Good luck with that... I'll see you in Istanbul in two days okay? ... The Professor has my address. I'll be in a safe house... Take a taxi there. I'll explain it all when I see you... Trust me... You take care Arty... Bye." Alistair assured his son his breath beginning to quicken again.

"See you soon Dad. Bye." Responded Arthur satisfied with some of the

answers his father had given.

And there was a click as the connection went dead.

The Professor had poured himself another large scotch coffee. Having hand written the address of the safe-house. Arthur studied the address scrawled on the piece of paper and finished the rest of his coffee feeling more comfortable. Asking the Professor if there was anything that could help him in this uncharted part of his world.

“Money and a gun.” The Professor advised flatly.

“Then it seems I’ve come well prepared.” Replied Arthur.

The crusades had ended a millennium before and Christians were now welcomed in Turkey. As was anyone with currency to spend or goods to trade. The country was still a hundred years behind the rest of Europe. Not that it mattered much to Turkey. It marched to the beat of its own drum. As did anyone who stepped inside its borders. It had been a gateway into the Europe for thousands of years and would be long after man had annihilated himself in another world war. Which could happen any moment with the current Middle-East tensions. Each side backed by superpowers flexing their nuclear muscles. All it needed was one of them to do something silly.

Putting aside thoughts of nuclear annihilation Arthur left the Professor’s office in search of Phil. Knowing he would not too hard to find. In the middle of the University’s central quadrangle. Talking to several young female students. Laughter could be heard. It was unsure whether the girls were laughing with him or at him. Either way Phil thought he was making progress.

Arthur’s job was now to rescue his good friend from another humiliating disappointment at the hand of his ache enemy. Women. Despite being shot down more times than Douglas Barter, he seemed to have been making progress with the young ladies.

“Sorry for spoiling the party old chap... But it’s time to go. We have a train to catch. You know how much you love train rides.” Cajoled Arthur trying to gain Phil’s attention.

“Can’t we stay a bit longer? ... I was just making progress.” Resisting the call to leave.

“Exchange email addresses... And let’s get going.” Arthur told Phil.

With those instructions Phil scribbled his email address on top of a lecture pad one of the young ladies and jotted down his telephone number underneath the email address, just in case. The young lady smiled and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Arthur was taken back in surprise as much as Phil was.

A smile came over Phil's face. He may have actually have scored this time.

"Okay Romeo... No time to stick around. We need to get to Istanbul." Said Arthur wishing to get underway.

"Istanbul...In Turkey? I thought Budapest was our last stop?" Exclaimed Phil surprised by the detour.

"So did I... But Dad wants us there as soon as we can." Instructed Arthur throwing his pack and duffle bag over shoulders.

Phil followed behind, looking back at the long legged brunette in the short grey skirt that was walking away from him.

"So close mate... And you shoot me down." A dejected Phil responded.

"Sorry mate... You were in the zone... I'm so proud of you." Consoled Arthur, "If its *love*... It can wait".

"Love? ... You must be kidding... Don't use that four letter word with me mate." Phil was never one for commitment.

Heading out of the University's grand gates they re-trod their steps back to the Budapest Grand Central station to buy tickets to Istanbul on the next available train. The afternoon was getting late. Arthur had spent more time with the Professor than anticipated.

Though he had hoped this was the end of the line for him.

Cassini and Francis watched from a distance amalgamating into academia. A Professor and his understudy. They waited for Arthur and Phil to depart. His Vatican connections would trace any bookings made. But first Cassini would pay the Professor a curiosity visit. They needed to discuss the Arthur's visit and destination. The Cardinal looked about the campus grounds for suspicious eyes. Reaching for the assuring feel of the Beretta in his pocket.



Zahra

Arthur and Phil retraced their steps back to the massive stone train station. Avoiding any detours that may divert them in the wrong direction. Budapest was a huge city, or two cities combined for that matter. And now was not the time to get lost in either of them. Ahead of them stood the giant grey station. Large stone columns camouflaged against the dark menacing clouds above it. Thick Hungarian lettering chiseled across its façade. Cold stone steps lead up to massive wooden doors supported on large iron braces. Inside the huge marble floors hall. People moved about in no hurry as if history had wounded them.

Locating the ticketing counter on the other side of the hall. A large wooden booth projected from the cold marble floor. Frosted windows covered all but one. Behind the open window sat an attractive women in her twenties with long dark brown hair and emerald green eyes and a faint birthmark on her neck. She sat quietly watching on curiously at Phil and Arthur approaching.

Taking this as a primal signal Phil approached the booth.

“Bonsoir jeune femme.” Said Phil practicing his limited French.

But more importantly trying to impress the young lady.

“I am sorry sir. But I do not speak French.” Said the young lady in almost perfect English with a smile.

“That’s okay... Neither do I.” Said Phil hoping that would break the ice.

Arthur was hoping that was the last of his pickup lines for a while he stepped forward and inquired about trains to Bucharest, then onto Istanbul. This was an unanticipated extension to their travels. His father had sounded tense. Arthur could sense a pain in his voice. If his father wanted him in Istanbul then so be it.

“There is an overnight train to Bucharest leaving at ten past seven this evening... The journey will take fourteen and half hours. Your arrival time would be ten-thirty tomorrow morning... You will need to organize another train from there to Istanbul I’m afraid... We don’t handle that line.”

The young lady looked at Arthur for approval. Giving him a smile that immediately made him think of Zara. At that moment he read the name tag on her uniform. *Zahra*.

‘Of course it is’, he thought.

Shaking his head in disbelief at the coincidence. It was then he noticed her incredible green eyes.

“Is everything Okay Sir?” Zahra asked with concern hoping she had not offended them.

“Yes. Yes... Everything is good... Your eyes... They are very beautiful if you don’t mind me saying.” Arthur added with some affection and stealing Phil’s thunder.

“Thank you very much.” Zahra responded with a slight blush.

Taken back by Arthur’s forwardness. Engaging in social intercourse with females. Phil would talk to him later about the irregularity.

“That sounds great. Can I get two please?” Asked Arthur.

“Do you have you passports? ... National Identity Cards?”

Frisking their own bodies. Padding themselves down in search of their wallets that held their identity cards. Finding them, they surrendered them onto the dark polished wooden counter and Zahra carefully examined them. Taking two looks at Phil’s.

“I’ve had a haircut.” He replied anticipating her concerns then giving her a side profile.

As if that would help. The photo on the identity card showed a straggly long haired creature. Possibly Phil. Possibly a Yeti.

“Hmm.” She accepted the dilemma and punched their details into the computer system.

“No warrants for your arrest... Monsieur Phil?” Teasing him with her limited French.

“Not yet.” He hastily replied.

Then realized it was not the best thing to say. Hoping she would see the funny side.

Inspecting him with her attractive green eyes. Giving nothing away as to his predicament. Her poker face revealed an indifference. Punching further details into the computer. A printer buzzed and whirled in the back ground before spitting out two pieces of paper. Reading them to herself she turned and handed the two young men their tickets.

“Your tickets Gentlemen... That will be a total of three hundred and forty euros please.” Then smiled at Phil knowing she had vexed him for a moment.

Phil returned the smile and shook his head for falling for it. Arthur reached into his pocket and pulled out the roll of euros. Peeled off three hundred and sixty. Returning the balance to his pocket before anyone had a chance to see the amount he was carrying.

“Keep the change.” Arthur added.

“Thank you.” Zahra graciously accepted the bonus slipping it inside her bra.

‘Lucky euros.’ Thought Phil beginning to warm the European women.

Zahra handed back their Identity Cards and they made their way out of the station for a second time. They had four hours to kill. Having spotted a café on

one of the narrow streets to the station. They agreed to head there for a bite. Perhaps taste the layer cake for which Bucharest was famous for.

“I wonder if they have Hungarian beer.” Asked Phil inquisitively.

“I am sure they do mate... Keep an eye open for a bar.” Hoping to appease Phil for the unsolicited extension to their journey.

“Cheers mate... You’re a champion.” Phil glowed with content having met two beautiful women in one day.

That had to be a first in Phil’s little black book. If he had one.

As they wandered casually out of the grand station’s giant doors. Two invisible gentlemen, equally as charismatic. Approached the booth. They smiled at the young lady and ordered two tickets. Showing the Vatican Identity cards immediately processed their tickets, taking payment by credit card. They knew Arthur’s destination. The Cardinal also had a piece of paper.

Having obtained it from the Professor now laying on his couch. A large empty coffee mug lay on the floor. Shrouded by the sun rays an arm hanging limp from his side. His fingers twitching before they too went limp.



Don Marconi

Alone and secure in his hill top hideaway of San Michelle, Marconi basked in the sun drenched morning. Reclined in a rattan chair, dark glasses shielded his eyes from the violating sun. A white bath robe open to the waist covered a pale portly torso. In his hand an iced tea laced with vodka, his face grinned with a smile and he chuckled to himself. In his other hand a newspapers displaying an image of a colleague. Though some may have called the man a competitor. In Marconi's line of business there was an honor among thieves. And it could well have been him in the photograph.

Marconi continued to chuckle and read the entertaining news of how Julian Braun, the renown and notorious relic collector had been found shot in a Munich rest room by a member of the pubic. Although described as an apparent mugging, it was reported that nothing was taken and Marconi wondered if there had been more to it. Braun's would never travel without his men about him, so where were they? No, there was more to this than what the article claimed there was. And what was his adversary doing at public train station, Braun had his own fleet of vehicles without having to resort to loitering in public toilets. Perhaps there was a side to Braun he did not know about. And chuckled again. It would not have surprised Marconi, everyone has dirty laundry no one wants aired in public.

A name surfaced in his name as to who was capable of inflicting such a calculated wound, to the leg. Cardinal Cassini. The Ring was indeed a sort after relic. The Church was in pursuit of the boy as well.

"Hmm." Said Marconi to himself.

The game had gotten interesting. His own man had not reported in after Vienna. One of his best men and he had suspicions that the man had been silenced. Maybe he had underestimated this Cardinal Cassini and his apprentice. Cardinal Dovizi had kept him well informed of Cassini's movements and had placed Cassini in Munich at the time of the shooting. The article had said that the Eurostar had mysteriously malfunctioned but had sprung back to life shortly after the shooting. Marconi tried to draw a connection between the two events.

Michael laid back on the rattan chair beside Marconi and basked in the divine light, hoping his Superior would not begrudge him a momentarily rest as he listened on unseen to Marconi's thoughts.

"That's Braun out of the way for a while." Said Marconi to himself. "He'll be back."

Marconi flicked the paper to financial page and scanned the stock prices, gold was up, silver was down, and the US dollar was holding its own against the Euro. His vast wealth buried in subterranean bank vaults along with relics that would never see the light of day, until the day he died. Unsure what he would do with it after that.

“Perhaps give it to the church... That would be ironic.” He mused, as Michael planted the thought to appease Marconi’s guilt.

Not all thoughts are our own and Marconi wondered where the thought had come from. Feeling he was becoming soft like Braun in his old age and shook the perverted thought from his mind hoping that was the last he would see of it. Shuffling the paper in his hands, the rustling pages caught in a gust of wind that bellowed suddenly from beside him causing the pages to flap about. Trying desperately to catch the flapping pages before surrendering the attempt and watched them fly into the air like kites caught on the wind. It was as though the paper had been ripped from his hands.

Michael washed the pages to the left and to the right, playing with them and allowed them to disappear over the chapel walls. There was a bright flash of light and Marconi looked about for thunder clouds but could see none. It was another perfectly fine day on the Isle of Capri.

“Hmm.” Grumbled Marconi reclining back into his chair, his day disturbed by the gust of angelic wind.

His mind returned to Braun, he would be bed ridden for a week and hopefully deterred from any further pursuit leaving Marconi in poll position. Dovizi had informed him the boy was heading to Istanbul. Marconi’s men would pick up the trail there. He had men there men on commission. In particular taxi drivers that prowled the streets who would alert him of anything of interest.

Marconi was a patient man. Men in his line of business had to be. Great prizes required tolerance. Forbearance not one to rush in like an immature young bull. He would take his time. Marconi picked up the phone and dialed a long number. A long distance number. It rang for but a moment. And was answered by a man speaking in Turkish and broken English.

Instructions were given.

“Find the son, follow the son and find the father... Find the ring.” Marconi said coldly before lowering the handset to its cradle.

The respondent knew they would be handsomely rewarded for their efforts and any split blood. Intercept and deliver the Ring at all costs. They would be in contact at the first sign of the son’s or the Cardinal’s arrival. One would signify the arrival of the other.

Reclining in a large rattan chair Marconi sipped an iced tea from short the

crystal tumbler. And looked out upon the harbor, and the town of Capri. Mount Vesuvius lay sleeping in the distance behind. Also waiting patiently, waiting to stir. Waiting to vomit its volcanic belly upon the forgetful souls below. As it had two thousand years earlier.

Marconi gazed at the distant volcano knowing he was safe on his forgotten hill top hide away. San Michelle.

The sun drenched the cloudless blue sky above as the crystal blue waters washed the shores below. Taking a sip of tea Marconi played with it in his mouth, savoring the thought of wearing the Holy Ring of the First Bishop of Rome. The first Pope, Saint Peter.

A tinkle came over his body.

The warmth of the sun on his body added to the insatiable desire of wearing the ring. His eyes scanned the immediate horizon for watchful eyes. Only to find himself alone atop his mountain fortress. Self-isolation from the outside world. Incarcerated in the Villa of San Michele.



Transylvania

If Hungary's tragic history of was a grisly reminder of man's cruelty upon fellow man then its neighboring country Romania to the south-east had its history written in the blood of its citizens.

Love him or fear him, few names in history resonate horror more than Dracula's. His people called him Vlad Tepes. The Turks would call him Kaziklu Bey. Both meant *The Impaler*. In the mid-fifteenth century Vlad ruled the central province of Romania. Wallachia. Caught between the Hungarian Cross bearing lands in the north of Transylvania and the Crescent bearing Ottoman to the south. Both demanded his obedience. And Vlad would bow to neither.

The invading Turkish Ottomans would capture Vlad and his brother. Holding them captive to secure his father's loyalty. Vlad would witness terrible tortures and would return home with his own terrible tortures for brutally executing his enemies. Impalement. A harsh punishment for his enemies. But remember, these were harsh times.

Vlad would not die from a wooden stake or silver bullet through his heart. He would die in battle on a cold January day in 1477. His corpse was be cut into pieces and his head sent to the Ottoman Sultan, Mehmed. There to be mounted on a stake and left to rot for all to witness.

Stocky and broad shouldered Vlad was a warrior. Dark thick bushy black eyebrows accentuated his large green penetrating eyes accentuated by a hooked nose and large black moustache curled at the tips. From his head hung thick black curly hair.

Inking immortal infamy upon him, Bram Stoker's poison pen to would demonize Dracula to the outside world. But to the Romanian people, Vlad would be loved. Cherished. Idolized as a Crusader, hero. The Savior of their beloved country.

But it was another Dracula, much more modern. And much crueler. Nicolae Ceausescu. History never allow tyrants to go unchecked and his soviet totalitarian regime, crumbled around him. Charged with war crimes this true Dracula would be publicly executed. Leaving behind a legacy of socialist inspired ego-driven architectural monstrosities. The Eastern Bloc eventually succumbed to Western ways of night clubs and democratic freedom. A pulse would return to this romantic ancient country. A pulse that said we shall overcome anything you throw at us. A pulse that said, "We are sons of the Dracul!"

A darkness blanketed Budapest as Arthur and Phil exited the restaurant. Their bellies full with beers and Hungarian goulash. A large full moon shone brightly with a peculiarly red hue. Tired legs carried the two young men back to the grand old railway station. Zahra had gone home and another beautiful young woman was sitting at the booth. Checking the large display board to identify the platform from which their train would be leaving. They made their way to the train and found other passengers already boarding.

The train itself was modern but nothing like the sleek Eurostar with its pointed nose. This was as a train should be, conventional. Its snub nose butted the end of the platform. It made rude noises a train should make and it made no apologies for making them. It had a sturdiness that suggested it was a weight lifter. Or a wrestler. As many Romanian's were renowned for. This was not a sprinter like the Eurostar. Brute strength and power was required to endure the hill climbs that littered the Romanian. The mountains of Transylvania. The last known residence of Count Dracula.

Finding their compartment, a bunk room with seats on the opposite wall. It was small but comfortable. Phil threw his bag on the top bunk and settled debate for the bed. Arthur was too tired to dispute sleeping arrangements and just wanted to sleep. His mind had been on edge ever since he left the Professor's office. Fearing an attack from zombie vampires at any moment and closed the door behind him and locked it. Wishing now he had a crucifix or had eaten more garlic that evening.

The past twenty-four hours had been hectic. Having travelled from London to Brussels to Vienna. The abduction by a mysterious man named Braun and then the heroic rescue by Phil. Visiting the Professor and speaking with his father. Only now to be told to go to Istanbul. On an overnight train. With another eight hundred kilometers to get to Bucharest and then another six hundred to travel before reaching Istanbul. Thoughts of ever returning to London were far from Arthur's mind. He needed to get to Istanbul. Hoping his father would have all the answers to the questions that were still accumulating in his mind. Hoping that would be the end of the journey and they could all go home, to Watford. The gas works never sounded so appealing.

The Cardinal had secured a compartment a few cabins back and had already settled in before the two young men had returned. The Cardinal had sent Francis to keep a passive eye on the two, and waited for Arthur and Phil to board the train. Giving them a moment to find their compartment before returning to his own compartment a report for the Cardinal.

With the competition now out of the way, Arthur and Phil belonged to the

Cardinal. He would make his move when Arthur had found his father. The Cardinal had no fear of zombie vampires. His crucifix and his faith were sufficient. But just in same, he did have silver bullets at hand. He may have had no fear, but that did not stop him believing in the demonic creatures that lived in the shadows. Whatever form they took.

In his line of work, dark creatures were an occupational hazard.

Diesel engines groaned to gather momentum. Straining to pull the heavy old train slowly from the station as if something was holding it back from going into the night.

An extraordinary blood red full moon lit the countryside covered in a mysterious mist. The train shunted its way through the dark towering forested mountains. Like a long silver spike slowly penetrating the heart of Transylvania. Arthur's mind swayed in and out of consciousness with the gentle rocking of the train. Weaving the day's events and the lunar lit countryside into one and sending him into a deep sleep.

3:00AM. He is suddenly awoken by the vibration of the train shuddering to a stop. Sitting upright he peered out the carriage window and in the near distance could make out the glow of a camp fire. Around which a group of gypsies that were dancing. Arthur watched on curiously. Thinking he recognized one of the gypsies.

"Zahra?" He said to himself.

Looking closely again, the smoke of the fire veiling her identity. But Arthur was sure it was her. Seeing Phil soundly asleep and not wanting to waken him he made his way to exit the carriage. Stepping down onto to cold ground he felt the sensation of cold grass beneath his feet. Between his toes. The chill of the night mountain air on his skin and his breath fogging before him he walked slowly toward the fire. Feeling the heat growing as he neared it. Smoke and mist drifted across the field. His lungs choking on the fumes. One by one the gypsy faces turned and stared at him whispering to themselves. Their eyes scrutinizing him.

"He's the one." One whispered.

Accordion music filled the smoke laden air with an old Romanian folk song. Pagan chants could be heard. Warding off evil spirits. Arthur approached the woman he thought was Zahra. Standing behind her, she turns around sees him standing there.

It was Zahra.

No longer dressed in her station uniform. Now in a long gypsy dress. Her long dark hair now braided with colored beads. Her green eyes twinkling with the flames of the camp fire. Looking wild and free and not surprised to see him.

As though she had been expecting him. Taking him by the hand she led him into the pagan dance around the fire. The hypnotic music pulling him into a trance, oblivious the train could leave at any moment. Dancing ceased and Arthur pulled Zahra to one side.

“What are you doing here?” He asks.

“This is my home.” Said Zahra looking about the camp site.

Zahra pulls Arthur closer looking into his eyes.

“You’re the one.” She whispers softly in his ear.

“The one what? ...” Arthur began to ask.

Only to have Zahra kiss him before he could finish speaking.

“The one that’s been foretold...” Zahra declares the gypsy prophecy. “... Come with me.”

Leading Arthur to a tent he followed without resistance. It was as if time had stood still. There was a peace in being with Zahra and he allowed himself to be lead.

Letting her dress fall to the ground. She stands naked before him and kisses him again. Arthur’s hands caress her body. He kisses her birthmark on her neck wondering of its origins. Zahra undresses Arthur slowly and the two young lovers made love. Sexually heated bodies providing the warmth from the chill of the night’s air.

This must be a dream thought Arthur. Unlike any dream he had ever had. He touched her. She was real. Laying in each other’s arms Arthur told her of his adventure. And his promise to return to find her. Zahra smiled and pulled him close. Knowing he would never return. It had be foretold. Pulling Arthur onto her they made love again. As young lovers do. Thoughts of Phil and his father could not have been further from Arthur’s mind.

Suddenly the two young lovers awoke to the sounds of people screaming in terror. Their brief honeymoon was over. Zahra knew what was happening outside. The camp had been discovered by the uninvited. Arthur frantically dress himself and peered out the tent’s opening. People running about with fire touches and pitchforks.

“What’s going on?” He asks in a panic at the sight.

“You must go now... Quickly... There isn’t much time... They’ve found us.” Zahra warned.

She looked towards the forest. Dark shapes moved. Red eyes glowed back from within. Reflecting the light of the fire.

“You can’t stay here....” She said warning him, “Go back to train... Quickly... They’ll soon be here”.

“Who will be? ... You must come with me.” Arthur urged, taking her hand

and pulling her towards the moving train.

“No... My place is here...” She said calmly, “Take this... Give this to Zara.”

Opening his hand she places a small white daisy into it and softly closes his fingers over it.

“Now go! ... Quickly. They’re coming”.

‘How could she know about Zara?’ Arthur thought to himself.

“I won’t leave you here!” Arthur pleaded with her.

“I know Arthur... But you must... It has been foretold.” Zahra pleaded.

“What’s been foretold?” Asked Arthur growing more confused and dazed.

Time was catching up with him again he could feel a dizziness and tiredness about him.

“Go Arthur! ... Go! ... You can’t be here...” Zahra continues to plead.

Terrified screams called out in terror. Large dark creatures leapt from the forest. Attacking and tearing at the scattering gypsies. Pandemonium replaced dancing and agonizing screams replaced the tranquil singing as the uninvited guests tore at the living. Arthur tried desperately to pull Zahra towards the train that had begun move slowly away. Michael stood by the train and waited for Arthur’s return, one way or the other.

Unexpectedly from no-where Arthur was attacked by a hideous beast. Half-human half-wolf. Snarling its blood stained yellow fangs. Arthur struggled with the creature. Striking his fists at its thick black furry chest. Its claws gripping him tightly as soulless black eyes stared into Arthur’s. The immense power of the beast making it impossible to hold back. The creature lunged at Arthur’s throat. The pain was sudden and excruciating as its fangs tore at his flesh.

Blood spurted from the open wounds.

Arthur began choking on his own blood. Struggling to strike back, but it was hopeless. Michael watched on from a distance. Unmoved. A shaking sensation came over Arthur. A bright light appeared above him. Then it disappeared, and then reappeared.

His eyes opened. Then closed. And opened again. He could heard a voice. It sounded like Phil.

“Wake up mate! ... Wake up.” Shouted Phil now standing over him.

Shaking him to consciousness. Shaking him back into this world.

Arthur came around. His eyes opening to the piercing bright light of the morning sun streaming through the window. Instinctively gasping for breath he reached for his neck of bloody wounds. But finds nothing. Arthur looked about the cabin disoriented and confused.

“You must have had a bad dream Arthur.” Said Phil. “You were thrashing about like you were in a fight or something.”

“Yeah... Something like that.” Not wanting to go into details of the undead he had just survived.

Arthur tried to recall what had happened, Zahra, the camp fire. The music and dancing. The love making. The red eyes in the forest. It was all too surreal for him. Then he remembered the daisy. He looked down at his closed hand. He could feel something within. Not wanting to open it. But he knew he had to.

He opened his hand slowly as if to deny its existence. And there lay a white daisy. Uncrushed and perfect. As if it had just been picked and placed there moments earlier.

‘Give it to Zara.’ Zahra had said. *‘Give it to Zara’.*

Arthur could not make any sense of it. Even if he wanted to. Taking the flower he placed it between the pages of his bible. Michener’s Chesapeake. He would give it to Zara, should he ever return home. Home was far away at this moment.

And was going to become further away by the time they reached Istanbul.



Bucharest

Just before ten-thirty that morning the soviet snub nose train crawled into the old Romanian station in Bucharest and came to a stop and gave a final loud sigh. Relieved to have survived the night the train released a sigh of steam from its valves.

After the previous evening's scare Arthur had no intention of enjoying the city's attractions. There could be predators waiting in the shadows. He could sense them as he exited the train. A chill ran down his spine. His hands instinctively reaching to his throat to check for wounds. He would stay in the sunlight until they had left this forsaken country. With another twelve hours to reach Istanbul he had to stay alive till then. The duffle bag and gun now a comforting burden.

Arthur hurried to find the nearest ticketing booth. Phil struggled to keep up.

"You seem to be in a bit of a rush... What's with the urgency?" Phil asked concerned about Arthur's change in character.

"Had a bad dream last night... I just want to get the hell out of this country as quickly as I can." Arthur informed.

"What? ... You see a Vampire or something?" Joked Phil.

"Yeah... Something like that." Said Arthur feeling his neck again.

Expecting to see blood on his fingers at any moment.

Phil would not push the issue any further. Arthur sounded unsettled and if he wanted to get moving. Then they would get moving. Approaching the ticketing booth to see a thick set old woman sat erect. As if she was part of the furniture. Staring at them coldly. Her large face devoid of a smile. Appearing to have been a left-over from the occupation and something the Soviet's had forgotten to take her with them when they left. Perhaps a Romanian wrestler. Perhaps a woman. Either way Arthur did not want to found himself in a headlock with her.

"Te pot ajuta?" She asked in a thick Romanian accent.

"Sorry... No speak Romanian... Do you speak English?" Arthur asked as politely as he could.

He was in her country now, there was no need for her to speak English.

"Yes... Of course." The woman replied in a thick Romanian accent followed by a small smile as if Romanian language did not come a smile.

"How can I help?" She asked again resuming her bulldog glare on the two suspicious young men.

"Two tickets on the first train to Istanbul please..." Arthur sort with an

urgency in his voice before qualifying. "...The Budapest station said you handled the trains to there".

"That is correct..." Confirmed the authoritarian voice. "...One moment while I check schedules... You have your travel documents with you?"

"Yes. Yes... Of course." Arthur said trying to satisfy the over bearing mass staring down upon him.

He wanted no issues, particularly with a duffle bag containing a gun and a load of money and they once again frisked themselves in search of their own identity. Patting themselves as though performing a Maori haka. Phil found his first and hesitantly placed it on the counter before the scrutinizing eyes expecting to be doubted he was in Budapest but was met with an acknowledging grunt. It could have been indigestion, but either way she was satisfied.

"Hmm!" The woman responded nodding happy it was him handing back his card.

'Really?' Thought Phil.

On examining Arthur's card takes two looks as though she was wary of likeness to the image on the identity card. Squinting she interrogated him with her eyes, as if she could see through him. And for the first time in his life Arthur felt he was not the person he thought he was.

"Hmm!" The woman responded shaking her head and handed back his card.

'Really?' Thought Arthur.

Satisfied the unlikely pair were who they said they were she pulled a hefty folder from a shelf beside her. Arthur wondered if they had computers in Romania or if they relied on pigeons or bats to send messages. Opening the folder at a colored section. The woman thumbed through the pages printed in a language other than English. Running her thick nicotine stained forefinger down the equally yellowing pages.

She suddenly stops.

Looks up to check the large station clock on the wall opposite. Raising one of her heavy dark eye-brows. As if to contemplate a thought in her mind. Or to pass wind.

'That cannot be good', thought Arthur.

"There seems to be one leaving at noon... It should arrive tomorrow morning at ten-fifty tomorrow morning." She informed Arthur looking down on him for his approval.

'Seems... Should? Don't they know for certain? Another night train?' Arthur thought. *'Shit.'*

He had had a frightening experience on the last one. At least this train was leaving Romania. Perhaps the Werewolves, or whatever had tasted his blood last

night, would retreat the closer they got to the remnants of the remnants Ottoman Empire.

“That sounds great. Thank you... We’ll take two tickets please. How much?” Arthur asked keenly to get the transaction over with as quickly as possible.

After inspecting their travel documents and checking Interpol’s watch-list. The woman processed two tickets on an old computer. Like herself it too was a left-over from the soviet occupation. The printer groaned as loudly as the train they had just arrived on. Then spat out two thick tickets. Taking their Euros as payment and gave back the change.

‘There would be no tip today’, Arthur thought.

Somehow she was not quite as appealing as Zahra.

After thanking the soviet lady for her assistance the two young men gathered their packs and headed out the doors of the dilapidated old station. They had just over an hour before their train departed and decided they would stretch their legs and see some of the city. A small reward for the unanticipated extended travel and protection with the growing sunlight. Arthur’s eyes shifted to the shadows for red eyes that may be looking back at him.

The road outside the station ran directly to the river Dâmbovița. Third only to the Danube. It was too far to walk. Especially with packs so Phil waved down a yellow taxi with black and white checked trim under the windows that reminded him of New York.

‘Maybe Romania was not as backward.’ Thought Arthur.

Still, he would stay in the direct sunlight cautious of any immediate attack by the undead that maybe lurking in the shadows.

“We should have time to check out the River and grab a bite before we get going.” Arthur suggested climbing into the taxi.

“Sounds good to me. I’ll be glad to see the back of trains after this.” Responded Phil climbing in the other side.

“Where to boys?” A fabricated Australian voice sounded back at them.

“Just down to the river please... Perhaps you could suggest a café we could get a bite at” Asked Arthur.

“No worries mate... Leave it to me.” And with that, the taxi drove off as quickly as it had arrived.

After merging with the steady flow of traffic and taking several detours on an otherwise straight route, the taxi pulled up outside a café with a colorful canopy covering small covered tables. Arthur handed the driver a Euro note and told him to keep the change. The driver smiled taking the money happily. He had already taken them the long way anyway and this was an additional bonus. Arthur

informed the driver if he was passing he should stop by in about forty minutes for a ride back to the station. The driver saluted and said he would see them again soon.

Finding a table at the road side café Phil browsed the menu and looked for something that resembled bacon and eggs and found Sângerete. A tasty black pudding and ordered two of those and wondered if he should have ordered one for Arthur.

Arthur wished he had more time to take in the sights but this was no vacation. They had to stick to bars and cafes. The only café he wanted to be at this moment was one in Watford. Arthur begins to daydream of Zara deciding he would bring her here one day. Then questioned why someone who works in a café, would want to come to another.

The conundrum would remain unresolved for now he had larger concerns on his mind than coffee shops. Looking to the sidewalk on the other side of the road, he saw couples strolling hand in hand. Then beyond to the colorful majestic boats lined the Dâmbovița River flowing slowly by. The thought of an assassin's bullet never entered his head. Happy to take in the romantic scenery before him.

History had been kind to restore Bucharest's dignity. Not that it had ever left.

The Cardinal waited at the station. There would be no need to follow them. His thoughts were on the men still following the son. They would need to be eliminated before they reached Istanbul. The son and his friend would be back and he knew where they were heading. The Professor had told him everything.

Francis sat quietly on a bench reading his book.

"It must be a good book Father." Asked Cassini inquisitively wondering what was holding the Father's attention.

"It is actually... It about a young man travelling on a train across America in the depression days... Apparently it's based on the authors own life... Quite intriguing." The Father tried to surmise briefly.

"Ohh." The Cardinal nodded.

Having not read for leisure in recent years, his reading was confined to mostly Vatican documents. He was getting old and his pleasures were few. Reading cost him valuable time and he thought it prudent to use his time more productively for his employer. And for God. Pulling out the only book he had on him. The Bible. Opening it at random, hoping not so much as to find a page. But for the page to find him. The passage would read like a horoscope. Vague, yet poignant to his task at hand.

The two sat quietly reading, waiting for the two young men to return.



Owe You One

Braun's men had also been mysteriously informed of Arthur's destination. Though he would be extending his resources to reach Istanbul. The Cardinal was aware of two gentleman that had boarded when Braun disembarked at Munich. He would try to discourage their continuance before they arrived in Istanbul. He had connections there and was already formulating a plan that would facilitate their removal. For now they too waited for Arthur and Phil to return to the train. Seeking shelter in the shade of the ancient station. Unaware of the Cardinal's observation of them. The Cardinal blended into the bench and his surroundings as Francis added to his cloak of invisibility.

Michael stood in a beam of sunlight that shone through an overhead portal window. Visible only to children who smiled at him as they passed.

Arthur and Phil returned to the station with time to spare to board. To be greeted by an even older than the Budapest train. It had seen better days. But what days they were, were uncertain.

'Luxury had not been a design brief', thought Arthur's engineering mind.

Hard wooden seats. Padded with embossed red leather. Large brass racks hinged above the large rectangular windows. They went in search of their sleeping compartment. Only to find there was not one. It appeared the seats were their beds.

"Should be an interesting ride... No top buck here big boy." Teased Arthur.

"Oh well... We've had it pretty good until now... About time we roughed it eh?" Reconciled Phil.

Shoving their packs down under the bench seats. They chatted about their adventures so far. Phil opened up his laptop only to discover there was no signal. Shaking his head despondently. He closed it again.

"No internet? What is the world coming to?" Said Phil thinking it had actually come to an end.

His emails and dating profile would have to wait until Istanbul, assuming they had internet in that country. His mind shuddered at the alarming thought.

A loud whistle sounded. A foreign voiced cried out and the sturdy old train gave a sudden jerk. Then another. Followed quickly by another. Rusty axles squealed in unison. As the train protested its movement from the dark station. The diesel engines winding loudly. A thick plume of black smoke drifted by the window. Raining its carbonized fog down on those unable to escape in time.

Shunting its way into a complex railway yard of innumerable rusting tracks. One would need to be a Romanian rocket scientist to understand the method to the madness of which tracks led where.

'Best not to think about it', thought Arthur.

Closing his eyes. And prayed that the driver was not heading back to Budapest. Back to the creatures he never wanted to encounter again.

The dining carriage rocked gently through the Bulgarian countryside. Sharing a bottle of red vino Arthur and Phil enjoyed a meal unaware of two gentleman sitting nearby watching them. Braun's men. The Cardinal had seen them. He would watch them and wait for one to make a mistake. Francis sat with his back to the Arthur and Phil. Unaware of the men that had drawn the Cardinal's attention and oblivious to the danger that had surrounded him since his arrival in London days earlier.

The Cardinal had assessed Francis' capabilities and combat was not one of them. Francis was a convenient accompaniment to his disguise. Something in his bones was telling him Francis had to be protected at all costs. Francis had been chosen for a reason. The divine itch irritated Cassini. Incapable of scratching it. Incapable of unravelling the meaning. Taking a sip of the red wine and switched his thoughts to Braun's men and how he would go about helping them from the moving train.

Partway through their meal one of the Braun's men stood and excused himself. Perhaps to the restroom. Perhaps to his cabin. The opportunity was too good to pass on thought Cassini. Taking a white napkin, Cassini wiped his lips and excused himself momentarily.

"Is everything okay Cardinal?" Francis asked curiously.

"Everything is just fine thank you Father... I won't be a moment." Suggested Cassini standing.

His eyes following the man about to leave the dining car.

The man could sense someone following him. A few meters behind. An old man. But this old man had his hand reaching inside his jacket. The man turned on Cassini and threw a massive body punch that winded him and sent him buckling over. Another blow to his back sends the Cassini toppling over onto the floor. Cassini reaches for his biretta. But Braun's man had drawn faster his revolver aimed at him.

Suddenly from no-where the man is struck by a solid punch to the side of his head. The gun discharges tearing a hole in the sleeve of the jacket and missing Cassini by millimeters. The sound being lost among the rattling and clanking of the old locomotive carriages. Phil's punch sent the man and the gun flying. Phil catches the man again with successive powerful blows to the face. Knocking the

man to the floor again. Motionless.

Cassini looks at Phil. Phil looks at the Cardinal. Each confused by what had just happened.

“Who are you?” Asks Phil panting for breath.

“No-one Phil.” Replies Cassini.

“How do you know my name?” Asked Phil becoming more confused.

“I know a lot of things Phil... Things you don’t need to know for now...” Cassini responded. “...I’ll look after this.” Turning to look at the man lay unconscious. “...You get back to your friend.” Opening his jacket to reveal his biretta.

Confused and stunned Phil wandered back along the passage way. The rocking carriages making his steps less certain.

“And Phil?! ...” Cassini called out before he disappeared. “...I owe you one.”

“You owe me nothing! ... Just keep away from us!” Warned Phil confused by the scuffle.

Wishing to distance himself from the old man. Then disappeared back to the dining carriage.

Pulling himself to his feet Cassini gazes over to the man on the floor. He was not as young as he once was. Phil had the youthful energy and the power. Fist fights were no longer in the Cardinal’s arsenal these days. Relying more on his biretta and bible.

Looking about the carriage way. He saw no one. Dragging the man into the restroom and latched door. The old train rocked on the rails shaken by the sudden turn of events. The Cardinal needed to get the man off the train. The old train window rattled as if to attract the Cardinal’s attention. The window rattled louder.

‘Over here’. The window called out for the Cardinal’s attention.

The Cardinal looked at window. Sensing the man’s comrade would soon come looking for him. The Cardinal levered the window open. Allowing the cold mountain air to rush inside the small compartment. Peering outside, the countryside moved unhurriedly by. Lifting the body onto the edge. The Cardinal uttered a prayer and pushed the unconscious body from the train. Michael watched on as it disappeared into the darkness towards Istanbul. Broken bones and bruises would heal. He would see him another day, but not today.

On closing the window the Cardinal composed himself and returned to the dining car. Finding as he had left it. The other man had finished his meal and looked up to see Cassini returning, as though he was expecting his colleague. Dismissing the Cassini’s appearance as no more than an old man finding his seat.

'You will would need to wait little while longer', thought the Cassini as he passed by the man.

"Everything okay?" Enquired Francis.

Observing the Cardinal was a little ruffled and blushed.

"Everything is fine thank you Father."

"Your jacket... You seem to have torn it?" Detected Francis inquisitively.

"Oh that... yes... I must have caught it on something."

"Shame... It's such a nice jacket." Complemented Francis.

"Yes it was... But jackets can always be replaced." Cassini responded philosophically.

Knowing how close he had come to being shot and how Phil had saved him from a certain death had he not arrived when he did. He owed that boy. Looking over to Phil's table. He could see him engaged in conversation. No doubt about the skirmish that had taken place moments earlier.

What had Phil said? *'Keep your distance.'*

That was the last thing Cassini intended to do. The Cardinal had an idea regarding the second man. But it would keep until they got to Istanbul.

"How's your meal Father?" Wishing to change the subject.

"Lovely. Yours?"

"Divine... Simply divine." As he watched the other man stand go in search of his colleague.

Arthur and Phil were finishing their meals and about to head back to their compartment unaware the competition for the Ring had been reduced by one. Phil looked up and saw the Cardinal looking at him. The moment lasted longer than he intended.

The Cardinal smiled at Phil, as if to say, *'I'm watching you.'*

But Phil gave the look that said, *'I'm watching you too.'*

For much of the journey they had been a distant acquaintance, but now there was no need for either to pretend.

The Cardinal gave a subtle nod to acknowledge their tacit communicate.



Istanbul

Twelve noon and the old Bucharest train crawled into the timeworn Istanbul Sirkeci Terminal. Situated on the Golden Horn, an historic peninsula next to a major waterway. Shaped like a horn and primary inlet of the Bosphorus Strait.

The station was built in the late nineteenth century by the Oriental Railway as the eastern terminus of the world famous Orient Express from Paris. Once a symbol of the city it was now indefinitely suspended for repairs.

They had finally arrived at their destination. Istanbul.

The eleven hour journey had taken its toll on Phil and Arthur. Managing broken sleep as the train rattled and rolled its way south. They had passed through Bulgaria. Unaware of its charm or its beauty. The capital Sofia at the base of the Vitosha Mountains would have to wait for another less hurried time.

Hoping it would be the last train ride they would need to take. Phil had fallen asleep on the bench seat with his pack as a pillow. The sudden jerking of the train as it stopped had shaken the two young men from their slumbers and slowly stirred them to life and they sat upright. Orientating themselves with the cabin and recollecting the events of the past twenty-four hours that had gotten them there. Arthur had tried to stay awake in fear of zombie werewolves that may have hitched a ride from Budapest. But was overcome with sleep before the werewolves had the chance to devour him again. Arthur stretched his arms sending sleep retreating into the mid-day shadows.

“Are we here?” Phil asked stretching the aches from his body and reanimating his stiffened corpse to life.

“Looks like it... We better find a taxi and head to the safe house... Wherever that might be in this city.” Arthur said unsure of his bearings.

Looking about the cabin for any watchful eyes that might be observing them unnecessarily. But could not see any. Alertness had given way to tiredness and for the time being he would allow those hiding in the shadows their stealth.

They still had to clear customs. This would be risky. If caught with the gun they would spend years rotting in a Turkish prison. Flashbacks of *Midnight Express* came to Arthur's mind. Arthur cringed at the thought. Looking out the large box window he took in the scene what lay before him. People of ragged descriptions walked pass. Had he travelled back in time? Was he still dreaming?

‘Anything was possible,’ he thought to himself.

He would need to wait for Phil to wake him to know him otherwise.

Shouldering their packs like seasoned backpackers and warily stumbled from the train onto the narrow platform. Sirkeci Terminal was unlike the grand stations they had encountered and far smaller by scale yet it was the most decorative with oriental architecture. Being the end of the line the number of passengers had dissipated and made it easier to negotiate the platform. They were greeted with a large white hall with high ceilings. Decorative Persian artwork adorned the windows and doors.

'This must have been a grand place once', Imagined Arthur taking in the adorning walls.

Imaging well-dressed European Gentlemen escorting Ladies in long dresses. Porters at their beckon call carrying their bags behind them. It must have been a magical time. Before the modern age overtook it and left it all behind.

Like sheep they followed the other passengers to the Customs booth.

Armed guards stood lazily by. Automatic weapons hung heavily at their sides. Smoking rolled cigarettes. The pungent odor drifted down the queue of passengers. The Glock in Arthur's duffle bag and the trove of cash would soon disappear among the officials should they be discovered. As would they to a Turkish prison if caught with them.

They joined the queue of tired travelers awaiting processing.

The Cardinal had disembarked ahead of the two young men and Braun henchman. Even in Istanbul his Vatican Credentials would see him pass without suspicion. It was an *understanding* that had dated back centuries. The queue shuffled slowly forward and the duffle bag becoming heavier with each progressive step.

Drugs were always a problem in Turkey. More so leaving the country than entering. Arthur and Phil resembled two tired British backpackers and not as drug mules. Security guards were keen to finish their long dusty shifts and the two young men looked as tired as the guards did.

The Cardinal and Francis approached Customs booth and showed their credentials. Within moments their documents were stamped told to proceed unchecked. But before they did the Cardinal spoke to one of the guards regarding a suspicious character he had seen on the train. Describing the man's appearance. Suggesting the person maybe carrying a weapon. The Cardinal then turned about and subtly indicated the person in question.

Phil watches the Cardinal talking to the guard. It seemed the Cardinal was looking directly at him. Telling the guard something about him. The official nodded and thanked the Cardinal for his concerns. Before ordering other guards to follow him. Weapons at the ready they made their way along the ragged line of passengers. Towards Phil and Arthur. Phil looked about, there was no place to

run. They were cornered. They would spend the rest of their lives in a Turkish prison.

“Arthur... I think this is it... The old man has squealed us out!” Phil spoke quietly to Arthur as the guards approached closer.

The guards stepped closer and closer.

“Shit!” Phil cursed.

“What old man?” Arthur looked about confused by Phil’s sudden anxiety.

But the Cardinal had disappeared from sight. The guards were almost upon them.

“Sorry mate ... It’s over.” Phil closed his eyes as the guards stepped towards them.

Ready to be hauled off to a dusty pen for questioning. How would he explain this to his mother? Hearing the sound of the guard’s footsteps get closer.

With his eyes still closed a heavy hand came down on his shoulder and he heard the guards footsteps pass by.

“What the hell are you going on about Phil?” Asked Arthur with his hand on Phil’s shoulder, looking about for what had caused the panic attack.

The guards approached the man the Cardinal had described. Braun’s second man and apprehended him. Throwing him to the ground to searched him. As suspected they found a hand gun in his pocket. Cuffing him before dragged him along the line of passengers now stunned by the turbulent arrest. A Japanese couple taking photographs.

And Phil sighed with relief.

“Mate... I thought they were coming for us ... I swear the old had doxed us in.” Declared Phil relieved now unsure what to make of the old man, then recalled the old man’s words... *‘I owe you one.’*

“What was that all about?” asked Arthur.

“Don’t know.” Said Phil trying to reconcile the reprieve.

As customs officials checked their papers, another disturbance was developing behind them. The Syrian backpacker that had travelled with them since Brussels had caught the eyes of the patrolling guards. More guards rushed over to an erupting situation. Arthur and Phil looked around in time to see the Syrian now lay face down on the ground. A security guard’s knee pressing painfully between his shoulder blades.

The customs official at the booth took one look at the two weary lads standing before him at the booth. Laden with heavy backpacks. The Cardinal had made comment to the Customs official and the official inspected the two innocuous individuals.

“You have friends in high places seniors ... Welcome to Turkey.” And quickly stamped their passports and waved them through.

There was more pressing matters developing with the Syrian terrorist.

“What does he mean by that?” Asked Arthur confused by the sudden turn of events.

“Someone owed me a big favor.” Replied Phil looking about for the Cardinal who had mysteriously disappeared from sight.

The Cardinal and Francis had long since fused with the crowd of people, transiting the great white hall.

“Who?” Wondered Arthur confused by the situation.

“The old man.” Said Phil.

“What old man?” Asked Arthur still confused by Phil and his fixation on an old man only he could see.

Clearing Customs without a search they emerged from the darkened shade of terminal building onto the bright sunlit of the main street. Reality struck their senses. The sound of noisy traffic and a pungent smell they could not place.

It was the smell of an ancient city. The smell of rotting history and the decaying corpse of the Ottoman Empire.

Bewildered by the strange sights around him. This was not Watford. They seemed like foreigners in a foreign land, as they were. Only to have foreign faces looking back at them. Hopefully they would not be entering the East Asian side of the country and that their toe hold of the Baltic peninsula would be sufficient enough for now.

All that depended on his father.

Taxis trolled the streets continually looking for foreign prey. Arthur signaled a taxi that quickly pulled over. Showing the driver the piece of paper the Professor had written the address of the safe house. Hoping firstly the driver was literate and secondly he knew where the place was.

“Taksim. Taksim.” Repeated the Arabic driver. “Yes. Yes... You want go there? ... No. No. Dangerous place... You not go there.” The driver cautions them in broken English.

“Yes. Yes... Very sure... We have friend there.” Arthur confirmed in his broken English.

Showing the driver a fifty Euro note and changing his interest in the fare. The taxi moved off and joined the flow traffic heading south. No need to take these two Englishmen on a roundabout journey. He would be paid well for a short trip.

Watching from the shadows of the large terminal doors, stood the Cardinal, Francis and Michael. Two seen, one unseen. Two dressed in civilian clothes, one in black clergy robes. They watched on as Arthur and Phil's taxi sped away into the distance. They waited a few moments for the taxi to get ahead a distance before walking out into the daylight.

Waving down a taxi for themselves. Francis expected the Cardinal to say, 'follow that taxi'. But he simply handed the driver a piece of paper with an address on it. He too had obtained an address from the Professor after some discussion. He knew where Arthur was heading. There were too many taxis to follow. And the Cardinal wish to avoid being taken the long way by an opportunist driver.

Michael rode shotgun and grinned with delight. Pressing his face against the window and watched the mystery of East flash past. It had been centuries since his last visit, but somehow it had remained unchanged.



The Safe House

Arthur and Phil's taxi pulled up outside the address that Professor Almesh had provided them. On a rundown street. Derelict abandoned rusting cars lined the sidewalks and over grown lawns. Unsure he had the right address Arthur sees a scantily clad woman leaning into a car window on the corner ahead of him. She looked like a prostitute.

Arthur double checked the address and gave it to Phil to verify. Everything seemed to match.

The driver's large brown eyes reflected in the rear mirror anxious to get his fare and be gone from this squalid neighborhood.

"Are you sure the address?" Arthur sort conformation from the driver.

"Yes. Yes... Same address as piece of paper. Tell you... Not place for you to be ... Not safe... I take you back... Come." The driver offered to leave the neighborhood as soon as he could.

"No. No... We stay." Confirms Arthur. "You can go."

If this was the address then this is the address and he pays the driver the fifty euros. Gathering his pack and duffle bag in a firm grip exits the cab. Phil soon followed and stood with him on the sidewalk staring at the derelict house before them of grime smudged white plastered walls. Scoured from years of neglect. Large iron grills protected the doors and windows. Looking about. Arthur could see all of the houses had grills over them.

'Can't be a safe neighborhood.' Arthur thought recalling the taxi driver's comments.

Looking up and down the street for anything untoward. Seeing nothing but the scantily clad woman who was now getting into the car to complete the carnal proposition. Nothing was moving on the street. The only thing out of place was them. Pushing on the metal gate that squeaked on rusting hinges as it opened.

"My father lives here?" Arthur questions Phil as if he knew the answer.

"I like what your old man has done with the place." Joked Phil closing the gate behind him.

Hesitantly, they climbed the wooden steps to the grilled front door. Unsure whether to knock or ring the non-existent bell.

"Maybe we should have phoned ahead." Joked Phil again.

Arthur was about to knock when the door suddenly flung open and the nose of a thirty-eight was suddenly thrust in his face. The gun was being held by his father. His left arm heavily bandaged with blood was seeping through.

At this point Arthur was unsure who the man holding the gun was.

“Oh Christ Arthur! ... It's you... You made it!” Exclaimed Alistair McGee.

Lowering his aim away from his son's face.

“I heard the gate... I thought it might be *them*.” Looking up and down the street.

“Good to see you too Phil... Come in... Quickly.” Pointing the gun into the tattered abode for them to accept his invitation.

“Like what you've done with the place Mister McGee.” Whipped Phil again never to let a good line go unrewarded.

“Thanks Phil... Glad you came.” Alistair replied.

“Wouldn't have missed it for the world Mister McGee.” Beamed Phil.

“So I was told.” Alistair responded grinning.

“Heard you've had a bit of fun with Braun's men.” Said Alistair.

“Nothing I couldn't handle Mister McGee.” Boosted Phil leaving out the old man's involvement.

The lounge was almost bare. A coffee table, lounge chair, and a small television covered in dust on a wooden crate. If this was the lounge. Arthur could only imagine the bedroom furnishings. But now was not the time to criticizing his father's taste in décor.

“What happened to your arm?” Asked Arthur concerned.

“I had to crack a few eggs if you recall... It's just a scratch.” He responded cryptically suggesting no further questioning was warranted.

The sound of a car engine and doors closing could be heard coming from outside. Alistair goes to the window and sees a car of henchmen had found his safe house. It could have been his taxi driver or Arthur's. It did not matter which, they were here now. A driver had sold out to a higher price in a country where money talked and Alistair had been out-bid.

“Get down!!” Exclaimed Alistair seeing the men pull automatic weapons from the trunk of the car.

Within moments loud intimidating automatic fire ripped bullets across the front of the building. Shattering windows and splintering the facade. Creating a series of Morse code dots and dashes across the walls. Their intention was to soften the prey inside before going in for the pickings. Neighbors peered through their grilled windows to see what was happening. Another turf war they thought. Likely over drugs. Or money. Or both.

“Welcome to Istanbul... Friendly place isn't it.” Whipped Alistair to Arthur and Phil.

Alistair fired two shots back in return from his thirty-eight. Sounding like

cannons inside the confined apartment only to be magnified outside. Phil pulled the Glock from the duffle bag and pulled back on the slide to load bullet into the chamber. Alistair took the gun he had taken from the cracked egg and handed it to Arthur.

“You know how to use one of those?” Alistair asked.

“Point and shot.” Said Arthur.

“That will do me.” Satisfied his son knew the rudiments.

Phil fired off several shots out the window to get a feel for the weapon in his hand. Showing the men outside that he meant business too. Bullets punched into the walls behind them to say they got Phil’s message. Splintering woodwork as percussions resonated about the room quickly followed by supplementary bullet holes. Arthur crouched behind the over turned coffee table already scared by a series of bullets spelling out ‘S.O.S.’

Arthur heard a noise from the back door. Turning about to see the Cassini and Francis rush in followed by Michael looking calm considering the explosions of sound ricocheting around them. The Cardinal had his Beretta raised above Arthurs head. A fires off a burst of rounds towards the window. With no time to think Arthur raised his gun and fired a wild shoot towards the Cardinal. Narrowly missing him.

Alistair suddenly pushes Arthur’s arm down in time to have the second bullet punch into the floor at the Cardinal’s feet.

“Not him Arty... He’s one of the good guys.” Alistair cried out.

“The good guys? ... He’s the one that been following us.” Arthur stuttered.

Shocked and surprised and attempting to raise the gun against his father’s resistance.

“London actually... And thank you for not shooting me Arthur...” Cassini replied calmly. “Phil.” The Cardinal acknowledged his presence.

Checking that Francis was unharmed by Arthur’s bad shooting.

“I’m good.” Responded Francis calmly to the Cardinal’s inspection.

“I called the Cardinal to keep an eye on you... Make sure no one followed you.” Alistair informed his son of the instructions. “I knew that if they could get to you. They would get to me... And they would get to the Ring... That was a risk I couldn’t take.”

“Cardinal? ... Since when do Cardinals have guns?” Arthur asked unconvinced.

“This one is a special kind of Cardinal Arthur...” Alistair responded giving the Cardinal a grin.

“So that explains why I kept seeing you.” Said Phil now reconciling the

Cardinal's continual re-appearances.

"Yes... I had to stay back so those following you did not see me... You handled yourself well Phil." Cassini commended Phil's heroic effects. "You were being followed since London. But they are no longer an issue... Alas they too had to leave the train."

"Some people don't travel too well do they Cardinal?" Alistair signaled his understanding of their demise.

"No they don't... And we won't be travelling well either if we don't get the *hell* out of here soon." Suggesting an urgency to find better accommodation than the ventilated walls that surrounded him.

Another hail of bullets sailed above their heads and peppered the walls. Phil returned a volley of cannon fire to show them he was still alive and kicking. Followed by Alistair's canon. He knew one day his secret hiding place would be found. It had served him well over the years. But it was time to part ways.

"It's not you, it's me." He told the pitted walls.

"Leave your packs here." Instructed Alistair. "No time for dead weight."

Arthur swung the duffle bag containing the money over his shoulder. Along with Phil's laptop. Which now appeared to have a hole in it from a stray bullet. Arthur and Phil followed the Cardinal and Francis out the back door. Alistair was about to leave, but before he does pulls the gas hose away from its supply tap set to fully open. All it needed now was a fool to light a match. Something he could count on with the henchmen that would soon be rushing in for the kill.

"Let's go... The place could blow any time", warned Alistair scampering away from the building.

"What do you mean blow?" Asked Arthur.

"I've set a little trap to slow them down... No time to talk... Follow me... I've got a van out back... Let's hope it turns over."

Running crouched from the back of the house through the long grass of the alleyway. Concealing their weapons from anyone watching from their windows. The gun fire keeping those watching inside until it was over.

"Where's the other guy that was with you?" Asked Arthur of Francis.

"What other guy?" Replied Francis with a blank look.

"He came in with you back there at the house." Arthur responded.

"There was only us Arthur... Maybe in the confusion you may have thought there was more." Francis tried to rationalize Arthur's error.

"I was pretty sure there were three of you... He was dressed in black... Like a Priest. He was standing *beside you*." Arthur tried to describe what he had seen. Turning to Phil to ask, "How many did you see?"

“Just two of them Arthur... Just two.” Confirming Francis’ answer.

“I must be losing it.” Arthur said trying to come to understand the events around him.

Fear can be more powerful than Faith. And fear was outside the front door. Faith was running for survival. It was the eternal fight between good and evil. But Francis’ faith was stronger. Stronger than the fear that was shooting at them. Francis had been thinking but remained silent. Best not disturb the young lad with things that lay beyond his comprehension. He had a good idea who the mysterious man was. If it was a man. Sent to protect someone, or something. But who, or what?



Looking for Bond Girl

The sound of loud gun fire echoed through the otherwise quiet neighborhood. Then there was silence. Alistair knew the henchmen would enter the house soon and discover that they were gone. It would not take them long to turn the place over and discover the back door and alleyway. They had to keep moving. And quickly.

Rounding a corner to find a white Toyota van parked by the side of the road. Rust patches covered its surface. Wounds attesting its bloody battle with the elements of nature. It was not pretty but then things in Turkey never are. But it was practical for getting around unnoticed. Blending in with the other traffic that occupied the roads. Tidier cars were seldom parked on the road, less so in Taksim. There was no guarantee the car would still be there an hour after parking it.

Rust buckets were dime a dozen in Istanbul. And Alistair's was worth a nickel.

"Get in... We don't have much time before they find the alleyway." Instructed Alistair.

Indicating the Cardinal should take the front seat.

"Rest of you in the back." Cried out Alistair looking back to check for any followers.

Climbing into the driver's seat Alistair inserted the key into the ignition and prayed. It had been a while since he last used it. And it had been longer since he last prayed. Did the battery have enough juice he wondered? There was groan... Then another...

'Not now', he thought.

Turning the ignition again there was another short groan... Followed by an ignition of cylinders. The engine sparked itself to life. Revving the engine several times. Alistair engaged the gears and accelerated down the street without looking back.

In a trance Arthur sat behind his father and stared at the world rushing past his window. As he had done through most of his journey to this point. His mind numb. The discharged Glock pistol resting in his lap. With his forehead resting against the window his mind drifted to a place where reality meet fantasy. Neither distinguishable from the other. But when combined a divine truth would unfold. Reflecting on his life and where he found himself. Why did life have to be so difficult? Life is never static, but dynamic. Cards are shuffled and dealt and

discarded. Until the right cards came along that one could keep. Arthur observed at his father sitting in front of him and wondered what cards he had been dealt.

Then realized he was a card his father wished to keep. Alive.

A pot hole jolted Arthur back to the conscious world again. As if God had poked him in the ribs and reminded him not to over analyze his life and to simply to enjoy the roller-coaster ride. He looked over to Phil and saw him staring out the open window at the passing houses. What was he thinking of all this? A few days ago he was surfing dating sites. Now he's involved in a shootout in Turkey with bandits and on the run in Istanbul.

Arthur imagined him updating his dating profile header.

'Looking for Bond Girl...' That should pull a few skirts for him, Arthur thought.

Somehow Phil looked at ease with a gun in his lap and the breeze rushing over him. His eyes were keen, his mind sharp. He was loving every minute.

Francis sat silently between the two of them. His eyes fixed on the road ahead. If he was praying he was keeping to himself. Of all five mortals in the vehicle he was the most at ease. But then he did not have a gun to worry about.

"Sorry I tried to shoot you back there Cardinal..." Arthur tried to apologize to the Cardinal, "...I didn't know..."

"That's okay Arthur... It's not the first time someone has tried to kill me in the past few days... It's an occupational hazard shall we say." Cassini tried to lessen the incident.

"By the way... If I may ask... What sort of church gives their Cardinal's guns?" Asked Arthur curiously.

"Just the Catholic Church Arthur... Just the Catholic." Replied Cassini seriously without going into the centuries of history of his secret fraternity.

Arthur imagined religious turf wars between the Catholics and anyone who had stood in their way. He tried not to dwell on the matter. There were enough religious wars in the world without adding another.

The Cardinal looked over to his good friend Alistair to whom he owed so much. In his peripheral vision Alistair could see the Cardinal looking at him and smiled. They had known each other for many years now. Alistair had stepped up to serve where many others had not. What made a man who was not very religious, put his life in danger for a Church that was?

But Alistair had long since rationalized that, just because one did not have a church, or religion did not mean they did not have a God. He had reached an understanding that required no broker. Sometimes, the relationship with God is personal. Only one other soul in the vehicle would have understood the meaning of that.

Michael sat unnoticed between the Cardinal and Alistair in divine comfort at the thought.

“Your father is a very brave man Arthur.”

Getting his words in before Alistair could rebuff them.

“I... And the Church...Owe him so much gratitude for his services recovering Holy Relics... Which reminds me Alistair... Do you have the Ring?” Looking at Alistair with anticipation and uncertainty.

Alistair held up his hand and showed him the palm side.

The Cardinal’s eyes lit up and gasped at the sight of it. *The Fishermen’s Ring*. In all its Holy Glory. The Ring of Saint Peter himself. Now residing on Alistair’s wedding finger. How it had survived the centuries of bloodshed and conquerors that had passed over Europe was a mystery that only God knew the answer to. He would have Faith, and leave the belief to the scientists.

“You want to hold onto it?” Asked Alistair hoping to lessen his burden.

“No. No... Best you hold onto it until you get to Naples... I could be detained by security guards at the airport. Francis and I can keep them guessing for the time being... They will think we have it. But they’ll find nothing on us... It will also buy you some time put some distance on those still after you... I am sure Braun will be back, he won’t give up that easily to obtain the Ring.” Advised Cassini of his plan.

The Cardinal would inform Professor Almesh of his successful mission to see Arthur safely to his father and the collection of the Ring. Assuming he had roused from his whiskey induced nap after the Cardinal had left him.

Contemplating the task ahead the Cardinal had formulated a plan that would have him in Naples to rendezvous with Alistair to collect the ring. But for now it was in safe hands. Alistair could handle any situations that may arise. His wounds, his son, and Phil had attested to that.

Suddenly a large cloud of grey smoke appeared in his rear vision mirror. Rising into the sky behind them. The gas had exploded and destroyed the house taking a few of the henchmen with it.

‘That should slow them down’, thought Alistair.

But it would not be long before they would be back on his trail again.

“Get me as close as you can to the airport... I’ll get a taxi from there with Farther Francis.” Instructed the Cassini, then inquired, “Are you able to get out yourself?”

“I thought I might catch a ride out of town... Something below the radar... I know someone who can fly us to Italy... An unofficial flight. If you know what I mean... With a cash incentive he might take on some added cargo... From there

we'll get a car to Naples... Should be there by tomorrow evening. Around midnight... Barring any delays. I'll meet you at the Cathedral." Advised Alistair of his itinerary. "...And have the Cavalry ready." He added.

"Good plan. I'll lead them away... But best you stay off the radar... But no Swiss Guards old chap. They are confined to Barracks at the Vatican City... Just get to the Cathedral and leave the rest to me." Cassini responded.

"Yes boss." Responded Alistair accepting the Cardinal's orders.

Alistair knew the streets of Taksim well enough to elude any who might have tried to follow. The roads were cluttered with moving traffic. Freight vehicles of all descriptions capable of carrying a load being pushed one way. Or being pulled the other. His Toyota was now a part of the whole moving with the tide that was heading towards the airport a few kilometers away.

Stopping near a rank of taxis to let the Cardinal and Father out and say their farewells. Alistair shook the Cardinal's hand they embraced and spoke words that only they could hear. Nodding in unison as if some secret pact had been made. Francis came over to Arthur and shook his hand. He looked into Arthur's eyes and saw Alistair's eyes staring back at him.

"Barabbas." Francis said.

Turning to the Cardinal remembering the word spoken by the Cardinal days before.

"Yes Father, Barabbas." Confirmed Cassini and the both grinned.

Arthur was unsure what to make of it and apologized again for shooting at them. Phil stood back like a wallflower at a school dance. However, he did not go unnoticed by the Cardinal. Who strolled over to him thanked him for being there with Arthur.

"You did a number on the man in Frankfurt... I was very impressed... As for the man on the train..." The Cardinal hesitated in search of words befitting Phil's actions.

Then confessed, "You saved my life... For that I am indebted to you."

"Thank you Cardinal... I am sure you would have done the same for me." Phil echoed.

"We could use a man like you in the field... Think about it." Cassini offered.

"I will." Phil replied proudly perhaps finding a new vocation.

"We'll see you in Naples... I have no doubt you can handle yourself if trouble arises again... And it will... The men after you don't play by any rules." Warned Cassini.

"Neither do I Cardinal... Neither do I..." Replied Phil keen to take on anyone who stepped too close. "...Be seeing you in Naples."

“You better get going.” Instructed Alistair, “Check in should be easy with no baggage... You okay for money?” Alistair inquired.

“We at the Vatican always carry American Express in such emergencies... We’ll be fine... It’s you guys that better get going if you want to keep ahead of *them*.” Lifting his glance into the distance behind Alistair.

“See you in Naples then... Safe driving.” Advised Cassini with a small wave.

Instructing the taxi driver to head to Atatürk Airport. Stopping for no one.

‘*Shotgun*’, called out Michael trying to instill some earthly humor.

Not that anyone heard him. He was to accompany them back to Naples. Protecting the package.

The Taxi merged with flowing traffic and was soon lost in the sea of yellow taxis heading to the airport. For a brief moment Arthur was sure he saw a bright glow coming from inside the taxi as it drive away. Before dismissing it as the sun’s reflection off the rear window.

Climbing back into the van.

“Shotgun!” Shouted Arthur to claim the front passenger seat.

“You can have it... It is called shotgun for a reason you know.” Laughed Phil with a smile.

“Okay you two... Let’s find ourselves a plane and a pilot... We have a flight to catch.” Advised Alistair.

Diving into the sea of yellow taxis and cars swarming in all directions.



Pierre

Lookouts would be on every street corner if Alistair's thinking was correct. The rusty old van would provide some camouflage from searching eyes. He would follow the back roads to an old airfield near the coast still used for local freight planes. Derelict cargo planes left over from the last war. Aviation standards in Turkey were simple. If it could fly it did and if it couldn't. It didn't.

With security controls were focused on international airports the regional airports would be left to police themselves. Corruption was ripe and with the ripe amount of money one could move goods. Or people. Without too many questions asked.

Alistair had a contact at the airfield that could help him get to Italy unseen. It would take them a good half hour to negotiate the streets and traffic to get to the airport. Assuming there was not any road works or an accident. Both being regular occurrences on the back roads of Istanbul. Road rules did not apply and like most rules in life, were more like guidelines.

Checking his rear mirror for suspicious vehicles that may be trailing him. The word, together with a bounty would soon be out on the street and looking for them. The van travelled as fast could without unduly straining its engine. Though having just surviving a gun fight and this was no time to be too law abiding. Alistair scanned the dials of the vehicle that waved back and forth like a Maneki neko lucky cat, unable to make up its mind to one or the other.

Arthur awoke again after another day dream had dissolved into reality and he scanned the streets for people on the lookout. All he saw were people going about their day.

'No one here ever seemed to work', he thought.

They just milled about and sat on benches. There was no rush and that Istanbul life moved in its own tempo. Being unemployed himself Arthur had found himself slipping into a same routine in Watford.

'We're not really that different', he thought to himself.

Arthur was drifting into one of his day dreams again but his father caught him in time before falling off to sleep again.

"You okay Arty?" Asked his father.

"I'm good thanks Dad... Just tired from the travelling I guess... How about you? How's the arm?" Arthur enquired.

"We're doing okay... You guys did well back there... Just another day in the office for me though... The arm will heal. I had a double shot of penicillin from

the Doc just to cover for any delays... How about you Phil? ...You holding up okay?"

"Doing great Mister McGee... Wouldn't have missed this for all the tea in Istanbul...We should do this more often Arthur." Said Phil with some apprehension in his voice.

"Seems your laptop took a bullet Phil." Arthur confessed the bad news to Phil.

"A casualty of war mate... I always wanted to buy a new one... This will give me an excuse." Grinned Phil with content.

His emails could wait, then imagined his dating profile embellished with adventures from the Far East.

"We should be at the airport in about twenty minutes I reckon ... I'll do all the talking... You two keep your eyes peeled. Guns ready if it goes south ... I don't expect it to. Best be prepared though... okay?" Instructed Alistair.

Looking at the boys, seeing Phil's face in the rear mirror.

"Yes Mister McGee... I've got your back Sir." Confirmed Phil.

Alistair was confident Phil meant it too.

"How about you Arty. You ready?" Checking with his son.

"I'll be there Dad... You can count on me." Arthur added.

Reassuring his father he was ready for anything that lay ahead. He had been attacked and salvaged by Werewolves and survived. Henchmen were pansies by comparison.

Negotiating the narrow roads and the van blended with the other vehicles parked on the street. The airport lay up ahead. A control booth at the gate would ask for substitutional paperwork and Lira to be handed over. Money would buy silence for only a certain amount of time for them before the word to be spread.

But it was a risk Alistair had to take.

It was mid-afternoon when the delinquent van reached gates of the remote airfield. Shanty rusty hangers lined the air strip. Alistair pulled up beside the control booth and peered in. The guard was asleep. Taking an afternoon siesta.

'Obviously it was a slow day in the office', thought Alistair. 'And the heat had gotten to the official.'

Unsure whether he should sound his horn and wake him or simply let him sleep. In the end Alistair decided simply drive quietly on. Deferring the necessary paperwork for a later date. Gently edging the van into the compound. His eyes searching for a particular hanger. There were several large hangers, but only one of interest to Alistair.

And there it was, with its doors open.

“I hope he’s home.” Indicating the hanger to Arthur.

Driving slowly up to the large hanger doors. Out of sight from the control booth Alistair eased the van beside the hangar. Inside stood an aircraft. A dilapidated Cessna 182. One of the twenty-three thousand ever produced. It could have been built in eighties or the nineties, but either way it was in a sad state of repair. Patches covered the fuselage like Band-Aids covering suspicious wounds. Alistair was very familiar with the Cessna’s specifications.

Crew: one. Capacity: three passengers.

Load: five hundred kilograms.

Cruise speed: one-forty-five knots.

And more importantly,

Range: seventeen hundred kilometers.

The distance from Istanbul to Bari was exactly a thousand and ten as the crow flies. But he was missing one vital specification, the pilot. Unbeknown to Arthur, his father was very capable of flying the plane. The missing pilot however knew the route needed to evade the radar systems in place between Istanbul and Italy. Then from no-where an intermittent noise sounded from within the plane.

On opening the door Alistair found the pilot snoring profusely and a bottle of whisky in his hand.

“I guess we found the pilot.” Mused Alistair unsure to make of the pilot’s condition.

“What do we do now?” Asked Arthur, looking about the vacant hanger.

“*Pierre* here will be out for a while... We still have time... Worse case I’ll get us up until he comes around.” Alistair informed the boys.

“You can fly this... thing?” Exclaimed Arthur discovering a side to his father he never knew.

“Yeah I’ve flown this old bucket before... But *Pierre* knows how to avoid the radar... You two stay out of sight... And keep an eye on that guard at the booth. We may need to make a quick exit and take *Pierre* with us. In the meantime... I’ll do a pre-flight check and see that it’s fully fueled.” Alistair instructed them. “...We should be out of here within the hour while we still have light to fly by.”

Pierre continued to snore loudly in the back ground. Twitching now again like a dog having a bad dream. Then briefly passed wind that sounded in part like a foreign national anthem, possibly French. Possibly over sixty, *Pierre* had established a small freighting business in and out of Turkey. When he was not flying he enjoyed drinking. His supplies often stocked by Alistair in appreciation of his services, supplemented by cash deposits from time to time.

Though a veteran flyer his license had expired decades before. What he

lacked in current credentials he made up for it with flying hours and he never kept a log book of his official or unofficial flights. He had been around so long that officials assumed he was still licensed. Letting him take off and land without any suspicion of his lack of credentials.

Pierre was familiar with the radar systems used by each country and how to avoid them. Flying low over the water. Often confusing coast guard radars as shipping and by the time they went to investigate the anomaly he would be well gone. Alistair had connected with Pierre several years earlier and had secured himself an escape route out of the country when it was required.

Such was the situation at hand. The down side as with this occasion was that Pierre was intoxicated and of no use to anyone. Little alone himself. He twitched again and passed more wind, followed by a facial expression of satisfaction. Then twitched again. Alistair knew Pierre would be fine once he came about. His recovery rate was remarkable. But for now it was best to let the sleeping dog lay.

Arthur and Phil went about checking out the hangar. Avoiding the doorway they watched for movements of people outside. No one seemed to be too interested in their hanger. Those that did curiously look in soon looked away and continued on their way. No doubt to report their sightings to their masters. Most hangers were engaged in some form of illicit line of business. Such was the code of silence among thieves. And as to what happened within the hangars stayed within hangars.

Pierre stirred and for a fleeting moment there was hope of getting underway. It was unsure how long Pierre had been out. Alistair would give him another twenty minutes but no longer. It would be dark in a couple hours and they would need as much daylight they could get. Night flying was always dangerous especially over water. With no external points of reference to fly by the moon may provide some illumination on the water and cloud cover could hamper them further.

The afternoon ticked slowly by.

The sun was getting lower on the horizon. Its rays crept into the hanger. Sunlight reached inside the cockpit and began knocking on Pierre's eyelids. The bright sunlight triggering his primal body clock to awaken. Pierre stirred, unable to fight back the incessant knocking. Suddenly his eyes sprang opened. Bright sunlight struck his retinas. Evaporating the alcohol induced slumber. Looking about the hangar sees his old friend Alistair looking at him.

"Alistair, C'est bon de te revoir!" Pierre exclaimed in French.

"It's good to see you too my old friend... How you feeling?" Asked Alistair.

"Wonderful... Never better. I was just having a nap... No? ... What brings

you here?” Asked Pierre, already knowing the answer.

“I need to get to Italy... What’s the chance of a ride? ... I’ve brought along the family.”

Pierre could see Arthur and Phil standing by the hanger door keeping watch.

“Sons of yours?”

“Just one... The one on the left is a friend... I’ll introduce you shortly. I have to warn you... It could get dangerous. There are have people after us.” Alistair explained without going into details.

Pierre understood the nature of Alistair’s business and sometimes things are best left unsaid. One could not speak of things one did not know about.

“Then we better get moving right away to maximize the day light.” Pierre advised.

“I’ve already done the pre-flight check... She’s fully gassed and ready to go.” Informed Alistair.

“Pre-check?” Asked Pierre curiously.

Something Pierre had long since dispensed with. He knew every creek and groan of the old aircraft. As if it was an extension of his body but which part he was unsure.

Outside it was quiet. Probably too quiet for Alistair’s liking. Walking to the hangar door he looked towards the control booth. As he might have expected, there appeared a large black car with men in the back. The driver was talking to the guard in the booth pointing in their direction. Fortunately they were some distance away.

Alistair could not wait any longer.

“Boys!! Jump in! ... Pierre! ... We’re getting out of here... Now!” Yelling at the Arthur and Phil.

Arthur and Phil scrambled into the back of the Cessna. Trying to fasten the seat belts which had long since rusted over. Giving up on that idea they watched as Alistair climbed in the front after them. Pierre was now fully awake as if he had never had a drop in his life turned the Cessna’s engine over.

‘Cough! ... Cough! Splutter! Cough! ... Splutter! Cough! Cough! ... Splutter! Splutter! Splutter! ... Roooaaar!’

And there was an almighty roar as the engine came to life.

“Just need to rev the engine to get her juices going.” Shouted Pierre over the roar of the engine.

Placing his headset over his ears to communicate with Alistair.

“We don’t have much time for foreplay Pierre... Just get this crake off the ground.” Called back Alistair.

Indicating the approaching men with guns protruding the windows.

“Better get out of here then... Follow me.” Joked Pierre indifferent to the danger that was coming towards him.

Un-muffled exhausts reverberated a deafening scream within the cockpit. It would be all in the timing and Pierre would have it down to the wire. Though the car was still a distance away the hoodlum’s bullets were faster and were beginning to ricochet off the fuselage sending sparks flying.

‘That explains the Band-Aids’, thought Arthur.

The old Cessna was carrying a full load but building speed as fast as Pierre could squeeze it from the throttle. There was no time to head to the run way with the car closing in on them. The prevailing wind was coming at them from across an open paddock. Pierre taxied the Cessna awkwardly over the turf. Shaking the occupants inside and stirring up a trail of dust onto the fast encroaching trailing car. It was a gamble but Pierre had a sixth sense when it came to flying. Easing the throttle fully open, flaps down for maximum lift. The plane shook violently over the rough terrain. As did the pursuing car choking on the resulting dust storm stirred up by the Cessna.

Arthur and Phil held on to the seats in front of them and wondered if the plane would hold together long enough to take off. The car behind was closing. Then suddenly over the incessant roar of the engine, the bumping and jostling ceased. A smoothness overcame the dilapidated airship. Bullets bounce off the sides of the plane then harmlessly into the distance. It was not the first time the old girl had been shot at and already bore a number of scars from earlier expeditions to forbidden places.

Pierre reduced the flaps and the Cessna increased in speed and altitude. And with it distance from the trailing car. With his eyes focused on the climbing plane. The driver did not see the wire fence ahead of him and crashed helplessly into it. Sending the vehicle into a summersault before ending on its roof. Arthur could see the carnage as the Cessna banked. Describing the scene below to Phil who was peering over his shoulder.

Pierre levelled the Cessna’s wings and scanned the instruments for any malfunctions. Checked his bearings and set a course to Bari. Somewhere on the southern East coast of Italy of his memory served him correctly. Switching the plane to auto-pilot turned to Alistair and asked.

“Fancy a drink? I always keep a bottle handy for emergencies.”

“Love one.” Replied Alistair, his arm beginning to remind him to take it easy.

“No glasses unfortunately.” Drawing a bottle of whiskey up from under his seat. “So tell me... What brings you to town?”

“You know... Usual business for the Vatican...” Replied Alistair.

Keeping the ring from view. The less Pierre knew the better, for his sake and any temptation from evil. Taking a swig Alistair passed the bottle back to Arthur who promptly took a mouthful. His frayed nerves in need of medicinal relief. Phil on the other hand took a couple of mouthfuls. One for his nerves, and one simply because he could. Then passed it back to Pierre who declined.

“I never drink while I fly.” Pierre responded. “I leave that for when I’m grounded.”

Much to the surprise and relief to everyone on board who laughed.

“Gentlemen... Please fasten your seat belts... We may be experiencing some low flying... E.T.A. is about five hours subject to head winds... Please enjoy your flight... In-flights refreshments are now being served... And thank you for flying Air-Pierre.” Pierre joked in an official announcement voice.

‘Seat belts? What seat belts?’ Thought Arthur. ‘Five hours? ... That would make it about nine or ten PM by the time they got to Bari.’

And that would only be after Pierre had negotiated the high-ways and by-ways to get them there. For now Arthur and Phil would try to get some rest. They had not sleep well on the train from Bucharest.

Unsure of what lay ahead after their arrival, it was all new to Arthur. His father seemed to have done this before and appeared quite calm about it all. Despite his heavily bandaged arm his father had now taken controls of the plane as Pierre instructed him through the head set of the various displays. A radar detector on the dashboard would warn them of any impeding beam.

For now they would follow the setting sun west as long as it lasted. Like a traction beam the celestial glowing orb pulled them closer.



Just a Scratch

It was not long before Pierre had fallen asleep under the harmonic droning of the engine that pulled him back to resume the dream he had been pulled from in the hanger. Eyelids surrendered to the darkness of the night.

They had been flying for nearly two hours. Placing them somewhere over the Aegean Sea off the coast of eastern Greece. When suddenly the radar detector sprang to life. Beeping and flashing its pre-encrypted warning to all those who would listen. Pierre did not stir. The boys in the back oblivious to the warning over the sound of the roaring engine.

Alistair took the controls and gently put the fragile craft into a controlled dive. Unable to make out the terrain of what lay below. The altitude meter indicated they were still several thousand feet above sea level. But that meant nothing when flying over hilly terrain. They could well slam into the side of a mountain at any moment. Navigating only by instruments to determine their approximate positioning.

Diving the plane to a thousand feet the detector continued to scream its impeachment. Not wanting to panic the boys in the back who were sleeping. The incessant roar of the engine deafening the warning siren. Pierre was indifferent either way.

Looking out the windows for lights below. There was none to be seen. Pushing the controls forward the plane Alistair pushed the craft lower. The altitude dial slowly unwinding like a clock's second hand. At six hundred feet the beeping stopped. They were now under the radar, or out of reach from it. Both were acceptable to Alistair. But could not maintain the low altitude forever. He needed to re-gain height to avoid colliding into the side of an unseen mountain.

Hoping they were still over water.

Only Pierre knew the route well enough to fly by night. There was a narrow corridor between Macedonia to the north and Greece to the south. The corridor would take them over Albania. From there they would fly over the Adriatic Sea. Leaving an hour's flight to Bari. Alistair would maintain the course due west for a while longer. Then wake Pierre when it was time to take them inland.

For now they were safe. He pulled back on the control stick slowly. Easing the craft higher, lifting the plane's nose and altitude. Another sudden beeping of the radar detector would mean another dive and Pierre would need to be dragged from his dreamland.

Monitoring the gauges. Alistair could not help but notice that the fuel had dropped more than he thought it should have. Looking out the windows under the wings. Noticed droplets leaking from the wing's fuel tank. Lights lit the tear drops being pulled backwards by the rushing air. A rouge bullet from the pursing car.

'Damn... We should be thankful it had not exploded', he conceded.

Pierre, Arthur and Phil had fallen asleep under the spell of the monotonous engine and deepening darkness. Leaving Alistair as the only person awake in the plane. They had travelled a third of the way and fuel tanks showed two thirds full. They would be cutting it fine if they were to make it to Bari by his rough calculation. Excessive use of the throttle would only burn more fuel he assessed. He would need to conserve fuel by maintaining level flight and cruise control. There was no way of stopping the leak. Pierre will know more when he came about.

Pierre roused from his evening siesta and opened his eyes and regained his focus. The cockpit was dark, lit only by the panel of colored instruments and a small white overhead bulb.

"Any problems?" He asked inquisitively.

"Not really." Alistair began. "Radar went off about half an hour ago and we may have a small leak in fuel tank... Port wing." He briefed Pierre who was still getting his own bearings.

Checking the fuel gauge and the time expired. Pierre then casually looked out the port window and saw the cat eyes blinking at him.

"Hmm... *Just a scratch...* Nothing to worry about. Not the first time the old girl has been hit." Said Pierre not wanting to give away the potential risk the leak created.

In the back of his mind Pierre had reservations but thought best not to cause unnecessary panic. He would know more in a couple hours. Either way, it was going to be close. Pierre did the dead-reckoning math in his head. Suggesting it was nearly time they should inland and head for the corridor overland.

The night sky was clear. No longer hidden by the earthly pollution and street lights. The spectacular band of stardust called the Milky-Way stretched from one horizon to the other. Billions upon billions of stars shone brilliantly above them. The angelic souls shone in unison as a testimony to God's great creation, the Universe. It was a majestic wonder to behold. The first wonder of the world. The moon was rising in the east and would soon light up ocean below.

Faint lights were appearing along the coast ahead of them. *Nei Pori* on the

east coast of Greece possibly assessed Pierre. A small town of only several hundred souls. No one would bother about a small plane passing overhead. Pierre would then turn the craft north-west and breach the corridor to Albania.

Having taken this path on number of times the plane banked gently to starboard without stirring the sleeping souls in the back. They had had an eventful day after their shoot out at Alistair's now not so safe, safe house.

Arthur's dreams had almost returned to normal. The werewolves had been left behind at the Ottoman boarder. He found himself not dancing around a Gypsy camp fire but in a quiet café in Watford. Dancing with a girl named Zara with a white daisy in her hair.

This was one dream he did not want to be woken from.



Bari

The single prop propeller screwed into the air, pulling the plane across the Adriatic Sea. The fuel gauge began flashing a bright red light indicating fuel was low and soon an alarm would sound as a secondary warning. There was a reserve tank, but its range was limited. Pierre estimated the still had another two-fifty kilometers to travel before they would reached their targeted destination of Bari. His experience told him the reserve tanks would give him two hundred, give or take.

Deciding to gain altitude. The logic being that more height he had, the more guiding distance he would have available. The most dangerous part of flying is not the landing but the taking off. Even the Space Shuttle lands by guiding. Without air speed or altitude a troubled plane has little room to maneuver. Altitude would give them a height to descend. Descending would generate air speed and air speed would create air flow over the wings that would create lift. Pierre would use this simple principle of aeronautics when the fuel ran out to gain additional distance.

Eyes peeled the horizon for distance lights. But they were too far away for any to be visible. Any radar warning would have to be ignored. The benefit of staying aloft was greater than the cost of diving lower and losing valuable altitude and precious distance. Pierre knew he would have to milk every inch of distance out of every drop of fuel.

Alistair had stayed awake the whole time. Noticing the flashing red light on the fuel gauge he said nothing. Pierre was aware of it and stating the obvious would be pointless. In his peripheral vision he saw Alistair looking at him. And gave a cheeky grin. His body language suggesting everything was under control. This was his baby and she had not let him down before. And she would not do so this time.

The Romanians have a saying, *'If it is impossible, then it can be done'*.

There was still fuel in the wings. And in the reserve. And they had altitude. It could be done.

Now flying above an ocean of moon lit clouds. Pierre scanned the regional radio frequencies. If they should fall short, he would need to send out a May-Day distress warning. Faith crackles and static sounded through the head sets. Incomplete words could be heard, nothing recognizable or coherent. They were close but not close enough.

Then the fuel alarm abruptly shouted its warning for all to hear.

“Pas maintenant! Not now.” Cursed Pierre killing the alarm so as not to wake Arthur and Phil.

Then flicked an overhead switch to open the reserve tanks. Hoping Alistair had filled those and unable to recall when he had last used the reserve tanks. Let alone filled them. Separate to the main tanks they would be unaffected by the fuel leak. Something in their favor he thought.

He needed a land mark and quickly to gauge the distance remaining. The current altitude would give him possibly another five to eight kilometers depending on the wind direction to slow them down or speed the up. But he could sense they were a lot further out than that.

The radio static grew louder. Audible voices could be heard over the head sets. Alistair listened carefully to pick out what they were saying and to whom. In the distance faith lights appeared, too dim for a city. A town perhaps. Hopefully Bari possibly not. He had flown at night before. But always with sufficient fuel to make deviations to correct his course.

Three possibilities existed.

One, they would crash into the ocean short of land. Not the preferred outcome. Two, they land on a road or paddock. Assuming they could find one and they miss any overhead powerlines. Or three, and the one Pierre desired most was to land at the remote air field where he had a hanger.

Pierre knew most of the towns that punctuated the coast line. But how much had the side winds blown them off course? He would soon find out. An air bubble had entered the fuel line. The engine gave a cough as if to warn Pierre it had a tickle in its throat.

The warning alarm would sound again as soon as the reserve tanks were low. Pierre was not religious, he took a deep breath and crossed himself. And said a prayer to the Patron Saint of Pilots. Whoever that was. Gauging they still had about twenty to thirty kilometers to go on the tanks and that they were still over water. Easing the plane slowly higher for additional height he waited for the death knell to sound out its evitable warning. The engine gave another intermittent fur-ball cough strangling the fuel line with air bubbles.

Then the alarm sounded it death kneel.

Screeching out its incessant warning of danger. Pierre knew the engine would stop at any moment he killed the alarm. But not in time for Arthur and Phil in the back to avoid from awakening. A red light was flashed brilliantly on the panel. Only Pierre and Alistair knew what it meant. Phil and Arthur was figuring it out very quickly. They could do nothing but leave it to Pierre who seemed to be in

control.

After several more intermittent coughing fits the engine suddenly fell silent, deceased. Only the eerie sound of air rushing coarsely over the wings could be heard. The Cessna maintained its initial momentum for a brief period before the forces of friction took hold to retard its speed. Pierre eased the Cessna into an angled descent followed by a sensation of falling. Arthur and Phil looked at each other wondering what was going to happen. Their engineering minds calculating what they had never studied, principles of aerodynamics.

Gauging they were just over five kilometers out and perhaps enough to guide. With little room to maneuver Pierre would need to get the approach right the first time. There would not be enough height for a second chance. Air speed steadied itself as the plane descended and the lights below grew brighter. On the starboard side, they could make out the remote airfield with its runway dimly lit. Banking was a risk as it would dampen the air speed and would they have the height to regain the air speed required before the plane would stall?

“Gently old girl ... Gently.” Pierre coaxed his lover.

Audible only through Alistair’s headset. Arthur sat frozen hyperventilating with the anxiety. Phil on the other hand was alert his veins coursing with adrenalin. Eyes focused on the lights below. Pierre had down the math and knew it would be close. Maybe.

The red runway lights that marked their approach grew brighter. Timing was everything as Pierre extended the flaps to provide more lift. But this would also reduce valuable speed. Too soon and the plane would stall and fall. Sending them falling to their premature deaths. Gauging they would touch down short of the runway. It would be bumpy, but they would be down.

“Fasten your seat belts gentleman and return your food trays to an upright position... It’s going to be a bumpy landing.” Warned Pierre just before the plane bounced its wheels against the roughed turf of the airfield.

The plane recoiled with jolts. Sending Arthur and Phil recoiling along with it in the back seats desperately trying to get a hold on anything that was not bouncing along with them. After a series of bunny hops the Cessna finally came to a stop followed by a morbid stillness and a deafening silence that said they had made it. Just.

The silent landing without the engine had been beneficial as no one had heard them arrive. People could be seen moving about in the distance in the hangers. Unaware of the recent unconventional landing. The Cessna’s lights the only tell-tale sign giving their presence away.

It was just after nine local time.

“Thank you Gentlemen for flying Air-Pierre... I hope you enjoyed your

flight. I look forward to flying with you again.” Announced Pierre switching off the plane’s instruments.

“Thanks Pierre... We cut it a bit fine... But we made it.” Commended Alistair.

Followed by a hand on the shoulder from Phil to say thanks.

“What do you mean fine?” Mused Pierre.

“I hope the old girl is alright? ... What with the *scratch* and the rough landing.” Asked Alistair.

“She’ll be fine... I’ll have her patched up in no time... We need to get you out of here before we’re spotted... The car is in the hanger... Where you heading to?”

“Naples.” Informed Alistair.

“Any chance there’ll be bullet holes in it when I get it back?” Enquired Pierre of second true love.

“Most likely... But the Vatican have a great third party policy cover.” Assured Alistair not kidding.

“We’ll leave the plane here... Not that we have much choice.” Advised Pierre heading towards the hangers.

Parked in the corner of the small hanger was a car covered with a heavy faded tarpaulin. Pulling the dusty tarp to one side revealed a small white Fiat. Like most Italians it was solid, sturdy and reliable. Its rust patches reminded Alistair of the van he had left behind in Istanbul.

“Keys are under the mat... Refreshments are under the driver’s seat.” Advised Pierre. “Might need some gas.”

“No worries... We better get going if we’re going to get to Naples by midnight... Mind if I use phone?”

“You know where to find it.” Replies Pierre looking to the small office.

Alistair had to make a call. The Cardinal needed to know they had made it to Bari. They would rendezvous in Naples, at the Cathedral di Santa Maria Assunta south of the city. Barring any delays.

“I’ll have some men ready should there be trouble.” Cassini informed Alistair that he would not be unprotected if it came to showdown.

“Good to know... See you around midnight... I’ll be taking the back roads which may add some time.” Advised Alistair and hung up.

A weary look came over his face, the pain in his arm reminding him it needed attention. Having taken the last of the pain killers at his safe house. His arm was beginning throb with pain. A few more hours and it would all be over. He hoped.

He had had several assignments for the Vatican but this was by far the bloodiest.

“Let’s get it over with.” He said quietly to himself inhaling a deep breath readied himself for the final leg.

Taking the duffle bag from Arthur, pulled out a roll of Euros.

“Take this Pierre...” Shoving the roll into Pierre’s hand closing his hand around it before he had a chance to refuse it. “...Couldn’t have got here without you mate.”

“Anytime my good friend... Anytime...” Responded Pierre happy he had gotten Alistair and the family safely to Bari. “...You better get going and get that arm seen to... okay?”

“Will do... I’ll be in touch once we’ve made it... You going to be okay?” Asked Alistair.

“I’ll be fine... I’ll make the repairs first light... There’s added protection under the back seat if you need it.” Pierre added ensuring Alistair went prepared into the night.

“Thanks... Let’s hope we don’t have to use it.” Alistair replied knowing they probably would.

The two men shook hands before heading in opposite directions.

“Nice meeting you boys... Take care of your dad...” Then added, “...He tends to get into trouble occasionally.” He teased walking into what constituted his office.

Peeling the cap off a half empty bottle of whiskey from his desk drawer and took a heavy swig and settled onto a sofa that had seen better days. Sighed and closed his eyes to continue his interrupted dreams.

Meanwhile Alistair had found the keys and the bottle under the seat. Taking a heavy swig before handing it to Arthur and Phil. Each taking a hearty mouthful. They were going to need it. They were going into the unknown.

Not been used for months a damp disused smell stained the Fiat’s interior. The tarp having marinated the fiat in the hangars damp odors. Alistair reached for his left arm seeing blood showing through the heavy bandages and feeling sweat forming on his forehead. The pain killers were wearing off. Alistair took another mouthful of whiskey. Just a few more hours, he thought.

“You okay Dad?” asked Arthur with concern.

“Yeah good.” Alistair lied. “Why don’t you drive?” And threw Arthur the keys.

Arthur resuscitated the engine to life and the engine gave an assuring sound as it idled.

“Okay boys... We’re heading to Naples... Keep an eye open for anyone suspicious.” Then it dawned on him.

The Ring.

He had grown accustomed to it feel. It had warmed to his body. He looked at his hand and the finger on which sat the ancient ring of Saint Peter. Stained with his blood. Taking the whiskey bottle he poured some onto his hand to wash away the blood.

'It would not hurt Saint Peter to try a descent whiskey', he thought and smiled to himself.

"Is that it?" Asked Arthur curiously.

"Yeah... This is what all the fuss and bullets are about."

Then turned the ring over so to have the relief on top. The relief revealed of two crossed keys.

"The keys to the Kingdom of Heaven... Let's hope we don't have to use them." Warned Alistair.

Arthur was momentarily stunned by the Rings significance. On his father's finger was not only two thousand years of history. But one degree of separation from Christ himself. He wanted to touch it but its reverence was too intense.

"Let's get going Arthur... Should be a three hour drive. Give or take any delays... Let's hope they are the right sort of delays". Instructed Alistair.

Snapping Arthur back into the twenty-first century again.

Reversing the Fiat from its covered corner. It had been a while since he had driven. But it came back to him quickly as they got underway. Alistair took the front passenger seat. His eyes keen as they had been at the Bazaar café. How he would have given anything to be puffing on a pipe about now. He was running in fumes just as the plane had. Taking another mouthful whiskey to distract his mind from the growing pain in his arm.

Arthur drove cautiously pass the hangers that lined the air field and made his way to the open road. The Fiat's head lights revealing the brief distance ahead of them. Phil sat in the back. His eyes searching the lights of the hangers.

'Bring it on', he thought, ready for another fight at any moment.

In the air they were safe. But on the ground they were vulnerable. They had become targets again. But eyes had seen them land. Marconi's and Braun's men were everywhere. Nothing escaped their commissioned attention.



The Chase

Naples lay three hundred kilometers to the west. They would avoid the multi-lane motorways that could see them boxed in by relic men's cars and single lanes of the back roads. Alistair was dealing the cards now. It would take a little longer but they would be in control for now. But the options would narrow the closer they got to Naples.

Arthur was beginning to regret driving. Sitting on the wrong side of the car and driving on the wrong side of the road and hoped he would not have a momentary lapse of concentration. With a fuel tank three quarter full quick calculations told Arthur they would have enough to get to Naples barring any bullet holes like the Cessna.

Just to the west lay the junction town of Modugno that connected to a Highway that headed west. Alistair pointed to the on-ramp Arthur should take to get them onto the highway. They would deviate occasionally and take rural roads running parallel to keep any followers guessing.

The full moon lit the night sky its brightness mollified by the passing street lights and the fiat's headlights on full beam. Arthur's eyes scanned the road ahead and checking the fiat's mirrors, wary of any vehicles that lingered too long or too closely. Mostly freight trucks and the cars heading home and Arthur wished he was heading home. The Fiat's engine hummed within cabin of the car. After the screaming Cessna engine for the past five hours, the Fiat's feeble groan was bliss. Either that or he had gone partially deaf in the plane.

"How you doing Phil?" Called out Arthur, looking at Phil in the back seat.

"Good mate... Good... It's been quite a day eh?" Phil replied, finding it difficult to sum up the day's events.

"Yeah, and it's not over yet." Responded Arthur recalling that morning they were in Istanbul. Now they are heading across central Italy heading to Naples.

"Yeah quite a day... Almost home." Comforted Arthur taking in a breath of the cold night air to refresh his concentration.

The Fiat's head lights lit the road ahead and peripheral curbs. Coming up behind a lorry travelling slower than the others. Arthur pulled in behind it and waited for a place to overtake and put his foot to the floor. Pulling out to pass the fiat accelerated reluctantly. Gradually moving by the large lorry. As they passed the lorry cabin. The lorry driver looked down and stared a little longer than he really should have. Almost observing rather than a glancing as most drivers would. Arthur pulled in front of the lorry and continued the fiat's acceleration

and then some. His father noticed the additional speed.

“Everything okay Arthur?” He asked curiously.

“Got a funny feeling about the driver... He was looking too long at us.” Suggested Arthur.

Alistair opened the side window causing a rush of cold air to slap across the Phil in the face. Adjusted the side mirror he could see the driver talking on the radio.

“That was quick... Well spotted Arthur... Seems we have company already.”

The words aroused Phil’s attention and reaching for his gun. As if to second guess their next move.

“Arthur... Stay on this road and keep your speed up... Get some distance on the lorry. The Vatican can afford any speed-camera fines... Phil, be prepared for anything okay.” Instructed Alistair to his charges.

“Yes Sir Mister McGee.” Responded Phil keenly. “Bring it on...”

The slow lorry was now no longer slow. It too had accelerated to keep pace with the Fiat.

‘It would not be long before others would be scouring the road for them’, thought Alistair.

The word had been sent out.

“Take the next road ahead.” Directed Alistair knowing a few kilometers ahead a rural road intersected a Highway.

“Which way?” Arthur asked wanting more instructions.

“Surprise me.” Replied Alistair.

It did not matter. Either way would be a surprise to the lorry driver who would find it difficult to negotiate the heavy lorry down a narrow winding road.

Arthur flipped a mental coin in his head. Then looked in the rear mirror at Phil whose eyes were fixed on his.

“Call it.” Intuitively knowing that Phil would be thinking the same.

“Left.” Called Phil decisively leaving it to the last moment.

And with that Arthur turned right.

“Good call mate.” Mused Phil returning to his surveillance of the lorry.

The lorry slowed down and turned into the same narrow road before coming to a stop. It may not be able to follow them. But it could block them coming doubling back. Alistair could only second guess what lay ahead. Reaching under his seat he pulls out a folded map of Italy. If there was a time he ever needed to use a map it was now. Recalling the name on the sign post, Mellitto.

“Found it...” He said to himself. “...Take the next road on the left... The road will take us through to Gravina... twenty-five clicks away... Hopefully they won’t have time to get men together before we get there... Hopefully

they'll think we'll stick to the main roads.”

From there they had a choice of roads and it was going to be a long winding route if they wanted to evade those tracking them. It would be a game of cat and mouse and the cat does not always win. Arthur focused on the narrow road ahead of him. Phil focused on the road behind them. Alistair focused on the map. He had options but they were becoming limited.

The fiat went rushing into the night. Its headlights the only sign of its presence in the unseen historic Italian country side the flashed past their windows. Countless Roman Legions would have marched these fields. On their way to and from historic battles in ancient Greece and North Africa. Just one step at a time, with no Eurostar or Fiat to assist them.

They were approaching another intersection lit with street lights.

“Keeping going straight.” Instructed Alistair pointing his finger forward like a rally car navigator.

Arthur hoped there would no sharp cornering or they would be in more trouble. Maintaining the course as directed by his father he searched out the windows for stationary cars. There were a few parked up. Then one came to life as they passed.

“Think we have company again Mister McGee.” Alerted Phil, noticing the vehicle picking up speed and gaining distance on them.

“You ready Phil?” Asked Alistair looking him in the eye. “It could get nasty.”

“Can’t get any nastier than back in Istanbul.” Rebutted Phil.

Pulling back on the Glock to put a bullet in the chamber.

“Make very shot count Phil... Aim for the radiator. Tires... Or the driver if you have to.” Suggested Alistair.

“Already ahead of you on that Mister McGee.” Responded Phil anticipating his next move.

Phil had an innate survival instinct having grown up in a rough Glasgow neighborhood. This was no different to him. The pursuing car pulled closer. And closer. Its lights on full. They were not hiding in the dark. Arthur tilted the rear mirror down to deflect the blinding beam in his eyes.

“Hold your speed Arthur... We can’t outrun them... But we can out shoot them.” Reaching for the thirty-eight from his pocket.

Its range was not great. But its punching power was second to none on this earth. Alistair was in no position of firing a control shot backwards from his window and Arthur’s window blocked. It was down to Phil who had the advantage from his window. Which he had wound down and waited for the

vehicle to draw nearer. The cars sped along the single lane road and there would be no overtaking here.

“Wait and see what they do... Keep our powder dry till we need it.” Warned Alistair monitoring the side mirror.

They would soon be nearing Gravina and Alistair assessed that was where the following car would make its move. There could well be more cars in waiting for them. Gravina also provided them more roads to evade capture. The ensuing car pulled back and held its distance.

The town was just ahead, its street lights illuminating the night clouds above. Alistair planned out a route he wanted to take. Not wanting to take too many deviations they would head to Altamura then onto Salerno, north through to Pompelli and onto Naples. Otherwise they would end up in dead end. In more than one sense.

“We need to shake them... But we better make sure they’re simply not boy racers on a joy ride.” Advised Alistair not wanting to start shooting at an innocent car. “When we get to Gravina don’t stop for any lights okay.” Instructed Alistair.

“Roger that dad.” Confirmed Arthur.

The Fiat entered the main arterial speckled by bright overhead street lights. Slowing their speed to match the traffic around them. The pursuing car would not try anything with other vehicles about. Or would they?

Without warning Arthur suddenly turned down a side street. They all held their breath to see what the car following would do. Only to see it continue a straight course and disappear from view. Alistair patted Arthur’s shoulder to say he had done well to make the call. The pursuing car could easily have been a decoy. Leaving others would pick up where they left off. The fiat stood out, even in Italy.

Driving parallel to the main road they continued their steady journey west. Further on would see them into Potzena. One of Alistair’s checkpoints. Arthur negotiated the tight winding roads outside Tolve having now familiarized himself to the Fiat’s subtle idiosyncrasies. Phil looked for anything out of place. He was sure the car that had fallen away would be waiting somewhere ahead. He trusted no one, with the exception of Arthur and his father. And the Cardinal. His mind toying with the Cardinal’s proposal.

The lights of Potzena could be seen on the horizon. At an altitude of nearly a thousand meters above sea level its mountain air was crisp. Its winding streets could easy trap them within the ancient labyrinth and they would stay on the outskirts and circumnavigate the city. The west coast junction lay another

hundred kilometers ahead of them.

Their options and roads to turn down grew fewer the closer they got to Naples.



Home Leg

Rail tracks ran parallel to the road. Despite wishes to the contrary Arthur would prefer a train over driving at this point in time. Keeping his mind occupied re-focused his attention on the road ahead, the fuel gauge and calculated distances and mileage. Phil and his father watched out for rouge vehicles.

Nearly two hours into their journey and reaching the half way mark and making good speed and time. And getting closer to danger with every passing kilometer. Henchmen would be lying in wait up a head. But where? Where had they set their trap? Alistair was contemplated the dilemma. Had the pursuing car known the route they had taken? Assuming it was a pursuing car.

Passing through the streets of Eboli. Two parked cars came to life. They had been waiting as were others cars other roads as part of a greater net cast to capture them. Not wanting to share their bounty with the other, this would be their spoils.

Phil spotted them first. Followed closely by Alistair. Arthur was too engaged on driving to have notice anything. His eyes straining on the road ahead. The impending adrenalin rush was about to change all that.

“Two bogies at six o’clock.” Warned Phil.

“See them.” Confirmed Alistair. “Hold your speed and course Arthur.”

Arthur checked his mirrors to see what the others could see.

“We won’t make a move until they do.” Suggested Alistair.

The pursuing cars followed some distance behind them.

“Don’t let them box us in Arthur.” Alistair warned.

Alistair checked the cannon in his hand. Fully loaded and ready to broadside any Italian pirate brigantine that wanted to pass.

“Wind down you window Arthur...”

Taking the whiskey bottle and swallowing a large mouthful to numb the growing pain in his arm. Then offering the bottle to Phil who took a hit and handed it back. None for Arthur he was driving.

“When I say hit it... drop a gear and put your foot down... When I say break... You break okay? ... Just enough to bring us level with... Got it? ... I’ll do the rest...” Alistair had a plan that would only work once. “...Hold your hands low on the steering wheel... I will need to reach across you... Okay? ... This could get noisy.”

“Got it dad... Let’s do it.” confirmed Arthur.

“Hold your fire until I say Phil... Aim at the tires.” directed Alistair.

“Yes Sir.” Phil confirmed the order.

The first car made its move and accelerated towards them. Hoping to get in front and trap the Fiat between themselves and with the car behind.

“Okay Arthur... Hit it!” Alistair gave the word.

Knowing it would be no match for the more powerful car encroaching on them. As the car pulled closer he saw the menacing faces of the men with grins waving their guns. Tormenting him to pull over. These were not boy racers on a midnight ride. They had shown their hand.

“We can assume they’re not the good guys!” Whipped Phil.

“You can shot at these ones Phil.” Joked Alistair. “Unless you see the Cardinal amongst them.”

“Copy that.” Confirmed Phil itching for action.

The first car was nearing their bumper when Alistair called out again.

“Break! Break! Break!”

Alistair wanted to catch them off guard before they had time to react.

With that instruction. Arthur applied the brakes slowing the Fiat down and the pursing car suddenly came level to theirs.

“Hit it again.” Calling out to maintain his speed with the car beside them.

The men in the other car were taken back by the sudden maneuver. Scrambling to lower their windows. But all too late and Alistair had anticipated their confusion. Leaning over to Arthur’s window and rested his good arm on the ledge.

‘Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!’ Rang out six deafening shots in quick succession.

The acrid smell of cordite filled the Fiat.

Windows of the other car shattered as the men dived for cover after the first shots were fired. Causing the driver to veer violently from the road and career into a tree. The men in the back seat catapulted inside of the car. Their bodies mangled with those in the front. A bloody jigsaw for the authorities to find and piece together.

“One down.” Called out Alistair. “Not too noisy I hope was it Arthur?” Asked his father.

“I can’t hear you... My ears are still ringing!” Exclaimed Arthur loudly and wishing he was joking.

“They’ve shown their hand and we’ve shown ours... The next one may not be so easy.” Alistair reasoned aloud.

The second car did not stop to assist their fallen comrades. The bounty would be all theirs. And accelerated after the Fiat. Approaching closer it began firing and punched holes into the back of the solid Fiat. Sounding sharp metallic bangs

as bullets struck the Fiat's body and sending sparks into the air.

'Pierre won't be happy with the ventilation holes', thought Alistair.

With that thought another smashed the back window sending glass granules flying.

"Look under the seat." Alistair calls out to Phil.

"Now we're talking Mister McGee!" Exclaimed Phil excitably pulling out a pump action shot-gun.

"Give them a taste of lead Phil!" Instructed Alistair.

Wild shots continued to ricochet off the Fiat. Hitting metal and air. Phil pumped the shot gun to load a cartridge. Shouldered the rifle securely he aimed at the radiator.

'Boom!'

The sonic boom reverberated the Fiat's interior, peppering lead pellets into the pursuing metal beast's gills, shattered a headlight and half blinding it. Phil pumped the shot-gun again and aimed towards the driver.

"You bastard!" Phil called out as if the driver could hear.

And fired again.

'Boom!' Another deafening blast, punching a hole into their windscreen.

The wounded car veered suddenly and erratically corrected itself. Despite more wild shots slamming into the Fiat's rear end steam began to erupt from beneath the bonnet of the pursuing car. Blinding the driver from the road ahead. Henchmen fired riotously at a last ditch effort to stop the Fiat. But to no avail. Their car coming to a stammering halt on the side of the road as plumes of white steam billowed from its punctured body. Watching the Fiat's red rear lights disappeared through the fog of steam and gun smoke ahead of them.

"Well done boys... You done good." Alistair said as he sat back in his seat holding his arm.

The action had caused blood to seep through the bandages.

"You okay dad?" Asked Arthur with concern.

"Yeah. Yeah... I'm fine... Not much longer now." Denied Alistair, but the pain that felt very real as the Fiat slipped into the darkness of night.

Marconi would need to be informed, a call no one wished to make. More of his men would be in wait in Naples. Cardinal Dovizi had kept Marconi and Braun informed as to the destination of the Ring. The Fiat was still another hour away from Naples and they had to pass through Salerno on the coast, then Pompeii to the north. There were back roads they could take to avoid the bright city lights. Darkness was their only friend now.

Arthur transited the highways and bi-ways as he came across them. Two

roads lead into Naples from the south. Alistair decided he would take the more direct route. Hoping the Braun's men would assume he would take the back route. Both would have lookouts watching for them. They had shown they could hold their own in a fight.

Two bloody noses to none.

On entering Salerno they turned down a residential street that ran parallel to the main road north. Hoping to keep the henchmen guessing their next move. Alistair was right. The street was unblemished as it ran the length of the city joining a junction.

One road went right, one left.

"Which way?" Asked Arthur.

"Left..." Responded Alistair "Will take us to Pompeii... You may have heard it."

"Yeah... But it's no time for a history lesson Dad."

And with that Arthur turned the Fiat left onto the highway and merged with traffic heading north.

"The more cars the better." Said Alistair to the boys.

Suspicious of any vehicle that encroached too close to them.

"Go with the flow Arthur... We'll try to blend in."

But the Fiat could not blend in. It stood out. Its shattered back window and rear end peppered with bullet holes. As if it had been in a gunfight.

The night sky had surrendered to the artificial street lighting. And the majestic brilliance of the Milky-Way had surrendered to the haze of pollution and smog. God's great creation would bear no witness to events happening below. Mount Vesuvius lay sleeping on their right.

Their sanctuary, the Cathedral of Naples lay twenty minutes ahead of them. They hoped.



Cathedral di Santa

Dressed in their black robes Cassini and Francis stood on the top steps of the Cathedral di Santa Maria Assunta. Michael stood to one side. His presence could be felt. Inside its massive interior for the Cathedral elaborate gold gilded frescos adorned the walls and ceilings. Reminiscent of the Sistine Chapel. The exterior covered with meticulous carvings and a large central window. Three dark wooden doors guarded the façade like large stolid monks.

Perched on high, crouched large stone Gargoyles. Their exaggerated evil features, grotesque and threatening. Glaring down on those below. Their sole purpose to strike fear into the hearts of those from below. Scaring them into church for safety and salvation. Their ancillary purpose to allowing rain water to gush through their open jaws before plummeting to the ground. Water sprouts. This evening they could smell not rain, but blood in the air.

The Cathedral closed its doors at midnight but did not stop the hundreds of tourists taking photographs of the flood lit structure. Dedicated to God with disfigured heavenly creatures perched above. Cassini and Francis stood quietly waiting, their hands crossed before them holding their bibles.

The café opposite doing a brisk midnight trade. Cassini surveyed the faces in the crowd. Gauging for those that did not belong, his men strategically positioned among the small crowd of tourists that were taking in the cool evening. The crowd providing collateral cover for Braun and Marconi's men that had gravitated at the café to await arrival of the prize. The two men would not be there that evening nor would they be seen to be part of the events that were about to unfold.

Marconi would be safe some distance away on his hilltop hideaway, his men that had failed to so far would surely not fail him now. This time he had the numbers, the guns. If it turned bloody then so be it. It was a price he was prepared to pay for the Ring. Too exquisite to let it slip from his reach and from his finger. Soon the ring would be his.

Braun would be in Munich. Licking his wounds Cassini had inflicted on him. His men would be there for the Ring's arrival, sitting around café tables. Blending in tourists and fidgeting in anticipation of the ensuing firefight. The two groups of men watched each other questionably. Unsure what to make of the other's presence before realizing they were contesting the same prize. They would first contest the ring, then each other. For now, my enemies' enemy is my friend. Unaware of a third party, the Vatican's men lying in wait. The trinity of

players suspiciously eyed each other in a Mexican stand-off. Who would draw first?

Turning into Via Duomo, a long avenue that ran north to the Cathedral. The last of the turns the tired Fiat would need to make and the last leg of its journey. Creeping nervously down the broad avenue along with other cars with less bullet holes in them. On reaching the huge round-about of the Pizza Nicola Amore Arthur drove tentatively around it to re-join Via Duomo on the other side.

Alistair scanned for menacing cars or people. Nothing, it was all too quiet.

'They wouldn't have given up that easy', Alistair thought.

On his lap hidden from view his thirty-eight reloaded at the ready.

Modern three terraced buildings lined the sidewalks as a string of cars parked lined the curbs. They could now see the flood lit square of the Cathedral coming into view and the Cardinal, standing alone side Francis. He also saw the café and men milling about reading newspapers.

"Pull over here Arthur!" Alistair suddenly instructs Arthur indicating a vacant spot.

Arthur crawled the Fiat to a stop.

"Kill the engine... We're here." Alistair informed them. "This is it."

Fifty meters to the right of the Cathedral. Fifty meters to the left the café. The sidewalk was protected by intermittent large concrete posts. Large stone seats protruded at regular intervals about the square. There was no way of getting the car closer.

"Bring your weapon of choice gentlemen." Said Alistair looking to Arthur and then back to Phil.

"Shot gun!" Exclaimed Phil, having finally found a relationship he could commit to.

"Glock for you then Arty." Said his father.

Alistair surveyed the lay of the land. Tourist. Good for them, bad for tourist, hoping they would scatter when the shooting starts.

"See the café over there... Those men aren't tourist." Alistair asked.

"How can you tell?" Arthur asks curiously.

"Who reads a newspaper at midnight? ... And there's too many suited gentlemen for my liking..." Advised Alistair. "...They're not going to allow us to simply walk across to square to the Cardinal."

"Yeah... I see what you mean... So what are we going to do?" Arthur asks.

"How fast can you run Arty?" His father asked looking at him.

"I'm not leaving you Dad!" Arthur insisted.

"I need someone fast to get to the Cardinal... We'll cover you. Once you're

safe... You cover us... Okay?"

"Why do I need to get to the Cardinal?" Arthur asked unsure of his father's plan.

"Take this..." Removing the Ring from his finger and placing it on Arthur's finger.

The burden had been lifted from his hand. A white flesh band marked on his finger. A silhouette left from his dried blood. Arthur stared down at the ring. It's past flooding into him. Taking the responsibly being asked of him.

"You good?" Alistair asked his son placing a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm good Dad." Replied Arthur looking into his father eyes.

"Phil... I'll fire a couple of shots in the air to disperse the crowd... That should also draw the vultures from their lairs... See anyone with a gun... Shot at them okay?" Alistair instructed his new recruit.

With pleasure Mister McGee... With pleasure." Phil said with pleasure.

"Arthur... After I fire my shots... I want you to run like the devil to the Cardinal... The scattering crowd will give you some cover okay?"

"Okay Dad."

Alistair waited momentarily to enjoy the peace before the storm that was about to unleash itself outside the House of God. He could see the Cardinal and Francis coming down the steps towards them. Then looked back to the café to see men reaching inside the overcoats.

"It's going down!" Called out Alistair.

Hoping it was not too late for the Cardinal and the Father. Pulling himself from the car took some effort. His wounded arm throbbing with pain. The pain killers had long since worn off. Pointing the thirty-eight to the sky fired two loud shots into the air.

'Boom! Boom!' The cannon loudly sounded its warning shots for everyone to scatter.

People instinctively couched and began to run for cover. Some towards the café. Moving like a school of frightened fish being chased by a predator. Only to be diverted in a new directions as the gunmen pulled their weapons and began firing at the Fiat. Sounding like thunder and stuttering lightning from their barrels.

"Run! Arty Run!" Alistair yelled amongst the screams of frightened tourists scattering in all directions.

Arthur scrambling over the passenger seat onto the ground. Bullets ricocheted off the fiat and concrete posts about him. Alistair squatted behind the open door of the fiat. Phil had positioned himself behind the rear door. The shot

gun's explosive detonations a good deterrent. Sending the gunmen scattering and upturning tables.

Cassini and the Francis took cover behind stone seats. Bullets striking around them. Never one to hide from a fight Cassini exchanged explosive volleys with the gunmen. Shots smashed into the stone seats. Sending fragments of shattered stone and dust into the air. The chaotic noise was deafening. Gunmen fired indiscriminately towards the Fiat and the Cardinal. Pitting the ancient walls of the Cathedral.

Arthur crouched behind a stone seat to catch his breath, but also to take reprieve from the gunmen's bullets. Raising the Glock he fired aimlessly towards the café. Scattering the windows and splintering turned up tables. The Cardinal's men were holding their own. But for how long? Marconi and Braun's men had come in numbers. Alistair and Phil were pinned down behind the Fiat. At some point they would need to make a run for the Cathedral otherwise they would be trapped. Phil turned and saw an approaching car behind him. Firing shot at it and stopping it in its tracks. Men tumbled out and began firing in his direction. Phil answered them with a volleys of his own.

"Time to go Mister McGee." Shouted Phil holding his position.

"Head to the Cardinal... I'll cover you... You cover me ... Go! Go! Go!" Called out Alistair running towards to the nearest stone protection.

Francis sees a gunman moving towards Arthur. Unaware of the danger around him as bullets shattered the concrete posts and stones seats. Arthur was trapped. Francis sees the gunman take aim and without thinking runs towards Arthur. Diving at him just as the gunman fire his shot. An excruciating pain strikes Francis in the shoulder sending them both tumbling to the ground.

Michael watched with bullets flying about him. Through him.

In anguished pain Francis looks up and sees Michael standing there. A halo of bright light glowed not around him, but from him. Michael knelt beside the Francis and placed his hand over Francis' bloody wound.

"You?" Said Francis weakly, looking at Michael.

Francis' eyes closed, life lifting from him. A darkness descended and a peace came over him. He was not afraid. The noise of the firefight faded. And he found himself sitting on a train. The same old train he had taken to Naples only a few days before. Instinctively he reaches for the pain in his shoulder to feel for the wound and the pain that was no longer there.

Seeing Michael sitting opposite, they looked at each other. No words would be spoken, but the communion bonded them. An understanding that all would be well. Michael turned and looked out the window to a brilliant orb suspended in a perfectly blue sky. Francis' eyes followed. Brighter than any celestial sun it drew

him closer. As if it radiated pure love.

The moment would seem like an eternity, but this eternity was but a moment.

And the noise of gun fire grew around Francis again. Drawing him back to the chaos and mayhem of the earthly realm. Regaining his senses he feels for the wound in his shoulder but finding nothing. His mind telling him one thing, his faith telling him another. Looking about for Michael, but He had vanished. Only a small white feather lay on the ground where He had knelt. Soon to blow away in the evening breeze.

Arthur lay beneath him.

“You okay?” Francis asked.

“I’m good. You?” Asked Arthur.

“Couldn’t be better... Let’s get you to the Cathedral... Stay on the right of me... I’ll cover you.”

“With what?” Exclaimed Arthur. Noticing Francis did not have a gun.

“Faith Arthur!” Whipped Francis. “Faith!”

The gunman that had shoot Francis had soon been gunned down by the Cardinal. But Cassini was confused how Francis could be standing after being shot. Laying down a barrage of shoots towards the café for cover to allow Francis and Arthur to crawl closer.

Suddenly the huge Cathedral doors burst opened and out stormed a platoon of Swiss Guards. Complete with brightly colored uniforms. Their long halberds replaced with automatic weapons spitting hell fire down upon the café opposite. The gunmen had found themselves quickly outnumbered and began hastily retreating into the dark shadows.

The air was filled with the gun smoke as Swiss Guards secured the area and rounded up those that had fallen behind their cowardly comrades. Alistair rushes over to Arthur to see if he was alright. Cassini checks on Francis who he thought had been hit. Examining the Father’s back for a bullet wound. Finding only a remnant hole in the cloth but no wound. He looked at the Father in astonishment.

“Long story Cardinal ... A very long story.” Said Francis.

Cassini understood. There would be time later to understand the divine mysteries of the evening’s events.

“Glad you brought the Cavalry... I thought these guys were confined to barracks?” Asked Alistair.

“They were... The Swiss Ambassador gave them special leave... Along with consent from his Holiness the Pope... But they have to be back in their barracks by sun rise.” Advised the Cassini. “Your arm looks like it could use some attention ... We’ll get a medic to look at it.” He suggested with concern.

Arthur was shaken but alive. It was finally over. Phil stood with the shot gun over his shoulder ready for another fight.

“Thanks for inviting me.” Joked Phil.

“I didn’t... You invited yourself remember.” Reminded Arthur.

“Yeah I did. Didn’t I? ... Do think we could get a beer around here? I’m kind of thirsty after all this shooting.” Whipped Phil.

“I think we shot up the coffee shop... So we might be barred from there for a while... And I don’t think we’d be welcome in any cafes around here totting guns... Cowboy.”

“Good point.”

Cardinal Cassini gathered the troupe together and saw everyone was in one piece. Looking down at Alistair’s hand he noticed a white band where the Ring should be.

“The Ring?” Exclaimed Cassini looking anxiously at the bare finger.

“I don’t have anymore.” Remarked Alistair, with a small smile growing larger.

“Who does?” Cassini asked worriedly.

“I do Cardinal.” Said Arthur quietly, holding up his hand revealing the antiquity sitting on his finger. “I do.” Trying remove it.

But the Cardinal raised his hand to stop Arthur him.

“It’s on safe hands my dear Barabbas... The ring has come this far... It can travel a little further... I have someone very special I would like you to give it to tomorrow. For now... Come with me.”

The Cardinal indicated for them to step inside a long shining black limousine that had just arrived. Arthur and Phil climbed in. Followed by Alistair and Francis. And finally the Cardinal took his position in the spacious interior. Michael had called shot-gun. Not that anyone had heard him and he took the front passenger seat. The limousine moved slowly away from the bloody square.

Swiss Guard re-entered the Cathedral closing the heavy ancient doors behind them just as police cars with sirens sounding and red-blue flashing lights arrived. Oblivious to the violent events of the past twenty-four hours.

Feasted Gargoyles looked down upon the flood lit square. Their bellies filled with the souls of the fallen felons.



Vatican Vault

Arthur awoke the next morning. Opening his eyes he sees heavenly angels staring down upon him. Hearing a choir of angelic voices singing somewhere at a distance.

“Not another bloody dream.” He said to himself.

Dazed and confused he closed his eyes and opened them again. The Angels were still there, staring at him. Was he dead? Hearing Phil's voice in the distance. Was he dead too?

"Get up you lazy bugger." Phil called out.

Then remembering where he was said, “Sorry.” As if God, or someone as equally important had heard him.

Arthur looked about at the large room he found himself and stared back the painted ceiling with Angels and smiled. This is the closest to heaven he had ever been. The closest he could ever be to his mother and smiled.

Sitting upright could see had Phil already showered and dressed and about to tuck into a hearty breakfast that had been delivered for them.

“Come in lazy bones... They'll be here any moment” Phil called out.

A new day awaited them. No more train rides. No more gun fights. No more werewolves. Arthur looked around just in case. Then looked at his finger.

“How's it feel.” Asked Phil.

“Heavy.” Replied Arthur hoping the burden would soon be lifted from him.

Alistair knocked at the door. His arm freshly bandaged but looking revived after a night's sleep.

“Come downstairs... There's someone you need to meet.” Alistair instructed the two lads.

Francis was sitting on the same bench he had first sat only a week earlier. Reading his book.

“Must be a good book.” Asked Arthur approaching him.

“Second only to the Bible.” Francis replied.

Showing him the cover. Arthur laughed and smiled.

“I'm reading the same author!” And he pulled out his book.

“Ha!” Laughed Francis, shaking his head in disbelief.

The two young men had not noticed someone approaching them. An eminent shadow threw itself across the two young men discussing their books. They looked up, then they immediately stood up.

“Your Holy Eminence, please forgive us.” Francis apologizes.

“No need to apologize Father Francis... I have come to see this young man... I believe you have something you travelled a long way to return to the Church... At the risk of your own life.” Said the Pope graciously looking Arthur in the eyes.

Arthur was stunned being in the presence of His Holiness the Pope. He was sure his heart skipped several beats. Then the realization struck him.

The Ring.

He looked down at his hand, hoping it was still there. And it was. The grey dull silver ring on his finger. Insignificant in value, yet invaluable significant to the Church. Carefully he removed the Ring. Holding for one last moment to examine the Ring. Seeing the relief of its two crossed keys. Recalling what the Professor said they signified and placed the Ring onto the Pope's open hand.

The Pope took a moment to examine its raw beauty. Before blessing it and closing his hand around it. Feeling the residual warmth. Placing the Ring casually into a pocket of his robe. The Bishop of Rome place his hand on Arthur's shoulder. Then raising his right hand with two fingers in unison. The Pontiff blessed Arthur and Francis.

“Dominus vobiscum (The lord be with you).” The pope quietly bestowed upon Arthur and Francis.

The words were lost to Arthur. But to Francis, the words brought a comfort. But He was already was with Francis who could feel Michael's hand resting on his shoulder. It was a little late for Arthur to inform the Pope he was Church of England.

Gently the Pope took Arthur's hand with both of his and softly thanked him for returning the Ring to the Mother Church. Then turned and with a grave face looked Francis squarely in the eyes.

“I believe the Cardinal had promised you a personal tour of the Vatican upon your return... Unfortunately that cannot be so... The Vatican has been closed for several hours for observational maintenance...”

“Oh... I understand.” A desponded Francis replied.

Pausing to heighten the dramatic crushing blow. The Pope continued.

“... I will be giving you a personal tour”. Said the Pope, a small smile appeared on the Pontiff's face hoping he had not caused too much distress with Francis.

Only to have him smile with some relief. Taking Francis by the arm the Pontiff led Francis down a long corridor towards the Sistine Chapel. Followed closely by Michael pointing out a picture of himself on the ceiling.

“That's me!” Michael calls out unheard.

Alistair stood a distance away observing his son. Proud of the way he had handled himself under pressure. Regretful he had dragged him into the violent affair. Knowing it was for his own safety. Going to Arthur he extended his hand pulled him close and hugged him.

“I’m proud of you son.” Alistair whispered to his son.

“I’m proud of you too Dad.” Arthur whispered back.

“What about me?” Called out Phil, not wanting to be left out.

The Cardinal approached Arthur and Phil.

“I seemed to have lost my protégé to the Master... How would you two like to see the Vatican Vault? ... It will bore your father as he has seen it many times... Several of the pieces are from his efforts.”

And with that Alistair excused himself saying he would rest his arm and he would see the boys back in the room later. The Vatican jet would be flying them to London that afternoon.

“What no train?” Whipped Phil.

“No trains ever again!” Exclaimed Arthur.

The Cardinal led them through a series of hallways and stairways. Arthur was hoping they would be able to find their way back. Finally they came to a huge chamber with shelves upon shelves of artefacts. The Vatican Vault.

The vault contained over fifty miles of shelving on which sat relics of every size and description. Priceless in more than one sense. Julius Braun and Don Marconi would have turned in their graves if they were dead. Objects that appeared ordinary. Pieces of wood and long rusty roman nails. Some appeared as treasures. Goblets and ancient gold coins.

Arthur had to ask about the Holy Grail.

“Good question Arthur.” Replied the Cassini, “We’re still looking for that Perhaps your father might retrieve that for us one day.”

Cassini brought them to an old brown box and lifted the dusty lid and pulled out a rolled scroll. Inspecting the identifying label.

“This is the Papal Bull from Pope Leo X excommunicating Martin Luther... Your father help retrieve this from a certain relic dealer who was reluctant to return the document to the Mother Church... The man himself having acquired by less than honest means... Your father persuaded him to part with it eventually.” Leaving the details there.

Reaching into the box again Cassini pulls out a scroll he recognized.

“Hmm... This is the 1530 petition from English clergymen and Lords asking Pope Clement to annul King Henry VIII’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon.” Then added, “An unfortunate affair, for King Henry... And the Church.” Said

before placing the scroll gently to its resting position within the box.

Finally he pulled out a sad historical scroll. This was bound with a faded blue ribbon. A dark blood red seal impressed with a Cross and a Sword. The Cardinal recognized it immediately.

“This scroll is from the trial of Galileo... He had questioned whether the Earth was really the center of the universe... A man ahead of his time I believe... The Church held strange views in those days.” Shaking his head in disbelief.

Handing the scroll to Arthur who felt its weight and the coarseness of the parchment. He was holding history, again. Reluctant to hold it much longer he passed it to Phil. Who then examined as an engineer would. Gauging its dimensions and weight. Peering inside to decipher its internal workings. The significance of the document was lost upon him. Then handed it back to the Cardinal, who placed it carefully back inside its box.

Turning to take in one last glance at what only a few get to witness they kindly thanked the Cardinal for the tour.

“It has been my pleasure... You will both be in my prayers... As will your father, for all you have done and risked.” Cassini quietly thanked them.

“Sorry about trying to shoot you earlier,” Arthur tried to apologize again.

Not that shooting the Francis would have been any less forgiving.

“You weren’t to know Arthur... We seemed to have had someone looking over us that day.” Said the Cardinal.

Francis had discussed his encounters with Michael and the Cardinal was satisfied God had protected them for reasons known only to Him.

Returning to their room they found Arthur’s father laying on the bed. Exhausted by the past twenty-four hours. The pain killers had taken effect and had carried him into a deep peaceful sleep. They would let him rest while they gathered what little belongings that had brought with them.

On the table sat a parcel addressed to Phil. Uncertain why there would be a parcel with his name on it, opened it to discover what it could be.

“Oh man! ... A new laptop! ... Mate_ this is so_ cool!” Exclaimed Phil who quickly booted it to life.

A Vatican screen saver popped up with two crossed keys. He would not be deleting that too soon. Stoked, he immediately checked his emails. Hoping that the young lady he had meet at Budapest University had written to him. He would defer the dating site until he had left the Vatican City. Some things you just do not open on hallow ground.

‘Assuming they had not blocked that’, he thought.

“They wouldn’t would they?” He said to himself aloud.

“They wouldn’t what?” Asked Arthur inquisitively.

“Nothing... Just talking to myself.” Said Phil catching himself.



Home Sweet Home

The Vatican jet landed in London and it was Alistair's turn to now carry the duffle bag. He had the license to carry the g-u-n. The Vatican had cleared their way through Customs and they headed instinctively for the Tube station for the next train heading to Watford.

Arthur and Phil found themselves laughing to themselves as they sat on the hard bench seats.

"What so funny?" Asked Alistair curiously.

"Didn't want to see another train again in my life... And where do we find ourselves?" Responded Arthur looking about the compartment.

"Yeah... I see what you mean." Said Alistair. "Enjoy... It might bring back some fond memories".

"Fond memories?" Spouted Arthur recalling the Werewolves and Gypsies.

"Gypsies! ..." He exclaimed to himself.

"Gypsies?" Parroted Phil unsure what to make of Arthur's rambling.

"Thanks Dad, you just reminded me of something I need to do."

"What's that Arty?" His father asked curiously.

"I've got to see a girl." Arthur said keenly with courage coursing his veins.

Alistair turned and stared intently at Phil hoping he knew about this.

"Don't look at me Mister McGee... I'm surprised as you are." Said Phil, knowing he would need to have a talk to Arthur about his later.

Turning to look back at Arthur.

"Sounds like a dangerous assignment son." Advised his father. "Just don't be late for your Aunt's dinner... Or she might have to send out The Swiss Guards for you."

"I know." Arthur repeated to confirm the potential danger.

Looking down at the paperback in his hands. Hoping it was still be there. Hoping it was not all just a dream. Slowly opening the book and saw the fresh white daisy laying between the pages as if it had just been picked.

Alistair and Phil headed home. Phil was keen to update his dating profile. While Alistair was just happy to be home. Arthur headed to the shopping center café hoping Zara was working that day. The café doorbell sounded as it opened. Arthurs looks about and finds the café is empty with Zara alone behind counter.

"Hello Stranger... Haven't seen you for a few days... Where you been?" Zara asked curiously.

“It’s a long story... I have something for you...” Arthur gently places the delicate white daisy into Zara’s hand.

“How did you know? ... They’re my favorite.” Said Zara inserting the white daisy into her dark hair.

Smiling she stepped closer to Arthur and kisses him as the juke box plays a slow song as it had in his dream. Holding her close they danced as one, feeling her body against his.

“I was wondering if you’d like to go out sometime...” Arthur asked.

“I’d like that... Maybe we could get a coffee.” Zara suggested.

“Coffee?” Said Arthur amused at the thought.

“So... What’s this great adventure that kept you away?” Zara asked curiously.

“You won’t believe me if I told you.”

“Oh, I don’t know... Try me.” Responded Zara.

“Do you believe in Werewolves? ...” He began.

Somewhere outside the cafe Arthur could hear someone whistling an annoying tune and he smiled to himself. It was good to be home.



About the Author

Born a long time ago in the small township of Foxton New Zealand. Bradley's first book was a Self-Help book E is for Effort. That led to his debut novel The Ring. And so began the trilogy of Kristina. The apocalyptic thriller Lady in Red is the final installment. Stepping aside momentarily to write Puppet on a String. Before embarking on the second installment The Mist. Each book stand on their own. Characters and passage of time stitching them together as one. His books reflects his keen interest in comparative religion, spirituality, romance and adventure. When not writing, he enjoys innovating products, golfing and hearty workouts at the gym. Or hanging out with his three amazingly intelligent and beautiful children. Harry, Emily and Rebecca. Then again, he could be found at a local tavern talking to complete strangers unravelling the mysteries of Life.

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