



The Ring

BRADLEY PEARCE

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Published by Bradley Pearce at obooko

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Dedicated to: Zara.

The coffee shop girl that inspired a love story.
That inspired the trilogy,
End of Days.

“... 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

Somewhere in a dark grotto beneath the imperial palace.

Torches throw moving shadows over the walls and rancid black smoke to the ceiling. Tainted, the taste of fresh air, the taste of freedom, long since forgotten by those held captive within.

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. Even to the 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 man laying flaccid.

Too weak to protest he staggers unhurriedly to his feet. There would have been a day he would had taken 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 darkened cavern. The old man grimaces with pain and buckles to one side. Gasping and clutching at his ribs.

Guards stripe the old man to his soiled loin cloth, laughing at the hunched individual standing hunched before them.

“Pathetic... Where is your God now?” A guard asks.

Small dark beady eyes peered back at the guard through grey bushy eye brows. Through parched lips now covered with a long white 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. Another told him to forgive and offer the other cheek.

How often had his preached these words? Countless. Maybe more.

The old man straightens himself expecting another blow that came by way of a heavy wooden shaft across the back of his legs. Falling to his knees looks to the guard’s dirty feet. Vague memories surface of his reluctance for 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 jail. About to be executed. The guard’s feet would remain dirty. Soiled with sin.

Looking up to the guard, as if to beg for his life. 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 like a plague across the Roman Empire.

Christianity.

In Rome where all things hideous and shameful flourished Emperor Nero had proclaimed it a mischievous superstition. Those caught practicing it would be executed. Those who were citizens would be beheaded. Those who were not would be tormented with a prolonged

agonizing death. Tied to poles and set alit as human torches. Feed to wild beasts for amusement of the populace.

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 growls at the old man.

“Simon Petrus...” The old man humors the guard for his over sight.

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

“I have said all that needs to have been said... To all those that have listened... All but one...” Petrus catches the Guard’s curiosity.

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

“I forgive you...” Petrus disgorges a final absolution on the guard, “... 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? Looking over to the other guard unsure what to make it. Only to have him shrug shoulders in ignorance. He had heard such words from other guards.

The strange religion had gained 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 run his sword through him and end both their miseries now.

But the guard softens. Curious to hear the old man out.

“What is it old man? ... What do you seek of death?” He asks staring into the old man’s eyes, glaring brightly back at him flickering with 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 guards looks again to the other guard in disbelief. And again is greeted with another shrug of shoulders. Re-examining the parchment, dare he digress its instructions. And sees nothing to the contrary. The thought amused the guard. A crucifixion was a crucifixion. Upside down of otherwise.

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

His mind perplexed by the growing interest in the new religion 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.

“Who be your Master?” 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 his Master had 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, as he had a thousand times before today.

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

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

“Hmm...” The guard grumbles, pondering the power of such a God whose name cannot be spoken. That brings the dead back to life again. No Roman God could do this.

From the shadows, a small boy watches on.

The son of the guard. Observing with interest the coming and going of prisoners. Intrigued by their fate, and the magic they spoke bringing people back to life. Were they really cannibals as his father suggested.

Did they really drink blood?

The small boy crashes the two wooden horses together as if playing out an ancient Greek battle. Every so often looking up to the old man. He had seen many suffer and die over the past months. Were they truly as dangerous as people say? They seemed almost *human*.

Emperor Nero had an insatiable appetite for Christians. More so for crudity. And the boy wondered where it would all end. Or who would be next. The Jews had escaped the Emperor’s attention *this time*.

Living in troubled times, the boy had heard rumors and stories from other boys of these Christians. Of their strange beliefs that defied the Roman Gods. Sharp young ears listened. 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.

Petrus catches a glimpse of the 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, she had become a convert. A spiritual child as if she was his own blood.

“Petronilla!” He calls out to her as if she had appeared before him to save him from his fate.

Eyes lit up with delight and a smile grows on his face. The guard looks about for who the the old man’s was talking to. But sees 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 lengthening 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 recognize the Roman Gods. Angering them to inflict floods, famines and other disasters upon the citizens 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 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 a Man. A halo about Him.

Rufus also sees to the Man. The boy's innocent eyes witnessing what his mind could not comprehend.

From a wooden tool box the guard pulls out a long iron nail. Nine inches of steel, 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.

'Clang!' The sound of metal on metal echoed around the grotto.

Gritting teeth, Petrus bore the pain his Lord had borne decades before as if it were pleasure on his flesh. Again the hammer slams down, and again. Penetrating flesh and bone and wood.

And not a word. Not a cry. Not a tear.

He would not give the Roman the satisfaction of his suffering. The guard looks at the old man staring into space. At something. Or someone. From the shadows Rufus watches on curiously. The man in black stands beside him.

Rufus had witnessed his father nailing many Christians to crosses. But this one was different.

The guard looks back at his son watching on. Thinking his son was enjoying the sight of pagans being tortured. As he should. Not wanting his boy to weaken and convert. Lest he too be crucified.

"Watch carefully how it's done..." The father calls back to him. "...Come closer... Watch."

The man in black softly nudges the boy closer with his hand on his shoulder. Life and death were cut from the same cloth.

One arm complete, now the other.

Pulling on it to gain tension. Sweating taunt muscles strain in the torch lit space. Pressing another large nail into the wrist.

'Clang! Clang! Clang!' Came the sudden repetitive blows.

The old man flinches in discomfort but remains silent. His breathing quickened as he awaited the next blow. More painful than the last. Placing the old man's feet on a knob of wood at the base of the cross. Crosses them over and takes a heavier nail reserved for the purpose. Takes aim at the nail head with the heavy iron mallet and drives the first massive blow through the first foot.

"Ahhh!" Petrus grimaces. Almost blacking out with the pain.

"Like that one did you?" Muses the guard chuckling.

'Clang! Clang! Clang!' Repeating blows fell. Each more painful than the last.

'Clang!' One final strike to complete the task.

Petrus' eyes roll in their sockets.

The Man looked at him detached from the cruelty being dispensed. Unable to interfere with the Will of man. Standing back the guard inspects 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 request.

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

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

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

A hole had already been dug for the vertical post to slide into.

“Come on you... Give us a hand...” Instructing the other guard to help push and shove the heavy cross now weighted with a body nailed to the hole, “... A bit more!”

“Ahhh_” The other 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 that of the grotto. But somehow what his father was doing was not right. In silence, he watched as his father and the guard levered the cross and the old man into air.

Allowing it to slide into the hole, *‘Thud!’*

The vertical

“Ahhh!” Cries out Petrus, as the post strikes solid earth.

Jerking him from a delirium of visions. Eyes open widely as pain recoils through arms and legs. His world now upside down. And sees Rufus looking at him confused. The Man beside him. His hand on the boy’s shoulder, speaking to him.

Seeing Petrus looking back at him. The Man suddenly vanishes. A brilliant light filled the grotto. Guards look about wondering the source of the lightning. The Gods were not happy. The sooner this Christian was dead the sooner the better.

Only Rufus stood undeterred by the light.

Protected as if by his innocence. And a soul free from sin...



Rufus the Apostle

Reluctant to leave the old man.

Rufus played in the shadows crashing carved horses together. Uttering battle cries with each charge. Intrigued by the old man's quietness. While others before him had cried out in agony. He remained silent. As though he found pleasure in the suffering. Defiant, a word beyond his child's mind. Resolute, another. Strong, he could understand. How else could he stand the pain? But this too slipped from his grasp seeing the old man's frail weak body. There was nothing strong about him.

Perhaps he was dead?

Eyes shift from the toy horses to the real man suspended inverted a distance away. A sadness came over him as though the old man were his grandfather. Unnatural growths of iron heads mushroom from the old man limbs. The bleeding had stopped. Leaving trails of dried blood and sweat down arms and legs like external veins. To his neck and beard and hair. Before dripping and soaking into the earthen floor.

A chest heaved. Catching a breath that could have been the last. Startling the boy. His mind grappling with the old man's imminent death.

This was Rome. Death was a daily occurrence. If not by the sword, then by plagues.

What happened after death? Was it true what he had heard? You lived again? Would this old man come back to life?

No, not possible. He had seen the dead. And the dead stayed dead.

Caught in a conundrum, his curiosity gets the better of him.

Approaching the old man slowly, sits quietly before him. Wooden horses in each hand, as though to protect 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 tired eyes sees not a savage lion with golden mane, but a placid young boy with long blonde hair. Clear pale blue eyes looked back at him. In his hands two small wooden horses.

A silence feel between them. Both taking in the other's appearance.

Sensing young ears willing to listen. Petrus spoke first.

"Lord... Give me strength..." He begs with inverted words.

With blood rushing to his brain. There was nothing comfortable about being upside down. Crucifixion never was. He grinned at the thought. If only to divert his attention briefly from the pain of his wrists and feet and joints being strained and stretched.

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

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

"Who are you?" He asks softly, looking about to see if anyone else was listening.

He should not be talking to the prisoners. Let alone a Christian one. If his father caught him he feared 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 about Christians.

"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. He had changed from the roughed fisherman he once was with his brother on the Sea of Galilee. His mind drifts to the boats and catches of fish and sunny days on that peaceful lake. Then sees the small boy sitting before him.

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

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

“No, no my son... Never.” The old man 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 fearful the old man would lunge at him at any moment and bite at him.

“Bread and Wine...” Petrus begins.

“Bread and wine?” Asked Rufus, was the old man hungry?

“Bread... Is His body... Wine His blood... To remember Him.”

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

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

“Yeshua...” 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 ignorance, he knows not what he does... He is simply following orders...” Petrus wondered if he had said too much. He was but a child.

“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...” Rufus recalls.

“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 thought to his danger, a small head nods up and down intrigued by the upturned man.

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

“No... This is no secret we keep... But a message we spread.” Professes Petrus.

“Oh...” Rufus’s conviction wavers, “...Tell me.” He pleads having gone too far to turn 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 Heaven with Him...”

“Do you believe in Him? ... Yeshua?” Rufus asked naively.

The old man pauses, recalling a time 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.

“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.

“But you believe in Him?” Rufus asks again confused by what the old man was saying.

“After all the miracles Yeshua performed... And what He gave me... With my all life I believe in Him... That is why I am here.”

“*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 sick and...”

“And? ...” Asked Rufus leaning forward dare he miss a word.

“...And *raised* the dead.”

“The *dead?*” Rufus gasped.

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

Rufus sat back stunned by the claims, unsure whether to believe the upside down man nailed to a cross. 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.

“Would you let me in when my time comes? With your keys.” Hoping not to be shut outside.

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

“I don’t know...” Rufus hesitates confused.

“Do you believe in Miracles Rufus?”

“I don’t know...”

“The Man you were standing with...”

“You saw him?” Rufus asked surprise the old man had seen him too.

“I saw Him... That was your miracle.” Proclaimed Petrus.

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

“He spoke to you... 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 dry blood.

“Hmm... Did he say his name?”

“Michael... Who is He?”

A peace comes over Petrus. All pain left his body as thoughts of the Man’s divine presence raced through his mind.

“More importantly, *what* is He ... For He is an *Angel* Rufus... an *Angel* ... You have been truly blessed to have been chosen.”

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

“Why are any of us Rufus? ... Do you believe now?”

“I believe.” A small head nods.

He could not refute what his own eyes had seen. His own ears had heard.

“Let me baptize you... Before I leave this earth.” Asked the old man feeling weaker.

Knowing the end was but words away.

“Baptize? Will it hurt?” Asked Rufus hesitantly.

“No, not at all... Get that cup of water over there.” He directs the boy.

Fetching the cup Rufus holds it out before the old man. Petrus blesses it. As he had so many times before.

“Give me the cup... Gently now.” Petrus instructs him, “... Come closer. I need to wet your head.” Fingers cling painfully to the cup.

Uttering the scared words of baptism. Holy words flowed like Wine.

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

Tilting the cup forward, water washes over the boy’s forehead and closed eyes. A blood strained forefinger made the sign of the cross on his 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 and cross away and running fingers like a comb through long blond tangled hair.

“Good... Then it worked.” Mused Petrus feeling a pain in his chest. Waited for it to pass.

Within the shadows a putrid snake slivers along a wall.

Hissing in disgust at the ceremony. Its forked tongue tasting the foul air. The boy was lost, but there would be others. His master would not be pleased. Disappearing into the abyss of the grotto.

Petrus looked to the Ring he had been given by Yeshua decades earlier.

Of how He had told him he was the rock on which the Church would be built.

He did not feel like a rock.

“Take the Ring...” Gesturing for the boy to remove the Ring lest the guards steal it when they stripped him from the cross.

Wrestling with the Ring and the old man’s swollen boney joints. Rufus pulls it free. Stained with blood. Leaving a white shadow on the old man’s finger. And examines the dull looking ring. The relief showing two crossed keys the old man had spoken of. Unsure of their significance.

“Do I have the keys now?”

“In some way you do... I should rename you Petrus.”

“I don’t think my father would be pleased with that.” Remarked Rufus looking over his shoulder as if his father would appear at any moment.

“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?” The boy asks curiously.

“Ah... *There’s* the mystery... Only *you* will know.” Advised Petrus.

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.

“Go now and spread the *Word*... And let an old man die in peace.” Instructed Petrus feeling the sharp pains in his chest growing more intense.

Rufus looked back at the old man suspended on its head. His chest heaving as the spasms took hold. Reluctant to leave. A divine hand nudges him away.

“Bye.” An innocent voice bids the old man farewell and the boy scampers quickly up the stone stairwell from sight.

Alone.

Petrus took in the dimness of the grotto. Unsure if it was dimly lit, or if it were him. To one side he saw the Man. A halo about him.

No words need be spoken. No earthly breath be taken. Within a blink of an eye Petrus found himself standing Michael. Staring back at the frail old man nailed to a wooden cross. An old man weathered by the years. By the countless footsteps that had gotten him to this glorious day.

Unfurling arms like wings and a brilliant white light spontaneously radiated from the grotto. The light spiraled up the stairwell. Through the Imperial Palace. And over the city of Rome. Citizens looked to the clear blue sky. Expecting a thunder clap to sound. Hearing nothing, resumed their persecution of Christians.

A darkness befell the grotto.

Rufus returned home and found his father napping on a wooden bench.

Exhausted having crucified Christians that morning. Climbing the attic stairs to his room, places the wooden horses and dull silver ring in a small wooden box. Staring at the ring laying within, touches his forehead recalling the message the old man had told him. Wary of the dangers and death he faced if discovered. In time he would seek out others of the new religion and spread the Word. Of the One true God. Of eternal life.

Replacing the lid ties the box off with course string, before shoving it into a darken corner from sight.

That evening at supper Rufus broke bread and sipped on 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 Informant

Rome, some two thousand years later.

Somewhere in the Vatican. 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 an ancient wooden desk. As his predecessors had. Deep in thought. Deep in prayer.

He had sinned.

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 came? Did his transgressions in the name of the Church transcend his sins?

The telephone rang un-expectantly.

Echoing 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. Breaking his prayers. The man eyes the defiant phone with suspicion. Who would be calling at this early hour?

Who would be calling *him*?

Lifting the handset from its cradle, annuls the intrusion of noise. 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. A word could kill if spoken carelessly. There were always ears listening. Someone somewhere. A receptionist. A spy. Someone willing to profit from the Word. The man listened carefully for subtle crackles on the line. Confident the line was safe, recognizes the familiar voice of an informant. 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 a treasure. Priceless not by its wealth, but its significance. A worried expression came over the man's face as he took in the news of the discovery of the long forgotten Holy Relic.

"The First? ... Are you sure?" The man asked as if he questioned the relic as authentic.

If true, it 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, weighing the situation with an urgency building in his mind.

Pausing momentarily. Pondering the measures that would be required to secure the relic's return to the Church. Pondering measures others would take to possess it. His mind filters through the names of those in the immediate vicinity. Word would already be out. Scouts. Opportunists. Whispering leads back to their masters. Scheming their own repatriation of the trophy.

He needed resources. His *Organization* had resources. Assets would be activated assist if the *situation* escalated. Or deteriorated.

"How can I help?" Asked the man dismissing the competitors.

Listening carefully to the request being asked of him.

“Yes I see... The son... I understand... Follow the son... I see... Rest assured my friend... I will take care of the son.” The man promised the informant.

The informant hangs up and the phone goes dead.

Leaving to the dead signal on the line ringing in his ear. The man waits before hanging up. Listening carefully for un-expectant clicks that never came. Replacing the handset. Contemplates a strategy for the relic’s return. Contesting with men also with their eyes also on the prize. Men that would kill to obtain it. The man would kill for it too, if it came to fight. If he was cornered.

The treasured relic must be re-appropriated by the Church. From whence it had come, so it shalt return. It was too scared to be left in hands of relic collectors. Grubby little men scavenging for personal gain, and boosting rights.

‘Braun...’ A name surfaced of the fallen brethren.

He who possessed the relic would be King of 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.

“Your Eminence... Please excuse the intrusion... I have some *very* important news.” Cardinal Cassini disclosed to his Superior, His Holiness the Pope...



Arthur of Watford

Some days later. Somewhere in East London.

An autumn morning broke upon Watford Terrace. A cold north breeze blew. Blowing with it a postman whistling an unrecognizable tune to himself. Much to the annoyance of Arthur waiting at the mailbox. No one should whistle unless it was in tune. And preferably a tune one could recognize. He waited for the annoying whistle to arrive.

“No mail today Arthur!” The Postman called out as he cycled by. To carry on his whistling way again, pushed along by the north breeze.

Arthur returned inside the terraced homestead. Closing the door in time to keep out the chill 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 a gas bill. Slumping into his father’s comfy arm chair, allowed it to engulf him. As though to hold him prisoner. And contemplated his existence. As he did most days since being laid off from the Council.

Twenty-nine years old found himself successfully unemployed after yet another global recession had sent its redundant ripples around the world. Sweeping away those caught in its path. Staring out the laced window to the suburban street lined with identical terraced houses.

Michael sat quietly unseen in a chair opposite.

Taking in the manger that was Arthur’s home. Eating what he imagined was ginger cake and drinking what he imagined was tea. Watchful of the young man sitting opposite. Curious as to why he had been chosen. Such decisions were beyond Him. Taking another bite of the imagined ginger cake. Allowing the imagined crumbs to fall to his lap.

The morning sun’s rays filtered through the lace curtains.

Diluted. Straining to reach Arthur. Sensing he was not alone in the room, looks about for his Aunt. But sees no one. The sun’s warmth re-inflating his deflated self-esteem. Days had blurred together to become months. Seeing no change on his grey horizon. Stares blankly out to the terraced street as though frozen in time. For a moment thinks he sees someone sitting opposite from the corner of his eye. Blinking, the vision disappears. Cake crumbs pepper the seat of the chair opposite.

“Hm.” Dismissing the nebulous aberration.

His days consumed with collecting the morning mail and watching football matches at the local bar. Over a pint and a packet of Walkers crisps. Usually with his best mate Phil who had also been laid off from the Council.

Arthur’s father peddled his company’s stationary products over Europe. Away at time for weeks travelling. Only to return and tell exotic tales of his travels. Of places and foods and equally exotic people. Rousing Arthur’s sense for adventure. Adventures he had only ever read about in books. To escape the captivity of his father’s arm chair. To escape Watford Terrace. Sensing something was calling him. He could smell it. And it was not the Gas Works down the road.

His 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.

That reason was beyond him. Believing she was somehow watching over him. His Aunt moved in soon after to care for him while his father travelled on business. She was the closest thing he had to a mother. After a while she had become a part of furniture. And 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. With 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, naming them Dizzy, Lizzy, and Cuddles. She would often be heard humming an unrecognizable tune. Arthur could not begrudge her these few comforts.

When not at the local bar.

Arthur could be found sitting in his father's arm chair, drinking incalculable cups of tea. And eating Ginger Cake. And watching television re-runs. Feeling himself slipping slowly into his Aunt'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.

Taking stock of Watford Terrace and the world outside. It might have been the chill in the autumn air that had unsettled him 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. Restless. He fidgets in his father's chair trying to get comfortable.

That evening Arthur retired to his room to read.

His Aunt stopped by wishing him a good night and turned off the light, as if he were still nine. Having faith that God believed in him, he would recite a humble prayer. Giving thanks for another day. Asking for an adventure that would take him from Watford Terrace. It had been a typical day for him. As it had every day since being laid off.

The cogs of his universe were already turning.

And had done so long before he had taken his first breath. Or uttered his first prayer. Divine revelations set down eons in the past, were about to be played out.

The adventure he had so long wished for was at hand...



The Flying Jug

Meanwhile, earlier that evening at the local tavern, *The Flying Jug*.

Pools balls chatter loudly. Like particles in an accelerator collision, they scatter in all directions, other than where they were intended. Before ricocheting silently off tired green felt cushions.

“Bugger.” Lies the player, handing the cue stick to Phil grinning to himself.

Phil chalks the tip with distinct strokes before blowing dust away. And eyes up his shot. Beyond the table in his line of sight, sitting at the bar, a long legged lass in six inch heels. Long bleached blonde wavy hair. Adding to her allure and wanton beauty. There was something exotic about her. His mind in two places. And he mishits the cue ball, sending it no-where in a hurry.

Laughter rouses from those watching on.

The lass giggles while sucking on a straw suggestively. Her eyes fixed on Phil. Now playing her boyfriend. A rouge looking gentleman who had wondered in off the street in search of a beer and good time. Hustling pool to pay for drinks and change.

Phil was good, but not that good. Maybe he was? Or was he?

After several pints, he was just getting warmed up. In the zone. Veins pumping testosterone and alcohol. Feeling invincible. Peacocking for the young woman on the stool. He would show her a thing or two. Fantasies of sweeping her off her stool. He grins back at her after the mishit shoot and shrugs his shoulders.

“You’re shot.” Handing the cue stick back to his opponent.

The hustler having fool around until now, was playing with Phil. Luring him into a false sense of security. Letting him win more games than he had lost. His girlfriend at the bar, would distract his attention from the game.

Bang! Bang!’ The hustler sinks two in a row.

It was as if he had set the shots up. Leaving only the black at the far end of the table. Phil had no chance with three left on the table. Unless the stranger missed. And waits anxiously as the man lines up the shot to win the game.

Taking longer than usual.

Maybe to allow the woman at the bar to weave her magic on Phil. Leading him into temptation. The man draws back the cue stick slowly, almost professionally.

Thud-Clatter!’ Cue tip mis-strikes the cue ball and rushes unimpeded down the table towards the black ball.

It was an easy shot any fool could make. Even him. Phil can’t watch. Closes his eyes and waits for the resounding clunk of the black ball hitting the back of the pocket. And end to the game.

“Bugger!” The hustler lies, holding out the cue stick to Phi to take the next shot.

“Phew!” Phil gasps. A reprieve.

What was the chances of that? The Pool Gods were smiling on him. Fingers twitch along the shaft as if playing a flute. He could smell victory in the air. The cue ball *had been* set up nicely for his next shot. He could not have placed it there himself better.

Failing to see he had been set up, plays one of his two remaining balls into a side pocket without contemplating his next shot.

'Clunk!' Almost mishitting it.

The hustler shakes his head in frustration, what does he have to do to help the guy win this game? Miraculously the cue ball finishes close to the last remaining color. Ignoring where the black was, Phil blindly slams home the final ball into a corner pocket and watches the cue ball bouncing aimlessly about the table. And back again. Chalking his cue, blows dust from its tip as though blowing kisses to the lass at the bar. Now uncrossing her legs.

And waited for the cue ball to finally come to a halt, center table.

The black ball positioned over a corner pocket. The hustler stands back. Allowing Phil space. Not to crowd him. Not to pressure him. That would come later. All eyes are on Phil. Taking a deep breath this was it, for victory. For the girl. Eyes fixate on the white cue ball, then to the eight ball that sitting over the open pocket. And he began to over analyze the shot.

Was to the left? Was it to the right?

'Play it straight you fool...' He told himself. Then changed his mind at the last moment.

Closes his eyes, exhaled, drew back his arm and slammed the white into the black. Sending the black flying into the pocket as the white ball followed perilously behind. Only to stop millimeters short of falling in.

And short of forfeiting the game.

"Phew..." Phil sighs again, turning to shake the opponent's hand, "... Good game."

"You too... Twenty quid says you can't do it again." The hustler baits him still holding the grip longer and firmer than usual.

Phil sensed some aggression him the man's grip. Saying he would not take no for answer.

"Don't know... I need to get going." Collecting the five pound notes from the lip of the table.

"Come 'on, just one more... I feel lucky..." He lied, "... Anyway, while you're deciding, I'm going to take a piss."

"Yeah, whatever." Phil heads to the bar and stands beside the lass now turning about to face him.

"You're a really good player... I can't play at all..." She lied. "... All the angles and dangles and balls and things... You know what I mean."

"Not really..." Phil begins, "... Haven't seen you here before, I'm Phil."

"I Asha... You going to play again?" Pressing her soft warm curves up against him.

"I don't know, I need to be heading home..." Failing to mention his mother having dinner waiting for him, "... He's not that good... Wants to play for twenty quid. It wouldn't be fair."

"Twenty pounds, ohh... If you win, you buy me a drink." She teases him.

"Careful what you wish for." He grins, blood rushing from his brain.

Phil nods his head to the bar maid, shaking her head at him being played. Everyone else in the bar was waiting for Phil to realize it. Sian pushes pint glass in front of him. And he takes a mouthful of beer. Asha sucks on a cocktail straw. Her lips pursed about it. Her eyes looking into his. Her cleavage beneath the glass. With his decision making ability now deprived of blood, there was only one decision he could make.

"Okay, I'll do it! ..." Sculling the dark pint of courage just as the stranger returned to the bar, "... Rack 'em up!" Called out Phil.

"Datta' boy..." Said the hustler grinning ear to ear, "... Twenty wasn't it?" Pulling a note from his wallet and placing it on the lip of the table.

“Yeah, twenty...” Phil pulls out his wallet, unsure what it contained. Only to discover a fifty. The last of his benefit money, “... Can you break a fifty?”

“I’ll go one better, I’ll match you.” Pulling out a fifty and replacing the twenty with it.

“No, no...” Phil tried to protest just as the man made the break. Shattering the balls about the marble table particle accelerator.

Too late.

Money was on the table and the balls had been broken.

“Damn.” Cusses Phil. Not one to back out of any challenge, sucks in a deep breath and waits for the balls to stop rolling about.

One drops. And eyes scan as to what had fallen.

“You’re on little one’s junior.” The hustler informs Phil. Perhaps he should not have had that last beer. His confidence was waning. Fifty quid was at stake.

‘Wham! Blam!’ The hustler sinks two more in quick succession before being blocked and laying up his next shot to snooker Phil behind the eight ball.

This was not the same opponent he played and beaten easily just before. The hustler hands Phil the cue with a stern look on his face that said, *‘Don’t mess with me kid.’*

Nervously, Phil contemplates the shots available.

Nothing. Get it wrong, and he forfeits two shots. Something did not smell right. And it was not just Asha’s provocative perfume. The stranger now standing beside as she handed an elongated case which could contain only one thing.

His worst fears.

He was being hustled. He had to chuckle. It was too good to be true. The games. The girl.

“Oh well, what the heck.” He concedes and bashes the cue ball about the table hoping something will fall in a hole.

Nothing.

Leaving the lolly scramble of colored bonbons to the hustler to pick over. Phil offered the cue stick to the stranger who declined it. In preference to his own professional cue. Chalking it with his own chalk. Blowing chalk dust subtly from its tip. Eyes focused on the table and the options possible.

‘Wham! Blam!’ Without hesitation, plucks two more balls from the table.

Leaving Phil again in a trapped position. Without chalking up, he bashes again, and one of his balls drop. Asha claps from the bar stool. The hustler grins. Charmed by his girlfriend’s amusement. Phil had saved himself the unpleasant embarrassment of having suck one.

He was on for another.

‘Slam!’ Center pocket. The fight back was on. Five to go.

‘Click!’ Softly, he tickles a little one into a corner pocket. Three-Four.

One more to keep pace with the hustler. Eyeing his options. Nothing.

Back to Plan-A again. Plan-Phil, bash ‘em and see what falls.

‘Slam!’ Phil bashes the cue ball into one of his. Causing a chain reaction. Mixing up the goulash of colored marbles. Whatever options the hustler had, just went out the window. The white ball settles tightly against the lifting cushion.

The big ones were down the other end of the table. A long way from the white ball.

Asha claps again, fidgeting on her stool. Crossing her legs with excitement. Phil admires her long legs and longer heels. If he ever needed a cue stick, he knew where to find one.

The hustler isn’t amused.

“Shut it will you.” Becoming perturbed by the change of future. He didn’t come to this small hick town to be made a fool of.

“Hey... Speak nice to the lady.” Phil steps up to him, reminding where he was.

“You’ll keep.” Warned the hustler.

“I’m right here.” Warned Phil not backing away.

Asha claps again. Her honor was being fought over. And she sucks heavily on the blue cocktail. Her big eyes looking over to Phil. His attention absorbed by what was to come next. Weighing his shots, the hustler plays safe.

‘Click.’ Barely touching one of his balls and rolling back to the far cushion.

“Nice.” Commends Phil.

The Hustler ignores the complement and walks over to Asha. Words are spoken. Phil watches on.

“You got a problem with her, you have a problem me.” He warns the hustler.

“Keep out of it and play your shot kid.” He warns Phil.

“When I’m ready, no rush.” Phil eyes the table. Nothing.

Maybe one.

His engineering mind determining the angles. The alignment of the planets did not look good. The domestic had cooled own at the bar. Asha sat pouting. Hands lightly clapping between her thighs.

“What the heck.” Back to plan-A.

‘Slam!’ Phil fires a single silo at the gaggle of balls.

‘Thud.’ One of his drops. Four-Four.

‘Thud.’ Followed by one of the hustler’s. Four-Five.

“Damn.” Curses Phil.

“All over rover.” The hustler insults Phil, pushing way past him.

“You do a lot of talking for a pool shark,” Insulting the hustler in front of the regulars.

A chuckle rouses about the bar. Knowing Phil could give it, as well as he takes.

“Gentleman!” The barman warns the two bulls.

Reaching beneath the bar as though for a baseball bat. Only to surface with a rack of fresh pint glasses. Phil stands back. The table was open. Any professional come have cleared the table with one eye closed. But this was no professional. This was a hustler.

Scruples were for the weak.

‘Slam! ... Thud.’ In the hole. Backspin. Set up for the next. Four-Six.

‘Slam! ... Thud.’ In the hole. Backspin. Set up for the next. Four-Seven.

Over confidence creating an adrenalin rush casing the cue ball to spin back too far.

And settles behind one of Phil’s balls.

“Shit.” The hustler spits out.

Looking to Asha as though she had something to do with it.

“Ha.” Phil chuckles to himself aloud, ensuring the hustler heard him.

The bar was unusually quiet. No one wanted to speak. It could well have been the world championship taking place. But it was not. It was Phil of Watford, taking on a woollyback hustler. Thinking he could come to the sticks and fleece the locals.

At four-seven the game was far from over.

With the table clearing by the moment, creating less traffic to get in the way of Phil's unpredictable shots. He had a line on one. And if the cue ball ended nearby, a shot for another.

'*Blam! ... Rattle-rattle-rattle-rattle-thud.*' Rattling about the pocket before remembering to drop. Five-seven.

The cue ball rolls forward. No fancy backspin for him. Like himself, Phil never stepped back when challenged. The cue ball comes to a halt inches from where he wanted it to. That was good enough for him. His instincts telling him to adapt and get on with it.

Asha squeals and claps her excitement. The hustler frowns, but does little to abate her enthusiasm.

Closing his eyes. Phil shunts the cue stick heavily in behind the white ball sending it flying across the table into his ball, recoiling it towards the pocket. At an angle. Striking to one side. Then the other. And back again. Rattling like the last ball. Undecided if it should drop, or pop back onto the table.

Regulars hold their breath in anticipation.

'*Rattle-rattle-rattle-rattle-rattle—rattle-thud.*' Then silence as it fell. Six-seven.

"Harrah!!" Regulars holler and cheer their man Phil.

The cue ball ricochets about the cushions. Thudding on some, thumping on others. And stops expectantly at the center of the table. As if by the hand of God.

Two balls remain. The last of his. And the black to win the game.

At one end of the table the black sat over a corner pocket. An easy shot for a blind person. Only trouble was. Phil was not blind. His ball was at the other end, center against cushion. An impossible for anyone. Less so a blind man.

Plan-A had would up until now.

Closing his eyes, says a prayer to the patron saint of pool.

Michael looks up from the bar, and his cup of English tea. And pondered who that might be.

'*Bash!*' The chalked leather tip strikes the cue ball, and hurled up the table towards the defenseless ball. Pinned to cushion like a prisoner facing a firing squad. Striking its heart and sending its soul flying in one direction and its corpus went in another. To be fused as one again as it settled back to its original position. Limp.

The cue ball returned to the center of the table. As though it too had not been disturbed. And Phil wonders if he should play the shot again.

"Damn." He was so close.

Asha slumps in her seat. Saddened Phil's gallant attempts. The hustler chuckles. Hunching himself over the table to line up the elementary shot. A straight poke.

"Black to the corner pocket..." The hustler rubs the impending victory into Phil's open wounds. Momentarily looking to Phil, "...Loser." And catches him and Asha exchanging glances.

Michael looks up from his tea and cucumber sandwich.

'*Clunk!*' A miss hit. The cue ball rolls true towards the black ball.

A perfect strike. *Almost.*

The corner pocket swallowing the black ball whole. The victory was fleeting.

Followed by the cue ball closely behind.

The tavern goes wild with cheers. Whopping and hollering. None more so than Asha. Rushing to embrace her champion. Phil extend his hand only to be left hanging. Instead is met with a flying right fist to his face.

Bitten but not shaken, Phil withstood the initial blow and countered with a combination of his own. Catching the hustler un-expectantly sending him falling backwards.

“Oy! Take that outside you two!” The hefty looking barman warns reaching for the baseball bat.

The warning goes unheeded. Muted by the adrenalin rushing through their veins the two bulls locking horns. Getting to his feet, the hustler comes at Phil again. Wrestling him over the pool table. Pinning him on his back. The hustler struggles to hold him down. Throwing misguided punches at him, striking the marble pool table as Phil dodged left and right. The remaining ball just beyond Phil’s reach. Straining limbs, finger tips touch the ball and he rolls it into his hand. And is about to crack it across the skull of the hustler.

When suddenly, from no-where, a cue stick is broken across the hustler’s back. Winding him and he falls away in pain. Asha stands back holding the broken stick in her hands.

“Sorry. He gets like that when he loses.” She apologizes.

“That’s okay.” Pocketing his winnings. Wiping the blood from a broken lip.

“Be seeing you.” She bids her farewell, and what could have been between them.

Pulling her man to his feet and leads him away. Propping up the broken hulk of the man that had tried to hustle him. The barman standing ready with the baseball bat happy to subdue any flare ups.

Phil watches the dream girl of his dreams wobble out the door.

“Drinks are on me!” Phil approaches the bar expecting to be welcomed as a hero.

“You’ve been cut off!” Warns the barman.

“Ohh!” Moans Phil dejectedly.

“Go home, sleep it off Phil.” The barman tells him to get going.

“See ya’ Phil.” Says Sian, biting her lip. Imagining her own fantasies.

“See ya’ Sian.” Phil limps from the bar and heads home.

Fifty extra quid in his pocket.

And a broken lip to show for it. Michael watches Phil leave. Unsure what to make of the young man that had also been chosen...



The Letter

Dawn broke again on Watford Terrace.

And Arthur awoke yawning and stretching tired limbs. Like a fading dream, a feeling of déjà vu came over him. Sending a chill and goosebumps over his body.

“That’s weird.” Shaking himself of the peculiar feeling.

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

“I’m coming!” He calls back.

The same cold breeze blew from the north.

Chasing the same Postman whistling the same annoying tune. Peddling frantically trying to keep ahead of it. As if it too wanted him to stop whistling. Slowing down, reaches into a basket of letters and pulled out two envelopes.

“Two today Arthur.” He declared, easing momentarily from whistling.

Passing them skillfully to Arthur. Before carrying on his annoyingly whistling way. Being chased again by the rabid breeze snapping at his peddles.

“Two?” Remarkd Arthur, trying to suppress his bewilderment.

He examines the envelopes.

Recognizing the cheap brown envelope and the Company’s logo in the corner. The Gas bill he had been expecting. Shuffling the letters, examined the second of the envelopes. A white envelope. Not a bill. But a letter. Hand written, it was addressed to him. Though the writing looked strangely familiar. He could not place it.

“Hmm? ... Strange, who would write to me?” Arthur asked taking in the oddity of the letter.

He had not received a letter from anyone in what seemed like a hundred years. Perhaps two. A large red foreign stamp sirens its origin.

‘*European.*’ He surmised, but he could not place it.

Flipping it over hoping to gleam the sender’s name. Blank.

Hoping his Aunt was not watching from the window quietly folds the envelope and shoves it into a pocket. His Aunt’s inquisitive questions will have to wait.

“Any mail today Arthur?” His Aunt enquired appearing on the door step from no-where.

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

Thoughts turned over as to how avoid his Aunt’s prying eyes from his letter. Then it dawned on him.

“I’m just popping down to the cafe...” He called out, “... Do you need anything from the shops?” Hoping the answer would be no.

“Pick up some more Ginger Cake... We’re getting low. And some tea... The loose kind... Would you be a dear?” She asked heading to the laundry.

“No worries Aunty.” Calling back reaching for an over coat.

Wrapping an old blue university scarf about his neck, headed out the door. The day was nippy. He hated a lazy breeze that blew through him, than around him. Pulling a tired woolen beanie over ears. Buries hands deep into the overcoat’s pocket.

The excursion to the café was an excuse to read his letter in private.

There was another reason he wanted to visit the café. Zara. He was smitten with her. But lacked the courage to ask her out. Wondering if he should ask Phil for advice. Then quickly decided otherwise.

He could pick up his Aunt's grocery items afterwards. The café a refreshing walk away from the solitary confinement of his bedroom. And the snooping eyes of his meddling, but loveable Aunt.

Zara's seductive smile made Arthur smile. Sandy brown hair half way down her back. Hazel brown eyes that enchanted him. Hoping she would be working that day. And she was.

"*Ding*" A small bell above the café door rings his arrival.

Zara looks up to see Arthur and smiles. He smiles back. Fumbling for words, talks about the inclement autumn weather. In a hope to prolong their momentary romantic relationship.

"Regular latte... one sugar, right?" She asked just as he was about to order.

"That's right." Taken back by her memory of his coffee.

"Take a seat... I'll bring it over." She smiles at him.

"Okay." He smiles back and with two left feet goes in search of a table.

Finding a table by the window and waited for the coffee to arrive.

In a daze, stared out at 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 vowed. '*...One day.*'

Pushing a hand into a pocket, feels the envelope and remembers why he had come to the café. Pulling it out re-examines it again. Just then, Zara arrives with his coffee and places on the table beside the letter.

"Thank you Zara." Using her name as though it would personalize her.

"You're welcome Arthur." She smiled again.

He watched her walking away 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 was no match for coffee. Veins pumped with caffeine. Invigorating his senses and resurrecting his spirit.

Picking up the envelope looks at the familiar hand writing. Still unable to place it. Like all date stamps it was illegible and the country unfathomable.

'*East European perhaps?*' He deduces.

A large building was portrayed in dark red ink. Not a church. A government building of some kind? Like Westminster. Only grander. Transfixed by the stamp his mind running through the possibilities of countries and wondered who he knew in Eastern Europe that would be writing to him.

Turning it over, the sender's name had still not appeared.

Running the leading edge of the teaspoon inside the envelope. Tears an opening to reveal a single piece of paper. Folded over. Removing the page he 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. Goosebumps ran up his shins. As though the cold north breeze had followed him inside the café.

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

But all he could see were passersby. The taste of the coffee was not feeling as pleasant as it had when he took his first sip.

Nevertheless. He took another sip.

Hoping to delay him from having to read the contents that would explain why the danger he was in. He scans the café and outside for suspicious eyes that may be watching him. Instinctively, he sank lower in his seat. As if this would avoid an assassin’s bullet. His heart beating delexically in his chest with anxiety.

What was this all about? There was only one way to find out. Taking another sip of coffee to calm himself. His 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. In the far corner you’ll find a shoebox.

Take the contents and go to Budapest University. 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. 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.

Constipated questions swamped his mind.

Who was Professor Almesh? What’s in the shoebox in the attic? Was his father on the run from the law? Did he want to get involved? Was he already involved? All these questions went unanswered.

Then there was his Aunt, what would he tell her?

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

His life 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, the thought of forgetting to buy his Aunt'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, decided it was safe for the time being.

Carefully re-folding letter, returned it to the envelope. To deny its existence and danger. Rocking quietly in the chair as though to a tune in his head. Perhaps now regretting the adventure he had longed for. Finishing the coffee stands and waves 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." He replied. Unsure if anyone would see him again.

Heading to the Shopping Centre grabbed a shopping basket from the green plastic pile.

"What did Auntie want?" Trying to recite the shopping list.

'Ginger cake... Tea... Loose... Anything else?' He thought unable to concentrate.

His father's letter causing him mental indigestion. He would Google the Professor when he got home.

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, the 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."

"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, he 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." He said.

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

"Will do Aunty."

No one actually knew what was up in the Attic.

It had been years since anyone had been up there. A forgotten graveyard of possessions and keepsakes. Arthur had no interest in those boxes. There was one particular box he did have an intense interest.

A shoe box.

On opening the ceiling attic door. Stairs slide down into place. Along with dust that settled on him and his Aunt's clean carpet. Checking the stair's sturdiness, climbs apprehensively through the opening into a semi-lit room. Light filtered through the large round grilled vent. He reaches for the light cord.

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

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

If he recalled correctly, there were spare lightbulbs on a shelf on the other side of the attic. Making his way between the boxes in the dimly lit room. Eased his way to the shelf. Eyes becoming accustomed to the darkness. Making out a likely box that contained spare bulbs. Reached inside and fumbled for one.

Exchanging the bulbs and placed the deceased bulb into a cardboard coffin for later burial. And returned to the light cord.

"Let there be light!" He pronounced.

'Click!' Tugging on the cord.

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

Illuminated radiance replaced the darkness. Confronted by stacked boxes. Caked with years of 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 their souls.

In a far corner. Behind several stacked boxes. He could make out the faint outline of the shoe box his father had spoke about his in letter. Dark shadows cloaked its presence. As though

to veil it further. Shoved into the dark corner. Covered in dust. But not as much as the other boxes. This had been a recent addition.

Reaching into the corner and carefully pulled it out. Unsure of the frailty. Or its contents. Feeling the 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 heavy knot. Not a bow. The box was meant to remain closed. As if to keep what was inside from escaping. Or those on the outside from peering inside.

Nervously he untied the knot. Unwound the string from around the box. Placing the string next to the box of bulbs as if performing a surgical autopsy. A gust of air breathed through the attic vent from outside. Stirring up settled dust. Creating skeletal fingers in the air as sunlight reached for him.

Was it trying to prevent him from opening the box?

This thought never entered his mind. His curiosity had gotten the better of him.

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

"It's okay Aunty... 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 instructed.

"Yes Aunty."

Hesitantly, lifts the lid of the shoe box and was shocked by what he saw. His mind taking a moment to register the 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, 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, he could accept. But a gun?

It appeared familiar. As though he had seen it on television.

The bulb threw a dark shadow of Arthur's body over the box. There was something laying underneath the gun. Carefully lifting it out, felt the weight. It felt awkward and he places it carefully on the box's lid as if not wishing to awaken it.

Reaching within the shoe box again, 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 directly behind him.

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

Her coercing voice no less fearful than the contents of the shoe box.

"Yes Aunty... Sorry Aunty... Coming now Aunty." He answered flustered.

Carefully replacing the gun on top of the bank notes replaced the lid.

Rewinding the string around the box. Finishing it with a secure knot like his father had done. He slid the box far back into its dark hiding place. He would have to come back later. Was he really about to go to Budapest?

Returning to the opening Arthur switched off the light and darkness fell again about the attic. Thin boney fingers of sun light reached into the attic. Suspended dust danced on the shifting air.

Climbing cautiously down the stairs. Brushes away any dust that may have hitched a ride.

“Did you fix the bulb? ...” His Aunt asked wondering why he had taken so long. “...Did you find the book you were after?” Machine gunning 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 lied hoping that would end her inquisition.

The letter and shoe box added to his loss of appetite.

Lunch was not as appealing as it usually would be. If the gun had not disturbed him enough. The amount of cash that laid beneath certainly had. He tries to rationalize the gun and cash to his father’s behavior. Nothing.

With innate curiosity, his Aunt could sense something was amiss with him.

“You feeling okay Arty? You’ve barely touched a bite. You’re not coming down with something are you? ... You look flush.” She asked with concern.

“I don’t think so Auntie... I must have had too much for breakfast. This is a lovely lunch.” Forcing himself to take another mouthful, “... A cup of tea would be lovely.”

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 he wondered.

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

“Ginger cake Arty?” She asked.

“Oh that would be lovely.” He replied.

Somewhere between the tea, the ginger cake and the re-run on the television, Arthur formulated an excuse to tell his Aunt as to how he could escape and not arouse her suspicions.

“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.

Hoping she had not been reading the Scottish obituaries in her spare time.

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

“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.

Taken back by his Aunt’s unreactive response to him leaving. Stunned, quickly calibrates the number of days.

“Oh... I thought I might stay about... A *week*... Might catch up with some old classmates and all that.”

“That’s a lovely thought Arty... Make sure you pack something warm.” She advised.

“Yes it will.” Arthur replied wondering. “I’ll this afternoon... I want to catch up with Phil before I go.” Embellishing the excuse with some truth.

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

“Ohh... I think I’m good for money, thanks Aunty.” He remarked.
‘*Very good.*’ He thought.

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

“I like this one.” Chuckling to himself unheard.

The cogs of Arthur’s life were turning. Forcing other cogs to turn with them...



Deck of Cardinals

Somewhere in the Vatican. Several days earlier.

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. Both indistinguishable from the other. 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. Or prayer. The early morning rays reached for him. And he imagined the warm 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. Answering to no-one, but God.

The sound echoing off worn polished marble tiles. Filling every square inch of the opulent office with an incessant ringing

As though ask, *'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*? Reluctantly, the man lifts the handset from its cradle to terminate the siren.

Filling the opulent office once again with a deafening silence.

"Salve." The man quietly answered in Latin.

"Please excuse my intrusion, Your Eminence... But I have some very important news." Cardinal Cassini began to explain to his Superior, The Pope.

"Go on." Now recognizing the Cardinal's voice.

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

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

The Cardinal relayed details of the relic's discovery. The ecclesiastic significance recognized immediately. It was without question that it would need to be returned to the Church.

"A relic... The first? ... I see..." Repeating the word to confirm what he had heard. "...Go on my friend." Hoping the call was not being monitored by *outsiders*.

Nodding to himself. Acknowledging the relic's importance and the steps that would need to be undertaken to secure its return.

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

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. As if it were his own. He would summon the Cardinals and advise them of the situation. He would take 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 afforded all resources and means to coordinate its 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.

Trimmed with gold braids, long dark purple drapes hung heavily from tall ancient windows. The walls hung with portraits of former Cardinals and Bishops of Rome. The room cool with the early morning air still lingering. Cardinals circulated among themselves. Moving slowly about the room as they conversed and nodding to one another as they did so.

Without warning, the sound of large heavy wooden doors creaked 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. And never the two shall meet.

The Pope entered the room to a series of ritual bows and nods. Like the Red Sea, Cardinals parted as He walked to the head of a large table. And waited for him 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.” As if to whet the Cardinal’s ecclesiastical appetites.

Causing an immediate mumbled chatter among the Cardinals before returning their eyes to their Bishop for confirmation.

“I have this on good authority from Cardinal *Cassini*... Whom you all know 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.” He confessed. 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. Eyes scan for Cardinals that appeared out of place. Stopping at an elderly Cardinal. Sitting quiet, as though frozen in time. The only Cardinal not to have made eye contact with him.

Cardinal Dovizi.

Senior in years. Rising him above suspicion 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 when 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. Standing, the Pope blessed the 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 creaking 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, and watched as the other Cardinals leave in pairs.

Eyeing a lonely individual that lagged behind the others. Reluctant to pair up with another. Cardinal Dovizi...



Safety in Numbers

Sitting in his father's chair Arthur stared out the window to the quiet suburban street outside.

Contemplating the journey that laid ahead. Could he go blindly into the unknown? His mind was a blank canvas as to what laid ahead. He had often wished for an adventure like his father's travels across Europe. Never expecting it to be so sudden. So dangerous.

But then what adventure is not dangerous?

What was the danger his father spoke of? Enough to require a gun? The reality of the gun slapped him across the face. Awakening him to the seriousness of his father's words.

His mind plays out scenarios. He needed to get to Budapest? Money was not an issue. Plane or train? Security checks. X-Rays would detect the gun. Followed by a lot of questions for which he had no answers. Flying was out of the question.

That only left trains.

It would take an extra day. But it would provide more places to conceal the gun. More room to maneuver. More opportunity to exist the train if required. Settled, trains it would be. Then contemplated if he 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 coastal village in India. Were they watching him now? Waiting for his next move?

Looking to the lace curtains, as afternoon sunlight filtered into his bedroom. Casting dancing shadowed angels dancing over the floor. The idyllic scene, behaving the darker dangers that lay in wait outside.

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

But if Arthur had looked past the shadow angels dancing.

He would have spied a small grey Humber that blended into the curb. Much like the driver. That blended into the upholstery of the seat.

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 he would speak Italian, or Latin. Thereby frustrating any conversation. If troubled further, Cassini had a solution in his pocket that would silence the matter. Appearing of no importance to anyone. He 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 the Professor was connected to the Department of Historical Antiquity.

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

But then, neither did the gun.

Despite his father's warning not to tell anyone, he wondered if he should visit to Phil. Perhaps getting him to play along with his visit to Edinburgh. Cementing his alibi with his Aunt.

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. Like Arthur, he had been laid off at the counsel and lived at home with his parents.

Arthur knocked on the door.

“Hello Arthur...” Said Phil’s mother, “... How have you been? I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“I’m good Misses A...” Replying cheerfully, “...I was wondering of Phil was home?”

“Come on in Arthur... Would you like a cup of tea?” She inquired. “...Phil_lip! Are you up there love?” Hollering up the stairway.

“What’s up mom?” A holler tumbled back down.

“Arthur is here to see you!” She hollered back.

“Send him up thanks Mom!”

“Thank you Misses A... I’ll go on up.” Said Arthur heading inside.

“Call out if you’d like a cup of tea.” She offered again.

“Will do Misses A.” Climbing the narrow stairs to Phil’s room.

Arriving at his bedroom door, takes in a room was unchanged from since he was a teenager.

Which was questionable how long ago that was. Rock posters adorn the painted walls. A well-arranged shelf of old vinyl LP’s. Phil sat a desk surfing the net.

“What you up to?” Asked Arthur trying to peer over his shoulder.

“Nothing much... Just surfing...” Quickly changing the page as he got closer. “... You?”

Turning about showing his face. His sirening a recent fight.

“Whoa! What happened to your lip?” Exclaimed Arthur taken back by the abrasion.

“Cut myself shaving.” Deflected Phil grinning.

“Yeah-right. Those safety razors can be dangerous.” Arthur hated to think what the other guy looked like.

“So what brings you here?” Phil asked curiously.

“Not much...” Pausing 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”.

“What you been up to? ... Is it a woman?” He asked hoping to expel his wisdom upon him. 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.

“A woman? No...” Hesitant to continue.

“Come on... Spill the beans...” Ribbing him 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...” He said cautiously, before realizing he had 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 Arthur! ... Besides... *Danger* is my middle name.” Phil joked.

“Yeah... Though sometimes I wonder if it should be your first.” Not joking.

“So what’s happened to get you into *trouble?* ... You haven’t robbed a bank have you?” He asked.

“Well *actually*... I don’t know...” He 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. Phil went to the door and closed it quietly. And looked at him 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?” Taking a more serious tone.

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

“It’s a women isn’t it?” Quick to surmise the problem.

“No... It’s not about women... 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 surprised.

“Wait there’s more... Said I should see a Professor there... Almesh... Told me not to tell anyone... Or I will put them in danger.” Informed Arthur, relieved to have now told Phil.

Reaching into his pocket and pulled out the letter to corroborate his story.

Passing it to Phil who opened it and read it to himself. His face became grave and lifted his eyes to Arthur’s.

“Shit... You weren’t joking.... So what was in the box?” He enquired.

“Money...” Arthur paused, “... And a gun.”

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

Becoming entangled in the same knotted thoughts Arthur had had. The pair sat looking blankly at each other taking in the obscure facts.

“So what you going to do?” Phil asked handing the letter back to him.

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

“Who’s this Professor... Almesh?”

“I did a search for him 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 salesman. When did he become a secret agent? ... Cool_!” Joked Phil.

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

“Yeah...” He chuckled, 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?” Not one to be left out.

“*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... 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.” Warned Phil.

Somehow Arthur knew he meant it.

No one got past Phil without a bruising to show for their troubles.

“You won’t regret it mate.” He grinned, excited by the journey.

“Yeah... That’s what I’m afraid of... There’s a train leaving St Pancras for Brussels at ten tomorrow morning... Don’t worry about money. There seems to be 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.”

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

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

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

“It will add a day... But we’ll get there... You sure you still want to go? You don’t have.”

“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 to the station. Cover story, you’re coming to Edinburgh for a week for a funeral of an old professor.” Informs Arthur.

“See you tomorrow morning mate.”

“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 was raised.

And settled in for dinner with his favorite Aunt before leaving into the unknown. To a man he did not know. In a 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 Auntie?” He 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, re-read the brief letter. Perhaps there was something he had missed between the lines, between the words...

‘Go to Budapest... Find Professor Almesh.’

His mind erupting with fantasies of spies and espionage.

That soon evaporated when his Aunt appeared at his door.

“You okay Arty? You look tired.” She asked.

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

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

“You too Auntie.”

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

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

Had he made a mistake telling Phil, going against his father’s directions?

Arthur's weakness was Phil's strength. Complementing the other. He was coming along wanted or not. Closing the laptop and book. Placing them on the side table. An switches off the bed side lamp. The room flooded with a darkness.

Subtly illuminated by the growing full moon outside. Tinged with a faint red glow.

Somewhere between puzzling thoughts and searching questions. A tiredness overcame him. As though not his own.

"Sleep." Commanded Michael standing at the end of the bed unseen.

Sending Arthur into a peaceful sleep. Deeper than he had ever slept before...



Cardinal Dovizi

Heads nodded in ritual bows, smudged voices discussed their concerns.

Upon standing, the Pope raised a hand and blessed the deck of Cardinals. Dismissing them back from whence that had come. A sea of red regalia parted to allow the Bishop of Rome to pass through.

Cardinals moved unhurriedly through the large doorway. Discussing among 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. Of senior years, he had clung to his elected position as he did to life. Through the decades he had made associations with people and organizations around the world. Some reputable. Some less so. 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. The less moral associates fulfilled the other. Too old to be concerned moralities anymore. Too old to be elected Pope. Forgave himself the few digressions that befell his ordained position while in 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. And friends that would reward him favorably should the relic fall into their possession. A quiet word to help them in the right direction.

There would be no blood on Dovizi's hands.

Shuffling unhurriedly to his office along a labyrinth of marbled passageways.

Eternally long hallways. With eternally high ceilings. Long winding staircases. Draped with royal red carpet. Held in place by polished brass bars. Accentuating each step.

Beams of morning sunlight shone through the towering windows. Standing like Sentinels looking down upon the diminutive figure shuffling along the corridor. They had been watching him for many years. 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 about the corridor to ensure he was alone. Staff would not arrive for another half hour. Lowering himself gently into a large wooden chair, upholstered in red leather. Brass tack heads rimmed the edges. Surveyed his desk of neatly stacked arranged piles of paper. A thorough man. Organized, he like things in their place.

Opening a drawer removed a small plastic box of business cards.

Reaching for a tired pair of reading glasses, wedged them on his nose. Hooking bent wire limbs behind large ears. Removing cards, thumbed through them as if he was playing bridge. Contemplating those to keep. Those to discard. He was searching for two in particular.

Hesitating.

Read the card in front of him. Voices in his head debated what to do next. Would he. Would he not? 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 business card. Taking a deep breath, annuls the growing anxiety. And reaches for the telephone. Lifting the heavy large green hand piece. 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. Nonetheless, it was a risk he was prepared to take. The man on the other end of the line also took risks. Poking boney fingers at buttons, punched numbers from 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 breakfast in the shade of the pergola hanging with vines.

Large stone lions watched from the corners of the courtyard.

“Cardinal Dovizi... How are you my good friend? What can I do for you?” Sang out a joyful voice.

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

“Caller ID my friend... Isn’t wonderful? ...” The man laughed, “...I can tell whose calling. It is good to hear from you...,” Pausing momentarily, somewhat knowing the purpose of the call, “... *You have something for me today?*” He voice eagerly.

The voice was that of Don Marconi.

An unscrupulous relic collector. In particular, religious relics. Already holding several of the Cardinal’s informed pieces in his private collection. And was always interested in more. Although highly illegal pursuit, Marconi’s connections with authorities afforded him protection from meddling righteous eyes.

On the Isle of Capri, Naples.

Resided on a remote hilltop hideaway, Villa San Michelle. Panoramic views of the town of Capri and its harbor. Mount Vesuvius laid sleeping in the distance. The former chapel, dedicated to San Michele. Reputedly built on the ruins of Roman Emperor Tiberius' villa. Now a forgotten relic to the outside world. A fitting residence for the illicit relic collector. Towering three hundred meters above sea level and over a thousand steps. Few ever ventured there.

Rediscovered by a young Swedish Physician at the turn of the last century. It is said the Physician made a pact with the devil to acquire the property. The villa had passed through a series of socialites and eventually onto Don Maroni.

Though he had not made a pact with the devil. Was about to enter into 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 cold. “...*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...” The cardinal paused to allow its importance to register. “... The Church is very, *very* keen to have it returned.” He added, tempting Marconi further.

“I understand they would.... The *first* of its kind you say?”

“Saint Peter’s himself...” Dovizi qualified the find, then as if sour the sweet Marconi was savoring, adds, “... Cardinal Cassini is charged with its return.”

“*Cassini* did you say? ... Hmmm.” Marconi grumbled his distaste for the Cardinal.

Their paths had crossed in the past. Barely escaping with his life. The relic must be prized by the Church to send Cassini after it. Preferring now to remain in the shadows, he had men that would do his dirty work and settle his score with Cassini.

Marconi sighs heavily. The prize was too great to let slip from his fingers.

“Thank you my dear friend... You won’t go unrewarded...” Enticing the Cardinal. “...Keep me informed.”

“I’ll be in contact again soon... Goodbye my friend.” Replied Dovizi ranging up.

‘Caller ID? What was that? I must be more careful.’ Thought Dovizi.

The electronic age had overtaken the Cardinal 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 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.

The Cardinal would have work to do if he wanted to locate the Ring. Nothing moved quickly in the Vatican. Particularly the paper work. Vatican secretaries talked to each other and it was not impossible 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 other cards and thought.

Cassini was a formidable opponent for the most determined relic collector. If Marconi should fail. Then another opportunity that may not present itself in his short remaining life time. Dovizi needed insurance. Thumbing the cards in his hands, shuffles them until he encounters the next he was in search of.

Julius Augustus Braun.

Marconi and Braun were fierce rivals. Competition will lift their game thought the Cardinal. Ensuring his payday. Examining the number carefully on the card as though to memorize it. Dialed the number 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 had risen from the ashes of the Second World War. Braun whose father was unknown, or unspoken of, had taken his mother’s maiden name.

Undeclared family wealth. Amassed in Swiss bank accounts and vaults. Providing the capital to create an even greater fortune from the less fortunate. Ruthlessly, Braun climbed from the rubble left by the Allied bombings. Forging a dynasty of industrial wealth and power. A new world 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 did little to mollify the ringing. Distracting Braun from the day's stock prices and trades. He had two phones on his desk. One for business. The other for private. A select few had his private number. And those that did were people connected to power. Wealth is nothing without power to protect it.

Braun answered the latter.

"Braun speaking." Intrigued as to who was calling.

"My apologies if I have disturbed you Senior Braun." He humbled himself.

"Cardinal Dovizi... What a delightful surprise. It's been a while since we last talked ... Hope you are well." Recognizing the Cardinal's distinctive Italian accent and aging voice.

"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.

"I have news that may interest you Senior Braun." He 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 came over Braun as he registered the relic's importance.

He knew of the Fisherman's Ring. But unaware of 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 the Keys of Heaven. Braun held several notable, yet 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... I will know more by the end of the day." He 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 the lengths Cassini would go.

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 step ahead of..." Dovizi soothed Braun's doubts.

"Yes, yes... Of course."

"I'll be in contact once I have more information..." Advised the Dovizi.

"Thank you Cardinal... I look forward to your next call... Good day." Braun hung up the phone to contemplate the worth of the find.

Financially and spiritually.

Contemplating Cassini's involvement. Their paths had crossed before. With Braun's men always coming away worse for wear. Or dead. Cassini was a torn in his side that needed to be removed.

He would see to it personally himself this time.

Dovizi hung up the phone.

Pleased he had satisfied his two masters. Reshuffling Braun's card among the others and returned the small plastic box to his drawer. Just as the office doors opened and staff arrived for the day. Advising the secretaries of the mission Cassini was to undertake and that they should provide whatever assistance was required.

They were to glean from Cassini's staff the location of the Ring and report back to him. Inferring 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 uncomfortable Dovizi eased his chair into the shadows. Looking back to window as though someone was watching him.

"Quod enim tale facere potui? (What have I done?)" The Cardinal mutters in Latin before crossing himself.

A twinge of guilt in a form of goosebumps ran over his body.

"*Indeed.*" Said Michael watching on unseen from a chair across from him...



Ginger Cake And Tea

Arthur had sent Phil a text message.

Instructing him to distract his Aunt to the garden while he accessed the attic and retrieve the contents of the shoe box. Despite routine habits, Arthur's Aunt was highly unpredictable as a sea gull at Brighton Beach on a windy day. Though not a seagull, she was however a passionate gardener. Unfortunately for Phil could not tell a weed from a chrysanthemum.

With the distraction organized, Arthur waited on Phil and finalized the itinerary. Travelling as backpackers. Eating on the go. Keeping a low profile from whoever may, or may not be after him.

He was beginning to realize he knew very little about his father.

The slate had been wiped clean with the discovery of the gun. A new identity was being etched. What that identity was would be clearer when he got to Budapest and had spoken with Professor Almesh. Doubting his father would be there as well by the way the letter was written. If not there, then where was he? The question perplexed him further. Deepening the mystery as to what he had gotten himself into.

Phil arrived earlier than expected, keen to get underway.

He had brought a cutting from his mother's garden.

"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." She 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." 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. Watching 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.

Then like an unpredictable regulation issue Aunt...

"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 his eyes lighting up, looking over his shoulder to Arthur.

Shaking his head in disbelief.

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

Followed her out to the clothes line in the back yard. Indicating to Arthur he should retrieve the the box.

Watching the pair disappear through the back door.

Arthur rushed up the stairs and pull down the attic ladder. And climbed quickly to the attic holding a duffle bag. Morning sunlight streamed through the vent providing some visibility. Through the grills 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 found the box and untied the knot and opened it. No surprises this time. Taking out the gun. Feeling its weight. Was it loaded? He 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 his mind. Carefully placing the gun in the duffle bag. Soon followed by the bundles of bank notes.

For some unknown reason after closing the box retied the box and returned it back to its hiding place. Nothing was to be out of place. 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 had climbed them. Returning the ladder to the ceiling closed the attic door.

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."

"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... Our train leaves at ten. We'll get a taxi to the Paddington Station." Wishing to get away quickly.

"Don't we need to go to St Pancras?" Phil corrected Arthur. 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".

Would they ever be able to escape the house and the clutches of his Aunt? But Arthur's Aunt was not listening. She had put the kettle on and was reaching for the ginger cake.

"Have a cuppa before you go... Won't you? She asked hoping to prolong their company.

"Let me help with that." Phil offered.

It was the least he could do for his slip of tongue thankfully passing over Aunt's head.

"We could stay for a cuppa can't we Arthur?" Phil played along.

"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 unbeknown to her upon a mysterious journey across Europe.

To a country they knew very little about. That did not trouble Phil. Nothing ever did. Between Wikipedia and a half dozen dating sites he was a wealth of knowledge. With 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 inconspicuous Cardinal.

He liked it that way. Few questions are ever asked of someone who did not exist. He 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 the 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.

In recent times it 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. Protected by diplomatic immunity should he ever be caught. Though now into his sixties, he was still called on from time to time for assignments that required his *expertise*. Blending into a crowd as though he were not there.

No one noticed an old man. Yet the old man noticed everyone. And everything around him. Carrying a Berretta in one pocket and a Bible in the other. Prepared to use both to the monstrous demons that threatened the Church's dogma.

Preferring to operate alone.

On this assignment he had been instructed an assistant would travel with him. A novice. Their duty, to assist the Cardinal 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 candidates 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 how very little he knew of the Father from the far southern parish. Something told him it was the right decision. And like a dream, lingering doubts faded. A sealed letter had been personally dispatched requesting the Father's presence at the Vatican.

Cassini patiently waited for the arrival of the new recruit.

Michael sat quietly beside him...



Francis of Amantea

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. Francis was preparing a sermon in the chapel, when a Papal Dispatcher appeared at old wooden church gates requesting to see him immediately. With him he 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 reluctantly broke the seal and opened the envelope. Unfolding the embossed parchment and read the hand written message. The letter instructed him to come to the Vatican immediately. Stating he had been chosen to assist the Cardinal on his travels to London, England. 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 passing English tourists, as being a cold damp place. Preferring the warm dry climate of southern Italy. Nonetheless, this was a rare opportunity for him. To be chosen by the Vatican. 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 clergy garments and civilian clothes. Packing his small leather suitcase with what little he had.

01:05PM A ticket was waiting for him at the tired station.

Climbing aboard an old train that had seen better years. It would take him on the five hour journey north to Rome. And found himself an empty compartment. There came the sound of a whistle, and a voice calling out the train's imminent departure.

Sliding the suitcase on the upper luggage rack 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 sat opposite unseen and grinned as to Francis' thoughts.

"All aboard" A voice called from the platform.

Released pressure hissed and steam bellowed into the air outside. Sending a sudden cloud of fog over the platform. The train lurched forward. Stuttered. And then lurched again. Fidgeting to get comfortable on the hard bench seat as the train steadied its motion.

Bewildered as to why he had been chosen for the assignment. 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. It was as though he did not exist. And guessed there some

places not even Google's spiders could not find their way into. The Vatican servers being one of them.

Arriving 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 rushing unhurriedly pass the window. The sun shone its brilliance upon the idyllic coast line that was ordinary to him. Spectacular to the droves foreign tourists. Carriages rattled and rocked gently side to side. And somewhere between the rhythmic rocking and the pages of the paperback, Francis drifted to sleep.

A passing conductor came to the cabin and found him sleeping with the book on his lap. His head leaned against the window. Spying the edge of the red train ticket being used as a book mark. Quietly leant over and punched a neat hole in a corner of it.

And let him sleep uninterrupted.

The train continued its journey northwards.

Along the seaside tracks. Through long dark tunnels. All the while rocking Francis in the cradle. He would need his rest for the mysterious assignment installed for him. Not only by the Cardinal. But the divine Hand of God.

He too had been chosen.

Travelling north. Stopping at the stations 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 waited patiently for Francis to be awoken...



Saint Pancras Station

It was a typical dreary autumn day in dreary north London.

Grey streets smudged with the grey buildings that smudged into the grey autumn skies above them. The lazy cold breeze blew from the north. The sun trying to breach the blanket of thick clouds. 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. Wanting no unnecessary delays Arthur paid the driver and told him to keep the change. Euston Road traffic was like a box of chocolates. With an assortment of vehicles rumbling by.

From the outside Saint Pancras Station could be mistaken for a 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 displays of every kind imaginable.

In its hay day it had been the largest single spanned roof in the world. Its design 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. Until the Chunnel had modernized it as an international terminal. And blended ancient Victorian architecture with contemporary design. Accommodating incessant needs of the foreign passenger's for faster trains.

Shouldering their packs they headed inside.

Negotiating through the crowd of people that were coming and going. Tourists stood like sticks in the mud. Stagnating other frustrated travelers as they took photographs of the grand old Victorian wonder. Much like London, the station was cosmopolitan. Contaminated with every nationality from every continent and beyond. Encapsulating every occupation, ethnicity, and religion. As it should. It was a gateway for almost every international destination across Europe.

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. Beginning with the Romans. Legions of foreigners now coming and going at will.

The European Union had seen to that.

Arthur and Phil went with the tide of people.

Drifting along with tidal eddies 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.

The sound inside the cathedral railway was surprisingly quiet. The high roof not allowing sound to condensate. Engines contributed musical tones periodically punctuated by conductors' whistles to signal that a departure.

Vaguely knowing his way around the station Arthur headed to the ticketing counter. Discovering a long queue of anxious passengers waiting. Colorful scarred travel bags by their sides.

A large display board indicated the Eurostar to Brussels would not leave for another half hour. The queue grew gradually shorter. And they shuffled their way forward. Phil kept looking around as though he was in danger. He thought he saw someone staring at them. Then 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. Turning about to see Arthur was about to secure the tickets to Budapest. Via Brussels and Vienna.

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

“In your dreams my friend...” Arthur replied dampening Phil’s enthusiasm and adding. “...It’s not really our money... So I better not be too reckless with it. Don’t want to draw attention to two backpackers travelling First Class, right?”

“Yeah... I suppose you’re right... Best keep our heads down.” Accepted Phil.

Feeling a little relieved now he had the tickets in hand.

And that they were on their way. Wanting to grab a coffee at nearby Café stand. This only reminded him of Zara and her smile. That only made him smile.

“What’s with you?” Enquired Phil.

“Nothing... Just a girl I know.”

“Do I know her?” Hoping to divest his knowledge.

“I don’t think so.” Thawing Phil’s enthusiasm.

Changing his mind about the coffee. Decided he would get one on the train and headed for the platform where their Eurostar was waiting. Phil climbed aboard 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 station. Wondering if he would 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. Feeling the weight of the duffle bag pulling down on his shoulder strap. Reminding him of the gun and what he had gotten into.

Hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

Feeling like he was being watched. Looking about he saw nothing suspicious. A carriage further back, two clergy gentlemen were boarding.

A whistle blew, long and hard. And Loud.

“All aboard!” Called out the platform conductor to the tardy stragglers.

Now running towards him.

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

Soundlessly the train moved from St Pancras Station.

Heading smoothly along seasoned tracks to Brussels. Travelling at over three hundred kilometers per hour it would arrive in the ancient city in just over two hours.

Phil found his seat. Cramming his pack into the overhead locker. Arthur arrived soon after. Taking his seat, placed 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. Saint Pancras moved swiftly past their window. The rusting stained railway yards disappeared from sight and was replaced by the rusting golden autumn colors of the English country side.

“Idyllic.” Said Arthur taking in the rare unseen beauty.

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

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 his mind.

The train swiftly sped east with the intermittent sound of the wheels passing over track partitions.

Checking 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.

As much as people sort to be socially accepted, they had an uncanny way of keeping a distinct social distance from each other. Trains. Cinemas. Restaurants. Bus stops. And cafes.

Had Arthur looked a further carriage back 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 rays of the sun. The paperback still open on his lap. Rocking gently, the old train waltzed its way along the coast line. The idyllic scenery passing unseen by Francis caught in dream.

Passing through ancient roman villages. Some little more than sleepy lanes and sparkling coves of clear blue waters below. Passing beneath the Rifugio degli dei, Refuge of the Gods. Perched high on the cliffs of the Amalfi Coast. Having visited in his youthful years, younger than the modest years he was today. Wondered if his legs could handle the seven hundred steps to the top.

Some Gods prefer to be left alone in solitude. Like a hermit. Sitting on top of a mountain.

Villas stacked one upon the other like Meccano bricks. A whitewash of colors of vivid orange, vibrant blue, and vivacious green. The Italians had a gift for making the simple Villa incredibly spectacular. All this would go unnoticed to him. As would the crystal blue waters, golden sand beaches below.

The warmth of the sun.

The gentle rocking of the carriages. And the romantic adventure of his book. Had placed Francis into a hypnotic trance, called sleep.

The conscious mind had given way to the subconscious. And the subconscious to a higher realm. He was at peace and could not have gotten closer to God than at that moment. As though he were bathing pure love. Finding himself standing in a field of vibrant green grass. An endless horizon touching a brilliant blue sky. Pure white clouds glowing like angels. A sun shone bright.

This was no ordinary sun. It did not hurt his eyes when looking at it. At peace with himself and the world, did not want to wake up.

But something was pulling him back. He was not allowed to stay in this scared place. This was but a peek. Then as though passing a bakery, smells the aroma of freshly baked bread. Taking one last deep inhalation through his nostrils before the train gave a sudden lurch forward.

Coming to a stop at one of the many stations on its journey north. The paperback slid forwards from his lap to the floor.

The red book mark, with its neatly plucked hole, still wedged firmly among its pages. Eyes opened instinctively. Bracing himself for an impact that never came. His mind returned to the compartment about him. Feeling like he had been robbed. And the candy had been taken away.

Suddenly he feels a sharp burning pain in his shoulder.

Gasping for breath at its impact. Reaching a hand to it, wondering what had struck him. The pain fades as quickly as it had arrived. Taking deep breaths, settles himself from the passing discomfort.

From the carriage window sees a small railway station and an oversized sign that stated...

SAPRI

He was 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 to dry.

'Idyllic.' He thought.

Then noticed someone sitting opposite, staring directly at him.

And he was also clergy. Of a kind.

"Divine, isn't it? ... Are you alright?" Enquired Michael seeing the sudden stop had shaken Francis. Picking up the book, handed it back to him.

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

Thoughts of a dream surface, but like all dreams is soon forgotten. There was a vague memory of something nice.

'Like freshly baked bread.' He thought.

The familiar scent lingers in his nostrils.

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

"I'm Father Francis." Extending his.

Their grips were identical.

Though Michael's grip was firm his hands were soft and smooth. No roughness one would come to expect from a man who labored gardens and helped the poor. It was warm grip. And he felt a comfort suddenly come over him. 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.

'He 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." Answered Michael 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." 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. Francis leaned forward.

"It would be best not to get too acquainted with the Cardinal. Do not be surprised by his *methods* ... Show him great respect and you might..." Pausing to consider his choice of words, "...Return home with a great honor of having served the Church." Michael concluded, holding back the explicit details.

"Thank you for your words of advice."

'Cardinal Cassini was obviously a very important person.' Thought Francis.

"Indeed." Responded Michael overhearing the thought.

After dispatching its human cargo, a whistle blew.

An old man wearing a frayed railway uniform, both of which predated the last war, waved an old red paddle to signify the train's imminent departure.

Lurched abruptly again. Lurching Francis with it.

Michael looked at Francis and smiled. It was a smile that was communicable. Radiant. As though he belonged to a special congress of people doing God's Work. Looking out the carriage window, Francis' eyes followed. The small town with its oversized sign and four thousand souls moved slowly past. Falling behind with each rotation of the wheels.

As though suspended by the hand of God, the afternoon sun shone through the window. The old train continued its slow waltz north. Continuing along the seaside tracks. Through long dark tunnels and rocking Francis in his cradle. And back to sleep to resume his dream. His mind re-connecting to a dream world and the smell of freshly baked bread.

Suddenly the train lurched forward.

'*Not again*' He thought, annoyed by the intrusion.

The aroma of freshly baked bread remained and drifted into his nostrils.

"Mm..." Taking in the seductive aroma, "... I must have dozed off again."

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. Tourists taking photographs.

And an oversized sign that stated...

"SAPRI".

Francis looked opposite to where Michael had been sitting.

No longer there. He looks about the compartment and to the platform outside. Seeing the same old man wearing the same old uniform. Predating the same old war. Waving the same old red paddle. Blowing the same old whistle to dispatch the same human cargo.

The paperback still on his lap. Still open at the page he had last read. It had not fallen to the floor as it had *before*. Between the open pages lay a small elegant white feather. Puzzled by its appearance. 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?

Reaching to his shoulder, as if to recapture the pain. Nothing. Maybe he had imagined that too.

Opening the paperback to continue reading.

The feather now lodged with the red ticket book mark. Now appearing 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?

Repositioning 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 him.

Michael sat quietly watching on. Enjoying the divine sunlight soaking into His eternal soul...



Roma

The train rolled its way North.

Through the ancient Italian townships of Pisciotta, and San Marco. A further stretch would take him past a beach front lined with colorful multilayered buildings. Then a short hop to the Pompeii with its grizzly Roman burial grounds. Mount Vesuvius slept, its bloody horn capped with snow. Twitching now and again, troubled by a disturbing dream of thousand years ago.

Thirty kilometers north lay Naples.

The central hub of Italy and the half way point of Francis' journey to Vatican City. There he would encounter a small delay, before connecting a train to Rome. And chance for him to stretch his legs. He had not been that far north for years. There was no necessity. Amantea satisfied all his earthly needs. Places were all much the same to he had reasoned. Simply labelled with different names.

3:00PM and the old train shunted into the Naples station.

Awakening Francis from a dream. There was no smell of freshly baked bread. And the dream faded as sight of the station over whelmed his senses. The train talked back to itself as it came to a jerking halt. Sighing steam over the platform. Relieved it had delivered Francis this far.

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

He settled in and 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. A roof of stain glass windows replicating a giant cathedral. Flooded by natural sunlight that filtered upon the steady stream of commuters below.

In a life before becoming a Priest he had dreamed of being an architect.

Torn with the passion to serve the Church. Conceded the world had enough architects and his Faith in God was stronger. Forsaking his dream, choose the path less taken, and became a Priest. Rewarded with twelve years in Brescia before being transferred to Amantea.

All that seemed a life time ago.

He was being paroled, after time served with good behavior. Believing he could serve the remainder of his sentence out under the watchful eye of the Cardinal Cassini. Feeling he had been chosen.

In some ways he had. But not by the Cardinal.

Pondering the encounter he had had with Father Michael. If he had at all. Recalling snippets of their conversation. Taking the book from a pocket, opened it and stared at the white feather between its pages. Unsure what to make of it. Their meeting seemed so real. Yet he had found himself re-living the arrival to Sapri.

'God works in mysterious ways.' Surmises Francis.

Recalling Michael's soft hands. His firm grip. As with most things that defy belief, Francis put his faith in God and accepted he had met Father Michael. Whoever, or whatever He was.

A whistle blew loudly for all to hear, as though to pull him away from the doubting thoughts.

"All aboard!" A voice cried out, before blowing the whistle louder and longer than before.

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 light. A single large central rectangular eye in its elongated forehead. Marked with an orange-red streak along its metallic skinned back.

On the platform opposite stood the train on which he had arrived. He 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.

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. English stragglers would be left behind, cursing the efficiency of European timetables. Stepping inside the belly of the metallic beast, was swallowed by its narrow intestines to his allotted seat. Snug seats. 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 the window outside. Accelerating smoothly from the giant Cathedral. Sunlight desperately tried to penetrate the tinted window. But in vain. Of the photons that succeeded only a few could lock onto him. With an hour and a half hours to Rome Francis opened his paperback, *'The Fires of Spring'*. A romantic adventure of a young man travelling across America in the depression days. By train. In many ways he identified with the adventurous young man.

The train would arrive precisely in Rome at 6:00PM.

Arrival times, much like their counterpart, were always precise. Taking the coastal route the train sped north. Slipping unseen through Monte San Biaggio. Renowned for dishes of shrimp and wild asparagus of pork sausages of chili pepper, and coriander seed. These would pass unsavored by Francis' palate. Before deviating in-land and aiming itself north to Rome.

Or Roma, as the Italians referred to it.

Nestled on the shores of the Tiber River, it was the home to some four million soles. Roma derived its name from the ancient word Ruma. Or teat. Referring to two of the Seven Hills of Rome. The Palatine and Aventine Hills. And a 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. And from humble villages grew the mighty Roman Empire. In time it would crumble under their own weight. And behind it ancient ruins of Forums and Colosseums. Provoking thoughts of Gladiators fighting. Of Christians being feed to the lions.

The Vatican sat on its own hill.

As if being estranged from the other Seven Hills of Rome. While Roman Empire succumbed to political erosion. The Vatican was still in its manger. An infant, its voice yet to be heard. Seventeen hundred years later, 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 him from its grip and he stretched in unison with the other passengers getting to their feet. Darkest was descending outside. The sun had been defeated and would allow him to walk free. Tomorrow it would try again. He had travelled almost the length of Italy. Some five hundred kilometers. Covering more distance in five hours than an ancient Roman Legions would in a week on foot.

Heading to the rest rooms to make himself more presentable. Wanting to look like an ordained Priest. Those that had seen the civilian man entering the restroom would not have recognized the ordained man that existed it. As though lead had become gold.

Making his way through the incoming wave of commuters. He had two choices. Take the Metro and five minute walk to the Vatican City. Or a Taxi that would take him directly there. The last thing he wanted was another train ride.

Electing the Taxi headed to the rank outside. Wanting to be dropped as close as he could to the Vatican gates. Ques of white taxis waited to devour the never ending supply of foreign souls. Climbing into one, closed the door. The noise of the station fell silent. The interior smelt of cigarettes. And opened a window to allow fresh air and sounds to circulate.

“Where to Father?” Asked the driver.

“Vatican please.” He replied proud as Punch.

“Yes Father.” The driver responded reverently pulling out into the congested traffic.

There is a madness to 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. Then sort absolution from Francis who was not listening. In a trance, stared out the window into the growing darkness and the chaos on wheels unconcerned. Thank God he was not driving he thought to himself.

“Where you from Father?” The driver inquired, detecting his Italian accent.

“Amantea.”

“You’ve come a long way Father.”

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 him directly to his destination.

Without delay. Without transgression. And without sin.

Driving in Roma traffic was like swimming in a crowded pool of colorful metal fish.

Minnows, scooters that darted between the other metal fish. Sharks, 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 swallowed whole.

A gigantic synchronized eddy washed around the large round-about, pizza. Twirling layers intertwined, then dispersed in dyslexic directions. Appearing as chaotic madness was in fact a

glorious waltz. Engines provided a musical accompaniment. Scooters the soprano. Cars the tenor. Buses the base. And tooting, the horn section.

'Utter madness', Francis thought.

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...



Vatican City

A taxi pulls up outside large black iron barred gates.

One of two main entrances to the Vatican City. Two brightly colored Swiss Guards stood rigid. Vivid blue, red and orange striped uniforms glowed almost fluorescently 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.

Swiss Guards have served as protectors at foreign courts since the fifteenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century the Swiss Constitution had outlawed their service. With exception of the Pontifical regiment. Bodyguards to the Pope and de facto military of the Vatican.

The gates would soon be 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. About the stony pointed monument, stood another. The Basilica. A Renaissance church within the Vatican City. An enclave and residence of the Pope. Within, a trove of iconic art, sculptures. Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. And Cardinal Cassini.

Francis stared at the smallest country in the world.

Taking up less than half of a square kilometer. Cocooning a population of 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 is not open to tourists. Only the ordained and invited dignitaries were privileged to access it.

Tentatively approaching the imposing Swiss Guards he introduced himself.

Handing them the letter and envelope from the Cardinal. Recognizing the blood red wax seal Francis had broken. They looked at him with intrigue and interest. But not suspicion.

"We've been expecting you." One guard quietly advised and directed him to step inside the archway. Keys clatter against metal, and a resounding *clunk* as the lock latches as the large gates close behind him.

He is escorted across the immense square.

One guard lead, the other followed. Cutting a solitary figure between the two tall guards. Feeling and looking like prisoner being taken to his place of execution. Guards in their colorful historic uniforms. Him in historic black clergy robes. Marching awkwardly out of step. Unable to match the towering guard's lengthy strides.

Skipping at times to keep up.

Occasionally looking up to the large marble statues of Saints that rimmed the Basilica roof top that were looking down on him.

Watching him. Assessing him. Scrutinizing him.

'Is this Him?' One Saint asks another.

'Aye.' Replies the other.

'He's the last one?' Unsure what to make of Francis.

'Aye.' Confirms the Saint.

'Doesn't look like much.'

'They never do... They never do.' Taking in the divine inequity.

Feeling not worthy to look at them, Francis lowers his head and uttered a silent prayer.

His suitcase swaying in time with the orderly march. The Basilica loomed closer and larger with every step. The evening sky providing a cosmic backdrop to the celestial building.

Conceived by Michelangelo, the Basilica is regarded as the holiest of Catholic shrines. Tradition holds that it is the burial site of Saint Peter. The first Bishop of Rome.

It is said. His tomb supposedly lays directly below the high altar.

Hundreds of thousands of Christians make the pilgrimage to the Holy City of Faith.

At this exact moment in time, it was the pilgrimage of one chosen person.

Francis of Amantea.

Guards lead him up the long stone steps. Hallowed ground reserved for a select few. Huge magnificent doors opened for before him and he enters a glorious hall. Above him, a ceiling befitting a Cathedral. Suspending a magnificent crystal chandelier. Appearing as a gigantic star lit orb. The opulence would have Christ turn in his tomb.

He is instructed to take a seat and wait. The Cardinal would be out to see him shortly.

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

Taking a seat on an arm chair gilded with rich red and gold upholstery. He had sat on many seats today, but this was the most lavish. Everything in the Vatican appeared lavish. Over the millennia the Vatican had acquired immense power. And with it immense wealth. The incongruence of empty stomachs of the poor caused a chill to run over him.

Perhaps it was guilt. Perhaps it was a draft.

Sitting quietly, takes in the great hall in which he found himself. Pairs of clergy could be seen wandering around talking inaudibly to each other. As if they had learnt to confine their voices to their immediate proximity. A majestic stairway curved to a second floor much higher up. He wondered who, or what was up there.

Large paintings of Popes Walls adorned the walls. Each 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, a shepherd's crook Crozier.

Each wore the Fisherman's Ring. A relief of Saint Peter casting his net from a boat. Each would have their names engraved around the relief. Each would be destroyed with a hammer when they died. Symbolically signifying end to the Pope's authority.

Again he found himself surrounded by superior eyes looking down at him.

Lowering his head, he prayed.

Satisfied he had humbled himself before his peers. Quietly recalled the day's journey and encounters. Reaching for his book. Then remembered where he was.

And takes out the bible his mother had given it to him upon his entry to the Seminary. Reading in silence for a period of time.

Then he heard voices.

Looking in the direction of where the voices was coming from and saw a Cardinal speaking to someone who appeared to be the Pope. Immediately he stood to attention. He would wait patiently should the Cardinal to walk his way.

The Bishop of Rome looks briefly towards his name sake. Returned his attention to the Cardinal, spoke a few words before walking away. Seeing Francis standing alone, the Cardinal walks unhurriedly towards him.

Extending a hand to introduce himself.

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

“Si Your Eminence...The trip was good. Thank you.” Francis replied nervously.

“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 Cassini.

“Thank you Your Eminence.”

“*Cardinal* will suffice Father... I am not one for *glorifications*... We will discuss more tomorrow before we leave for London. If you would like to come with me... I will show you your room.” The Cardinal gestured Francis to follow him.

Along hallways and stairways of the scared labyrinth of the Vatican.

Thinking 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 reading his thoughts. “...That’s good. We will be doing a bit of travelling.”

Arriving at set of large double doors, gilded with gold.

“Ah. Here we are... A meal will arrive shortly. 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 would be happy to give you a personal tour of the Vatican.”

“Thank you very much *Your... Cardinal...* You’re most kind.” Francis graciously accepted.

With those final instructions, the Cardinal opened the double doors and revealed another glorious room. Unsure if the Cardinal had the correct room.

“Thank you Cardinal.” He responds, taken back by the grandeur.

Closing the doors behind him.

Places the small leather suitcase down. Looking out of place in the oversized room. Adorned with carved angels. A ceiling of painted cherubs on puffy white clouds above. A far cry from his humble parish dormitory of clay walls. A simple wooden cross on the wall.

“What am I doing here?” He asked himself 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 quietly took in the opulent room.

Perhaps he would have a word with his superior...



London

Time was of the essence if the Cardinal wanted to catch the son.

The Euro-Star was fast. But it could not match the speed and comfort of the Vatican private jet. At thirty thousand feet Cassini and Francis had taken the more direct route to London.

The Cardinal was familiar with its streets and dreary weather. Having visited the city on Church *business* numerous times. Finding it the most bewildering of cities. One either loved the place, or hated it. Possibly simultaneously. Often wondering how the Church had lost this Anglo-Saxon archdiocese, so many centuries before. But accepted they had made better Protestants than they did Catholics.

Arriving at the four star Mayfair Millennium Hotel in the heart of the city.

The Hotel afforded him the Cardinal a privacy from public view. A dwelling place for those wishing to go unnoticed. The Doorman, complete with a Bowler Hat, greeted regular guests. But never by name. Acknowledging their return with a small nod.

Francis stood staring at the magnificent building like a bewildered tourist. Familiar with Roman-Italian architecture that belonged to no particular period. This was a very different kind of architecture. Georgian-Victorian. The latent architect in him looked up at the grand façade. 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.

“Sorry Cardinal.” Francis shuffled forward.

Through large gilded glass revolving doors he entered a luxurious foyer that was as spectacular as the façade.

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

The Concierge had been expecting them. Words were rarely spoken at the Mayfair. Guests preferred it that way. A well-groomed Bellboy wearing a plum red uniform carried their bags to their room. A magnetic key opened the door and they enter an elegant room of 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 English tea.

Francis did exactly that.

And made himself at home. Or as closely has he could. It was a far cry from his humble Parish. 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 spies a small bottle whisky. Liking a wee-drop once in a while.

Scottish whiskies were rare in Southern Italy.

Removing the cap, the aroma of fruit flavors, distinct spices and honey notes filled his nostrils. Not that he could tell one from the other. Taking several cubes of ice, placed them deftly

into the crystal tumbler. Pouring the golden spirit over the frozen crystals. And eased his travelled weary body into a large lather armchair. He made himself comfortable.

Turning on the large flat screen television. Flips 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 they had not been taught him, was that tragedy sells advertising. And that it 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 discovers Francis watching television. A crystal tumbler in his hand. Cassini pours himself a whisky. One of the few indulges he had. Pouring it neat, takes a seat beside Francis. Content for the time being to resurrect his soul after the lengthy journey.

"You managed to arrange the vehicle?" Francis enquired breaking the silence.

"It's all been arranged. They're very good here." Cassini replied.

Maybe the whisky 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 glass coffee table, "...I'll be having my usual." He added.

Not identifying what the usual was.

Taking a sip from his glass.

Francis savors the strong essences before swallowing whole. Picking up the menu opens it and examines the half a dozen meals. Narrowing 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 and was keen to savor the English delicacy.

The meals arrived and the Cardinal gave grace before they began.

Both ate in silence. Holding communion with themselves and their meals. The Cardinal enjoying a Fettuccine Alfredo. Tossed with parmesan cheese and butter. Melted cheese emulsified with the liquids, coating the pasta in a smooth and rich sauce. It had been one of his favorite dishes since he was a boy 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 tender with gravy only adding to the gastronomic pleasure. He was unsure what to make of the Brussel sprouts with their unusual texture and taste. Taming them with a little added butter and salt.

Sharing a bottle of dark 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 whisky.

Unable to place it the country geographically. Francis knew the luxury would not last, savored every last morsel and every last drop. Befriending the Cardinal was not so bad he thought.

‘Not to get too close’. He recalls Michael’s warning.

The *dream* still lingering long after the train ride. Like a haunting memory, Father Michael seemed such an Angelic ghost. He eyes the Cardinal suspiciously as to a darker side. Appearing self-assured. Confident. Wise and old. As one would expect an elderly statesman to be. Unable to detect any sign of danger about the man, dismisses Michael’s warning.

Feeling very full and very 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 him 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.” He informed Francis listening on intently.

Keeping the dangers from him. The less he knew the safer he would be.

Advising how tomorrow he would take the hire car and watch the son’s movements. The Cardinal would teach the inexperienced Father the art of being stealth. Molding him gently like clay. There was no rush. Nothing happened very fast at the Vatican.

Cassini dismissed Francis to make ready for bed. And finished 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 world war.

In the small Italian north west town of Portacomaro. The eldest of five children. His father was an Irish immigrant Engineer. His mother was an immigrant from Buenos Aires. A traffic accident that took the lives of his other siblings. Save his sister Maria that survived. By fate. Or divine intervention, he was not in the car that day.

Their deaths, and possibly his, had weighed on his mind heavily ever since.

Attending a technical school, Antonio graduated with a diploma in chemistry. Working a few years as a laboratory technician. Holding down a variety of odd jobs that included of all things, a bouncer.

At the age of twenty-one, suffers a life-threatening pneumonia. Having to part of a lung removed. As he lay in the hospital bed he experienced what some would describe as a near-death experience. 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 was suffering. There was a destiny that needed to be fulfilled. In the moment between heartbeats, where death resides. Found himself back in his body. Life again filled his senses. Pain filled his chest. Antonio 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, Antonio 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?' He would ask himself when doubt crept into his mind. He 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, and they became one again.

Orientating himself, focused on the purpose for why he was there. Inhaling deeply. Air reached the extremities of one and half lungs. Finishing the last of his wine, 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." He repeats to himself.

The Holy Ring of Saint Peter himself...



The Gun

The Eurostar speed swiftly through the Kent country side.

Colors rushed past the window. The grey of the city turn to the green and rustic browns of pastures and forests. Heading towards Folkestone. The British portal town of the Chunnel. There it would take another twenty minutes to reach the French portal town of Coquelles. Arthur knew as much about Coquelles as he did about Folkestone. Places have history to them, much unspoken. Much forgotten...

...Folkestone laid in a valley between two cliffs. A millennia and a half earlier, Saint Augustine had passed through bringing Christianity to the Pagan land. Arthur stared out the window and saw a sleepy fishing port passing by. The pagans had long since disappeared.

'Nothing much happened here', he thought, letting the town and its history slip from view.

Sensing a reduction in speed as the train slid into the open mouth of the mega-structure.

The idyllic vista changed from quaint white cottages to sterile grey concrete walls. Descending to a depth of one hundred and fifteen meters beneath the English Channel. Above them, ship wrecks of the Spanish Armada had been sunk on their disastrous journey to conquer England four hundred years earlier.

Like a sudden lunar eclipse, darkness filled the exterior cavity. Lights flashed by at regular intervals. Hypnotizing him as he sat transfixed. Eyes unable to focus. His mind drifted in and out of the darkness.

"Let's see it then." Asked Phil startling him, 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."

"I knew that... I just didn't think you'd get it a hundred meters below sea level!" Exclaimed Arthur.

"Let's see it then." He asked again like a broken record.

"See what?"

"The G-U-N." Spelling out the forbidden word.

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. This time he managed to decipher the word.

"What for?"

"I just want to see it... I did some territorial training before I entered university." Informed Phil proudly.

"I didn't know that... Maybe it was a good you did come along."

"Come on then..." Pledged Phil keen to see it.

"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.

"Phil... Keep an eye out for anyone suspicious. You don't know who is following us."

Watching Phil walk down the aisle towards the restroom. Looking about the cabin again. Everyone were behaving normally. The only person not behaving normally, was him. Eyes

shifted to the window into the darkness and the lights flashing by. His mind in thought as to what lay ahead. The answers he searched for were in Budapest.

And Budapest was still a continent away.

Phil located the restrooms and latched the door behind him.

And stares at himself in the wall mirror. Staring back at him. On the surface he appeared calm. Underneath he was anxious. Why had he decided to come along? This was something Arthur could not do alone. Something told him he had to be there. They were complete opposites. A pair of unlikely lads. Yet they complemented each other.

'Arthur would do the same for me.' He thought.

Taking a deep breath, opened the duffle bag. And peered in. The cubicle's overhead light shone on the contents.

"Oh shit!" He said to himself.

Unsure if it was the gun. Or the amount of cash 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.

A Glock.

Having seen them advertised for sale and hopefully to people with hand gun licenses.

Looking for find the safety catch. It did not appear to have one. Was it loaded? Pressing a latch at the base of the handle the magazine popped, then slid out. Anyone watching him would have thought he had handle the gun before. And they would be wrong. Though the gun was growing on him. His training had given him a basic understanding of the weapon.

The Glock was new to him. Examining the magazine, it was loaded. He would Google more about gun when he got back to his seat. Quick thinking said there might be a bullet in the chamber. Sliding the magazine back into the handle, gave the base a strove with his palm. Clicking back into position. One hand gripping the handle, the other slowly pulled the top backwards to reveal nothing in the chamber.

"That's a good sign." Relieved it could go off accidentally.

Satisfied with the gun. Places it on the metal bench and checks the cash in the bag. Opening the bag further discovers several rolls bank notes. Euros and Pounds.

'Arthur was not joking about several round trips.' He knew who was buying the beers on this journey.

Placing the gun back in the bag and pulled the chord tight. His heart racing. Thinking he should be at home about 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 on the basis of a letter from Arthur's father.

Thoughts of having to go through checkpoints in France and Belgium. The last thing he wanted to be caught with a gun and load of money. Then be incarcerated in a French jail.

He had an idea.

Looking about the restroom he spies a ceiling panel.

Taking out a roll of Euros from the bag, pockets it. Secures the bag again and climbs onto the bench. Pushing the ceiling panel upwards to reveal a small dark ceiling cavity. Large enough to conceal the duffle bag. Hoping it would go undetected until it was time to disembark the train. Carefully he shoves the bag into a darkened corner.

Closing the ceiling panel to its original position, he climbed down. Feeling pleased with his cunning plan and relieved to have unburdened themselves of the incriminating bag. Splashing cold water on his face. And stares at his 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 sparked between neurons.

Thoroughly wiping down the bench, satisfied it was as it was before he had entered. And re-gathered his composure.

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

“Sorry.” Phil apologized.

Eyes met. Locked momentarily. Then disengaged. Brief smiles exchanged.

“That’s alright young man...” Replied the old man.

Phil looked back to the closed restroom door. Suspicious of the sudden encounter. Hoping he had done enough to cover his tracks. And made his way back to his seat only to find Arthur had disappeared. Looking up and down the aisle. To see no sign of him.

‘He must be still on the train. He couldn’t have gotten off.’ He reasoned.

Taking his seat again. All he could do was wait. This was probably a good time to check out the Glock on the net. A listing appeared and he clicks on the Wiki-link...

... ‘Made from an advanced synthetic polymer... Blah-blah-blah... 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... Blah-blah-blah... The number of rounds varied with each model... Blah-blah-blah... Effective firing range fifty meters... Good to know... Five million built... Not good to know... Blah-blah-blah... Preferred weapon of choice among the US military and FBI... Blah-blah-blah... Polymer construction meant that it could circumvent metal detectors...’* Reading the specifications aloud in his mind.

“What you up to? ... Surfing dating sites again?” Asked Arthur surprising Phil mid thoughts.

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 was missing.

“Where’s the bag?” He asked anxiously.

“Don’t worry... 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.

“Good thinking... Let’s hope no one looks up there... I was a little worried myself how we would get through the border checks.”

“What’d you find out?” Arthur asked curiously.

Phil gave 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 it... Bottom line ... Keep your bloody finger away from the trigger unless you intend to use it okay?”

“Think I’ll let you hold the thing from now on.” Offered Arthur.

“Good idea...” Then thought about the cash, “...That’s a lot of cash Arthur. You sure your old man doesn’t rob banks?” He asked.

“Yeah... I had the same thoughts. 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?”

“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 a watchful distance.

The Cardinal was an expert of surveillance. Astute as to others on the train that may 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. They did not belong on the train. Yet there they were. The more he watched them, the more he assessed the men was following the son. As he was. Speculating their origin, 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 their presence at a suitable time. He loathed completion.

The Cardinal would not be sharing the bounty...



Border Control

Arthur recalled the procedure they would go through at the border control.

Having only been there a couple of times while on student weekends away. So long as they looked like two weary backpackers. Which they were. They would pass without suspicions. The trick was to stay calm, and not to attract attention to themselves. That was easy for him. His whole life he had been invisible to people.

The same could not be said of Phil.

Any attempt to change his behavior would immediately draw the attention. If Phil louted about, then hopefully he would be dismissed as just another adolescent delinquent. Albeit at the age of twenty-nine. He 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 halt.

Hissing a release of modern steam over the tracks. Passengers stood from their seats and gathered their bags. And formed an orderly queue in the aisle to disembark. Following each other like sheep towards the processing pens. Bags would be X-rayed, bodies scanned for offensive items.

One suspicious individual stood out more than those about him. As though he were a fanatical extremist, pulled aside by security 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 known the old man from the rest room incident. His mind pre-occupied with the duffle bag hidden in the restroom ceiling. Looking as they should, two English backpackers. Benign.

One by one the passengers were be processed and re-boarded the Eurostar. Carriage doors closed again, sealing them within the metal cocoon. Then smoothly accelerated north-east towards Brussels. Resuming their seats, they talked about what would happen when they arrived.

Both had differing priorities.

Though Phil was keen for a beer, 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...”, then qualified, “...So there’ll be no time for sightseeing, pub crawls... Or chasing skirt for that matter!”

“Oh_ mate... Where’s the fun in that?” Said Phil despondently.

“There isn’t any... We here to find my father...Not find you a girlfriend.” He added.

“We’ll see.” Trying to have the final word.

Staring out the window and contemplated the unknown they were travelling towards.

Their reflections staring back at them, also contemplating the unknown. On the other side of the aisle sitting unseen, Michael stared out his window.

He had no reflection staring back at him.

The duffle bag would remain its hiding place until they disembarked. Until they reached the Professor, Arthur's main task was to keep an eye on Phil. How hard could that be?

A carriage back, the Cardinal had been keeping an eye on the two nomadic men that were watching the son and his friend. Francis had 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.

Unaware of the men the Cardinal had detected, Francis had been sent on the arduous assignment to retrieve sandwiches. Cassini could surmised that the men were 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 pair until they got to Brussels and would see if they re-boarded.

No doubt belonging to criminal underworld organizations. The Cardinal was from an organization above ground. And very much larger. Involved in other assignments that required his unique skill. This would be no different. But it would be a first for the Father. Care must be taken to protect his fledgling underling.

"Indeed." Thought Michael overhearing the Cardinal's concern for Francis.

Cassini was already a few steps ahead of Arthur and Phil.

And knew about the concealed duffle bag. The gun and the money. It was his job to know these things. Having seen Phil go in with a duffle bag and leave without it. 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 Cassini's astute observation detected anomalies, and deduced their cause. Looking to the ceiling panel to unraveled the puzzle. He would leave the duffle bag where it was hidden. Not wanting to arouse panic in his quarry. His task to tail them to the father and to the Ring.

Armed with his own weapon, was well versed in self-defense. And could handle the henchmen in his own time. In his own unique way.

God had dealt him a good hand. And with any hand, you never let your opponent know what you're holding. Cassini resumed his poker face and sat quietly reading the morning paper. In just over an hour they would arrive in Brussels.

Cassini watched the henchmen. Whom with Francis, watched Arthur and Phil. Who were in turn, admiring the French autumn country side passing them by.

Unaware of the eyes watching them.

Phil confirms the timetable from Brussels to Vienna on the laptop.

"There's one that leaves at 1:00PM... That's the first available... There is another an hour later." Phil added. Hoping he could stall him into staying for a 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?" Warned Arthur.

"There might be a bar at the station." He suggested.

"Okay... But we're staying in the station."

"Okay." Phil conceded.

"Once we clear the border control, go get the bag okay?"

"Okay." Relieved to have scored a beer.

No sooner had the Eurostar left the British-French border, it 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 until the next check-point.

Arthur and Phil went with the flock and were soon returned to their pen. The Eurostar accelerated slowly and resumed its high speed journey north to Brussels.

The two young men stared out the window.

Oblivious to the innumerable souls staring back at them. Oblivious to the country steeped in history. Steeped in blood shed. Of a country once named Gaul. Once occupied by Celts. Roman legions marched through and took control of the country in the first century. Only to be displaced by Franks, Germanic tribes in the fifth century. By the ninth century, Charlemagne crowned himself King and began seeding a lineage that reined a thousand years. A French Revolution would lead to The Massacre of Swiss Guards. And a young Napoleon would dismantle Charlemagne New Holy Roman Empire. That was neither holy. Nor an empire. Germanic tribes would return two more times. More mechanized than the first. 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 called from around the world looking for adventure. Only to find an early death.

“Beautiful isn’t it.” Said Arthur.

“Lovely.” Replied Phil. Enchanted by the sea of blood red flowers.

“*Tragic.*” Said Michael remembering the loss of countless lives and souls he had gathered.

Looking about the cabin and blindly seeing nothing untoward, Phil ventured to the restroom.

From his cloaked seating position the Cardinal observed Phil entering 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. Too busy watching the son to be distracted by his friend.

‘Amateurs.’ Cassini thought.

“Got it... Everything’s there.” Phil advised, passing it to Arthur.

“Well done Phil... I guess I owe you a beer for that.” As though to reward him.

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. I’m not marching all over Brussels to find you a damn beer okay?” Warned Arthur.

“We’ll see.” Responded Phil getting in the last word...



Belgium Beers

Rolling through the Belgium country side was not much different that of France.

Fields covered in blood red poppies. Fields that morphed into villages, then towns, then 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. As with France, the Romans Legions had come and gone.

Beginning as a mere chapel being built on a small island in the middle of the River Semen it 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 it speed into the Brussels-South Station, and came to a seamless stop.

Hissing a relief after the short sprint from the border. As the station name suggested it laid south. The bilingual city center spoke both French and Dutch. As did the sign posts.

Arthur were on foreign ground. Neither of them could speak Dutch, and their French was limited to a few elementary words.

They had an hour before their train departed. With no time to lose, Phil pulled his backpack from the overhead locker as Arthur threw the duffle bag casually over his shoulder. Feeling the weight of the gun and money inside. And disembarked into the tide of people on the platform.

From a brochure map of the station Arthur had a rough idea where to find the nearest bar and he headed in the general direction. Phil had already studied the map beforehand and was several of steps ahead of him. Any suspicions of being followed were lost in the mass of people coming at them. Creating an information overload. Faces became meaningless, nonthreatening strangers.

That all looked the same.

Two thugs followed the two young men discreetly behind. Both unaware of each other. And unaware of the Vatican's men following them.

Cassini 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.

The Cardinal's assignment was to observe and not lose track of the package.

'Follow the son. Find the father. Find the ring.' Cassini thought to himself.

"Barabbas... Son of the father." He muttered to himself upon reflection.

"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.

"Yes Cardinal... On the train." Repeating his instructions.

"We'll keep back... You watch those two..." Indicating the son and his friend, "...I'll watch the other two." Instructed Cassini.

“What other two?” Thinking he had missed something, looking about.

“The two gentlemen ahead of us... One in the fawn trench coat and tweed hat... The other with the beige jacket...” Directing Francis’ attention to the men. “...We’ve got competition if my suspicions are correct.”

“We can afford to lose the son... We know their next move. But these gentlemen may require a personal introduction... Let’s give them the benefit of the doubt for now... Shall we?” Formulating a plan.

Francis observed the two men and gathered the impression that the men were indeed following the son. Cassini 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’

His eyes lit up with the discovery.

A heavy plum colored velvet curtain concealed the entrance. Providing insulation from the autumn chill. Pushing this to one side he enters the bar. Crowded, worked his way to the bar. Colorful badges adorned each beer handle. Crafted by monasteries and handed down through the ages.

Phil guessed the monks had nothing better to do than make home-brew.

‘Perhaps I missed my calling.’ He thought.

Then wondered if he could really shave his head. Or take a vow of celibacy and abstinence.

‘Perhaps not on second thoughts.’ He thought again.

While Phil perused the tap selection Arthur had found a table and allow him to do what he did best. Buy the beers. Having had narrowed his choice down to Leffe Brune for Arthur. And a Blonde. He always preferred blondes.

Carrying two large bulbous glasses over to Arthur’s table.

“Here you go mate.” He exclaimed placing two very frothy beers on the table.

“Cheers mate.”

Arthur raises the glass towards Phil.

“Here’s to a great adventure mate... Thanks for coming.” Toasted Arthur.

“No worries mate. You know I wouldn’t let you go by yourself.” Phil reminded him.

“I’m glad I told you about the letter.” Conceding it was now a good idea, taking a savory mouthful of beer.

The beer tasted sweeter with each successive sips.

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 nonetheless looked about the bar 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. The answers to his father's brief letter waited for him in Budapest. With Professor Almesh. They had an hour to unwind and enjoy a couple beers before they had to get back to the train.

Sitting on a tall stool, a short squat man in a fawn trench coat sipped on a weak beer.

Reading the Guardian newspaper he had brought from London. Sitting not too far away from him was another gentleman, a glass of red wine at hand. Eyes were fixed on the son. Cassini stood at the bar with his back to the two gentlemen. Sipping on short glass of Whisky neat. While Francis sipped on a pale beer. The mirror on the wall in front of them would provide ample observation for now. Chatter and music filled the bar. Dousing nearby conversations.

Feeling lightheaded after their second beer.

Arthur decided it was time to head back to the train. As did several other passengers that were taking the same train. As Phil was turning to leave, noticed a man at the bar looking at him in the mirror's reflection. Their eyes made brief contact. Not for the first time he recalled vaguely and a fleeting tinge of Deja-vu came over him.

His recollections dampened by the beer, his mind stained by the alcohol, busy trying to place the face. Where had he seen him before? Dismissing the connection, followed Arthur out the doors.

Cassini did not entirely dismiss the connection. It had been brief, but held. What mattered was that he was following them. And not the other way around. The short squat man in the fawn trench coat soon followed the young men some distance behind. A moment later the beige jacket man joined the line of people making their way back to the train.

Cassini finished his drink.

There was no rush. He knew where to find the son. And would keep the other two men under observation until an opportune time to assist them off the train.

Finding their seats again, stowed their packs in the overhead lockers.

And made themselves comfortable for the eleven hour eleven hundred kilometer journey to Vienna. Briefly stopping at Frankfurt, Nuremburg and Munich to pick up additional passengers. Arriving just before midnight.

Budapest would be the end of the line.

'No more trains... Never again. Flying is the only way.' Thought Arthur.

That was the plan.

But plans have a habit of changing...



Alistair McGee

To say Istanbul is a massive is an understatement.

Resident to fourteen million religiously tolerant souls. It constituted the largest city in Europe. In a transcontinental country that had one foot in the Balkan and a much larger foot in East Asia. Separated by a straight stitched together by bridges. Bordering eight countries and three seas. Its claws dipped into the Black, Aegean and Mediterranean Seas.

Turkey had seen the rise and fall of mighty empires. Alexander the Great. Romans. Byzantines. Ottomans.

All came and went.

All falling to the next mighty empire and the sands of time. And with great power came great abuse. Massacres and genocides. The beginning of the Silk Road began here and stretched as far East as Korea and Japan. Crusaders trudged through the country on their way to Jerusalem. Ottomans chose the wrong side during the Great War and paid the price with dissolution.

Their empire no more...

While Arthur and Phil enjoyed ginger cake and tea with his Aunt earlier that morning.

Arthur's father had arranged to meet a colleague of a colleague at an obscure cafe opposite a not so obscure market place.

The Grand Bazaar.

With over four thousand stores. On sixty one covered streets. Walls punctuated with twenty two ancient gateways. Catering to over the two hundred and fifty thousand daily visitors. Trading wares from every corner of the world.

As it had done so for the past five centuries. Seven days a week. Twenty four hours a day.

Alistair could hear the perpetual drone of the market. As if it were a hive of bees making money.

High rise buildings supplanted tents. Electricity, and automobiles supplanted camels. 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.

Looking at the Bazaar today. 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.

Alistair casually reclined in a rattan chair.

One would have taken him for a local enjoying a Nargile smoke. Taking shallow puffs on the pipe. Not looking out of place with the surroundings. His placid appearance, brought on by the fragrant smoke. And attuned to the pulse of the marketplace, he blended in as if he was one of them. For which he was not.

11:50AM.

Two small coffee cups sat waiting on the small table waiting to be consumed. Waiting on a visitor. A colleague of Professor Almesh. Though they had never met before, he would recognize him when, and if he arrived.

They were to meet before the day became unbearable with the harsh afternoon sun. Turquoise shell sunglasses resting on the bridge of his nose. Beads of sweat were forming under his fedora hat could not disguise his English intolerance to the East Asian heat.

Taking another puff, 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. Not wishing to be identified.

Reaching to a jacket pocket feels the reassuring cool steel of a snub nose thirty-eight special. Very effective at a short distance. And very, very loud. Guaranteed to disperse a crowd. Or anyone standing in front it. It had served him well persuading people to part with treasured relics. Glancing over the newspaper spies 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 his thoughts.

Assessing the man's clothing. He was dressed too neat. Too sharp to be a local. Someone on an affordable *salary*. Few people around here could afford his clothes. Without a camera he was not a tourist. Lowering eyes, pretended to look elsewhere. Then glanced back again. The man was still on the mobile talking to someone.

Their eyes met again and momentarily locked. Then disengaged.

Now he 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. Others would be waiting in the shadows. Watching. Reporting back to their masters.

'Word must have gotten out about the Ring', He thought. "Hmm."

Dismissing his predicament, he had been in tighter spots than this.

This was Istanbul. Sometimes the law did not apply. The police were as much of a problem, as a solution. Assessing the situation and how it could play out. They would not move on him until they knew he had the Ring. Obviously they did not know about the colleague. Or they would not be watching him.

At that moment he thought of Arthur. Hoping he was on his way to Budapest. Unsure how he would have explained it to his Aunt. Checking his watch saw there was still another five minutes before the colleague was expected to arrive.

Assuming he could find the café. There were hundreds of cafes. One on every corner. And all looking the same.

The man on the other side of the street reached inside his jacket. Thinking was reaching for a gun. Only to pull out a pack of cigarettes. Lighting one, continued to talk on the mobile. A series of small nods suggested he was getting instructions. The call ended, and pocketed the phone. Taking a long draw on the 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 pocket to touch the reassuring metal of gun again.

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 his business. Improvisation and adaption were the keys to survival. Experience had taught him to be patient. Fear and hasty decisions would undo the best of plans.

'Stay relaxed. Stay calm. And carry on.' He told to himself.

12:10AM And a grubby yellow taxi pulled up outside the café.

Looking fazed and lost, an elderly gentleman appears from the cab. Paying the driver several Lira above the fare before it drove off along the dusty street.

A straw hat covered the gentleman's balding head of thinning grey hair. Wearing a lightly soiled cotton suit. Stained with dust attracted to it. And looking more like a lost professor, than a tourist. A camera suspended around his neck, as instructed by Alistair earlier that morning. Adding little to the impromptu disguise.

The Professor looked about the café and confirmed the tattered sign as the place.

Peering through the haze of smoke the Professor made eye contact with Alistair. He was about to raise his hand to acknowledge his arrival. When Alistair shook his head discreetly in time for the professor to withdraw the gesture. And made his way around the wicker chairs of hallucinated smokers.

"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 fingers fidgeted beneath 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 if he hadn't." He 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 nods of approval. As though in discussion with a old friend. Their business had been concluded the moment they had shaken hands. The exchange had been seamless and undetected by the prying eyes.

A magician would have been proud of them. Having secured the ring on a 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 guardian of the Keys to Heaven. The first Bishop of Rome, Saint Peter. The relic was now residing on Alistair's wedding finger. This was not the time or place to examine it. His assignment was simple.

Collect the ring and deliver it.

'Stick to the plan', He minded himself.

"Would you like a coffee while you're here?" He asked pushing one of the two small cups towards the Professor.

"Thank you." Taking a sip from the now cold coffee, refreshing in the heat of the midday sun.

After 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. Waving down a passing taxi that was circling. Ushered the Professor into the back. Directing the driver to take the passenger back to his Hotel. Handing him enough money for a round trip. Instructing him not to stop for *no one*.

The driver nodded as if to appease Alistair. This was Turkey, life was cheap. And money talked. The taxi slipped into the traffic orbiting the Bazaar. To be consumed by the other traffic around it.

Alistair returned to his seat to finish his coffee and ponder his next move. Thoughts shifted to Arthur again. Perhaps he would call the Professor Almesh later to check on him. Lifting the newspaper, scanned its horizon and 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 the pipe one last time. Exhaled a large plume of smoke into air. The predicament did not faze him. He had a friend in his pocket. And his friend was very noisy when it needed to be.

Standing casually, leaves a moderate tip for the attractive Turkish waitress. And walked to the curb as if nothing was untoward. Waiting for a gap in the traffic, made his way through the slow moving derelict vehicles. And walked towards the two men.

A hand resting in his pocket.

Confused, they stood stunned unsure what to make of it. Was he about to attack them? At the last moment he turned and headed into a gate of the Bazaar. He knew the Market well enough from previous visits. The warren of streets within provided cover 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. Money talked in the Bazaar. Defying rules of modern finance. It answered to no one but itself. Disagreements would be settled within its walls.

Alistair had one that needed settling.

Colorful mosaics decorated high arched ceilings. Walls dripped with merchandise of every kind imaginable. Boulevards smelt of the aromatic herbs. Pungent spices and the seasoned dishes. Corpuscles circulated in all directions. Before being spat onto the sun drenched dusty streets. Leached of their Lira. Laden with their replica Aladdin lanterns and Persian tapestries.

Losing the men would be difficult.

Gauging his bearings, quickened the pace and made his way deeper into the Bazaar hoping the men would follow him.

The hunters were about to become the hunted...



Cracking Eggs

“It’s time to crack some eggs”, Alistair told himself.

And set about to divide and conquer. Stopping at one of a carpet store, casually examined a rug. Discreetly eyeing the two men that lingered some distance behind. Their garb making it difficult for them to blend in.

Appearing in no rush to jump him in the crowded street. He continued on his way. Walking past stalls, then abruptly turned into a narrow alley. Dark and dusty, the air marked with the stench of urine. Half way down, there was a doorway set into the wall and he quickly stood in it. Hoping the men had not seen. Closing eyes to become accustomed to the dark. The pungent air made it difficult to think as he anticipated their next move.

And waited.

Hoping the men would spilt up. One go around the other side to cut him off and that one would come down the alley. Reluctant to use the thirty-eight. It would be too loud in the confine space and attract attention. If both men ventured down the alley way, then he would be in trouble. Then he would *have* call upon his friend in his pocket to assist.

He waited.

Taking shallow breaths. Feels his heart thumping in his chest. Making out soft footsteps approaching. One man he thought. No voices. A good sign, but no guarantee. Pressing himself deeper into the shadowy corner. A darkness appeared on the ground approaching the doorway. The man hesitated before the door way as Alistair had anticipated and raised the barrel of his gun.

Without thinking Alistair rushes the at hand holding the gun. A shot goes off. The bullet plugs into the dirt floor. The percussion was lost in the drone of the bazaar. Twisting the man’s hand upwards and to the side. Breaks the man’s hold of the gun and it falls to the ground. Striking the man with an elbow, connects with his jaw. Briefing disorienting him. The man lashes out with a wild series of punches catching Alistair’s ribs. Temporarily winding him and recoiling him backwards.

Rushing forward, Alistair sends his knee into the man loins and buckling him over. Delivers a heavy blow to the back of the neck. A distinct crack was heard. And the man falls unconscious to the ground. Unsure if the man was dead or alive, dragged his body into the doorway. With no time to stand about, he had to get out of there before the other man arrived.

Pocketing the gun continued down the alley and went in search of his prey. Leaving his friend sleeping in the doorway behind him. If anyone had seen the incident they were not sticking around to file any paperwork. There was an unwritten law, what happens in the Bazaar stayed in the Bazaar.

As it had for centuries. As it would for centuries to come.

Wanting 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 attention. Unwilling to lure him down the same alley as his sleeping friend. There were other sordid alleys that would serve the purpose. Taking a deep breath turns his back on the man knowing he would follow without concern for his fallen comrade.

People strolled aimlessly between stalls. Hagglng prices. Pushing his way through the crowd. The first man had been relatively easy to dispense with. 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 it was a dead end. Of all the alleyways, he had chosen this one. He was trapped.

“Shit.” He cursed himself.

Trailing some distance behind. Alistair could see the man’s silhouette in the light of the street behind him. The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a stick. Flicking it expertly 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. Hastily removing his jacket. Wrapped it around his 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 a brutal 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. The blade caught the coat an arm. Cutting it a wound that bleed through his coat.

Flitching as the blade etched its mark.

Enraged, the bull had tasted blood and came quickly at Alistair again.

Raising his arm as a shield. Knowing he would take the damning wound. Grimaced with pain as the knife imbedded itself in his forearm. Momentarily disorienting the agitated bull and allowing Alistair to throw a massive fist into the bull’s nose. Breaking it with a cracking sound. Causing it to bleed worse than him arm. Off balance, the man stuttered backwards wrenching the blade free from the impaled arm.

Spitting blood the raging bull came at him again.

Sweeping wild blows with a sharp metal horn hoping to make contact. Alistair’s defensive left arm went up again and pain resonated as his fist swung in full fury. Connecting with the man’s jaw and sending it sideways. Stumbling backwards, the man to falls backwards onto an exposed metal spike protrusion from the wall. Penetrating his back, it exists his chest.

Gasping for breath. Looking down at the protruding fatal bloody wound. Then looked up bewildered by the brilliant white light and to Alistair. As if someone was standing beside him. Arms fall flaccid to his side. The metal horn still frozen in the man’s grip.

Only he and Michael saw the divine light. Eyes rolled upwards.

Darkness again filled the earthly realm and the pungent bitter sweet smell of urine returned Alistair’s nostrils. His heart beating fast. An arm throbbing with pain. The cold sensation of blood trickled down over his hand and fingers.

Looking to the street for curious observers. None. Just passersby. Anyone who did look would only have seen a darkened alley.

With no time to lose. Others would be in pursuit. And he was not about to stick around to find out. Leaving the solder where he had fallen. 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.

And he knew a doctor that would not ask too many questions for the right money. Wrapping a handkerchief as a dressing around the bloody wound. Draped his jacket over his arm. Bloody side down. Composed himself and strolled onto the street as if he had just relieved himself. Which in some way he just had.

And fused with those exiting the Bazaar.

Waving down the first taxi he saw, fell low into the back seat.

Sweat building under his fedora. Ordering the driver to take him to Taksim without stopping for anyone. A rabbit warren of dusty uneven alleys some five kilometers to the south. Rife with unemployed, crime and prostitution. It would be the last place anyone would look.

Or would wish to visit.

Looking about for anyone was following. If there were, he could not see them. The 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. He examined the ring around his finger.

Now baptized with his blood...



Frankfurt

Some hours after Alistair had fallen into the back seat of the taxi.

The Eurostar left Brussels. Travelling towards its next stop, Frankfurt. The two young men had fallen under the influence of the beers and began to snooze. If Arthur had thought he had been dealt a rough hand, he need only look out the window to the historic Deutschland rolling past his window to feel better about himself...

Humans first arrived there half a million years before the Eurostar.

Followed by the soon to be extinct Neanderthals. Unable to tame the people east of the Rhine, Julius Caesar would call the land and its barbarian people *Germania*. With the fall of the Roman Empire, the Germanic tribes amalgamated to form the foundation of what became 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.

What man could not kill, the Black Plague would provide assistance.

Erupting like a rash of rash of small pox, over eighteen-hundred principalities, palaces and summer houses speckled the Empire. Before Napoleon systematically dismantled it. The Archduke of Austria would be shot by a Yugoslav Nationalist. Resulting 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 rolled 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. And 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 watch 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, ranked third in the world for beer consumption per-capita, it was not hard for Phil to find a bar. Spotting the first tavern, he left Arthur in his wake. Slipping through open doors, headed straight to the bar. And is greeted by a beautiful buxom blonde behind the counter.

Distracted momentarily by the Fräulein's buxom bosoms erupting from her low cut top. 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." He winked at the bar maid smiling 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... 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.

"Good call... Have to concede that one Arty." Pleading guilty to the charge.

"And two... This is not Pub crawl... Okay?"

"We'll see about that..." Said 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.

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 man. Every now and again glancing up to ensure the son was in sight.

Francis had remained on the train and read his paperback. Every now and again glancing up to observe the short squat man reading the 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.

On entering the restroom Phil took a position at the urinals. Giggling 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 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, and did what he did best. Throwing 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 him 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!" Warned Phil quickly realizing how close he had come to being shot.

Standing to his feet the man stood over him. But Phil had toppled taller trees.

"Bring it on." Phil encouraged eagerly, keen for a fight.

Stepping forward the man swung wildly at him. 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 cut connects with the man's jaw sending him backwards into urinals. After slamming the man's head against the porcelain, drags 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 entering the restroom, drops the man to the floor. 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 closes the cubicle door and returned to the hand basin. Splashing water again over his face. Looking up to see the old man still at the urinal. He heads back to inform Arthur of the encounter.

Cassini notices the gun laying against the far wall. Pocketing it, 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. Cassini knelt beside the man and removed his biretta and secured a silencer. Tapping barrel against the man's forehead as he spoke.

"Who... Do... You... Work... For?" Cassini asked politely with a fake grin.

But the man remained silent. Panting. Struggling for breath after the 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 defiantly silent.

"I commend your loyalty... Perhaps this will help you remember."

'Thud!' Firing a muffled shot into the thigh.

The man screamed loudly.

"Shh! ..." Soothed Cassini tapping the heated barrel on his forehead, "...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. 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 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.

'Must be a codename', the man thought. Confused by the name.

"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 Cassini's order and hoped his master would be as lenient. Flinching in pain and Cassini presses 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?" He instructed calmly.

The man nodded repeatedly hoping *The Cardinal* would leave to return to the bar to see Arthur's friend explaining the ordeal.

“You for real Phil? ... So where’s the gun?” Asked Arthur doubting the close encounter.

“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.

Only to see placid intoxicated faces drinking beer and chatting. And 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.” Suggested Phil.

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 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.

“We’re in this together mate... We have to be more vigilant okay?”

“Okay... So what about the man in the restroom?” Asked Arthur worried.

“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!” Looking the restrooms.

“Let’s get out of here.” Grabbing the duffle bag.

Happy to feel the weight of the gun it contained.

Cassini followed some moments later. Allowing other passengers to buffer 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?” Cassini 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.” Contemplating the consequences.

Knowing the extent to which Braun 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 again.

Passing the duffle bag to Phil who seemed to need it more than he did. Self-defense came natural to him. Undaunted by the altercation. Arthur had come to accept he was more of a lover than a fighter. Until now, he 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 trying to put a positive spin on it.

“Mate... These guys don’t come alone. There’ll be others... 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 the comment.

“Guardian Angel? ... Ooh_ I like the sound of that.” Michael declared to himself, engulfing the carriage with a brilliant white light.

“You see that?” Asked Phil peering about the carriage searching for the source.

“Probably lightning.” Suggested Arthur about to read his paperback.

“Lightning?” Responded Phil looking up at the cloudless sky...



Nuremburg

From an Imperial Castle a thousand years ago, grew the unofficial capital of the Holy Roman Empire.

Nuremberg.

Compering huge Nazi conventions that would milk the wanton despair of the German people. Having partitioned Europe among themselves, the victors handed Germany the bill. If the great depression had not crushed the country's economy enough. Reparation payments would be the final straw. By rhetoric propaganda, 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.

And another bill.

As the Legislative Body of the Holy Roman Empire.

It seemed only fitting that Nuremberg over saw the heinous war crimes of the tyrants and their lap dogs. Tyrants whose ideology amounted to little more than the self-actualization of their own insanity. Many 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. Watching over the trials and subsequent hangings. Gathering the lost sheep that had wandered too far from the Good Shepard.

The city's wounds had healed.

Life had return to the streets.

Death had receded to the grave.

Courts now cafes. Gallows now jungle gyms where children play, suspending themselves upside down. Seeing the world through inverted eyes. Innocent to Nuremberg's dark past.

The Eurostar rolled quietly unnoticed into the station.

A bygone dust settled upon the train as it came to a halt. Brakes sighed the release of pressure. Relieved 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." Aware of the gun with no safety catch.

"Oh sorry mate. I forgot... Just need powder my nose... Stay here okay."

"No worries mate... I'm not going anywhere." Gazing out the window watching the passengers moving about.

Foreign faces, going about foreign lives.

Going in foreign directions. Then contemplated his own direction. Budapest. Cassini watched from behind. Francis had nodded off and was enjoying a dream of an adventure across America. Lowering eyes and read the 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.

Aware of the Cardinal's identity, the man had intentionally stayed out of sight. Having had encounters with him in the past. The Cardinal focused his attention on man ahead of him.

Discreetly, Braun pulls a gun from brief case. Concealing the gun under the overcoat on his arm. Stands and stretches his legs. Timing would ensure the Cardinal would remain on the train. Looking like a sharp businessman, a lowered hat hid his face. And headed to the restroom and waited for the son to exit. The door opens and Arthur is confronted by a businessman standing in his way.

"Sorry... Excuse me." Hoping the man would allow him to pass in the narrow passage.

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. Arthur panicked at the thought that he had been cornered.

"Keep quiet and you live... This way."

Pointing the barrel in the direction of the exit.

Cautiously looking back towards Phil, feeling the gun pressing his back encouraging to walk the other way. Stepping onto the platform the chill of the German wind slapped his face.

'Wake up Arthur'.

This was no dream. Michael watched from a distance. Unmoved.

"Walk! ... This way." Nudging him to the nearest station exit where a car would be waiting.

Whistles siren the imminent departure.

Relieved to be moving again. Cabin doors closed gracefully sealing the passengers within. Phil glances out the window and for a moment thought he saw Arthur. Then looking to the seat opposite realizes he had not returned. Frantically scanning the crowded platform again. 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. Cassini looked up, unsure what had excited the son's friend.

Then quickly came to the same conclusion. The son must be off the train.

The Eurostar moved slowly from the station. Phil reached the sealed door. Searching for a handle. Nothing. Seeing a large red emergency exit button. Without thinking presses it and a loud warning sounded and slowly the door slide open. The train was gathering speed. He had no time to contemplate the consequences. Stay and leave Arthur behind. Jump and possibly kill himself.

He jumped.

Tumbling onto the platform before crashing into a rubbish bin. Sending its contents flying. Passengers cried out in surprise seeing Phil tumbled over and over again. Watching from his seat, incapable of following. The Cardinal is trapped within the accelerating speeding train. Francis awakens to the sudden alarm and looks about as to the cause of the commotion. Cassini explains to him what had just occurred assuring him that all was not lost. A minor setback perhaps. Nothing he could not handle. Contemplating 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. 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.” Responded Francis.

Bystanders had gathered around Phil curious to his condition.

The duffle bag still secure in his arms. 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 his back. Desperately Phil pushes his way past people and ran as fast as he could to catch up. Only to catch sight of him being pushed into the back of large black Limonene. Finding the nearest taxi pushes 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. Opening the duffle bag and pulled out a fold of Euros. Peeling off notes, hands them to the driver. Money was an international language and the taxi drove off to catch up.

“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.

Then to the man sitting opposite who had abducted him. A cold chiseled face stared back at him. The dark business suit gave him no confidence as to the man’s respect for human life. The gun and overcoat resting on his lap.

“What’s this all about? I know nothing.” Pleaded Arthur innocently.

Braun remained silent. They would talk when he was ready and not beforehand. The limonene drove south. Weaving through the ancient narrow cobble stone streets. Arriving sometime later alongside a row of terraced stately manors. A wealthy neighbor. Exotic cars lined the quiet street.

The limonene stopped in front of one the manors.

On exiting the limonene, enters the home. Nudged by the gun in his back to step inside the brightly lit entrance. Priceless paintings hung from the walls. A grand crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. A rich Persian rug layered the length of a wooden hallway.

Moments later the taxi idled up down the street. In time to observe Arthur going into a house.

“Drive pass the house.” Phil instructs 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 in the rear vision mirror.

“Money’s not an issue mate.” Tapping the duffle bag.

“Then I wait.” Said the driver.

The taxi drove casually pass the manor. Phil scrutinized it features. Hoping to see life behind the lace draped windows. Nothing. The lights were on but it seemed like no one was home. Only Arthur and the man.

‘Less to deal with.’ Phil thought to himself.

“These places have a back to them?” He asked the Driver.

“Of course... Kitchen delivery... Rubbish disposal.”

“Good.” Responded Phil.

He had two plans. Plan A, go silently through the back entrance. Or plan B, knock on the front door, with the gun. There was no plan C.

“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 began he could always drive off and leave the passenger behind.

Taking the duffle bag with him, Phil climbed from the taxi. And casually made his way around the corner to investigate the back entrance.

Nudging the barrel into Arthur’s back, Braun directs him towards the den.

“Sit there.” He commands.

A log fire blazed to one side. Filling the room with a warmth that did not match Arthur’s comfort. Falling into a large leather chair. Its armrests coming almost up to his shoulders. Feeling himself restrained by the armrests walling him in. And wondered what formidable giants sat in such chairs.

“What do you want?” Arthur pleaded again, and is met with silence.

Looking about the enormous den. Its dark wood features as dark as the man glaring at him. Glass cabinets lined the walls with odd shaped items. More archaeological than art thought Arthur struggling to identify the objects.

“You are Arthur... Arthur McGee” Braun began to ask.

“Yes...” He replied hesitantly as if being cross examined.

“Your father is Alistair McGee?” Braun continues.

“That’s right... Do you know where he his?” Confused how the man before him knew his father.

“I was hoping you would tell me.” Braun asked, now wondering how much the young man knew.

Perhaps he had been premature in apprehending him.

“Where’s your father Arthur?” Braun asks more directly.

“I don’t know... How do you know my father? Where is he?” Arthur asked hoping someone would throw light on the mystery.

“Your father and I are close... *Acquaintances*, shall we say... We have had a number of business *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?” Gathering the son knew very little about his father’s secret life.

“Know *what* Sir?” Inquired Arthur respectfully.

Braun did not answer.

“Where are you heading Arthur?” He enquired, curious as to why he 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 the man opposite 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 wondered what he would be thinking at this moment...



The Great Escape

The only thing Phil was thinking at that moment was how to get inside.

Cautiously making his way down the narrow alleyway behind the stately terraced manors. Hoping the residents would not call the police to have him hauled away. Arriving at the back entrance of the manor Arthur was held. Peering over the fence, sees a hive of activity in the kitchen with servants preparing meals.

“Bugger.” He curses, plan A was off the menu.

It would have to be a frontal assault and cautiously retraced steps back to avoid detection by prying neighbors.

“You okay?” Phil asks the driver.

“Yeah... But funny thing though...” The driver began.

“What’s that?” Asked Phil curiously.

“Don’t look now... I saw a car park up down the street... The small grey car.”

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 being watched.

‘Who was he?’ Thought Phil.

“He’s been sitting there watching that house your friend went into.” Unsure of the situation developing by the moment. Wondering what he had gotten himself into.

“If you want to take off, I understand... But if you stick around, I can make it worth your while... And get ready to leave at any moment... Okay?”

“Okay.” Accepted the driver looking in the rear vision mirror.

“The back way is crowded... I’m going to have to use the front entrance... See you soon.” Said Phil heading to door of the manor.

“Good luck.” Calls out the driver sinking down in the seat.

“Budapest you say?” Questions Braun with eager ears listening.

His mind wondered what was there that would cause the son to head there. Word had surfaced on the grapevine that his father was in Istanbul. Could he have made his way already to Budapest to rendezvous with his son?

Braun stared at him 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 the ring to others in the chain.

Faced with an expected quandary, 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 goes to answer it. Opening the door to discover Phil on the doorstep. 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 him 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 ragged appearance and begins to close the door.

“Funny thing is I looked there... It was a bit busy for my liking... So I thought would try the front door.” Joked Phil, on being told to bugger off.

“Then we really cannot help you.” Responds Augustus and closes the door abruptly in Phil’s face.

Phil knocks again.

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 help me, you see... My friend is here... And I would like him back.” Phil informed him.

But then wondered who his father was talking to in his den.

“Your friend is not here... Now please leave before I call the police.” Warned Augustus again.

“Perhaps this might jog your memory...” Pulling the gun from behind his back and points it directly at August. “...Inside... now!”

Phil enters the same spacious hallway could hear voices talking. One of them was Arthur’s. Raising the gun to Augustus’ head and nudges him in the direction of the voices. The den door opens wider and 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 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 asked.

Stunned by his miraculous appearance and the sudden turn of events, Arthur looks to Phil Surprised to see him standing there.

“How the hell did you get off the train? ... How did he find me?”

“I’ll explain later over a beer...” Wanting to get moving, unsure where the man’s gun was.

“Keep your hands where I can see them.” Instructs Phil, eyes searching the desk and room for the weapon.

“Actually... Arthur was just leaving... I hope I haven’t caused you too much alarm. I am as eager to find your father as you are.” Coaxed Braun.

“Stay away from Arthur’s father... And stay away from us... I warn you.” Pointing the gun at Braun as though pointing a finger at him.

“Unfortunately I don’t scare too easily young man... But thank you for that piece of advice.” Braun replied about to pour himself a whisky from a crystal decanter.

Braun could sense Phil’s his nervousness. Sweat was appearing on his forehead and his breathing 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.” Remarked Braun handing a tumbler to his son sitting composed watching on.

“You know your way out gentlemen.” He 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 informed Arthur.

Taking one last look at the man who had abducted him. 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.

Walking as calmly as they could without raising suspicion of prying neighbors. Looking back at the large black door. Anticipating a fire-fight at any moment. Arthur and Phil dive into the back seat of the cab. T

The driver astonished that his friend had rescued him. Phil saw the small grey car still watching them from a distance.

'Who the hell are you?' He thought.

"Let's get out of here." Patting 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.

"Okay then." 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... Not sure how. Nothing to do with office supplies... There's something bigger at stake here... Something that could get us killed if we're not careful." Trying to fathom his father's secret life.

What was he trading if it was not stationary products? Suspecting 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 plainly.

"You could have killed yourself!"

"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! ..." then conceded, "...Well maybe one." Relieved to have escaped.

"What about our packs? ... They're still on the train." Asked Phil.

“We’ve got the most important bag here.” Patting the duffle bag 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 that lined the street.

Wondering if one would come to life and begin following them. Phil looked out the rear window for of the small grey car. Speculating who they were and why they had been watching.

“Keep an eye out for that grey car.” Phil called out to the driver.

“Will do.” 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 his friend has managed to rescue him. They are heading to Munich as we speak.” Cassini chuckled, 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.” Cassini advised, “... 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 the delay. Dumbfounded, engineers could find no 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. No warning lights flashing indicating a fault. Test after test came back as successful. Yet the engines refused to come to life. Michael stood behind the engineers, looking curiously over their shoulders.

As if He had nothing to do with it...



Munich

“Get the Helicopter ready...” Braun gives instructions over the phone.

“Is there a problem father?” Augustus asks placidly.

“Nothing I can’t handle. Hold the fort here... I won’t be long.” He advised his son.

Keen to get to Munich before Arthur and his friend. Braun’s Limousine headed to a private air strip.

The 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.

“The prize is too great for him... I will need to have a word with him personally.” Thinking out his next step.

While the train remained stranded, so did Arthur. And the risk of Braun apprehending him again grew.

“I’m going for a walk...” Cassini suggested, as if about to go for a leisurely stroll. “...Stay with here and keep an eye on our friend there. I suspect he won’t go anywhere without the son.”

“Yes Cardinal.” Said Francis turning his attention to the gentleman looking confused as to where the *package* had disappeared to.

Gathering his overcoat, Cassini made his way off the train. Blending seamlessly into the people shuffling about the platform. Before blending into the shadows. And waited for Braun to appear and make his move.

The son was *his* prize and he was not about to share it with Braun. Calculating that they would arrive in just under an hour. And Braun half an hour before that. Cassini uttered a short prayer, calling upon divine forces to rupture Braun’s plans.

“Ita sit. Amen.” Cassini dispatched his prayer before crossing himself hoping to keep the bloodshed to a minimum.

The taxi raced along the narrow country road.

Hidden by towering elms that lined the shoulders. Phil searched the road behind them. Eyes failing to see Braun’s helicopter keeping pace with the taxi.

“Down there!” Pointed Braun to a clear section of road.

The Helicopter moved ahead and lowered itself. Hovering but a meters 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!’ He thought, ready to step up to the giant hovering ahead of them.

“Keep driving! ... Don’t stop whatever happens.” Instructed Phil, calling Braun’s bluff.

Having 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. Less so his own life for a taxi.

“Faster! ...” Commanded Phil, “...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!”

Adrenalin rushing through the driver’s veins. Eyes bulging and wild. A crazed look comes over his face as 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 a collision and bullets. Arthur gripped the front seat in panic and waited for an impact at any moment.

“Again!” Shouted Braun over the headset.

Braun needed his prize alive not dead.

Another round of automatic fired punched into the road. Sending stones and dust flying. But leaving the taxi unscarred. The taxi sprinted closer and closer. Now it was Braun’s turn to blink. The pilot, sensing imminent danger pulled frantically up on the control stick. Straining to regain the 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. 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 the towering trees.

“That was close! ... Great driving!” Phil called out to the driver. “...How much further to Munich?”

“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.”

“Yeah he is...” Reflected Phil, “...You okay?” Seeing Arthur looking traumatized.

Unable to speak, Arthur stared out the window of the taxi into the distance. Unable to focus on the untamed Germanic country side rushing violently by. Braun’s cold face etched his mind. Wondering if it could get any worse.

‘Safety in numbers’, he thought to himself. Thankful now Phil had invited himself.

Time was up.

Braun would arrive any moment and the son not be far behind. Cassini had his men blending in as passengers. Watchful of Braun’s arrival and his henchmen in tow. His mobile vibrated. Alerting him to Braun’s had arrival. Six o’clock to his position. Lowering his hat to cover his face, Cassini lifted a newspaper. Turning peering over a shoulder to see Braun and two henchmen approaching the train. Sending his men in different directions in search of the son and his friend.

“Take the men... Braun’s mine.” Cassini messaged his men.

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 within 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 if it were a lucky dip.

Pulling out a roll of Euros and peeling off a handful of notes and handed them to the driver.

“That enough?” He asks the driver.

“More than enough. Thanks... You boys take care.” Said the driver.

“You too.” Said Phil throwing the bag over his shoulder and heading inside the station.

The gun shoved down the back of his trousers, at the ready should it be required.

“We can catch the next train out of here... We’ve got open tickets.” Advised 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?” He asked 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?” Confused at the sight.

“Only one way to find out.” Said Arthur heading to the doorway.

Braun had spotted the two young men and was about to follow when he felt something press against him from behind.

Cassini nudged the concealed biretta’s silencer into his back beneath an overcoat.

“Stay where you are Julius.” Cassini warned.

“Ah_ Cardinal... How nice of you to stop by.” Braun said calmly.

“This way...” Instructed Cassini, indicating they should take a walk to his office.

The restroom.

Braun scanned the platform for his men then realized they too may have be preoccupied by the Cardinal’s men. Waiting 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 raised 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?”

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 a 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 grappled his leg in agony and the burning flesh wound. Watching the Cardinal calmly walked from the restroom. Braun's men had been captured and momentarily detained until the train departed.

Cassini returned to the train and took his seat beside Francis.

"Is everything alright Cardinal? ..." He inquired innocently, unaware of the Cardinal's intervention. "... The son 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. Carriage doors closed gracefully. Sealing the occupants within the locomotive's belly. Brakes squeaked their release from their 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.

Struggling to reconcile the day's events. Only to find themselves back on the same train. 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.

The Eurostar moved elegantly from the station.

Thoughts of Zara at the café entered Arthur's mind. As if to distract him from the danger around him. Wondering what she was doing. Her smile made him smile as he gazed at the tranquil Germanic countryside rolled harmlessly by. 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. Further away from Home...



Vienna

Morning light burgled through the hotel windows.

Raining warm sunlight over the stirring sleeping souls. Arthur awoke first. Disoriented by the high plastered ceiling. This was not his bed room back in Watford. His mind re-calibrated to the new surroundings. Piecing together the events that had got him there.

And sees Phil sleeping in the bed opposite about to waken. Animating himself to back to life, lazily pulls himself upright. Stretching arms, stands lethargically and wandered towards the bathroom as if he had always lived there.

'Nothing fazes him', thought Arthur watching him wonder from view.

Over sixteen hundred kilometers from home and Phil was already operating on autopilot. 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 twitched. Eyes rolled in their sockets. Struggling. Searching for final words that would not come.

"Hmm!" Responded Phil in a dying breath.

Tilting back his head resumed 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 dying.

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 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. That was just a wrong number..." He explained, "...Want to get to Budapest and visit the Professor... 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 locate the University.

"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... No time for sightseeing I'm afraid... Maybe after the University... Then we can all go home." He called out heading to the bathroom.

Cassini and Francis stayed at a much more luxurious hotel.

And were awaking to even more lavish surroundings. The Vatican spared no expense looking after its employees. Though Cassini had long ceased being an employee the moment he had been 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.

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. Sitting back, saw the beauty of Vienna pass outside the window.

Having arrived in the dark, saw little of the Vienna and its imperial glory. What they could not see they could only feel. The artistic and intellectual legacy of its former residents. Mozart, Beethoven and Sigmund Freud. The Danube River divided the city. Imperial palaces and grand summer residences scattered on either side. Remnant scars of a pox riddled Holy Roman Empire.

It is said that Hitler, Trotsky, Stalin and Freud had frequented the same coffee houses. It is also said that even the humble Croissant owes its shape to Vienna. 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 and croissants.

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. Cassini waited 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. More so the chill from the CCTV cameras. The fine Italian grey leather gloves were for warmth. Thick black rimmed glasses distorted his appearance further.

The short squat man sat at a café drinking an espresso coffee, reading the latest edition of the Guardian and waited for the son to arrive. Cassini waited for his prey to make his elementary move. To the restroom. He was a patient man. He had been his whole life.

And allowed the short squat 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. What had to be done, had to be done silently. However the Cassini may have given the man too much of a head start. For when he reached the restroom the man had disappeared from sight.

Cassini's intuition whispered something was amiss.

Suddenly the Cassini felt a sharp blow to his rib cage from behind. Winding him and sending him to the ground. The short squat man kicked at him. Softening him up before the kill. Pulling a concealed hunting knife the man lunged down at the Cassini. Only to roll away in time. The knife's tip striking the hard tiled floor. Echoing a sharp metallic sound about the tiled walls. Cassini rolled away again and again. Avoiding the repeated stabs and allowing him time to reach for his Beretta. Affixed with silencer.

Rolling onto his back. Cassini aimed directly at the short squat man.

‘Thud! Thud! ... Thud!’ Three sharp shots rang out quietly.

Death was instant. Death was silent.

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. Cassini picked himself up and pulled the man into an empty cubicle. Turning to close the door saw the short squat man lying 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 Cassini 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 countless others that would come and go that day.

Calmly composing himself. Pulled up his collars of the grey over coat. Adjusting the grey hat and 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 lying in the cubicle right now.

Cassini questioned 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 familiar with each other. Soon the relationship would need to be broken off. This would be their last dance together.

Finding their assigned seats, Phil and Arthur resumed their positions of staring out the window as people walked by on the platform outside.

Then Phil noticed someone.

“I think I know that guy.” He exclaimed quickly before the man disappeared from sight.

“Who?” Arthur asked.

“The old man in that grey coat... Grey hat, dark glasses... Over there!” 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...” Said Arthur who was also having trouble focusing on him. “...How do you know him?”

“I thought I saw him at the bar back in Brussels... And the restroom in Frankfurt. 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 that had now blended into the platform then lost sight of him.

“Or maybe he’s *following* us?” Claimed Phil becoming paranoid.

“He doesn’t look like the following type of guy... He looks more like... A *Priest*...” Said Arthur accidentally. “...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 of it.

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.

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. An unlikely suspect. Travelling with a Father to Budapest on papal business. Cassini focused his attention to the newspaper in front of him and his quarry just on its horizon.

The Eurostar moved speedily across the country side. And crossed unnoticed into Hungary. They had crossed into a murder scene...



Hungary

Hungary had seen its share of bloodshed over the millennia.

Romans legions had come and gone. Followed by the Crusades that had marched through on their way to the Holy lands. Attila the Hun returned home after years of plundering Europe only to die from a nose bleed on his wedding night. Mongols would pass through offering to help the Christians fight the Persians.

Only to be declined, and slaughter the Persians anyway.

The twentieth century brought with it weapons of mass destruction. Marxist ideals fueled Social unrest. Freeing the working class from oppression under the capitalist yoke. Europe was a tinker-box waiting for someone to strike a match.

Or shoot an Archduke.

Wars would be fought by proxy. Conscripting young men from around the world to die in foreign fields on other's behalf. Neutral parties would profit from the war. And when it was all over, the dividends distributed. Kings would return to their country clubs and continue their extramarital affairs. Young men lay beneath fields of blood red poppies. A cheap memorial for their widowed brides.

In Russia, communism took root and spread its obnoxious vines. Indiscriminate as to what it strangled or suffocated. But history, 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. Everything was Monstrous. Everything was grey.

Engrossed by the melodramatic events playing out in his book. Arthur painfully unaware of the forces at play to ensure the acquisition of the relic. Forces that had resources and credit around the world.

As did the Vatican.

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, exited the train for the last time and made their way out of the massive railway station. Thinking that if anyone knew 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.

They 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. Then 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 students? 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. Sounds good, thank you... Your English very good.” Phil offered to commend the driver for his efforts.

The driver spoke better English than they could speak Hungarian, thought Arthur.

“Danka You... I trie too leaurm eacha daay.” Quite pleased with himself.

The driver’s 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 the *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. Catering to a range of faculties, but Arthur was only interested in one. 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. Seeing Phil walking away as if some magnetic attraction.

“Go find your Professor... I’m going to practice my Hungarian...” Focusing on his targets, “...You know where to find me”.

“Yeah... That won’t be too hard will it? ...Stay here okay?” Advised Arthur.

But Phil was not listening. He was already engaging with the young ladies 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 existed 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 the son was with his father.

Finding the central Administration block, Arthur enquired where he could find a Professor Almesh. Professor of Religious History and Ancient Antiquities. A 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.

Following the directions the receptionist had given him. Walked a gravel path that ran beside the Danube River. Captivated by the beauty of its ancient architecture and the romantic river flowing by.

Arriving at the entrance of a building.

Entered a darkened hallway. Eyes adjusted to the dissolving darkness. And he found himself in a long wooden hallway. Aging portraits of aging academics hung from 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.

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

The plaque on half open door that stated in concise lettering:

Professor Ali Almesh
Religious History and Studies in Antiquities

Arthur knocked so as not to move the door 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 layered with open books and cluttered stacks of paper. 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. Of studies long since graded and forgotten. The Professor was dressed as any absent minded academic would be. Mismatched clothing and a fashion sense that had no place in his vocabulary, nor faculty. Grey hair was in need of combing. Bristles chin in need of a razor. Eyes in need of sleep. A large coffee mug occupied one hand, while the other signaled for Arthur to enter.

“Come in young man... Come in... Hurry now.” Ushered the Professor as if he 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 his was unfamiliar. Inquisitively the Professor could see something was troubling the lad standing before him.

“You’re not one of my students... Are you?” He asked peering over his reading glasses.

“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 he had graduated somewhere.

“Edinburgh... Engineering.” He said proudly, adding his own intellectual authority.

“What’s your name son?” The Professor asked becoming more direct.

“Arthur... Arthur McGee.”

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.

Angling his head slightly. The Professor’s eyes opened a little wider and thick dark eye brows lifted from their static horizontal station. Creating frown lines on his 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.” Unsure whether this was a good thing.

“Well then son... *Welcome...* I’ve been *expecting* you.” Standing to close to the door.

Peering up and down the hall way for lingering bodies that were out of place. Pulled a key from his pocket and locked the door.

'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?” He asked 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?” He asked with concern in his voice.

“Phil... My friend... We work together back in London. I feel better with him watching my back... And just as well...” Stammering 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?”

“He’s admiring the University.” Arthur fibbed.

Which would no doubt end in disaster for Phil. Though he suspected the east European women might find his quaint English accent and pickup lines more palatable than the more resilient English women.

“Would you like a drop of whisky son? You father sent me a case last Christmas.” He offered.

“I’m good... Thank you Sir.” Said Arthur.

Then found himself re-considering, after a kaleidoscope of butterflies had suddenly taken flight in his stomach.

Pouring a large single malt into a large mug before settling into an arm chair. Gently rocking the mug in his hand. 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 endanger because of that bequest.

“You know my father then Professor?” Arthur asked hesitantly.

“I do indeed. I do indeed... I know him very well...”, then added, “... 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?”

By Arthur’s apparent quiet demeanor, intuitively assessed he knew very little of the immediate danger he was in. Taking a large swallow from the mug to settle his own butterflies taking flight.

“Two days ago...” Arthur paused wondering how to proceed, “...I received a letter from my father instructing me that I should find you... Said people were after him... And they may well me after me too.” 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...” he began, “...Thankfully Phil was about to sort them out... No one crosses him... 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?" He asked hoping someone would explain the conundrum in which he found himself entangled.

"You don't know do you son? Do you?" Sensing Arthur's innocence in the matter.

"Know what Sir?" Arthur echoed 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." Hoping it would settle the growing anxiety.

The Professor gathered his thoughts as to where to begin.

Finding a clean mug, dispensed a shot of the rare whisky into it.

"You'll appreciate this one... 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 the sunlight. But also 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..." Pausing momentarily to let the facts soak in.

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...*" Chuckling at the thought, "...He's a Relic Hunter. Do you know what a Relic Hunter is?"

"They hunt relics?" Hoping not to sound silly.

"In a roundabout way. Yes... Do you know what a Relic is?" Enquired the Professor. Probing the lad's mind further as if sapping intellectual thought from a reluctant student.

"Old and ancient... Antiques. But special." Replied Arthur.

"That's right... Antique... Moreover of ancient times... Antiquity... The time before modern time and usually of an historical importance... In this instance, ecclesiastical... Put simply, the Church... More specifically. The Catholic Church... Are you with me so far?" 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?" He asked with some doubt.

"The Church is not happy for this particular Relic being in the possession of *private collectors*." Accentuating the words to suggest their dubiousness nature.

"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... Besides, 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 paper trails... They leave *dead ends*... If you know what I mean?” Wondering how much the lad was taking in.

“Dead ends are not good are they?” Taking in the seriousness of the situation.

“No... They are not.”

“What is this Church Relic?” Arthur asked.

“It's a Ring. Specifically... It's a Fisherman's Ring... There have been many over the centuries... Normally they are destroyed on the death of a Pope, but this particular ring was the first of its kind... Do you know what a Fisherman's Ring?”

“A Ring for Fishermen?” Arthur replied 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... Most have a relief image of Peter casting a net from a boat... Symbolizing the tradition that the Apostles were the fishers of men.”

The Professor explained as simply as he could.

“But in this instance, Saint Peter's Ring has two crossed keys... The symbol of the Keys to Heaven which Jesus bestowed on Petrus... The first Pope of the Catholic Church... Unlike other Rings that were made of gold, his was made of silver...”



“...If 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 hesitantly, uncertain if he wanted to know.

“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 sacred Ring of Saint Peter... Inside the ring was scribed a single word in ancient Hebrew, ‘*Petrus*’ Peter.” Taking another swallow of whisky from the heavy mug he continued.

“It was not the first time your father has picked up relics from foreign countries... Word must have gotten out and certain people are trying to trace its where about.”

Taking another sip of from the mug. Sighing in thought.

“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... But then I am Muslim... What interest would I have in such a Ring?” Taking a generous sip of courage from the 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.” He replied 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 the lad was in. “...I have a gun ... You will need it where you are going”.

“Thanks Professor... I already have one.” Tapping his duffle bag. To the Professor’s surprise.

At that moment, as if by chance, the phone rang.

Startling them both as they sat in the quiet office. The Professor lifted the large black handset.

“Hello... Professor Almesh speaking.” Answered the call...



The Call

“Professor... It’s me, Alistair. Has Arthur visited you yet?” Alistair 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?” Wondering if he had said too much over the phone.

“I am well enough considering... I have the Ring... I’m looking at it... Had to crack some eggs... If you know what I mean.”

“Cracking eggs is what you do best Alistair.” Responded the Professor indicating who was on the line.

“How’s Arthur handling it all? I’ve seemed to have put him in a bit of tight spot.”

“He’s handling it surprisingly well... Him and his... *Friend*.” Dropping the surprise on him.

“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 and handed it to him.

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?” He asked seeking an explanation.

“I assume the Professor has told you about the Ring?” His voice straining, 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 ... I’ll be fine. As for the gun... Sometimes I need it for protection.” Sounding out of breath.

“Protection? You’re a salesman Dad.” Hoping to erase the confusion.

“I still am... But certain people recruited me to help repatriate relics shall we say...” Hoping that would be enough deflect his questioning. “...Do 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”.

“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... Nothing Phil didn’t settle... There was one man... Had a son called Augustus? ... Said he knows you.”

“Ah... Julius Braun... How did you meet him?” Asked Alistair.

“Abducted me off the train... Then Phil busted in and spoiled the party.”

“Thankfully Phil came along then... Braun will be back.”

Arthur recalled the objects in the glass cabinets. Relics, so that’s what they were and explains Braun’s interest in his father, and the Ring.

“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. “... 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?”

“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.

“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... You take care Arty... Bye.” He 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.

Hearing the connection went dead.

The Professor had poured himself another large scotch coffee. Having hand written the address of the safe-house on a piece of paper. Arthur studied the scrawled address 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 a hundred years behind the rest of Europe. Not that it mattered 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 a head of state 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 task 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 one of 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.” He told him.

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, just in case. The young lady smiled and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Arthur was taken back, surprise as much as Phil was.

A smile comes over his face. He may have actually have scored this time.

“Okay Romeo... No time to stick around. We need to get to Istanbul.” Informed Arthur wishing to get underway.

“Istanbul? I thought Budapest was our last stop?” Exclaimed Phil surprised by the extended journey.

“So did I... But Dad wants us there ASAP.” 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 re-trod steps back to the Budapest Grand Central station to buy tickets to Istanbul on the next available train. The afternoon was getting late. He had spent more time with the Professor than anticipated.

Hoping it would be the end of the line for them.

Cassini and Francis watched from a distance amalgamating into academia.

As though 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

Retracing the path back to the massive stone train station.

Avoiding detours that would 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. Its tall stone columns camouflaged by the menacing grey clouds above it. A façade chiseled with thick Hungarian lettering chiseled. Cold stone steps lead up to massive wooden doors braced on large iron braces. Inside the huge marble floors hall.

People moved about in no hurry as if history had wounded them.

The ticketing counter stood at the center of the grand hall. A large wooden booth projected from the cold marble floor. Frosted windows covered all but one. Behind the open window sat an attractive woman in twenties with long dark brown hair and emerald green eyes. And a faint birthmark on her neck. Quietly watching Phil and Arthur approaching.

“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.” Hoping that would break the ice.

Arthur was hoping that was the last of his pickup lines for a while and stepped forward and inquired about trains to Bucharest. Then onto Istanbul. This was an unanticipated extension to their travels.

“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.” He added with some affection and stealing Phil’s thunder.

“Thank you very much.” She responded blushing.

Phil was taken back by Arthur’s forwardness. Engaging in social intercourse with females. He 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 wallets. Finding them, surrendered them onto the dark polished wooden counter. 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.

“Not yet.” He hastily replied.

Inspecting him with attentive green eyes. Giving nothing away as to his predicament. Her poker face revealed nothing. Punching further details into the computer. A printer buzzed and whirred in the back ground before spitting out two ticket. Reading them to herself, turned and handed them to the two young men.

“Your tickets Gentlemen... That will be a total of three hundred and forty euros please.”

Arthur reached into a 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.” He added.

“Thank you.” Zahra graciously accepted the bonus slipping it inside her bra.

‘Lucky euros.’ Thought Phil beginning to warm the European women.

Handing back their Identity Cards. Zahra watched as the mysterious young men walked away. Making 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. Agreed to head there for a bite.

“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.

“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 too had a piece of paper scrawled with an address.

Having obtained it from the Professor. Now laying on his couch. Shrouded by the sun rays. A large empty coffee mug lay on the floor. An arm hanging limp from his side.

His fingers twitched before they too went limp...



Don Marconi

Secure atop his hideaway of San Michelle, Marconi basked in the sun drenched morning.

Reclining in a rattan chair. Dark glasses shielded his eyes from the brilliant morning sun. A white bath robe open to the waist covered his pale portly torso. In his hand an iced tea laced with vodka. A face grinned and he chuckled to himself. In his other hand a newspaper 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.

It could well have been him in the photograph.

The Cardinal had gotten the better of Braun. 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 public. Although described as an apparent mugging, it was reported that nothing was taken and Marconi knew immediately who the man responsible.

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. He chuckled again. This had the Cardinal fingerprints all over it.

Who else would be capable of inflicting such a calculated wound? To the leg. The Ring was indeed a sort after relic. The Church was in pursuit of the boy as well.

"Hmm." Sighed Marconi.

The game had gotten interesting.

One of his best men had not reported in. Perhaps he had been silenced. Maybe he had underestimated the Cassini and his apprentice. Cardinal Dovizi had kept him well informed of Cassini's movements. Placing 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 a rattan chair and basked in the divine light. Hoping his Superior would not begrudge him a momentarily temporal 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."

Flicking the paper to financial page, 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, together with relics that would never see the light of day. Unsure what he would do with it after he died.

"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 it 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 flailing pages before surrendering the attempt and watched them fly into the air caught on the wind.

It was as though the paper had been ripped from his hands.

Washing the pages to the left and to the right, Michael played with them like kites and allowed them to drift 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 ruffled 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 son was heading to Istanbul. Marconi’s men would pick up the trail there. He had men on commission there. Taxi drivers that prowled the streets and 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. Not one to rush in like an immature young bull. He would take his time. Picking 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.

“Follow the son, to the father... Find the ring.” Instructed 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. They would be in contact at the first sign of the son’s arrival. Or the Cardinal’s. One would signify the arrival of the other.

Reclining in the large rattan chair, Marconi sipped an iced tea from a crystal tumbler. Overlooking 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.

Above, a sun drenched cloudless morning sky, as crystal blue waters washed the golden sand shores below.

Taking a sip of tea, 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 it. 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 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*. Ruling a central province of Wallachia in the mid-fifteenth century. Trapped between the Hungarian Cross bearing lands in the north of Transylvania and the Crescent bearing Ottoman to the south. Both demanded his obedience.

Vlad would bow to neither.

As a child he was captured by the invading Turkish Ottomans. Holding him captive with his brother to secure his father's loyalty. Witnessing terrible tortures he would return home with his own brutal tortures for executing his enemies.

Impalement.

A hash 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 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. His head thick with black curly hair.

Bram Stoker's poison pen would demonize Dracula, inking immortal infamy upon him. To the Romanian people though, he would be loved. Cherished. Idolized as a Crusader. A hero.

The Savior of their beloved country.

It would be another Dracula that deserved the hatred of the people.

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 peculiarly large full moon shone brightly above. Glowing an eerie 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, identified the platform from which their train would be leaving. And 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.

A snub nose butted the end of the platform. It made rude noises a train should make. And made no apologies for making them. It had a sturdiness that suggested it was a weight lifter. Or a wrestler. 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. Too tired to dispute sleeping arrangements Arthur just wanted to sleep. His mind on edge ever since he left the Professor's office. Fearing an attack from werewolves at any moment. 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. Only now to be told to go to Istanbul. On an overnight train. With another eight hundred kilometers to Bucharest and then another six hundred to Istanbul. Thoughts of ever returning to London could not have been further his mind. Hoping his father would have the answers to the questions mounting 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. Cassini had sent Francis to keep a passive eye on the two. And waited for them 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, the son belonged to the Cardinal. He would make his move when he had found his father. Cassini had no fear of vampires nor werewolves. His crucifix and his faith were sufficient. Just in same, he did have silver bullets at hand. He may have had no fear. It did not stop him believing in the demonic creatures that lived in the shadows. 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 it was reluctant to into the night.

An extraordinary blood red full moon lit the countryside covered in a mysterious mist. The train shunted 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, peers 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. He 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 ground feels the sensation of cold grass beneath his feet. Between his toes. The chill of the night mountain air on his skin. His breath fogging before him walked slowly toward the fire. Feeling its 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. Warding off evil spirits. Arthur approaches the woman he thought was Zahra. Standing behind her. He turns around sees him standing there.

It was her.

No longer dressed in her station uniform. Now in a long gypsy dress. 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 leads him into the pagan dance around the fire. The hypnotic music pulling him into a trance. Oblivious the train could leave at any moment. Then the dancing ended.

“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? ...” He began to ask.

Only to have Zahra kiss him before he could finish.

“The one that’s been foretold...” She 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 her.

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 and she undresses him 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 He told her of his adventure. And his promise to return to find her. Zahra smiled and held him close.

Knowing he would never return. It had be foretold.

Suddenly the two lovers awoke to the sounds of people screaming in terror. Their brief nuptials over. Zahra knew what was happening outside. The camp had been discovered by the beasts. Frantically Arthur dresses 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.” She warned.

Looking to the forest. Dark shapes moved. Red eyes glowed back from within.

“You can’t stay here...” She warned him again, “...Go back to train...Quickly... They’ll soon be here”.

“Who will be? ... You must come with me.” He 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.
‘*How could she know about Zara?*’ Arthur thought to himself.
“Now go! ... Quickly. They’re coming”.
“I won’t leave you here!” He pleaded with her.
“I know Arthur... But you must... It has been foretold.” She pleaded with him.
“What’s been foretold?” Growing more confused.
Time was catching up with him again, feeling a dizziness and tiredness come over him.
“Go Arthur! ... Go! ... You can’t be here...” Zahra continues to plead.

Terrified screams called out in terror.

Large dark beasts leapt from the forest. Attacking and tearing at the scattering gypsies. Pandemonium replaced dancing. Agonizing screams replaced tranquil singing as the uninvited tore at the living. Arthur tried desperately to pull Zahra towards the train that had begun move slowly away.

Unexpectedly from no-where Arthur was attacked by a hideous beast. Half-human half-wolf. Snarling blood stained yellow fangs. He struggled with the creature. Striking fists at its thick black furry chest. Its claws gripping him tightly as soulless black eyes glared at him. The strength of the beast making it impossible to hold it back. The creature lunged at his throat. The pain was sudden and excruciating as its fangs tore at flesh.

Blood spurted from the open wounds.

Michael watched on from a distance. Unmoved.

Choking on his own blood. Arthur struggled to strike back, but it was hopeless. A shaking sensation came over him.

A bright light appeared above him. Then it disappeared. Then reappeared.

His eyes opened. Then closed. And opened again.

He could heard a voice. It sounded like Phil.

“Wake up Arthur! ... Wake up.” Shouted Phil now standing over him.

Shaking him awake. Shaking him back into this world.

Arthur came about. Eyes opening to the piercing bright light of the morning sun streaming through the window. Instinctively gasping for breath reaches to his neck for bloody wounds. But finds nothing. He looks 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.

Trying to recall what had happened

Zahra, the camp fire. The Gypsies. The music and dancing. The love making. The screams. The red eyes in the forest. It was all too surreal for him.

Then remembered the daisy.

He looked down at his closed hand. He could feel something within. Not wanting to open it. He knew he had to. Opening it slowly as though to deny its existence. Within lay a white daisy. Uncrushed and perfect. As if it had just been picked and placed there moments earlier.

‘*Give it to Zara...*’ She had said. ‘...*Give it to Zara*’.

Unable to make any sense of it. Even if he wanted to. Taking the flower he placed it between the pages of his paperback. He would give it to Zara, should he ever return home. Home was becoming distant memory...



Bucharest

The snub nose train crawled into the Bucharest station and squealed to halt.

Hissing steam. Relieved to have survived the night. Arthur on the other hand still troubled the previous evening's scare. Reluctant to step outside the carriage. There could be predators waiting in the shadows. He could sense them.

A chill ran down his spine. Goosebumps over his skin.

Hands instinctively reach to his throat for wounds. Vowing to 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.

Hurrying to the nearest ticketing booth, Phil struggled to keep up.

"You seem to be in a bit of a rush... What's the urgency?" Phil asked.

"Had a bad dream last night... I just want to get the hell out of this country as quick as I can." Arthur informed him.

"What? ... You see a Vampire or something?" Joked Phil.

"Yeah... Something like that." Feeling again for his throat. Expecting to see blood on his fingers.

Phil would not push the issue any further. Arthur sounded unsettled and if he wanted to get moving. Then they would get moving.

At the ticketing booth they discover a thick set woman sitting erect. Staring at them coldly. As if she was part of the furniture. Her large face devoid of a smile. Appearing to have been a left-over from the Soviet occupation and 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-a Romanian... Do you speak English?" He asked as politely.

He was in her country now. There was no need for her to speak English.

"Yes... Of course." The woman replied followed by a small fake smile, as if her 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.

He wanted no issues.

Particularly with a duffle bag containing a gun and a load of money. And 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, and is met with an acknowledging grunt.

"Hmm!" The woman responded as if satisfied. Though it could easily have been indigestion.

Nodding, she hands his identity card back to him.

'Really?' Thought Phil. Confused at how easily she identified him.

On examining Arthur's card, the woman takes two looks at him as though she was wary of likeness to the image on the identity card. 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, pulls 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 a heavy dark eye-brows. As if to percolate a thought in her mind. Or to pass wind.

'That cannot be good', thought Arthur.

"There *seems* to one leaving at noon... It *should* arrive tomorrow morning at ten-fifty tomorrow morning." She informed, looking down at 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 whatever beasts had tasted his blood last night, would retreat the closer they got to the remnants of the Ottoman Empire.

"That sounds great. We'll take two tickets please. How much?" He asked keenly to get the transaction over with as quickly as possible.

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 Euros as payment, she gave back the change.

'There would be no tip today', Arthur thought.

Somehow she was not quite as appealing as Zahra.

Arthur thanked the woman for her assistance, gathered their packs and headed out the doors of the dilapidated station. They had an hour before their train departed and decided they would stretch their legs. Keen to be in the growing sunlight, Arthur scans the shadows for red eyes that may be lurking within.

The road outside the station ran directly to the Dâmbovița.

Third only to the Danube. It was too far to walk. Phil waves down a yellow taxi with black and white checked trim under the windows that reminded him of New York.

"We should have time to check out the River and grab a bite before we get going." Advised Arthur climbing into the back of 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 from the front seat.

"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 and merged with the steady flow of traffic.

Taking several detours on an otherwise straight route.

The taxi pulled up outside a café with a colorful canopy covering small covered tables. Paying the driver, Arthur told him to keep the change. The driver took the money happily. He had taken them the long way and this was an additional bonus. Telling him if he was passing he should stop by in forty minutes for a ride back to the station.

The driver saluted and said he would see them again soon.

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. Then wondered if he should have ordered one for Arthur.

Arthur was not listening to Phil’s thoughts. His mind on a cafe in Watford. And he begins to daydream of Zara thinking he would bring her here one day. Then questioned why someone who works in a café, would want to come to another. Looking to the other side of the road to see couples strolling hand in hand. Beyond them, the Dâmbovița River flowing slowly by. Lined with colorful boats.

Thoughts of an assassin's bullet never entered his head.

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 surmise briefly.

“Oh.” 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 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.

Opened it at randomly.

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. And waited for the two young men to return...



Owe You One

Braun's men had also been mysteriously informed of Arthur's destination.

Cassini was aware of two new gentleman that had boarded when Braun had disembarked at Munich. Unaware of the Cardinal's observation of them. They too waited for the son and his friend to return to the train. Finding shelter in the shade of the ancient station.

Cassini blended the surroundings, Francis added to his cloak of invisibility.

Michael stood in a beam of sunlight that shone through an overhead 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 discover an even older train waiting for them. It had seen better days. But what days they were, were uncertain. 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 seats. 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?" He said.

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. 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 carbonized fog over 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 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.

Enjoying a meal and a bottle of red vino, unaware of two gentleman sitting nearby watching them. Braun's men. Cassini had seen them. He would 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.

Oblivious to the danger that had surrounded him.

Cassini had assessed Francis' capabilities and combat was not one of them. He was a convenient accompaniment. Something in him Francis was to be protected at all costs. He had been chosen for a reason.

The divine itch irritated Cassini.

Incapable of scratching it. Incapable of unravelling its meaning. Taking a sip of wine, switched 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 by 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." About to follow the man about to leave the dining car.

Some way down a deserted carriage way back to his cabin, the man could sense someone following him. A few meters behind. Instinctively, the man turned about and suddenly threw a massive body punch that winded Cassini and sent him buckling over. Another blow to his back sends him tumbling to the floor. Cassini reaches for his biretta. But Braun's man had drawn faster his revolver aimed directly at him.

And was about to fire.

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 flesh by millimeters. The sound lost among the rattling and clanking of the old locomotive carriages.

Phil's punch sent the man and the gun flying. And catches the man again with successive powerful blows to the face. Knocking the man to the floor again. Unconscious.

Cassini looks at Phil.

Phil looks at the Cardinal.

Each confused by what had just happened.

"Who are you?" Phil asks panting for breath.

"No-one Phil." Replies Cassini calmly.

"How do you know my name?" Becoming more confused.

"I know a lot of things... Things you don't need to know for now..." Cassini responded. "...I'll look after this." Turning to look at the man lying unconscious. "...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!" He warned, 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 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. And dragged the man into the restroom and latched door. Cassini needed to get the man off the train. The window rattled as if to attract his attention. The window rattled again, louder.

'Over here'. The window called out.

Cassini looked at window. Sensing the man's comrade would soon come looking for him. And levered the window open. Cold mountain air rushed into the small compartment. Outside, the countryside moved unhurriedly by. Lifting the body onto the edge. He uttered a prayer and pushed the unconscious body from the train.

Michael watched as the train disappeared into the darkness towards Istanbul. An inert body lay beside the tracks. Broken bones and bruises would heal. He would see the man another day.

But not today.

Closing the window the Cassini composed himself and returned to the dining car.

Finding it, 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 old man finding his seat.

"Everything okay?" Enquired Francis, observing the Cardinal ruffled.

"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."

"Yes it was... But jackets can always be replaced." Cassini responded philosophically, knowing how close he had come to being shot.

Phil had saved him from a certain death had he not arrived when he did. He owed that boy. Looking over to the lad's table. 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.

With thoughts of what to do about the second man. He would keep until they got to Istanbul.

"How's your meal Father?" Wishing to change the subject.

"Lovely. Yours?"

"Divine... Simply divine." Watching the other man stand go in search of his colleague.

Unaware the competition for the Ring had been reduced by one.

Arthur and Phil finished their meals. And were about to head back to their compartment, when Phil turned and looked back at the old man. Catching him looking at him.

Cassini smiled at Phil, as if to say, *'I'm watching you.'*

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.

Cassini gave a subtle nod to acknowledge their communique...



Istanbul

12:00AM and the old Bucharest train shunted into the timeworn Istanbul Sirkeci Terminal.

The eleven hour journey had taken its toll.

Phil had fallen asleep on the bench seat with his pack as a pillow. The sudden jerking of the train as it stopped, shook the two young men from their slumbers. Stirring them to life again, they sat upright. Orientated themselves, and recollected the events of the past twenty-four hours that had gotten them there.

Arthur had tried to stay awake in fear of werewolves that may have hitched a ride from Budapest. Overcome with sleep before the werewolves had the chance to devour him. Stretches his arms sending sleep retreating into the mid-day shadows.

“Are we here?” Phil asked stretching limbs, reanimating his stiffened corpse.

“Looks like it... We better find a taxi and head to the safe house... Wherever that might be in this city.” Looking about the cabin for watchful eyes that might be observing them unnecessarily.

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. Fearing if they were caught with the gun, they would spend years rotting in a Turkish prison. Flashbacks of *Midnight Express* came to his mind. And he cringes at the thought. Looking out the large box window took in the scene what lay before him.

People of raggedy description walked pass. Had he travelled back in time? Was he still dreaming?

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 wooden platform.

Being the end of the line the number of passengers had dissipated and made it easier to move about. 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 elegance behind.

Like sheep, they followed the other passengers to the Customs booth.

And joined the queue of tired travelers awaiting processing.

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 the 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.

The queue shuffled slowly forward and the duffle bag became 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, not drug mules. Guards keen to finish their long dusty shifts and the two young men looked as tired as they did.

Cassini had disembarked ahead of the two young men and the Braun's remaining man. His Vatican Credentials would see him pass without suspicion. An *understanding* that had dated back centuries. Within moments their documents were stamped told to proceed unchecked. But before they did the Cassini 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. Cassini then turned about and subtly indicated the person in question.

Phil watched as the old man talked to the guard.

It seemed the old man 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!" He informed Arthur as the guards approached closer.

The guards stepped closer and closer.

"Shit!" Phil cursed.

"What old man?" Arthur looked about confused by his sudden anxiety.

But the old man 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 filthy 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 feels 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.

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. And dragged him along the line of passengers now stunned by the turbulent arrest. As a Japanese couple took photographs.

"Whew! ..." Phil sighed with relief, "...Mate... I thought they were coming for us ... I swear the old had dobbed us in." Relieved.

"What was that all about?" asked Arthur.

"He owed me one." Said Phil reconciling the reprieve.

Customs officials checked their papers as another disturbance was developing behind them.

The Syrian backpacker that had travelled with them since Brussels had caught the eye of a suspicious guards. More guards rushed over to an erupting situation. Seeing the Syrian now lay face down on the ground. A security guard's knee pressing painfully between his shoulder blades.

Momentarily distracted, the booth official took one look at the two weary lads standing before him at the booth. Laden with heavy backpacks. Cassini had made comment concerning 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 favor.” Looking about for the old man who had mysteriously disappeared from sight.

“Who?”

“The old man.” Said Phil.

“What old man?” Still confused by Phil’s fixation of an old man only he could see.

Clearing Customs they emerged from the darkened terminal 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. 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.

Taxis trolled the streets continually looking for foreign prey. Arthur signaled one that quickly pulled over. Showing the driver the piece of paper the Professor had written the address of the safe house. Hoping the driver 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... We have friend there.” Arthur confirmed in his broken English.

Showing the driver a fifty Euro note, encourages the driver’s 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 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 before walking out into the daylight.

Waving down a taxi for themselves.

Francis expected the Cardinal to say, ‘follow that taxi’. But simply handed the driver a piece of paper with an address on it. He too had obtained an address from the Professor. He knew where Arthur was heading. There were simply too many taxis to follow. Cassini wished 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

A taxi pulled up outside the address that Professor Almesh had provided them.

On a rundown street. Lined with derelict abandoned cars lined. Cracked sidewalks and overgrown lawns. Unsure he had the right address Arthur sees a scantily clad woman leaning into a car window ahead of them.

Arthur double checked the address. Everything seemed to match.

The driver's large brown eyes appeared in the rear mirror anxious to get his fare and be gone from the 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 their packs and duffle bag exits the cab. Phil stood with him on the sidewalk staring at the derelict house of grime smudged white plastered walls. Scoured from years of neglect. Large iron grills protected the doors and windows. As did all the houses in the street.

'Can't be a safe neighborhood.' Recalling the taxi driver's comments.

Looking about for anything untoward. Seeing nothing but the scantily clad woman who was now getting into the car to complete the carnal business transaction. Nothing was moving on the street.

The only thing out of place was them.

Pushing on the metal gate that squeaked on rusting hinges.

"My father lives here?" Arthur questions.

"I like what your old man has done with the place." Phil joked closing the gate behind him.

Hesitantly, they climbed the creaking wooden steps to the grilled front door. Unsure whether to knock, or ring the non-existent bell.

"Maybe we should have phoned ahead." Phil joked again.

About to knock when the door suddenly flung open.

And the nose of a thirty-eight was suddenly thrust in Arthur's face.

The gun was being held by his father. His left arm, bandaged and seeping with blood.

At this point Arthur was unsure who the man holding the gun was.

"Oh Christ Arthur! ... It's you... You made it!" Exclaimed his father.

Lowering his gun 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." Directing the snub nose barrel to the tattered abode.

"Like what you've done with the place Mister McGee." Whipped Phil.

"Thanks Phil... Glad you came." Alistair replied.

"Wouldn't have missed it for the world Mister McGee." Beamed Phil.

"So I was told."

“Heard you’ve had a bit of fun with Braun’s men.”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle Mister McGee.” Phil boosted.

Sparely furnished, the lounge was almost bare.

A wooden coffee table. A lone lounge chair. And a small television covered in dust sitting on a wooden crate. If this was the lounge. Arthur could only imagine the bedroom. Now was not the time to criticizing his father’s taste in décor.

“What happened to your arm?” He asked concerned.

“I had to crack a few eggs... It’s just a scratch.” He responded, suggesting no further questioning were warranted.

The sound of a car engine and doors closing sounded from outside.

Alistair goes to the window and sees a car of henchmen exiting the vehicle. It could have been his taxi driver, or Arthur’s. It did not matter which, they were here now.

“Get down!!” Exclaimed Alistair seeing the men pull automatic weapons from the trunk of the car.

‘Ratta-tat-tat-ratta-tat-tat-ratta-tat-tat!’ 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 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 the boys.

‘Boom! Boom!’ Alistair fired two shots back in return sounding like cannons.

Phil pulled the Glock from the duffle bag. 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.

Showing the men outside that he meant business too.

‘Ratta-tat-tat-ratta-tat-tat-ratta-tat-tat!’ Bullets punched into the walls behind them to say they got Phil’s message.

Splintering woodwork, quickly followed by supplementary bullet holes.

Arthur crouched behind the over turned coffee table already scared by a series of bullet holes. Turning about, to see the back door open and an old man and another man rush in. Followed by another man, looking calm considering the explosions of sound ricocheting around them.

Cassini had his Beretta raised above Arthur’s head. A fires off a burst of rounds towards the window. With no time to think Arthur fires a wild shoot towards the intruder. 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 since Brussels.” Arthur stuttered.

Shocked and surprised, attempts to raise the gun against his father's resistance.

"London actually..." Cassini replied calmly. "...Phil." Acknowledging his presence.

Cassini checks Francis was unharmed by Arthur's bad shooting.

"I'm good." He responded.

"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 if they got 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." He responded.

"So that explains why I kept seeing you." Said Phil.

"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.

'Ratta-tat-tat-ratta-tat-tat-ratta-tat-tat!' More bullets punched into the walls behind them.

"No they don't... And we won't be travelling well either if we don't get the *hell* out of here." Suggesting an urgency to find better accommodation.

'Ratta-tat-tat-ratta-tat-tat-ratta-tat-tat! ... Ratta-tat-tat-ratta-tat-tat-ratta-tat-tat!' Another hail of bullets sailed above their heads and peppered the walls.

Phil returned a volley of shots to show them he was still alive and kicking. Followed by Alistair's canon.

Alistair 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 over his shoulder. Along with Phil's laptop. Which now appeared to have a hole in it from a stray bullet. And they followed the Cardinal out the back door. About to leave, Alistair does pull the gas hose away from its nozzle. And began hissing foul gas into the air. All it needed now was a fool to light a match. Something he could count on with the henchmen rushing in for the kill.

"Let's go... The place could blow any time", He warned 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."

Crouching, they ran from the back of the house along an alleyway of long grass.

"Where's the other guy that was with you?" Arthur asked Francis.

"What other guy?" Replied Francis looking back.

"He came in with you back there at the house."

"There was only us Arthur." Replied Francis.

"I was pretty sure there were three of you... He was dressed in black... 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."

“I must be losing it.” Said Arthur struggling to understand what he had seen.

The fight between good and evil is eternal.

Fear can be more powerful than Faith. Francis’ faith was stronger. Stronger than the fear that was shooting at them. He thought about the man in black. 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 what, or who? ...



Looking For Bond Girl

The sound of loud gun fire echoed through the otherwise quiet neighborhood.

Then there was silence. 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 they came to a 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. It was however practical for getting around unnoticed. Blending in with the other traffic on the roads. If rust buckets were dime a dozen in Istanbul.

Then 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.” He cried out looking back for followers.

Climbing into the driver's seat, 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?

'Clough-clough-splutter-cough-splutter-cough!' The engine coughed phlegm.

“Not now!” He complained, turning the ignition to hear a the engine whine.

Followed by an ignition of cylinders.

The engine sparked itself to life. Revving the engine several times. Engaged the gears and accelerated down the street without looking back.

Arthur sat in a trance 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. A discharged pistol resting in his lap. His forehead resting against the window. His mind drifted to a place where reality meet fantasy. Neither distinguishable from the other. 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 come along. What cards had his father 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.

And imagined him updating his dating profile.

'Looking for Bond Girl... That should pull a few skirts for him', he 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 about trying to shoot you back there Cardinal...” Arthur tried to apologize, “...I didn’t know.”

“That’s okay Arthur... 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.” Without going into the centuries of history of the secret fraternity.

Cassini looked 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. He had stepped up to serve where many others had not. Not a deeply religious man, Alistair had reached an understanding that religion 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.” Cassini informed 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.

Cassini’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 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. Father Francis and I can keep them guessing for the time being... They will think we have it. 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.

Cassini would inform Professor Almesh of his successful mission to unite Arthur safely to his father.

Assuming he had roused from the whisky induced nap, after the Cardinal had left him.

Contemplating the task ahead, Cassini formulated a plan that would have him in Naples to rendezvous with Alistair to collect the ring on Italian soil. 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. The gas had exploded and destroyed the house taking a few of the henchmen with it.

“That should slow them down.” Said Alistair.

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... 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 the planned itinerary. “...And have the Cavalry ready.” He added.

“Good plan. I’ll lead them away... 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 replied.

“Yes boss.” Accepting the Cardinal’s orders.

Alistair knew the streets well enough to elude any who might have tried to follow.

Roads were cluttered with moving traffic. Freight vehicles being pushed one way. Or pulled the other. The van was now a part of the whole moving with the tide that was heading towards the airport a few kilometers away.

Stopping by a rank of taxis to dispatch the Cardinal and Father and say their farewells.

Shaking 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 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 the Cardinal had spoken days before.

“Yes Father, Barabbas.” Confirmed Cassini and the both grinned.

Unsure what to make of it, Arthur apologized again for shooting at them.

Phil stood back like a wallflower at a school dance. However, he did not go unnoticed by Cassini.

“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.”

“We could use a man like you in the field... Think about it.” Cassini offered quietly to him.

“I will.” Responded Phil.

“We’ll see you in Naples... I have no doubt you can handle yourself if trouble arises... 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.

“You better get going if you want to keep ahead of *them*.” Advised Cassini lifting his glance 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. 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...



Pierre

The tarnished van would provide some camouflage from searching eyes.

Following back roads to an old airfield near the coast still used by 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 focused on international airports, regional airports 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 would get to Italy without too many questions being asked. Barring road works or an accident, they would be at the airfield in half an hour. Both being regular occurrences on the back roads of Istanbul. Road rules did not apply here. And seem to serve more as guidelines.

Checking rear mirrors for suspicious vehicles that may be trailing him.

The word would be out on the street important men were looking for them. Together with a bounty. The van travelled as fast could without straining its engine. Though having just survived a gun fight and this was no time to be too law abiding. Dashboard dials waved back and forth like a Maneki Neko cat.

Another pothole awakens Arthur from another day dream. Back to the reality of the van's interior as he rambled aimlessly along derelict back streets. Scanning the streets for people on the lookout. Seeing people going about their day. Milling milled about or sitting on benches. There was no rush to Istanbul life that moved at its own tempo. Unemployed, 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 before he did.

"You okay Arty?" Asked his father.

"I'm good thanks Dad... Just tired I guess... How about you? How's the arm?" He 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. How about you Phil? ... You holding up okay?"

"Doing great Mister McGee... We should do this more often Arthur." Suggested Phil.

"Seems your laptop took a bullet." Arthur gave the bad news.

"A casualty of war mate... I always wanted to buy a new one... This will give me an excuse." Phil grinned. His emails could wait, then imagined his dating profile embellished with adventures from the Far East.

"We should be at the airport in about ten 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.” He 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 merged with the other vehicles.

The airport lay up ahead. A control booth at the gate would ask for substitutional paperwork. Lira to be handed over. Money would buy silence for only a certain amount of time, before the meter ran out. And the word to be spread. But it was a risk Alistair had to take.

Mid-afternoon, and the delinquent van reached gates of the remote airfield.

Shanty 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.’ He thought

Unsure to sound his horn and wake him, or simply let him sleep. In the end, decided simply drive quietly on. Deferring the illicit paperwork for a later date. And gently edged the van into the compound. Eyes searching for a particular hanger. There were several large hangers, but only one of interest to him.

And there it was, with its doors open.

“I hope he’s home.” Pointing out the hanger to Arthur.

Driving slowly to the large hanger doors. Eases the van beside the hangar. Parking it out of sight of the control booth.

Inside the hangar was an aircraft. A dilapidated Cessna 182. One of the twenty-three thousand ever produced. It could have been built in eighties, or the nineties. Either way it was in a sad state of repair. Patches covered the fuselage like Band-Aids concealing 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 flew.

But he was missing one vital specification. The pilot. Then as if from no-where, an intermittent snore 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?” 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.” He 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 like a dog having a bad dream. Passed wind, sounding vaguely familiar to La Marseillaise. And twitched again with satisfaction. Possibly over sixty, Pierre had established a small freighting business in and out of Turkey. No questions asked. When he was not flying he liked to drink. His liquor supplies often stocked by Alistair in appreciation of his services.

Though a veteran flyer his license had expired decades before. What he lacked in current credentials he made up for it with flying hours. Having 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.

Familiar with the radar systems used by various countries. Flying low over the water to avoid them. Often confusing coast guard radars as shipping. By the time they went to investigate the anomaly had flown the coop. Pierre had become a convenient 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 peculiar facial expression. Then twitched again. He 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 checked out the hangar. Avoiding the doorway, watched for movements of people outside. No one seemed to be too interested in their hanger. Those that did curiously look in, 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 what happened within the hangars stayed within hangars.

Pierre stirred and for a fleeting moment there was hope of getting underway.

Unsure how long he had been out. Alistair would give him another twenty minutes, but no longer. It would be dark in a few 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. Cloud cover would hamper them further.

The afternoon ticked slowly by.

The sun was getting lower on the horizon. Rays creeped into the hanger. Reaching inside the cockpit and began knocking on Pierre's eyelids. 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.

"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... I've brought the family along."

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. 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 girl. 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 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 lads.

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, 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! ... Roooooaaaaaaaar!’ An almighty roar sounded 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.” Yelled back Alistair.

Indicating the approaching men with guns protruding the windows.

“Better get out of here then... Follow me.” Joked Pierre, unfazed by the danger 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 bullets travelled 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 and building speed as fast as Pierre could squeeze it from the throttle. There would be no time to head to the run way with the car closing in on them.

The prevailing wind came at them from across an open paddock. Pierre taxied the Cessna awkwardly over the turf. Shaking the occupants inside and stirring up a trial of dust over the 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 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 rickety 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. Bearing beauty spots from earlier expeditions to forbidden places.

Retracting 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 peering over his shoulder.

Levelling the wings Pierre 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.

“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 whisky up from under his seat. “So tell me... What brings you to town?”

“You know... Usual business for the Vatican...” He replied, 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 and 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... ETA five hours subject to head winds... Please enjoy your flight... In-flight 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.’

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 them. His father seemed to have done this before and appeared quite calm about it all. Despite a heavily bandaged arm his father had now taken controls of the plane. Pierre instructed him through the head set.

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.

Luring 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 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.

Diving the plane to a thousand feet, the detector continued its screaming impeachment. The incessant roar of the engine deafening the warning siren. Pierre was indifferent either way. Looking out the windows for lights below. 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 him. Unable to maintain the low altitude indefinitely. 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. A narrow corridor between Macedonia to the north and Greece to the south would take them over Albania. From there they would fly over the Adriatic Sea. Leaving an hour's flight to Bari. He 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.

On monitoring the gauges. He 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. Seeing tear drops lit in the light, 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 conserve fuel by maintaining level flight and cruise control. There was no way of stopping the leak.

Pierre roused from his evening siesta and opened his eyes and regained his focus.

The cockpit was dark. Lit 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 him, still getting his own bearings.

Checking the fuel gauge and the time expired. Pierre 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 he 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. Dead-reckoning the math in his head.

Suggesting it was 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. A spectacular band of stardust called the Milky-Way stretched from one horizon to the other. Billions upon billions upon billions of stars shone brilliantly above them. Angelic souls shining in unison.

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 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. He would turn the craft north-west and breach the corridor to Albania.

Banking gently to starboard, so as not to wake the sleeping souls in the back.

Arthur’s dreams had returned to normal.

The werewolves had been left behind at the Ottoman boarder. And he found himself not dancing around a Gypsy camp fire, but in a quiet café in Watford. Dancing with Zara, a white daisy in her hair. As a slow song played on the juke box.

This was one dream he did not want to be woken from...



Bari

The single prop propeller screwed into the air.

Pulling the Cessna and its sleeping occupants across the Adriatic Sea. A red LED flashed. Indicating fuel was low and soon a secondary warning would sound its alarm. There was a reserve tank, but its range was limited. Estimating they still had two-fifty kilometers before they reached Bari, Pierre's experience told him the tanks would give him two hundred. Give or take.

He decided to gain altitude and gently pulled back on the stick. The more height he had, the more guiding distance he would have. The most dangerous part of flying was not the landing. But 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. Air speed would create air flow over the wings that would create lift. And hopefully gain additional distance.

Eyes peeled the horizon for distant lights.

Still too far away for any to be visible. And any radar warning would have to be ignored. The benefit of staying aloft was greater than the cost of diving lower. Losing valuable altitude and precious distance. 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 light on the fuel gauge, and said nothing.

Stating the obvious would be pointless.

In his peripheral vision Pierre 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.

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. Crackling incomplete words. Nothing recognizable, nothing coherent. They were close, but not close enough.

Then suddenly the fuel alarm blared a warning for all to hear.

"Pas maintenant! Not now." Cursed Pierre killing the alarm so as not to wake the boys in the back. Flicked an overhead switch to open the reserve tanks.

Hoping Alistair had filled them. 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 thanked.

Pierre desperately needed a land mark to gauge the distance remaining.

The current altitude would give them another five to eight kilometers depending on the wind direction that would slow them down. Or speed the up. He sensed they were a lot further out than that.

The radio static grew louder. Audible voices cackled like witches through the head sets. Alistair listened carefully, picking out what they were saying. And to whom. In the distance faint lights appeared. Too dim to be a city. A town perhaps. Hopefully Bari. Possibly not.

Three possibilities existed.

One, they would crash into the ocean short of land. Not the preferred outcome thought Pierre.

Two, they land on a road or paddock. Assuming they could find one in the dark. And miss the overhead powerlines.

Or three. The one Pierre desired most. Was to land at the remote air field where he had a hanger.

But how much had the side winds blown them off course? He would soon find out. An air bubble entered the fuel line. The engine gave a cough as it had a tickle in its throat. The warning alarm would sound again as soon as the reserve tanks were dry. Pierre was not a religious man. He took a deep breath and crossed himself.

And prayed to the Patron Saint of Pilots. Whoever that was.

Gauging the tanks still had about twenty to thirty kilometers remaining. Easing the plane slowly higher, waiting for the evitable warning. The engine gave another fur-ball cough. As air bubbles began to build and strangle the fuel line.

Then the fuel alarm tolled its death knell.

Screeching out an incessant warning of imminent danger. Knowing the engine would stop at any moment, Pierre killed the alarm. Not before Arthur and Phil had awoken in the back. A red light was flashed brilliantly on the panel. Only Pierre and Alistair knew what it meant. Phil and Arthur were quickly figuring it out. Powerless but leave it to Pierre to do what he did best.

After more intermittent coughing fits, the engine suddenly fell silent. Deceased. Hearing only the eerie sound of the air rushing coarsely over the wings. The Cessna maintained its initial momentum, before the forces of friction took hold to retard its speed.

Pierre eased the Cessna into an angled descent, soon followed by a sensation of falling. Arthur and Phil looked at each other wondering what was going to happen. Engineering minds calculating what they had never studied. Aerodynamics.

Still over five kilometers out.

Pierre would need to get the approach right the first time. There would not be enough altitude for a second chance. Air speed steadied as the plane descended and the lights below grew closer and brighter.

To their left, they could make out the remote airfield with its runway dimly lit. Banking was a risk as it would dampen the air speed. Would they have the altitude to regain the air speed required before the plane would stall?

“Gently old girl ... Gently...” Pierre coaxed his lover, “...Facile maintenant.”

Audible only through Alistair’s headset.

Arthur hyperventilating with the anxiety. Phil on the other hand alert, veins coursing with adrenalin. Eyes focused on the lights below. Pierre had done the math and knew it would be close. Red runway lights that marked their approach grew brighter. Pierre extended flaps to provide more lift. But at the same time reduce valuable speed. Timing was everything.

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.

“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 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. The 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 unconventional landing. The Cessna’s lights, the only tell-tale sign giving their presence away.

09:07PM

“Thank you Gentlemen for flying Air-Pierre... I hope you enjoyed your flight. I look forward to flying with you again.” Announced Pierre shutting down the Cessna’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... There a 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 cover.” Assured Alistair.

“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 mass 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.” Looking to the small office.

Alistair made the call. Informing the Cardinal 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 men ready should there be trouble.” Cassini informed. He would not be unprotected if it came to showdown.

“Good to know... See you around midnight.” Advised Alistair and hung up.

A weary look came over his face, the pain in his arm reminding him it needed attention.

He had taken the last of the pain killers at his safe house. His arm beginning throb with pain. A few more hours and it would all be over. He hoped. He had been on many 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 him 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?” He asked.

“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.” Knowing he 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.” Walking into what constituted his office.

Peeling the cap off a half empty bottle of whisky from a desk drawer and took a heavy swig. 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.

A damp disused smell stained the Fiat’s interior.

The tarp having marinated the fiat in the hangars 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 whisky.

“You okay Dad?” Asked Arthur concern for his father.

“Yeah good...” His father lied. “...Why don’t you drive?” Throwing him the keys.

Starting 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 whisky bottle he poured some onto his hand to wash away the blood.

‘It would not hurt Saint Peter to try a descent whisky’, he thought and smiled to himself.

“Is that it?” Asked Arthur curiously.

“Yeah... This is what all the fuss and bullets are about.” Said his father examining the dull silver ring.

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 Ring’s significance. Two thousand years ecclesiastical history upon his father’s finger. The rock on which the church was founded.

“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”. His father informed him.

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. Eyes as 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 whisky to distract his mind from the growing pain in his arm.

Arthur drove quietly pass the hangers that lined the air field and made his way to the open road. The Fiat’s head lights revealing the road ahead. Phil sat in the back. His eyes searching the lights of the hangers.

‘Bring it on’, he thought, ready for another fight.

In the air they were safe.

But on the ground they were vulnerable. They had become targets again. 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.

Avoiding multi-lane motorways that could see them boxed in by Braun's men. Alistair was dealing the cards now. It would take a little longer, but he would be in control for now. The options narrowed 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. Hoping he would not have a momentary lapse of concentration. With a fuel tank three quarter full quick calculations told him 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 take rural roads running parallel to the highway and keep any followers guessing.

A full moon lit the night sky its brightness mollified by the passing street lights and the fiats headlights on full beam.

Feverishly Arthur scanned the road ahead. Checking rear mirrors, wary of any vehicles that lingered too long, or too close. Most freight trucks and the cars heading home. Arthur wished he was heading home. The Fiat's engine hummed within cabin of the car. After the screaming Cessna for the past five hours, the feeble groan was bliss. Either that, or he had gone partially deaf in the Cessna.

"How you doing Phil?" Called out Arthur, looking at him in the back seat.

"Good mate... Good... It's been quite a day eh?" He replied, finding it difficult to sum up the day's events.

"Yeah, and it's not over yet." Responded Arthur, recalling only hours before they were in Istanbul. Now they were heading across central Italy.

"Yeah quite a day... Almost home." Said Arthur taking in a breath of the cold night air, refreshing his concentration.

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, the fiat accelerated reluctantly. Gradually moving by the large lorry. As they passed the lorry cabin. The driver looked down and stared a little longer than perhaps he should have. Almost observing rather than a glancing as most drivers would.

Catching Arthur's curiosity.

Pulling in front of the lorry, continued to accelerate 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. A rush of cold air slaps Phil across the face. Adjusting the side mirror Alistair 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. Phil, be prepared for anything okay.” Alistair instructed 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 won’t be long before others are scouring the road for us...” Advised Alistair, “... Take the next road ahead.” 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 out 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 to follow them. 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. 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... They won’t have time to get men there before we get there... Hopefully they’ll think we’ll stick to the main roads.”

It was going to be a long winding route if they wanted to evade those tracking them.

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.

Headlights marked its presence in the unseen historic Italian country side that 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. On foot. One step at a time. No Eurostar, or Fiat to commute them.

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 he searched out the windows for stationary cars. 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.

“You got that right.” Conceded Alistair.

“Make very shot count... Aim for the radiator. Tires... Or the driver if you have to.” Suggested Alistair.

“Already ahead of you on that Mister McGee.” Anticipating his next move.

Having grown up in a rough Glasgow neighborhood. Phil had an innate instinct for survival. 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. Alistair was in no position of firing a control shot backwards and Arthur blocked his window. It was up to Phil. Which he had wound down and waited for the vehicle to draw nearer. The cars sped along the single lane road. There would be no overtaking here.

“Wait and see what they do.” Warned Alistair monitoring the side mirror.

Nearing *Gravina*, Alistair assessed that was where the following car would make its move. And there could well be more cars in waiting for them. The town provided more roads to evade capture.

The ensuing car pulled back and maintained its distance.

The town was just ahead, street lights illuminating the night clouds above. Alistair calculated 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 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 township’s 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 telling anyone, 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 his son’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. Negotiating the tight winding roads outside *Tolve*. 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 quietly 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 the mountain air was crisp. Staying on the outskirts and circumnavigate the city. Its winding streets could easy trap them within the ancient labyrinth.

The west coast junction lay another hundred kilometers ahead of them. The roads to turn down grew fewer the closer they got to *Naples*...



Home Leg

Rail tracks ran parallel to the road.

Despite previous thoughts to the contrary Arthur would prefer a train over driving. Keeping his mind occupied, re-focused his attention on the road ahead. His father and Phil watched out for rouge vehicles.

Nearly two hours into their journey and reaching the half way mark they had made good speed, and time. But with every passing kilometer, they were getting closer to danger. Braun's men would be lying in wait up a head. But where? Where had they set their trap? Alistair 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 on other roads, as part of a greater net cast to capture them. Not wanting to share their bounty with the other, the fiat would be theirs'. And the spoils.

Phil spotted them first.

Followed by Alistair. Arthur was too engaged on driving to have notice anything. His eyes straining on the road ahead. An impending adrenalin rush was about to change all that.

"Two bogies at six o'clock." Warned Phil, gaining Arthur's attention to the rear mirror.

"See them..." Confirmed Alistair. "...Hold your speed and course Arthur."

"We won't make a move until they do." Suggested Alistair.

The menacing cars followed some distance behind them.

"Don't let them box us in Arthur." His father warned.

Alistair checked the cannon in his hand. Fully loaded and ready to broadside any Italian pirate brigantine that came too close.

"Wind down you window Arthur." Instructed his father.

Taking the whisky bottle, took a large swallow to numb the growing pain in his arm. Then offering the bottle to Phil who took a swallow 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'll 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." He directed.

"Yes Sir." Confirming 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 gaining on them. As the car pulled closer he saw the menacing faces of the men with grins. Waving guns as though to torment them 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.” Said Phil itching for action.

The first car neared the Fiat’s 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 speed with the car beside them.

Taken back by the sudden maneuver. The men within the car scrambled to lower their windows. But all too late. Alistair had anticipated their confusion. Leaning over Arthur to his 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.

Shattering windows of the other car and the men dived for cover. Causing the driver to veer violently from the road and career into a tree. Catapulting men in the back seat violently forward. 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!” 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.

Not stopping to assist their fallen comrades. The second car continued passed the bloody mangled metal wreck. The bounty would be all theirs. And accelerated after the Fiat. Firing chaotically as it got closer. Punching holes into the back of the Fiat. Sounding sharp metallic bangs as bullets struck the Fiat’s heavy metal skin. Sending sparks into the air.

‘Pierre won’t be happy with the ventilation holes’, thought Alistair.

With that thought a rouge bullet 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 pulling out a pump action shot-gun.

“Give them a taste of lead Phil! ...” He instructed him, “... This could get noisy Arthur.”

“What?” Asked Arthur over the ringing in his ears.

Misaimed 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. Aimed at the radiator.

‘Boom!’ The sonic boom reverberated inside Fiat’s interior.

Peppering lead pellets into the pursuing metal beast’s gills Shattered a headlight, half blinding it. Pumping it again, he 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 being fired and missing, steam bellowed from beneath the bonnet of the stricken car. Blinding the driver from the road ahead. Henchmen fired recklessly as a last ditch effort to stop the Fiat.

But to no avail.

Their own car coming to a stammering halt in the middle of the road. Plumes of white steam billowed from its punctured body. Watching as the Fiat's red rear lights disappeared through a wall 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 begin to seep through the bandages.

"You okay dad?" Asked Arthur with concern.

"Yeah. Yeah... I'm fine... Not much longer now." Said Alistair, denying 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. Dovizi had kept Marconi and Braun informed as to the destination of the Ring. The Fiat was still another hour away from Naples. There were back roads they could take to avoid the bright city lights.

Darkness was their only friend now.

Transiting 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.

Two bloody noses to none.

On entering Salerno turned down a side street that ran parallel to the main road north. Hoping to keep Braun guessing their next move. Alistair was right. The street unblemished of henchmen as it ran the length of the city.

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." Joked Arthur.

And with that Arthur turned 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. Only watch they drive on by harmlessly. Perhaps they were being paranoid. Perhaps they were only being cautious. Either way, they were not going down without a fight.

"Go with the flow Arthur... Try to blend in." Said his father, leaning back in the seat.

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

Standing atop the steps of the Cathedral di Santa Maria Assunta, stood the Cardinal and Father Francis.

Dressed in their clergy robes. Looking like props to the ancient Cathedral. To one side, unseen, stood Father Michael. Three large dark double wooden doors guarded the façade like fat stolid monks. Its massive interior decorated with elaborate gold gilded frescos. Reminiscent of the Sistine Chapel. Its exterior etched with meticulous carvings. At its center a large central circular window.

Appearing somewhat out of place, large stone Gargoyles perched on high. Chiseled with exaggerated features. Looking grotesque and threatening. Glaring down on those below. Striking fear into the hearts of those from below. Scaring them into church for safety and salvation. Otherwise, they would serve as water spouts, gushing rain water through their open jaws before plummeting to the ground.

Their nostril's twitched. Sensing not rain, but blood in the air.

Though its doors closed at midnight.

Hundreds of tourists continued to take photographs of the flood lit structure. Cassini and Francis stood quietly waiting. Hands crossed before them holding bibles.

The café opposite doing a brisk midnight trade. Cassini eyed the faces in the crowd. Gauging for those that did not belong. His men strategically positioned among the tourists that were taking in the coolness evening. The number of people provided convenient 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 in person that evening. 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. A price he was prepared to pay for the Ring. It was too exquisite to let slip from his reach, and from his finger. Soon the ring would be his.

Braun would be in Munich. Licking wounds Cassini had inflicted on him. His men would be there for the Ring's arrival. Sitting around café tables. Blending in with tourists. Fidgeting with 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.

Their priority, to 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?

Arthur turned the Fiat onto 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 lined with cars with less bullet holes in theirs. Reaching the huge round-about of the Pizza Nicola Amore, 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', he thought.

On his lap hidden from view, the thirty-eight reloaded at the ready.

Modern three terraced buildings lined the sidewalks. A string of expensive cars parked lined the curbs. Alistair could see the flood lit square of the Cathedral coming into view and the Cardinal, standing alone side Francis at the top of the steps. He also saw the café and men milling about reading newspapers.

"Pull over here Arthur!" Alistair suddenly instructs him.

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 punctuated with 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, surveying the lay of the land.

Tourist. Good for them, bad for tourist. They would soon scatter when the shooting starts.

"See the café over there? ... Those men aren't tourist." Informed Alistair.

"How can you tell?" Arthur asks curiously.

"Who reads a newspaper at midnight? ... And there's too many suited gentlemen for my liking... 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?" Asked Arthur.

"How fast can you run Arty?" His father asked looking at him.

"I'm not leaving you Dad!" He 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.

Leaving a white band mark on his finger. A silhouette left from 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." Looking to 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?" He instructed his new recruit.

With pleasure Mister McGee... With pleasure." Said Phil grinning.

"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.

Enjoying the momentarily peace, before the monumental 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. The pain killers had long since worn off. His wounded arm throbbing with pain. Pointing the thirty-eight to the sky fired two loud shots into the air.

‘Boom! Boom!’ The cannon loudly sounded 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 thunder. Spitting lightning from their barrels.

“Run! Arty Run!” Alistair yelled over 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. Cassini exchanged explosive volleys with the gunmen. Bullets smashing into the stone seats. Fragments of shattered stone and dust flew into the air. The gunfire was deafening. Gunmen fired indiscriminately towards the Fiat and the Cardinal. Pitting the ancient walls of the Cathedral. It had faced more terrifying opponents before today.

Arthur crouched behind a stone seat to catch his breath, but also from the gunmen’s bullets.

Raising his gun 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. And fired a thunderous shot at it and stopping it in its tracks. Men tumbled out and began firing in his direction. Phil answered them with volleys of his own. Lead pellets doing far more damage.

“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. Bullets punching at concrete posts and stones seats. Arthur was trapped. Seeing the gunman taking aim at Arthur, Francis runs towards him. Diving at him just as the gunman fire his shot. An excruciating pain strikes Francis in the shoulder sending him and Arthur tumbling to the ground.

Michael watched as bullets flew about him. Through him.

In anguished pain Francis looks up and sees Michael standing beside him. A halo of bright light glowed not around him. But from him. Michael knelt beside him and placed a hand over Francis’ bloody wound.

“You?” Said Francis weakly, looking at Michael.

Francis' eyes closed. 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 but a few days earlier. Instinctively he reaches for the pain in his shoulder, only to discover the wound and the pain that were no longer there.

Seeing Michael sitting opposite. They looked at each other. No words would be spoken. 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, feels again for the wound in his shoulder that is no longer there. His mind telling him one thing. His faith telling him another. Looking about for Michael, to find 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 hastily retreating into the dark shadows.

It was all over in a matter of seconds.

Gun smoke filled the air as Swiss Guards secured the area. Rounding up those that had fallen behind 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... But they have to be back in their barracks by sun rise..." Advised the Cassini.

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.” Arthur reminded him. Happy he came nonetheless.

“Yeah I did. Didn’t I? ... Do think we could get a beer around here? I’m kind of thirsty after all this shooting.” He quipped.

“We might be barred from here for a while... Seeing how you shot up the coffee shop.”

“Good point.” Phil conceded.

Cardinal Cassini gathered the troupe 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, 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.

The Cardinal raised his hand to stop 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.”

Indicating for them to step inside a long black shining 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 arrived. Sirens wailing and red-blue flashing lights. Oblivious to the violent events of the past twenty-four hours. Unsure what to make of the carnage and smoke still lingering in the air.

Looking down upon the flood lit square. Blood dripping from talons and beaks. Gargoyles. Their bellies fill. Having feasted upon the souls of the fallen...



Vatican Vault

Arthur awoke the next morning.

Eyes opening to 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 remembered where he was said, “...Sorry.” As if God, or someone equally as important had heard him.

Arthur took in the large room he found himself and stared back the painted ceiling of 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” He inform him.

A new day awaited them. No more train rides. No more gun fights. No more werewolves. But 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.

An arm freshly bandaged but looking revived after a night’s sleep.

“Come downstairs... There’s someone you need to meet.” He 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.

“What a small world.” Said Arthur chuckling.

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, as if in fright, quickly stood up to face the eminent dignitary.

“Holy Father, please forgive us.” Francis apologizes for them.

“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 His Holiness graciously.

Arthur was stunned being in the presence of His Holiness. 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. Invaluably significant to the Church. Carefully removes 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 His Holiness's open hand.

His Holiness took a moment to examine its raw beauty. Blessing it. And closed his hand around it. Feeling the residual warmth. Placing the Ring casually into a pocket of his robe. The Bishop of Rome place a hand on Arthur's shoulder. Then raising the other with two fingers in unison, His Holiness blessed Arthur and Francis.

"Dominus vobiscum (*The lord be with you*)." His Holiness quietly bestowed upon Arthur and Francis.

The words were lost to Arthur. But to Francis, the words brought a comfort. 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 Pontiff he was Church of England.

Taking Arthur's hand gently with both of his, the Pontiff 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 crushing blow. The Pontiff continued.

"I will be giving you a personal tour". Informed the Pontiff, a small smile appeared on his face, hoping he had not caused too much distress with Francis.

Only to have Francis smile with some relief. Taking Francis by the arm led him down a long corridor towards the Sistine Chapel. Followed closely by Michael pointing out a picture of himself on the ceiling.

"That's me! ... 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. Sorry to have dragged him into the violent affair. Knowing it was for his own safety. Going to over to him, extends 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 needed to rest his arm and would see them back in their 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. Shelves upon shelves of artefacts filled the immense vault. The Vatican Vault. Containing 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.

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 cardboard box. Brushed away the dust with a hand. Gently 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 it 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 another scroll he recognized.

“Hmm... 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.” 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... 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 lost on him. Then handed it back to the Cardinal, placing it carefully back inside its box.

Walking about the isles, examining and describing relics. Objects that appeared ordinary. Pieces of wood. Long rusty roman nails. Some appearing as treasures. Goblets and ancient gold coins. Now it was time to leave the scared vault.

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.”
The Cardinal informed him.

Francis had discussed his encounters with Michael and the Cardinal. 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. 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. And opened it to discover what it could be.

“Oh man! ... A new laptop! ... Mate_ this is so_ cool!” He exclaimed, quickly booted it to life.

The note that accompanied the gift stated that the technicians had managed to restore *most* of the applications and directories from the former laptop.

“Most? ...” He wondered, “...Oh...” Realizing the Vatican cyber spiders had stumbled upon a buried forbidden directory, obviously not deep enough, “...Sorry.” He apologizes again to an unseen God.

A Vatican screen saver popped up displaying two crossed keys.

He would not be deleting that too soon. Stoked, 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.

‘They hadn’t delete 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.” 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 having cleared their way through Customs, the trinity of weary adventures headed instinctively to the Tube station. And waited for the next train heading to Watford.

Arthur and Phil found themselves laughing to themselves sitting 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 his father. "Enjoy... It might bring back some *fond* memories".

"Fond memories?" Feared Arthur recalling Werewolves.

"Gypsies! ..." He exclaimed recalling Zahra.

"Gypsies?" Parroted Phil unsure what to make of his sudden 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 about girl." He said keenly with courage coursing his veins.

Alistair turned to 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 send out The Swiss Guards."

"I know, ha." Thinking she probably would.

Looking to the paperback in his hands. Hoping it was still be there. Hoping it was not all just a dream. Slowly opened the book and saw the fresh white daisy laying between the pages. As if it had just been picked. And grins to himself. He had played the scene out in his head a thousand times in his mind.

Phil headed home, keen to update his dating profile with adventures to Far East.

Alistair was just happy to be home, keen to settle into his comfy arm chair and a slice of Ginger Cake.

Arthur headed to the café, hoping Zara was working.

The café doorbell sounded as it opened, and Arthur discovers the café is empty.

Zara alone behind counter.

"Hello Stranger... Haven't seen you for a few days... Where you been?" She asked curiously, smiling as though a dear friend had appeared.

"It's a long story." He smiled back.

"I've got plenty of time, was just closing for the day." As she turns the close sign over on the glass door.

"I've got something for you." Opening the paperback and gently places the white daisy into Zara's hand.

“How did you know? ... They’re my favorite.” Inserting it into her long sandy brown hair.

Zara steps closer and kisses him. He grins and kisses her back. The juke box plays a slow song. Holding her close, he dances with her. Feeling her body against his. As he had in his dream. Slow dancing as if they never wanted the song to finish. Sharing a communion of thoughts He looks into her eyes.

“Would you like to go out sometime?” He asked anxiously.

“I’d like that... Maybe we could get a coffee.” She suggested.

“*Coffee?* ... Yeah.” Amused at the thought.

“So... What’s this mystery that kept you away?” She asked curiously.

“You won’t believe me if I told you.”

“Oh, I don’t know... Try me.”

“Before I do, I have to ask you something?”

“What’s that?” Zara asked.

“Do you believe in *Werewolves?* ...” He began.

Outside the café Arthur could hear someone whistling an annoying tune.

And smiled to himself. It was good to be home again...



The Entity

Somewhere in a grotto beneath the Vatican, some six months later.

Electric lamps throw moving shadows over the walls. Shadows of two men in mortal combat. A metal horn lashes out at Phil. Missing flesh by millimeters. Sweat dripping from his forehead. Gasping for breath in the stifling heat of the enclosed chamber. A foot slips in an indentation on the floor. A hole long since filled in a millennia before.

Phil catches himself from falling. The aggressor comes at him again, only to be thrown to the dusty floor. Tumbling over and over to land on his feet again. Frustrated Phil comes at the man, pushing the knife away and swinging a low punch to the man's stomach. Unconventional, unexpected, it worked. Cassini grins at Phil's improvisation.

Again the man comes at him. Again Phil throws the man floor, pinning the arm with the knife with his knee. Throws three successive heavy fake blows to the man's face. The man taps out.

Rushing from the grotto, Phil scampers up the worn stone steps to another chamber, scampered by Rufus two thousand years earlier.

Rufus would have won that race.

On a table lay three weapons, two pistols and an assault rifle. Grabbing the first of the pistols, flicks the safety.

'Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!' Firing shots in quick succession at a suspended paper target some thirty feet away. A tight grouping of holes pepper the center. Tearing it to shreds before falling to the ground.

Another weapon and another blast of lead.

'Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!' Another grouping, bar one rouge shot that hits to the side.

"Damn!" Phil curses, indifferent to those listening on.

Dispensing the pistol cocks the assault rifle and fires at a sack dummy some sixty feet away.

'Ratta-tat-tat-ratta-tat-tat-ratta-tat-tat-ratta-tat-tat-ratta-tat-tat-ratta-tat-tat-ratta-tat-tat.'

A deafening cackle of lead spat from the muzzle. Emptying the magazine. Riddling the dummy with holes, causing it to bleed sand to the floor.

Without time to think he rushes up the stair well with the ghost of Rufus on his heels. The next chamber larger than the last. Assailing ropes, crawling beneath heavy nets and scampering over netted walls. Is confronted with the assailant he thought he had dispensed with earlier.

"You again? Don't you ever give up?" Asked Phil feeling exhausted.

The clock was ticking and the man stood in the way to a length of rope dropping to the lower chamber. His escape. The man lunges at him. Phil was ready for him. Deflecting the knife hand in one swift motion, raising a knee into the man's groin send shim groaning to the floor.

Rushing past the man, Phil dives for the rope and slides down.

Hitting the floor with a thud.

Panting. Exhausted. Sweating profusely. Looks up to the Cardinal standing over him, barely breaking sweat. A stop watch in one hand. A clip board in the other.

"How as that?" Asked Phil, pleased with his third attempt.

“Too slow... Again.” Orders Cassini watching over his new recruit.

“Oh_ come on... I’m knackered.” Protested Phil gasping for breath.

“Those after you are not going to stop because you’re *knackered* Phil... Again!”

Gasping for breath Phil trudges to the start of the obstacle course. Determined to outrun, outfight and outshot anyone who crossed his path. Cassini watches the fledging protégée depart. There were creases, an anger that could be channeled elsewhere.

He showed promised.

Sometime later, Phil lands at the feet of the Cardinal again.

Cassini’s stops the clock at twenty seven minutes and thirty three seconds later. A personal best for Phil.

“How was that?” Panted Phil, sweating profusely.

“Better...” Surmised the Cardinal. Not giving away how well he had done, “... But there’s always room for improvement... Wash up and meet me in my office.”

“Yes Sir.” Relieved it was over.

Wiping his forehead, a face smeared with grind and dirt and sweat.

“How’s he doing?” Asked Alistair anxiously sitting opposite.

“Better than I expected.” Cassini pressed his hands together to form a steeple. Contemplating the file on his desk.

“Is that it?” Asked Alistair looking to the benign pale green file, thick with photographs and surveillance notes.

“Hmm.” Cassini grumps unsure if Phil was ready.

Phil appears at the door looking somewhat different to before. Clean fresh clothing. Combed back hair.

“Come in Phil. Take a seat.”

“Phil.” Acknowledges Alistair.

“What are you doing here Mister McGee? Where’s Arthur?” He asked inquisitively looking about, expecting him.

“He’s at home getting ready for the wedding. And working. Something you should be thinking about.”

“Getting married? Never.” Protested Phil at the thought.

“I meant working.”

“No rush Mister McGee. Kind a liking it here.”

“Don’t get too comfortable Phil... I have a little assignment lined up for you... Both of you.” Informs the Cardinal.

Phil’s eyes light up with anticipation of what it could be. Memories of Istanbul still fresh in his mind.

“Istanbul?”

“Closer to home... Naples.”

“Hmm... What’s there? Can’t the local police handle it?”

“Unfortunately, they are as much a part of the problem as they would be the solution.”

The Cardinal pushes two files towards the two men.

Alistair the veteran, Phil his apprentice.

“Can’t be any more difficult as Istanbul and Naples? ... Can it?” Asked Phil deflecting the danger.

“Danger is real no matter where you go Phil. There are men out there that will go to great lengths to acquire a relic. More so to keep them in their possession.” Cassini enlightened his protégée.

“I understand Cardinal, sorry...” Phil sits back and opens the file of large glossy black and white photographs, “...Looks like a villa?”

“That’s right... Villa San Michelle. Heard of it?”

“Not really, should I have?” Probed Phil.

“Current owner, a one Don Marconi... You encountered his men at the square if you recall.”

“Those were his men?”

“His, and Braun’s... Or what was left of them.”

“Hmm... What’s at the Villa? Another Ring?” Inquired Phil.

“It’s all in the file, you find a listing at the back... Seems Marconi has been busy.” Grins the Cardinal, re-examining the list of relics an informer had dispatched to him.

“Whoa... We’re going to need a truck.”

“Most of them are fake.”

“How do you know that?”

“We hold the originals already... In the Vault...” Informs the Cardinal grinning, “... I’ve highlighted the items we are after.”

“Okay, nails... A chalice... Not the...” Phil began to say.

“Perhaps, we won’t know until we examine it... You leave within the week. I’ll have my men at your disposal.”

“Thanks Cardinal. Best we be off and study these.” Advises Alistair standing to leave.

“Phil... Before you go, I have something for you.” Cassini catches his attention.

The Cardinal opens a draw and takes out a small black velvet box. And hands it ceremoniously to him. He is unsure what to make of the gift.

But this was no gift.

He had proved himself with the repatriation of the Ring. Risked his life. Every assignment might be his last. He opens the ebony box to discover a gold ring with a dark blood red stone. Its relief a Cross and Sword.

The sign of the Entity.

“Welcome to the Entity Phil... I don’t need to tell you what that means. What happens within these walls stays within these walls.” Extending a hand to cement the allegiance.

“I understand Cardinal... Thank you. It’s an honor to serve.” Pocketing the black velvet box.

But feels something inside his pocket and remembers.

“Oh, I almost forgot... I have something for you...” Pulling the object from his pocket, “...I found it while down in the grotto. Must be a toy of some sort?”

Handing the Cardinal a small wooden carved horse.

Rufus’ eyes light up with excitement. He had wondered where it had gotten to. Cassini examines the grubby small wooden horse. Stained with time. Stained with blood. A thumb rubs the dirt and dust away.

Its significance lost on him.

“Hm! Most interesting, thank you Phil...” Placing the toy horse on his desk, front and center, “... Now if you excuse me, I have a funeral to attend to... Cardinal Dovizi... May God have mercy on his soul.”

And wondered if he had said too much.

“Oh I’m *sorry* to hear that.” Alistair understood the inference.

“Yes, it *seemed* he had a *heart condition*... It was only a matter of time before it *caught up* with him.” Cassini purses his lips.

A grave look comes over his face. Some assignments were never easy.

“Indeed... Best leave you to it then... We’ll be in touch.” Said Alistair holing up the file. Phil followed behind him.

And closed the door behind them.

Cocooning Cassini within his opulent office.

Sitting quietly at the ancient wooden desk. As his predecessors had. He stares at the small wooden horse as though it were a crystal ball. Michael sits opposite listening to his thoughts. Rufus stands beside him. Recollecting the grotto and the old man. And strange journey of the Ring.

The office was void of sound.

Lace curtains fluttered in the afternoon breeze. Creating eddies of dancing angel shadows over the marble floor. Cassini sat deep in thought. Deep in prayer. Seeking forgiveness. He had sinned. Wondering God would judge him when that day came?

The telephone rang un-expectantly.

It rang incessantly. Breaking the impasse of the silence and the Cardinal’s thoughts. Breaking him from his prayers.

He eyes the defiant phone with suspicion.

Who would be calling at this hour? Who would be calling him?

Lifting the handset from its cradle, annuls the intrusion of noise. Filling the large room with a deafening silence once again.

“Hello.” Cassini spoke softly and economically...



The Mist

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The second book in the *End of Days* Trilogy...

Escaping the rigors of the NY trauma clinic Ned takes leave to trek from the Adriatic to the Black Sea. Crossing into the fabled lands of Transylvania, he makes camp at the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. That evening a mysterious mist covers the lands shrouding the campsite and he awakens five hundred years back in time.

Having been warned to leave, then being told he was never meant to. His destiny entangled with the Divine and a Witch's unspoken prophecy, lest it changes events. Caught in a twilight realm trapped in time, a young girl must leave to meet a man that would save the world. A Mother Superior longing for a death that would never come. A King longing for a sleep that will never arrive. A son longing for the crown that will never be and a woman he cannot have. Ottoman ride the land seeking a peace, only to find war.

Can he escape the cursed land? A covenant between God and Vlad Tepes. Dracula. A curse where beasts roam at the blood moon. A curse that can only be lifted when the heart finds an innocent home, free from sin.

And a small boy squeals...

Chapter One

The dilapidated old train pulled into an ancient station.

Wheezing a release of steam over the platform. Startling those standing too close. Rattling metal lungs coughed thick black diesel phlegm into the air before making a grumbling sound as if it were talking back to itself. Brakes screeched, jolting a sleeping passenger from a bizarre dream, as it completed the passage from Budapest. Over the Hungarian Steppe and deep into the heart of Transylvania.

Dazed, he sits upright and regains his senses. Squinting into the bright exterior of the new day. His mind taking in the rambling scene out his cartage window. Running his fingers through unkempt hair and combing it from sleepy eyes. Scratching an irritation of a two week old beard.

Having grown accustomed to the unclipped growth that had sprouted about his jaw. Wondering if he should keep when he returned to civilization. It had been weeks since he had last seen a mirror. Detaching himself from the outside world, from the hectic pace of New York. The bloody demands of the trauma clinic which he headed. Leaving behind gunshot wounds and sleep deprivation for the mountain vistas and star lit evenings.

Groaning as his body protested its abrupt resurrection. At least Christ had three days to rest. He had had only ten hours. Eyes strained into the early sunlight and peered out the window of the old train. Acquainting himself to the new surroundings, Sighisoara. Nestled in the cradle of the Carpathian Mountains to the south and east. Renowned birthplace of the original Dracula, Vlad III of Wallachia. Now immortalized by visiting tourists. Lured by the legend and myth of a fictional story written four hundred years after his death. A death that would come not by a wooden stake through the heart, but on the battle field, one cold winter January day.

Such fables were of no interest to Ned.

Preferring to leave Stoker's dark fairytale between the pages of the book from where it had germinated. Fearing there were darker creatures lurking the streets of New York than the idyllic Slavic countryside of Romania in which he now found himself. His goal, to trek from the Adriatic to the Black Sea. Ending at the Danube delta. And he had allowed himself six months to complete the expedition.

The spring sun hung low on the horizon piercing the train's large rectangular window.

Finding a shadow he checks his watch. And reaches for a folded map. His mind gauging the distance travelled so far, and what he had to go. His immediate destination the Bucegi Mountains to the south within two weeks walk. Brows pinch together as though to confirm the schedule. Refolding the map returned it to a tight pouch in his pack. Finding his dusty boots beneath the bench seat that had served as a bed. Secures them and stamps on the floor to regain feeling in his feet that had grown numb by calluses and blisters.

Taking a deep breath stands and stretches his limbs, feeling a stiffness of the past few weeks had caught up with him overnight. The hardness of the bench was no better than the terrain he had pitched his tent. Like the old train on which he had arrived, his body resisted any further movement. The mind was willing but his body had its doubts.

Jerking a pack onto his shoulders like a Romanian weight lifter and feels its familiar weight. Before shuffling it into place. With weary steps he exists the train onto the platform. Strange faces greet him. None wished to speak to the foreigner passing through their lands. He had

generally found locals friendly enough when engaged otherwise each would kept to themselves. He dismisses the benign faces just as they dismissed him.

Standing atop of the steps outside the station he looks up and down the street to get his bearings. The rising sun on his left was the first indication. South would directly ahead of him. The direction he would be heading, but first he needed a few supplies. Inhaling the fresh morning air, he could almost smell the snow on the distant mountains in the crisp spring breeze. A puff of exhaust of a noisy passing motorcycle drew his attention back to the street. Shuffling the pack on his shoulders about again heads in the general direction of the traffic. Like a large white finger pointing skywards he spies a church steeple, suggesting a town center.

Regaining a rhythm in his step makes his way into a large town square.

Small shops punctuate facades of ancient stone buildings. Cobbled pavement smoothed by centuries of feet and wheels. History to the conquerors that had passed over these lands, the Huns, Mongols, Ottomans and Moldavians. Each claiming Transylvania as their own. Each being repelled. Forging brief fragile alliances before fracturing and another suitor laying claim to the throne.

Taking in the Square, feels as though time had stood still and that the world had passed it by. Peasant looking faces stared curiously at him. As though he was being scrutinized. Being watched. Making him feel a little uncomfortable. Assuming they were curious because he was a foreigner. Ned dismissed their inspection and proceeded on.

Looking up at the church steeple. Dwarfing the surrounding buildings. Atop the steps leading to the main entrance of the church, stood a man dressed in black clergy robes. His hands folded before him covering a small dark book. Despite the distance between them, again feeling he was being watched. As though the man was expecting his arrival. The man's eyes followed his movements about the square. Turning away to look in a store window. Hoping to catch the man's reflection. But to discover he had gone. Relieved, turned about only to see the man still atop of the steps again. Turning back to the reflection that told him the man was not there.

'That's weird?' He thought unsure what to make of the shifting aberration.

Goosebumps creeped over his skin. This time looking about to discover the man had now actually disappeared.

"Coffee... That's what I need... Coffee!" Shaking the aberration from his thoughts.

Having lived on coffee twenty-four-seven at the clinic, short of a transfusion it had been his life blood.

He looked about for a likely café and a grocery store and sees what could be one with people leaving with shopping bags from its doorway. The overhead sign in Romanian sign meant nothing to him. Making his way to the store front peers into the window of the darkened store and he could make out familiar shelves of goods.

On opening the door he hears a bell sound overhead his arrival. Startling him before realizing what it was. He grins with embarrassment and enters further inside. It was no Tesco or Seven-Eleven, but it would have to do. Eyes adjust to the dim lighting, his lungs to the dry air, his nose to the strong smell of herbs and spices. It was a bouquet smells he wished he could have bottled and taken with him. No seven-eleven ever smelt like this.

"Buna." He offers a brief Romanian hello, hoping if he had pronounced it correctly.

But the salutation goes unreciprocated as a stolid woman behind the counter breaks conversation with another woman and looks Ned over from head to toe. She looked him over as though examining a patient.

Offering a smile which also goes unrewarded. And he awaited her diagnosis.

“That’s him... He’s the one...” She mutters in Romanian to the other woman who examines the foreigner’s features. “...the Ouster.”

Making out the faint word tries to interpret its meaning. The woman look out to the square for confirmation to a bronze statue of a man standing atop of a stone pillar. Following their eyes out the window wondering what they were looking to. Seeing nothing that drew his attention decides to look over the shelving for the supplies he needed. Suspicious eyes follows his every move. Accompanied by a commentary to the other woman.

Returning with an assortment of items he carefully placed them onto the counter before the stolid lady. Canned food and rice. Batteries, toothpaste and a bar of soap. And waited on the inanimate storekeeper to spring to life and tally the cost. It could well have been a high stake poker game, her face revealed no indication as what she was thinking. Suddenly as if someone had thrown a switch she begins to punch heavy keys on a cash register.

‘Punch-punch-punch-ding.’ Sounds the register loudly, protesting its sudden awakening.

Pondered both the register’s and woman’s ages. Both seemed to have been a leftover of the Soviet occupation. The register groans with the calculation before stammering out a total.

‘Ding!’

A silence hung in the air and the standoff began again.

“How much?” He inquires, hoping the woman spoke some English.

Then offered what little Hungarian he knew.

“Mennyi? ... How much?” He asks, his eyes shifting from the lady to the cash register and back again.

“Patruzeci și șapte Lei” The woman responds hoping the ouster had Romanian currency.

Having no idea what she had just said and his face showed his confusion. The woman points to the register where he could make out the numbers *‘forty-seven’*.

“Ah...” Tearing at a tired stained Velcro wallet.

Pulling several out foreign notes he begins to spread them about on the counter hoping the woman would take what she required. The woman shuffled the currency like a magic trick to find one she liked and removes an American five dollar note. Good currency with even better exchange rate. This foreigner would know no difference.

From the open drawer of the register the woman plucks three small silver coins and pushes them towards him. The coins seemed insignificant to the American note. Quickly, the woman closing the cash register’s drawer heavily to suggest their transaction was completed. She begins to pack the items into heavy brown paper bag. Before pushing that too towards him.

“Thank you.” He thanked the woman.

“Mulțumesc.” The woman extended thanks turning again to the other woman to resume their conversation.

Sensing he had out stayed his welcome.

Opens the door and encounters another *‘ding’* and a flood of brilliant sunlight. Squinting, he enters the daylight again. Next on his immediate agenda was breakfast. It would camp food after this morning and his last chance to enjoy a decent coffee. Across the square he sees the small café he had spied earlier. Stepping onto the cobbled street, narrowly avoids being hit by a scooter

racing pass him. Dismissing the near miss he watches on as the scooter splutters on its way. Leaving behind a plume of stinking grey exhaust smoke in its wake that irritated his lungs and nostrils.

Eyes follow him as he crosses the square.

Nearing the café scrutinizes it. It appeared to be open. No life seem to be seen from the darkened interior. Sliding the pack from his shoulders places it next to a table and begins to pack the items he had purchased inside. Then senses someone standing nearby. Looking up to see a young man in a neat white apron standing before him.

“English?” Ned asks hesitantly.

He was in their country now. There was no need for the waiter to speak English.

“A little...” The young man replies.

“Coffee? ... Bacon? ... Eggs?”

“Bien sûr... Un moment.” The young man gestures disappearing inside the café’s interior.

Followed by sound of voices and plates rattling. Content his order was on its way Ned sits back and takes in to vista of the Square. A central cenotaph stands erect. The statue looked familiar. As though he recognized the face but could not place the name. Honoring someone he thought. He could make out a brass plaque but too far to read.

“Hmm.” He said pondering its significance.

He would have a look afterward breakfast if he remembered.

Suddenly the passing scooter reappeared baffling a noisy exhaust and spewing more smoke behind it. The wall of temporary smog drifted over Ned. An eerie feeling came over him. And those watching, as if it were a sign. The man atop the steps of the church grins amused by the fog of exhaust drifting over Ned. Ned however could not see the funny side. Covering his mouth and nose as it slowly drifted away from him and he could finally gasp a breath of fresh air.

Looking beyond the distant buildings.

Ned could make out the snow-capped peaks of Carpathian Mountains.

Every day would become a little warmer as spring surrendered to the encroaching summer. Taking out the map again unfolds it on the table to go over the route he had marked. With little thought of the wolves and bears that populated the dark forests. Those that he had seen had appeared to be more afraid of him than he was of them.

Running a finger along a dotted line before stopping at a junction. Wondering why it went around a large area when it seemed one could take a shorter route. There was no obstruction indicated on the map and he sits puzzled by the diversion. His eyes searching the map’s legend for markings to suggest a reason. Just then the waiter returns carrying a plate and a large cup of coffee.

“Merci.” Ned thanks the young man.

“Cu plăcere... Enjoy... se bucura.” The waiter offers and walks off to leaves the traveler alone.

Places the cup on the map to hold it in place.

It had been a while since Ned had tasted freshly cook food and enthusiastically consumed every last morsel and crumb. Pushing the plate forward he sat back and allow food to settle in his stomach. The coffee augmenting the culinary satisfaction. Checking his watch knew he would have to start moving if he wanted to make the designated base camp by that evening.

The waiter returns to collect the plates and the Ned hands him several euro bank notes.

“Keep the change.” He offers.

“Mulțumesc.” Slipping the currency into a pocket of his apron.

It was more than enough to cover the meal, and then some. A tip was a rare treat in this town. His mother would be pleased.

“Excuse me...” He asks for the waiter to stay a while longer.

The waiter looks curiously at him as to what he wanted.

“This place... Here...” Pointing to the map and the junction diversion. “This place... Forest?”

The young man examines the map getting his own bearing and identifies location that he was referring to. But then hesitates, displaying a fear that he picked up on.

“What’s wrong?” He asks wondering what had caused the sudden mood swing.

“You no go dare.” The young man warned him. “Take path... Please. Here...” Pointing to the direction he should take.

“Why? ... See... Easy way through here... Nothing there. Forest.” Ned tries to fathom the waiter’s logic.

Was something there that was troubling him?

“Bears? ... Wolves?” He asks hesitantly.

“No... Bântuit... Bad place. Bântuit” The man nervously warns. Short of pleading with the foreigner to persuade him to go around.

“Bân-tu-it?” Ned repeats, reaching for a well-worn pocket book of phrases tries to find the word.

Before coming across its meaning.

“... Haunted?” He said looking back at the young man.

“Yes. Haunted... Stay away from dare... Strange things happen dare.”

“Here? ... Haunted. Like ghosts?”

Ned tried not to laugh. The fear on the young man’s face told him not to.

“Bad things here... Mai rau... Go around here. Here...” The Waiter insists.

The waiter jabs at the map with his finger, at the junction and the dashed line indicating the path around the forest.

“Okay. Okay, I understand... Thank you.” Ned lies refolding his map. “Mul-țu-mesk... Thank you... I’ll go around.” Ned lied again.

The Waiter sensed the foreigner was not have been telling the truth. But he had done his best and warned him nonetheless. Many had gone there, few had ever returned. Those that did spoke of a place not of this world. Walking away, the waiter looks back at the foreigner re-examining the map. Hoping he had heeded the warning.

Ned’s mind wrestled with the strange facts disclosed. Was he afraid of Ghosts? This was Romania. The land fabled for blood sucking Vampires. Stoker had fabricated the legend and Hollywood had propagate it for profit. He did not believe in ghosts. Less so Vampires. There had been nothing in the travel blogs he had read. Putting it down to local superstition and folk-lore refolded the map he would decide when he got there. Standing, levers the pack onto his shoulders. Looking back at the café sees the waiter standing in the doorway observing him leave.

“I’ll go around... Around... Okay?” He told himself said out unconvincingly. Gesturing with his hands a circular motion to annul the man’s fears.

The Waiter lifted his head and gestured his acknowledgement.

Knowing the foolish foreigner would try to cut through the forest. They always did. Looking to the Priest the waiter shrugged his shoulder. As though to say he tried his best. The Priest nodded he had done what had been asked of him.

Destiny, like Freewill must be unbridled.

“Do you know him?” Ned asks the Waiter.

“Father Michael. He watches over us... So to speak.” The Waiter responds kindly.

“I’m sure he does... I best be off if I want to make camp before dark.”

Looking back, Ned waved farewell to the Waiter and lifted the pack on his shoulders. Jiggling it into place and he walked from the Square. Forgetting to look at the bronze plaque beneath the cenotaph that honored him. Eyes followed and watched him leave. As did the two ladies from within the grocery store. They had watched him at the café and talk with the Waiter.

The Priest stood on at the top the steps to the church. Watching the wary traveler leave and walk out of the village square. He would return and they would meet again. As he left, thought he saw a brilliant flash of pure white light. Looking to the sky thinking lightning was about. And waited for the thunder that never sounded. The sky a deep penetrating blue. Puffy clouds floated like cotton balls.

“Strange place.” Muttered Ned to himself, happy to be leaving the village that seemed to be trapped in a time warp.

The mid-morning sun was rising slowly.

The late budding spring rays rejuvenated his spirit and energized his step. Birds chirped and sang songs known only to them. He was amongst nature again. His pack had now become an extension of him. With time he had shredded much of its excess weight leaving but the bare essentials. Leaving behind what he did not need. The only excess weight was a medical box for emergencies. One could take Ned out of the ER, but you could take the ER out of him?

Walking the sealed road south, headed towards the imposing Carpathians in the distance. Letting the country side engulf him, the town faded from view with each forward step. The church steeple peered over the trees to watch him leave. Its white crucifix like a hand reaching up as though to wave goodbye. Or gesture for him not to go any further. Before it too surrendered beneath the trees and allowed him to go on his way. Into his destiny.

Shrubs rimmed the road side as it transformed from tar-seal and then to metal and then to dirt. The track narrowed and at times disappearing briefly before reappearing some distance later. The brightness of the day darkened as he entered the canopy of thick green foliage. Wild blue-bell flowers punctuated the undergrowth as though Monet himself had added the vibrant color.

Sun-light pierced the trees like fanning spot lights, before dissipating into thin air. Leaves rustled as a wind blew throw the upper branches. The smell of damp earth and compost roused his nostrils. A rambling brook flowed nearby. And he could hear toads croaking beneath the undergrowth. Completing the magical realm he had entered into. A place known by all but seen by few, he was one again with nature. His smart phone captured the rare Kodak moments. Finding a rhythm and pace in his step, his body no longer ached and complained as it first had when he began.

“Take the path less taken.” He reminds himself of the purpose behind his journey that he had begun but a few months earlier in Slovenia.

Taking in a deep breath of the cool morning air to fill his lungs and released it.

Excising the demons of the bedlam of the ER. Recalling the daily violence on the streets of New York. A battle field of knife and gunshot wounds. Life and death hanging in the balance. Once hanging in his hands. Hoping his team were coping without him. But that was half a world away now. Unaware of the blood stained earth on which he was stepping. The sound of snapping twigs the cracking of ancient bones beneath his feet.

Checking the compass, heads deeper into the foothills. Taking in the beauty and serenity that came with being one with nature. Entering a monastery of towering pines, like hooded silent monks.

Watching him, as he passed beneath...

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 "End of Days" trilogy. The fuse had been lit and one book lead to another, and as they say the rest is history. His books reflects his keen interest in comparative religion, spirituality, adventure and romance. When not writing he enjoys innovating new products, hearty workouts and hanging out with his three amazingly intelligent and beautiful children Harry, Emily and Rebecca. Then again, he could be found at his local enjoying a craft beer with good friends.

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