

PAX BRITANNIA

MASQUES AND LIES

A Short Story



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*Fortune does not change men;
it unmaskes them.*

– Suzanne Curchod (1739 - 1794)



I



The Eastern Front

AUSCHWITZ, OCCUPIED POLAND, 1944

IVAN STEPPED OVER the cooling body of the Nazi guard and slowly pushed open the door into the dormitory. Filthy pallets crowded the floor, and a few wretched belongings – a girl’s torn dress, a book missing its cover, a silver Star of David – were scattered here and there, but the draughty shed was as devoid of people as all the others had been. He turned back and looked around the empty camp again.

What was going on here?

Even the Nazis had all but disappeared. The guard had been Ivan’s third kill since his arrival, and only the eighth living human being he’d seen. After all their preparations and stealth, Captain Ilyanov’s unit were essentially unopposed; the officers, most of the men, the engineers, even the Jewish workers had all seemingly vanished. Possibly, with the loss of the Frankenstein Corps and their catastrophic failure at Amiens, the Nazis were retrenching. Or, perhaps, the officers and men at Auschwitz

had been warned that Russian forces were on their way, and had fled.

Fled, somehow, taking the time to set fire to their own administrative block and bring all their prisoners with them, but leaving – judging by the plumes of acrid smoke pouring from the chimneys of the massive building looming ahead of them – the factory’s engines burning in the middle of the night.

He turned and glanced over at Daria, emerging from the dormitory opposite his. Her eyes flashed as she met his gaze, like a cat’s, and she solemnly shook her head. Empty. She crept around the side of the building, tight-fitting black fatigues fading into the shadows, and peered around the corner; they were at the end of the last accommodation block.

Ivan mirrored Daria, his skin gleaming in the moonlight, looking around his own building. Nothing. Eventually, he shrugged and walked across the open ground to her.

“What?” she hissed.

“There’s nothing here,” he shot back, gesturing around him.

She nodded. “It’s strange. If it’s a munitions factory, you’d think they’d have gone to more effort to hold it.”

“If.” Ivan shrugged, looking at the fence beyond the dorms; at the cinderblock boxes immediately in front of them, and the great red building beyond, with the smoking chimneys.

“Should we return to Katya and the captain, clarify our orders?”

He shook his head. “We may as well finish our search.”

He kissed her on the cheek, left her side and walked up to the gate in the chain-link fence, casting around for any more guards as he went. He made his way to the first block, a grim, grey building with exposed pipes running along the walls and into the ground. He detected faint traces of harsh chemicals, chlorine and detergent... and something else. On the wall of the block, the word DÜSCHER had been painted in high black letters. *Showers.*



II



Carnevale

VATICAN CITY, THE VATICAN PARTITION, 1998

HE'D BEEN NEARLY conscious of the noise all day.

Crossing the northern colonnade of the Piazza San Pietro and approaching the checkpoint, Father Giacomo Ferrera first became aware of the noise itself – of the cheering, of those incessant whistles, of the wordless shouts, of the sheer *volume* of people talking, drinking, arguing and seducing – and then realised that it'd been hanging just out of hearing since morning, putting him on edge, distracting him from his prayers.

Carnevale.

Every year at this time, for seven days, the city beyond the walls became a riot of noise and colour. The sober young men and women of Rome set down their tools and their books and took to the streets. Every night it was something different; a play about the workers' struggle, a masqued parade through the Campidoglio, swimming in the fountains, bonfires in the streets. For the past two years, blowing little tin whistles all night long

had been all the rage. And around and throughout the rest, young people celebrating, in the houses, in the bars and on the streets.

The irony of it was, Rome had never held Carnevaless, even back when it was still Catholic; everyone used to go to Venice. That's where the masks came from. All this had only been going on for about ten years, courtesy of the Communist Party and their "Cultural Revival" nonsense. Giacomo shook his head.

He slowed just before reaching the checkpoint and ran his hand across one of the stone columns at the end of the colonnade, as if for luck, and looked up. An ugly mix of iron, canvas and wood, the Britannian checkpoint looked like what it was: a tent that had stayed too long and set down roots. Rust ran down the ancient walls from the temporary brackets, mounted to carry telegraph wires into the tent; weeds gathered under the edges of the canvas walls. A peeling sign warned him as he entered, in Italian, German, French and English:

YOU ARE NOW LEAVING VATICAN CITY.
PLEASE HAVE ALL TRAVEL DOCUMENTS READY
BEFORE ENTERING THE CHECKPOINT.

He patted his bag, checking for the fourth or fifth time that he still had the passport and visa he'd been given an hour before, then gathered his black habit around himself and stepped into the blinding glare of the gaslight.

A soft murmur joined the noise of the revelry from beyond the checkpoint. Two of the four desks were open, and other travellers – both priests, like him – were speaking quietly with clerks in British Army uniforms, checking their paperwork and confirming their routes. Cheap folding chairs lined the walls of the tent, this side of the checkpoint, and nine other men and women sat uncomfortably, waiting their turn. Giacomo nodded distractedly at another Jesuit, but sat on his own, apart from the others. He crossed his legs and breathed deeply, striving not to look as anxious as he felt.

Of course, he wasn't doing anything wrong. The passport was quite genuine, as was the visa, and he had every right to enter Rome. But his mysterious errand smacked of espionage, and he couldn't help but wonder what a Party official would make of it if he was stopped.

“You’re meeting someone,” said the Superior General. “A Russian. Name of Konstantinov. At the Campo de’ Fiori, under the statue of Bruno.”

“A priest?”

“No. An officer, I gather. We don’t have a great deal of information on him.”

Giacomo frowned. “And what does he want? What help can I be to him?”

“He’s going to hand over some papers, apparently. Wants to get them to il Papa. I suspect they’ll go to Cardinal Kovacs; he can deal with them.”

“What papers? What’s this about, Father?”

“We don’t know. This Konstantinov says they’ll be of interest to us, but that he can’t enter the Vatican. Get too many questions asked, in Rome and back in Moscow. Says it’s important.”

“Look, it needn’t concern you for very long, my son. Go and meet the man, take the papers from him, bring them back to me and this’ll all be out of your hair.”

And that was that. A monk’s life is one of service, after all.

The queue had moved on; there were only three more people still sitting by the wall, not including himself. Giacomo looked around him.

Behind the row of desks, a rank of automaton soldiers stood impassively, a hint of red light flickering in their dead eyes. He shuddered. He was not a superstitious man by nature; cybernetics was nothing more than a branch of science, every bit as much a reflection of God’s glory as bioscience or chemistry. Some of his own brethren used difference engines in their work. But it’s one thing to know that an android is simply a machine, a work of men’s hands, and quite another to stand in front of one and not feel as though it were... *unnatural*.

If the machines felt his eyes on them – if they were even capable of feeling uncomfortable under scrutiny – they didn’t show it.

And now he was the only man waiting, and a clerk, mercifully human, had come free. He stood and walked up to the desk.

“Name?” The bored clerk gestured to the seat in front of him, not looking up, his pen poised over a blank form.

“Fath – Father Giacomo Ferrera,” he replied, stumbling over the English.

The clerk glanced at his habit. “What order?”

“The Society of Jesus.”

“Mm-hm.” The clerk made a note.

“I suppose you’re an Anglican?” Giacomo asked, attempting a smile.

The man looked up, met his eyes. “The Devil I am. I was born in Cork.”

“Ah. I’m sorry. I cannot tell accents well in English.”

The soldier chuckled. “Quite alright, Father. Now... purpose of visit?”

“Pilgrimage. I am visiting the Basilicas before Lent.”

That was another change. In 1947, the Basilicas outside the Partition were lost to the Church. For nearly thirty years, they had been locked up by the Party, used for storage or administrative offices, until they were re-opened in 1975 as museums. But since 1990, when they were re-consecrated to the new state-approved Church of Italy, Catholics had been allowed to visit them on pilgrimage.

“I went when I first got here. They’re a sight. Passport and visa?”

“Of course.” Giacomo fumbled in his bag for the documents.

“Thank you.” The clerk made some more notes, asked for a signature, and then handed Giacomo’s papers back to him. “I’m obliged to warn you that your visa gives you access to the Socialist Republic of Italy for no more than twenty-four hours, and that you are to remain within the bounds of the City of Rome for the duration of your stay. Also, under the terms of the Lateran Treaty of 1991, you are not to perform any spiritual service for any resident of the Republic, regardless of their stated religious beliefs. I’m sorry, Father, I have to say it. It’s the rules.

“Enjoy your stay. God bless, and have a good evening.”

“Thank you.” Stuffing the papers back into his bag, he walked past the automatons and through the tent into the shouts and the cheers.



III



The Hunt Begins

ROME, THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF ITALY, 1998

IN A SMALL office overlooking the famous Trevi fountain, another visitor looked out on the mounting festivities, awaiting an appointment.

Obersturmbannführer Dietrich Adler was not a typical Schutzstaffel officer: tall and slender, he had unruly black hair and dark brown eyes, a complexion that tanned readily, and a strong, crooked nose. What he lacked in Aryan purity, however, he more than made up for in savagery; it was rumoured that years ago, when he'd overheard a junior officer questioning his heritage, Adler had beaten the poor man to death with a riding crop.

Whether it was true or not, he scared the hell out of Otto.

Adler stood motionless in front of the window, hands behind his back, staring down at the Italians shouting and singing in the piazza below. He held a handmade necklace in one hand – fangs and beads, much as wild young men sometimes wore on the

beaches in America – and idly rubbed one of the fangs between his thumb and forefinger every few seconds. For the past fifteen minutes, it had been the only sign that he was still alive.

Otto met his partner Ingo's eyes, across the room. Neither of them dared move until Adler did. They had been assigned to him from the Luftwaffe two years ago, and he had never so much as addressed either of them by first name. Two of the best wing-harness fliers in their year at the academy, they were seconded directly upon earning their commissions and had been attached to the enforcer ever since, travelling around the world and assassinating the enemies of the Reich.

Down in the piazza, the steady traffic that had come and gone since dawn was gradually becoming a crowd. Even in the cool February afternoon, more than a few people had already taken impromptu dips in the fountain – some voluntarily, some less so – and were drying themselves by the fires that had sprung up in barrels at the corners of the square. A handful of Carabinieri stood around, keeping the peace, but looking slightly nervous as the crowds grew louder and more chaotic.

Sunday night, according to the Ministry for Culture, was masque night, and the revellers in the streets were wearing a dizzying array of guises, from plain, traditional Venetian leather masks to great jewelled and feathered head-dresses that towered over the crowd. It wouldn't make their hunt any easier, but that was no doubt their quarry's intention.

Still not turning from the window, Adler spoke.

"Hartmann. Ritter. Suit up. I'll want you in the air for this one."

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, sir." The two scrambled to put their harnesses on, the steam-driven, cavorite-infused engines that would keep them over the streets of Rome as the Obersturmbannführer hunted. The machines were the reason the two men worked with Adler in place of SS troopers; many of his targets were extremely dangerous, and the older man valued the tactical advantage of flying back-up. In practice, he rarely asked them to wear them, unless he was worried about the mission. Otto exchanged another look with Ingo, but neither of them said anything.

"The sun sets in fifteen minutes. We shall tail him as he leaves his hotel, and apprehend both him and the man he is planning to meet."

“Yes, sir,” repeated Otto, tightening the straps across his chest, and bending to buckle up his legs.

“And remember, take no action until I give the kill-order. The Italians are uncomfortable about our presence as it is.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Ingo, adjusting the throttle on his wing-harness, listening to the pitch of the engine.

Adler slowly lifted the necklace in his hands and fastened it around his neck, and then tucked it under his collar and turned to face them. “It is imperative that we do not fail. Tonight, the very future of the Reich may depend on us.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Yes, sir.”



IV



The Showers

AUSCHWITZ, OCCUPIED POLAND, 1944

DARIA HURRIED OVER to Ivan, scanning the shadows as she came, frowning.

“Now what –” She stopped. “Blood.”

He nodded. “Human, fresh, more than one person. There’s also recent bullet scars on the walls” – his hand brushed the grey blocks – “and this...”

He bent to pick up a white lozenge, about the size of his palm. It was one of several dozen scattered at their feet.

“Soap?” she asked, squinting at it. She looked up at him, her ivory, heart-shaped face shocking in the moonlight. “There was a firefight... over soap?”

“Or someone didn’t want a shower.” He gestured at the steel door, which was rubber-sealed all around, and locked from the outside with a heavy iron wheel.

“I don’t...”

“Can’t you smell it?”

She looked down and cocked her head, sniffing the air and concentrating. For several long seconds, she stood unmoving. A light breeze blew through the camp, whistling softly at the edge of hearing. Ivan stared at her intently.

“I smell... chlorine... detergent... and something else... cyanide?”

“Yes. And under that?”

She frowned again, closing her eyes. “I smell... I – oh, God...” Suddenly her eyes were wide open. “What have they done here?”

He raised his hand to the wheel. “There’s only one way to find out.”



V



Rome At Night

ROME, THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF ITALY, 1998

THE FRENCH SOLDIERS guarding the other side of the checkpoint barely registered Giacomo's presence, nodding at him as he passed them into Rome. He hunched his shoulders against the chill and trotted into the gathering dark, acknowledging the greetings – and occasional jeers and catcalls – of the young men and women passing him, and made his way towards the Ponte Vittorio.

A fine mist had sprung up, slicking the cobbles and making them treacherous underfoot, fogging up Giacomo's lenses so that he had to remove and polish them every few minutes. Barrel-fires were springing up all over the city, and in the baleful, flickering light, the masked figures were starting to look sinister, even demonic. The drink had begun to flow, and the revellers were singing, dancing, hooting and capering in the street.

Most seemed to assume that his habit was a costume, laughing and demanding to know why he didn't have a mask. A tall girl

in a fox mask, no more than half his age, seized him and kissed him sloppily on the mouth, slurring and breathing grappa into his face. He stammered, trying to extricate himself from her grip, and she pouted at him and pleaded to be confessed, before being dragged away, laughing, by her friends.

Giacomo had stared around wildly, looking for any Carabinieri, or for anyone watching the exchange closely; he'd heard the Party used secret police. She's been joking, of course, but he remembered the Irish soldier's warning. He didn't want to be arrested on sedition charges because someone decided he was offering absolutions.

No-one seemed to be paying attention, so he went on his way, eventually reaching the bridge. He paused to regain his composure, watching the Tiber flow underfoot.

Not everyone made the same assumption, unfortunately. A handful of people realised he was a genuine monk, and hurled abuse at him. A policeman even spat at his feet, shouting at him that he should return to the Vatican where he belonged. Giacomo had not been sure what to do. He'd just shown the man his visa, apologised – why had he apologised, he wondered; for doing what? – and walked on, hoping he would leave it at that.

He reflected, not for the first time, on Rome's twin role as the heart of both the Holy Church and godless Communism; not just as the capital of Italy, but de facto leader of the whole League of Socialist Republics, from Yugoslavia to Bulgaria.

Not *Communism*, of course. "Analytical Socialism." Giacomo stopped himself from sneering in the street. The great clockwork machine that filled one whole floor of the Palazzo Senatorio supposedly knew where every grain of wheat grown in the whole of the League was, and where best to send it to the greatest benefit of the people. How listening to the precepts of some machine god was any better than following the orders of mortal men, he didn't know. The very idea of a machine having so much power seemed stupid and perverse.

He shook his head. That was the kind of blinkered feeling that the Superior General had criticised him for. It was the same as the British automaton, after all; nothing more than science, a remarkable application of natural laws.

Wait. Was that the same girl in the fox mask? The drunken one?

Giacomo couldn't be sure. She looked similar, but surely there were hundreds of girls in fox masks out in Rome tonight?

Even if it was, she couldn't be following him, could she? Spying for the Party?

That was foolish. The Italian government wouldn't need to set up some sort of elaborate scheme to spy on him. If anyone were watching or following him, it would most likely just be a uniformed Carabinieri. And he'd seen one or two this evening...

It was now full dark. A pair of lampionai were making their way down the road ahead of him, firing the gaslamps and bathing the cobbles in warm yellow light. Shaken, starting at shadows, Giacomo made his way west.

IT WAS NOW full dark. Otto was perched on the roof of the Palazzo Poli, looking down on the Trevi Fountain, and on the small hotel across the square where Adler had said their quarry was staying. Ingo was out of sight on the roof of one of the other buildings. Adler himself was down on the street, browsing through the papers on sale at a newsagent's stand just outside the hotel.

As Otto watched, Adler frowned, checking his watch for the third time, and then looked up at the roof of the Palazzo and waved towards the roof of the hotel. Otto nodded his understanding – although he doubted if the Obersturmbannführer could see him on the roof – and took to the air, as Adler stormed in the front door of the hotel.

Otto and Ingo circled above the hotel, metal wings clanking as they beat at the air, steam escaping in short puffs and hisses from the engines on their harnesses, scanning the crowds below. They had a basic description of their target, but with most of the people below them wearing masks, he would be impossible to identify. Eventually, Otto pointed out the rooftop fire escape to Ingo, and then banked and swooped towards the third-floor window of the target's hotel room, landing on the window-ledge and smashing in the glass with his boot.

Adler was already in the room, Luger in hand, rummaging through the bureau. Unmoved by the noise, he glanced up, nodded perfunctorily and continued opening drawers.

"We're too late. He left earlier than expected. Search for any hint of his destination."

Otto dropped into the room, casting about himself. The bed had been slept in, although the maid should have been to the room hours before, and the door had been kicked in by Adler. A fire was built in the firegrate, but had not yet been lit. He held his hand out, but there was no heat. A large, striped box filled with crepe paper rested on a chair by the window. This had presumably held their target's mask, which must have been large and elaborate; possibly both a mask and a hat. Otto held some of the crepe paper up to his nose. Oiled leather, perhaps?

"A-ha." Adler had pulled the top sheet off the writing pad on the bureau – on which their target had written a note to the hotel manager – and was peering at the sheet beneath it.

"Our man had a very firm hand, it seems."

He reached into his coat pocket for some charcoal, with which he very gently shaded the upper half of the sheet, holding it close to the desk lamp.

"Under... Bruno.' Does that mean anything to you?"

"No, sir," said Otto.

"Under Bruno... Under Bruno..." Adler tapped the charcoal against his chin thoughtfully, then smiled, coldly. "Of course..."

He wheeled on Otto. "Hartmann! Go get Ritter and head east. Keep me in sight. I have him."

He stormed out the door, his long black leather coat swirling out behind him.



VI



Truth and Lies

AUSCHWITZ, OCCUPIED POLAND, 1944

“...AT LEAST TWO hundred of them. I’d guess they normally kill a few dozen at a time, but these were packed in like sardines. And the other blocks were the same. Some of them resisted and were shot. There’s blood everywhere.” Ivan’s voice shook slightly. The last two guards he and Daria had encountered, at the furnace block, had... suffered, more than they’d needed to. More than their colleagues had, at any rate.

Captain Ilyanov nodded, his face impassive, eyes reflecting the moonlight redly. “And the furnace?”

“It’ll be impossible to count, even when it burns down; the ovens are hot enough to burn bone,” said Daria, more calmly. “But they seem to have overfilled them, too. There must be thousands of bodies burning in there right now.”

The captain was silent for a moment, before turning to the fourth member of their unit.

“Katya, get over to the vehicle sheds. Find out if the Nazis

were kind enough to leave us a working jeep or car. We need to get back to Russian lines quickly.”

The small, red-haired woman nodded and ran off into the camp.

“Why?” Ivan demanded, but the captain didn’t answer. He stepped in front of him. “What are we doing, Josef?”

Ilyanov met his eyes, unblinking. He was two inches shorter than Ivan, with fine, fair hair and a neat goatee. His lips parted slightly, giving a hint of his fangs.

“Firstly, Lieutenant,” he said, crisply, “you will address me as ‘Captain,’ or ‘Sir,’ at least as long as we are in the field. We are far from typical soldiers, but we should observe some discipline.

“Secondly, you will show your commanding officer a modicum of respect, and of trust.”

Ivan flushed angrily, but dropped his gaze and stepped back.

“Of course, sir. Forgive me.”

“It’s alright, Ivan. I understand. This must all have come as a shock to you.”

Ivan’s eyes widened in shock. “You knew, didn’t you? You knew what we would find.”

Daria gasped, looking from Ivan to Ilyanov. “Captain...?”

The captain sighed, picking an imaginary thread off the cuff of his jacket. “Yes, Ivan. Daria. I knew. Moscow has received reports. About this camp... about camps like it. It’s why we were sent here, instead of regular troops. The Romanovs trust us more. And there are fewer people to talk.”

“Fewer people to...?” Ivan gaped. “But surely we have to –”

“To return to the Russian lines and wire our Britannian allies,” Ilyanov interrupted, raising his voice slightly. “To confirm that Auschwitz-Birkenau is a munitions factory as reported, and that we have neutralised it, but cannot spare the men to hold it. To ask them to send an airship to bomb it to the ground; ensure that not one stone is left standing on another.”

“But we –”

“Think of it as a burial, Lieutenant. It’s the only dignity these poor souls are likely to receive.”

“But Captain –”

“Lieutenant Konstantinov,” Ilyanov said, firmly. “Whatever may yet befall between Germany and Britannia, Poland has already lost this war. The Jews have already lost this war. The

resounding defeat of the army that did this is the only punishment we can mete out, and the only satisfaction we can offer.

“Listen: Russia is now occupying half of Poland, and will, by the time this war ends, have it all. At present, all of Europe is satisfied with this; it is, if you will, Russia’s reward for entering the conflict. If this” – the captain flung his arm out, taking in the camp, the empty dorms and the smoke pouring from the furnace – “became public, there would be more pressure to create a Polish state, to give Poland to the Poles. You would cost the Romanovs their one great coup in this war, and these men and women would be no less dead.”

Ivan scowled stubbornly. “But if the British found out –”

The captain threw up his arms in exasperation. “Britannia stands to lose as much as Russia does. The Palestine situation has been on the verge of exploding in their faces for years. What effect do you think this would have?”

The sound of an engine sputtering to life echoed across the camp from the vehicle shed. Katya had apparently succeeded in finding something.

“I still don’t like it.”

Ilyanov rested his hand on Ivan’s shoulder. “If it helps, Ivan, nor do I. I know that the Romanovs are appalled at what has happened here, and I take comfort from that; but I don’t agree with their decision to keep it quiet.

“But these are our orders, and we will follow them. If they’re right, we may actually be saving lives.”

The jeep roared as Katya drove through the camp and pulled up in front of them.



VII



Il Campo de' Fiori

ROME, THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF ITALY, 1998

A LIGHT RAIN had banished the mist by the time Giacomo reached the Campo de' Fiori, and his habit was getting cold and wet and heavy. It did nothing to dissuade the masked revellers, though, who sang and danced, slipping on the cobbles and laughing.

He didn't recognise most of the songs. They sounded revolutionary.

There was old Giordano Bruno, high and severe on his plinth, peeking out from under his hood. The much newer statue of the American, Doc Thunder, stood in stark contrast opposite him, dressed in his signature lightning-bolt tee-shirt, smiling sadly out on the world. Perhaps deliberately, the two appeared to be looking at each other, two giants of rationalism exchanging a glance across the centuries.

A group of eight young men and women joined hands in a ring around Thunder's plinth, and were dancing around it, chanting and giggling.

Giacomo remembered Thunder's visit to Rome and the Vatican, eight years before. The grainy photo, in all the papers, of Thunder standing with President Perroni, their arms around each other's shoulders. Thunder kneeling in front of *il Papa*, asking for his blessing and kissing his ring.

He'd heard rumours about Doc Thunder, more recently; about his lovers, both male and female. He wondered if either man would have greeted the American as warmly, had those rumours been circulating back then.

He sighed. In truth, Thunder had made the Lateran Treaty possible. Without him, Giacomo wouldn't be standing here in Rome, looking at the American's statue. In both cities, he was still hailed as a hero, and the rumours were either firmly ignored or furiously debated.

He huddled at the foot of the old philosopher – there was a tobacconist on the edge of the square, but it was locked and barred for the night, and the awning was locked against the walls – and waited for the mysterious Russian.

A ninth man had joined the group dancing around Thunder, dressed as a Plague Doctor. He wore plain black clothes and a great black coat, topped with a wide-brimmed, black leather hat and the notorious "beak mask," with its long, freakish nose and glass lenses over the eyes, like a grotesque parody of a modern-day gas-mask. Giacomo shuddered at the scarecrow figure, but the dancers greeted him with cheers and laughter, inviting him into their ring. He capered and danced with them, although he did not join in their song, as far as the monk could hear from across the square.

It was dark, and cold, and wet, and Giacomo find himself thinking lovingly of his dry cell, and a change of clothes. There was a fire-barrel near the tobacconist; surely he could stand near it and watch out for anyone approaching the statue?

He'd barely gone a dozen paces when the Plague Doctor broke from the ring of dances, whirled and skittered across the square, grabbed hold of him and started to swing him around. The masked dancers laughed and clapped, as the doctor spoke to him, muffled by the mask:

"Father Ferrera?"

"Y – yes..." he answered, hesitantly.

"We must leave at once. I believe I am being followed." The

stranger's Italian was excellent, with only a hint of a Russian accent. He swung Giacomo around and around, eventually leading them both down an alley off the Campo. At length, they stumbled to a halt in front of one of the fire barrels, where the Russian made a great deal of losing hold of his hands and falling on to his rump. He staggered to his feet as though drunk, but when he pulled the beaked mask off his face, his gaze was steady and his voice level.

"Thank you for meeting me, Father. I am Ivan Konstantinov."

"Giacomo Ferrera."

"An honour, Father. I won't keep you long; it's best for us both if we are on our way back to our respective homes as quickly as possible."

"I understand." Giacomo stood over the bin, warming himself by the flames. Steam was starting to rise from his habit.

The Russian reached into his coat pocket and produced an envelope. "Take this."

Giacomo hesitated, then took it. "May I see the contents?"

"If you wish. I want it to be taken to His Holiness as soon as possible, but if it needs to be read by others to speed it on its way, so be it."

The monk tore open the envelope and leafed through a bundle of photos, facsimiles of written statements, typewritten reports.

He received a confused barrage of horrors: grainy pictures of dead bodies, twisted and contorted; catalogues of human bones, grouped by the inferred age and gender of the deceased; blandly awful lists of quotas of the dead. The forms and reports were all dated in the late 'thirties or early 'forties; many of the names were German.

Without exception, the documents were stamped with the Russian word тайна, in thick red letters.

"What does this mean?" he asked, pointing to the stamp.

"Secret." Konstantinov smiled. "You will never know how difficult it was to collect all that. I have been piecing it together for nearly fifty years."

Giacomo shot the stranger a sharp look. He didn't look like he could be any more than thirty years old. "What is this, exactly?"

"Evidence."

“Of what?”

“The greatest crime of this century. Of any century. This, Father, will destroy the Eternal Reich.”

“I don’t understand. Why me? Why the Vatican?”

The Russian took Giacomo’s hand in his. “Moscow will not act on it. Rome will not act on it. It is hard for me to get to America or Britannia.

“The Church can get this out there. The truth will be known.”

Giacomo stared at the stranger, firelight flickering in his eyes. “Why is this so important to you?” he asked.

Konstantinov smiled, sadly. “It’s a promise I made myself, years ag –”

Suddenly the world was full of the sounds of clanking, wheezing machinery, and the hiss of escaping steam. Strong arms seized Giacomo from behind, pinning his arms to his side.

The Russian gaped at him, his eyes wide and staring, a trickle of blood spilling from the corner of his mouth. Briefly, hysterically, it seemed to the monk as though the stranger had grown a set of wings. Then he saw the grinning soldier standing behind him, a German wing-harness strapped to his back. After that, he saw the spike protruding hideously from Konstantinov’s sternum, crimson blood glistening on the fire-blackened wood. He looked on in horror as the light gradually faded from the Russian’s eyes, and the soldier allowed him to slump to the street.

It occurred to the monk that the man holding him would also be a German soldier, armed and equipped the same way. Neither attacker spoke as the stranger died, and it didn’t even occur to Giacomo to struggle as the sound of approaching boots echoed up the narrow alley.

OTTO HELD ONTO his captive as Adler walked up the alley from the Campo. The monk’s... *softness* disgusted him; his weakness, his refusal to struggle, his ridiculous eyeglasses. Being asked to restrain him was almost an insult to his abilities. He looked at Ingo, still relishing the honour of the kill; not with resentment or envy, since he was his closest friend, but hopeful of having the same good fortune on their next hunt.

The Obersturmbannführer stopped at Otto's side and bent to inspect the corpse of the vampire, lifting its face to the firelight to confirm its identity. Satisfied, he withdrew a pair of pliers from his coat pocket, inserted them into the vampire's mouth, and – with a discernible grating noise – pulled out one of his fangs. He straightened and turned to address the monk.

“This is the fifth one of these that I have collected, you know,” he said, in passable Italian. “I shall make quite a stir in the Officer's Club.”

“Who... who are you?” The priest spoke hesitatingly, although Otto couldn't tell if he was terrified or simply stunned.

“Of course. Where are my manners?” replied Adler, extending his hand. “Dietrich Adler. And you are?”

“Ferrera.” He stared at Adler's hand blankly. Otto released his arms, but he still made no move to accept the Obersturmbannführer's hand. “Father Giacomo Ferrera, of the Society of Jesus.”

Adler shrugged at the monk's rudeness, and bent to retrieve the pile of photos and documents, lying forgotten on the ground.

“I suppose you know what they are?” asked the monk.

Adler smiled, briefly, as he leafed through the pile. “Lies, Mister Ferrera. Only lies, spread by the enemies of the Eternal Reich. And I am here to correct them.”

“You can't keep it covered up forever,” Ferrera rejoined.

The SS officer tucked the documents under his arm, reached into his pocket and withdrew a silver cigarette case. He carefully selected a cigarette and placed it between his lips, kicking Konstantinov's body as he replaced the case. He shrugged, apparently satisfied that the vampire was truly dead, then dipped the papers in the bin, catching the corner of the stack on fire, and using it to light his cigarette.

“Keeping the Führer's secrets forever is the Führer's concern, Mister Ferrera,” he muttered, drawing on his cigarette until the tip glowed orange and blowing the smoke back out before dropping the papers in the fire-bin. “Mine is keeping this one, tonight. And I have done so.”

He turned and started walking away. “Hartmann, Ritter, come with me. We're done.”

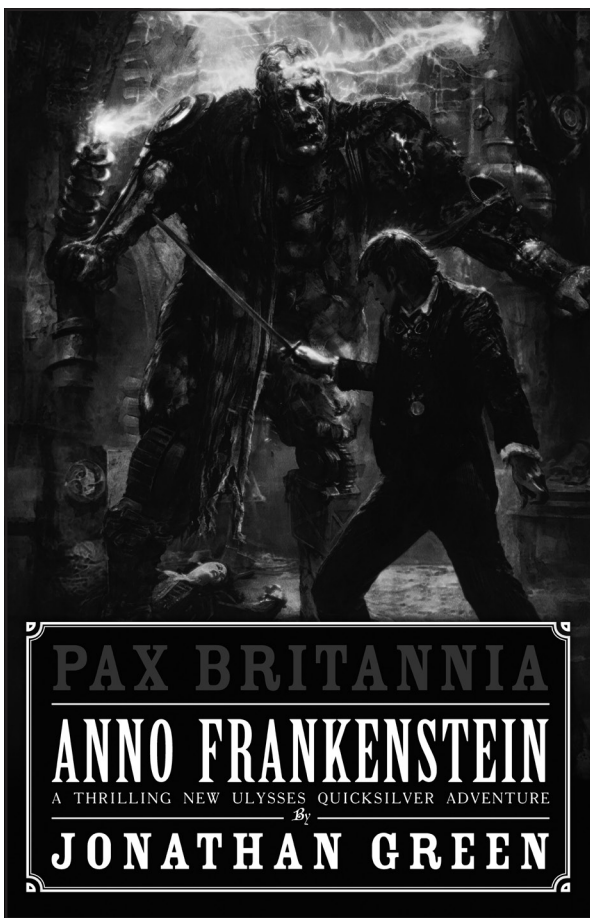
After a few paces, he stopped, as if suddenly remembering something, drew his Luger and shot Ferrera through the heart.

The rain grew heavier as the three Germans left the alley, washing the monk's and the vampire's mingled blood away. The hoots, shouts and laughter of the Carnevale echoed through the night.



THE END





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