

FROM THE CURIOSI CASEBOOK

-DARK MATTER-

Installment One

By Tim Wintermute

I woke in a shroud of sweat. I hadn't escaped Sarajevo after all. There was a ringing in my ears. Maybe from the blast but how could I still hear if I were dead? Had I been buried alive in a Balkan mass grave? I opened my eyes and rolled out of bed onto the floor and reached up and grabbed the phone off the nightstand.

"I'm sorry if I woke you." It was Ugo.

"I'm the one who should apologize since I forgot to ask for a wake-up call."

"Then I am your wake-up call." He sounded cheerful like he'd had nothing but sweet dreams.

"From the dead," I muttered in English as I held the phone in my hand, the cord stretched as far as it would go. I looked at the outline of my body tangled in the sheets and added. "It's an expression. I'll be down in five minutes."

It took ten minutes and when I entered the hotel restaurant Ugo was sitting at one of the tables reading a newspaper. Before he folded it, I saw that the war in Yugoslavia was still headline news even if I wasn't there. He had already ordered coffee so I poured some for myself and took one of the warm rolls from the plate.

"I read your report. It is very good, as I knew it would be. We have deposited your fee into your bank account as we agreed."

"Thank you," I mumbled, dribbling some bread crumbs.

"And what are your plans now?"

"I don't have any for the next couple of weeks. Some R and R."

"In Rome?"

"Rome and rest don't exactly go together so I was thinking I'd spend a few more days here in Venice. It's nice and quiet."

He smiled in relief. "Yes, Venice is much better than Rome to rest." He poured some more coffee into his cup. "Since you are planning on spending a week here I wonder if you would consider

taking on another little assignment for us? You see the person who was supposed to work on it has had to cancel at the last minute. We cannot postpone the project because it is very time sensitive. If you agree to do this we will pay for the rest of your stay in Venice in addition to your fee and regular expenses.”

“Sure, why not.”

His face relaxed into a smile. “I had hoped you would say yes.” He removed an envelope from the breast pocket of his jacket and handed it to me. “This envelope has the instructions as well as an advance.”

“What would you have done if I’d said no?” I asked taking the envelope.

He sighed and began spreading butter on a piece of bread. “Fortunately, I do not have to find out. Your assignment will not start until 2 PM so you have some free time even today to have some R and R, as you say. Perhaps a gondola ride?”

“As you saw in my report, I already had a ride. No, I was thinking of going to an art museum.”

“Excellent. Art is one of the best ways to restore oneself and there is so much art to see in Venice. It is filled with masterpieces. There are the Tintoretos in the Scuola San Rocca or the masterpieces in the Accademia, and then there are the churches where” He waved the bread knife as if it was a conductor’s baton.

“So much of that art is filled with dead people and even if they’re martyrs and saints who are all having a great time in the afterlife I don’t think I’m quite up for it. I was thinking that something more modern and abstract might be better.”

“Then there is always the Guggenheim. I don’t believe there is a single work of art there with a dead saint or martyr.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

-2-

A grocer’s boat was moored to the Fondamenta Braggadin on the Rio di San Vio and the grocer stretched his right arm over the gunwale with a head of lettuce in his hand. He reminded me of the gravedigger in Hamlet holding the skull of poor Yorick. An elderly woman on the Fondamenta looked it over carefully and then nodded her approval. After she shuffled off dragging her shopping bag, I bought an apple, put it in my pocket and continued on to the Guggenheim.

After spending a couple of hours in the galleries I walked out into the courtyard. I sat down on a bench and took out my apple and looked at it. It was large and shiny and fresh and I couldn’t help thinking that for some of the people in Sarajevo it would be a lot more important than anything displayed at the Guggenheim.

“You’d be surprised how many people spend more time staring at the place where Peggy Guggenheim’s dogs are buried than they do looking at the art hanging on the walls inside. It’s not like they can really see anything and even if they weren’t buried they’d be nothing but dust anyway.”

I looked into the blued eyes of a young man who could have been Croatian or Bosnian and if he had been either he was really lucky that he didn’t have a bullet hole in the middle of his broad unlined forehead. The flat Midwest American accented English in which he’d made his observation and the name Brad Swenson engraved on the nametag pinned to the breast pocket of his blazer told me he was a lucky Lutheran from Minnesota.

“I hope it’s not considered an act of disrespect to eat my apple here?”

“I don’t think this is exactly holy ground,” he answered. “Besides, I’m only a student intern not a guard.”

“What do you study?”

“Art history. Yeah, there are actually people who study art history in college and don’t just sleep through the slides. A lot of my friends would love to be here. I don’t necessarily mean here at the Guggenheim but in Venice, or even Italy, or to be honest, anywhere but where they are, which is in Minnesota.”

“I thought you might be from Minnesota.”

“My college is in Minnesota, but I grew up in North Dakota.”

“Not much in the way of canals in North Dakota.”

“Not much in the way of art either. So being here is like a pig rolling in s...” he suddenly stopped and seemed paralyzed as his white face began to turn red.

“Slime?”

“Yeah, slime. A pig rolling in slimy mud.” He smiled with relief.

“So tell me, Brad, what history is there to study in a museum of modern art? Doesn’t modern mean the present?”

“Good question.” I could tell any question on art, no matter how silly, was welcome. He furrowed his brow as if it required some heavy thinking. “My answer would be that even the most recent works of art can only be appreciated fully when you know their historical context. I mean, when they claim to represent a break with the past you need to understand the past that they are supposedly breaking with in order to understand them. Besides, the modern art that Peggy Guggenheim collected is almost a hundred years old.”

“So what kind of art comes after modern other than the future?”

“Post-modern. There was a group that called themselves futurists but they were more of a political rather than an art movement like post modernism.”

I took another bite of my apple before responding. “It sounds confusing. After all, wouldn’t something that comes after modern be in the future and that would mean it doesn’t exist yet? All you would be able to show would be a blank wall and who would want to look at that?”

He looked over at the ground where the dead dogs were buried as if there might be some wisdom or a witty retort he could scoop from the dirt. I felt like sharing my apple with him but there wasn’t much left but the core and there couldn’t be much knowledge in that. “Guggenheim and her dogs don’t exist, at least not anymore, and that doesn’t stop people from coming here and looking at nothing. The story is that when they were burying her last dog just before she died they uncovered the skull of one of her other dogs. We don’t mention that in our guided tours, of course. It would freak people out.”

-3-

I’ve heard stories about tourists who refuse to get off at the Santa Lucia railway station because they think there’s another station farther down the line but if the train went any further they’d be swimming in the Grand Canal. However, it looked like everyone on this train knew exactly where they were going and how to get there as they walked past me without a bit of hesitation. I had written the name of the person I was supposed to meet in large letters on a sheet of paper that I held to my chest. Since the instructions didn’t say if she was a signora or signorina I just printed Gloria Hernandez.

“Signor Flynn?”

I didn’t expect an attractive woman dressed in a trim black skirt with a white blouse. Her black hair that just brushed her shoulders had just a hint of gray, which meant she was old enough to have it and not worried enough about her age to hide it.

“Si...” I drew out the first syllable not knowing if it was Signora or Signorita, hoping she would cut in before I had to make a choice as to her current marital status.

“Sister.” I could see she was amused at my reaction to the word. She added. “I guess Ugo didn’t tell you I was a nun. In any case, you can just call me Gloria since, as you can see by the absence of a habit, I don’t wear my religious vocation.”

“And you can drop the Signor and call me Dante,” I answered.

“After the poet?”

“Once removed. My grandfather’s name was Dante. He and my grandmother were both Italian. My father’s side was Irish American. I get my Italian language skills from my mom’s side of the family and my appreciation for a good story from my dad’s.”

“Sounds like you inherited the best of both cultures. I’m Spanish on both sides, which gives me both a tragic sense of life and a love of fiestas.”

I took the handle of her suitcase without asking but she didn’t object. “It has a bent wheel, which makes it want to veer to the left,” she warned me as we walked down the platform. After passing through the lobby of the station and through the front doors, we descended the dozen steps to the broad fondamenta. Gloria stopped and took a deep breath as if she was taking in the smells as well as the view. As she inhaled she turned in a 360 degree arc out over the Grand Canal. A breeze pushed her skirt above her knees. She didn’t seem to notice and just kept looking at the station. Smooth white stone without a nick sliced the cloudless sky until it ran into the ancient church that was its neighbor.

“Santa Lucia is like a time machine,” she declared. “You leave the train in the present, walk through the Station and come out into the past. Just look at Santa Maria degli Scalzi there,” she pointed at the church with its Corinthian columns holding up a triangular roof that reminded me of a Roman temple except for the angels perched on top. “It looks like it’s been there forever.”

“Didn’t Mussolini build the station?”

“Yes. He tore down a church named after Santa Lucia, Saint Lucy, and then gave the train station her name. No doubt, he thought it appropriate given how many people he and the Fascists sent to eternity in train cars.” She waved her hand in a vague direction beyond the church. “The old Jewish Ghetto isn’t far from here. Over there on the other side of the Cannaregio canal.”

Unlike the IRT Number One that runs up Broadway under Manhattan through black tunnels and subway stations as bleak as a Hopper painting, the Vaporetto Number One zig zagged up the Grand Canal on a technicolor tour. Gloria pointed at a church. “That church there, with the dome and the tower behind it, is San Geremia. That’s where the relics of Santa Lucia were moved when they built the railway station.

“Is she the patron saint of railway stations?”

Gloria laughed. “No, Saint Lucy is the patron saint of the blind because she plucked out her eyes in response to the advances of a powerful man who couldn’t take his own eyes off of her. Instead of getting the message that she didn’t appreciate that type of adoration, he was so upset that he had her tortured and killed. As if driving her blind wasn’t enough.”

“If that had been enough for him we would have one less saint.”

“And one less abused woman. She could be the patron saint for abused women as a matter of fact. Probably more important for Venice is that Santa Lucia is also the patron saint of artists.

You know, in the middle ages the test for whether the relic of a saint was authentic was whether it could perform miracles.”

“If creating great artwork is a miracle then based on the number of such works in Venice it would seem the relics in the Church are legitimate,” I replied. The soles of my feet began to vibrate as the boat shifted into reverse. Sister Gloria gripped my arm as the boat bumped into the dock. “And how do they authenticate relics today?”

“The same way they authenticate art work – they rely on experts and documentation.”

Hordes of embarking passengers pushed us toward the railing and reminded me that this was Venice’s version of the rush hour. “You sound like an expert.”

“I know something about religious artifacts including relics.”

Sudden a spray of water from a motscabo that had pulled astern pelted the side of the Vaporetto. Two men in trench coats and wrap-around sunglasses, one tall and thin and the other short and stocky stood in the front on either side of the helmsman. They reminded me of the Blues Brothers. Instead of passing us they dropped back, bouncing across our wake as we slid under the Rialto Bridge.

“We should get off at this stop.” Gloria said. I found the handle to her suitcase and lifted it off its wheels as we docked. As soon as the gate was pulled back we shoved our way through the crowd and out onto the fondamenta. Gloria turned left and walked up the steps onto the bridge. I followed her, as we crossed the bridge between its rows of shops to the other side. There we wended our way through the stalls of the fish market and, finally, ran a gauntlet of souvenir kiosks before making a sharp left hand turn into a narrow passageway partly hidden by a vendor’s cart overflowing with tee shirts.

Feeling bombarded by color and smell and slightly shell shocked I bumped into Gloria, who had stopped abruptly and was looking at a sheet of paper. She whispered that according to the directions she had written down the place we were going was on the next street. She put the paper back in her purse and we continued through the dark alley until we came out into a relatively uncluttered and deserted calle where we turned right.

Gloria stopped in front of one of the shops and, after looking back to make sure she hadn’t lost she entered. Masks with painted faces and empty eyes looked down on us from the walls and ceiling. Some were laughing, some crying, a few looked demented and others seductive. There were also a few whose expressions were hard to decipher. A young woman came out from behind the counter. Gloria asked if she had a mask of Pinocchio? The woman nodded and motioned for us to follow her. We entered a room with a paint splattered, wooden table in the center. Several unfinished masks rested on it. Two of them looked like skulls but the third was pink with full red lips and black arched eyebrows. A man put down the paint brush in his right hand, wiped his hands on his apron, and walked over to us.

“Giuseppe Sarni.” He announced with a broad smile tilting his head up at a forty five degree angle so that he could see us through the glasses that had slid to the tip of his nose. Pinned to his apron was a small mask that looked, appropriately, like a demented happy face. “I see that you were able to follow the somewhat circuitous route that was written in the directions.”

“Yes, we got off the Vaporetto at the Rialto rather than San Silvestro so that we had to follow the much more indirect route that you had given me,” Gloria replied.

“Did you notice anyone trying to following you?” He asked, motioning for us to sit on the stools next to the work table.

Gloria sat down before she answered. “There was a boat following the Vaporetto with two men in it. I thought that they looked too much like private detectives with their trench coats and dark glasses to be the real thing. If they were we seem to have lost them once after we got off the vaporetto and followed the route in the directions.”

Giuseppe pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Yes, one can never be too careful.” He placed a large envelope on the table and slipped out a photo, turned it around, and slipped it toward Gloria. “Do you recognize this?”

She looked at it and quickly responded. “That’s easy. It’s the Translation of St. Mark’s Relic. It’s in St. Marks and is the most famous mosaic in Venice and there are a lot of mosaics in Venice, as everyone knows.”

His face lit up like the Lido on a summer night. “Ah, you do recognize it. Of course, why am I surprised since I have heard so much about you Sister Hernandez.”

“You can call me Gloria.”

He seemed relieved by her answer. “Exactly, Sister Gloria. The mosaic illustrates the discovery on June 25th, 1094 of the relics that were thought to be lost in the great fire that destroyed much of St. Marks. They were miraculously found hidden in a pillar of the Church when the new St. Marks was completed.”

Gloria put down the photo. “Of course, the mosaic isn’t entirely accurate since the Doge who is depicted isn’t the one who found the relics. In fact, there is even some doubt as to the authenticity of the relics.”

“I see that you have already done some research. But, then, why else would you have been asked to participate in this investigation if you weren’t one of the world’s experts in lost religious artifacts. As you correctly pointed out the Doge in the mosaic is the one who commissioned it, Ranieri Zen, who held the office from 1253-1268, rather than Doge Vitale Falier who actually made the discovery.”

“If pictures can lie, why not mosaics.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Giuseppe nodded and proceeded to tell us that after the original St. Mark’s burned down in 976 the relics of St. Marks were saved and the Doge at that time Domenico Selvo, in his role as their protector, had them stored in a supposedly safe place. Unfortunately, he died before the restoration of St. Marks was completed and they couldn’t find the safe place where he had hidden them. This put his successor, Doge Falier, in a bind because St. Mark’s was built to be a giant reliquary for the remains of the Saint and the Doge. It was Venice’s claim to a special relationship with God because of St. Mark that allowed them to assert their independence, even from - in fact especially from - the Papacy. The Papacy claimed the right to rule not only the spiritual world but the temporal as well and controlled a large swath of Italy from Rome to the Adriatic. If Doge Falier didn’t come up with the relics, his credibility and that of the ruling families and all of Venice would have been undermined. Giuseppe tapped a spot on the photograph. “But after praying and fasting the relics miraculously appeared in a pillar of the church.” He picked up another photo from the envelope and passed it to Gloria. “Now look at this.”

Gloria examined the photograph. “This one shows only a portion of the mosaic. The part that depicts the Doge.” Gloria placed it next to the first picture and looked at both of them. “Wait, I am wrong, because the face of the Doge is different in this photograph.”

“You are correct. The Doge in this mosaic is not Zen but none other than Doge Francesco Foscari!”

Gloria looked at him with surprise. “But that would be impossible. Foscari wasn’t elected Doge until almost two centuries later.”

“Yes, but what if the suspicions as to the authenticity of the relics that you mentioned earlier were true and the actual relics of St. Mark’s were never discovered?”

“Then whoever found the true relics would increase his power immensely. Given Foscari’s reputation he certainly would have been the one to exploit the situation.”

“As you know the other powerful families of the nobili tried to limit the power of the Doge as much as possible to that of a symbolic ruler, like the present Queen of England.” He added with a chuckle. “Does anyone think that the dear lady has any real power when she can’t even control her children? Foscari, however, used the symbolism to increase his power when he became the Doge. For example, he commissioned the triumphal arch in the Doge’s Palace and the person carved into the stone kneeling before St. Mark was none other than himself. And he isn’t kneeling as a loyal subject, but as someone about to be crowned the king. He was quite good at self promotion, not unlike other leaders we have had.”

“Mussolini, for one,” Gloria answered.

Giuseppe nodded gravely. “Yes, although there are others, even today, who are tempted to do such things. However, unlike Mussolini, Foscari was an older man when he was elected. It was

a form of term limits. Of course, with Italy's parliamentary system no government lasts more than a year so we no longer need to worry about such things. In addition, unlike Mussolini, the Doges were democratically elected."

"Democracy for wealthy men, you mean. If you were a woman or didn't have money it was a dictatorship."

"That is unfortunately true for women, but not for men. Until the thirteenth century all of the male residents of Venice could vote even if they were poor." It was only later, Giuseppe tells us, after the disappearance of St. Mark, that the right to vote was restricted to the wealthiest twenty-five hundred families. They were the ones designated as the nobili and their names were entered into what was called the Golden Book. Once a family's name was entered into the Golden Book they could not be removed even if they lost their wealth. They formed the Great Council. Even those members of, the lower class, the cittadini, who acquired wealth that matched or surpassed that of some the nobili did not get their names into the Golden Book. It remained that way until Napoleon defeated Venice and took over control of the city. The real importance of the nobili was that they were all equal with each having one vote, including the Doge. This meant that the Doge's power was more symbolic and his executive power was restricted. As a further check on his power, after the Doge died his family was held responsible for whatever indiscretions he might have committed, especially those that favored his family. It was this concern that the Doge would enrich his family that was really behind the practice of electing only old men. They wouldn't have that much time to hand out favors to their families nor were they as likely to be influenced by sexual favors. It was the same problem the Church faced. "Remember," he says. "Celibacy was mandated only in the twelfth century and only then because of the fear that the families of certain clergy were acquiring too much property and power."

Gloria looked at me. "A problem with family values, particularly the families of a Cardinal or the Pope. Although, the celibacy rule didn't stop the Borgia's or the Medici's."

"You are right, Sister Gloria." Giuseppe answered.

"Gloria is fine, Giuseppe."

Giuseppe acknowledged the request with a nod and then responded. "Yes, Gloria. The big problem was with the Popes at that time. They wanted to take over everything so that their families would prosper while the other rich families wanted to prevent it. In the case of the families of Venice's Golden Book they wanted to prevent the Doge's families from taking over. In fact the Council of Ten, which unfortunately has become known as a sort of Venetian Gestapo, was created in the fourteenth century in order to keep watch on the nobili, including the Doge. Their mission was to make sure that the Doge and individual members of the nobili didn't abuse their position and power. They were to protect the nobili from each other and the people from the nobili. It was organized after a member of the nobili, Bajamante Tiepolo, tried to take over and become a dictator. The revolt ended when an old woman dropped a large stone on his head."

"A rare example of a woman casting the deciding vote," Gloria observed drily. "But if the relics weren't found by Falier, what happened and how did Foscari get involved?"

"Ah, yes," Giuseppe rested his elbows on the table and we both did the same as if the ears on the papier mache masks were real and couldn't be trusted with what they might hear. "It seems that Falier pretended to find the relics in order to save himself. The Council of Ten had uncovered the truth and had been searching for the relics. Of course, it was top secret, because it was in no one's interest that the truth should come out. Foscari led the Council of Ten before being elected Doge in 1423 so, of course, he knew about the situation and the search for the relics. He also knew the weaknesses of the other members of the Council of Ten quite well and when he became the Doge he must have bribed or blackmailed the member of the Council who was leading the search. As a result, when the relics were located Foscari was able to have them removed and hidden in another place so that when the other members of the Council searched the hiding place they found nothing and assumed they had made a mistake."

"Why did Foscari want to prevent them from finding the relics?" I asked.

"If Foscari found the relics himself, he could use that as a way to enhance his own power and become St. Mark's and God's chosen absolute ruler of Venice rather than someone constrained by the power of the nobili. The mosaic was ready to portray the miracle of finding the relics: A miracle that would have made him a miracle worker: Someone favored by God, himself. Fortunately, his plot was uncovered by the other members of the Council of Ten and that was the real reason why he was deposed in 1457. Foscari refused to divulge the place where he had hidden the relics, however, so they were never found and the Council of Ten was forced to continue their search. All of this was kept completely secret."

"That means the Venetian's have been lying about St. Mark's relics being in the Church for more than half a millenium."

Giuseppe seemed hurt by the assertion. "The Venetian people were not lying since one can only lie if one knows the truth and only the Doge and the Council of Ten knew the truth. Besides there was a piece of his body that did not disappear."

"A piece of the body?" I asked.

Giuseppe closed his right hand then unfolded each finger one at a time until they were all displayed. "The right hand was chopped off after the body arrived from Constantinople. This was after they unpacked it from the pork it was concealed in. You know that after they stole the body they hid the mummified body in a barrel of pork brine because they knew no Moslem would want to be anywhere near pork. The reason it was the right hand was because they wanted to give the hand that wrote the Gospel to the Pope as a peace offering. They assumed St. Mark was right handed. After they lost the body, Doge Falier kept the hand and put it in the reliquary under the high altar along with the body of a pauper and gave the Pope the hand of the pauper, instead."

"Pardon the pun," I said. "But didn't that leave the Pope empty handed?"

Giuseppe shrugged. "But it seemed better at the time to lie to the Pope than to the people. Unfortunately, once the truth is discovered the Vatican will demand that we give them not only the real hand and head but the entire body," Giuseppe wriggled the fingers of both of his hands. "But we are now very close to finding the true relics. If we can look at the entire mosaic, not just this section that is in the photograph, we will be able to see where the relics are hidden and return them to where they rightfully belong, in the Basilica.

"When you asked me to come and help you said it was urgent that I come immediately. I don't understand the urgency if it is still a secret and you are close to finding the relics and putting everything right?"

"You know about COPR?"

"The Catholic Office for the Preservation of Relics. It's the official Church agency responsible for investigating stolen or missing relics. COPR reports directly to the Vatican and, although they deny it, they are suspected of engaging in clandestine operations."

"In that case you will understand the significance of COPR's Director, Father Pietro Lupurelli, being in Venice. It is our belief that he knows that the relics of St. Mark may not be in St. Marks. A week ago the Vatican requested from the Cardinal permission to do some tests on the relics. They say that it is part of a new initiative to determine the condition of the holiest of relics so that any preservation measures that are required can be instituted. The Cardinal, not knowing the truth about St. Mark nor the Vatican's real motives, has granted them permission and the testing will be done a week from now. "

"You think Father Lupurelli is behind this?" Gloria asked.

"Why else would he come to Venice as a member of the team that is going to inspect the relics? I believe he has already done carbon testing on the hand that was given the Vatican and has concluded that it isn't old enough to be St. Marks'. Once he sees the relics he will not only find the real hand but will discover that the rest of the relics are also not old enough to be those of St. Marks. The Vatican will tell the Cardinal the truth and demand the real hand and tell him that the rest is a fake. It will be a catastrophe for St. Marks and Venice. As you know the head of St. Mark's was given to the Egyptian Coptic Church in return for which the Coptic Church gave up their claim for all the relics so that the rest of the relics could remain in Italy."

Gloria filled in the rest. "If the Vatican announces that neither they nor we have the real relics than the Egyptian Coptic Church will test their own and discover the truth. They will then accuse the Vatican of cheating them and the Vatican will accuse Venice and the Vatican will assert their authority over all of the relics that are currently in the City."

"The pound of flesh exacted from Venice," I said.

"Only in this case it's bone and it's more than a pound. All of this will serve as a pretext for Lupurelli to expand COPR's powers. He will assert authority over all the relics and be able to

control access.” Gloria turned and asked Giuseppe. “Does the Cardinal know the real relics were never found and the ones that are in St. Marks are fake?”

“No. How could one ask a Cardinal, a Prince of the Church to lie? As I told you earlier, only the Council of Ten and the Doge knew the truth.”

“But all of those people are long dead and buried,” I pointed out.

“Not quite. It is only the Doges who are no longer with us.”

“You are saying that the Council of Ten still exists?” Gloria asked in astonishment.

He smiled and leaned toward us as if he was letting us into a really big secret. “It would be more accurate to call it the Council of One. We could not disband with St. Mark still missing.”

Gloria waved her right hand in an arc. “Then all of this is fake; a false front?”

“Masks as a mask,” I added.

Giuseppe laughed. “I assure you I am a real maker of masks and all of these are my creations. As you can imagine the Council did not anticipate that it would take five hundred years to recover St. Mark’s bones. Because of the many bad decisions made by Foscari before he was deposed as Doge, Venice became too weak to resist the Inquisition completely even though they knew it was a way for Rome to exert its authoritarian rule. They were forced to appoint three inquisitors and the Council of Ten lost its power. The inquisitors were not told about St. Mark for obvious reasons but the Council had no official status to continue its investigation nor any funding. However, it continued to do so unofficially. I guess you would say we went underground. After Napoleon’s invasion, the members could no longer fund the investigation out of their own pockets. That is when we began to make masks.”

“But if you have already found the mosaic what do you want me to do?” Gloria asked. “You can easily find out where the relics are hidden after you’ve seen all of the mosaic.”

“I believe a friend of mine has located the hiding place of the real mosaic while restoring a building. However, we need someone with your expertise to determine if the mosaic is genuine and can verify that it is authentic. With that I can go to Monsignor Ricardi at St. Marks and persuade him to allow us to remove the real relics from their hiding place and substitute them for the bones of the pauper. We also have a plan through a fellow Curiosi to secretly replace the fake head in Egypt with the genuine one of St. Mark.” He put the two photographs back in the envelope. He then took a camera from beneath the desk and handed it to Gloria. “It would also help if you took a photograph of the entire mosaic so that we can show it to the Monsignor as additional proof. This camera has a particularly powerful flash so that you should be able to get a good photo.” Giuseppe then placed two shopping bags on the table. “I have a little gift for each of you as a gesture of my personal appreciation. In each bag there is a mask that I have made.”