
Opening Extract from...

The Blue Demon

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THE BLUE DEMON

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Part 1

DIVINATION

Fere libenter homines id quod volunt credunt.

Men willingly believe what they wish.

Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*,
Book III, Ch. 18

– 1 –

The garden of the Quirinale felt like a suntrap as the man in the silver armour strode down the shingle path. He was sweating profusely inside the ceremonial breastplate and woollen uniform.

Tight in his right hand he held the long, bloodied sword that had just taken the life of a man. In a few moments he would kill the president of Italy. And then? Be murdered himself. It was the lot of assassins throughout the ages, from Pausanius of Orestis, who had slaughtered Philip, the father of Alexander the Great, to Marat's murderess, Charlotte Corday, and Kennedy's nemesis, Lee Harvey Oswald.

The stabbing dagger, the sniper's rifle . . . all these were mirrored weapons, reflecting on the man or woman who bore them, joining perpetrator and victim as twin sacrifices to destiny. It had always been this way, since men sought to rule over others, circumscribing their desires, hemming in the spans of their lives with the dull, rote strictures of convention. Petrakis had read much over the years, thinking, preparing, comparing himself to his peers. The travelling actor John Wilkes Booth's final performance before he put a bullet through the skull of

Abraham Lincoln had been in *Julius Caesar*, although through some strange irony he had taken the part of Caesar's friend and apologist, Mark Antony, not Brutus as history demanded.

As he approached the figure in the bower, seeing the old man's grey, lined form bent deep over a book, Petrakis found himself murmuring a line Wilkes Booth must have uttered a century and a half before.

'"O mighty Caesar . . . dost thou lie so low? Are all thy conquests, glories, triumphs, spoils, shrunk to this little measure?"'

A pale, long face, with sad, tired eyes, looked up from the page. Petrakis, realizing he had spoken out loud, wondered why this death, among so many, would be the most difficult.

'I didn't quite catch that,' Dario Sordi said in a calm, unwavering voice, his eyes, nevertheless, on the long, bloodied blade.

The uniformed officer came close, stopped, repeated the line, and held the sword over the elderly figure seated in the shadow of a statue of Hermes.

The president looked up, glanced around him and asked, 'What conquests in particular, Andrea? What glories? What spoils? Temporary residence in a garden fit for a pope? I'm a pensioner in a very luxurious retirement home. Do you really not understand that?'

The long silver weapon trembled in Petrakis's hand. His palm felt greasy. He had no words at all.

Voices rose behind him. A shout. A clamour.

There was a cigarette in Dario Sordi's hands. It didn't even shake.

'You should be afraid, old man.'

More dry laughter.

'I've been hunted by Nazis.' The grey, drawn face glowered at him. Sordi drew on the cigarette and exhaled a cloud of smoke. 'Played hide and seek with tobacco and the grape for more than half a century. Offended people – important people – who feel I am owed a lesson, which is probably true.' A long, pale finger jabbed through the evening air. 'And now you wish me to cower before someone else's puppet? A fool?'

That, at least, made it easier.

Petrakis found his mind ranging across so many things: memories, lost decades, languid days dodging NATO patrols beneath the Afghan sun, distant, half-recalled moments in the damp darkness of an Etruscan tomb, talking to his father about life and the world, and how a man had to make his own way, not let another create a future for him.

Everything came from that place in the Maremma, from the whispered discovery of a paradise of the will sacrificed to the commonplace and mundane, the exigencies of politics. Andrea Petrakis knew this course was set for him at an early age, by birth, by his inheritance.

The memory of the tomb, with its ghostly painted figures on the wall, and the terrible, eternal spectre of the Blue Demon, consuming them one by one, filled his head. This, more than anything else, he had learned over the decades: freedom, of the kind enjoyed by the long-dead men and women still dancing beneath the grey Tarquinia earth more than two millennia on, was a mayfly, gloriously fleeting, made real by its impermanence. Life and death were bedfellows, two sides of the same coin. To taste every breath, feel each beat of the heart, one had to know that both might be snatched

away in an instant. His father had taught him that, long before the Afghans and the Arabs tried to reveal the same truth.

Andrea Petrakis remembered the lesson more keenly now, as the sand trickled through some unseen hourglass for Dario Sordi and his allotted assassin.

Out of the soft evening came a bright, sharp sound, like the ping of some taut yet invisible wire, snapping under pressure.

A piece of the statue of Hermes, its stone right foot, disintegrated in front of his eyes, shattering into pieces, as if exploding in anger.

Dario Sordi ducked back into the shadows, trying, at last, to hide.

– 2 –

Three days earlier . . .

'Behold,' said the man, in a cold, tired voice, the accent from the countryside perhaps. 'I will make a covenant. For it is something dreadful I will do to you.'

Strong, firm hands ripped off the hood. Giovanni Batisti saw he was tethered to a plain office chair. At the periphery of his vision he could make out that he was in a small, simple room with bare bleached floorboards and dust ghosts on the walls left by long-removed chests of drawers or ancient filing cabinets. The place smelled musty, damp and abandoned. He could hear the distant lowing of traffic, muffled in some curious way, but still energized by the familiar rhythm of the city. Cars and trucks, buses and people, thousands of them, some from the police and the security services no doubt, searching as best they could, oblivious to his presence. There was no human sound close by, from an adjoining room or an apartment. Not a radio or a TV set. Or any voice save that of his captor.

'I would like to use the bathroom, please,' Batisti said quietly, keeping his eyes fixed on the stripped,

cracked timber boards at his feet. 'I will do as you say. You have my word.'

The silence, hours of it, was the worst part. He'd expected a reprimand, an order, might even have welcomed a beating, since all these things would have acknowledged his existence. Instead . . . he was left in limbo, in blindness, almost as if he were dead already. Nor was there any exchange he could hear between those involved. A brief meeting to discuss tactics. News. Perhaps a phone call in which he would be asked to confirm that he was still alive.

Even – and this was a forlorn hope, he knew – some small note of concern about his driver, the immigrant Polish woman Elena Majewska, everyone's favourite, shot in the chest as the two vehicles blocked his government vehicle in the narrow street of Via delle Quattro Fontane, at the junction with the road to the Quirinale. It was such a familiar Roman crossroads, next to Borromini's fluid baroque masterpiece of San Carlino, a church he loved deeply and would visit often, along with Bernini's nearby Sant'Andrea, if he had time during his lunch break from the Interior Ministry building around the corner.

They could have snatched him that day from beneath Borromini's dome, with its magnificent dove of peace, descending to earth from Heaven. He'd needed a desperate fifteen-minute respite from sessions with the Americans, the Russians, the British, the Germans . . . Eight nations, eight voices, each different, each seeking its own outcome. The phrase that was always used about the G8 – the 'industrialized nations' – had come to strike him as somewhat ironic as he listened to the endless bickering about diplomatic rights and protocols,

who should stand where and with whom. Had some interloper approached him during his brief recess that day, Batisti would have glanced at Borromini's extraordinary interior one last time, then walked into his captor's arms immediately, trying to finish his *panino*, without much in the way of a second thought. Anything but another session devoted to the rites and procedures of diplomatic life.

Then he remembered again, with a sudden, painful seizure of guilt, the driver. Did Elena – a pretty, young single mother who'd moved to Rome to find security and a new, better life – survive? If so, what could she tell the police? What was there to say about a swift and unexpected explosion of violence in the black sultry velvet of a Roman summer night? The attack had happened so quickly and with such brutish force that Batisti was still unsure how many men had been involved. Perhaps no more than three or four from the pair of vehicles blocking the way. The area was empty. He was without a bodyguard. An opposition politician drafted in to the organization team out of custom and practice was deemed not to need one, even in the heightened security that preceded the coming summit. Not a single sentence was spoken as they dragged him from the rear seat, wrapped a blindfold tightly round his head, fired – three, four times? – into the front, then bundled him into the boot of some large vehicle and drove a short distance to their destination.

Were they now issuing ransom demands? Did his wife, who was with her family in Milan, discussing a forthcoming family wedding, know what was happening?

There were no answers, only questions. Giovanni

Batisti was forty-eight years old and felt as if he'd stepped back into a past that Italy hoped was behind it. The dismal Seventies and Eighties, the 'Years of Lead'. A time when academics and lawyers and politicians might be routinely kidnapped by the shadowy criminals of the Red Brigades and their partners in terrorism, held to ransom, tortured, then left bloodied and broken as some futile lesson to those in authority. Or dead. Like Aldo Moro, the former prime minister, seized in 1978, held captive for fifty-six days before being shot ten times in the chest and dumped in the trunk of a car in the Via Caetani.

'Look at me,' a voice from ahead of him ordered.

Batisti closed his eyes, kept them tightly shut.

'I do not wish to compromise you, sir. I have a wife. Two sons. One is eight. One is ten. I love them. I wish you no harm. I wish no one any harm. These matters can and will be resolved through dialogue, one way or another. I believe that of everything. In this world I have to.' He found his mouth was dry, his lips felt painful as he licked them. 'If you know me, you know I am a man of the left. The causes you espouse are often the causes I have argued for. The methods . . .'

'What do you know of our causes?'

'I . . . I have some money,' he stuttered. 'Not of my own, you understand. My father. Perhaps if I might make a phone call?'

'This is not about *money*,' the voice said, and it sounded colder than ever. 'Look at me or I will shoot you this instant.'

Batisti opened his eyes and stared straight ahead, across the bare, dreary room. The man seated opposite him was perhaps forty. Or a little older, his own age

even. Professional-looking. Maybe an academic himself. Not a factory worker or some individual who had risen from the street, pulled up by his own boot laces. There was a cultured timbre to his voice, one that spoke of education and a middle-class upbringing. A keen, incisive intelligence burned in his dark eyes. His face was leathery and tanned as if it had spent too long under a bright, burning sun. He would once have been handsome, but his craggy features were marred by a network of frown lines, on the forehead, at the edge of his broad, full-lipped mouth, which looked as if a smile had never crossed it in years. His long, unkempt hair seemed unnaturally grey and was wavy, shiny with some kind of grease. A mark of vanity. Like the black clothes, which were not inexpensive. Revolutionaries usually knew how to dress. The man had the scarred visage of a movie actor who had fallen on hard times. Something about him seemed distantly familiar, which seemed a terrible thought.

'Behold, I will make a covenant . . .'

'I heard you the first time,' Batisti sighed.

'What does it mean?'

The politician briefly closed his eyes.

'The Bible?' he guessed, tiring of this game. 'One of the Old Testament horrors, I imagine. Like Leviticus. I have no time for such devils, I'm afraid. Who needs them?'

The man reached down to retrieve something, then placed the object on the table. It was Batisti's own laptop computer, which had sat next to him in the back of the official car.

'Cave eleven at Qumran. The Temple Scroll. Not quite the Old Testament, but in much the same vein.'

'It's a long time since I was a professor,' Batisti confessed. 'A very junior one at that. The Dead Sea was never my field. Nor rituals. About sacrifice or anything else.'

'I'm aware of your field of expertise.'

'I was no expert. I was a child, looking for knowledge. It could have been anything.'

'And then you left the university for politics. For power.'

He shook his head. This was unfair, ridiculous.

'What power? I spend my day trying to turn the tide a little in the way of justice, as I see it. I earn no more now than I did then. Had I written the books I wanted to . . .'

Great, swirling stories, popular novels of the ancients, of heroism and dark deeds. He would never get round to them. He understood that.

'It's a long time since I spoke to an academic. You were a professor of ancient history. Greek and Roman?'

Batisti nodded.

'A middling one. An over-optimistic decoder of impossible mysteries. Nothing more. You kidnap me, you shoot my driver, in order to discuss history?'

The figure in black reached into his jacket and withdrew a short, bulky weapon.

'A man with a gun may ask anything.'

Giovanni Batisti was astonished to discover that his fear was rapidly being consumed by a growing sense of outrage.

'I am a servant of the people. I have never sought to do anyone ill. I have voted and spoken against every policy, national and international, with which I disagree. My conscience is clear. Is yours?'

The man in black scowled.

'You read too much Latin and too little English. "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all."'

'I don't imagine you brought me here to quote Shakespeare. What do you want?' Batisti demanded.

'In the first instance? I require the unlock code for this computer. After that I wish to hear everything you know about the arrangements that will be made to guard the great gentlemen who are now in Rome to safeguard this glorious society of ours.' The man scratched his lank, grey hair. 'Or is that theirs? Excuse my ignorance. I've been out of things for a little while.'

'And after that you will kill me?'

He seemed puzzled by the question.

'No, no, no. After that *he* will kill you.'

The man nodded at a place at the back of the room, then gestured for someone to come forward.

Giovanni Batisti watched and felt his blood freeze.

The newcomer must have sat silent throughout. Perhaps he was in the other car when they seized him at the crossroads near the Viminale. Though not like this.

He looked like a golden boy, a powerfully built youth, naked apart from a crude loincloth. His skin was the colour of a cinematic Mediterranean god. His hair was burnished yellow, long and curled like a cherub from Raphael. Bright blue paint was smeared roughly on his face and chest.

'We require a sign,' the man in black added, reaching into his pocket and taking out an egg. 'My friend here is no ordinary man. He can foretell the future through the examination of the entrails and internal organs. This makes him a . . .'

He stared at the ceiling, as if searching for the word.

'A haruspex,' Batisti murmured.

'Exactly. Should our act of divination be fruitful . . .'

The painted youth was staring at him, like a muscular halfwit. Batisti could see what appeared to be a butcher's knife in his right hand.

On the table, a pale brown hen's egg sat in a saucer with a scallop-shell edge.

The man with the gun said, in a clear, firm voice, '*Ta Sacni!*' Then he leaned forward and, in a mock whisper behind his hand, added, 'This is more your field than mine. I think that means, "This is the sanctuary." Do tell me if we get anything wrong.'

The golden boy came and stood behind him. In his left hand was a small bottle of San Pellegrino mineral water. His eyes were very blue and open, as if he were drugged or somehow insensate. He bent down, gazed at the egg and then listened, rapt, captivated, as the man in black began to chant in a dry, disengaged voice, 'Aplu. Phoebos. Apollo. Delian. Pythian. Lord of Delphi. Guardian of the Sibyls. Or by whatever other name you wish to be called. I pray and beseech you that you may by your majesty be propitious and well disposed to me, for which I offer this egg. If I have worshipped you and still do worship you, you who taught mankind the art of prophecy, you who have inspired my divination, then come now and show your signs that I might know the will of the gods! I seek to understand the secret ways into the Palace of the Pope. *Thui Srenar Tev*.'

Show me the signs now, Batistic translated in his head.

The youth spilled the water onto the table. The knife came down and split the egg in two.

The older one leaned over, sniffed and said, 'Looks

like yolk and albumen to me. But what do I know? He's the haruspex.'

'I cannot tell you these things,' Batisti murmured. 'You must appreciate that.'

'That is both very brave and very unfortunate. Though not entirely unexpected.'

The naked youth was running his fingers through the egg in the saucer. The man pushed his hand away. The creature obeyed, immediately, a sudden fearful and subservient look in his eye.

'I want the code for your computer,' the older one ordered. 'You will give it to me. One way or another.'

Batisti said nothing, merely closed his eyes for a moment and wished he retained sufficient faith to pray.

'I'm more valuable to you alive than dead. Tell the authorities what you want. They will negotiate.'

'They didn't for Aldo Moro. You think some junior political hack is worth more than a prime minister?'

He seemed impatient, as if this were all a tedious game.

'You've been out of the real world too long, Batisti. These people smile at you and pat your little head, caring nothing. These,' he dashed the saucer and the broken egg from the table, 'toys are beneath us. Remember your Bible. "When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly . . ." '

Batisti recalled little of his Catholic upbringing. It seemed distant, as if it had happened to someone else. This much of the verses he remembered, though.

'But faith, hope, love, abide these three,' he said quietly. 'And the greatest of these is love.'

'Not so much of that about these days,' the silver-haired man replied mournfully. 'Is there?'

Then he nodded at the golden boy by his side, waiting, tense and anxious for something to begin.