FROM THE CURIOSI CASEBOOK

-DARK MATTER-

Installment Two

By Tim Wintermute

I stared at the mask and thought that it would be nice to look at but I wouldn't want to wear it. As I wondered where I might display it in my apartment there was a knock on my door.

Gloria stepped into my room without hesitation and quickly sat in the only chair leaving me the bed. "I just had a phone call from Father Lupurelli."

"Lupurelli? How did he know you were here?"

"He told me he had called me wanting some advice and Diego, my research assistant, informed him I was in Venice. I called Diego and he confirmed that Lupurelli had telephoned, but I am convinced that Lupurelli called in order to create a cover story and that he already knew I was here."

"What makes you think he already knew?"

"Because he didn't ask me why I was here. You would think he would be curious, wouldn't you? In any case, Lupurelli told me that the COPR is planning a symposium on religious artifacts and relics that have been lost and wants me to participate and since we were both in Venice he suggested we meet as quickly as possible."

A half hour later we stood in the Campo San Giacomo Dell'Orio looking at the Church of the same name. With its austere exterior the church looked like a tourist trap for ascetics. "According to the guidebook for Venice this area was inhabited by wolves before they constructed this Church in the Ninth Century," I said, placing the guide with its accordion map into my coat pocket. "Maybe that's why Luppurelli decided to make this his base since Lupus means wolf."

She smiled. "I see you know your Latin."

"Doesn't every good Catholic?"

"So do a number of not so good ones."

"I'll confess to that much, but I'll spare you the details."

“I can’t offer you any absolution. However, I wouldn’t be as shocked as you might think. You may have noticed that I don’t live in a cloister.”

Gloria spared me from trying to come up with a response by rapping on the door using its heavy iron knocker and after a short wait it opened a crack. An elderly face peaked out at us and then the door swung in revealing the nun dressed in a traditional habit. She seemed to struggle to keep her head up to look at us under the weight of the large crucifix hanging from her neck as Gloria told her who we were.

“Are you alone?” The nun demanded, looking past us at the Campo. As her head turned the cross swung like a pendulum across the white scapular in the front of her black habit throwing her off balance. Gloria’s grabbed her arm and held it until the little nun regained her footing. Once recovered, she thanked Gloria and asked us to follow her. We trailed her down a dim corridor until she stopped in front of a wooden door with the Roman numeral X carved into it. She knocked and the door immediately opened. A man stepped out into the corridor. He was wearing a black cassock that covered him from just beneath his solemn face to his sandals. After bending over to have a whispered exchange with the nun she shuffled off into the darkness. He opened the door and ushered us through. Instead of following us, he shut the door leaving Gloria and I alone in a small, narrow room, which was crowded with a desk and several straight backed chairs. A desk lamp provided the only illumination other than the feeble light seeping through a postage stamp window set high in the far wall. The door opened again and a tall, thin man entered. Unlike the other priest, he was wearing a black suit with a clerical collar and carried a worn, brown leather briefcase.

"Father Lupurelli, I was afraid for minute that we'd been sentenced to a life of solitary confinement," Gloria said.

He half smiled and motioned for us to sit down before seating himself behind the desk. "Not confinement but contemplation. However, for a monk, having to share a cell, particularly with a member of the opposite sex, even a sister, would probably be thought of as a form of torture. Of course, I am not a monk.”

"One person’s punishment might be another's pleasure," Gloria quipped as I tried to find a comfortable spot on the hard wood of the chair.

“In that case it would be essential for the torturer to know the difference." He replied, leaning toward us, stretching his sharp jaw so that the skin of his face was as taut as a clenched fist. “It is indeed fortuitous that we are both in Venice at the same time, Sister Gloria.”

“Quite a coincidence."

"Or providential."

"I suppose that depends on whether I can help you with your symposium. You said that the subject is lost saints?”

“Lost? I should not have used that word. As you know, Saints are never lost since they no longer have a corporeal existence in this world. However, it is a sad fact that the remains, the relics, of some saints, are missing and some have even been stolen. Although, in most cases it is only a piece, not an entire body.”

“I would be honored to be part of such a symposium,” Gloria said.

“I am so happy to hear that. The symposium will be focusing on first class relics. As you know there are three classes of religious relics.”

“Of course,” Gloria answered. “The first class includes the body parts of a saint. The second are things that a saint wore or touched and the third class is composed of things that have been touched by either of the first two classes. Relics like that you can buy in a gift shop. On the other hand, it is a violation of canon law to sell first class relics.”

Father Lupurelli shrugged and said. “Most people sell the reliquary in which the relic is kept. In that way, the relic, itself, is given for free so that technically it is not a sin. Although it exploits the weakness of humans, no matter how pious, to obtain what is rare.”

“In other words, they get off on a technicality. I can understand the attraction for a collector. There aren’t many things rarer than the remains of a dead saint except the bones of a live saint.”

Father Lupurelli’s eyes arched at this observation. “As you know, Sister Gloria, the Church does not canonize people who are still living.”

“You aren’t contending that they weren’t a saint while they were alive? In fact, it is a requirement, wouldn’t you say?”

“Of course,” Father Lupurelli stammered and removed his hands from their prayerful embrace. “But the Church must weigh all of the evidence before it decides and some can occur after the saint’s death such as miracles that result from praying to the saint. Only then can the correct decision be made. I like to compare it to what is called dark matter.”

“You mean the term that physicists use to describe the mass of the universe that they have been unable to detect or measure directly?’ Gloria asked.

“Exactly, just as scientists believe they can learn something about this unseen missing part of the material universe through what they do see by using indirect methods and observation, I believe we can discern the properties of the unseen, spiritual universe by examining what we can see.”

“A dark mass of the soul,” I said.

Lupurelli glanced at me with annoyance. “We prefer not to joke about these matters, Signor Flynn. In any case, I was only making an analogy. The concern of the symposium is the sad fact that there are always a number of relics that are missing. Some of them have not even been

reported. One wonders if those responsible for their care are even aware that they are missing. Or perhaps they are and that is the reason they are afraid to say anything." He brought the fingertips of his hands together forming with the help of the lamp a shadowgraph of a praying hand on the bare wall to his left.

"Even in Venice?" Gloria asked.

"Especially in Venice. There are so many bones of saints here the city itself is a reliquary. There is no question about that. The question is how many of the relics have been acquired through legitimate means? Just take the relics of St. Mark that were stolen from Constantinople. Who is to say that relics that were acquired by theft won't disappear again?" He said, then unclasped his hands. "But tell me Sister, what do you think might be missing?"

"For a City that's been disappearing into the sea since the day it was founded, it might be easier to list what isn't missing."

"Be careful," the little nun warned us as she led us back to the front door. "Venice has become a very sinful place and there are signs that the end is coming."

"What do you mean, signs?" I asked.

"For one, the aqua alta is coming. Every year it is higher. Many people no longer live on the ground floor for fear of drowning but that will not save them since the very foundations will crumble."

Gloria turned to the nun. "Remember, Sister, that God made a promise that it would not be a flood but a fire that would come at the end of the world."

"Perhaps but Venice has always been separated from the rest of the world so God would have a special end in mind for us."

"In that case, Sister, let us hope God has chosen a Venetian to build a gondola as big as Noah's Ark."

A few minutes later as we stood on wooden planks above the green water that washed over the embankment of the Grand Canal waiting for the Vaporetto, I said. "She might be right about Venice sinking into the Adriatic."

"Unfortunately, for someone like Lupurelli the aqua alta is just another reason to rescue the bones of St. Mark and take them to Rome where they can be kept high and dry on St. Peter's rock. As far as they are concerned the living inhabitants of Venice, including the little Sister, can fend for themselves."

At our hotel the aqua alta had receded leaving behind a soggy welcome mat at the entrance. “Fortunately it decided not to stay for the night,” the desk clerk announced, referring to the aqua alta, and then handed Gloria an envelope that was delivered an hour earlier. Inside were two invitations to a masked party at the Accademia that evening.

“Now we know why Giuseppe gave us the masks,” Gloria said.

-2-

A man dressed as an eighteenth century footman gave an exaggerated bow as we entered the Accademia. Another servant handed us flutes of champagne and we were quickly engulfed in a current of masked partygoers and swept into the large inner courtyard where a white wigged chamber orchestra played with the vigor of a jazz band. We made our way through the crowded room to the far side and into a gallery where Gloria tugged at my arm and we stopped in front of a large painting covering most of one wall.

“It’s The Supper in the House of Levi by Paolo Veronese,” remarked the masked man standing beside us. It was Giuseppe’s voice hidden behind a golden mask with a foot long beak. “Of course, like many things, it really is not that at all. It was supposed to be the Last Supper, but the Inquisition objected to the drunks and what look like a group of Germans.”

“They probably thought it was a conspiracy by German Lutherans,” I said.

“In any case, Veronese made a slight artistic compromise and changed the name.” Giuseppe bowed slightly. “Please, allow me to introduce myself. I am Il Dottore. During the plague the doctor’s wore masks such as this because the long nose dampened the smell of death.” He turned to Gloria. “The volto, or half mask with the plume of black feathers that you are wearing is called the Temptress.”

“I suppose I should thank you for not making me wear a nun’s habit to go with it although I am wearing black, which isn’t the color I imagine a real temptress would be wearing,” Gloria plucked at the fabric of the plain black dress she was wearing. “In any case, now we know that you gave us these masks so that you could tell who we were.”

“Ah, but you are not the only temptress here tonight, so I have given your mask a particular, but subtle, detail that enables me to identify you. Nonetheless, someone might have followed you and be suspicious of my approach. Therefore, I will pretend to be telling you about this painting and you will pretend to show your appreciation for my knowledge by nodding as I point to various parts of the painting.”

His gloved right hand reached out from the black cape he was wrapped in and pointed at the upper left corner of the painting and our masks tilted in that direction as if we were marionettes. “Tell me, how did the meeting go with Father Lupurelli?”

After Gloria recounted the meeting, Giuseppe said. "I wish I had been there. It confirms my own suspicion that he believes you might be in Venice because of St. Mark. He might even

believe you will lead him to the relics. However, as long as he doesn't know that we are working together than we still have the advantage."

"I don't think he knows."

"Good," Giuseppe said. "Now we need you to authenticate the mosaic and take a photograph of it that shows the spot where the relics are hidden."

"Don't we have to find the mosaic first?" I asked.

His arm swept across the painting to the center where a dog looked up at Jesus as he sat behind a table. "But we already know where it is," he answered. "Why else would Sister Gloria be here? It is in a palazzo that was originally owned by a wealthy Jew, Jacopo Grimaldi, who built it in the fifteenth century fifty years before the Jews were forced by the Inquisition to move into the ghetto in Cannaregio. He was one of the Jewish moneylenders who were the bankers for the nobili. Foscari and his family had become quite wealthy in business as the result of his influence and he had used Grimaldi as his banker. When Foscari concocted his plot to take credit for the discovery of the true relics of St. Marks he turned to Grimaldi. He knew that a Jew would not be afraid of eternal damnation in a Christian hell for being part of such a conspiracy. On the other hand, Grimaldi knew that if he didn't help Foscari he might never be repaid the money owed him. And then there was also coercion. That would have been easy to employ against a Jew who had no rights. They weren't even allowed to be members of the cittadini much less the nobili. So Grimaldi was at the mercy of Foscari."

"Who was not just any member of the nobili but the Doge," Gloria added.

"Why didn't he say anything after Foscari was deposed?" I asked. "After all he would have already lost any chance of being repaid and couldn't be punished by Foscari."

"But if he divulged Foscari's plot he would have had to explain why he'd agreed to participate in such an act of treason and heresy in the first place. As long as Foscari didn't talk, he was safe. Foscari, of course, didn't talk because he knew he would probably be executed once the relics were recovered. As long as he didn't tell the Council of Ten where they were he had, as they say, an ace up his sleeve."

"Then why would Grimaldi keep the mosaic since it would incriminate him?" I asked.

"Grimaldi believed that if Foscari ever confessed and implicated him then his only chance would to exchange his knowledge of where the relics were hidden for his life and fortune, or at least his life. Then before he died he left the secret with his descendants. When the entire Jewish population of Venice was forced to move into the Ghetto in 1516 they pretended to sell the Palazzo to Lorenzo Gambello a member of the nobili who was deeply in debt to the Grimaldi's. In order to cancel the debt he agreed to hold it for them until they were allowed to live once again outside the Ghetto. Two centuries later Napoleon captured Venice and allowed the Jews to leave the Ghetto. The Grimaldis reclaimed the Palazzo from the Gambello's. During that entire time, the mosaic remained hidden in a secret room. After the invention of photography, the

Grimaldi's had the photograph made so that if they needed to they could show it as proof that they knew where the Mosaic was without having to divulge its real location."

"So that's why the photograph doesn't include the part of the mosaic that shows where the relics are hidden," Gloria said.

"Unfortunately for them, when Mussolini came to power the fascists didn't care about saints much less their bones so knowing where the mosaic was that showed St. Marks burial place didn't provide any protection."

"You only need to see what Mussolini did to Santa Lucia to know that," Gloria said. "Making the trains run on time was of more interest to him than his soul."

Giuseppe dipped his long nose in agreement. "The Nazis shipped the Grimaldi family off by those very trains to the death camps. Fortunately the photograph, itself, was not lost but was found stuffed in a book that was included in an estate sale six months ago. Ironically, it was the estate of the very same Gambello family who had, somehow, regained the palazzo after the demise of the Grimaldis. It was only after discovering the photograph that I was able to learn the full story and where the mosaic is. But I have already talked with you long enough." Raising his voice from the whisper that we had been conversing in, he announced. "I hope I haven't been boring you with my little lecture. Before you leave, however, make sure you look at some of the other paintings. You might find the one next to this of particular interest." He shook my hand, kissed Gloria's and with a swirl of his cape, he disappeared back into the crowd of partygoers.

After Giuseppe left we followed his recommendation moved to the left and stood before *The Transporting of St. Mark's Body* by Tintoretto. We turned and looked at each other through the slits in our masks. Gloria opened her right hand revealing a small piece of paper that Giuseppe had slipped her.

-3-

He was sitting in a piazetta next to one of the many humpbacked bridges that span Venice's narrow, less grand, canals. The wheelchair lift attached to the right side of the bridge reminded me that I hadn't seen one person in a wheelchair since I'd been in Venice. It made me wonder if the lame had all been miraculously cured.

Felippo put down the paperback book that had a scene depicting cowboys sitting around a campfire on its cover. We knew from the note that Giuseppe slipped to Gloria that we should look for a man reading a paperback western. However, it was clear from Felippo's denim shirt, jeans with a large silver buckle and black cowboy boots that he wasn't packing the book just for our benefit. After we shook hands and sat down Felippo reached into the breast pocket of his shirt but instead of pulling out a cigarette he pulled out a stick of Juicy Fruit gum and offered it to us. I took one while Gloria declined.

"I stopped smoking so I chew this instead," Felippo said, returning the pack to his pocket. "I need to have something in my mouth. Drinking coffee is also a problem since I always smoked

when I had my espresso. That's why I chew the gum when I drink although it must seem strange." He nodded toward the small cup on the table.

As I chewed, Gloria observed that it was lucky that Felippo already knew Giuseppe when he discovered the mosaic. "Otherwise, who knows what might have happened."

"It was not a matter of luck. As an architect and contractor I am always looking for opportunities, so when Giuseppe approached me and asked me to restore an historic palazzo that he had bought I was more than happy. Then, when he told me what he thought was hidden in the building. As soon as I discovered the hidden chamber and saw that there was a mosaic inside I stopped everything and told Giuseppe. He said to stop all work on the palazzo and to not go near it until he had an expert come and look at it. And here you are, the expert. I am proud to be a part of something that will be of service to Venice. You see, I am one hundred percent Venetian underneath this denim." Felippo stopped and looked around, then pealed a bill from a wad that he carried in his front pocket and dropped it on the table. "We should be going," he said, pulling a rucksack over one shoulder. As we began walking he whispered to us. "Those two men at the café have been watching us." I looked over my shoulder as casually as possible and saw the two men in trench coats and wearing sunglasses who we had seen on the Motoscafo the day before. When I turned back Gloria and Felippo were already halfway across the bridge and I had to break into a trot to catch them. On the other side of the canal, instead of following the calle next to it, we entered an opening between the buildings. Once inside the narrow passage we turned left at a right angle and were immediately enveloped in twilight with the sky an undulating strip of blue framed by tile roofs. Footsteps clattered over the bridge we'd just crossed and I sped up, grateful for the silence of the Vibram soles of my shoes. Suddenly the alley broke sharply to the right, and almost ran into Gloria and Felippo, who had stopped several yards from another bridge.

"Why have we stopped? I can hear them behind us." Gloria asked.

Felippo pointed to a row boat tied to the quai next to the bridge. "Quickly, into the boat," and we scampered into the boat as the footsteps behind reverberated off the walls of the alley sounding like cattle stampeding through a canyon.

As the boat bobbed, green water from the canal splashed over its gunwales. Felippo quickly untied the line from the bow and yanked it toward him pushing the boat forward. Just as we were even with the metal ring where the other end of the line was attached, he threw the line onto the quai and we slipped under the bridge. As the boat slid into a barrel of darkness Felippo raised his arms above his head. Gloria and I followed his lead and our hands clawed the gritty underside of the bridge until the boat came to a stop. There was shuffling at the foot of the bridge then some muffled words, followed by footsteps on the bridge. We pushed against the sweating stone in order to hold the boat as still as possible. The footsteps grew louder and then halted above us at the crest of the bridge. I held my breath, as if they might actually hear it, and stared at the stone above us. It was like a scene from a war movie where the crew of a submarine sweats in silence, listening to the ping of sonar from a destroyer, waiting for depth charges to explode. The footsteps started again and grew fainter as they crossed over to the other side.

We lowered our arms and Felippo pointed at the oars. “Now we must row.”

“Row?” Gloria’s whispered. “Now that they’re gone why can’t we walk?”

“Because Sister we cannot walk on water. Well, you may, but I can’t and I have my doubts about Signor Flynn.”

“Your doubts are justified,” I answered.

“What you’re saying is we need the boat to get to the Palazzo,” Gloria added, not telling Felippo to just call her Gloria.

“I thought you stole it so that we could get away from the posse?” I said.

Felippo stuffed his hand into his mouth to stifle a laugh. “This boat belongs to me. We take stealing boats as seriously as horses only we drown the thieves rather than hang them since we have few trees to throw the rope over and plenty of water. Now, one of you will need to row because I must direct us.”

“You mean navigate?”

“Yes, that is what I mean. I know the where it is so I will navigate and you must row.”

“I can steer,” Gloria announced grabbing the tiller in the stern and wiggling it so that the bow bumped against the side of the side of the canal.

Felippo whispered. “Very good Sister, you may take the helm.”

“I guess that makes me the galley slave,” I said, as I grabbed the oars.

I rowed and Gloria steered for some time through a series of canals following Felippo’s commands before he motioned for us to stop. I pulled in the oars letting us glide through the water while Gloria pushed the tiller to the right steering the bow toward a canvas wall that was at least three stories high on which there was an almost life size illustration of an elegant sixteenth century palazzo. Felippo reached behind the edge of the canvas as we approached, grabbed onto something and pulled us behind it. In front of us a grid of metal scaffolding, crisscrossed with wooden planks, rose to the top of the building. The façade had been sandblasted and the light straining through the canvas gave it the pink hue of a baby’s skin. Felippo tied the bow line onto the scaffold and pulled himself up onto its planking. Gloria and I followed, stepping between the dangling ropes that swung back and forth as the canvas inhaled and exhaled with the breeze, until we reached a padlocked metal door.

"How do we get past this locked door?" Gloria asked.

"We use this," Felippo answered calmly producing a key.

After we entered Felippo switched on a flashlight he had taken from his rucksack. We followed him down a wide hallway, cluttered with building material, passing until we reached another door with a padlock. This one had a combination lock and asked me to hold the flashlight as he rotated the tumblers until it clicked open. The room we entered was a large square with a tarp over the floor. Sheets of plywood covered the windows and buckets of paint, brushes and pans were stacked in one of the corners. The walls were pockmarked with spackle.

Felippo flicked a switch near the door and the room was lit by a bare light bulb suspended from an orange cord attached to the ceiling. "Help me roll back the tarp." He said as he took slipped off his rucksack and dropped to his knees

We rolled up the tarp, exposing a marble floor. When we had rolled it half way across the floor Felippo told us to stop. He pulled out a screwdriver from his pack and began prying at a seam between two sections of the marble. He slipped it into the crack and pushed down on the handle. The slab slid free and I helped him pull it up.

"It's a lot lighter than I thought it would be," I said, thankfully, since my arms and back were sore from the rowing.

"That's because it's not as thick as the rest of the marble floor. You can see how the wood underneath it is raised so that it fills in for the thinner marble. Now help me remove the sections next to it."

Felippo and I took out three more sections exposing a trap door with a recessed iron ring. Felippo yanked hard on the ring and the trap door opened. He pointed his flashlight into the opening illuminating a wooden ladder that descended about ten feet.

"It's still dry," he announced and then asked me to hold the flashlight as he descended the ladder. When he reached the bottom he called for us to follow and I held the flashlight as Gloria desnded and then tossed it to Felippo and climbed down myself.

"Where's the mosaic?" Gloria asked.

"On the floor over there." Felippo pointed the flashlight to the right. As he held it Gloria walked over and examined the mosaic laid out on the floor.

"Even after all the centuries it looks ready to replace the one in St. Marks."

"We don't have much time so do whatever it is you need to do," Felippo said.

Gloria bent over with her flashlight and examined the mosaic. Then she took the camera from her bag. The room was lit with flashes. "I hope I got everything," she said.

"Now, we must go back up the ladder. Quickly," Felippo said.

As soon as we climbed through the opening, Felippo slammed the trap door shut. I held the flashlight as he took a tube of adhesive from his pack and smeared it on the bottom of the sections of marble and then lifted them into place.

“It is as sealed as a tomb,” I said.

“A watery one,” He answered. “It will soon be covered by the aqua alta.”