

**THE KEY
ORIGINAL OPENING CHAPTERS**

1

VATICAN CITY, ROME

Cardinal Tantalus sat in the busy corridor, his legs numb from sitting too long on a chair that was more decorative than functional, his jaw aching from biting down on the anger that had slowly simmered up inside him.

He had arrived early for his appointment, strolling through the manicured gardens with a lightness in his heart he had not experienced for many months. Not even being ambushed by the TV news crews camped outside the solid, pink granite palace of the Governorate had soured his mood, for they were only further evidence of the crisis his former rivals now found themselves in. He thought back to the last time he had made this short walk from the Vatican train station, two years earlier - following his defeat. Back then he had been heading in the other direction, each step weighed down with the heaviness of believing he would never step foot here again. Then the explosion in Ruin had torn a hole in the foundations of the church and everything had changed.

Tantalus had a particular soft spot for the ancient Turkish spa town, one that looked likely to grow if its current troubles now proved to be the end his own. He was Turkish by birth, had spent some of his youth in the city of Ruin, and it had even become part of his portfolio of responsibilities for a while during his long career. As such he had some knowledge of the peculiar position it held

within the church and the systems by which it operated. Despite its historical importance and the central role it had played in founding the modern church it had always remained distinct from Rome and fiercely autonomous. As such his responsibilities towards it had largely been to leave it alone, but he had learned some things in that time. And now he felt, with his politician's instinct, that the explosion in Ruin, and the unprecedented events that had followed, were the reason for his sudden recall to Rome. But the thing that had made his return all the sweeter was the person who had ordered it.

Cardinal Secretary Schaefer was the main power behind the Papal throne. As de facto prime minister of the Vatican he had far reaching executive powers over the running of the church and the international affairs of the city-state; but he also held a very personal significance for Tantalus. Two years earlier, during conclave to elect the new Pope, Schaefer had promised Tantalus his vote and then switched allegiance at the crucial moment consigning him not only to a surprise and humiliating defeat, but also, ultimately, to his exile. Now he was in trouble and had personally called him back. But, even though his former enemy had been forced by circumstance to offer him an olive branch, it was clear, as the minutes ticked by, that he intended to beat him with it first.

The room Tantalus had been called to was on the lower level of the palace of the Governorate, the large administration building that faced the back of St Peter's Basilica. This choice of venue had puzzled Tantalus at first as the offices of the Cardinal Secretary were in the much grander Apostolic palace, just down the frescoed halls from the Papal Apartments. But, as the corridor steadily filled

with the morning workforce buzzing with the crisis that had enveloped them all, he realised why he had been specifically called here. The palace of the Governorate was much larger, and therefore much busier than the building housing the Cardinal Secretary's offices. This meant it was also far more public. So, as one familiar face after another drifted past, looked in his direction, then just as quickly looked away, he felt the repeated sting of a carefully orchestrated public humiliation. It brought it home to him, as no doubt was intended, that in two short years he had gone from being within a finger's reach of the highest office in the church, to sitting in a corridor like a naughty schoolboy, waiting to be invited back in by his masters.

He glanced up at the closed door, caught his own angry reflection in the highly polished brass fingerplate by the handle and quickly looked away. He had always hated his appearance, his moon face with its fringe of curly hair - once blonde, now white - making him appear like a grotesque, oversized cherub. He hated it even more now the pain of the last two years had sunk into him, settling around his eyes, hollowing them out and giving him a haunted look. Schaefer would no doubt muse on it later, putting it down to the combined burden of his thwarted ambition and the toll of having to nurse his terminally ill sister to her painful end. In truth, having the time to properly care for Esma had been the greatest consolation for not becoming Pope. He would never have had time to personally minister to her if his ambitions had been fulfilled. And, when the disease finally gnawed her away to nothing and she had eventually found peace, she had done so in the arms of a brother who genuinely loved her, not some

stranger who was there out of duty or in exchange for a salary. No the real reason for his altered appearance was something much more tangible than grief, but no one knew of it, and no one would. One of the great benefits of his many years spent mastering the art of gleaning other people's secrets was that he had also learned how to keep his own.

A murmur of voices echoed down the long corridor as a fresh knot of clerics pushed through the fire doors and started heading towards him. Tantalus groaned inwardly and willed the door opposite to open. But the room he was waiting outside had also been chosen for another reason. It had another entrance. Inside the room a door led down to a tunnel that cut directly underneath the gardens and emerged in the papal apartments. It meant the Pope, and other senior officials, could attend private meetings here without having to go through the paraphernalia of being escorted through the gardens by the Swiss Guard. It also meant Schaefer might not even be in the room yet. He could still be in bed for all he knew, or eating a leisurely breakfast with other members of the Secretariat, laughing at the thought of his old adversary squirming helplessly in the busy corridor under the gossip hungry gaze of his former colleagues.

The group of clerics draw nearer and he heard their conversation dip to silence as they spotted him. He reached into the attaché case on his lap, searching for something to occupy him. He pulled out a creased copy of the morning paper someone had left on the train. It was *La Repubblica*, a left leaning daily famously critical of the church. No doubt the sight of him reading it would

fuel more gossip later in the lunchtime refectory, but he didn't care. He had always read the papers that were hostile to the church. Only by studying the opinions of those who sought to do you the most harm could you work out the best way to outmanoeuvre them. Was it not Machiavelli himself who had advocated keeping your friends close but your enemies closer? Maybe his own enemies had realised this too, and that was why he had been summoned.

The clerics passed in silence, their conversation only whispering back to life as they continued on their way down the corridor. Tantalus ignored them, scrutinising instead the latest news on the explosion at the Citadel in Ruin, still clinging to the front page more than a week after it had happened. He quickly scanned the article rehashing the details of the crisis that had rocked the church. At the bottom was an editor's note indicating the story was the subject of comment in the day's editorial. Tantalus turned to the inner pages, enjoying the paper barrier it created between him and the corridor, and started to read.

Church in Crisis

THE CITADEL of Ruin in Southern Turkey is famous as much for what we know about it as what we don't. We know the first bible was written there and that it was the original power centre of the Catholic church. We also know of the great secrets associated with the mountain fortress, particularly the powerful relic

known as the Sacrament, a secret that has been kept for thousands of years by the monks who guard it.

But twelve days ago that secret was threatened. For the first time in recorded history someone emerged from the mountain and climbed to the summit. The pictures of that solitary monk standing on top of the Citadel, making the enigmatic sign of a T-shaped cross with his body, made the cover of every newspaper in the world. It drew the world's attention, and when he tragically fell to his death the world mourned, and the current crisis in the church began. A tragedy had occurred at the most ancient and sacred site in the world; but the church said nothing. They neither identified the monk, nor explained how he had come to climb to the top of the Citadel and fall to his lonely death. He may have been one of theirs, but in death they chose to abandon him – and for the rest of us, brought up on the notion that the mother church watched over and cared for us all, it was a cold and frightening message indeed.

Then two days later a large explosion tore a hole in the base of the mountain fortress and for the first time in history thirteen people emerged from inside:

ten monks and, incredibly, three civilians. The pictures of these bearded monks in their blood-drenched green cassocks being stretchered from the mountain were shocking enough, but since allowing them to leave the Citadel the church has, again, seemingly disowned them.

Tantalus flipped back to the front page where a photograph had accompanied the main article. It had been taken during the initial evacuation, before the monks had been hidden away in the hospital. It showed a biblical looking figure, long haired and bearded, his green cassock stripped to his waist as he lay unconscious on a hospital stretcher. Blood ran freely from deep wounds cut in deliberate and ritualistic patterns all over his body. The cuts were straight and deliberate – ritualistic even. They could not possibly have been caused by the random shrapnel of an explosion. Tantalus turned back to the inner pages and continued reading.

Similarly the church has offered no information or explanation as to the presence or identity of the three civilians also brought out of the mountain, or why – in such a famously male only society – two of them were women. Instead they fell silent again, their one visible action being to virtually

imprison all thirteen in private rooms in the city hospital, guarded by priests so that no-one may talk to them.

But if the church hoped to hide behind this silence, imagining the world would lose interest in what had happened, they got it very badly wrong. Fire may go out when faced with a vacuum, but nature, as we know, abhors one, and speculation and rumour have flooded in to fill the void they have created by their inaction. Questions are now being asked on a governmental level about why the church has said nothing. Every conspiracy theorist with a blog is speculating on the significance of the monks' injuries and what it may reveal about the closed society within the Citadel. Chief among these theories is that the monks, isolated from the world for so long, have degenerated into some kind of barbaric cult, and the presence of the civilians is evidence of old testament style blood sacrifices being practiced inside the mountain. One thing is clear, whatever the church hoped to achieve by their inaction they now face increasing international pressure, particularly from the predominantly Catholic

**countries, for Rome to grant access to the Citadel
so that an independent investigation can take
place to not only disprove these rumours but also
...**

‘Tantalus?’ The sound of his name ricocheted off the marble floor like a gunshot. He dropped the paper down to reveal a thin, grey man peering at him from round the edge of the now opened door, a file clutched tightly under his arm. His caterpillar eyebrows shot upwards behind rimless glasses and thin-lips twisted into a parody of a welcoming smile.

‘Bishop Aloysius,’ Tantalus said, smiling back and feeling the ache in his jaw from biting down on his anger for so long. ‘How nice to see you. I didn’t realise you now served the Secretariat.’ Aloysius was one of the career Bishops who, like a lizard on the rim of a volcano, seemed to live dangerously close to the white heat of power without ever getting singed.

‘I have been so blessed,’ Aloysius said, glancing quickly up and down the corridor before opening the door a little wider to indicate Tantalus’s presence was finally required within. ‘Our sincere apologies for keeping you waiting,’ he added.

‘Not at all,’ Tantalus said, creaking unsteadily to his feet and tucking the newspaper into his case. ‘Truth be told, I only just got here myself.’

2

Tantalus passed from the brightness of the corridor into the dark of the oak panelled meeting room. The heavy, wooden shutters had been pulled closed across the windows and the main lights were switched off. Behind him, Aloysius closed the door, cutting out the murmur of voices and the clip of leather heels that echoed down the corridor. It also cut out the spill of daylight, sinking the room into deeper darkness.

Tantalus squinted into the gloom, his eyes adjusting after sitting so long in the bright glare of the corridor. The only illumination came from a single desk-lamp sitting in the centre of the rectangular table. There were no round tables in the Vatican. It was not a democracy. The Pope was the last absolute monarch in Europe and this rigid, hierarchical power structure was reflected everywhere, even in the furniture. The chair at the head of the table was noticeably larger than the others. It was also empty.

Tantalus turned towards Aloysius, what little patience he had now exhausted.

Follow me, Aloysius said cutting him off and scuttling round the table towards the second door in the far corner. Tantalus watched him reach the far end of the room, take two steps to the left then vanish. He blinked and stared at the spot where Aloysius had been and now was not. He took a step forward, the

room taking form now as his eyes became accustomed to its darkness. As his perspective changed, a gap became apparent behind the panel where Aloysius had apparently vanished. He continued towards it, noticing a faint light now, glowing low at the base. He reached it and opened the gap wider making it large enough for him to pass through. The light filtered up from a flight of stone steps leading down. Aloysius was waiting at the bottom of them. 'Pull the panel closed behind you,' he said, then without waiting for his answer he turned abruptly and marched away.

Tantalus stepped through the doorway and pulled the panel shut behind him. It was surprisingly heavy, requiring him to lean backwards with all his considerable weight to pull it securely into place. It banged shut and some unseen catch clicked down to hold it in place. He turned and descended the stone steps as quickly as his bulk and the cramped space would allow. During his time at the Vatican, He had thought he'd learned all the secret passages and chambers that riddled the ground beneath the Papal palaces – but this one was new to him. He reached the bottom step and peered down a narrow tunnel. The walls were old and rough, in stark contrast to the smooth, decorated lines of the building above them. They were made from a patchwork of stone and the type of long, flat bricks that could also be seen in the Necropolis underneath St Peter's Basilica. Some of those chambers dated back to the 3rd century: these looked just as old, maybe older. He traced their surface with his eye, the contours and textures illuminated by dim lights set into the walls at floor level. Aloysius stood a little way down waiting for him to follow, clutching the file against his chest

like a talisman against the dark. He could sense his impatience, even at this distance.

'Is all this cloak and dagger entirely necessary?' Tantalus called after him, his own impatience a match for anything the Bishop could muster. He was already tetchy from his long wait in the public corridor and breathless from negotiating the stone steps.

'You'll see,' Aloysius said, then he turned and continued on his way

Tantalus took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He was clearly going to get no answers from Schaefer's messenger; better to save his questions, and his breath. He hoisted the attaché case in front of him so it wouldn't scrape against the walls of the narrowing tunnel, then followed the Bishop down into the damp smelling earth.

The tunnel was long and was broken up into smaller passageways by a series of heavy doors that had all been unlocked and left open for them. As they passed through each one Aloysius turned and asked him to close them, sealing them in as they made their way deeper into the earth. It made Tantalus feel uneasy. He had arrived here prepared for a meeting with his old enemy, now he was being taken to some secret place deep beneath the ground. It felt like he was being led to his own grave. This unsettling feeling was further enhanced when, after a few minutes walking, they passed through another door to be confronted by an entire wall lined with human bones. Aloysius marched on without even registering the empty eye sockets staring out at him from a complicated latticework of leg bones. Tantalus stood motionless, transfixed by the macabre

sight. 'What is this place?' He called after him.

Aloysius stopped and looked up at the wall of human bones. 'It's what's left of the catacombs from the old basilica,' he replied with as much feeling as if he were describing an old pair of shoes. 'Before that these tunnels and chambers were part of an older shrine, but we tend to play down the fact that other faiths worshipped here before we did: very few people know this place even exists.' He smiled his chilly smile then turned and continued on the seemingly endless journey. Tantalus followed, beads of sweat popping out on his forehead despite the subterranean chill.

They rounded another corner and through another door. There were more bones beyond it, neatly piled and stacked tightly in every recess so the walls now appeared to be made as much of the dead as they were of stone. There were no brick sections this far down, just the bedrock of Vatican Hill. Where the stone showed between the stacks of bones faint symbols were scratched on the surface. He saw round symbols for the sun, large beasts that were probably lions and outlines of insects that could have been bees. They were pagan symbols, carved in honour of ancient gods long before Christianity edged them aside. He wondered now how old the bones were that lined the tunnel; maybe they had already been buried here when Christ and St Peter walked the earth above. So engrossed was he with these thoughts that - as they turned another corner and squeezed through a narrow archway into a small, round chamber - he was utterly unprepared for the sight that confronted him.

In the centre of the space was a large block of stone, its upper surface

worn smooth by great age. There were shallow channels cut inside the edges and more pagan symbols carved on the sides. He had seen something like it twice before when visiting other prehistoric temples, once at Stonehenge in England and again in Tartu in Estonia. It was a sacrificial altar the gulley in the stone designed to let blood drain away from whatever had been sacrificed on it. This particular stone was the size of a man. But it was not the presence of such a primitive and barbaric object buried beneath the sacred heart of the Vatican that had taken Tantalus aback, it was the man who was standing next to it.

At first sight it seemed as if one of the skeletons had climbed down from one of the loculi lining the room, shrugged into a cardinal's surplice and was now stooping beneath the weight of it. The low level lighting enhanced his skeletal appearance casting shadows across his gaunt face, turning sunken cheeks into dark hollows and eyes into blank sockets.

'Tantalus,' Schaefer said, his voice courteous though he made no move towards him by way of welcome, 'you're looking well.'

Tantalus had rehearsed this meeting so many times in his head, sharpened the barbs of what he would say and imagined how liberated he would feel once he had unleashed them. But as he looked now upon his one-time ally, later his betrayer, now his superior he didn't feel anger or hate; he felt pity. Schaefer looked so much older than he remembered. His hair had thinned noticeably and was scraped across the skull-like dome of a head that hung forward as if weighed down by the sheer size of the responsibilities it now held. Seeing his nemesis like this, standing in the dark like a sideshow horror, Tantalus

had a flash of the parallel life he could have led. Looking upon the cadaverous creature in front of him, ground down by the wheels of the great machine he served, he wondered how he would have coped had he got his wish and attained the position of Pope.

‘Please,’ the skeleton said, sweeping a thin arm towards the sacrificial stone like he was hosting a dinner party. ‘Sit.’

For one bizarre moment Tantalus wondered if he was actually being invited to climb onto the altar stone in preparation for his own sacrifice, until Schaefer moved stiffly to the far side of it and stiffly sat down on a small folding chair that was almost invisible in the gloom. Aloysius banged the door shut behind them, sealing them inside the chamber, then scurried to another chair at the right hand of his master where he dutifully sat and placed the file on the stone in front of him. Tantalus glanced at it. There was no writing on its cover. He stood for a moment, transfixed by the bizarre tableau that confronted him: Schaefer sitting behind a broad stone that had once been used for blood sacrifices, Aloysius sitting attentively next to him like a secretary waiting to take a letter. It wasn’t quite how he had imagined it, and both the oddness of the setting and the strange circumstance of him being there conspired to suck all the wind from his sails. So instead of launching a spleen filled tirade against his betrayer, as he had fully planned to, he simply moved across to the remaining chair and carefully lowered his bulk onto the spindly looking thing until his face was level with theirs.

‘Thank you for coming so quickly,’ Schaefer said, as if this was just a

routine weekly meeting rather than a recall from two years of exile taking place in a prehistoric death chamber. 'Also my apologies for this unusual venue. But the purpose of this meeting is very sensitive. No one must ever know it has taken place.'

'Then why keep me waiting in a corridor for so long that half the staff of the Vatican have had a good look at me?'

Schaefer looked away and lifted a hand to deflect the anger in Tantalus's voice. 'I'm afraid that was deliberate,' he said, 'again my apologies if your wait there was uncomfortable. But the more people who will swear they saw you in the Palace of the Governorate the better. My own appointments diary shows that I was busy in meetings all morning in the Apostolic palace. Therefore we could not possibly have met.' The hand lowered again and settled on the stone block that separated them. 'Offices can be bugged,' he explained. 'There are even devices that can pick up the vibrations on a window pane and reconstruct the conversation taking place within the room. So we never met today. And nothing we are about to discuss here can ever be made public.'