

## Chapter 26

*How Frank and Martin had supper with six foreigners, and who they were*

Every Monday, their hotel provided a complimentary dinner for their guests, and Frank and Martin had become regulars. As they were sitting down to eat, a very fuzzy man approached Frank, took his arm, and whispered, "Be ready to leave with us, without fail."

It was Mahmud! Only seeing Missile-Tits could have delighted him more. Mad with joy, he embraced his dear friend and said, "Where is she? Take me to her, let me die of happiness with her."

"She isn't here," said Mahmud, "she's in Istanbul."

"Good heavens! Istanbul! But I'd fly to her even if she were in Xinjiang. Let's go!"

"We'll leave after supper," said Mahmud. "I can't tell you any more than that. I'm at work right now, and my boss is waiting for me. Don't say a word. Eat your supper and be ready."

Frank felt overwhelmed by joy and sorrow; he was happy to see his friend again, but sorry to witness him bent to such service. He could think of nothing but reuniting with his wife, and became agitated, his mind in turmoil. He sat down to table with Martin, and with six travelers who had come to Venice for the carnival.

Frank had bought himself an outfit for the carnival, of a quality befitting his station, made from porcelain with gold filigree, and dark velvets trimmed in thread-of-gold. He had little enthusiasm for the stuffy and itchy entrapments, however, and carried them about grudgingly. Yet Martin felt comforted by the anonymity that the traditional masquerade provided, as did their dining companions.

When they all came to sit at table, however, they removed their masks. Frank and Martin found that they knew their dining companions, though they had never met. Frank started with the person he recognized first. "Hey! You're Rob Gronkoski!"

"Yeah!" said Rob Gronkoski. "I used to catch touchdown passes in super-bowls, but I retired, and I've been so bored and frustrated my therapist told me I should try coming here and putting on a mask like everybody else, so- Yeah. Anyway," Gronk pointed at the gentleman seated across from him, "I recognize this dude, too! Aren't you, like, on tv or something?"

Flattered, the gentleman stood and introduced himself, shaking hands all around. "Bill J Fullwidth! I was CEO of the Ford Motor Company for eleven minutes in 2004. In the same month, I was on the cover of Forbes, Fortune, Car and Driver, and People Magazine. No one has taken my picture since. I came to the carnival to drop some photobombs. But I am far from the second-most-famous person, here." As he concluded, he looked up at Angela Merkel.

Angela Merkel sighed and stared into her lap, and when her gaze arose, she wore her global television face. "My successor as Chancellor of Germany does well enough, but the situation has become so terrifying that I've come to Venice to try to relax and enjoy the carnival. And I am not even the only former head of state!"

At this, Jair Bolsonaro raised his head and made a bullfrog sound, then stared down at his charger in anticipation, holding his knife and fork upright in his paws. Seated beside him, somewhat red of face, Greta Thunberg wore a similar expression. Overcoming her revulsion, she engaged Frank and Martin. "You two seem like reasonable gentlemen. You must know my story, how my earnest passion for the future of our world brought a wave of celebrity, how my detractors tried to infantilize and insult me, and when that failed they simply began shouting nonsensically about everything from all directions until my humble message was drowned out. I have come to Venice to help with our climate demonstration. Are you here to participate?"

They were not, but Frank listened to her plan and apologized that he couldn't attend, as he needed to be in Istanbul immediately. He reached inside his velvet robes and pulled out a small leather pouch on a thong around his neck. Giving this to Greta, he explained, "herein lies our salvation, in the form of a few moldy seeds and a water-damaged thumb drive. Take it to your friends who are ecologists and geneticists, and bid them bend all of their resources to its recovery." He transferred her two-hundred-thousand Euros and signed up for her mailing list, and gave her his blessing. It was not at all like the Shangri Lama's blessing, which hit like a hair-dryer, but Greta lost some of her flush and smiled, and engaged the table afterward.

Martin studied their final companion. "I recognize you, as well. You're George Santos, the congressman from New York who won election based on false credentials."

Santos let his knife strike the corner of his plate. "They told me I had to! They said I could get elected and be a congressman if I followed their plan, and the made-up papers were part of it. I thought they were being stupid, but it turns out that people only asked, "How could this happen?" and "When did Who know about it?" Not one person bothered to ask *why*, so they remain hidden. And no one had an answer to "What should we do about it?", so I remain in office.

“Who do you mean by ‘they’?” asked Martin.

“Who do you think?” shouted Santos.

In an effort to calm everybody down, Angela confessed, “In the EU, it is still the energy industry and the military, along with the big food companies, that make puppets of our legislators. I’m told it is the same in the US.”

Santos tapped his nose. “I came to the carnival on their orders. As long as I’m not in Washington to vote, my opponents’ hard work stalls on the floor.”

At that moment, the congressman’s aid appeared beside him, and whispered, “Sir, the line of credit extended to us by the hotel has been canceled, and your bill is now called due. I am leaving to attend my own affairs. Farewell.”

Bolsonaro, the former CEO, and Rob Gronkowski each gave Santos a few hundred euros while the rest looked on in disgust. Their meal thus concluded, everyone left the table. Frank and Martin went and packed up their things. At the front desk, they were held up by a group of wealthy and beautiful young women just arriving. Frank took no notice, his mind firmly fixed on Istanbul.