

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ANNA POPOV

Jack Rogan Mysteries Book 2

Gabriel Farago

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Chapter 73

Wolf's Lair, 9 March, 2:30 a.m.

The Wizard reached the bottom of the stairs first and was about to turn right to check the strongroom under the crypt when something caught his eye.

The Bone Scraper sat in the Wizard's chair at the round table, motionless and silent like a statue. Two of his men stood under the stairs, guns drawn, and the others were lurking in the shadows behind the stone pillars. The Wizard's eyes darted around the room like the desperate eyes of a cornered animal searching for a way out.

'Hello Eugene. Got my message?' said the Bone Scraper. It was more of a statement than a question. 'Ars moriendi – remember? Can't say I didn't put you on notice.'

'How the fuck did you bastards get in?' roared the Wizard.

'What do you think? Back door of course. Great tunnel. Leaving it unprotected like that ...very careless. Not like you at all.'

'How did you know?'

'Cassandra ...'

That's it! thought the Wizard. *Jack!* Suddenly it all made sense. *A set up!* Strangely, knowing made him feel a little better.

The Bone Scraper was enjoying himself. 'Where's your little mate, the Undertaker?' he asked. 'Why don't you ask him to come down? You'll be needing his services – soon.'

Standing perfectly still in the silent church above the crypt, the Undertaker had overheard everything. Leaning forward a little at the top of the stairs, he could just see the Bone Scraper's chest through the stone balustrades. Slowly, he raised his gun and took aim.

Sensing danger, the Bone Scraper turned his head. 'Gun! Twelve o'clock!' he shouted, struggling out of his chair.

The Warrior standing by the pillar looked up and fired his shotgun.

The Undertaker's Barretta went off at the same time. It missed. The shotgun didn't. The Undertaker came tumbling down the stairs like a limp sack of potatoes.

'Now look what you've done. You should have asked him to come down,' said the Bone Scraper as if nothing had happened. 'But then, you were never one to listen, Eugene, were you? Failure to listen has a price. So does murder ...'

The Wizard stared at the Undertaker lying at his feet with a large, bleeding hole in his chest, but didn't reply.

Jack was on a high. He could hardly believe his luck. He'd done it! The plan had worked! He was about to turn into the main road at the bottom of the hill when he passed an overgrown track. Recalling the diagram he'd drawn for the Bone Scraper, he stopped the bike and turned around. *This must be it*, he thought, looking at the fresh tyre marks in the long grass. *Why not?*

At first, the sentry at the bridge didn't want to let him pass, but Jack insisted that he contact the Bone Scraper on his radio.

The Bone Scraper didn't sound too pleased. 'Leave this to me,' he said curtly. 'You've

done your bit. You don't want to be mixed up in this, believe me ...'

Still pumped, Jack didn't listen. Reluctantly, the Bone Scraper relented.

'Come if you must then, but don't fuck around getting here. And don't say I didn't warn you.'

Jack left his bike under the bridge, followed the drain, and then turned into the tunnel, the small cone of light from the torch the sentry had given him snaking along the uneven ground. *It's exactly as she described it*, he thought, barely able to control his excitement.

Jack could hear the chanting well before he reached the rusty door at the end of the tunnel. Faint at first, but growing louder with every step. The door was ajar, its hinges twisted to one side. Jack squeezed through and stopped. The chanting was coming from above. 'Ka mate, ka mate! Ka ora! Ka ora ...' Walking slowly up the stairs leading from the tiny strongroom – which was once a family vault – to the crypt above, Jack tried to make sense of the strange chorus. It sounded warlike, threatening, yet strangely familiar. *The haka*, he thought, *that's it! Just like at the beginning of an All Blacks football game.*

When he reached the top of the stairs and looked into the crypt, he almost tripped over something lying on the floor. He stepped back quickly, only to find himself standing in a pool of blood next to the Undertaker's twisted body.

The chanting became louder and more urgent.

'Tenei te tangata puhuruhuru ...'

As Jack stepped over the body, he saw the backs of six huge men standing in a semicircle in the middle of the crypt. With their arms raised and stamping their feet in rhythmic unison, they chanted at something he couldn't quite make out. Jack moved a little to one side, and gasped.

The Wizard teetered on tiptoe on a skull the size of a large watermelon, blood dripping down his naked chest from a gaping wound at the throat. With his hands handcuffed behind his back and his ankles tied together with rope, it seemed an impossible balancing act. What Jack couldn't see in the gloom was the noose made of fine piano wire around the Wizard's neck, and the hook in the ceiling to which the wire was attached. The only reason the Wizard wasn't dead yet was because he was able to support his weight on the skull – just.

As his eyes became accustomed to the candlelight, Jack noticed that something was trickling out of the eye sockets and the nose of the skull. *Looks like sand*, he thought. The skull, carved out of wood, was a copy of an ingenious device invented by the Inquisition – a hanging-stool with a sinister twist. Hollow inside, it could be filled with sand from the top. Once it was full, a small round piece of wood could be placed on top like a lid. But the lid was smaller than the opening and as the sand ran out the lid would sink into the skull. The eyes and the nose were blocked by marbles which could be removed to let the sand trickle out, giving the executioner many options. The Wizard stood on a deadly hourglass, suspended between life and death.

Pigeon

I saw him move first. Despite the gaping wound in his chest, the Undertaker was still alive! Eyes wide open, he was staring at the gun – tantalisingly close – lying next to him on the floor. Slowly, his fingers began to move forward. Jack stood directly in front of him, mesmerised by the dance of death. It was obvious what was about to happen: the Undertaker was going to shoot the messenger responsible for the disaster. I began to panic... After all he had done, Jack didn't deserve this. We had to do something! Once again,

Jandamarra came up with the answer. 'Show yourself; quickly!' he urged, hovering just above the Undertaker. 'Now!' Fortunately, this time I already knew what to do. I floated down until I was almost level with the Undertaker's face and began to materialise.

With white stars beginning to dance in front of his eyes and his stiff fingers refusing to obey, the Undertaker was about to give up, when suddenly he could feel it: steel – cold and reassuring – reviving his fingertips. Because it was covered in blood, the gun was slippery and he had to try several times to get a grip on it. Barely able to breathe he closed his eyes, as the strange chanting assaulted his exhausted brain.

'Ka mate, ka mate! Ka ora ...'

You can do it, he thought, he's right in front you. Despite life oozing out of the mortal wound, one last bit of strength remained. The Undertaker opened his eyes and raised the gun. Squinting, he took aim ...

Pigeon

That's when I appeared. Just in time. Our faces were so close they almost merged and I saw terror in the Undertaker's eyes. 'Pigeon?' I heard him say, just before the gun went off. Too late, I thought, but fortunately I was wrong. The bullet grazed Jack's right temple and ripped apart the face of the clown in the Pagliacci portrait before coming to rest in the wall behind it. I had spoilt the Undertaker's aim!

Dazed, and with the gun shot still ringing in his ears, Jack spun around. The Bone Scrapper standing directly in front of him did the same. Pulling a gun out of his belt the Bone Scrapper fired two shots at the Undertaker lying on the floor. Jack looked down and saw the Undertaker's head being blown away.

'That was close,' said the Bone Scrapper, checking his gun. 'Let me have a look.'

'It's nothing, just a scratch.'

'You're a lucky guy! A little to the left, and ...' Jack pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and pressed it against his bleeding temple.

'I did warn you,' said the Bone Scrapper.

'You did. Thanks. You saved my life.'

The Bone Scrapper pointed to the Wizard. 'You gave us this ...' he said.

'That's some retribution,' said Jack quietly.

'He deserves it.' The Bone Scrapper looked anxious: to interrupt the haka was bad luck. 'You've seen it. Now please leave. We have unfinished business here.' Jack realised this was an order, not a request.

The Bone Scrapper's radio began to crackle. One of his scouts was reporting in.

'The cops just passed the roundabout,' announced the Bone Scrapper. 'We have ten minutes.' Without saying another word, he turned around and began to chant:

'Kikiki kakaka kauana!

Kei waniwania taku tara

Kei tarawahia, kei to rua i te kerokero!

Careful not to step in the bloody mess, Jack walked around the Undertaker's body and hurried down the stairs and into the strongroom below.

'Ka mate, ka mate! Ka ora! Ka ora!' chanted the Warriors behind him.

With the adrenalin rush ebbing away, elation gave way to panic. Dashing through the tunnel, his head throbbing with pain, Jack had only one thing on his mind: to get away. As

he reached the outside, he took a deep breath and wondered if the Wizard was still alive.

****** End of Chapter Excerpt ******

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