

AN UNBELIEVABLE STORY

Brother Sean, surrounded by some fifteen kids, was sitting on the big round steps framing the Virgin's white statue placed right in the middle of the Benedictine cloister.

Summer was ending; it wouldn't be long before the kids would go back to school. They were waiting for their parents to pick them up after the afternoon spent together in that quiet haven out of town.

Usually, before parting, Brother Sean would tell them a story. Once again, they were all eager to listen to their friend, whom they dearly loved. He looked at them and smiled; this time he had something really special in store for them.

"I'm going to tell you about a great adventure, something you have never heard of: something no newspaper, TV or website ever mentioned. An adventure involving the most extraordinary theft ever committed."

"Do you know what the Shroud is?", he asked, after a theatrical pause.

A girl raised her hand: "Sure I know, it's the cloth Jesus was wrapped in, as He was buried. It's in Turin now!"

"Attagirl!", said the monk. "Well, only a few people know that the Shroud, years ago, was stolen. It was a close shave, it was almost gone."

The kids opened their eyes wide and got closer to Brother Sean, eager not to miss a single word.

"That's how it all happened", he began.



SHADOW

The man's blue eyes shone brightly, scrutinising the face of the man speaking from the 52-inch monitor hanging on the wall.

His contact, this time, was talking about a really big heist, maybe even beyond his actual possibilities, and this made it extremely alluring. It would be the perfect ending for his career.

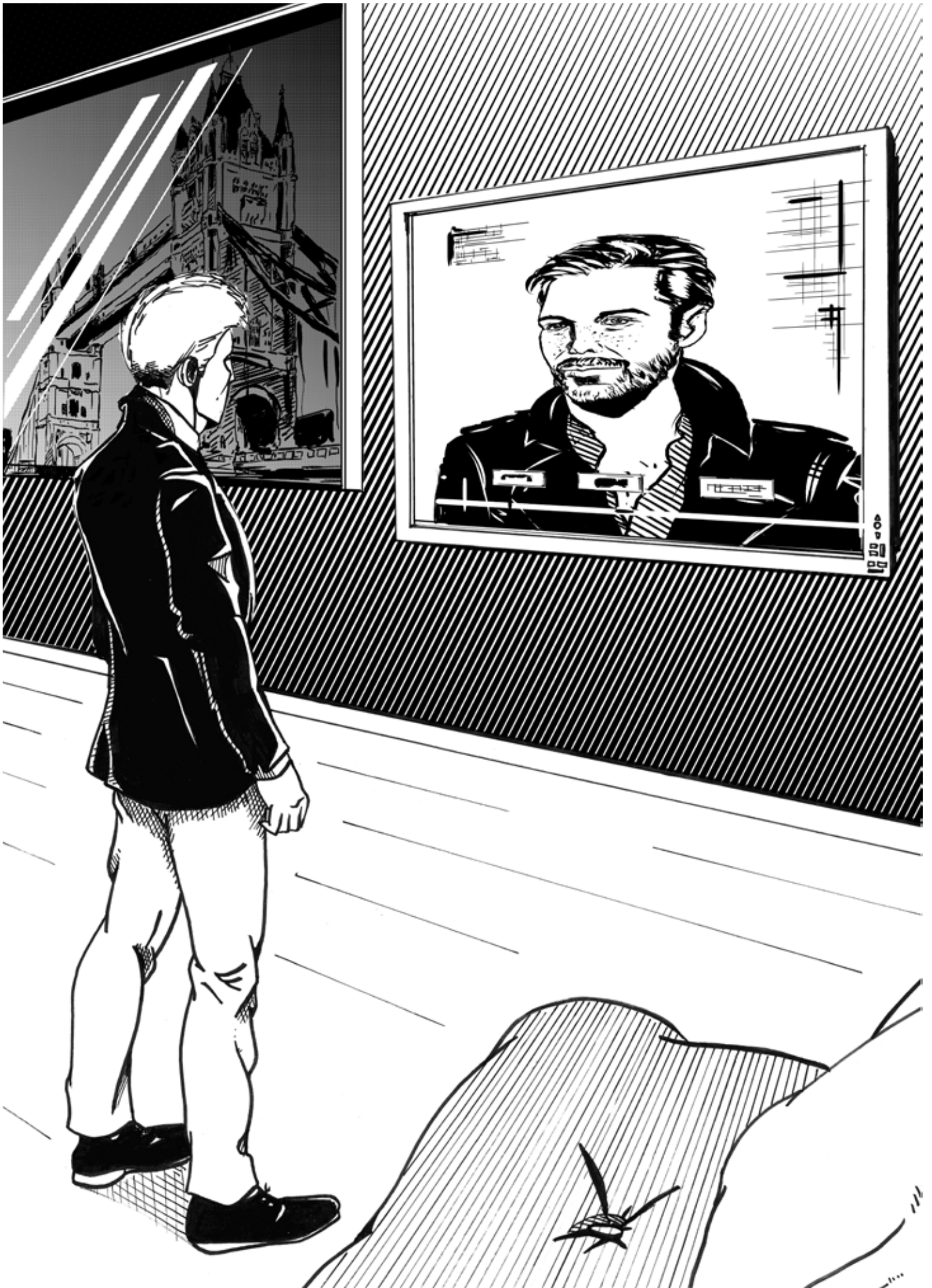
They were offering to pay him a huge sum of money, and this meant that the job would be no piece of cake. Ten million Euro, two in advance, was definitely a sum one couldn't refuse easily. On the other hand... Before saying yes, it was better to evaluate things very carefully.

"The Shroud of Turin?", John Fisher asked the other man. "And these clients of yours are offering ten million Euro... For a cloth...?"

"Well yes, a cloth, but a famous, precious and ancient one, dating to the Middle Ages at the very least. According to some, it was made in the 1st century and it's nothing less than the burial cloth Jesus was wrapped in", said the man in the monitor.

"I don't believe in these things", answered John with a sardonic smile. "But I guess the people asking me to steal it do."

"You don't understand, John, my clients are definitely not Christians. Actually, as far as I know, only Christians believe the Shroud is authentic, and not even every Christian; some say it's a medieval fake. Anyway, I think they're up to something else, maybe they plan to ask the Catholic Church for a ransom and get more money. Who knows?"



“Erik, you’re always thinking about money, you only ever see the economic side of things... Maybe they have something different in mind. Not that I’m interested. Let me think it over for a while and I will get in touch.”

“You have a fortnight to accept the job, not more than that, these people are hurrying me a bit...”, he added after a moment of hesitation, knowing how much John hated being pushed.

The most wanted thief in the world – Shadow, as the Police and the media called him, because nobody ever saw anything but his shadow, silently gliding in the corridors of some Museum he robbed – nodded slightly, raising no objections at all.

“Ten million Euro for a single job”, Erik thought, “that’s a lot of money for him too...”

GETTING READY

John got started immediately. First of all, he surfed the Web to try and understand what the Shroud really was: but it was disappointing. Too many websites, too much conflicting data, too many opinions of every sort. They just said everything as well as its opposite. It wasn't easy to figure it out, not even to tell a trustworthy website from a dodgy, unreliable one. One thing, though, was pretty clear: that enigmatic object triggered the wildest reactions in both those who believed it was actually Christ's burial cloth, and in those who considered it a hoax.

Evidently, what someone once wrote was perfectly accurate, were it the burial shroud of Achilles or of a Pharaoh, nobody would ever argue anything, that cloth would be an archaeological find worth studying and that would be all: but since it was Christ they were talking of, to someone, this was a matter of life and death. Eternal.

What did Shadow have to do with it? The only matter of life and death he knew about was not to be arrested, the only really important things to him were challenge and money.

How could he possibly care whether the Shroud was authentic or not? Actually, he didn't give a damn whether Jesus actually resurrected or not. Would that affect his life? Not at all.

What really mattered, however, was to find the way to steal an object like that, leaving no trace. Just as usual.

First of all, John focused on the place where the Shroud was kept, Turin's Cathedral, and quickly managed to get a few layouts of the church: that was only the very first step, he had learned by experience that the best thing to do when planning a theft, is to accurately study the location.

“Let’s see. Here it says that the Shroud is stored flat, in a custom-built protective atmosphere, i.e. in a hermetic case filled with argon, an inert gas, to prevent the cloth from deteriorating. Light and air, over the centuries, already yellowed the cloth more than enough: as a result, the image, faint and low-contrast against the background as it is, is getting less and less visible. And pollution makes it even worse, naturally”.

Now Shadow was beginning to get the whole picture. “It won’t be easy. Well, that makes it riskier. And much more entertaining too”.

He had to leave for Turin at once.

During the flight he would have a chance to study the church’s layouts, as well as those of the square and the streets downtown. Eventually, when on site, he would check them to evaluate every single detail of both the robbery and the escape.

He accessed the flight booking website and made a reservation on a flight to Turin-Caselle; he did the same to book an average hotel room. “Better not to draw attention to myself”, he thought.

He went to his bedroom, packed the light trolley case he used for short trips, and he finally sat on a small armchair beside the bed. He put his left hand under the seat, until he heard a clicking noise.

As if by magic, the bed began to rise up and a passage opened in the floor, leading to an underground room: it was Shadow’s secret vault, a kind of strongroom where he kept the tools of his trade.

He went downstairs and found himself facing a steel reinforced door. He drew his right eye near a retina reading device on the door and, at the same time, placed his thumb on a tiny pad on the side.

The door silently opened.



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John entered the room – some hundred square feet –, went to a chest of drawers and pulled out a stack of cleverly forged passports: Gianfranco Cardelli, Jacques Dubois, Michael O’Shea, Dietrich Keller, Goran Stancic, Shimon Landau... Keeping count of Shadow’s false identities was impossible. He spoke many languages without the slightest accent and this definitely helped to assume different identities in the countries he visited for his jobs.

This time he took a forged Italian passport and a stack of Euro banknotes. He was ready to leave.