

Jerrard Monet was not a naturally nervous being. In his two-hundred-and-fifty-year tenure as maître d' of the famous and most glamorous restaurant in the world, La Casa Luca, he had never once feared a compromise within the very dining room where he now stood.

La Casa Luca was situated along the Champs-Élysées and had been opened fifty years before Monet's long-term service by his father, Demitri Monet. It represented the purest heights of sophistication, class, and glitz. Over the centuries, many eternally infamous names and world leaders had their names scrawled into the thick guest book. It was a place for the rich and powerful to come and close the door between them and the squalor of society for a few hours. Monet prided himself upon the club's privacy, and it was widely recognised around the globe that having one's name on that hallowed guest list was a mark of exceptional achievement.

With this fact in mind, Monet continued to stare across the restaurant in an uncharacteristically fixated fashion. A young man, no more than in his mid-twenties, sat quietly smoking a cigarette, staring rather blandly towards the great oak doors that formed the grand entrance to the great dining hall. Monet traced a long, pointed, white index finger down the register for the hundredth time that evening. *Mr Paul Harrow and guest*. Monet narrowed his ancient eyes at the name scrawled upon the register. Mr Harrow was a frequent guest of the club, and apart from the odd starstruck female companion, he usually dined alone. The man was, as far as Monet was concerned, of the utmost respectability — a British merchant banker from a respectable firm. How did this rather dangerous-looking young man have anything to do with Mr Harrow?

He was dressed in a black suit with a perfectly pressed white shirt and an expensive blue tie; Monet's keen eyes registered the expensive craft of Italian tailor-ship. The man himself was of average height, his skin slightly darkened through much travelling, his hair neatly cropped short to expose a handsome face. When Monet had first met the man at the desk, he had been almost charmed by his general courteous nature and demeanour. His face was cold, hard, and slightly menacing, yet there was a softened friendliness to the lines around the polite smile, and his strikingly deep blue eyes held just a twinkle of welcome. There was much youth in him and a sense of that naïve nature common in men of his age, but it was shrouded in a strange protective shadow — which was the second reason why Monet was feeling particularly nervous that evening.

He watched as the young man accepted the Scotch he had ordered from the waiter and smiled with satisfaction as he raised the glass nonchalantly to his nose and breathed in the sweet aroma of a drink poured from a bottle that cost north of two hundred euros. A man with expensive tastes, Monet reflected, as he glanced over to the grand entrance to watch the aforementioned Mr Harrow being escorted in by Franco, the old club porter. There was a slight falter in the step as Mr Harrow glanced towards his usual table; he masked it well by straightening his tie and pulling a wry smile at his young guest, who had yet to stand. Those deep, dark blue eyes merely continued to stare at the older man as he approached and took his seat before him.

"Well, I never imagined that they would send a rookie to greet me." Harrow smiled courteously, his eyes filled with condescending confidence, but his guest's sharp young eyes registered the slightest trace of unease at his presence.

"I received your invitation through my secretary. I must say, I am impressed you managed to put my name on the register here. Old Monet over there"—he pointed vaguely in the direction of the maître d', who seemed to be busying himself with shuffling papers at his workstation—"he is remarkably apt at sniffing out imposters."

The young man shrugged and sat back in his seat, lighting a cigarette and breathing softly through his teeth.

"And what of my secretary? I trust she is well?"

"I can make no assurances of that, Mr Harrow, given her," Shaw paused for the correct choice of word, "her rather gruesome appetites, shall we say?"

Harrow sat back and smiled at the young man. "Alas, a fine companion, but I am sure I shall find another."

"I don't think so, Mr Harrow. I'm afraid you won't be doing any more recruiting for Sallah Adule."

Harrow looked taken aback for a moment but then chuckled, his eyes gleaming in the chandelier light.

"What a ridiculous notion. So go on, young one. Humour me," the older man chuckled. "What are your orders, and how do you intend to get me out of here? You, of course, realise that I am protected by some very powerful forces."

The younger man studied the older man for a while, sipping his whiskey and taking in the surrounding sounds of the other diners in the restaurant.

"I'm well aware of your protection, Mr Harrow, but I'm afraid much of that has now vanished. Your associates did not take too kindly to your overall plans and the man you truly report back to. I must confess, it really is a fascinating case: treason, extortion, betrayal, and then yet more extortion. It's a wonder I found you first, what with all the bounties that have been placed upon your head. Your old circle of friends doesn't take kindly to your new association with Sallah Adule."

Once again, Harrow gave that same look of surprise at the mention of the man Shaw had just named; but again, he managed to regain his composure.

"First assignment, is it?" smiled the older man almost kindly, as he leant forward. "Well, I'm afraid this will not end well for you, my young friend. Taking me in won't be as easy as you so arrogantly assume. You have no evidence to arrest me, and by the look of you, you are a very long way from the assassination gig. I can only assume your boss has decided to send me a warning, an attempt to scare me off from a pursuit that is far from reversible." He barked a laugh and shook his head in mock disbelief. "Sallah Adule indeed. You people have been reading too many bedtime stories. The man is a myth."

Shaw sat back in his chair and smiled back at the older man.

"Who said anything about taking you in?" His voice was deadly cold, and his eyes had darkened to an even deeper blue. "Your crimes are far from pardonable, and I am sorry to say that the evidence is overwhelmingly stacked against you. There is only one place you're headed, Mr Harrow."

There was a ping of broken glass. Both men paused as the alien sound faded back into the noise of the restaurant.

"There, you see, my young friend!" Harrow smiled in delight as the young man raised a hand to his chest. He studied the deep crimson of his own blood upon his hand as he withdrew it from inside his jacket. The eyes remained deadly calm, but the hand shook ever so slightly. "You barely lasted five minutes against me. The bullet that has now lodged itself within your heart is almost microscopic, and it is even now poisoning your entire blood system with a very potent toxin. I expect you shall be dead within a minute."

The young man's eyes darted to his left, where he had suspected the shot to have come from. There was a waiter moving swiftly among the tables towards the exit.

"Now, before you die, I should very much like to know your name." Harrow was positively beaming in his triumph. The young man shook his head, closed his eyes tight, and gripped the edge of the table with such strength that Harrow could hear the splintering of wood. The poison should have knocked him to the ground, thought Harrow, but to his surprise, the young man released his grip on the table and straightened up. The pained expression that had been momentarily upon his face had faded away, replaced with a slight twinkle in his eyes and a cunning grin on his face.

"My name?" The young man smiled as his right hand rubbed the area where the tiny bullet had passed through his skin. After a second, he flicked the flattened piece of metal onto the table.

"My name is Michael Shaw."

Harrow was so surprised by the tiny bloodstained object that had been so disingenuously flicked towards him that he had not noticed the silenced pistol now levelled very steadily at

him. The colour drained from his face as he seemed to realise the game was up. Harrow sighed tiredly and shook his head. He glanced over at Monet, whose back was turned to him.

"I'm sorry, old friend. I hope you shall forgive me." He turned his attention back towards Shaw; he then nodded his head twice as if in acceptance.

The great hall exploded into complete chaos. Bottles, glasses, plates, and tables crashed around as a gang of hooded men stormed in. Shaw felt a pair of strong hands grab him and hurl him into the air; he crashed into an overturned dining table. All he could hear were the screams of the customers as they tried to escape the chaos. He rolled over to his side and reached for his gun which lay only a few centimetres out of his reach. The hands returned; they forced him to his feet and spun him around. He stood face to face with one of the masked men.

"Kill him, Magnus!" yelled Harrow.

The masked figure pulled back his hood to expose a nightmare of a face. The creature opened his mouth, baring impossibly sharp fangs dripping with what looked like venom. Shaw could smell the flesh of other victims on the creature's breath. He kicked out, his steel toe cap making crunching contact with the beast's kneecap. The strong hands loosened enough for Shaw to shake himself free. He heard another creature running up behind him. He drew his dagger from its sheath hidden within his jacket and lashed out behind him. The blade slashed through the creature's throat, and it collapsed, its existence erased before its lifeless body hit the floor. Shaw lashed out again, and the first creature fell to the floor with a scream of agony. A bullet whistled over his head. Shaw ducked and then rolled behind a service counter. He peeked around the corner and could just make out Harrow aiming another shot at him. The bullet embedded itself into the ancient oak counter. He peered around again and was chilled to the bone at the scene unfurling around him. The beasts were feasting upon the guests who had failed to escape. They fed with relish, as if they had been starved for years. So this was Harrow's little army.

Shaw calmly pulled out his mobile phone and pressed the screen until it came up with the special menu that all agents had programmed in. Only twelve hours earlier, he had planted several heavy explosives around the restaurant. Now was the time to detonate. He knew that once he pressed the send button, he would have only a minute to escape. His finger hovered over the button as he tried desperately to plan his hasty escape while ensuring Harrow was disposed of. He felt himself being pushed forwards as a creature crashed into him, and his finger hit the button. The one-minute timer began. Shaw punched outwards and caught the creature across the jawbone. It roared in pain as the bones were smashed. He then lunged forward and drove the knife deep into the creature's skull. He could feel the seconds slip by as he scrambled across the room. A strong pair of arms gripped him from behind, and he fell forward. The weight of his attacker landed on him, squeezing all of the air from his lungs. He could feel the seconds slipping by. The charges would soon be going off. He was aware of the frantic, warm breath in his right ear.

"There is nothing you and your pitiful agency can do," hissed Harrow. "You will never change the inevitable. My lord, Sallah Adule, will succeed."

Shaw, his mind still on the dwindling seconds, responded by bucking his body up so that the weight of the older man was shifted. He rolled over and away. He could see that Harrow had been badly injured; there was no chance of him escaping. Their eyes met, and for a moment, the old man's brown eyes turned black. A chill ran down Shaw's spine. He had no time to contemplate what he had seen; he needed to move.

The remaining creatures, sensing their master was injured, began to circle Harrow, who was trying to call them off. Shaw knew they would not back down; he was an easy supper for them. Master or not, Harrow was finished, and it would not be a good end for him. He left the soon-to-be-dead traitor and made his way to the exit. As he left the room, a twisted, high-pitched scream of horror and agony echoed through the building, making the small hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

He was greeted by the scent of fresh air as he walked calmly onto the pavement. Just as he did, the building behind him exploded, illuminating the entire skyline in a blindingly beautiful orange hue. Michael Shaw did not falter in his step; he straightened his tie and continued to walk through the gathering crowd of shocked onlookers, disappearing slowly into the secretive shadows of the night.