

The day before in downtown Lisbon...

Oppenheimer Hugo Junior III sat at the table outside a restaurant in a lane just off the Rua De Prata. The sun was high overhead, and he was feeling nauseous. He sloshed at the warm olive oil in the earthenware dish with a spoon. Having asked for a vegetarian soup this is what had been placed before him. The smirking waiter told him *Sopa Alentejana* was a local delicacy. It was hot olive oil with an egg cracked into it, a raw egg. Hugo pushed the dish away and looked once again at the puzzle in front of him.

Never in his whole career as professor of symbolism at the University of Los Angeles had he faced such an enigmatic conundrum. In a simple box in front of him was an egg, but it was no simple egg. It was an elegant bejewelled egg, unlike the mess floating in the rancid oil in front of him. This one was breathtaking. He held it in his hands amazed he had it and even more amazing was how he had got hold of it in the first place.

Oppenheimer had been searching for this egg since he had first heard whispers of it while doing research at the University of Kiev ten years before. He had followed its trail down every dark alley, dirty dive and dodgy dealers empty come on ever since. Until yesterday that is when a shaky looking Englishman took it out of his pocket and placed it on the table in front of him. They had come to terms of a 60/40 split and arranged to meet at a later date.

He span the jewel in his hands letting the sun catch its facets. It was just over five-inches-tall. Exquisitely detailed paintings depicted the most notable events of the reign of Nicholas II and each of the family members. But as Oppenheimer now knew it also contained a secret, a secret message from the maker himself. But Faberge, the old goat, had protected that secret with a code, it was a code unlike anything Oppenheimer had seen before. It was the fabled Faberge Code.

As Hugo perused the egg in the hot sun of the Portuguese summer, he was being watched. Across the lane in a small bar sat a diminutive figure sipping a cold beer. As Oppenheimer twisted the egg in his hands the albino dwarf with the rasta locks muttered to himself. 'It's mine it is, the precious, mine', he sipped his beer. 'They took it from us they did, yes they did.' The dwarf, named Manoel de Quadros d'Arzilla, was for the first

time in many years within twenty metres of the thing that made his tedious life worthwhile.

Manoel de Quadros d'Arzilla was following a path that had become clear to him three days ago when he had heard the news that the precious was found once again. Lost to his family during the Spanish Civil War the bejewelled egg held the secrets of the Romanov treasures. It was a secret that dated to the sinking in 1771 of the treasure ship Vrouw Maria - Catherine's fabled treasure ship en route from Amsterdam. Manoel's family were trusted servants and confidants to the Russian royal family for decades. His father and his father's father had all been major domo to the Russian royal family and privy to all their secrets. Manoel's shoulders drooped with shame as he recalled how his family had failed Alexandra and her family as the Soviets had dragged that cursed family away for execution.

Manoel well remembered his father's whispered instructions. The prized secrets passed on at the dead of night. His breath tainted with tobacco and the rough local brandy that dulled the pain and the shame. As a small boy being allowed to look, but not touch, the fabulous jewel his father had hidden in the small Barcos Rabelos that they lived on. The De Quadros d'Arzilla family's sacred duty to the lost Czarena and the Russian people was impressed upon him. The secrets made him feel tall.

Sipping his beer, staring at the precious across the road in the foreigners fat hands he remembered his father telling him the key to the message contained within each exquisitely enamelled face, the key which would unlock the trinket that the Faberge egg was, to uncover the real treasure within. The egg then lost to them when the Nazi's bombarded their Barcos Rabelos on the Douro River. The fascist looters took the precious away from them - from him. That they also took the life of his father, mother and sister was of little account now to Manoel who sat quivering in the dark bar.

Oppenheimer's colleague, the beautiful and brilliant cryptographer from the St Petersburg State University sat opposite him reading a Chad Kroski novel, Sardines And Tuna coincidentally paralleling the meal she was absentmindedly picking at while Oppenheimer stirred the oily mess in front of him.

‘Olginka.’ Oppenheimer muttered whirling the bejewelled egg around in his thick fingers

‘Da, my Pushkin,’ she folded over the corner of the page she was on and closed her novel fixing her grey green eyes on the fat sweating man opposite her, he appalled her but she smiled anyway.

Oppenheimer winced at the cavalier way she treated her book. Folding the page over like that, ‘typical russkie,’ he thought.

‘Olga, this is most puzzling, most puzzling, the panels on this egg seem to vibrate at a frequency that is probably equal to the sub atomic particle “Esturine” but there I’m guessing.’ He raised a sceptical eyebrow at the Russian beauty before him.

‘Esturine hmm?’ Olga pouted and fluffed her dark red pageboy cut. She crossed her legs with a whisper of silk against silk. ‘Isn’t that what they used to deprogram those *devoshka*’s in Essex last year, my darlink?’

‘Yes, my little pioneer, you are right, now I remember’ Oppenheimer nodded, all thoughts of folded corners and paper cuts fleeing from his mind as he turned his huge intellect towards the object in his hand. ‘But how?’ he muttered. ‘And why?’ He touched each of the exquisite panels, noting how the vibrations changed subtly to his touch. ‘De de dah dah dum’ he hummed along with the vibrations.

‘Olginka, pussycat, what do you think?’ Olga shuddered at the use of his pet name for her, they had been together far too long, but she reached across to take the jewel from his hands. She placed the egg on the table and reached down into her handbag to take out a large magnifying glass. Oppenheimer unthinkingly sipped his soup and gagged.

In the bar across the road Manoel saw the opportunity he needed, leaping off his bar stool he rushed across the road as quickly as his stubby legs could carry him. As he ran he chanted his mantra. ‘My precious, my precious, my precious.’

At the table he grabbed the egg and swept the hot olive oil soup into Oppenheimer’s lap. Olga leapt to stop him but he darted beneath her long Slavic legs, noting en route she

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wore stockings and was going commando, no 'La Perla' undies for her, a fact he filed away for future use.

Manoel ran towards the docks clutching his precious to his chest. At long last he could fulfil his destiny. He could crack the code, win the treasure and pay for those leg extensions he had dreamt of for years. And after that quick excursion between Olga's thighs perhaps extra cash spent on other short parts of his anatomy as well.

He skipped around a corner his dreads whipping across his eyes, straight into the arms of a large man who smelt faintly of onions, Borsch and Hai Karate.

'A, ah, slowly, slowly my *malinki* pale comrade, it is I, *tovarich*, Boris and I see you have what I have been searching for.'

Boris reached down and utilising a soviet version of the vulcan death grip called 'Trotsky's de - spatch' learnt when he was a Spetnatz officer, rendered Manoel unconscious. As Manoel collapsed Boris lifted the precious vibrating egg from his pale, slightly clammy hands.

Laying Manoel in the gutter, Boris placed the egg in his pocket danced a few steps of a Paso Doble, clicked his heels, and leapt onto a passing tram. He had an important meeting with a fiery customer and a *priatna angliski devoshka* and it would be bad form to be late.

A few short minutes later Manoel opened his eyes and found himself once again looking up the long wintery slopes of Olga's legs to her jutting pubis. But before his pale pink eyes had focused, he found himself looking into the face of a highly irritated professor of symbolism who had an oily stain spread across his crotch..

'Ahh, Manoel, you are awake? Alas, I take it you no longer have the egg?'

Manoel tried to look away. He gasped ‘my precious’ and looked down at his hands as if he was still holding the Romanov jewel. ‘I had it professor, you had it, they had it’, he gabbled, ‘it was mine, my father’s sacred trust, it was mine, my precious’ He covered his eyes to block out the sun. ‘The Organizatsiya,’ he moaned.

‘You followed us didn’t you, you vorm?’ Olga kicked the squirming moaning dwarf with her high heeled pointy Manolo Blahniks

‘Oww,’ he squealed. ‘Stop it, you had my precious, I had to have it, it is my duty.’

‘AND. NOW. WE. DON’T. AND. THE. MAFIASKI. DO.’ said Oppenheimer enunciating his words in a way that was alien for an American such was the stress he was under as he bent over the small pale figure.

‘Manoel you must tell us the secret,’ Olga hissed.

‘Never.’ Manoel crossed his arms across his body

‘Manoel.’ Oppenheimer growled, ‘You know I have been searching for this for years and we don’t have time for this.’ Manoel nodded, his lips tightly closed symbolically. ‘I will never speak of it again, I swear on my father’s memory.’ Manoel muttered from between the clasped lips.

‘You know I am a professor of symbolism?’ growled the impatient sweating oil stained fat man, Manoel nodded again; they had met weeks ago when Manoel was contacted by the professor who had grilled him about the precious.

‘You lied to us didn’t you Manoel?’ Olga poked the dwarf with her pointy shoes once again. Manoel wriggled but remained silent. ‘You know the secret of the egg.’ She poked the writhing dwarf again with her foot. ‘Tell us you, you *peido de cona*.’

‘Manoel.’ Oppenheimer whispered. Manoel stopped trying to look up Olga's skirt once again. ‘Symbolise this *cuzão*.’ Manoel slumped backwards blood spraying the tiled walls behind him as the 9mm slug from the silenced Tokarev pistol crashed through his skull, his pink eyes turning a piercing blue as life left his body.

‘Right Olga... the tram, let's get on it, I have a hunch it will take us somewhere.’ said the professor of symbolism as the beautiful and brilliant cryptographer retouched her lipstick, pouted, hissed ‘*poshyol ty*’ at him and took a small pocket sudoku book out of her handbag while they waited.