

# I

## THE WAY OF THE ANGELS

*Paris, April 1934*

Forty men in white were lying face-down on the cobbled square.

It looked like a giant snowfield. Swallows whistled as they brushed past the bodies. Thousands of people were watching the spectacle. The cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris spread her shadow over the assembled crowd.

All around, the city seemed to be gathering its thoughts.

Vango's forehead was pressed against the stone. He was listening to the sound of his own breathing, and thinking about the life that had brought him here. But for once, he wasn't frightened.

He was remembering the sea, the briny air, a few special voices, a few special faces, and the warm tears of the woman who had raised him.

The rain started falling on the square in front of the cathedral but Vango didn't notice. Lying on the ground in the midst of his companions, he wasn't aware of the umbrellas bursting into bloom one after another.

Vango didn't see the crowd of Parisians, the families dressed up in their Sunday best, the devotion of the old ladies, the children squeezing between people's legs, the pigeons numb with cold, the dance of the swallows, the onlookers

standing up in their carriages. Nor did he see the pair of green eyes, over there, to the side, watching only him.

Two green eyes brimming with tears, behind a veil.

Vango kept his own eyes tightly shut. He hadn't turned twenty yet. This was the biggest day of his life. A solemn feeling of happiness welled up inside him.

He was about to become a priest.

"Sweet madness!"

The bell-ringer of Notre Dame, high up above, muttered these words as he glanced down at the square below. He was waiting. He had invited a young lady by the name of Clara to dine with him on boiled eggs in his tower.

He knew she wouldn't come: she'd be just like all the others. And, while the water was simmering in the pan beneath the giant clock, the bell-ringer took a good look down below at the young seminarians who were about to be ordained as priests. They would lie on the ground for a few minutes more, before making their commitment for life. From his perch fifty metres above the crowd, it wasn't the sheer drop that made Simon the bell-ringer's head spin, but the leap into the unknown that these prostrated lives on the ground were, of their own accord, about to make.

"Madness," he said again. "Madness!"

He made the sign of the cross, because you never know, and went back to his eggs.

The green eyes were still fixed on Vango.

They belonged to a girl of sixteen or seventeen who was wearing a charcoal-coloured velvet coat. She rummaged about in her pocket but couldn't find the handkerchief she was

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looking for. The back of that white hand ventured under the veil and wiped away the tears on her cheeks. The rain was starting to come in through her coat.

The girl shivered and glanced across to the other side of the cathedral square.

A man looked away abruptly. He had been watching her. She felt sure about that. It was the second time she had noticed him this morning, but she knew, far back in her memory, that she had already seen him somewhere. A waxen face, white hair, a thin moustache and small wire glasses. Where had she met him before?

The thunder of the organ brought her back to Vango.

The ceremony was about to begin. The elderly cardinal stood up and made his way towards the young men in white. He brushed aside the umbrella held out to keep him dry, just as he brushed aside all the hands that offered to help him down the steps.

“Leave me be!”

He was carrying his heavy crosier and every step was a small miracle.

The cardinal was old and sick. That same morning his doctor, Esquirol, had banned him from celebrating mass. The cardinal had laughed, sent everybody away and heaved himself out of bed to get dressed. As soon as he was alone, he could groan freely with every gesture. In public, he was a rock.

Now, he was walking down the steps in the rain.

Two hours earlier, with the black clouds thickening, everyone had begged him to move the ceremony inside the cathedral. Once again, he'd held firm. He wanted it to take

place outside, facing the world these young men would engage with for their whole lives.

“If they’re worried about catching a cold, let them choose another job. They’ll live through other storms.”

On the final step, the cardinal came to a stop.

He was the first to detect something afoot in the square.

Up above, Simon the bell-ringer didn’t suspect a thing. He dropped his eggs into the water and started counting.

Who could have predicted what would happen in the time it takes to boil an egg?

Three minutes to change the course of destiny.

While the water was coming to the boil, the crowd was simmering in a similar state of excitement, starting from the back row. The girl gave another shudder. Something was going on in the square. The cardinal raised his head.

Twenty individuals were beating a path through the crowd. The murmuring swelled. Shouts could be heard.

“Make way!”

But the forty seminarians didn’t move. Only Vango turned his head to the side, putting his ear to the ground like an Apache. He could see the shadows closing in.

The voices were becoming clearer now.

“What’s going on?”

“Move back!”

People were distrustful. Two months earlier, riots had led to fatalities and hundreds wounded in the Place de la Concorde.

“It’s the police!” a woman called out to reassure the crowd.

They were looking for somebody. The faithful tried to quell the hubbub.

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“Shhhh ... be quiet!”

*Fifty-nine seconds.*

Under his clock, the bell-ringer was still counting. He was thinking about young Clara who had promised him she would come. He looked at the wooden crate laid out for two places. He could hear the saucepan humming on the embers.

A cleric wearing a white robe went over to the cardinal and whispered something in his ear. Just behind them, a short, rotund man stood holding his hat in his hand: Superintendent Boulard. There was no mistaking his drooping eyelids like those of an old dog, his big snout, his ruddy cheeks, and his eyes that twinkled with a zest for life. Auguste Boulard. Unflappable under the April shower, he was on the lookout for the slightest sign of movement from the young men lying on the ground.

*One minute and twenty seconds.*

Just then, one of the seminarians stood up. He wasn't very tall. His robe was weighed down with the rain. His face was streaming. He turned full-circle in the midst of so many bodies, none of which moved. On every side, plain-clothes policemen emerged from the crowd and began to advance towards him. The young man brought his hands together as if in prayer, then let them fall to his sides. The clouds in the sky were reflected in his eyes.

“Vango Romano?” the superintendent called out.

The boy nodded.

In the crowd, somewhere, a pair of green eyes was flitting, like butterflies in a net. What did these people want from Vango?

The young man started moving. He stepped over his fellow seminarians and walked towards the superintendent.

The police officers were edging forwards.

As he advanced, Vango pulled off his white robe to reveal the black clothes underneath. He stopped in front of the cardinal, and dropped to his knees.

“Forgive me, Father.”

“What have you done, Vango?”

“I don’t know, your Grace, please believe me. I don’t know.”

*One minute and fifty seconds.*

The old cardinal gripped the cross with both hands. He leant on it with his full weight, his arm and shoulder wrapped around the gilded wood, like ivy on a tree. He looked sadly about him. He knew every one of these forty young men by name.

“I believe you, little one, but I fear I may be the only one here who does.”

“That already means a great deal, if you really do believe me.”

“But it won’t be enough,” whispered the cardinal.

He was right. Boulard and his comrades were only a few paces away now.

“Forgive me,” Vango begged again.

“What do you want me to forgive you for, if you haven’t done anything?”

Superintendent Boulard, who was now standing right behind him, put his hand on the boy’s shoulder and Vango gave the cardinal his answer:

“For this...”

Vango grabbed hold of the superintendent’s hand, stood up and twisted Boulard’s arm behind his back. Then he

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flung him towards one of his men.

In a few leaps, the young man had escaped the two police officers who rushed towards him. A third brandished his gun.

“Don’t shoot!” ordered Boulard, from the ground.

A great clamour rose up from the crowd, but with a simple hand gesture the cardinal silenced it.

Vango had made his way up the platform steps. A group of choristers scattered noisily as he ran through them. The police officers looked like they were crossing a school playground. With every step, they tripped on a child or were head-butted in the stomach.

“Tell them to stand aside! Who is in charge of them?”

The cardinal raised his finger in the air, delighted.

“God alone, Superintendent.”

*Two minutes and thirty seconds.*

Vango had reached the central portal of the cathedral. He saw a small, pale, plump woman disappear behind one side of the double doors and close it after her. He threw himself against the wooden door.

On the other side, the lock turned.

“Open up!” shouted Vango. “Open up for me!”

“I knew I shouldn’t have,” a trembling voice answered him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean any harm. It was the bell-ringer who told me to come here.”

Behind the door, the woman was crying.

“Open up!” Vango called out again. “I don’t even know what you’re talking about. I’m just asking you to open the door.”

“He seemed a nice person ... please. My name is Clara. I’m not a bad girl.”

Vango could hear the policemen's voices behind him. He felt his legs buckle.

"I'm not blaming you for anything. I just need your help. Open the door for me."

"No ... I can't ... I'm frightened."

Vango turned around.

There were ten men in a semi-circle around the carved cathedral gates.

"Don't move," said one of them.

Vango pinned his back against the door that shone with brass. "It's too late now," he whispered. "Whatever you do, don't open up. I'll have to go another way."

He took a step towards the men, then turned around and looked up. Above him was the Portal of the Last Judgement. He knew every detail by heart. There was a carved stone filigree around the door. To the right, in relief, the damned of hell were depicted. To the left, paradise and its angels.

Vango chose the way of the angels.

Just then, Superintendent Boulard reached the scene. He nearly passed out when he saw what was happening. In less than a second, Vango Romano had scaled the first rows of statues. He was five metres above the ground now.

*Three minutes.*

Simon the bell-ringer, who hadn't seen anything, removed the eggs with a spoon.

Vango wasn't so much climbing as gliding gently across the cathedral façade. His fingers were able to get a grip on the tiniest piece of relief. His arms and legs moved effortlessly. He looked like he was swimming vertically.

The crowd watched him, open-mouthed. A lady fainted

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and slid off her chair, like a scrap of cloth. Down at the foot of the great wall, police officers were moving around in every direction. As for the superintendent, he was frozen to the spot.

A first shot rang out. Boulard managed to find enough breath to bellow:

“Stop! I told you not to open fire.”

But none of the policemen had used a weapon. One officer was pointlessly giving a leg-up to his colleague. The poor devil was all of eighty centimetres off the cobbles. Others were trying to open the two-tonne door with their nails.

A fresh burst of gunfire.

“Who is shooting?” roared Boulard, grabbing one of his men by the collar. “Instead of wrestling with that door, find me the person who’s shooting. What do you want to get in there for anyway? To light a candle?”

“We thought we’d catch him in the towers, Superintendent.”

“There’s a staircase on the north side,” an irritable Boulard informed them, pointing to the left. “I’m keeping Remi and Avignon with me. I want to know who’s trying to shoot my target.”

Vango had already made it to the level of the Kings’ Gallery. He drew himself up to his full height and hung on to a column. He was breathing calmly. Determination and despair were both visible on his face. He was looking down at the square below. Thousands of eyes stared up at him. A bullet caused a stone crown to shatter into smithereens, just by his ear, blowing showers of white powder on to his cheek. Far down below, he could see the superintendent pacing in circles like a madman.

“Who did that?” boomed Boulard.

It wasn’t the police firing at him. Vango soon realized that.

He had other enemies in the vicinity.

He continued his ascent, and in a few moves had reached the foot of the Rose Window. He was now climbing the most beautiful stained-glass window in the world, much as a spider glides over its web.

Down below, a hush had fallen on the crowd. The onlookers stood there, captivated by the vision of this boy hanging on to the West Rose Window of Notre Dame.

The swallows flew in a tightly packed flotilla around Vango, as if to protect him with their tiny feathery bodies.

Below his bell, and with a tear in his eye, Simon took the top off the first egg with his knife. Once again, she hadn’t come.

“It’s a sad world,” he mumbled.

When he heard the squeaking of the wooden staircase that led to the bell, he stopped.

“Clara?” he stammered.

He looked at his second egg. Confused, Simon thought for a split second that happiness was knocking at his door.

“Clara? Is that you?”

“She’s waiting for you downstairs.”

It was Vango. A final bullet had grazed him while he was regaining his footing in the Grand Gallery.

“She needs you,” he told the bell-ringer.

Simon felt a flicker of joy. Nobody had ever needed him.

“And you? Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“I don’t know,” said Vango. “I’ve got no idea. I need you too.”

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Out in the square, the other girl, the one with green eyes and the charcoal-coloured coat, was battling against the crowd. At the precise moment when Vango had made a run for it, she had seen the man with the waxen face taking out a gun from his coat. She had rushed towards him, but the crowd prevented her from making any progress. When she finally got to the other side, he was no longer there.

Earlier, she had looked as forlorn as a bedraggled cat. Now, she was a tearaway lion clearing everything in her path.

And then she heard the shot. Strangely, she knew at once that Vango was the target. With the second shot, her eyes turned towards the Hôtel-Dieu Hospital, on the north side of the square. That was when she saw the man. He was on the first floor. The pistol was protruding from a broken window and in the gloom it was possible to make out the icy reflection of the killer. It was him.

She glanced upwards. Vango was doing his balancing act on high. Heaven had wrenched him from his destiny at the last moment. But for her, everything had become possible again. As long as he was alive.

The girl with green eyes strode towards the hospital.

Suddenly, in the sky above Notre Dame, a gigantic monster rose up, almost making the crowd forget everything at ground level. As tall and majestic as the cathedral itself and gleaming with rain, the Zeppelin appeared. It filled the sky.

At the front of the cockpit, Hugo Eckener, the elderly commander of the Graf Zeppelin, was peering through

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his telescope in search of his friend down in the cathedral square below. Returning from Brazil, and heading for Lake Constance, he had made the balloon take a detour via Paris so that the shadow of the Zeppelin would play a small part in this important moment of Vango's life.

At the third shot, Eckener realized something was wrong.

"We have to leave, Commander," urged Lehmann, his captain.

A stray bullet risked puncturing the balloon, which held sixty passengers and crew members in its gleaming body.

There was a final explosion at ground level.

"Quickly, Commander..."

Eckener lowered his telescope and agreed reluctantly:

"Yes, let's go."

Down below, a dead swallow fell at Superintendent Boulard's feet.

And the bells of Notre Dame began to ring.