*Shinto* sat on a small stool, carefully dabbing at the canvas on the small easel before him, a box of oil paints on the ground to his side and a colour-splattered palette in his left hand. Of course *Shinto* was not his real name – it was, in fact, an anagram of two words he considered to be self-descriptive. In *Shinto’s* line of work, real names were rarely used – anonymity being of vital importance in the murky world of subterfuge that he and the other operatives worked. Six years ago, he had made this part of the Mediterranean his home and he now had the opportunity to unwind by dabbling in his hobby, aware that he wasn’t particularly good at oil painting but knowing he was at the top of his game in the profession he had fallen into.

His concentration was broken by the unmistakable vibration alert of the work phone that he *always* carried in his pocket – the phone that rarely troubled him and only ever delivered a cryptic message when it did. He placed his brush and palette on the ground and pulled the phone from his pocket to read the three words of text – *CODERS WORST MESH* – knowing instantly that he was wanted 3,500km away for an urgent meeting. He gathered up his painting paraphernalia and mulled over which passport and identity to use.

Fourteen hours later *Shinto* sat alone at a table outside the café, with a clear view of the street and the Georgian row houses opposite. He wore a crumpled white linen suit, his panama hat placed within reach on the chair next to him. He sipped occasionally from a small coffee cup containing a wickedly rich Turkish brew knowing that sometimes, being obvious guaranteed no more than one dismissive glance from passers-by. From his vantage point he could see the comings and goings from the house with the white façade and unadorned black door. He had been sitting and watching for forty minutes and had seen at different times, three of his colleagues approach the door, press the small button on the door frame and lean towards the intercom and, after a brief interval, enter past the door that appeared to open inward automatically.

Having seniority, he always made it a policy to arrive at these meetings last and glanced at his watch noting that the fourth (and newest operative) was almost running late. Sudden movement further down his side of the street caught his eye as she hurriedly alighted from the taxi, looked both ways, crossed the street and rushed towards the numberless black door, using the same routine to gain entry.

*Shinto* gathered up his hat and placed it on his head, drew a fiver from his pocket and placed that under the coffee cup. He casually looked up and down the street, confident he was not being watched, then briskly crossed the street.

The same entry routine saw him standing in the foyer as Hawkins rose from his desk to greet him.

‘Morning Sir’ Hawkins said brightly.

‘Morning Hawkins. Usual procedure?’ *Shinto* asked.

‘If you don’t mind Sir’ Hawkins replied as he ran the scanner thoroughly over *Shinto*. ‘Are we carrying today Sir?’

‘Just my usual weapon of choice. Make sure you look after it Hawkins – it’s helped me out of many a pickle’ *Shinto* said as he carefully reached into his inner coat pocket and with two fingers removed the implement that looked very much like an expensive fountain pen.

‘Right you are Sir. I’ll pop it in the safe and you can collect it on your way out. Is Sir dining in today? I’m told Chef’s sole meuniere is most excellent’

‘I think I will today Hawkins – ring Chef to let him know’

‘Very well, Sir. They’re waiting for you in the Chamberlain Room’

*Shinto* padded silently down the plush carpeted hall and entered the second room on his right. Seated around a large table were the other four who nodded greetings. He took his seat near the head of the table and glanced at the manila folder with the red ribbon binding sitting on the table in front of him, curious to see what would unfold.

A door to the side opened suddenly as the Chief swept into the room, closely followed by an underling who closed the door and stood guard in front of it.

‘Thank you all for coming – short notice I know but we have a situation of great international importance – our Bureaux around the world are reporting a lot of disquiet on this particular issue’ the Chief said as he took his place at the head of the table. ‘I don’t need to remind you that what is said today in this room, stays in this room. I assume you have all managed to decode the message I sent you?’ the Chief asked looking around the table.

*Shinto* picked up the manila folder and spoke on behalf of the others.

‘Yes Chief – I think we’ve all managed to get a handle on it. A clever anagram turning three words into two by the way’ *Shinto* replied as his eyes scanned the cover of the manila folder -

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