

Salvatore

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Degree

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To my parents

for your unconditional love,

eternal support,

and unerring faith

in myself and my dreams.

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Abstract

This creative dissertation includes Book One of *Salvatore*, a literary fantasy novel, along with a critical introduction.

Set in an Italian Renaissance-inspired fantasy utopia, where humans and dragons work together to create artistic masterpieces made of glass, *Salvatore* follows the life of a gruff, middle-aged businessman and criminal named Salvatore Manco, who runs an antiques shop by day and fences stolen goods by night. When a mysterious organization offers him a fortune to obtain a dragon egg, Salvatore initially agrees to facilitate its theft. Once the group's plan to expose the existence of dragons to the rest of the world becomes clear, Salvatore and his companions — the charming master-thief Silvio and the sarcastic dragon Nico — must work together to stop the organization before their homeland is plunged into cataclysmic ruin.

The critical introduction, “*Salvatore* and the Hybrid Genre of Literary Fantasy,” explores the innate dissonance that exists between the traditional fantasy novel and the contemporary literary novel and discusses how these genres' apparent contradictory elements might be combined to create a new kind of fiction with greater meaning and wider appeal.

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***Salvatore* and the Hybrid Genre of Literary Fantasy**

As both a novel and a creative dissertation, *Salvatore* is something of an anomaly.

In order to discuss the work's various oddities, however, an initial description of the narrative itself must first be established:

The story is set in a fictional utopia known as the Isole Fulgide, a magnificent city-state of beautiful islands and shimmering canals sequestered in the middle of a massive lagoon. Established in centuries past as a creative paradise, the Isole Fulgide serves as an ideal home for the many artistic and talented humans that live there and work within its various artisan guilds. The isles, however, also serve as a secret sanctuary for a community of large, intelligent, fire-breathing dragons. Like their human counterparts, these peaceful creatures dedicate their lives to the highest of artistic pursuits, most prominent among them the creation of magical iridescent glass.

Within this colorful setting, the story's narrative follows the double life of a businessman and criminal named Salvatore Manco, who runs a legitimate antiques shop by day and fences stolen artwork in the depths of its hidden basement by night. When a mysterious organization called the Fenice offers Salvatore a fortune to obtain for them a dragon egg, he is initially enticed by their reward and agrees to facilitate the egg's theft. Once the group's plan to expose the existence of dragons to the rest of the world becomes clear, however, Salvatore realizes just how terrible the consequences of his actions will be and changes his mind. Salvatore and his companions — the charming master-thief Silvio and the sarcastic dragon Nico — must then push

their various skills and abilities to the limit in order to stop the Fenice's plot before the secret of the Isole Fulgide is revealed and their idyllic homeland is plunged into cataclysmic ruin.

As the description above demonstrates, *Salvatore* possesses many of the characteristic elements of a typical fantasy novel: an enchanting setting, extraordinary and heroic protagonists, high-stakes conflicts with potentially world-ending consequences, and countless moments of exciting action and thrilling suspense. The following description, however, paints a very different — yet equally accurate — image of this same creative work:

The story is set in a fictional city-state heavily inspired by the real-world isles of Venice and Murano, historical centers of international trade and artistic innovation, during the cultural movement known as the Italian Renaissance.

The narrative follows the everyday life of a gruff, middle-aged bachelor named Salvatore Manco, who keeps his unprofitable antiques shop afloat by fencing stolen goods for the local population of pickpockets and thieves. Embittered by the artistic failures of his youth and his subsequent alienation from mainstream society, Salvatore has longed for decades to escape the constant reminders of inadequacy foisted on him by his surroundings, but due to the city-state's strict prohibition on emigration, he is unable to leave. Stymied by this government restriction, Salvatore simply tries to get by one day at a time, all the while endeavoring to maintain the few important relationships he has developed in his life. As the story progresses, he finds himself struggling to come to terms with his niece Luce's decision to pursue glassblowing — the same career choice that once ruined his own life — as well as dealing with his adopted son Nico's anger and resentment over his deformed body and childhood isolation. Salvatore also struggles

with his sexual identity when his criminal associate and friend, Silvio — a much younger man and a former victim of human trafficking — finally admits his romantic feelings for Salvatore.

After a risky business transaction with a shady organization turns sour, Salvatore's decades of criminal activity are abruptly revealed, and he finds himself arrested and his fencing operations in shambles. The greatest loss Salvatore endures, however, is his close relationship with his younger sister Marzia, a widowed law enforcement officer who had always believed in her brother's goodness and innocence. Upon realizing the destructive nature of his long-held bitterness, Salvatore is finally able to let go of the mistakes and tragedies of his past. Seeking to redeem himself in the eyes of his family and community, Salvatore, with Silvio's and Nico's help, assists the police in identifying, locating, and capturing the treasonous members of the organization, an insurgent group bent on exposing dangerous state secrets to the outside world.

Viewing the story from this alternative angle, it becomes clear that *Salvatore* also features many elements of a traditional literary novel: a setting grounded in historical reality, ordinary and flawed protagonists, personal conflicts that require both internal growth and external action to resolve, and a wealth of interconnected themes and humanistic depth.

This begs the question, then, of how *Salvatore* can and should be categorized as a work of fiction. Delving beyond simple descriptions and synopses into the text itself provides no easy answers; the narrative in its entirety only further complicates the issue by revealing the existence of fantasy and literary elements in roughly equal measure. This perplexing anomaly, then, not only makes *Salvatore's* generic categorization as a novel difficult to define, but also its intended readership and its academic value as a creative dissertation.

From the very moment of its conception, however, I have envisioned *Salvatore* as a work of fiction neither fantasy nor literary, but instead as a rare and potentially noteworthy hybrid of both: a literary fantasy.

By incorporating and emphasizing what I have come to understand as the fundamental strengths of each genre, I have sought to compose an original kind of narrative that is truly greater than the sum of its parts, that transcends what the average reader might expect from either a standard work of fantasy fiction or literary fiction. Meticulously weaving together the best aspects of both, I have striven to craft a timeless tale that appeals — often in different ways — to a wider audience rather than a niche readership, to spin a story that is simultaneously meaningful and thrilling, grounded and whimsical, authentic and extraordinary.

If I have indeed accomplished with this novel and creative dissertation what I set out to do, then *Salvatore*'s value as a work of fiction and as a work of artistic scholarship cannot be denied. To gauge how successful I may have been in this attempt, however, requires a deeper examination of both the two genres' defining characteristics and their application within the story of *Salvatore* itself.

Disparate Genres: The Literary and the Fantasy

In his aptly-titled book *Genre*, literary theorist John Frow initially defines this concept as “a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning” (10). Reflecting on narrative-based works in particular, he narrows this definition of genre to “a matter of discrimination and taxonomy: of organising things into recognisable classes,” going on to note that we as readers “also tend to think of classifications as being like standards: explicit, formalised, durable rules” (56). Outlining various approaches that literary

theorists have used over the centuries to establish genre taxonomies, Frow adds to his definition once more, stating that “genres form a horizon of expectations against which any text is read” (76).

Genres of fiction, then, can be considered both the products of widely-recognized taxonomies as well as the producers of new works of literature. The formal aspects and thematic elements that are considered “standard” within a preexisting genre provide authors with an established structure around which to build their settings, characters, and conflicts. If the author upholds the standards of the chosen genre too strictly by thinking of them as “rules” rather than “expectations,” their work is likely to come out feeling derivative and stale, lacking a sense of originality that would distinguish it from other works in the same category. Bending or even breaking a few of these standards by substituting in aspects and elements from other genres, however, will often result in a hybrid work — one that could be considered a subgenre of the original or, potentially, a brand new genre altogether.

The most commonly-recognized genres of narrative prose fiction today — romance, horror, science fiction, mystery, fantasy, history, etc. — are routinely and successfully combined by authors into a variety of intriguing hybrid subclasses. Combining romance with other prominent categories, for example, produces such lucrative hybrids as the historical romance and the paranormal romance, while fusing science fiction with various other genres has led to the formation of the sci-fi dystopian, the superhero story, the space opera, and steampunk. Even the merging of the same two genres can lead to different results depending on what aspects of each are combined. Pairing elements of the mystery with aspects of crime fiction, for instance, produces such divergent subgenres as the legal thriller, the caper, and the detective story.

Examining the most ubiquitous of these hybrids, however, soon reveals that the genres that comprise them inevitably possess similarities or complimentary attributes that make their combining a fairly smooth and easy process for the author. In the case of historical romances like Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* (1991), for example, the distant time period and unfamiliar setting contributes a desirable sense of exoticism and timelessness to the emotional conflict at the center of the romantic plot. In sci-fi dystopian novels like Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008), the futuristic time period and advanced technology characteristic of science fiction provides ample opportunities for exploring how our current civilization might fall into decline and what potential dystopian civilizations might arise as a result.

When it comes to the literary genre and the fantasy genre, however, the hybridization process is not so easily or smoothly accomplished. Like fire and water, these two categories of fiction are distinctly at odds with one another, as the very characteristics that seem to define them — their settings, their protagonists, their conflicts, and the very goals behind their creation — sharply contrast and appear to make the two genres incompatible.

The literary novel — particularly in its late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century form — excels at presenting to its audience a world grounded in realism, with a narrative shaped to invoke deeper meaning through heightened use of language, the repetition of humanistic themes, and occasional hints of allegory. Works such as Tom Drury's *The End of Vandalism* (1994), Don DeLillo's *The Falling Man* (2007), and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) exemplify this genre, with their stories set in the contemporary reality of real-world places like the American Midwest, New York City, and the Mississippi coast. The stories of literary novels typically follow the ordinary lives of rather ordinary people — small town sheriffs, lawyers, businessmen, children — as they encounter external hardships and endure common internal struggles

throughout their everyday existence: the awkwardness of adolescence, the struggle for economic survival, the pursuit of love or acceptance, the loss of family or innocence, the achievement or failure of lifelong dreams. The dilemmas that literary protagonists face may be superficial, but are often life-changing; Ward's young protagonist Esch, for example, struggles to care for her motherless siblings while dealing with her own teenage pregnancy. Such conflicts, however, are almost always localized and personal to the particular characters, even if the story itself is set against the backdrop of major historical events like Hurricane Katrina or the September 11 terrorist attacks. By focusing its attention on realistic, individual human struggles, literary fiction is able to examine its subjects with insightful depth and thus imbue its typically lyrical narratives with a sense of greater meaning and higher, scholastic importance.

In stark contrast, the fantasy novel — both traditionally and contemporarily — excels at presenting to its audience a world free of many of the physical and logical restraints of reality, with a narrative primarily shaped to invoke wonder, excitement, amusement, and general entertainment. Works like R. A. Salvatore's *The Dark Elf Trilogy* (1990-1991), George R. R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* (1996), and Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn: The Final Empire* (2006) epitomize the fantasy genre. The introduction of magic and other supernatural forces affects every aspect of each narrative's fictional world, from its physical setting and history to the abilities and customs of the people and creatures that inhabit it. The dark underground city of Menzoberranzan in Salvatore's novels, for instance, is saturated with the evil magic of the spider goddess Lolth, which twists its ambitious, scheming inhabitants into constantly engaging in bloody house warfare, while in Sanderson's work, the existence of uncommon, inherited supernatural powers known as allomancy leads to dramatic class and economic stratification in the capital city of Luthadel. As a consequence of magic's introduction into the setting, the sorts

of individuals that fantasy stories typically follow and the kinds of hardships and struggles faced by those characters are greatly affected as well. Regardless of how humble their origins might be — misfit, outcast, exile, orphan — such protagonists are never truly ordinary in the same sense as a literary protagonist. These characters invariably possess some quality, ability, or inherent trait that raises them beyond normal human status. For example, Salvatore’s dark elf Drizzt Do’Urden is a master swordsman who wields two scimitars in battle, his astral panther companion Guenhwyvar fighting by his side; Martin’s Daenerys Targaryen, known as the “Mother of Dragons,” possesses control over three of the huge mythical beasts as well as a massive and terrifying army; Sanderson’s Vin is a Mistborn, capable of wielding every form of allomancy rather than the typical one, and is a highly capable and acrobatic fighter as well. The hardships that most fantasy protagonists face are similarly uncommon and fantastical: the struggle to master sword-fighting or sorcery, the hardships of questing through uncharted terrain, the fight to escape from curses or traps, victory or defeat at the hands of a villainous foe, the fulfillment of an ancient prophesy or destiny. These dilemmas are usually much larger in scope when compared to their literary counterpart as well, with the fate of a kingdom like Westeros, a world like Scadrial, or even multiple dimensions like the Forgotten Realms dependent upon the protagonists’ actions. By overcoming such extraordinary trials, these protagonists become more than the narrative’s central character, transcending ordinary humanity to attain mythical status as a legendary hero. By focusing its attention on supernatural and wide-reaching conflicts, fantasy fiction is able to present narratives and characters outside of the boundaries of the real world. This provides fantasy’s readers with an entertaining escape from the mundaneness of ordinary reality and everyday life — the very thing that literary fiction best represents.

Despite the apparent incompatibility of these two genres, there are certainly plenty of examples of literary fiction incorporating elements of fantasy and of fantasy fiction incorporating aspects of the literary. Robert R. McCammon's literary novel *Boy's Life* (1991), for instance, is grounded in the cultural reality of 1960's small-town Alabama, but includes encounters with local cryptids and even a living triceratops at a traveling carnival, while Patrick Rothfuss' fantasy novel *The Name of the Wind* (2007) features the exceptionally talented, intelligent, and charismatic magician-bard Kvothe as its main protagonist, but includes a major subplot surrounding the highly-relatable acquisition and repayment of student loan debt. The vast majority of such fiction, however, skews more heavily towards one of the two genres, with the second genre contributing only a few more superficial aspects to the work. Such combinations result in unbalanced hybrid subclasses like magical realism (literary with a hint of fantastic whimsy) or fairy tales (fantasy with a dash of literary didacticism).

While there is nothing inherently wrong with these uneven literary-and-fantasy subclasses, as they can be quite successful in their own right, rarely does a literary author or a fantasy author try to balance these conflicting genres equally within the worlds, characters, conflicts, and purposes of their stories to create a truly genre-neutral work of literary fantasy. *Salvatore*, however, is an attempt to walk this creative tightrope from the first page to the last without ever straying too far to either side.

The World of *Salvatore*: The Grounding Realism of a Fantasy Utopia

In his illustrated fantasy book *Dinotopia: A Land Apart from Time* (1992), author James Gurney presents his readers with a wondrous world in which humans and dinosaurs, having escaped the extinction of their ancestors, coexist in peaceful harmony. A largely pastoral island

of sweeping plains, massive forests, dramatic canyons, and glistening waterfalls, Dinotopia — and the continuance of its existence — is dependent on the symbiotic relationship between the two species. Here, messages are transported by humans riding on flying Skybax, hatchlings and children are nurtured by caretakers of both kinds, and even the written alphabet is composed of dinosaur footprints to allow the beasts to communicate. As its portmanteau name suggests, Dinotopia is a true utopic paradise, hidden away from the outside world and protected from the industrial, colonizing forces of the nineteenth-century by dangerous reefs and lethal storms.

Inspired by Gurney's central concept — as well as by his lush oil paintings and detailed descriptions — the setting of *Salvatore* is similarly meant to present readers with an image of paradise, specifically one that belongs both to humanity and to fantastic beasts. The agrarian landscapes and untamed wilds that contribute to *Dinotopia*'s idyllic vision are distinctly absent in *Salvatore*, however. It is the city and civilization that is set up as the utopic ideal, complete with this way-of-life's elevated motivations beyond basic survival: the desire for prestige, a sense of community, and true self-fulfillment.

Nevertheless, the humans and dragons of the Isole Fulgide live amongst each other much like the humans and dinosaurs of Dinotopia. They learn, work, play, and produce art together in a societal harmony that they themselves often take for granted. While some spaces might favor one population over the other (the brothel district, for example, is “perhaps the only place in the isles where it was strange to see a dragon”) and some resources might be distributed unevenly (in particular, “red and gamy meat”), both groups are considered equal in the eyes of the Isole Fulgide's culture and laws. The same opportunities for career, social, and political advancement are open to all, and the isles' leaders, the *dogi*, rule in pairs always comprised of “one human, one dragon,” a clear acknowledgment of this parity.

Unlike the dinosaurs in Gurney's book, however, which are intelligent but still largely act and vocalize like animals, the dragons in *Salvatore* are in essence another form of humans — albeit large ones that walk on all fours, are covered in scales, and are capable of breathing fire. These dragons are fully sentient, with the ability to speak human language, to develop ideas and dreams, to feel the full range of possible emotions, and to form close bonds and mutual relationships. Lacking the wings and flying capabilities commonly associated with these mythical beasts in Western fantasy literature, the dragons' predilection for creative expression — whether through glassblowing, cooking, singing, or storytelling — is perhaps their most wondrous quality, as the ability to produce art is considered the exclusive purview of human beings in our real-world reality.

The fantastical essence of humanity in *Salvatore*'s dragons is perhaps best exemplified by the character Efelidrame. In Capitolo Tre, when Salvatore unexpectedly runs into the copper-speckled *draguomo* outside of a brothel, Efelidrame's "hot, scorch-scented" breath, "rumbling voice," and towering height drives home his threatening and bestial appearance. As they continue to talk, however, Efelidrame begins to demonstrate distinctly human signs of nervousness — "shift[ing] his attention away" and giving "ambiguous repl[ies]" — which leads Salvatore to the conclusion that "the *draguomo* was just as uncomfortable running into him here... as he was [running into the dragon]." Salvatore's memories of a younger Efelidrame in Capitolo Quattro also support this sense of humanity. Characterizing the adolescent dragon as "serious and awkward," Salvatore reflects on how Efelidrame was "fast friends" with Marzia and Renzo and that he "could recall Efelidrame having such ambitions [of joining the Guardia di Drago] even as a spindly *dragazzo*." Not only does Efelidrame act and emote in a way that is

recognizable and relatable to a human, but he experienced the same aspects of childhood that a human would, including the desire for friendship and dreams of a future career.

Beyond the utopic structure of its society and the presence of its humanistic dragons, the world of *Salvatore* is also fantastical in its physical appearance. Although the novel lacks the intricate and colorful illustrations that give Gurney's written work so much character, the various isles of the Isole Fulgide are purposefully described in an overabundance of multisensory detail in order to evoke a particularly strong sense of place.

As is common in most works of fiction, visual descriptions of setting are the most predominant, and among those in *Salvatore* can be observed a particular focus on color and light. The opening paragraphs of Capitolo Primo, in which Salvatore surveys the lagoon at sunset, are a good example of this: "...[t]he blue of the sky was streaked with coral and amber, the clouds dappled with touches of rose. The light set the vast surface of the water shimmering. Each tiny break and crest was laced with gold, casting filigree reflections onto the hulls of passing gondolas."

Bright vivid colors, metallics, and jewel-toned hues are constantly referenced, both in the Italian names of many of the isles — *giada* ("jade"), *alizarina* ("alizarin"), *oro rosa* ("rose gold"), etc. — as well as in descriptions of these isles' buildings, streets, and squares. The neighborhood where Salvatore lives, for instance, is the Quartiere Verderame (meaning "verdigris"), which features "winding streets paved in olive green and reddish-orange tiles," while the textile district on Isola Indaco ("indigo") has "wide avenues... paved with porcelain tiles, intricate patterns of deep blue overlaying the white glaze." Other elements of the setting are given color-focused descriptions as well, such as the isles' gondolas ("all painted a cool bluish-

black and decorated with metallic patterns, like a night sky full of starry constellations”) and patrol boats (“their snapping banners displaying [a] crisp white and ultramarine blue”).

That light also plays a major role in these descriptions is not, perhaps, surprising; the Italian name of the city-state means “the Shining Isles,” after all. The most ubiquitous elements in the setting — water, fire, metal, and glass — are all known for their ability to produce, reflect, or refract light, which leads to common use of adjectives like “shimmering,” “glinting,” “shining,” “glittering,” and “glistening.” Colored lanterns are used to designate buildings belonging to the various arts (crimson and emerald for theaters, orange for clothiers, etc.), and the Quartiere Peridoto in particular is known for its “olivine lanterns, flashing and winking like cat’s-eyes.” Iridescence — a visual quality dependent on changes in the angle of light — is an especially important descriptor whenever it is used, as it is tied to the highest reaches of creative expression through its connection to *dragovetro* (“dragon glass”) and the aptly-named patron dragon of glassblowers, Iridescenza.

The visual is not the only sense used to highlight the fantastical elements of *Salvatore’s* world, of course. Scent and taste are often used to differentiate one location from the other. In Capitolo Tre, the various culinary districts of Isola di Zafferano are distinguished not only by the colors of their shops but by the aromas they produce. The bakeries, for instance, are identifiable by the “warm and heady aroma... [of] baked bread... the dry, spicy tang of ground cinnamon... [and] the sickly saccharine scent of sugar,” while the eateries reek of “the briny pungency of cooked fish mixed with the occasional whiff of grilled meats, fried onions, and freshly-chopped herbs.” In Capitolo Quattro, Salvatore even notes his passage into the territory of the Painters Guild through his growing awareness “of the lingering scent of linseed oil and turpentine,” which evokes “the usual bittersweet taste of nostalgia on his tongue.” Sound is also used in a

manner similar to scent and taste. Salvatore distinguishes the music-centric Isola Acquamarina, for instance, through its “confusing cacophony of moods and melodies,” while the shipbuilding Isola di Vele is characterized by its “rhythmic sounds of saws and hammers in motion.”

The constant profusion of color, light, and other vivid sensory details are a deliberate stylistic choice, and a necessary one as well. In other fantasy novels, the reality-twisting effects of magic create obvious anomalies within the setting; J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, with the warped streets of Diagon Alley, the gravity-defying Burrows, and the ever-shifting staircases of Hogwarts, comes to mind. *Salvatore*, however, uses its in-your-face sensory descriptions to amplify the setting’s sense of unreality and wonder, to evoke the vibrancy and whimsy of an animated cartoon or a Broadway musical through the power of words alone.

This fantasy-like playfulness is further emphasized by the way in which the Isole Fulgide’s human and dragon populations interact with the setting itself. Though work and education are shone to be just as important to the isles’ citizens as these concepts are in our real-world lives, the consumption of various forms of art and entertainment is equally valued. Rather than considering dances, concerts, poetry readings, and the like as special occasions, the world of *Salvatore* treats them — and the enjoyment derived from them — more like social obligations. In Capitolo Due, for instance, Salvatore reflects on the enormous popularity of *spettacoli di mezzogiorno*, episodic performances reminiscent of real-world televised soap operas and children’s programming, as well as the mainstream culture of dedicated daily attendance that surrounds them. Later, in Capitolo Quattro, Marzia even expresses concern for Salvatore’s welfare and happiness largely because he “never mention[s] attending new exhibitions or performances” and doesn’t “go to masques anymore.”

Capitolo Tre in particular exemplifies this fantastic aspect of the setting. In this chapter, the reader experiences a single Saturday in the Isole Fulgide, and although this particular occasion is not considered a ‘holiday’ in the traditional sense, Salvatore notes that Saturdays are always “given over to city-wide frivolity” including “special open-air markets and annual festivals and all manner of indulgent entertainment.” In one notable scene, Salvatore finds himself swept up in a street performance as — incited by a group of professional musicians, singers, and dancers — the watching crowd “surge[s] forward” to join in a perfectly choreographed, yet completely impromptu, song-and-dance number à la Disney. The likelihood of such an occurrence spontaneously happening in public is slim to none in the real world, further heightening the whimsical charm of the Isole Fulgide as a setting.

As the elements described above make clear, the world of *Salvatore* contributes a great deal to the novel’s generic identification as a work of fantasy fiction. Beneath this bright and shiny veneer, however, can be seen another darker and more realistic vision of the same setting. This perspective illuminates the Isole Fulgide’s sharply contrasting aspects — social and economic disparity, enforced isolationism, stifling excess, and lack of common sensibility — that serve to ground *Salvatore* in a world that is both reminiscent of our own and is, by extension, well suited to a work of contemporary literary fiction.

Though a utopia in the same sense as Gurney’s harmonious land and *not*, as is common in countless works of fantasy and literary fiction, a tyrannical dystopia in disguise, the Isole Fulgide is nevertheless not without its flaws. While its socio-politico-economic institutions and structures are idyllic for those humans and dragons with interest in the arts, the city-state is far from utopic for the minority of its population that lives outside the encompassing influence of the artisan guilds. Advancement in the world of *Salvatore* is not affected by species — nor,

indeed, by other biological traits, such as gender or ethnicity — but it is affected by an individual's level of artistic talent, creativity, and skill. In order to be elected as a member of one of the isles' governing bodies, for instance, a politician must first obtain a high rank within one of the guilds, which itself can only be achieved by a professional artist or craftsman; this requirement is even reflected in the name of the lawmaking Consiglio dei Maestri, or "Council of Masters." The same goes for the isles' clergy, as the *sacerdoti* who run the various art-centric shrines are almost exclusively artists who "join[ed] the priesthood upon [their] retirement." Economic potential and social status are closely tied to artistic talent as well. In Capitolo Tre, for example, Isola Nebbiosa is identified as "home to the elite of the Isole Fulgide," and its luxurious *palazzi* are mostly owned by "the city-state's oldest artisan families" and "its most prominent glassblowers." Later, in the same chapter, when Carina discusses her fellow prostitutes' dreams of social elevation via obtaining a high-class lover, she notes that they would "[prefer] a glassblower, of course, though any wealthy artist of some renown would do."

Nothing drives home the isles' dismissal of its non-artistic minority, however, quite like the existence of Moltosabbia. Known as the "patron dragon of sundry arts," Moltosabbia is described in Capitolo Quattro as "something of an icon of charity" for having "devoted herself to the mundane, to all those uninventive occupations so necessary to the continuous operation of civilization." Though officially recognized as a member of the isles' semi-religious pantheon, Moltosabbia's status as a catch-all patron places her squarely at the bottom of the hierarchy, and as a result, her devotees are quietly regarded by mainstream society as something of a joke. Though unable to completely escape all association with Moltosabbia, due to his occupation as a shopkeeper, Salvatore's disdain for what he believes the patron actually represents — creative

incompetence and general failure — leads him to avoid her *santuario*, as well as the *università* of general education that bears her name.

Those individuals disenfranchised by the isles' pervasive artistic meritocracy are left with few options, most of which boil down to either a life of unfulfilling work, a life of abject poverty, a life of crime, or some combination of the three. The effects of this can be seen in a variety of characters, but particularly in thieves like Ysabel Monti (who must turn to pickpocketing to support her family because her job at an *osteria* is unable to pay the bills) and Leandro and Arrigo Tosi (who must shoplift to avoid being evicted from their shabby apartment). Salvatore, of course, is the perfect example of this kind of disenfranchised individual. Having failed in his chosen artistic path as a glassblower, he is forced into the role of shopkeeper with no hope of attaining any sort of social, political, or economic advancement in the future. Because of this, Salvatore begins his illegal fencing operations, the only means by which he, a non-artist, is able to make any profit and to gain any modicum of status or power.

Emigrating in search of a better life with new opportunities, however, is not an option for members of this minority. This is due, of course, to the Isole Fulgide's foreign policy of strict isolationism. Although this insular way of thinking contributes to the cultivation of the symbiotic harmony that exists between the human and dragon populations, it also gives the world of *Salvatore* a threatening edge grounded in historical reality. For centuries, the real-world isles of Venice and Murano, in a bid to protect lucrative artisan trade secrets from falling into foreign hands, threatened their glassblowers with imprisonment or assassination if they tried to leave the country. In *Salvatore*, however, this threat is extended from the isles' glassblowers to the entire population because their "trade secret" — the existence of fire-breathing dragons — is public knowledge within the community.

While some readers might consider the enforcement of this emigration ban a clear signal of a dystopia in disguise, its implementation is not considered tyrannical by the majority of the isles' population. The novel actually emphasizes the general acceptance of this isolation as a means of protecting a large portion of the community from potential genocide. As Luce logically explains to Salvatore in Capitolo Cinque, "Here is the only place in the world where dragons are safe to live. ...So to protect the secret, the Guardia di Mare keeps all of the other countries' ships away, and no one from outside is allowed in." For societal outcasts like Salvatore, however, the wondrous creatures that inhabit the isles actually detract from the idyllic nature of the setting, since it is the dragons' very existence that prevents any hope of their personal advancement or self-fulfillment.

The novel's overabundance of sensory detail — which, on the surface, contributes greatly to the setting's air of whimsy — also works to ground *Salvatore* in literary reality. Not all of the sights, scents, and sounds described within are pleasant, after all. In Capitolo Due, for instance, the drunken Giulia Ratti stinks like "old salt from the lagoon mixed with something rancid and washed in what smelled like a dragon-sized tub of hard liquor;" in Capitolo Tre, Carina's dingy room at the Casa di Limetta is described as "almost oppressively enclosed and warm" despite the brothel's outward splendor. It is Salvatore's reactions to this constant sensory overload, however, that makes the Isole Fulgide feel the most connected to our contemporary reality. Just as the technological trappings of the twenty-first-century world inescapably assault our eyes with blinding backlit screens and prismatic high-definition video, the isles' ubiquitous shining lights, bright colors, shimmering canals, and iridescent glass are easily overwhelming to the point where its presence becomes repugnant. When presented with too much light, Salvatore usually

“squints” or “shades his eyes,” and he immediately pulls out his pipe of medicinal herbs — the fantasy equivalent of an asthma inhaler — when confronted by strong perfumes or foul odors.

Though unable to completely avoid the isles’ overabundance of sensory inputs, the ways in which Salvatore deliberately shapes the environments he does have control over is quite telling. In *Capitolo Due*, Salvatore recalls how he painted his antiques shop “a more subdued, neutral beige” in comparison to the other brightly-hued shops nearby, and when “his neighboring shopkeepers... complained about [it] incessantly for weeks on end,” he pointedly replaced his shop’s colorful door and awnings “with plain ones an equally neutral chocolate brown.” In the same chapter, Salvatore’s apartment is defined by its sharp contrast to a stereotypical dwelling in the isles: “Unlike most [apartments]... the space was not crammed with furniture, art supplies, and shelves full of knickknacks, nor was it filled with bright colors and patterns. The walls were painted a cool gray and the bedspread was dark blue and there were hardly any decorations... It was stark and without a strong sense of character.” This minimalist interior is a deliberate pushback against the suffocating excess of the fantasy setting, as Salvatore envisions his apartment as “a tiny oasis of peace in the isles’ whirlwind of jubilant chaos.”

The *Isole Fulgide*’s insistence on the constant consumption of art is strongly reminiscent of our contemporary world’s around-the-clock easy access to various forms of media and entertainment, and this socially-acceptable excess is shown to be revolting to Salvatore in the same way as the sensory overload. When musicians begin to play outside of the restaurant where Salvatore is eating in *Capitolo Tre*, “he sighed and remained in his seat as the other customers left off their conversations and turned alertly to the window... neglecting their food and their companions;” the novel notes in particular that “the delighted enthusiasm of his fellow customers irked him and left him unable to relax.” Soon finding himself in the middle of the impromptu

street performance, Salvatore deliberately rejects the social expectation to fall in line, “chant[ing] a low ‘no, no, no, no’ of firm refusal as one of the dancers motioned for him to join an empty space in the dance.” In a brief moment of metafictional commentary, Salvatore reflects on the ridiculousness of “drop[ping] whatever you were doing — no matter how important or time-sensitive — to share in the performance of a song and dance in public” and bemoans the fact that such acts of whimsy are considered “perfectly natural” in his society.

Beneath every fantastical aspect of the novel’s world, then, exists a darker reflection that resembles elements of our contemporary reality, from strict government policies to various forms of social inequality and excess. Although this similarity alone doesn’t automatically allow the world of *Salvatore* to be designated a typical literary setting, it does help to ground the novel in the all-important familiar: to make a peaceful utopia more believable because of its structural flaws, to make the appearance of magical dragons more acceptable because they act like normal humans, to make the bright colors and cheerful atmosphere more palatable because its absurdity is acknowledged. The world of a literary novel is largely characterized by the reader’s sense of its grounded realism, and while *Salvatore* is inarguably set in a fictional space, its world still works enough like our reality to feel properly convincing.

The Characters of *Salvatore*: The Ordinary Man as a Fantasy Hero

In Chapter 2 of his genre survey *Fantasy: The Liberation of the Imagination*, Richard Mathews discusses how the worlds of fantasy novels in the nineteenth century contributed to the development of the modern fantasy protagonist. Pointedly contrasting these characters with their contemporary literary-novel counterparts, he argues that “given its special use of geography and setting... fantasy brought a shift away from focus on individuals. Complex personality, which

had become so essential to realist fiction, was often only an incidental detail in the context of the geography of fantasy” (40). In addition, he notes that “character in fantasy is frequently generalized or idealized, but as in myth, the concept and quality of the hero are of great importance” (40).

According to Mathews, then, the archetypal fantasy protagonist is more romanticized and less psychologically complicated than a typical literary protagonist because the wondrous aspects of the fantasy setting necessarily take precedent over the central character. Since the realistic setting of a literary novel needs to provide the reader with little to no explanation on how the world works, the literary author is free to delve into the complexities of their protagonist as deeply as they wish. The fantasy author, however, cannot take the reader’s understanding of their fictional world for granted. Round, dynamic characterization often falls to the wayside, then, to be replaced by flatter, more static personalities whose shallowness and dearth of development is often concealed beneath a mask of magical or extraordinary attributes. Commonly, such qualities include a unique and/or supernaturally beautiful physical appearance, the possession of a noble bloodline or mythical origin, the innate ability to learn or complete inhuman tasks with little effort, and a prophesied fate or grand destiny that reassures the reader of the protagonist’s eventual victory over adversity.

As a fantasy protagonist, Salvatore appears at first glance to lack most of the attributes traditionally associated with that status, but a brief review of the novel’s setting — in particular, the specific aspects that make it fantastical — provides a logical explanation for this deviation. In *Salvatore*, the only truly supernatural element within the world is the existence of fire-breathing dragons; magic in any other form, whether elemental, arcane, or divine, is otherwise completely absent. In addition, the Isole Fulgide is a republic, not a monarchy or dictatorship, and prestige is

tied to individual artistic talent rather than family inheritance. Because of these elements of the novel's world, Salvatore as a character is naturally exempt from the fantasy expectation of possessing some magical talent or of being a child of royalty and/or destiny.

Salvatore is not, however, completely without extraordinary attributes. One of these is his notable luck in criminal matters. Reminiscent of one of the three main protagonists in Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series, Mat Cauthon — whose status as a destiny-controlled *ta'veren* ensures that every chance-based situation works in his favor — Salvatore's incredible success as a *ricettatore* is largely the result of various unrelated events and circumstances falling neatly into place. In Capitolo Primo, Salvatore is described as having been “buying and selling for nearly twenty years, even before he'd inherited the antiques shop, and through his myriad precautions and more than a sliver of good luck, he'd never once been held in suspicion as a receiver.” This unusual good fortune is even recognized by other characters: “It was a feat that never failed to astound his criminal associates, and one made all the more impressive by the fact that Salvatore dealt almost exclusively in high-end artisan goods.”

On the one hand, the unusual longevity of his criminal work and the Guardia's complete obliviousness to these illegal activities is made more extraordinary when it is revealed that Salvatore's closest family member, his sister Marzia, is a long-time member of law enforcement. On the other hand, the well-hidden nature of his base of operations, the Caveau, could be said to detract from this impressive accomplishment. The Caveau, however, is also tied to good fortune, as is Salvatore's ownership and discovery of its location. As stated in Capitolo Primo, “the subterranean space was a marvel for even existing” due to “the majority of the Isole Fulgide [having] not been built on smooth land but atop... wooden piles driven deep into the silty clay bottom of the lagoon;” the Caveau's status as “an early bolt-hole” created by one of the isles'

fabled patron dragons, Ribesquamo, lends it the mysterious aura of an ancient landmark. Salvatore's inheritance of the antiques shop above the Caveau from his late employer is shown to be an unexpected windfall; though Salvatore "had known that Signor Uberti had no living relatives... to pass the shop down to," the previous owner's "final act of generosity" still leaves him "stunned." Good fortune also leads Salvatore to not only the Caveau's well-concealed trapdoors, but also the original ancient keys to unlock them.

Beyond his exceptional luck, Salvatore also displays impressive intellectual capabilities that are certainly extraordinary and befitting of a fantasy protagonist. His ability to memorize large sets of data, to perfectly recall this data at a later time, and to mentally conduct extensive mathematical calculations on the fly is referenced multiple times throughout the novel. In Capitolo Due, Salvatore makes "a mental note of each [valuable] item and their location" that he sees on his walk back from the Biblioteca di Cinabargilla; later, "he recited to Nico the wares that had caught his attention that afternoon. He described them in as much detail as he could recall and noted the shops and streets where he had seen them." In Capitol Tre, he accomplishes a similar feat at the Garofalo auction house, where he "commit[s] to memory each lot's successful bidder" and "mentally sorted [each lot] by market value, potential buyer, and ease of illicit acquisition," and once again later that night with Carina's stolen loot, "appraising their quality and valuing them as accurately as he was able." It is specifically noted as well that Salvatore doesn't consider this mental work "any great hardship": "Salvatore found it satisfying, actually to have the whole lot neatly organized — in descending order by maximum potential profit — in his mind."

In addition to his remarkable memorization skills, Salvatore also demonstrates some notable talent in deductive reasoning à la Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes (who,

while not considered a fantasy protagonist, is certain held up as a sterling example of an extraordinary fictional character). When, in Capitolo Primo, Nico first describes the dragon's horn ring that Vittoria wants him to acquire, Salvatore is not only able to easily deduce the studio where the object was made and the identity of its maker, but also offers "some astute guesses" about the identity of Vittoria's client ("likely a *dragadonna*, and a member of the Jewelers Guild — retired perhaps") and the reason behind the theft's commission ("the client must have been inspired by [the maker's] death to seek out the match to the ring she already possesses"). Nico's growing astonishment with each of Salvatore's subsequent deductions drives home their incredible nature, and despite Nico's ultimate show of exasperation, "Salvatore imagined the dragon was at least a little impressed."

Salvatore's heightened luck and mental capabilities, however, are admittedly overshadowed by the fantastical attributes of his fellow main protagonists. While Nico is inescapably a fantasy character due to the simple fact that he is a talking dragon, Silvio is as stereotypical a fantasy protagonist as the novel's world allows.

Silvio's introduction in Capitolo Primo immediately draws attention to his special nature. Not only does the pleasant sound of his voice — "light, an airy and lyrical tenor, and warmly familiar" — cause the novel's titular character to "[sit] up straighter on his stool" in attention, but the subsequent lavish descriptions of Silvio's appearance confirm his fantasy-esque youthfulness and beauty: "light gray eyes, shining like newly-minted coins" and "sable black [hair], soft and feathery in texture, and neatly cut to frame the delicate contours of his smooth, heart-shaped face." While Silvio's bloodline is unknown, his origins are certainly appropriately mysterious for a fantasy character. As Salvatore recollects, "[Silvio] had appeared at the Caveau's door one night out of nowhere... with a polite request for a set of forged citizenship

papers,” and the mystery of Silvio’s “foreign skin tone and refined manners and salt-encrusted white clothing” had “inspired Salvatore to give the forgery a try.”

Silvio’s exceptional talent in thievery is, of course, the most fantastical aspect of his character. Among the many pickpockets and burglars present in the novel, he is the only one given the unique designation of “*maestro-ladro*” (“master-thief”), a moniker that places him among the likes of such fictional thieves as Maurice Leblanc’s Arsène Lupin. In Capitolo Primo, Silvio is described as “pulling off directed heists for Salvatore’s clients that other criminals could only dream about committing” and as being able to “charm any lock, crack any safe, slip past the most invisible traps and the most vigilant guards... and swipe the most valuable and precious items from beneath the very noses of their owners, all without breaking a sweat.” These near-magical abilities, as well as Silvio’s accomplishment of not once being “seen, much less caught, by the Guardia di Drago,” play a large role in Salvatore’s success as a fence, as both of the named clients who commission him — Vittoria and the Fenice — want Silvio’s thieving services in particular. In Capitolo Primo, Nico recalls Vittoria’s statement that “if anyone can get the [dragons’ horn] ring on short notice, Leggièri can,” and in Capitolo Cinque, Mario Rossi admits that the Fenice only found out about Salvatore’s illegal operations after hearing that “this *maestro-ladro* works exclusively with a *ricettatore* called Sal.”

Despite Salvatore, Silvio, and Nico clearly possessing extraordinary attributes as befitting stereotypical fantasy protagonists, all three also possess more grounded and realistic aspects to their characters. The flat and static personalities commonly associated with the fantasy genre are notably absent, as each member of the trio is shown to be well-rounded and to experience internal change and growth as an individual throughout the course of the novel. These realistic

elements of character make *Salvatore*'s protagonists feel tangible and relatable to readers in the same way that the "common man" protagonist of a literary novel is meant to function.

His occasional luck and intellectual skills aside, Salvatore is truly an ordinary human being and was created by design to be and act in an ordinary — and, therefore, realistic — fashion. Unlike the vast majority of fantasy protagonists, who are in their teens or twenties, Salvatore is forty-one years old, and his appearance is neither unique nor strikingly handsome, but decidedly normal in a tired, middle-aged sort of way: "olive-complexioned and a bit broad about the waist," "chin-length dark hair," "circles beneath his brown eyes," "round, serious face." The son of a competent "but not... particularly inventive" painter, Salvatore grew up in a small middle-class household and, following his expulsion from the Glassblowing Guild and his brief stint in prison, becomes a simple shopkeeper by trade. While his competency as a criminal "earned him a place of genuine respect within the [underground] community," his occupation of fence is strikingly white-collar and devoid of adventure in comparison to Silvio's thrilling thefts and Elisa's risky smuggling, as shown through several montages throughout the novel of "all of the mundane tasks that were required to run a successful fencing business."

His lack of talent in any of the arts plays a major role, of course, in separating Salvatore both from the rest of the Isole Fulgide's population as well as from most other fantasy protagonists, and his bachelor lifestyle — foregrounded in the novel's first five chapters — is shown to be distinctly, almost monotonously, ordinary as well: he goes to work, eats out, wanders the city, visits his sister's family, conducts business, and goes to sleep in his apartment alone. While some of Salvatore's daily behavior is a deliberate facade to avoid the Guardia's suspicion — he admits his "doddering antiques dealer" persona is "a ploy" — he still possesses a "serious and forthright demeanor" during his nightly criminal activities. He demonstrates a range

of understandable emotions as well, including fondness for his family, irritation at suffocating crowds, guilt for missing religious services, and cold rage at having his past failures brought up. For a protagonist living in a beautiful utopic land full of dragons, Salvatore's appearance, background, personality, and behavior are all grounded, and no aspect of his character would be out of place in the real-world setting of a literary novel.

While Silvio's beauty, talent, and personality — charming, convivial, and unerringly optimistic — could conceivably strain the reader's suspension of disbelief in a fictional world fully bound to our reality, Nico as a character possesses a surprisingly literary nature. Setting aside his dragonic physical form, Nico is ordinary in many of the same ways as Salvatore, including his comparatively unimpressive appearance ("solid black from top to bottom, with scales as dark and matte as pitch") and his lower middle-class background as the adopted son of a single father. Nico expresses a variety of emotions as well, though at nineteen-years-old, the range and intensity of his feelings are heightened like those of a typical real-world teenager. Generally sarcastic and full of biting quips, Nico puts forward a confident and cool persona around those he considers his peers, such as Leandro Tosi, who he teases and exchanges "increasingly creative insults" with, and "the guys at the Levriero [tavern]" with whom he plays cards. His behavior around Salvatore is more nebulous, however, due to his current phase of youthful rebelliousness. Nico is quick to voice his irritation when his parent tells him to do something he doesn't want to do, but still demonstrates unspoken signs of affection: "curl[ing] up around Salvatore's neck and... [falling] asleep," rushing to give Salvatore his pipe and shouting at Giulia for almost triggering a respiratory attack, and insisting on following Salvatore to his meeting with the Fenice in case he needs backup.

Although the humanistic nature of the novel's dragons is part of its fantasy, Nico is actually so far removed from what makes dragons like Efelidrame or Mielevampata "normal" that he ultimately comes across in the narrative as more human than dragon. Described as "hardly as big as a house cat," Nico is many times smaller than a dragon should be despite his "tiny features" being "the mature ones of an adult male dragon," and his dull black scales are an ominous anomaly among the shiny colors and patterns of the rest of the isles' dragon population. Unlike "most dragons [who] could summon fire from their core in order to expel burning flames from their mouth," Nico is incapable of breathing fire, and despite the fact that dragons "required a substantial amount of [red or gamy meats] to remain healthy and strong," Nico is never shown to eat it, instead displaying a distinct preference for fish, a food associated with humans. Nico's full name — "Nicolò Gianni Manco" — is perhaps the most clear signal of his ordinariness. While all other dragons bear a single name, unique and visually descriptive, with no reference to their bloodline, Nico bears common Italian first and middle names as well as Salvatore's surname. In Capitolo Cinque, Mario Rossi even remarks that "Nico" is a "strange name for a dragon," adding that it's "fitting... for such a strange dragon." What makes Nico an abnormal dragon, then, makes him more human and thus more ordinary in a realist literary sense.

As demonstrated above, *Salvatore*'s main characters are well suited to the hybrid setting they inhabit because, like the world of the Isole Fulgide, they display both extraordinary attributes of the kind associated with fantasy fiction (romanticized beauty, talent, etc.) as well as realistic attributes of the kind associated with literary fiction (complex personalities, growth, etc.). While a protagonist like Silvio might lean more towards the magical hero and a protagonist like Salvatore more towards the common man, their rich characterizations are ultimately all able to escape becoming a mere "incidental detail in the context of the geography of fantasy."

The Conflicts of *Salvatore*: The Epic Victory of Overcoming Personal Struggles

While Scott Lynch's fantasy novel *The Lies of Locke Lamora* (2006) was not one of the original works that inspired the creation of *Salvatore*, the two stories bear several striking resemblances to each other on the surface. Like *Salvatore*, Lynch's novel is set in a fantasy version of Renaissance-era Venice — though the city of Camorr is a decidedly darker, meaner, and more squalid place than the Isole Fulgide, with canal sharks and poisonous scorpion-hawks instead of iridescent dragons. Much like *Salvatore*, Silvio, and Nico, Lynch's main characters are also criminals of the thieving variety; titular protagonist Locke is a talented and charismatic con artist who, with the help of his gang the Gentlemen Bastards, pulls long and elaborate ruses on unsuspectingly nobles in order to defraud them of their wealth.

Given these similarities, then, it is not particularly surprising that the central plots of both fantasy novels are structured around heists. A subgenre of crime fiction, the heist story involves the clever planning, detailed preparation, and audacious execution of some theft or robbery in order to obtain an enormous sum of money or, more commonly, a particularly important, expensive, or unique item. Because the defining characteristics of the subgenre are divorced from any particular kind of setting, the heist is commonly incorporated within a wide range of fictional genres, fantasy included. *The Lies of Locke Lamora* begins with Locke and the Gentlemen Bastards attempting to con the wealthy Don Lorenzo Salvara through a series of disguises and staged scenes; as the plot unfolds, however, new enemies appear, twists emerge, and friends and allies are slain. By the novel's climax, the heist structure is largely set aside in favor of a more traditional fantasy conflict, grand in scope and with potentially world-altering consequences: Locke and his last remaining companion, Jean Tannen, find themselves racing

against the clock to both eliminate the criminal-tyrant Capa Raza and prevent the extinction of Camorr's governing elite via a mass magical mindwipe.

The story of *Salvatore* also begins with a heist: the acquisition of the dragon's horn ring from the Cristallobianco archives. As with most good heist stories, the reader is privy to every detail of the characters' plans and preparations. In Capitolo Primo, Salvatore learns about the horn ring and its location from Nico, and he and Silvio agree to complete Vittoria's commission; in Capitolo Due, Salvatore acquires a copy of the archives' blueprint, and after he, Silvio, and Nico examine it together, they discuss plans for conducting reconnaissance of the building. In an unusual twist, the execution of the theft happens off-stage, with Silvio simply returning to the Caveau with the horn ring in Capitolo Cinque. This, of course, is due to the novel's first-person limited perspective and to the fact that Salvatore does not directly participate in the thefts he helps to direct.

The novel truly takes off, however, with the introduction of a new heist: the acquisition of the dragon egg *crisalide* from Mielevampata's *palazzo* on Isola Nebbiosa. This heist, on behalf of the mysterious Fenice, is much riskier and more involved than its predecessor, but the potential rewards are much greater, and the reader again follows Salvatore, Silvio, and Nico as they conduct research and reconnaissance and develop a careful plan. As before, the off-stage execution is successful, but the acquisition itself, fraught as it is with moral and political implications, causes the emergence of conflict and disagreement between the three criminals.

Salvatore's next major heist, once more commissioned by Vittoria, has even more dramatic consequences. Silvio not only fails to acquire the target — a first for the extraordinary *maestro-ladro* — but also returns to Salvatore severely injured after being ambushed by the waiting Guardia di Drago. Following a complex series of events, including a tense confrontation

with Vittoria that almost ends in bloodshed, this third heist eventually leads to Salvatore's capture and arrest.

Unlike *The Lies of Locke Lamora*, the novel retains its original heist format even at its climax, though with an interesting twist. Now working with the Guardia di Drago rather than hiding from its gaze, Salvatore uses his knowledge and abilities as a fence to devise a plan for stealing the *crisalide* back from the Fenice before it can be smuggled out of the isles. Silvio, Nico, and the Guardia are able to successfully execute this plan at the last minute, both saving the *crisalide* and preventing the potential destruction of the Isole Fulgide's utopic civilization.

The conflicts that arise from the heist-centric structure of *Salvatore*'s plot are typical of those found in traditional fantasy novels. The main problems that the protagonists face (for example, how to break into high-security locations without being caught) are extraordinary in nature, and overcoming these obstacles requires the characters to utilize their unique attributes and abilities (Salvatore's deductive reasoning, Silvio's innate talent for thievery, etc.). The scope of the ultimate trial is appropriately vast (an entire malevolent organization must be dismantled and brought to justice) and the stakes are conventionally high (the peaceful way-of-life of an entire species is on the line). These fantastical conflicts, however, play a startlingly minor and more surface-level role in *Salvatore* in comparison to the multitude of more grounded struggles at the heart of the novel. As previously demonstrated, Salvatore is a more traditionally literary protagonist by nature — an ordinary but dynamic man rather than an extraordinary and static hero — and so it follows that Salvatore faces in his daily life the kinds of realistic and personal conflicts around which literary novels are usually centered.

In his discussion on the growth of nineteenth-century fantasy and literary fiction, Richard Mathews states that, in contrast to the fantasy novel, “the realistic novel was following a literary

path of individualism that would eventually lead to the depiction of unique characters, frequently isolated from their society and history, who ultimately tended toward solipsism and despair” (40). While Mathews’ characterization of these “unique characters” is tied to a particular historical period, the typical contemporary literary protagonist still fits this description, and so does Salvatore. His isolation from the mainstream artistic society of the Isole Fulgide, as well as his preoccupation with his perpetual feelings of bitterness and regret over having failed as an artist, are a major part of what makes Salvatore a complex and realistic character and also constitute the novel’s most central conflict. This personal struggle is introduced in the opening scene of Capitolo Primo, in which Salvatore observes the sun setting over the lagoon and reflects on the “whole world of places and people and things he would never get to see.” This is not merely idle contemplation, however, as the novel makes clear that “Salvatore [had] silently brooded over the tableau... countless times over the last twenty years” and that the sight caused a “bitter sensation” to “[well] up within his chest.”

Salvatore’s internal struggles with his past mistakes shape many of the actions he takes and the important decisions he makes throughout the novel. On a personal level, his positive relationship with his niece Luce is greatly strained in Capitolo Quattro when she — not knowing that Salvatore was expelled from Studio Artigiano di Scordato in his youth — asks him to accompany her to a glassblowing demonstration there. Not only does Luce’s innocent suggestion cause Salvatore to abruptly leave the table and the house, but Salvatore’s internalized bitterness results in an intense conversation between he and Marzia in which Salvatore snaps at her “suddenly, accusingly” for not stopping her daughter from voicing the request. The advancement of the novel’s heist-centric plot is also tied to Salvatore’s unresolved bitterness and regret. In Capitolo Cinque, Mario Rossi uses his knowledge of Salvatore’s past to his advantage, correctly

guessing that alluding to Salvatore's expulsion from the studio — “with a slight flick of his head, Rossi gestured towards the old, dusty facade of the glass foundry” — will cause him to agree to the Fenice's treasonous commission as a form of revenge.

Outside of this central struggle, the myriad realistic conflicts present in *Salvatore* largely arise from his personal relationships with his family. It is not just his own bitterness that causes Salvatore to push Luce away, after all, but his fears for the possible loss of Luce's innocence and happiness if she chooses to apprentice as a glassblower. Seeing a vision of his younger, more naive self in her enthusiasm for the glass arts, Salvatore is desperate to keep Luce from experiencing the same terrible fate that he did — personal failure and social isolation — but he struggles to express this fear while still keeping Luce in the dark about his own mistakes as a matter of pride. Salvatore's close sibling bond with Marzia also drives a lot of the novel's conflict. Because his sister is a member of the Guardia di Drago, Salvatore is forced to keep his work as a fence secret from her in order to avoid Marzia having to choose between fulfilling her sworn duty and keeping her beloved older brother out of prison. A large part of Salvatore's life revolves around his criminal activities, however, and lying to Marzia becomes both a necessity and a habit. When his crimes are finally revealed, Salvatore's lack of guilt for his decades of lies causes an explosive fall out between the siblings, and Marzia's broken trust in Salvatore is only partially repaired by the novel's end.

Salvatore's father-son relationship with Nico is particularly fraught with conflict due to their complex personalities and individual personal struggles. Salvatore experiences lingering remorse for having to keep Nico hidden away throughout the dragon's childhood, despite still believing that these extreme measures were necessary. Due to his many physical abnormalities and impairments, Nico was not likely to be accepted within the dragons' society, and Nico would

have been taken from Salvatore's custody simply because Salvatore was raising him as one would raise a human child (individually, in a nuclear family) rather than a dragon hatchling (communally). Salvatore is silent about his remorse, however, and this leads to conflict with Nico, who has grown distraught and bitter over his lifelong isolation from society and is experiencing the rebellious instincts of a typical teenage. Both characters are self-absorbed and blind to the other's struggles, and the strain eventually causes Nico to lash out and Salvatore reacts without thinking, lashing out in return. It is only Salvatore's arrest that drives Nico to apologize for his temper and, through their combined efforts to stop the Fenice, father and son are finally able to express their individual concerns and put an end to their volatile conflict.

In stark contrast, Salvatore's relationship with Silvio is quite stable; their personalities, different as they are, do not clash, and the two characters are not prone to arguing. Silvio's romantic interest in Salvatore, however, exposes a very real and personal conflict commonly found in contemporary literary fiction: the struggle to identify and come to terms with one's sexuality. In Capitolo Tre, when Carina propositions him as thanks for his services as a fence, Salvatore insists that "that sort of intimacy... [is] not something I need... or want" and states that he has "yet to meet a single person who is [attractive to him]." While the antiquated culture of the Isole Fulgide does not have a word to describe his orientation, Salvatore's presentation in the novel would likely be labeled in our contemporary society as asexual, both uninterested and somewhat repulsed by sexual intimacy. Even before Silvio admits his attraction halfway through the novel, however, Salvatore has already displayed many unconscious signs of interest in the *maestro-ladro*. Whenever Silvio enters the Caveau, Salvatore's posture straightens and his attitude lifts, and while he brushes aside Silvio's occasionally flirtatious comments and actions, Salvatore doesn't get angry, admonish him, or reject Silvio's little gifts of coffee and treats. In

Capitolo Primo, Salvatore's attention to the details of Silvio's appearance is noticeable — his eyes linger on Silvio's "long, black eyelashes" and his "trim fingernails... lacquered with a smooth coat of matte black paint" — and in Capitolo Cinque, Silvio's lute playing leaves Salvatore "unsure and off-kilter... [and] a little entranced in spite of himself." Upon learning of Silvio's interest in pursuing a romantic relationship with him, Salvatore struggles to accept that the young, handsome, and talented man might desire someone of his age, appearance, and disposition; Salvatore has an even more difficult time, however, figuring out whether or not he might return Silvio's feelings and, if so, how they should precede. Salvatore's ultimate acceptance of his true romantic and sexual nature ironically helps to further the surface-level plot, as his fury over Silvio's injury is what drives him to confront Vittoria, eventually leading to his arrest.

As demonstrated above, the most important conflicts in *Salvatore* are the personal, grounded, and literary struggles faced by the main protagonist rather than the more epic-in-scale fantasy hardships that develop from the novel's heist structure. Salvatore's internal conflicts surrounding his identity, his relationships, and his past regrets greatly contribute to his complex and rounded characterization, and the fact that Salvatore suffers through such common and relatable struggles helps to ground the fantastical nature of the novel's world even further in familiar reality.

The Purpose of *Salvatore*: Finding Meaning in Indulgent Escapism

As an earnest attempt to produce a true, genre-neutral work of literary fantasy, *Salvatore* is impressively well-balanced in its presentation of the novel's fictional world, characters, and conflicts. Whenever one element (the fantastic nature of the utopic setting, for instance) dips

slightly to one side, another element (the ordinary nature of the main protagonist) tilts the opposite way to restore the novel's generic equilibrium.

Setting aside these fundamental aspects of storytelling, however, what most distinguishes the literary genre and the fantasy genre from one another and what truly produces their seemingly inherent incompatibility is the sharply-contrasting goals behind the creation of each type of fiction.

The purpose of fantasy — as its very name implies — is to ignite the imagination and evoke within the reader a heightened feeling of wonder, excitement, and awe, a very particular sensation that simply can't be produced if the story is bound to all of the laws and expectations of the real world. This unshackling from reality is responsible for fantasy fiction's prevailing identification as "escapism," a fraught term that may be either empowering or derogatory depending on the speaker.

The purpose of literary fiction, however, is not to escape from reality, but to examine it up close with fresh eyes, to see the real world from a unique and different perspective and discover new ideas not previously known or comprehended. Such novels evoke within the reader a greater appreciation for and understanding of reality and humanity, and because it possesses this transformative potential, literary fiction is considered meaningful and therefore worthy of cultural elevation.

To be considered a work of literary fantasy, then, *Salvatore* must simultaneously lift the reader up into the clouds of imagination and keep the reader down on the solid ground of reality, and I truly believe that I have accomplished this ambitious feat. The novel is bursting with indulgent scenes of pure whimsy, from the delightful and airy charm of the festival markets to the risqué enchantment of the Quartiere Peridoto to the heart-pounding, floor-shaking spectacle

of the human-and-dragon glassblowing demonstration. The novel is also suffused with the slow and steady pace of normal, everyday life — the ordinary actions of waking, working, eating, and sleeping — presented in an uncompromisingly realistic fashion. The world of *Salvatore* is fantastic and strange in many ways and it allows the reader a moment of escape from the mundane, but it is also hauntingly real and familiar and it insists that the reader reflect on its humanistic themes of isolation, alienation, and possession.

Salvatore himself is the perfect embodiment of this duality of purpose. Caught between his desperate desire to escape the restrictive world he had grown to bitterly resent and his acknowledgment of his society's contrasting perspective on their homeland, Salvatore is forced to learn and grow, to transform as a person, from his various life experiences — and, in the end, is ultimately rewarded with the fulfillment of his dream as he and Silvio sail away from the Isole Fulgide towards unknown shores.

Conceding that *Salvatore* is a pure hybrid work of literary fantasy, the question remains as to the reason for combining these disparate genres in the first place. If a novel's intended audience is difficult to define and its value as a creative dissertation is unclear, then why attempt to create such a perplexing anomaly?

The nature of hybridization as a concept provides a clear and simple answer. Combining the best attributes of two very different entities can only result in something new that is greater than its constituents, and so it is with literary fantasy. What genre of fiction could be more important and impactful in the world than one that both entertains its audience with indulgence and leaves it thinking more critically about its reality? Such a genre defies the idea of a niche audience and is truly accessible to all readers, no matter their initial preferences or reasons for engaging with fiction. And as for its academic worth, a work of literary fantasy like *Salvatore* is

highly beneficial to both scholars and creative writers, as it encourages the study and canonization of diverse forms of fiction previously (and erroneously) dismissed as meaningless escapism and stimulated the creation of new, more individual forms of human expression through fiction.

Salvatore may thus be an anomalous work of fiction — neither pure fantasy nor true literary realism — but it is a better novel and a better creative dissertation for it.

Book One



Figure 1: Map of the Isole Fulgide

Capitolo Primo

Salvatore stood on the front stoop of his antiques shop, broom in hand, and spared a moment to watch the sun's descent into the lagoon.

The day had been mild and fair, and now the blue of the sky was streaked with coral and amber, the clouds dappled with touches of rose. The light set the vast surface of the water shimmering. Each tiny break and crest was laced with gold, casting filigree reflections onto the hulls of passing gondolas.

Beyond the canal, out past the tiny silhouettes of distant trade ships, the sun dipped toward the horizon like a gather of molten glass clinging lazily to the end of some ethereal blowpipe. Salvatore shaded his eyes, squinting carefully into the light. The glow was so yellow-hot, it was almost a wonder the water did not sizzle and steam from the proximity. But it was only a trick of the eye from where he stood, here on the western edge of the Isole Fulgide, the shining isles of the Laguna Vitreo.

Further out beyond the line where the water met the sky, Salvatore knew there existed a world of foreign lands and seas, both wild and tamed, alive and bustling with verdant nature and exotic human cultures. It was hard for him to imagine, but it was nevertheless true: out there was a whole world unaware of the civilized and intelligent dragons that, together with their human companions, had made the Isole Fulgide their home.

A whole world of places and people and things he would never get to see.

Salvatore silently brooded over the tableau, just as he had countless times over the last twenty years. He was visibly older now than he had been when he'd first taken up the habit, back

when he was a mere shopkeeping assistant to the late Signor Uberti. Though he'd always been olive-complexioned and a bit broad about the waist, in the intervening years Salvatore's girth had grown more ample, his chin-length dark hair had grown oilier and limper, and the circles beneath his brown eyes had settled deeper within his round, serious face.

The bitter sensation that welled up within his chest, however, as he gazed at the setting sun, was the same as it had always been. He felt his throat tighten with its customary ache, his eyes sting with an unavoidable itch.

One day, Salvatore thought, a private promise to himself. One day.

The moment passed. Grimacing, Salvatore blinked the spots from his eyes and turned away from the sun. He swept his broom a few more times over the front stoop and absently waved at an acquaintance passing by on the *fondamenta* before stepping back inside the shop. The stately copper sign beside the entrance gleamed in the fading light.

Antichità Manco

Isola di Onice

A. S. Manco, *proprietario*

The bell sounded its familiar, welcoming peal as Salvatore shut the door behind him. The ring echoed off the shop's high ceiling and oversized walls before losing itself amongst the chaos of the antiques he had for sale.

The room was packed with a dizzying array of old furniture, knickknacks, housewares, and all manner of secondhand possessions. Heavy mahogany cabinets displayed a disjointed collection of ceramic dishware, carved wooden figures, and musty piles of blankets. A row of

mismatched vases had been unceremoniously stuffed beneath a sideboard, the surface of which was covered in yellowing lacework and worn masks trimmed in bent feathers. Off in one corner, beside a haphazard stack of chairs with fraying cushions, a set of sturdy cupboards nearly sagged beneath the weight of the thick, leather-bound tomes shoved onto their shelves. Framed landscapes and portraits painted long before Salvatore was born clung to the walls nearly up to the rafters. Faded tapestry rugs strove unsuccessfully to hide the old scratches and stains marring the hardwood floor.

Amongst the worn and dingy clutter, however, gleamed an assortment of fine metalwork and jewelry. The cases in the shop's front windows brandished all manner of rings, bangles, and necklaces at those strolling by on the *fondamenta* outside. Though some of the pieces were tarnished, most were still in decent shape and were peppered with semiprecious stones, engravings, or decorative beadwork. Brighter still were the various works made of glass, the tiny baubles, vessels, figurines, and pendants that had somehow found their way over the years from the world-renowned glass foundries of the Isole Fulgide to the humble disorder of Antichità Manco. The overall effect of the room was simultaneously charming and exasperating, the homeyness of a dragon's den that could nevertheless do with some thoughtful curation and a good, hearty dusting.

It was the perfect ambiance for a modest antiques shop. Salvatore had worked long and hard to cultivate that air of unassuming innocence.

Setting his broom aside, Salvatore flipped the sign hanging on the door's window from *Open* to *Closed* and turned the latch. He turned the knob for the secondary lock, too, though the action was more for show than actual security. He didn't need to worry about anyone breaking in to pilfer the place. There was nothing much to tempt a potential thief, beyond the old jewelry and

glass perhaps, but more than that, the very idea of anyone stealing from the shop of Salvatore Manco was absurd to the point of irony.

With a huff of amusement at the thought, Salvatore shuffled his way through the assortment of precariously-stacked wares to the counter in the back. He'd made the snaking pathways through Antichità Manco as wide as he possibly could to accommodate his larger dragonic customers, but there was only so much room and far too many goods yet to be sold.

Salvatore picked the shop's ledger up from where it sat on the countertop and flipped through the last few pages, squinting at the scrawled figures. Mentally he balanced the day's sales against the cost of the box of silver rings he'd recently picked up at auction and the decades-old tea set he'd reluctantly bought off a distressed customer that afternoon. Salvatore found himself sighing at the net loss. The deficit was unsurprising, but still irritating, especially with salary payments coming up at the end of the week and property taxes at the end of the month. Granted, he only had one employee and he wasn't forced to pay for an artisan goods permit like many of his fellow shop owners, but still.

Running an antiques shop in the Isole Fulgide required a great deal more fortitude than it likely would anywhere else in the world, Salvatore mused. His fellow citizens tended to prize the most recent and innovative of creations while also revering the oldest and most traditional of masterpieces. They did not, by and large, have much interest in works of art too old to be new and too new to be ancient.

Salvatore scratched absently at the dark bristles of his short, patchy beard as he calculated how much coin he'd need to break even after all expenses, then added a modest amount to serve as profit. He did, after all, need to maintain the longstanding ruse of just barely staying afloat.

Double-checking the figures one last time, Salvatore nodded to himself and snapped the ledger shut.

Holding his calculations in the back of his mind, he quickly carried out the rest of the chores required to close up the Antichità Manco for the day, the next of which involved counting the coins in the safe-box. They were mostly iron *gocce* and copper *basse*, along with a handful of silver *stagni* and three or four gold *maree*. Paltry as the sum was, it matched up with the ledger, so Salvatore leaned down to stuff both book and box in their customary drawer beneath the counter, then locked it with one of the multitude of keys hanging from the keyring on his belt. It was as much for show as the locks on the front door, but his shopkeeping assistant, Teodora, would probable notice and grow curious if he left this step undone.

Straightening up, Salvatore felt his lower back twinge at the movement and he frowned, sliding the flat cap off of his head and slicking back his hair with a broad hand. He tossed the cap onto the counter and slipped off his shopkeeper's apron, letting it settle into a heap beside the cap. He made one more circuit around the shop, on the unlikely chance that some customer was still lurking around and hadn't noticed the time. He halfheartedly tapped the amulet of Moltosabbia, patron dragon of sundry arts, hanging by the front door for good luck and fortune — not out of any real belief, but because Signor Uberti had always done so and he'd respected the man. Then, gathering up the cloth bag of leftovers he'd saved from dinner, Salvatore headed through the door at the rear of the shop labeled *Storage*.

The inside of the backroom was dark. There were no dragonfire orbs in sconces along the walls like there were in the shop proper; the little glass balls, which provided steady warmth and light for days, were too expensive and faded too quickly to waste on a room so rarely visited. But Salvatore knew the layout of the room by heart. He didn't need to be able to see much to make

his way through the crooked maze of shelves, each one crowded with the sort of detritus that even the rare lover of antiques wouldn't want. He easily sidestepped the piles of chipped ceramics, rusting metals, moth-eaten fabrics, and half-rotten wood, all remnants from Signor Uberti's time or from some unknown time before that.

Reaching the back corner of the room, Salvatore felt his way down the wall and knelt awkwardly on the floor, setting the bag aside. He swept the tips of his thick fingers along the wooden planks until they found the smallest and most inconsequential of knotholes. He rummaged blindly through his keyring for a moment until he felt the key he was looking for — thin, but heavy, and very, very old — and slipped it carefully down into the knothole. He turned the key until he heard a quiet click. Withdrawing it, he ran his fingertips once more over the wood until they caught on the now slightly raised edge of the camouflaged trapdoor. He lifted the panel; it swung open, silent and easy. Salvatore's eyes were instantly met with the distinct golden glow of dragonfire orbs radiating up from the wide, vertical shaft below and he blinked rapidly to adjust to the change. So expertly was the passage hidden that not a single pinprick of light had been visible from above.

Returning the keys to his belt and looping the bag around one wrist, Salvatore scooted to the edge of the opening and lowered himself slowly until his boots met with the slots carved deep into the stone. Climbing down a few steps, he reached up, grabbed the trapdoor's inner handle, and pulled the panel shut, the lock clicking back into place.

As he descended, Salvatore felt his discontent and weariness fade. He welcomed the small resurgence of vitality, pushing all lingering thoughts of the world beyond the isles out of his mind. After all, the night was young, and he had criminals to meet with, documents to forge, and wares of questionable origin to purchase, catalog, and prepare for smuggling.

The sun may have set, but for Salvatore — a *ricettatore*, and the most prominent fence of stolen goods in the Isole Fulgide's black market — the day's true work had only just begun.



Buried deep beneath the Antichità Manco was a hidden chamber Salvatore's associates had come to refer to as the Caveau.

As long and wide as the shop above, the subterranean space was a marvel for even existing. The majority of the Isole Fulgide had not been built on smooth land but atop hundreds of thousands of wooden piles driven deep into the silty clay bottom of the lagoon. Barring a few of the outer islets, whose craggy surfaces jutted up above the surface of the water, building underground was not an option since there was no solid ground to build beneath.

Isola Onice was one of the smaller and more inconsequential islands in the city-state, and it was not generally known to have been constructed atop anything other than piles. And ever since he had discovered the hidden chamber years before, Salvatore had prayed this incorrect assumption would remain intact. He had even taken certain steps to insure this. Sketched by the patron dragon of architects during the founding of the isles over four centuries ago, the original blueprints for Isola Onice's infrastructure had once been sealed in a vault at the Biblioteca di Cinabargilla; now it rested innocuously on a shelf in the backroom of the Caveau. No one would think to look for a chamber beneath Salvatore's shop if its very existence seemed impossible.

While the space itself had come as a shock to Salvatore, the identity of the one who had ordered its creation had not. From what he'd gleaned off the fragments of ancient letters he'd found inside, the Caveau had been secretly constructed at the behest of Ribesquamo, the patron

dragon of artificers, clockmakers, and locksmiths. Ribesquamo had been well-known for his paranoia and initial mistrust of humans; this sentiment was often attributed to the loss of two digits on his left front paw, severed by the metal bite of a human hunter's trap. The *draguomo*, however, had also been a mechanical genius, and he had used his gift to create some of the most elaborate safes and vaults both human- and dragonkind had ever seen; many of those contraptions remained uncracked by the *maestri* of the Artificers Guild to this day.

The clandestine nature of the Caveau and the ingenuity of its two trapdoors — one leading into the antiques shop, the other out into a narrow back alley — made much more sense to Salvatore if Ribesquamo had been involved. The place had been an early bolt-hole for the dragon, a safe haven and a secure location to store his design plans, before he eventually abandoned it to settle permanently on Isola di Serrature with the few humans he'd eventually grown to trust.

At the bottom of the stone shaft, a plain door awaited Salvatore's arrival. The lock looked deceptively simple, but was near impossible to pick. Salvatore flipped through his keyring once more, selected a different ancient-looking key, and unlocked the door without a problem, letting himself into the main chamber.

While the Caveau was a simple rectangle in shape, its construction was impressively sound. The straight walls were reinforced with beams made from the same wood as the underwater piles and the smooth floor was covered in irregular, interlocking flagstones. Buried beneath layers of chipped plaster and heavy stone, Salvatore had even found evidence of the use of *dragovetro* glass in its construction. He guessed Ribesquamo had employed the sturdy material for insulation and waterproofing, as the Caveau had never shown any signs of flooding,

even during periods of *acqua alta*. There were even ventilation pipes up near the wooden rafters, which siphoned clean air into the chamber from above.

It was an ideal place for a dealer in stolen goods to conduct their illicit activities, and once he'd found it, Salvatore had wasted no time establishing it as a permanent secondary shop for his nightly business.

The counters and shelves that lined the Caveau's two longer walls had already been there when he'd found the place, a remnant from Ribesquamo's occupation. Salvatore had cleaned them up and repurposed them as display cases for some of the most dazzling and extravagant pieces he'd purchased and had yet to sell. Rows of fine jewelry were laid out across velvet cushions and hung from elaborate stands: all gold and silver, polished and dripping with diamonds and gemstones, plucked from the boutiques on Isola di Oro Rosa. Beside them perched sculptures cast in bronze and carved from beautiful stone, detailed representations of humans and dragons alike, pilfered from the studios on Isola Catecù. Rare illuminated volumes — bound in the smoothest leather, pages rimmed in gold, and filled with painstaking calligraphy — sat upright between marble bookends, each book purloined from the libraries and studies of Isola Zaffiro and Isola Ametista. A series of exquisite boxes, carved from fragrant and exotic woods, protected pouches of expensive spices swiped from the storage cabinets and pantries of Isola di Zafferano.

In the floor space between the shelves, a broad table had been set up to support a series of glass cases that were filled with even more stunning works of art. There were sensuous ivory-veneered masks from Isola Alizarina, lovingly embroidered silks from Isola di Indaco, sleek blades with sapphire pommels and bejeweled scabbards from Isola d'Acciaio, and the finest and most delicate of bone porcelain from Isola Catecù.

And amongst all of these lavish pieces were neatly displayed the most expensive and luxurious acquisitions in Salvatore's possession: *dragovetro* glassworks from Isola dei Vetrai. Shimmering like the opalescent scales of Iridescenza, the patron dragon of glassblowers himself, the unique glass called *dragovetro* was produced when molten material was shaped by the fire of a dragon's breath. The *dragovetro* pieces here took many forms — strings of *millefiori* beads, lampworked pendants and figurines, vases threaded with twisting cane — but all of them were mesmerizing in their unrivaled beauty.

Salvatore had once loathed the very sight of any work of handblown glass, much less pieces made of *dragovetro*. But over time he had hardened his mind to their presence, for there was nothing else in all the isles that could fetch such an extraordinary price.

Nearest to the door through which Salvatore entered was the Caveau's shop counter, a long and ancient piece of furniture made of rich wood with an inlaid marble top. The inner side of the counter, where Salvatore's padded stool sat, was covered in drawers of assorted shapes and sizes, each bearing their own unique lock; Salvatore suspected that Ribesquamo had used the piece as a desk or drafting table in his time. Behind the counter and beside the door he'd come through was the entrance to the Caveau's small backroom, used for temporary storage and the preparation of packages. Its opening was partitioned off with an elegant tapestry-turned-curtain.

On the opposite wall, a single door led into a second stone shaft, and the trapdoor at the top of it opened out into one of Isola Onice's back alleys. This exterior entrance was as perfectly concealed as the one in the antiques shop, the panel's mosaic surface an exact match for the pattern of ceramic tiles around it. Only those who knew where it was and what order in which to press a certain combination of tesserae could unlock the trapdoor from the outside. Salvatore didn't deal with just any old cutpurse or reprobate itching to get warm goods off their hands;

only those associates he reasonably trusted knew the trick, and he counted on them to only share it with those they trusted in turn.

Setting the bag of leftovers on the countertop, Salvatore ducked into the backroom just long enough to slip a brown leather jerkin on over his tunic. The garment was too well-made for a modest shopkeeper and gave off too tough of an air, but it was just right for a prosperous criminal. Back at the counter, he made himself comfortable on his stool and unlocked the wide drawer closest to him, withdrawing a pen, a bottle of ink, and the Caveau's current ledger.

This book was nothing like the flimsy one Salvatore kept for the Antichità Manco. It was twice the size and three times as thick, the pages nearly bursting out of their leather-bound covers. It was forcibly held shut by two metal clasps that Salvatore unlocked with yet another key from his keyring. He spread the ledger open to its most recent pages and slipped on a slim pair of reading optics. Salvatore's eyes flicked over the neat, slanted rows of his handwriting, a world away from the careless scrawl he used upstairs. Columns separated out lists of figures, names, dates, and item descriptions, keeping precise track of each and every illegal transaction Salvatore conducted with his associates and clients. And this book held information only for the last seven months; a large trunk in the backroom was crammed with similarly sized ledgers from many years past.

Before he could forget it, Salvatore quickly jotted down the figure he'd calculated in the shop above. It was simple enough to transfer the funds he needed to maintain the Antichità Manco from the income the Caveau raked in. It would take but a moment to fudge a few numbers in the antiques shop's ledger, an action made all the easier by his deliberately bad script and haphazard record-keeping. He'd had plenty of practice at forging, so now such work came to him naturally.

Setting the pen aside, Salvatore glanced up and surveyed the Caveau. The room was quiet and still; its organized treasures gleamed softly in the light of the dragonfire orbs resting in their sconces overhead. After a moment, he turned his attention to his bag of leftovers, pulling out a metal container and a paper sack. Prying off the container's lid released a savory-salty whiff of anchovies and onions; the thick noodles inside were still lukewarm. Salvatore slid the container to one side and the package of fresh-baked *sfogliatelle* pastries to the other.

"Nico?" he called out, flicking flecks of sugar from the sack off his fingertips. "You here? I brought dinner, if you want it."

A moment passed. Then a voice called back, small and sharp, from somewhere up near the ceiling. "What is it?"

"Bigoli in salsa."

"Again?"

"I was in a rush," Salvatore said, a little defensively. "I thought you liked the pasta from Passerini's."

"I do, but, *cazzo*, that's three times this week."

"Do you want it or not?" He tapped his fingers on the countertop, then added, "I got extra fish on top this time."

There was a flicker of movement among the grid of wooden rafters. A sinuous shadow detached itself from a spot near the far door, two beady eyes reflecting back light from the chandelier. The dark form skittered across the high scaffolding, looping around intersecting posts and leaping over empty spaces with ease, until it was perched sideways on the beam above Salvatore's seat. A long, slender tail whipped around in the air, serving as a counterbalance as the scaly body dipped forward and wiggled in preparation. Salvatore braced himself, and then a

solid weight landed across the back of his shoulders. Four sets of claws dug into the tough leather of his jerkin to maintain balance. Salvatore could feel the sharp prick of the tips through his tunic.

“*Ciao*, Nico,” he said, tilting his head to catch the dragon’s eye.

Nico curved his serpentine neck over Salvatore’s shoulder and sniffing the air appraisingly. “*Ehi*, Sal. Smells good.”

“It’s still warm. Mostly.”

With a throaty sound of thanks, Nico leapt onto the counter and navigated around the ledger and inkwell. He settled down on his back haunches before the container and curled his tail around it protectively, immediately burying his slender snout in noodles.

Solid black from top to bottom, with scales as dark and matte as pitch, Nico was hardly as big as a house cat and his slinky body was only as thick around as Salvatore’s forearm. The dragon’s tiny features, however, were the mature ones of an adult male dragon — a *draguomo* — if a young one at that. Two straight, pointed horns jutted out from the back of Nico’s head and small horn-like nubs lined the curved edge of each side of his jaw. A series of thorny barbs ran down his spine from mid-forehead to the tip of his tail, and they lifted slightly in pleasure as he stuffed his mouth with sauce-covered *bigoli*.

Salvatore watched Nico for a moment, an expression of wry fondness crossing his face as he made sure the dragon didn’t choke himself. Then he picked up his pen and declared, in his serious businessman’s voice, “Alright, so what news do you have for me? Should I expect anyone to stop by tonight? Or do I get to work in peace for once?”

Nico lifted his head, licking sauce from his pointed teeth with a slender pink tongue. “Besides the usuals?” Salvatore nodded. “Well... I heard from Loris, who was playing cards at

the Gazza-e-Fiammifero last night, that Leandro was boasting to the whole table about some wild clip he pulled on Indaco last festival day. Something about chatting up a vendor while sliding set after set of cufflinks up his sleeves. Just stared the man straight in the eyes while he did it, too.”

Salvatore snorted, unimpressed. “He’s going to get himself hauled straight to Punto Nord if he keeps pulling that sort of shit all the time.”

“Yeah, I know,” Nico said. He sat up, clutching a long sliver of anchovy in one paw and waving it around for emphasis. “What’s he supposed to do if a mark just happens to look down? Say all the goods just fell in his sleeves by accident?” Though dragons didn’t quite have opposable thumbs, the four long digits and backwards-facing pollex they possessed on each of their front paws made them as dexterous as any human. Nico shoved the anchovy in his mouth and, as he chewed, continued. “So he and Arrigo will probably show up, if not tonight, maybe tomorrow.”

“If he’s smart — and not just talking out his ass — it’ll be tonight. Especially if it happened on Saturday.” Salvatore rifled through the ledger, looking for his last recorded transaction with the Tosi brothers. Leandro and Arrigo were longtime swindlers, and though Leandro was more prone to taking unnecessary risks than his younger brother, both were proficient shoplifters. They knew better than to let themselves get caught by the Guardia di Drago with stolen accessories in their possession.

That was what *ricettatori* were for, after all. As a fence of stolen goods, Salvatore served the vital role of middleman between the assortment of lifters, burglars, and thieves that haunted the isles’ shadier recesses and those clandestine clients who were eager to buy goods on the cheap or purchase rare and unique items from an untraceable source. He wasn’t the only fence in

the Isole Fulgide, of course. There were maybe half a dozen or so running full-scale operations in clandestine bases throughout the isles, and there were maybe half a dozen more who peddled in fencing on the side. Salvatore kept in contact, and congenial competition, with the best of them.

But of those fences currently in business, Salvatore held the most seniority by far and worked with the greatest anonymity. He'd been buying and selling for nearly twenty years, even before he'd inherited the antiques shop, and through his myriad precautions and more than a sliver of good luck, he'd never once been held in suspicion as a receiver. It was a feat that never failed to astound his criminal associates, and one made all the more impressive by the fact that Salvatore dealt almost exclusively in high-end artisan goods. They were the most valuable but also the most difficult items to fence.

Salvatore knew he did not exude charisma like most of the fellow receivers; he didn't chat and cut up and wheedle his associates into hard bargains with a conspiratorial smile and a wink. His serious and forthright demeanor had, however, earned him a place of genuine respect within the community. Thieves and clients alike seemed to consider him a trustworthy and reliable fence, knowledgeable about his trade and fair with his prices on both sides of the bargaining table. And so they continued to come to him, year after year, knowing he had the connections, the funds, and the discretion to make lifted items disappear from thieves' pockets and reappear into the hands of eager clients, safe from the taloned reach of the law.

Salvatore flipped back to the current pages of the Caveau's ledger and glanced at Nico over the top of his optics. "What else have you heard?"

"Ah... I think Giulia was supposed to be released from custody today."

Salvatore chuckled despite himself. He'd forgotten Giulia Ratti was still sitting in a detention cell on Punto Nord. The wizened old reprobate had spent her whole life shunted in and

out of prison for one silly reason or another, her brief stints inside usually preceded by some ill-advised, drunken escapade. She wasn't a half-bad pickpocket when she was sober, but Salvatore couldn't remember the last time Giulia had stumbled into the Caveau without the reek of alcohol on her breath. Nevertheless, he owed Giulia the sort of debt he would never be able to repay, so Salvatore continued to deal with the woman on those rare occasions she actually had something to sell.

"What was she in for this time? I can't remember."

"Caught with her hand in a busker's tip jar up on Isola Giada."

"*Maledizione*, Giulia." Salvatore shook his head, bemused. "Here's hoping Leandro doesn't follow in your footsteps... and that some other coinsnatchers I know remember to keep their wits about them." He raised an eyebrow and leveled a knowing look at the dragon.

"Ah, come on," Nico complained. "I'm not stupid." His tail whipped around in agitation, the tip barely missing the inkwell. "Like I'd let anybody *see* me, much less catch me in the middle of a clip. *Cazzo*."

"I know, I know. Don't get your tail in a twist." Salvatore waved his indignation away. "It's just a reminder."

"Which I don't *need*." The dragon briefly bared his fangs, a childish retort, before relaxing into a sulk.

"Well, we probably don't have to worry about Giulia showing up tonight," Salvatore conceded. "I'm sure as soon as they let her loose, she ran straight for the first tavern she spotted in Riposo dei Marinai. Anything else?"

Nico sullenly stuffed more *bigoli* in his mouth and began to chew with exaggerated slowness. Salvatore crossed his arms and leaned back on his stool, waiting with practiced

patience. He knew Nico would stop brooding soon enough, and he did. As the dragon slurped up the last of the noodles in the container, the barbs along his spine lifted and he suddenly raised his head. “Oh, yeah. I went out to the Levriero Zoppo early last morning, like you asked — *non c’è di che* —”

“*Grazie.*”

“— and I talked to Vittoria about that job she mentioned the other day.”

Salvatore straightened his posture. “And?”

“She gave me all the details on her client’s commission.”

“Good.” Salvatore nodded. “I was hoping she’d stop beating around the bush and just tell us.”

Vittoria Constantino was a promising young *ricettatrice* based on Isola di Opercolo, far off on the eastern side of the Isole Fulgide. He’d only met with her twice in person, but both times she had come across as enterprising and agreeable, leaving Salvatore with a fairly favorable impression. She ran her business fencing high-quality fabrics and textiles out of a backroom at the Levriero Zoppo, a tavern popular with the local renegade community, and she’d already lured in a steady stream of small-time thieves and clients.

Despite her potential, however, Vittoria’s operation was still modest. Rather than own her own base, she was forced to pay exorbitant rent to the owner of the Levriero Zoppo, and Nico had reported seeing Vittoria working behind the bar there in her spare time. Even more prohibitive was her client list. The contacts Vittoria had managed to establish so far appeared to be quite disparate in their tastes and did not always come to her with requests that fit within her specialization. She had reached out to several of her fellow fences for assistance in fulfilling some of her clients’ more unusual orders, but only Salvatore had agreed to help out on occasion.

He wouldn't normally have intervened, but so grateful was Vittoria for any assistance at all, she was often willing to share a larger percentage of her profits than was perhaps wise. And Salvatore was confident that some day, when her trade in textiles grew more lucrative, Vittoria would have the good sense to send her problematic clients directly to him. He would always welcome a larger pool of paying customers.

Salvatore quickly unstopped the inkwell and filled up the pen's tip. He smoothed out the ledger's pages and positioned his left hand at the top of the next empty space, ready to write. "Alright, let's hear it."

"The object's a ring," Nico said. "Dragon's horn ring, to be exact. Sterling silver. Fused *dragovetro* inlay around the whole band. Studded with eight white diamonds at regular intervals." Salvatore copied down the specifics as Nico recited them, the dragon's tone bearing a quality of neat precision. Nico possessed excellent aural recall and retention of details, and that, combined with his ability to slip into the shadows and bypass the authorities, made him the perfect courier for Salvatore's operation. "A solid piece, about seven inches in diameter." Nico gauged the distance with his spread paws. "Meant to sit about two-thirds of the way down a straight horn. Between forty and forty-five years old. Bears a maker's mark on the inside, a four-point star with the initials F.S. entwined in the center."

"Diamonds over fused glass," Salvatore mused, once he'd finished taking down Nico's report. "Well, if that doesn't have Studio Cristallobianco written all over it."

"Vittoria said it's a Cristallobianco piece." Nico looked amused. "It's currently held in the studio's archives on Isola di Oro Rosa. One of those vaults with all of the little drawers and the fancy locks on each one. It's not a very big place, apparently, but the client did give Vittoria

the drawer number: five-two-six-eight.” Salvatore jotted the figure down and circled it. “Kind of takes all of the fun out of swiping it, if you ask me, knowing exactly where to find it.”

“But it’s certainly more efficient, and I’m sure the lock itself will provide more than enough of a challenge. Not to mention whatever other security measures Cristallobianco has in place.” Salvatore glanced back through his notes. “The client’s obviously familiar with the piece, and with the archives as well. Did Vittoria tell you anything about the client?”

Nico snorted. “Of course not. Not a word.”

Salvatore hadn’t expected that she would divulge any identifying features, but it would have been telling if she had. Clients expected as much confidentiality from their fences as the thieves who sold to them did. Vittoria was at least mindful enough to maintain her contact’s privacy, even if she did need help fulfilling their requests.

However, that wasn’t to say that Salvatore couldn’t make some astute guesses. “It’s likely a *dragadonna*, and a member of the Jewelers Guild — retired, perhaps. Someone who was fond of Fortunato Stabile and is feeling particularly sentimental right now.”

The barbs on Nico’s back stood up straight. “*Cosa?* Where did you get all of that?” Salvatore grinned. “I get why the client’s probably a dragon, since it’s a horn ring and all. But why a former jeweler? And who’s Stabile?”

“He was a jeweler at Cristallobianco,” Salvatore said. “Not a *maestro* or anything — not someone just anybody would have heard of — but not a studio drudge either. He specialized in custom work for the dragonic market, particularly horn rings and particularly ones for *dragadonne*. The four-point star was his maker’s mark.”

“Lots of marks have stars in their designs.”

“Yes, but paired with the initials, the age of the piece, and the fact that it’s a Cristallobianco, it couldn’t be anyone else’s work but Stabile.” Salvatore tapped the end of his pen thoughtfully on the countertop, then added, with an air of admission, “He passed away a week or two ago in his sleep. There was a short mention of it in the *avviso*. The client must have been inspired by his death to seek out the match to the ring she already possesses.”

“The match?” Nico cocked his head. “How do you know the ring’s part of a set?”

“Because that was the style at the time,” Salvatore explained patiently. “No dragon wearing Cristallobianco would have worn horn rings asymmetrically, not the way so many *dragazzi* do these days. The client’s looking for a specific item and she can describe it precisely, down to the number of diamonds: she already has one of the rings. I don’t know how she lost track of one and not the other. Maybe she pawned it for coin at some point. But now that Cristallobianco has it stashed away in their archives and Stabile’s no longer around to craft more rings, there’s no way for her to obtain it through legal means.”

“But why does that mean she’s a jeweler, too?”

“Because she knows the exact drawer where it’s located. Cristallobianco’s not likely to let anyone outside of the Jewelers Guild see their archive catalogs, not without special permission, at least. She must have seen a description of five-two-six-eight in their books, maybe even a sketch. So she knows where it is, but she can’t get to it herself.”

“*Va bene! Va bene!*” Nico threw his paws in the air. “You have it all figured out, I get it.” Despite his exasperated tone, Salvatore imagined the dragon was at least a little impressed.

“I’ve been dealing with cagey clients longer than you’ve been alive,” he said. “After a while, you get a feel for what sort of people are looking for what sorts of goods. Anyway, did Vittoria at least say when she needed the ring?”

“Yeah. Before Tuesday morning.”

Salvatore couldn't help it; he laughed. “She wants it in four days? Really? *Merda*, Vittoria.” He leaned his elbow on the countertop, resting the side of his cheek on his fist. “That's hardly any time for reconnaissance, much less the rest of the preparation such a job involves.”

“She doesn't seem used to dealing with thieves that actually plan ahead,” Nico said. “Just opportunists that grab whatever's right in front of their faces.”

“Clearly.” Salvatore considered the issue. “Cristallobianco's not somewhere I'd want to break into without at least a week of surveillance and an up-to-date list of any sentry posts, patrol routes, and shift schedules. But since it's the studio's archive and not their storefront or workrooms, they're not likely to waste time and coin on live guards. Complicated locks, yes, and probably an alarm, and maybe a trap or two. We might be able to get by with just a few days of surveillance and blueprints of the relevant floors.”

“Vittoria seemed to think so. She told me, and I quote —” Nico pitched his voice higher into something Salvatore could only guess was meant to sound like a human woman. “— ‘I know it's a lot to ask, but if anyone can get the ring on such short notice, Leggièri can!’” Nico rolled his beady eyes. “I swear, she and the rest of those fencing vultures — they'd bypass you and hire him directly if they could.”

As Nico continued to complain, Salvatore laid down his pen and pulled a plain wooden pipe, a small pouch of dried *stramonio* leaves, and a case of matches out of a pouch on his belt. He carefully stuffed the pipe and lit it, taking in a deep draw. The sweet, familiar scent of the smoke burned in his nose and mouth, and he breathed out slowly. Within a moment, he could feel the medicinal plant already at work as it fought to relieve the knot that had suddenly developed inside his chest.

“What’s Vittoria offering?” he asked.

He watched Nico’s eyes follow the faint whirls of rising smoke, seemingly transfixed. Eventually, the dragon muttered, “Sixty-forty split on twenty-eight hundred in gold *maree*.”

Salvatore coughed. “If it sounded like anything more difficult than a quick in-and-out, I’d tell her to keep the job and find a halfway competent burglar of her own. But... go back to Opercolo in the morning —”

“*Merda*, that’s so *far*...”

“— and tell her we’ll get the ring to her before dawn on Tuesday. In return, tell her the sixty-forty split is in *my* favor, not hers. Actually, make that seventy-thirty. I won’t take a coin less than nineteen-sixty, you hear? And that’s more than she deserves for such minimal risk to herself... and for presuming to tell me how to do my job.”

Nico laughed, showing off the sharp points of his teeth. “Okay, fine. I’ll let her know. I just hope she doesn’t get mad and tells her landlord to ban me from the Levriero. There’s a card table in the back that likes me; they always try to deal me in when I drop by.”

“Vittoria shouldn’t mind, if she knows what’s good for her. I’m helping her build up her reputation; she doesn’t have the right to complain.” Releasing another calming plume of smoke, Salvatore gestured to the container and added, “If you’re done with that, let’s get this place ready and open up shop. Did you unlock the trapdoor yet?”

“Yep,” Nico said. “And I changed out a few of the chandelier orbs that’d already faded.” He placed the lid back on the container and scooted it in Salvatore’s direction. Salvatore didn’t miss the way his eyes then shifted to the bag of *sfogliatelle*, nostrils flaring as he scented the pastries inside. “Are those candied citrus? Can I—?”

“No. They’re not for you.”

“Ah, come on, Sal! Just one?”

“If you want dessert, you can go buy some yourself with your own coin. That’s what your stipend’s for.”

“None of the patisseries I can go in have *sfogliatelle*,” Nico grumbled. “S’not fair.” Salvatore felt a pang of guilt at the way the dragon curled in on himself, barbs flattening along his spine. There weren’t any places Nico could reveal himself outside of those run or populated by the black market community. At least there *is* more than one pastry shop he can safely visit, Salvatore thought.

“Give some coin to Elisa,” he proposed, setting down his pipe and stuffing the container back in its sack. “I’m sure she wouldn’t mind picking some up for you.”

“That’s stupid, and you know it. Can I have *half* of one?”

“*Merda*,” Salvatore cursed. “Fine. Just stop complaining.” He pulled one of the flaky, shell-shaped pastries out of the bag and handed it to Nico. It was almost as big as the dragon’s head. “Don’t say I never give you anything.”

Nico beamed, and Salvatore fought off the smile that threatened to cross his lips.

“But take it in the backroom, I don’t want you leaving crumbs everywhere.”

Nico clamped his jaws around the *sfogliatella* and leapt off of the countertop. Salvatore watched him scamper across the floor on all fours, diving under the tapestry curtain rather than wasting any time shifting it aside. With a sigh, Salvatore brushed sugar and pastry flakes off the countertop and turned his attention back to his ledger. It was Nico’s job to open the Caveau for business each evening, and if he’d already taken care of his chores, then Salvatore could jump straight into his work.

And he did. As he waited for his associates to drop by with their ill-gotten wares, Salvatore threw himself into all of the mundane tasks that were required to run a successful fencing business.

He reviewed his ledger, making sure everything was up-to-date and that every stolen item in the shop was listed in meticulous detail, numbered, and stored where he could easily find it.

He read through a stack of smuggled letters from some of his foreign clients outside of the Isole Fulgide, all clamoring to get ahold of the isles' artisan goods without having to pay the expensive tariffs. Combing through his stock, Salvatore selected several fine pieces he knew would fulfill a few of their requests and wrote back to those clients with detailed descriptions and calculated offers. He wouldn't dream of going through the whole smuggling process without payment in hand, as it would be too easy for them to never send him his coin and Salvatore had no other way of enforcing their compliance. But his repeat foreign clients were more than happy to pay ahead of time; Salvatore had never failed to deliver.

He sorted through a different stack of smuggled letters, each laden with coin or money orders that could be safely cashed at an Isole Fulgide bank, no questions asked. He sorted out the payments, recorded them in his ledger, and set about packing up their purchases in unmarked boxes lined with silk and protective padding. He would pass them off to his smuggler, Elisa Andatura, who would in turn assure they made it onto the correct outbound trading vessel undetected; her own network of foreign smugglers would pick up the boxes and make sure they made it into the clients' hands.

He went through the same process with the secretive notes he'd received from clients closer to home, answering queries, logging payments, and packing up purchases. Most of these

he would also pass off to Elisa to deliver locally, but some of the smaller pieces — human-sized rings, brooches, pendants, and the like — he would have Nico deliver in the dragon’s spare time.

As he worked, Salvatore fell into his nightly mood of habitual contentment, going through the motions of maintaining the black market empire he had built himself from scratch. Not even the most potent of liquors was as good at making him forget the bitterness that lurked in the depths of his heart like a wounded and festering shadow.



The first thieves of the night arrived at the back alley entrance an hour or so after the Caveau opened for business. To Salvatore’s complete lack of surprise, they were Leandro and Arrigo Tosi.

A series of sharp knocks sounded from across the room and he paused, pen hovering over the response letter he was writing, and peered over the top of his optics. “Nico? Get the door.”

Nico, who was half-asleep from boredom and sprawled across one end of the counter, shot him a drowsy expression of great inconvenience. Nevertheless, he got to his paws, stretched, yawned widely, and hopped down onto the floor. Salvatore tucked the letter in a drawer to finish later as the knocks came again and the dragon picked up his pace, trotting to the door, then scaled the wooden beam of the door frame with ease. Hovering near the locked latch, he called out, “Who’s there?”

“*Ehi*, Nico!” a lively voice replied from the other side. “It’s me, Leandro. And Arrigo, too.”

“What’s the password?”

“*Cazzo*, Nico, there *is* no password! Just let us in!”

Nico’s tail whipped back and forth, a certain sign of mischief. “Wrong. Try again.”

“*Vaffanculo!*” Despite the expletive, Leandro didn’t sound mad, but rather like he was trying not to laugh.

“That’s not a very nice password,” the dragon replied primly.

Salvatore rolled his eyes. “Just open the door, Nico.”

Reluctantly, Nico obeyed, reaching out a paw to turn the latch. As soon as it was unlocked, he shot to the top of the door frame and leapt onto the rafters, dodging Leandro’s playful attempt to grab his tail as the Tosi brothers entered the shop.

Both were dressed in similar cream-colored tunics and subdued brown trousers, but their bright accessories more than made up for the blandness underneath. Kitted out in a garish mishmash of cheap rings, ear hoops, leather belts, and self-embroidered touches, the Tosi brothers looked the very essence of Isole Fulgide reprobates: poor and disreputable, but still painfully keen to fit into the vibrant artistry of mainstream culture. Leandro, the older and taller of the two, strode jauntily up to the Caveau’s counter. His long hair was tied back in a queue — much as Salvatore’s had been when he was their age — and the scarlet sash tied around his waist drew attention to the heavily-laden pouches hanging at his hip. Arrigo, ever the quiet one, kept his distance, observing the treasures in their cases with his hands stuffed in the pockets of his loose vest.

“*Buonasera*, Sal!” Leandro greeted him merrily. “I bet you weren’t expecting us tonight!”

“*Buonasera*. I most certainly was.” Salvatore shifted the ledger to one side and gestured for the rogue to take a seat. Several stools lined the opposite side of the counter and Leandro plopped onto one with a grin. “Got your hands on a few pairs of cufflinks, I hear?”

Leandro laughed. “News travels fast these days.”

“Right from under a vendor’s nose as well.” When the thief didn’t deny it, Salvatore clicked his tongue disapprovingly and shook his head. He opened a drawer beneath the counter, pulling out a clean white cloth and spreading it across the marble surface between them. “Couldn’t you have waited for him to turn around?”

“I *tried*, by Iri!” Leandro protested lightly. He pulled one of the pouches off his belt and dumped its glittering contents out onto the cloth. “I watched him for at least half an hour before I made contact. The fool wasn’t paying a lick of attention to his stall; he was too busy making eyes at the lady running the booth across from him. I got him talking about her, and you’ve never *heard* such rhapsodizing drivel. Not from anyone outside the Poets Guild, anyway.” He dumped a second pouch’s contents out beside the first. “It all worked out fine. And, besides, Arrigo was spotting for me across the way. He would’ve told me if a *guardiano* was skulking nearby.”

Salvatore didn’t bother to lecture him about staying cautious. It wasn’t his place, and Leandro already knew the risks he and his brother were taking. It would have gone in one ear and out the other anyway. Instead, he slid his fingers through the pile of cufflinks, spreading them out, and nudged them around the cloth into their pairs.

It took him but a moment to recognize that Leandro had done good, if imprudent, work. The bases of the cufflinks were all fine metals — eighteen-karat rose gold, twenty-two karat crown gold — and the inlays ranged from jade and cat’s eye cabochons to faceted topaz, green garnet, and jacinth. One pair even featured settings of ivory carved to resemble miniature full-

face masks; he supposed they'd been crafted with an eye towards prosperous members of the Maskmakers Guild, the Actors Guild, or one of those guilds' benefactors.

"Eleven pairs, all recently crafted, no visible wear," Salvatore muttered, as much to himself as Leandro. "The rose gold with opaque cabochons on these six sets —" Salvatore pointed them out. "— makes me think they're Studio Nascimbeni pieces. But if so, the lack of further ornamentation probably indicates the work of apprentices — *skilled* apprentices, of course, but not *maestri*. They should sell easily enough.

"These four, on the other hand —" He separated them out from the rest of the group. "— are most certainly Studio Giordano." He picked one up, holding it up to the light of the chandelier, and squinted at the square topaz setting through his optics. "Yes. The facet pattern is right. Giordano's been cutting their gems in the *principessa* style for years now; they've practically monopolized the market. It's a simple-looking finish, as lapidary work goes, but an effective one, especially for cufflinks. They'll sell well." He placed the topaz piece back with its mate.

"This one, though..." Salvatore gestured at the carved ivory set and frowned. "The etching is masterfully done, but it's too unique to sell in my shop. If your vendor ever noticed any of his wares went missing, it would be this set, and he could take a good description of it to the Guardia."

"*Cazzo*." Leandro's good humor deflated. "If I'd been able to get a good look at what I was snatching when I was snatching it, I wouldn't have picked them up in the first place. But I couldn't very well look down and give the game away." He sighed. "C'mon, Sal. Can't you still take them off my hands? There's no one else I can take them to, and I can't hide them in our apartment. Our landlord keeps getting the *guardiani* to sweep the place for contraband."

Salvatore wasn't surprised. The Tosi brothers lived on Isola di Opercolo, home to the isles' fishermen's district, and much of the housing there was cramped from overpopulation and not well maintained. The isle was a popular location for swindlers and thieves to live, but as a result, they often faced great suspicion from their more law-abiding neighbors. Not that the suspicion was unwarranted, of course.

"That stupid *stronzo*," Leandro continued, his voice growing angry, "would love nothing more than to kick us out, even after all we've—"

"*Va bene*." Salvatore held up a hand and Leandro grew quiet. A low growl still rumbled in the man's throat, but Salvatore didn't take it personally. He held one of the ivory pieces up to the light, appraising it. The engraving truly was extraordinary; he couldn't imagine how long it had taken the artist to carve out the tiny mask's subtle, mocking smile. Despite the bitter tightness that clenched within his chest, Salvatore couldn't let the little masterpieces end up at the bottom of a canal, where Leandro would surely throw them just to be rid of the evidence. "I doubt I can sell them to anyone outside our borders. Foreigners don't go for this sort of thing; they prefer less... esoteric icons for their jewelry. However..." Leandro's eyebrows lifted as a hopeful expression stole across his face. "If you'll allow me to hold onto these for a few months — until the next Festival of Mascheravoria, perhaps — I have a few local contacts that might welcome something this distinctive."

"Take all the time you need, Sal," Leandro said quickly, clearly relieved. "I know you're good for later payment. I'm in no rush — as long as you're buying the others now. Gotta pay rent, buy food, and all that."

"And pay off your gambling debts." Nico leered down at Leandro from the rafters above. "Heard from Loris you racked up a hell of a debt on that last hand."

Leandro's rude gesture made the dragon laugh.

"For these ten pairs," Salvatore declared, "I can give you one-hundred twenty *stagni*. That's around twelve silver per set, give or take — forty-percent of their market value."

"I was hoping for at least a hundred fifty," Leandro admitted. He drummed his fingers on the countertop, idly eying the sack of pastries. "Given the risk me and Arrigo ran and all. And our shitty landlord's just raised the price—"

"One-hundred thirty," Salvatore interjected. He knew how wheedling Leandro could be if given the chance, and he wasn't interested in haggling over something as mundane as cufflinks. "That's the highest I'll go, especially since I'm holding onto the ivories for you." He peered at the thief over the top of his optics. "I have to make a living, too, you know, and I don't get *my* coin until I offload the things."

After a moment, Leandro nodded. "That's fair. *Grazie*, Sal."

Salvatore nodded in acknowledgment as he unlocked a nearby drawer and pulled out the Caveau's safe-box, heavy with its burden of gold, silver, and copper coins. Leandro didn't bother watching as Salvatore counted out the one hundred and thirty silver pieces; instead, he tilted his head back to better trade increasingly creative insults with Nico. Salvatore tuned out their banter easily enough, noting down the payment in his ledger.

As Leandro swept the coins into his emptied pouches, filling them back up again, he glanced up at Salvatore with a hint of a smirk and said, "Carina sends her regards, by the way. I saw her the other night, while I was, well... you know. In the Quartiere Peridoto. She said to tell you the next time I saw you that you should drop by and see her soon." The hint grew into a full-blown grin. "She must have something she wants to show you."

Salvatore snorted, unperturbed by Leandro's teasing. "I'll keep that in mind," he said dryly. "Now get out of my shop. And don't come back until you bring me something better than fucking *cufflinks*."

Leandro guffawed. He slid off the stool and ambled over to Arrigo, hooking his arm around his silent brother's shoulders. "*Grazie mille, Sal. Arrivederci.*" He shot Nico an offensive gesture of parting, and the Tosi brothers left, the door locking itself behind them.

By the time Salvatore had finished cataloging, tagging, and storing the eleven pairs of cufflinks in the backroom, Dafne Ermacora had slunk into the Caveau, her 'password' a drawn dagger tickling the air in front of Nico's snout. The dour, dark-haired young woman had skipped out on apprenticing with one of the guilds, and now she worked as a street cleaner in the Rione Esibizione, where the majority of the isles' actors, performers, and illusionists plied their trades. She had a penchant for robbing unsuspecting inebriates as they left their late-night parties and theater performances, and she visited the Caveau the same day every week to sell the jewelry and other knickknacks she had collected.

This time, Dafne presented Salvatore with several nice pieces, including a bronze pendant necklace with iolite settings and a matching set of earrings. He nearly asked her how she'd managed to pickpocket earrings without her mark noticing, but then thought better of it. Living on the fringes of reputable society had clearly hardened her in ways Salvatore didn't understand. But he could empathize, at least, with the repressed enmity that seemed to simmer just below the surface. Dafne wasn't cheerful with him like Leandro, but she responded seriously to all of his questions and accepted the payment he offered without fuss. The nod she gave him as she took her leave was nearly cordial.

A few hours passed with only a handful of his associates stopping by, including Gerardo Basile with a set of some unlucky family's fine silverware, Elisio Monti with three elegant pocketwatches, and Cinzia Scarpa with a tasseled dragon's tail band. In between each visitor, Salvatore had plenty of time to work on his cataloging, letter-writing, and packing.

Upon scanning his ledger, he also noticed a few of the older works of artisan glass he'd recently received would need new records of their provenance, especially if he hoped to sell them outside of the isles. The ability to prove that a work was created in the Isole Fulgide was of the utmost importance to foreign clients, as this status conferred to the artwork in question much of its monetary worth and societal status. Any expensive item lacking extensive records detailing the legitimate conference of ownership from one person to the next was most always suspected to be a counterfeit produced outside the isles... or to be stolen property. Fortunately, Salvatore was well-versed in forging genuine-looking records of provenance. He knew how to format the pages, knew the terminology the record-keepers used, and knew how to add just enough flaws and inconsistencies to give the papers a real sense of legitimacy. He even used special paper, worn and yellowed fragments dug up from the supply rooms of the bookbinders, to drive home the records' apparent age. Salvatore took a temporary break from answering letters to pen the imaginary provenance of a fifty-year-old glass goblet with gold leaf around the rim and specks of gold dust suspended within its fine, crystalline bowl; he hoped providing a sample of the provenance to a foreign client would persuade them to buy the beautiful piece.

It was nearing one in the morning, according to the engraved oak mantle clock sitting on a shelf nearby, when a light knock sounded at the far door.

Salvatore had gradually fallen into an exhausted sort of stupor, only half of his mind on his work, but the knocking brought him back to himself and he looked up, stretching and wincing

at the ache in his lower back. He pinched the bridge of his nose beneath his optics and yawned, then mumbled for Nico to get the door. The dragon was idly perusing some book on the floor by Salvatore's feet, and he paused for a moment to mark his place with a scrap of ribbon before trotting over to the back alley entrance. He was much more alert than Salvatore this time of night.

Climbing up and clinging to the door frame, Nico snapped, "Who's there? You interrupted my reading, and I was just getting to the good part."

"*Mi dispiace*, Nico," a voice replied, "but it's me. May I come in?" The sound of the voice was light, an airy and lyrical tenor, and warmly familiar. Salvatore sat up straighter on his stool, now fully awake.

Nico didn't hesitate to unlock the door and poke his head out into the tunnel, but Salvatore could still hear his hopeful query of "Password?" A moment later, the dragon let out a small growl of delight, emerging with a rolled tube of fried pastry clamped in his jaws. Salvatore could almost guarantee that the *cannolo* was stuffed with creamy ricotta and salmon. Nico climbed the rest of the way up the door frame and leapt onto the rafters, immediately clutching the pastry in his paws and biting into one end.

The door swung silently inward, admitting a short, slender figure dressed head to toe in smoky gray and jet black. His clothing — a tailored amalgamation of soft oiled leather, the finest silk, and rich, dense velvet — clung to his body like a second, shadowy skin. It made no sound as he stepped further into the Caveau and closed the door behind him. A black rucksack hung across his lean back, held in place by a diagonal chest strap, and though he wore a hood low over his forehead and a dark scarf pulled up over his nose, Salvatore could still see his light gray eyes, shining like newly-minted coins.

“*Buongiorno*, Sal,” the young man said, a pleased lilt to his voice.

“*Buongiorno*, Silvio,” Salvatore replied. The corners of his lips turned up in spite of himself. He slipped off his optics and set them aside, absently brushing a few strands of hair out of his face. “I was starting to think you weren’t coming by tonight.”

“And miss the chance to revel in your presence? Never!”

Salvatore snorted, still smiling, and waved him towards the counter. “Come over here, then, *maestro-ladro*, and show me what you’ve brought.”

Silvio Leggièri padded across the Caveau on light feet, his soft-soled leather boots hush against the flagstones. Salvatore observed his eyes dart among the shining objects in the display cases as he passed, taking in the stolen treasures. He paused briefly to read the numbered tags beside some of the newer acquisitions he hadn’t yet seen.

“The iolite on that bronze necklace is exquisite,” Silvio said as he approached, pulling his scarf down around his neck.

“Ermacora brought it in earlier tonight.”

“I’m sure it will sell quickly.”

“Yes. I was pleased to take it off her hands.”

Salvatore watched as the thief threw back his hood, letting the fabric drape around his shoulders like a capelet. Silvio’s hair was sable black, soft and feathery in texture, and neatly cut to frame the delicate contours of his smooth, heart-shaped face. It contrasted neatly with his pale skin — an unusual sight amongst the largely olive-skinned human population of the isles, but not a displeasing one. This close, his gray eyes were even more striking, lined as they were by long, black eyelashes.

“I think you will be even more pleased when you see what I’ve brought you from Isola di Zafferano.” Silvio pulled the rucksack up and over his head, laying it down on the counter with the utmost delicacy.

Salvatore watched with growing anticipation. “If this is what I think it is…”

Silvio grinned. He swiftly undid the main buckles keeping the rucksack securely closed. Bound up in fingerless leather gloves, the thief’s hands flashed as he worked, displaying their usual precision and dexterity even in such a mundane task as unpacking. Silvio’s trim fingernails were lacquered with a smooth coat of matte black paint. Salvatore hardly felt Nico’s heavy landing on his shoulders.

With the air of a consummate showman, Silvio slid a rectangular wooden box out of the sack, flipped the clasps, and opened the lid. Nestled within thick cushions of velvet lay a tall goblet made of glass.

“*Merda*,” Salvatore breathed, unable to help himself. “You did it.”

Silvio lifted the goblet out of the box, setting it upright on the white cloth. The bowl itself was simple, adorned only with a thin rim of gold leaf, but the translucent glass gleamed with the shifting iridescent hues of green-teal-violet. The wide foot at the bottom was similarly plain but striking. It was the goblet’s stem, however, that irresistibly drew the eye. Twisted canes of emerald and peridot glass had been shaped into a sinuous S-curve to create the stylized form of a dragon, the back of the creature’s head supporting the bowl and the tightly-curved tail settled atop the foot. Meticulously-shaped globules of green glass had added definition to the dragon, creating a pointed snout, legs, and paws; tiny pinches of amethyst glass formed the dragon’s spiral horns, claws, and the barbs down its spine. Dots of gold leaf served as its eyes, and

clutched in its front paws was a miniature version of the bowl atop it, hardly the size of a thimble.

A hiss of amazement escaped Nico as he crawled slowly onto the counter to get a closer look. “A goblet of Fogliatèverde. Never thought I’d see one outside her *santuario*. Aren’t there only a few still in existence?”

“There were only ever six in the set,” Salvatore murmured. With the very tips of his fingers, he turned the goblet, watching the patterns of iridescence shift as it moved. “One was shattered two centuries ago, and the rest were dispersed: one to the *santuario*, one to the vintners...”

“One each to the teamakers and the coffeemakers,” Silvio picked up, “and the last to the Archivio di Birraio.” He lightly tapped the gold rim. “This is the Archivio goblet. The client didn’t specify which one she wanted, right? Just as long as it was one of the originals.”

“Yes.” Salvatore sat up, reluctantly slipping on his optics to better take in the fine details. “Why did you end up targeting the archive? I thought we’d agreed it was the most heavily trapped, especially compared to the shrine.”

“The priests were always going to notice the shrine’s goblet missing first, since it’s still used for the occasional ceremony. But it might be awhile before the archive recognizes theirs is gone, and I doubt they’ll want to publicly declare it disappeared out from under their nose.” Silvio’s grin grew a little abashed as he shrugged. “I’ll admit, I felt a little wary at the thought of stealing from a *santuario*, and, well... I might have felt up to a bit of a challenge? The traps ended up being pretty basic, though, very easy to disarm. The lock on the vault door gave me far more trouble.”

Salvatore shook his head. “*Maestro-ladro*, indeed.”

When Salvatore had first met Silvio Leggièri nearly six years ago, the young man had still been a youth, barely old enough at the age of sixteen to apprentice with a guild and woefully inexperienced in the ways of larceny and theft. He had appeared at the Caveau's door one night out of nowhere, guided by the gnarled old hand of Giulia Ratti, with a polite request for a set of forged citizenship papers. While such documents — a necessity for all of the Isole Fulgide's inhabitants — were outside Salvatore's usual range of falsification, something about the youth, with his foreign skin tone and refined manners and salt-encrusted white clothing, had inspired Salvatore to give the forgery a try.

When Silvio had left the Caveau in the early hours of the morning, he had done so not only with documentation declaring Silvio Leggièri a natural-born citizen of the isles, but with a pouch full of coin, several leads on potential rooms for rent, and a humble lockpicking set. There was a furtive sort of grace in the youth's movements that had suggested to Salvatore that he might make a decent living as a burglar, and Silvio had not declined his counsel. Silvio had returned to the Caveau with his first major illegal acquisition — a *dragovetro* necklace valued at over two thousand *maree* from an elite jeweler's safe — within three weeks. Salvatore had known for certain, then, that he had stumbled upon an individual with a rare, innate talent for thievery.

And so he had encouraged that gift. Ironically inspired by the benefactors that sponsored many of the isles' most gifted artists, Salvatore had poured a not-insignificant amount of money and resources into Silvio's criminal education, betting on a respectable return on investment. Salvatore had never been a pickpocket, burglar, or safe-cracker himself, but he knew all of the best ones and it had been easy to arrange lessons for the youth, particularly once Silvio's incredible aptitude had become widely known throughout the Isole Fulgide's underworld. For

several years, Salvatore had spent countless hours at the Caveau's counter working in his ledger while Silvio sat across from him, examining blueprints with a former architect and picking practice locks under the tutelage of a rouge locksmith. By the time he was twenty, Silvio had 'graduated' from his makeshift apprenticeship and was pulling off directed heists for Salvatore's clients that other criminals could only dream about committing. The young thief could charm any lock, crack any safe, slip past the most invisible traps and the most vigilant guards, navigate the most convoluted of buildings, and swipe the most valuable and precious of items from beneath the very noses of their owners, all without breaking a sweat.

At twenty-two, Silvio was the most accomplished thief in the Isole Fulgide, a true *maestro* of his craft, and not once had he been seen, much less caught, by the Guardia di Drago.

Salvatore was grateful that Silvio had stuck with him, even after completing his apprenticeship. In arranging his tutelage, he had placed the thief under no obligation beyond expressing hopes for a future business partnership, and Silvio had seemed to find this arrangement agreeable. He received a larger percentage of the income from each item he stole than the rest of the thieves that brought Salvatore their goods. But, then again, Silvio brought in specific objects far more valuable than most of the others' miscellany and he took much greater risks to lift them. Salvatore didn't mind paying more for the kind of consistent and skillful work Silvio could do.

Besides, despite their differences in age and temperament, Salvatore found that he and Silvio had become something perhaps like friends.

"Did you come here directly from the Archivio?" Salvatore asked. Now that he examined the goblet closer, he could see tiny spots of amethyst glass embedded in the dragon's flank. It

was a perfect glass facsimile of Fogliatèverde, patroness of vintners and brewers and one of the three patron dragons of the culinary arts.

“Yes. After stopping by a late-night *caffè*.” Silvio smiled. “It’s hard to resist buying treats when you’re in Isola di Zafferano. The whole place smells like cinnamon and fresh-baked bread.”

“What did you do? Just walk up to the counter wearing your blacks?” Nico asked.

“Of course not.”

From beneath a hemline on one black sleeve, Silvio pulled out a corner of cotton fabric, dyed a lovely sky blue, and showed it to the dragon. Salvatore knew that tucked away beneath the folds and buckles of Silvio’s attire was an entirely different outfit, topped by a flouncy blue tunic embroidered with rose-colored thread and beading, that he could transform his thief’s clothes into at the drop of a hat. It was a trick members of the Actors Guild regularly employed on stage to mystify their audiences and Silvio was as skilled at quick-change as any performer Salvatore had ever seen. In the Isole Fulgide, it was often easier to hide in plain sight by wearing bright colors than by wearing darker hues or black.

“I didn’t want the poor *barista* to think I was robbing the place,” Silvio explained. Nico laughed.

“Any problems, besides a tricky vault door?” Salvatore asked. He picked up the goblet — it was heavier than it looked — and placed it gently back into its padded box. “No alarms, no run-ins with guards that might have glimpsed you passing by?”

“None.” Silvio relaxed, crossing his arms on the countertop. “I even rearmed the traps on my way back out, in case any other thief wants to give it a go.” He and Nico exchanged grins.

Salvatore shook his head and failed not to smile. He replaced the box's lid and latched it shut. "The client will be quite pleased to see this piece. I'm sure it will be the highlight of her collection of Fogliatèverde keepsakes."

"A collection she can hardly show off to her friends without arousing suspicion," Silvio pointed out.

Salvatore shrugged. "She'll know she has it in her possession. That sort of knowledge alone seems to be enough for most of these high-end buyers." He picked up the box and stood. "If they're willing to pay for the pleasure of owning a priceless object they have to keep hidden, I'll not dissuade them."

Silvio's eyes darted to the paper sack of pastries, untouched since Salvatore had removed one for the pleading dragon. "May I? I didn't actually get anything at the *caffè* for myself."

"Sure. I'm finished with them." Salvatore ignored Nico's scandalized expression as he carried the box into the backroom. He placed it on a low shelf with several other unmarked boxes, all filled with goods waiting to be prepared for smuggling. He would make sure to pass it on to Elisa tomorrow. No sense in keeping the client waiting too long; he wouldn't get his full payment until it was in her hands.

Salvatore returned to find Silvio happily sharing a *sfogliatella* with a self-satisfied Nico. The thief took small bites, hardly spilling a speck of powdered sugar, while Nico managed to get crumbs all over the countertop. Salvatore repressed a sigh.

"I'll have your take from the job ready in the next day or two," he said, and Silvio nodded, unperturbed by the delay. "How soon do you think you'll be ready for the next one?"

Silvio licked a fleck of pastry from his lips and gave Salvatore a knowing grin. "I'm always ready. You have another lined up?"

Salvatore plopped back down onto his stool. “Courtesy of our friend Vittoria. She hasn’t agreed to the profit split yet, but she will by this time tomorrow. The object her client wants is not on quite the same level as an ancient patron dragon artifact, so I apologize for any disappointment. But it is housed in another archive; perhaps you’ll find this one a tad more challenging.”

He laid out the Cristallobianco job as Nico had reported it, the dragon interjecting every now and then to clarify a point or detail. Silvio nodded intently as he listened, taking an occasional bite of his *sfogliatella*. His eyes, however, never left Salvatore’s face. If Salvatore hadn’t grown used to how inscrutable the young man’s gaze had become over the last year or so, he might have thought something was wrong. When he finished explaining the objective and the particulars, Silvio wasted no time agreeing to take the job.

“You’re right,” he told Salvatore thoughtfully. “Four days is plenty of time for a small heist like this one.” It amused Salvatore how breaking into the secured historical vault of a high-quality jewelry business had become a ‘small heist’ in Silvio’s eyes. “I’ll go do a bit of reconnaissance on Saturday night; no one’s likely to be around at that time. Want to come with me, Nico?”

“I was gonna play cards with some of the guys at the Levriero,” Nico said, looking unsure. At the disapproving glance Salvatore shot him, however, Nico shrugged and relented. “But sure, I’m up for it. Breaking and entering’s always a good time.”

“I’ll drop by the Biblioteca di Cinabargilla tomorrow and see if I can’t scrounge up some blueprints of Cristallobianco’s archive,” Salvatore told Silvio. “If you want to stop by tomorrow night, we can take a look at what I find and get an infiltration plan started.”

“I’ll be here,” Silvio said with a grin. Salvatore didn’t doubt it. The thief dropped by the Caveau nearly every night of the week, often with an expensive trinket or two to sell but sometimes with coffee for Salvatore, some treat for Nico, and an apparent desire for idle chitchat. Salvatore didn’t mind. After all of Silvio’s years of apprenticeship, the Caveau often felt too quiet and empty without his comfortable presence.

A single peal of a tiny bell sounded from the nearby mantle clock, and Salvatore saw that it was already one-thirty in the morning. “Well, it looks like you’re probably the last visitor for the night. I still have a few letters I need to finish up before I leave, though.”

“Of course,” Silvio said, sliding gracefully off of his stool. “I should head out as well.” He refastened the buckles on his rucksack, slipped it back on, and pulled his hood back up over his head. His pale gray eyes found Salvatore’s and he said, with far too much quiet concern, “Be sure to get some good sleep, Sal. You seem tired.”

Salvatore’s lips twitched in an awkward grin. “I live perfectly well on naps and coffee, *grazie mille*.” Silvio smiled back, but the worry still lingered in his gaze.

“I’ll see you all tomorrow night.” He bobbed his head towards Salvatore and Nico. “*Arrivederci*.” Salvatore nodded back and Nico flicked the tip of his tail in a parting wave. Silvio walked to the back alley entrance with steps just as quiet as those before. Pausing halfway out the door, he glanced back and sent them one more smile and wave before pulling his scarf up over his nose and disappearing into the tunnel beyond.

Nico turned to Salvatore with a grave expression on his dark, scaly face. “Can I drink out of the goblet?”

“No.”

The dragon slumped bonelessly onto the countertop with a frustrated growl. “But isn’t that part of the legend? That wine drunk from a goblet of Fogliatèverde is supposed to cure all ills or something?”

“It’s just a myth,” Salvatore grumbled, turning back to his ledger. “You’re not sick and the goblet’s not something to play around with.”

Nico sighed. “It’s not like I’d break it, *merda*.” Salvatore ignored him.

By the time the mantle clock struck two, he had finished answering all of the inquiries, cataloging all of the stolen goods, and preparing all of the shipments he had planned to do that night. So Salvatore closed down the Caveau, taking off his leather jerkin and locking the ledger in its drawer beneath the counter. In a tired haze, he bid Nico farewell, reminding the dragon as always to lock the door and the trapdoor behind him, and climbed the tunnel shaft up to the back alley exit.

The seam of the trapdoor disappeared among the tessellated tiles as Salvatore lowered it into place, hearing the latch click shut beneath him. He stood up, rolling his aching shoulders, and glanced both ways down the alley, which zigzagged behind the shops of Isola Onice, creating all manner of blind corners. It was dark and quiet here in the nighttime shade behind the Antichità Manco, but Salvatore could hear the slosh of water and the subdued murmurings of an all-night tavern nearby. He followed the sound with ease — he knew these alleyways as well as he knew the antiques shop’s storage room — and emerged out onto the *fondamenta* beside the tavern’s entrance.

Affecting the sleepy demeanor of a tavern patron who’d been at the bar far too long was not terribly difficult as tired as he was, and he still remembered the feeling of being just that sort of person. Salvatore slipped in among a small group of weary human drunkards waiting for

transportation. There were a few gondolas still out and about on the dark water, dragonfire lanterns glowing at their sterns and bows, and Salvatore pitched in with three other men for the fare to take them to the northeastern waterfront of Isola di Rame. The passengers and the gondolier were quiet as the sleek boat wound its way through the maze of canals, slicing smoothly through the channel between Isola Topazio and the Scoglio di Agata, sweeping past the looming clock tower on Scoglio Torre dell'Orologio, and curving around the westernmost point of Isola di Giada. The gondolier let them off on Isola di Rame not too far from the building where Salvatore lived and he was grateful for it. The other passengers dispersed and Salvatore walked the rest of the short way alone, his footsteps muffled but the clink of his keyring sounding far too loud on the nearly empty streets.

Finally arriving at his building, Salvatore laboriously climbed the four flights of stairs to his garret apartment on the third floor and let himself inside. Within minutes, he had shed his tunic, belt, boots, and trousers, drug on an old nightshirt, washed his face, and climbed into bed. The last thing Salvatore thought before falling asleep was that if he drifted off right this second, he might be lucky enough to get almost four and a half hours of rest.

Then he would have to get up, and the perpetual cycle of his dual life would start all over again.

Capitolo Due

The Mercato Pietra clock tower dominated the small, rocky islet of Scoglio Torre dell'Orologio. As one of the first permanent landmarks built during the founding of the Isole Fulgide, its hourly chimes had been calling the citizens of the western isles to their work and to their rest for centuries.

It was a true work of beauty, as many of the greatest dragonic artists of the time had contributed to its construction. The stone tower had been designed by Cinabargilla, patron dragon of architects, and constructed under her watchful gaze. The fabrication of the gears and intricate inner mechanisms had fallen to Ribesquamo. Codaruggine, patron of blacksmiths and metalworkers, had molded and cast the five massive bells, whose tones and melodies had been selected by Ventocelesto, patron of musicians and composers. The exterior was decorated with elaborate geometrical engravings by Zannapietro, patron of sculptors, and metallic inlays by Fiancogemmo, patron of goldsmiths, silversmiths, and jewelers.

Most stunning of all were the four round, single-paned clock faces, one pointed in each of the cardinal directions, that had been crafted by Iridescenza himself. The opalescent *dragovetro* shimmered in the rising light and seemed to glow with its own soft inner essence during the dark hours of the night.

Salvatore awoke to the clock tower's bells pealing the seventh hour of the morning. Sunlight streamed in through the large east-facing window of his apartment, spilling across the wooden floorboards and the bedspread and onto his face. Eyes still screwed shut, Salvatore grimaced and rolled over towards the wall, the mattress creaking at his shifting weight. He

wanted nothing more than to sink back into the peaceful oblivion of sleep. But he could sleep in tomorrow, Salvatore told himself in, and the day after that. Just one more day of running the Antichità Manco first.

Reluctantly, he rolled to the other side of the bed and sat up, untangling himself from the bedsheets. His dark hair was plastered to his forehead and the side of his face, and he shuffled blearily to the small wash room to clean off the sweat.

Once he'd freshened up and taken care of the morning necessities, Salvatore felt a little better. He wouldn't really be awake, though, until he'd had his morning coffee. Stretching and pulling his nightshirt over his head, he wandered back into his bedroom. It was separated from the rest of the apartment, not by walls, but by function. Like most single-tenant housing in the isles, the apartment consisted of one large room plus a wash room and storage space, and as the garret space on the top floor, the walls slanted to accommodate the building's architecture. Unlike most, however, the space was not crammed with furniture, art supplies, and shelves full of knickknacks, nor was it filled with bright colors and patterns. The walls were painted a cool gray and the bedspread was dark blue and there were hardly any decorations, only a shelf with neatly arranged books and a few trinkets that were gifts from his family. It was stark and without a strong sense of character. Salvatore liked it that way. It was a tiny oasis of peace in the isles' whirlwind of jubilant chaos.

There was an old full-length mirror stuffed in one corner of his bedroom and Salvatore eyed his reflection's pudgy form and the scattering of dark curls across his chest with resigned distaste. He peered a little closer at his face, noting the darkness of the circles beneath his eyes. It was little wonder Silvio had told him to get more sleep, he thought. Tossing the nightshirt aside,

Salvatore dressed for the day with methodical efficiency. He slipped a maroon vest on over his drab tunic and hoped it provided enough color to not make him stand out in a crowd.

Salvatore eyed the sparse kitchenette in the corner near the front door, the small table with only two chairs and the counter covered in debris from the last few days' breakfasts. He wondered if he should just make his own coffee again, but he found himself craving something better, something brewed by a professional. Resigned, he strapped his keyring and coin pouches to his belt, slapped a flat cap on his head, and left the apartment.

Stepping out into the street, Salvatore was instantly assaulted by a flurry of bright color and motion. Early as it was, the citizens of the Quartiere Verderame were already out and about, heading for work or school or opening up their businesses for the day. The neighborhood was largely residential, apartment buildings and townhouses crunched side by side along the winding streets paved in olive green and reddish-orange tiles. Many of the buildings' ground floors, however, were taken up by small shops and eateries catering to the local population. Salvatore set out towards one of his preferred coffee shops, dodging between fellow shopkeepers in their business aprons, women in functional dresses, skirts, or trousers as befitting their occupations, and men in the fine dress of clerks and trade inspectors heading north for their offices on Isola di Ottone.

Though the Quartiere Verderame was largely populated by humans, he passed several dragons as well, their scales glistening in the morning light as they padded their way through the growing crowd or paused to converse with friends and acquaintances. Even on all fours, the adult dragons — the male *draguomini* and female *dragadonne* — loomed over the humans around them with ease; the top of Salvatore's head almost but didn't quite reach their shoulders. The adolescent dragons, however — the male *dragazzi* and female *dragazze* — were more of a size

with their adolescent human counterparts, reaching a similar height when standing up on their hind legs. The patterns and colors of the dragons' scales were diverse, as were the sizes and shapes of their horns. Their level of dress varied as well, some sporting jewelry and accessories, others wearing choice articles made of cloth or leather, and some bearing nothing at all. Salvatore passed by a *draguomo* with teal-and-peach dappled scales and a lilac-hued *dragadonna* with royal blue patches along her flank. He marveled at the thought of what Nico might have looked like had the little black dragon ever reached his proper size.

He nearly collided with a rambunctious gaggle of children and *dragazzi*, the humans' white uniforms and the dragons' white, square-knotted neckerchiefs emblazoned with their school colors, but they parted around him, laughing and teasing each other, hands and tails whipping through the air for emphasis. Shaking his head at their antics, Salvatore hastened his step and made his way into the Caffè di Palmieri. The coffee shop was already buzzing with customers, but he managed to get a seat at the bar and order his breakfast without too much trouble. A harpist, hired by the Palmieri from the Musicians Guild to entertain the morning rush, was playing a brisk, cheerful tune in one corner of the shop, his busker's license badge gleaming on his chest. Salvatore kept to himself while he waited for his breakfast, his mind running through all of the tasks he needed to complete during the day, and he perused a stray copy of the morning's *avviso* while he drank his cappuccino and munched on a *biscotto*.

After paying for his food and tipping the harpist with the change, Salvatore set out in a southerly direction for his antiques shop. He wasn't in a real rush — his shopkeeping assistant Teodora always opened the Antichità Manco in the morning — so Salvatore took his time getting there. He did veer from the Quartiere Verderame's main streets, however, to walk along the *fondamenta* that ran beside the canal.

The day was shaping up to be as nice and mild as the one before, so Salvatore decided to walk to work this time rather than hailing a gondola. A little bit of physical exertion was probably in order, too, he thought, remembering his broad reflection in the mirror. Though the *fondamenta* was narrow in comparison to the interior streets, Salvatore appreciated the open air the canal provided. It was nice to feel the light, salty breeze on his face after spending so many hours in the enclosed confines of the Caveau. It was difficult to feel spacially oppressed in the Isole Fulgide; though most buildings didn't reach beyond four or five-stories tall, each floor was at least sixteen feet tall to accommodate the stature of adult dragons. This architectural element was consistent throughout the isles, and even though Salvatore had grown up with ceilings far beyond his reach, in those rare moments when he really thought about it, he felt dwarfed and too small for his surroundings.

Salvatore followed the *fondamenta* as the canal curved around the westernmost point of Isola di Giada, the largest of the three main isles in the Mercato Pietra. The district was home to the largest general marketplace in the Isole Fulgide, the affordable shops, independent artisan studios, and casual eateries stretching out across the isles of Giada, Topazio, and Onice. It was here that Salvatore spent most of his time and he knew its vibrant streets, its businesses, and its people better than he really wanted to.

The clock tower rang in the ninth hour just as Salvatore passed the Scoglio Torre dell'Orologio, the melodic peal of the bells reverberating across the water. He took the first arching bridge he came to over to Isola Topazio, continuing his route along the *fondamenta*, until the first glimpses of the open lagoon appeared to his right. By this point, the bottoms of his feet had begun to ache and he was silently berating himself for not catching a ride, but he was too close to the shop now to make it worth the time and coin to flag down a gondolier.

Wincing as the pain increased, Salvatore cut through one of Isola Topazio's interior streets to shorten the distance, finally crossing over onto Isola Onice. It was the smallest of the Mercato Pietra isles, and though the businesses it supported were modest in size, ambition, and income, the two-story buildings seemed to insist on projecting as bright and cheery an air as any structures in the Isole Fulgide. The storefronts were painted in bold, alternating shades of lavender, tangerine, azure, canary, and cerise, and the ornate signs and awnings that hung from their walls clashed and complemented them with a sort of carefree abandon.

After making it onto Isola Onice, it was but a short, if slower than usual, walk along the *fondamenta* again until Salvatore reached his shop. He took a moment to admire the Antichità Manco's exterior with something akin to gratified spite. When, under the ownership of its former proprietor, the shop had been called the Antichità Uberti, the storefront had been painted a horrifying shade of bright goldenrod that Signor Uberti had insisted was both cheerful and well-suited to a store specializing in aging objects and yellowing tomes. Upon assuming possession of the antiques shop, Salvatore had wasted no time in swapping the garish hue out for a more subdued, neutral beige that his neighboring shopkeepers had then complained about incessantly for weeks on end. Despite the social pressure, Salvatore had refused to change it back or swap out the beige for a more vivid color. In a fit of youthful pique, he had even gone on to replace the green front door and striped awnings with plain ones an equally neutral chocolate brown. The other shopkeepers along the *fondamenta* had eventually thrown up their hands in defeat, seemingly resigned to young Signor Manco's unorthodox taste in exterior design, and had henceforth gone out of their way to ignore the drab eyesore of a storefront that interrupted the otherwise vibrant strip.

As expected, the sign in the door's front window had already been flipped to *Open*, so Salvatore walked inside. At the sound of the bell, a bespectacled head poked up above the counter in the back, round optic lenses flashing with the motion. "*Benvenuto*, how may I—? Oh, it's you."

Salvatore could hardly be offended by the abruptly bored tone of his assistant's voice. "*Buongiorno*, Teodora," he replied dryly. He glanced around the shop; the place was still and quiet, everything where he had left it the night before. "Any customers drop by yet?"

"Not yet." She lowered her head back down, returning to whatever task he'd interrupted. Knowing the young woman, Salvatore suspected she was reading some assigned text from one of her evening classes at the Università di Moltosabbia.

Teodora Orsini was one of only a handful of people Salvatore knew who had willingly taken the less-traveled route of attending the institute of general education down on Isola di Pergemene. While most sixteen-year-old humans, upon completing their schooling, chose to apprentice with one of the artisan guilds or join the Guardia di Drago, a select few would go to the Università to study the so-called "sundry arts" of economics, medicine, history, philosophy, mathematics, and the like. Teodora was currently in the second year of her program in business and finance and was paying her way with the money she earned working at the Antichità Manco during the day.

Sometimes Salvatore felt like kicking himself for not attending the Università di Moltosabbia himself at that age. While not as prestigious as completing an artisan apprenticeship, having a degree in economics or business would have been preferable over not completing any higher education at all. At the time, however, the concept of going to the

Università had never once entered Salvatore's mind, and he would have been offended if anyone had even suggested such a path to him. He had never been able to shake the sense of irony.

Salvatore wandered to the back of the shop, trading out his vest and cap for his shopkeeper's gear, and casually peered over Teodora's shoulder. She was reading, just as Salvatore had thought, some hefty text with painfully tiny script.

"What class is that for?" he asked.

"History of International Trade," she said, not looking up, "with Professore Caruso."

Salvatore hummed noncommittally and left her to her reading. He didn't mind Teodora studying during work hours when the Antichità Manco was devoid of customers. She always did the tasks he asked of her first: she opened the shop, kept the cleaning and organizing to a minimum to maintain the shop's atmosphere, helped out the occasional client, and recorded purchases and payments in the ledger when applicable. There was no sense in her wasting her time sitting around aimless and bored when she could be working to improve herself.

After making a few rounds of the shop and changing out a dragonfire orb that had grown dull, Salvatore settled down into an old armchair stuffed in one corner of the room and took a morning nap. It was the only way to keep up with his nightly activities, and over the years he had gotten quite good at dropping in and out of sleep at a moment's notice. Salvatore knew his habit of constant napping made him look like the laziest person in the isles, but it was one of several sacrifices to his pride that Salvatore made every day in order to maintain his fencing operations.

He woke only partially whenever the shop's bell rang, just long enough to glimpse who the patron was, and then fell back into his light slumber, safe in the knowledge that Teodora would deal with the customer herself unless there was some problem or they asked for Signor

Manco specifically. The bell rang six times throughout the duration of his nap, signaling the entrance and exit of two men and one *draguomo*, but Salvatore remained otherwise undisturbed.

He awoke fully, as refreshed as he ever was, to the distant midday melody of the Mercato Pietra clock tower. Dragging himself to his feet, Salvatore stretched and wandered back over to the counter. Teodora was still reading the same book, though she had noticeably advanced through the pages.

“Any sales?” he asked hopefully.

“Two *cristallo* vases. The ones with the enamel peacock feathers around the base.” Salvatore smiled to himself. He always felt an odd sort of satisfaction when he was able to sell warm goods out of his own shop. Silvio had nicked the pair of vases out of an old seamster’s townhouse half a year ago. Salvatore had only set them out among the antique shop’s merchandise last week. He had known they would sell quickly, especially at the lower price he’d been able to mark them for. He was certain the customer had thought they were getting quite a bargain, though it was Salvatore who truly profited from the transaction.

“*Molto buona*. Anything else?”

“No. Just browsers.”

“Hm.” Salvatore rubbed his lower back, working out the kinks. If he cared more about the financial success of the Antichità Manco, he might have urged Teodora to be more aggressive in her salesmanship. It was ultimately easier, however, to just transfer money from the Caveau, and neither he nor Teodora seemed inclined towards more ruthless business tactics. “Go ahead and have your break, get something to eat,” Salvatore told her. “But be back by one; I have several appointments this afternoon off-isle.”

“*Va bene.*” Teodora marked her place in the book. When she stood, she tucked the heavy tome under her arm, and Salvatore had no doubt she would read all of the way through her meal. “*Grazie, Signor Manco.*”

Salvatore nodded. He waited until Teodora was out the door, the bell jingling behind her, before settling down into the chair she had vacated and thumbing idly through the shop’s ledger.

Midday usually provided even less foot traffic than the morning and afternoon. Most of the schools and guild studios let out for an hour around noon so their students and artists could take a break, have a light meal at a nearby *osteria*, and perhaps catch a local *spettacolo di mezzogiorno*, one of those daily half-hour dramatic performances that were so popular in the isles. The *spettacoli* were usually episodic in nature, the elaborate stories performed by the actors dragging on for weeks, months, or even years at a time. There was one ongoing *spettacolo* out in the theatrical center of Isola di Smeraldo that had been spinning the same epic tale, featuring the same aging performers, for nearly twenty-three years now. It was common for those with midday breaks to have their lunch while watching their favorite *spettacolo* every day, as each segment was never performed twice and missing even one day of the long-running story could cause the viewer great confusion.

Salvatore had watched his fair share of *spettacoli* growing up. He remembered countless lunches spent with his childhood classmates, choking on pesto *gnocchi* while laughing at the silly, exaggerated antics of the comedic performers, or gasping and shrieking with delight at the whirling flurry of staged sword fights. As a youth, he’d been embarrassingly fond of watching the daily adventures of Virgilio the Traveler, a fictional fortune hunter who explored the world in search of lost treasures. Salvatore had loved the elaborate set pieces and the *spettacolo*’s depictions of strange, exotic environs: sandy deserts baking beneath the blazing sun; dense

forests of massive trees dripping with rainwater; the peaks of tall mountains covered in cold, untouched snow. He had been cross and surly for an entire week after the spettacolo ended following its four-year run, and he'd never been able to watch any performance featuring Virgilio's actor again.

Salvatore hadn't seriously attended any spettacoli in the last decade or so, just catching the occasional episode of a nearby show without any context or background. Keeping up with the long storylines felt more like a chore than a pleasure these days, and Salvatore couldn't justify the expense of season tickets. He had taken Nico to see some children's spettacoli when the dragon was younger, however. Salvatore had tried his best not to look out of place among the unruly crowds of children and *dragazzi* while the tiny dragon watched, transfixed, from his hiding place beneath Salvatore's hair or inside a strategically-placed satchel.

Salvatore allowed himself to be lulled into a doze as he quietly reminisced. The hazy trance was only broken by Teodora's return, precisely as the clock tower began to strike the first hour of the afternoon.

"Have a good break?" he asked. Teodora gave him a tight smile and nodded, her twin braids bobbing with the motion. Salvatore could tell by the way she clutched her book that she wanted him to leave, so she could return to her studies in peace. He stood, giving her back the counter seat, and slipped his maroon vest and cap on once more. "I'll be back in a few hours. If anyone wants to buy, let them, by Iri, but if they're trying to sell, tell them to come back at the end of the day or on Monday so I can appraise it myself."

"Yes, Signor Manco."

"Unless it's something you already know the retail value of or can easily look up in the catalog."

“Of course, Signor Manco.”

“And then only buy it off them if it doesn’t set us back by much. And if we don’t already have too many in the—”

“I *know*,” Teodora said, then added, as if concerned she’d been too brusque with her employer, “I promise I only ever buy with discretion.”

“Yes, I know you do.” Salvatore nodded, straightening his vest and checking his belt for his coin pouches and keyring. “*Grazie*, Teodora. I’ll be back before closing.”

“I hope your appointments go well,” she said, a little awkwardly.

“And your studying.” He touched the edge of his cap. “*Ciao*.”

“*Ciao*, Signor Manco.”

Salvatore left the shop, pleasantly greeting an incoming customer on his way out. His stomach pointedly declared that lunch should be his first order of business, and Salvatore concurred. He strolled down the *fondamenta*, scoping out Onice’s familiar cheap eateries, and, after guiltily ruling out Passerini’s and their pasta, settled on some shrimp *tramezzini* from a *panetteria*. The triangles of fresh-baked bread were stuffed with enough creamy seafood to make a satisfying meal, so he carried them out and ate as he walked.

As he neared the southernmost point of Isola Onice, Salvatore began to catch sight of white canvas sails snapping in the breeze and dark wooden hulls bobbing in their moorings. Across the wide channel was Isola di Vele, where the isles’ shipbuilders and woodworkers plied their trades. The rhythmic sounds of saws and hammers in motion drifted to him over the water. Salvatore paused for a moment, chewing on a bite of *tramezzino* and watching several laborers hoist a new secondary mast to the top of a trade vessel under repair.

The ships that crossed the border of the Isole Fulgide were plainer and more sober in appearance than the boats and gondolas that stayed within the confines of the isles. The better to fit in amongst the trade ships of the surrounding nations, Salvatore expected, though he'd never seen a foreign ship up close. No vessels were allowed within several fathoms of the isles but those flying the banner of the Isole Fulgide: thick, horizontal stripes of deep blue, white, and deep blue, with a circle of silvery iridescence in the center. Any unknown or foreign vessel that ventured within those boundaries would face an immediate assault by the water-based Guardia del Mare division of the Guardia di Drago. If the vessel did not instantly turn around — if it stayed its course or tried to fight back — the nearest Guardia warship would deploy their ustorious mirror.

From where he stood, Salvatore could see one of the giant contraptions bolted to the deck of a moored ship. Its series of massive burning-glasses were wrapped in individual canvas coverings to both protect the *dragovetro* lens and to prevent accidental fires. When its lenses were unwrapped and lined up in precisely calculated patterns, the ustorious mirrors could focus the rays of the sun and direct a powerful, concentrated beam of light and heat at any object in its path. It could set wood and canvas alight with greater speed, distance, and accuracy than flaming arrows or any other ranged weapons available to the outside world. Like the Mercato Pietra clock tower, the ustorious mirror was the product of several of the founders and patron dragons of the Isole Fulgide. Iridescenza and Ribesquamo had designed and constructed the original lenses and metal frame, while Cielotempestoso — patron dragon of shipwrights and boatbuilders — had been the one to suggest such a contraption after conferring with Bluoltremarone — patron dragon of guardians, and the only patron besides Moltosabbia not directly associated with the arts — about how to deal with threats at sea.

The ustorious mirror was a terrifying invention, Salvatore reflected. Fortunately, there wasn't much reason to use them these days. The isles' mainland neighbors had long ago learned to steer clear of the city-state's watery boundaries, seeming to accept that the only way to ever get their extraordinary artisan goods was to allow the isles' trade ships into their foreign ports. This didn't stop the Guardia del Mare, however, from keeping their ustorious mirrors clean and in good shape, always ready to be deployed at the drop of a hat.

After finishing his *tramezzini*, Salvatore moved on, rounding the tip of Isole Onice and grabbing an early afternoon coffee at a small, nearly-empty *caffè*. Once the coffee was gone, he crossed another bridge and struck out east across Isola Catecù.

Isola Catecù was the center of production for most of the isles' visual arts. It was home to the guildhalls of five artisan guilds — the Architects, the Ceramists, the Painters, the Illustrators, and the Sculptors — and each of these community centers were surrounded by a network of guild-owned galleries and the private studios of independent *maestri*. In between the guilds' overlapping sectors, apartments and townhouses were home to the isle's apprentices, craftsmen, and their families. Salvatore was as familiar with Isola Catecù as he was with the Mercato Pietra district. He had grown up in a small townhouse on the isle, had attended school there, and it was where most of his remaining family still lived.

The streets were not as crowded now that most of the artists had returned to their studios for afternoon work sessions. Nevertheless, Salvatore walked along the side of the street to keep out of the way of the foot traffic. He dodged a group of women carrying outdoor easels and large folios of scrap paper, their hands and faces smudged with charcoal dust, and passed a courier bearing a heavy-looking satchel that smelled strongly of turpentine. It wasn't long before he found himself crossing the liminal boundaries of Catecù's sectors into the territory of the

Architects Guild. The exteriors of the buildings, already thoughtful works of art, grew more elaborate and unique the further Salvatore walked, windows and door frames bending into odd shapes and the walls and pathways covered in strange colors and materials.

Passing beneath a grand archway, Salvatore found himself in the courtyard outside the Biblioteca di Cinabargilla. It was an imposing building, towering four stories high, but it had been constructed with such perfect symmetry that its orderly lines, trimmed greenery, and mirrored engravings could take even Salvatore's breath away. He rounded the life-size marble statue of Cinabargilla stationed at the center of the courtyard. The figure's slanted, stony eyes seemed to follow Salvatore with suspicion as he passed, as if she knew his intention for visiting her library. A few members of the Architects Guild lingered on the steps leading up the main entrance, discussing some design project, and they stopped and stared at Salvatore as he climbed the stairs, their gazes not hostile but more full of curiosity. No one stopped him, however; the ground floor of the Biblioteca was open to the general public, even if the rest of the floors were for members of the guild only.

Inside, Salvatore approached the librarian at the front desk. "*Scusi*, but do you know if Signor Estoppino is around?"

"Yes," she replied, "I believe so. I think I saw him pass by not too long ago now. May I ask who's inquiring?"

Salvatore smiled politely. "Tell him Signor Manco would like to have a word with him about an acquisition for the collection. He knows who I am."

The librarian motioned for Salvatore to have a seat nearby and he did, watching as she beckoned a youth loitering near the front doors. The boy was kitted out in a crisp apprentice architect's uniform, and after a moment of discussion, he left the librarian's desk, presumably off

to complete his errand. Salvatore only had to wait a few minutes before the apprentice returned with a slender, well-dressed man in tow.

Salvatore stood. “Signor Estoppino,” he greeted him kindly, offering his hand.

Morandi Estoppino shook it politely, though there was a tightness about the head archivist’s lips and eyes that betrayed his silent disquiet. “Signor Manco. A pleasure, as always. If you’ll follow me, we can discuss this... acquisition in private.” Estoppino turned to the librarian. “Signor Manco will be accompanying me up to my office.” The librarian nodded in acknowledgment.

Salvatore followed Estoppino back through the shelves of books and bound scrolls, passing miniature models of famous buildings displayed proudly on fine pedestals. Reaching a large locked door, Estoppino slipped a bronze key out of his pocket, the key’s head branded with the seal of the Architects Guild, and let them both inside. The door led to a private staircase, and Salvatore followed him as they climbed the three flights of stairs to the top floor in a palpable silence.

Estoppino’s shoulders were hunched with tension, Salvatore noticed, though he himself felt almost relaxed. He understood the man’s apprehension, however. High-ranking members of the Architects Guild — including head archivists like Estoppino — were allowed to bring non-members to the library’s upper stories if those visitors remained under their constant surveillance, but Estoppino knew, to a certain extent, why Salvatore had requested a meeting, and he was obviously anxious at the possibility of crossing paths with any of his colleagues. It was a wonder, Salvatore thought, that the man’s salt-and-pepper hair wasn’t already solid gray with stress.

Fortunately for them both, they encountered no one on the way to Estoppino's third-floor office, though Salvatore could hear amongst the stacks the quiet murmurings of apprentices studying and the shuffling of librarians restoring books to their rightful shelves. The tension finally got to Estoppino as they approached his office door. The man's hands trembled as he struggled to get his key in the lock, his head swiveling to both sides to make sure no one was watching. Salvatore waited patiently, his thumbs tucked in his belt loops, until Estoppino got the door open on the third try and ushered him inside.

The office was richly furnished, all dark green velvets and darker wood furnishings. Dragonfire orbs glowing warmly in their sconces. Estoppino locked the door behind them, finally turning to face Salvatore with an anxious and frustrated expression. "Must you always come straight in the front door?"

Salvatore sighed. "Calm down, Estoppino. Trust me, it's less suspicious asking for you at the desk than it is skulking around some back alley, waiting to get your attention."

"But someone is bound to notice eventually!" The archivist wrung his hands, then added, in a hissed whisper, "And why must you come by so often? Surely you don't —"

"I come by as often as I need to come by," Salvatore said firmly. Estoppino would dither on and work himself into a lather if Salvatore didn't gain control of the situation. "I need access to the Oro Rosa blueprints."

Estoppino's expression fell. Isola di Oro Rosa was the center of the isles' fine jewelry production, and the archivist seemed to guess where this was going. "Really?" Salvatore nodded. Estoppino gave a shaky sigh. "Any... any particular structure?"

"Cristallobianco's."

"*Merda.*" The man looked nearly sick. Salvatore didn't budge.

In all of the years he had been coming to the Biblioteca di Cinabargilla to conduct research, Estoppino had never asked *why*, precisely, Salvatore wanted to see the classified blueprints he requested. The range of Salvatore's interest, however, seemed to speak volumes: original floor plans for glass foundries, high-end shops, fine art galleries, guild archives, and the *palazzi* of the Isole Fulgide's most powerful and wealthy citizens out on Isola Nebbiosa. Estoppino would have been stupid not to suspect what sort of activities Salvatore was up to, but as long as the archivist didn't know for certain and kept receiving payment for the risks he was taking, he didn't seem inclined to terminate their clandestine transactions.

"I promise not to take up more than an hour of your time," Salvatore said diplomatically. He drew a hefty, nondescript silk purse from one of the pouches at his belt and passed it to Estoppino. The man barely looked at it, much less checked its contents, before secreting it away in a drawer beneath his desk. Estoppino, like all of his clients and associates, knew Salvatore would not cheat him out of his due.

The archivist jerked his head towards a door in the back of his office. "Head in. I'll be back in a few minutes. Anything else besides... besides Cristallobianco's?"

"That will do for now."

Estoppino nodded, staring down at the fine rug carpeting the floor beneath his shoes. Salvatore wondered if the rug was the property of the Biblioteca or if the archivist had purchased it himself with his hush money. While high archivists were considered prominent members of their guilds, that level of power didn't necessarily guarantee a prominent salary. Wiping a bead of sweat from beneath his round optics, Estoppino shuffled out of his office, locking the door behind him.

Salvatore made his way into the adjoining chamber, which was Estoppino's private reading room. The light was brighter here, dragonfire orbs nearly spilling out of the overhead chandelier, and the walls were covered in shelves crammed with folios, scrolls, and the various supplies of an architect. Salvatore poked through the shelves until he uncovered a large scroll of thin, translucent paper, a pair of smooth white gloves, and a light stick of charcoal, the body wrapped in paper and the tip ground to a fine point. Gathering these supplies, Salvatore sat at the flat drafting table in the center of the room to wait.

The archivist returned as quickly as he predicted, carry a slender leather tube half-hidden beneath his tailored jacket. A small padlock dangled from the cap at one end of the tube, and Estoppino unlocked it with a tiny key before handing the whole thing over to Salvatore. "Be *careful*," he whispered, eying the charcoal stick with concern. "Not a single stray mark!"

"I promise," Salvatore said, knowing that telling the man not to worry would accomplish nothing. "No harm will come to them."

Estoppino bit his lip. "One hour," he finally said, then left the reading room and closed the door behind him. Salvatore could hear the archivist sitting down at his office desk. He hoped Estoppino wouldn't spend the entire time quietly panicking and regretting his life choices.

Salvatore quickly got to work. He pulled on the white gloves, which were only a bit too tight for his pudgy hands, and with delicate precision slid the blueprints to Cristallobianco's studio, showroom, and vaults out of their protective case. He rolled them out across the drafting table, working slowly to avoid causing cracks and tears in the aging paper. He didn't believe Cinabargilla was responsible for this particular jewelry studio's design, but the plans hadn't been drafted too long after the patron dragon's time, making them at least three centuries old. It took Salvatore a moment to sift through the stack, but finally he found what he was looking for: the

floor plans for Cristallobianco's archive. Noting the order in which the blueprints were assembled, Salvatore gently set the irrelevant scrolls aside and spread out the archive plans, weighed down the corners with felt-backed paperweights.

The layout of the archives was much like that of others Salvatore had seen. Rows of locked drawers spanned the walls from floor to ceiling, curving in complex, maze-like patterns meant to confuse those unfamiliar with the premises. He scanned the plans, drafted from a bird's-eye point of view, and noted the lack of windows and few hallways leading to the archive's single, massive vault door. Many of the notations throughout the document were written in a tiny script that had faded over time, so Salvatore slipped on his reading optics and traced the progression of numbers labeling the dozens of columns of drawers. Once he spotted the location of the target — drawer five-two-six-eight — he grabbed the scroll of thin blank paper, laid it out on top of the blueprints, and repositioned the paperweights.

After that, it was only a matter of lightly tracing the original plans with the charcoal stick, a simple endeavor that even Salvatore could do. He copied the blueprint quickly and with as much detail as his skill and allotted time allowed, occasionally lifting up the top layer to double-check his work. He made sure to highlight those key architectural elements that would allow Silvio to slip in and out of the archive as safely and efficiently as possible. Though the blueprints didn't take note of any guard stations or traps installed to ward off intruders — such measures would have been out-of-date anyway — the plans did give Salvatore some idea where potential obstacles were most likely to be lurking.

Time seemed suspended while he worked. The reading room was silent save for the intermittent, muffled creak of Estoppino shifting in his office chair outside. Salvatore wasn't sure how much of his designated hour had passed, but by the time he was satisfied with his

duplication, the archivist hadn't yet disturbed him, so Salvatore supposed he had finished early. With the same delicate touch as before, he inserted the original document into its place within the stack, rerolled the scrolls, and slid them back into their tube. Salvatore peeled off the white gloves gratefully, shaking the feeling back into his sweaty hands, and returned Estoppino's supplies to where he found them. The duplicate he folded in half again and again until it was a thick, palm-sized rectangle of paper, which he then tucked into an empty pouch on his belt, safe from suspicion.

He knocked lightly on the door. Estoppino stuck his head in a moment later, accepting the leather tube Salvatore offered him with trembling fingers. Salvatore waited patiently in the reading room while the archivist relocked the case and returned it to the high-security vault where the isles' original blueprints were stored. He came back to Salvatore with an expression of distinct relief.

"Ready to go?" Estoppino whispered.

"Yes." Salvatore brushed off his vest, flicking away any lingering specks of graphite that might have settled on the cloth. "*Grazie*, Estoppino."

The archivist grimaced. "Come on, then," he said, motioning them forward. He cautiously guided Salvatore back through the stacks, then down the private staircase. Their journey was once again undetected by any of Estoppino's fellow guild members.

At the bottom of the stairs, Estoppino opened the door, letting Salvatore back out onto the ground floor. "*Buona giornata*, Signor Manco."

"And you as well, Signor Estoppino." Salvatore touched the brim of his cap and couldn't help but add, with an innocent smile, "I'm sure I'll see you again soon."

Estoppino's lips contorted as he tried, and largely failed, to form a similarly pleasant expression. "Take your time." He closed the door and Salvatore heard the distinct click of the key turning in the lock.

Suppressing a chuckle, Salvatore casually made his way back to the front entrance. He waved goodbye to the librarian at the desk and left the Biblioteca di Cinabargilla without incident.



The walk back to the Antichità Manco was uneventful. Keen to avoid a repeat of the morning's foot pains, Salvatore took as straight a path westward across Isola Catecù as he could. He strolled down streets lined with shop after shop selling locally-produced goods, everything from serviceable ceramic dishware to ornamental painted landscapes to lavishly extravagant books with their vellum pages trimmed in silver. He paused a few times to peer through several business's display windows, pondering whether or not to purchase a few new knickknacks for the antiques shop. Each time, Salvatore decided that he just couldn't justify the expense. He was better off making a mental note of each item and their location, so that later on he could inform the shoplifters he knew about specific targets they might get a little extra coin for.

Finally reaching the westernmost edge of Catecù, it was a short walk down the *fondamenta* to the nearest bridge, which took Salvatore back to Isola Onice. From there, he cut through the isle's back alleys, careful not to appear like he was loitering, and emerged back onto the *fondamenta* on Onice's western side not far from the Antichità Manco's front door.

Teodora had fortunately sold a few small items during Salvatore's absence — a glass beaded necklace, a worn decorative basket, and a porcelain jewelry box — and as the afternoon progressed, a few more customers filtered in to browse, several purchasing cheap miscellaneous trinkets that had caught their eyes. Salvatore welcomed each of them into the shop with a pleasant "*buon pomeriggio*, come on in," but didn't otherwise engage them in discussion or follow them through the meandering aisles like some hovering nuisance. Two or three struck up conversations with Salvatore, however, and he replied with appropriate answers to their banal questions and small talk about the fine weather. He let Teodora handle each of the monetary transactions, instead busying himself with a fruitless rearrangement of the merchandise in the shop's front windows.

At the distant five-o'clock tolling of the bells in the clock tower, Salvatore allowed Teodora an hour's break for dinner. When she returned, he took his own late afternoon break, venturing down to a nice little Onice *osteria* for a meal of risotto and shrimp. Most of the tables were occupied with small clusters of visual art apprentices from Isola Catecù, all companionably bemoaning the assigned texts they had to study and the technical skills they needed to practice, but Salvatore managed to find an empty table where he could eat in quiet solitude. He ordered some extra shrimp to go with the leftover risotto and had it boxed up, then returned to the Antichità Manco for the remainder of the workday.

He allowed Teodora to leave about half an hour before closing. She seemed grateful enough for the reprieve, short as it was. Salvatore counted out her wages for the week, bundled them up in a small silk pouch, and passed the coin over, telling her as he always did, "Don't spend it all on books!"

Teodora smiled awkwardly, but thanked him and tucked her history text beneath her arm. “*Buonasera*, Signor Manco. I’ll see you on Monday morning.”

“*Buonasera*. Be sure to take some time off from studying to go have a bit of fun.”

“I will, if I can.” She waved goodbye and left, the shop door’s bell ringing in her wake.

Salvatore didn’t wait for the clock tower to signal the end of the workday at seven o’clock, but began to clean up and prepare to close the Antichità Manco down for the week as soon as Teodora was gone. He wasn’t likely to have any more customers shopping for antiques this late on a Friday, after all. He pulled shut the heavy velvet curtains over the front windows, then stepped outside with his broom to sweep the front stoop. Salvatore paused for only a moment to glare bitterly at the stunning beauty of the setting sun and the unreachable distance of the horizon. Then he stepped back inside, slamming the door shut behind him. He flipped the sign to *Closed* and slid the two locks into place.

Perusing the day’s sales in the ledger, Salvatore found his spirits slightly lifted by the increase in profits from the day before. He quickly locked up the book and safe-box, shed his apron and cap, and slipped into the darkness of the storage room. Though the paper he had used to copy the archive blueprint was thin and nearly weightless, its presence folded up in the pouch on Salvatore’s belt had grown larger and heavier in his mind as the afternoon had wore on. A little coil of excitement was writhing in the pit of his stomach as he navigated blindly to the trapdoor and unlocked it with its special key. The day-to-day labor of buying stolen goods and facilitating their sale to shady clients had long since lost its ability to evoke tremors of anxiety or fear in him. Actively planning the brazen theft of a highly valuable item, however, still managed to make his heart beat faster and his blood run cold with the thrill.

Arms and legs a little shaky from the climb down the ladder, Salvatore shrugged off the touch of nerves and swept his limp hair back out of his face. He entered the Caveau to find the room already brightly lit with fresh dragonfire orbs in the chandelier, and to find Nico awaiting his arrival from his lounging spot on the counter. The spines along the dragon's back lifted in anticipation as his beady eyes locked on the bag of leftovers hanging from Salvatore's wrist.

"Don't worry," Salvatore said, before Nico could ask. "It's not *bigoli* this time."

The dragon's nostrils flared, sniffing the air as Salvatore set the bag down on the counter. "Something with... crab? No... Shrimp?"

"Shrimp and risotto from Aiello's."

"Yes," Nico hissed out in emphatic excitement. His tail whipped around as Salvatore removed the box from its bag and opened it in front of him. "Finally!" He dug into the warm dish, snapping up mouthfuls of rice, onion, and minced garlic with a grateful growl.

"Don't get crumbs on the counter," Salvatore said, tucking the leftovers bag away in a drawer. He slipped on his leather jerkin, removed his pen, inkwell, and ledger from their drawer, and set up his usual workspace. Nico was already halfway through his dinner and was pulling the white fleshy meat off of a curl of shrimp before Salvatore had gotten situated on his stool. "Don't choke yourself. It's not going anywhere."

Nico bared his fangs, which were unappealingly flecked with green shreds of basil, and discarded the shrimp's tail into one corner of the box.

Salvatore ignored the petty gesture. "What news do you have for me tonight?"

"Well... I went back to Opercolo this morning... like you said," Nico informed him in between bites. "The trip took forever, too, by the way... Had to get one of Elisa's men to carry me into the Levriero in his satchel... Too many fishermen already up and about..."

“And? Did you talk to Vittoria?”

“Course I did.” Nico rolled his eyes. “You should have seen her face drop. One minute, she’s all glad I’m there because I said you’d take the job... the next, she goes all tight-lipped that I dared bring her a counteroffer.”

“Did she take it?”

“Didn’t want to at first... Said it wasn’t fair, that it was for *her* client, *bla bla bla*... But I said, ‘Not a *mare*a less than nineteen-sixty or you can find your own *maestro-ladro* in the next three days.’”

“And?”

“She took the deal.”

Salvatore chuckled. “I assumed as much.” Vittoria would make only a little over eight hundred gold on the entire commission, but as she was really just facilitating transactions between two other parties, the return seemed more than fair to Salvatore. Perhaps it would also push her to begin concentrating more heavily on her speciality in textiles, rather than taking whatever jobs she could get her hands on. “Get any additional information from her on the target or the client?”

“Nothing she hadn’t already said or you’d guessed.”

“Fine.” Salvatore removed the folded paper from his belt pouch and set it beside the ledger. “I got a copy of the archive blueprints without any problem. It shouldn’t take more than an hour or so to hammer out a solid plan tonight. Any other news?”

“Cinzia Scarpa was at the Levriero having a morning drink. She apparently had a close call while pilfering her studio’s supply room. Almost got caught with five pounds of engraved

silver buckles and a pouch of ivory buttons in her skirt pockets, but she dodged her *maestro* at the last second.”

“A lucky escape.” Salvatore thumbed through the most recent pages of his ledger. “I’m sure she was there to sell the ivory to Vittoria, but is there any chance some of the silver might make its way here?”

“Maybe.” Nico shrugged. “I told her you’d give her a fair price on at least a few of the buckles, but she didn’t seem inclined to hitch a ride all the way out to Mercato Pietro just for that.”

“She’ll probably offload them on Paolo,” Salvatore said, and Nico nodded. Paolo Ululato was a gruff old weaponsmith who ran his forge, the Lupo Grigio Fucina, out on the southeastern isle of Isola d’Acciaio. Stout and muscular with a thick salt-and-pepper beard, Paolo struck a formidable figure, but didn’t quite seem like the type to run a fencing operation specializing in stolen weaponry out of the back of his forge. Nevertheless, Paolo did, and was well-known for taking both fine pieces and scrap without asking any questions.

“The engravings on the buckles would make them easier to identify and trace,” Salvatore added thoughtfully. “But Paolo is sure to just melt them back down and use them as raw material for his forge.”

“That’s one way to eliminate any risk.” Nico chewed on a thick chunk of shrimp meat. “As for other news... I saw Loris again, but he didn’t have much new to tell me. *Eh...* Ruggero Poggi might be by soon. He’s been getting up to some nighttime exploits in Giada this past week. Might have lifted some nice stuff from the shops there... But really, that’s about it.”

“A few slow nights won’t hurt us much,” Salvatore said, leaning back on his stool and stretching his arms until the joints cracked. “I have plenty of work to do already and some hours

without constant disturbances would be nice. Are you done?” Nico licked the last traces of risotto from the container, flicked his tongue across his fangs, and nodded. “Good. I saw a few choice items on my way back from the Biblioteca today and I’d like to make a list to hang up, in case anyone is interested in a spot of shoplifting for extra coin.” He pulled a blank sheet of loose paper from a nearby drawer, then slid it in front of Nico, whisking away the empty food container at the same time. “Jot this down.”

As Salvatore cleaned the countertop and made his rounds of the Caveau’s display shelves, inspecting them for dust or any identification cards out of order, he recited to Nico the wares that had caught his attention that afternoon. He described them in as much detail as he could recall and noted the shops and streets where he had seen them.

Wandering back to the counter, he watched as Nico finished recording the last of the list in his clear, sharp-tipped scrawl, ending it with a quick flourish. His penmanship had come a long way over the years, Salvatore observed.

When he had first taught the little dragon how to write his letters, Nico had struggled to trace the simple lines on the practice pages Salvatore had made, the broken sticks of charcoal wiggling in his awkward clawed grasp like a worm on the end of a hook. Trying to teach him with calligraphy brushes and pens had only resulted in spilled water and dark ink stains embedded into the surface of his kitchen table. Both of them had grown frustrated with the repeated failures, Salvatore perplexed by the unusual lack of dexterity and Nico cross at struggling with something apparently easy for others to do. It was only after a particularly nasty fit on the dragon’s part that Salvatore realized the problem, and the obviousness of it had been upsetting. Nico’s right paw was his dominant one, but Salvatore had been trying to teach him to write with his left the way he himself did. Once Salvatore had identified the issue, it was simple

enough to solve. Soon Nico was writing legibly without difficulty, though, like the rest of him, his letters were proportionally smaller.

Nico set the pen aside and waved the paper lightly to dry the last of the ink. He passed it up to Salvatore, who hung it from a nail on a nearby wooden post.

“*Va bene*. Let’s open for business. Did you unlock the trapdoor already?” Nico stared flatly in response. Salvatore waved his reaction away. “Fine, fine! You know your job! Go in the back and fetch me the stack of letters on the right end of the desk. The shorter stack.”

“Sure thing, *capo*,” Nico grumbled sarcastically, but he hopped off the counter and trotted to the backroom without further fuss.

The next two hours passed without outside interruption. This allowed Salvatore to answer a variety of inquiries from foreign clients, count and record received payments, and prepare several discreetly-wrapped packages — including the goblet of Fogliatèverde — for shipment.

The nearby mantle clock had just chimed nine-forty-five when the first of the night’s visitors arrived. It was Ysabel Monti, a crafty lifter and opportunistic pickpocket in her mid-thirties. She strolled into the Caveau with confidence, her bead-adorned braids and thick tangle of hair pulled back with a wide headscarf. She fished a crumbling chunk of almond *biscotto* out of one of the many deep pockets in her skirt, then held it out for Nico to pluck from her fingers with his teeth, a slight smile stealing across her lips. Ysabel was the sole provider for her husband and their two young children, but her position serving meals at a small *osteria* on Isola Alizarina could barely cover their rent. As far as Salvatore knew, her husband, a former fisherman injured on the job, was unaware of how his wife supplemented their income.

He took his time pricing the wares Ysabel brought him: three slim bracelets, a few sets of nice silverware, and a slightly-scratched pocket watch. If Salvatore gave her a bit more than

he normally would for the lot, it was only because of the way she scratched Nico fondly on the top of his head between his horns, causing the dragon's eyes to close and the spines along his neck to rise in delight.

Not long after Ysabel left, Ruggero Poggi stopped by. He plopped an unwieldy sack on the counter in front of Salvatore with a shit-eating grin, which was missing several prominent teeth. As disheveled, crooked-nosed, and wild-eyed as the scoundrel was, Rug still looked like a native of the isles; his skinny form was draped in a loose vest of violet and malachite mended with sunny yellow patches, which seemed, for the most part, aesthetic rather than practical. Rumor had it that Ruggero had wanted to join the Entertainers Guild as a tumbler, but a bad fall from some height during his audition had resulted both in a denial of his request for admission and in a broken nose and missing teeth. It was a story Salvatore could easily believe. Rug liked to present his hauls with gusto and flair, and he always wore the purple-green-gold palette of Mèchevioletto, the patron dragon of acrobats, illusionists, and entertainers.

Ruggero introduced the items from his sack with his usual fanfare. The spread he laid out across the white cloth included a set of four finely-crafted pewter tankards, a jewel-encrusted letter opener, a heavy leather-bound volume of traditional dragonian epic verse, and several velvet caps in the style young men wore these days. Salvatore bought the tankards and letter opener and was persuaded to purchase the book by Nico's unblinking, beseeching stare. He declined the caps, however, directing Ruggero to take a trip to the eastern side of the isles to bargain with Vittoria.

Another half hour passed, and Salvatore was pleased to see a buying customer enter the Caveau for once. Ettore Albricci was a somber, older man who served as a personal buyer for his private client. His entire job was to find and obtain whatever his employer wanted in the realm of

fashionable clothing, furniture, decorations, and other purchasable items. Most personal buyers would balk at the thought of using illegal means to fulfill their duties, even if it saved their client money, but not Albricci. Straight-backed and keen-eyed, the man gave off an air of quiet ruthlessness that sent Nico scurrying up to a high perch in the rafters.

Though Albricci's employer was unknown to Salvatore, he knew the client lived somewhere out on Isola Nebbiosa, home to the isles' most wealthy and powerful citizens. He had his guesses as to their identity, if just from the sort of goods Albricci had purchased from him before, but he would never question the client's right to anonymity. Salvatore left the counter and approached Albricci with a respectful welcome, firmly shaking the man's dry hand. He didn't hover as Albricci surveyed the stolen stock on display, not the way other fences or shopkeepers might have done, but he made himself available to answer any questions the buyer might have about what he saw. When Albricci had come to the Caveau for the first time, Salvatore had gotten the distinct impression that the man disliked senseless chatter and pandering. This worked just fine for Salvatore. He supposed Albricci, whose entire job revolved around shopping, appreciated the unobtrusive change of pace.

Albricci did indeed ask Salvatore a few quiet questions — on the approximate age of this bronze figurine or the identity of the maker's mark on that ceramic vase — and eventually settled on a set of bronze bookends shaped like stylized birds in flight, as well as a glass jewelry dish whose *murrine* were patterned with tiny green leaves and delicate spring flowers. Salvatore was unperturbed by Albricci's counteroffer of his first suggested price, and they traded offers until both men were satisfied with the number. Albricci paid with exact coin, bid him a fine evening, and left as quietly as he had come.

It was nearing eleven-thirty when a loud *thump* at the far end of the room signaled the arrival of his next visitor. When Nico cracked the door to see who it was, the door swung forcibly open instead, and a ragged heap of gray and brown cloth collapsed onto the flagstones in the threshold. By the sound of Nico's loud cackle of amusement, Salvatore knew exactly who it was.

He sighed. "*Buonasera*, Giulia."

It took Giulia Ratti a good minute or two to stand up from her sprawled position, but Salvatore wasn't inclined to help. He couldn't smell anything yet, but from the look of repulsion on Nico's face as his nostrils flared, Giulia likely had the pungent odor of several seedy dockside taverns hovering about her person. Eventually, the old pickpocket managed to drag herself into a tilted approximation of a standing position and tried unsuccessfully to blow some of the long, tangled strands of grey hair away from her face. Nico closed and locked the door behind her as Giulia staggered forward. She rested one dirty hand on the pristine central display case for balance until she realized her error. With exaggerated deliberateness, she stepped one foot after the other across the flagstones until she got to the counter, where she slumped onto a stool with a dazed grin of pride.

"*Come va*, Sal?" she slurred. "Bet you thought I was still up in Punto Nord, didn't you?"

Now Salvatore could smell her, and it was worse than he had expected: old salt from the lagoon mixed with something rancid and washed in what smelled like a dragon-sized tub of hard liquor. Salvatore's eyes began to sting and he coughed, quickly fumbling for his pipe and pouch of *stramonio*.

"*Maledizione!* I told you not to come into my shop stinking like a garbage boat! *Merda!*"

He packed the dry leaves into the pipe as Giulia blinked at him, not comprehending the outburst. Nico was suddenly at Salvatore's elbow, striking a match and holding it up over the bowl as Salvatore took a shaky draw. Almost immediately, the sweet burning scent of the plant filled his mouth and his nose, overpowering even Giulia's stench, and he exhaled a puff of grey smoke in tremulous relief.

"Ah..." Giulia murmured, her wrinkled face starting to look a bit guilty beneath the tangled strands. "*Scusa*, Sal... Forgot about your lungs. Didn't think I was that bad off."

Salvatore coughed, then took another, slower draw. He could feel the prick of Nico's claws resting on the bend of his arm through his sleeve. He blinked away the moisture that had welled up in the corners of his eyes. Nico let out a low growl, and snapped, "How long have you been drinking today?"

"*Beh*, only since they let me loose on Porto Sicuro. Had to... celebrate my liberation, you understand."

"Giulia," Salvatore sighed, as the tightness in his chest began to dissipate. "They released you from custody yesterday."

"Is that so?" The old woman looked stunned. Then she laughed, showing off her yellow teeth. "I'd never have guessed that! Guess I've been drinking a whole night and a day, then!" She continued to laugh, as if she were watching the funniest comedic scene the Actors Guild had ever staged. After a moment, Nico began to chuckle, too, a low gurgle of amusement, which made Giulia wheeze and slap the marble countertop. Salvatore rolled his eyes, taking another puff on his pipe as he stored the *stramonio* pouch away.

"As glad as I am to see that you've escaped the clutches of the Guardia di Drago once more," he told Giulia dryly, "what precisely brings you to the Caveau in this condition?"

“You’re missing out on the best part of the night for drinking,” Nico added with a sly, dragonish grin.

“Got something for you, of course.” Giulia patted Salvatore’s right hand where it rested on the countertop — or at least attempted to, as her aim was off — with the air of a benevolent grandmother. She began to fumble around in the pockets of her ragged coat, checking this one and that one and rejecting whatever bits she found in them.

Nico leaned over towards Salvatore’s ear and whispered, “This should be good.” Salvatore huffed, releasing another stream of smoke into the air.

“Here it is!” Giulia finally cried, pulling something palm-sized and shiny out of one of her interior pockets. She slapped it down on the white cloth with a grin of triumph. “Got it just for you.”

It took but a moment to recognize the object, and then both Salvatore and Nico groaned. “*Maledizione*, Giulia,” Salvatore muttered. “What have you done this time?”

It was flat and shaped like a shield, its thick metal border a lovely white platinum in color. The interior, also shield-shaped, featured three horizontal bands of enamel, striped dark blue, white, and dark blue. In the center of the bands rested a coin-sized circle of silvery iridescent *dragovetro*, which glittered even in the diffuse light of the chandelier.

It was a badge made for a human officer of the Guardia di Drago.

“Bit of a souvenir from my stay in the *prigione*,” Giulia continued, undaunted. “Nicked it off one of the *guardiani* as they were hauling me to the gate. Fellow didn’t feel a thing.” She wiggled her gnarled fingers, as if to show off their deftness and skill.

Salvatore flipped the badge onto its back and inspected the sequence of numbers engraved into the metal. He didn’t recognize the identification number off-hand, but that didn’t

mean he didn't know the person the badge belonged to. He was familiar with many members of the Guardia di Drago.

"What, by Iri, am I supposed to do with this?" Salvatore asked tersely, holding the badge up for Giulia to examine.

The woman stared at the stolen trinket in confusion. After a long moment of difficult contemplation, she ventured a guess. "Sell it?"

"And who exactly am I meant to sell it to?" Salvatore countered. When Giulia's look of confusion only increased, he continued. "I can't sell it openly in my shop. The number on the back makes it too easy to identify its original owner. Masking or destroying the engraving would only look more suspicious, and there's no way I could pass off something containing real *dragovetro* as a forgery or an actor's prop. I can't sell it down here to a local, because they would immediately be accused of theft if they were caught with it, and no one wants to take on that sort of risk. I can't sell it abroad, not only because there's no market for such a thing, but also because it could compromise the security of the isles if it fell into the wrong hands." With each item Salvatore added to the list, Giulia slumped a little further down in her seat. "I can't even sell it for scrap, not with the enamel and *dragovetro* so deeply embedded into the metal. *So who, in the name of il Creatore, am I supposed to sell this to?*"

Giulia flinched as Salvatore snapped the badge down onto the white cloth with a muted thump. "Guess I wasn't thinking too straight at the time," she muttered. "Hadn't seen the sun or a bare speck of artsy work in days. Those cells are a blank nightmare, you know. The shine just caught my eye, and the fellow wasn't paying me much mind and I just—" She snapped her fingers. "—quick as a wink, before my mind caught up."

The woman was a sorry sight to behold, ragged and stinking and huddled uncomfortably on her stool. Salvatore sighed, aggravated, taking another draw on his pipe to calm himself down. He let Giulia stew for a moment, watching the gnarled hands grip compulsively at the edge of the countertop and the edges of her overcoat. Finally, he said, “I’ll take it off your hands.” Giulia looked up at him hopefully. “*This time*. Pull this shit again and you’re on your own. Understand?”

“*Sì, sì, grazie, Sal,*” Giulia said, her words almost garbled in her haste to get them out. She clasped her hands. “I understand, *completamente. Grazie mille!* You are very—”

“I’m not going to pay you for it,” Salvatore stated firmly. Giulia’s exclamations of gratitude petered off. “I can’t profit from it. But I’ll make sure it’s returned to the authorities, unobtrusively, so no suspicion is cast on you. That way they won’t have a reason to haul your ass straight back to Punto Nord.”

“That’s... that’s fair,” the woman admitted, though she looked pained as she said it. “More than fair. I appreciate the gesture, Sal, I do. It’s just...” She paused for a moment at Salvatore’s raised eyebrow, then carried gamely on. “It’s just, I don’t have any coin for food right now, you know? I was hoping for a few *basse*, at least. Can’t remember the last time I ate.”

“Do you have anything else to sell?” Salvatore asked in exasperation.

Giulia patted her pockets weakly, but, as he expected, came up empty. “I don’t suppose you could lend a poor old woman a few coins, just for the next day or two? You can take out twice as much from my next haul.”

“I’m not a bank, and I’m not a moneylender,” Salvatore articulated slowly. “I’m running a business here, Giulia, not a charity. If you don’t have anything worth buying...”

“Just a little favor, then, between friends?” Giulia swallowed at the hard look Salvatore gave her. Then she grinned, like a gambler who just drew the exact card she needed. “I set you up right good with Leggièri, didn’t I? Did you a great favor right there.”

“It’s been six years,” Salvatore snapped. “You can’t use that excuse forever.” But the pickpocket looked so pleased with herself and her stench was starting to permeate the hazy, sweet cloud of *stramonio* and, by Iri, Giulia was *right* that Salvatore could never fully repay her for bringing Silvio to the Caveau. So Salvatore, teeth clenched around his pipe, dug into a drawer and pulled out a small pouch full of copper *basse*. He topped its contents with a few silver *stagni* and tossed the pouch across the counter. Giulia latched onto it with a cry of relief. The pouch immediately disappeared into one of her pockets for safekeeping. “If I find out you’ve bought even a swallow of liquor with that coin,” Salvatore growled, “I’ll take that badge straight to the Guardia myself and let them know *exactly* who lifted it.”

Giulia didn’t seem bothered by his warning; she knew an idle threat when she heard one. Fences who ratted out their criminal associates to the authorities didn’t last long in the Isole Fulgide. She stumbled off of her stool. “*Grazie mille*, Sal. I’ll have something real good for you next time, promise.”

“Get out.” Salvatore waved her away. “I don’t want to see you again until you’ve taken a bath. With soap.”

Fortunately, the majority of the salt-and-liquor odor left the Caveau with Giulia’s departure, and the scent had completely dissipated by the time the mantle clock began to strike the midnight hour.

As the last chime faded, there came a familiar light knock at the far door.

His chest suddenly feeling just as light, Salvatore set his pipe aside and straightened his posture as Nico scampered briskly to the door and cracked it open.

“*Ehi*, Silvio! Password?”

“Will this suffice?”

There was a pleased cry of “*Bussolai!*” before the little dragon dove back into the Caveau, proudly carrying a golden ring-shaped cookie in his mouth.

Silvio slipped into the room, closing the door silently behind him. He held a lidded porcelain cup in one of his hands, and a paper sack of *bussolai* was tucked carefully into the crook of his arm. Silvio pulled down the scarf of his thieving attire with his free hand, letting the dark cloth dangle around his neck, and gifted Salvatore with an audacious smile. “*Ciao.*”

“*Ciao,*” Salvatore replied cordially, motioning him forward towards the counter. “Ready to plan a heist, I take it?”

Silvio laughed. “With you, Sal? Always.”

Salvatore cleared the countertop of his ledger and various papers as the thief settled himself neatly on a stool, shrugging off his rucksack and throwing back his hood. He placed the porcelain cup and paper sack down on the counter, then scooted the cup carefully across the marble in Salvatore’s direction. “That’s for you, by the way.”

Salvatore raised an eyebrow, but obediently lifted the lid. He was greeted by the dark, bitter aroma of perfectly hot coffee. A dollop of foamed milk floated in the center. “I thought you could probably use a bit of a pick-me-up,” Silvio explained.

“This time of night, you’re not wrong.” Salvatore took a long sip. It was plain and strong, but of good artisanal quality, just like he liked it. “*Grazie.* You didn’t have to.”

Silvio's grin widened, but he waved the gratitude aside. "So the Cristallobianco job is definitely a go, then?"

"Yes," Salvatore said. "Vittoria agreed to my terms. Nineteen-hundred and sixty in gold to us if we deliver the horn ring by dawn on Tuesday. Will nine-hundred and eighty *maree* suffice for you?"

"Certainly." Silvio did, in fact, look perfectly content with his share. As well he should, Salvatore thought. There was not a single other thief he would even remotely consider splitting his profits with fifty-fifty. But for what Silvio was capable of accomplishing, half of the gold they earned for the job seemed more than fair, and perhaps not even enough. As always, Silvio seemed to be the exception to the rule.

Salvatore took another long sip of the coffee, then set the cup to one side, trailing his fingertips over the warm surface. The porcelain was decorated with a light lavender glaze that faded upwards into pale indigo, and the side was stamped with a simple yet elegant insignia. The words *Sala da Tè di Ada* curved around it.

Salvatore had noticed that whenever Silvio happened to bring him coffee, it was usually from this same place. He assumed the thief was a regular at the tearoom, wherever it was located, during the long, unknown hours of his days. He wondered if a woman named Ada ran the place, and if so, what she was like, and why Silvio chose to frequent the place.

"I was able to make a copy of the archive floor plan," Salvatore said. He unfolded his replica of the blueprints carefully and was pleased to see that the charcoal had barely smudged. He laid the paper out across the countertop, turning it towards Silvio so the thief could more easily read the notations. "This is the original plan, anyway. It's a few centuries old now, but I can't imagine it being very different from what the place looks like today."

Silvio's eyes lit up as he leaned over the sketch. He looked as impressed with Salvatore's acquisition as Salvatore usually was with what Silvio stole. "Well done. This will make breaking in a great deal easier."

"Especially as there aren't many viable entrances or exits." Salvatore removed several paperweights from a nearby drawer and placed them at each corner of the blueprint. He rubbed at some of the creases in the paper with his thumb. "No windows into the archive itself, of course. Just a single central hallway through the middle of the floor, with the actual storage vault taking up one whole side and various reading rooms and the like on the other."

Nico leapt onto the counter beside Silvio. He licked cookie crumbs from his snout and paws and peered down at the blueprint too. "Any windows into the reading rooms?"

"Three of the rooms have them, yes." Salvatore pointed out his notations of the windows. "But I doubt any of them would make ideal entrances."

Silvio hummed thoughtfully. Obviously noticing the same thing Salvatore did, he said, "They all face out towards the street, don't they?"

Salvatore nodded. "And it's no half-hidden side street, either. It's one of the main thoroughfares through Isola di Oro Rosa, right in the middle of the isle's most prominent studios. It's only a block away from Campo di Fiancogemmo and the main guildhall of the Jewelers Guild, too. A perfect location for a studio like Cristallobianco."

"So even in the dead of night, there's likely to be a few potential witnesses milling about," Silvio said.

"I'm certain there's at least a few Guardia patrols that pass through the area every hour or so." Salvatore took another sip of his coffee. "The studios aren't full of freshly-blown *dragovetro*, of course, but all of the gold and silver and precious gems they do house aren't

anything to sneeze at. And the place is fairly well lit with dragonfire orbs, too, though mostly near street level.”

“So, not the reading room windows, then,” Nico muttered.

“They wouldn’t be my first choice,” Salvatore admitted. “I imagine they’re probably locked from the inside as well.”

“It’s good to know they’re there, though,” Silvio pointed out, “in case I need an emergency exit.” Nico snorted in amusement, apparently at the thought of Silvio ever needing to escape from anywhere in a hurry. “How close is the archive to the roof of the building?”

“It’s on the uppermost floor,” Salvatore said. “If you can find a way in from the rooftop, that would be a great advantage.”

The thief turned to Nico. “We’ll scout out the roof situation first tomorrow night, *eh?*” The little dragon nodded, sliding another *bussolai* out of the paper sack and biting into it.

“Watch the crumbs,” Salvatore grumbled.

“What about the lower floors?” Silvio asked. “How do the studio’s members get up to the archive?”

“There’s two staircases,” Salvatore pointed them out, one at each end of the central hallway. “The floor below is mostly studio space, and the one below that houses the main showroom, the owner’s office, and a storage room.”

“Any windows on those floors that don’t face out towards the main street?”

Salvatore smiled. “There’s a few on the floor below the archive that do face an alleyway, but I’d be wary of treading into the studios themselves, even after midnight. There’s always one or two artists intent on continuing to work when everyone else is asleep.”

“That’s a sentiment I can relate to,” Silvio said, and Salvatore chuckled.

“Any back doors on the ground floor?” Nico asked around a mouthful of cookie. He swept the resulting crumbs off the countertop with his tail before Salvatore could so much as shoot him an irritated glance.

“One side door. The back of the building is flush against the back of another.”

“Would it be more feasible to get in through the building behind it?” Silvio wondered aloud. “If that building has less security...”

“I didn’t see any connecting doors on the blueprints.” Salvatore sipped his coffee. “Doesn’t mean they haven’t installed one in the last few centuries, but I doubt it. The building behind Cristallobianco’s is another jewelry studio, and I can’t imagine they would be any easier to break into.”

“*Va bene*. The ground-floor side door is a possibility, then. I’m certain it wouldn’t be too difficult to pick.” From an interior chest pocket of his thieving attire, Silvio produced a slim, palm-sized writing pad and a thin stick of graphite. He flipped open the pad to a blank sheet and began to write down some notes.

Salvatore waited patiently, nursing his coffee and watching the fluid movement of Silvio’s hand. The thief’s letters were small but clear, legible and confident, far from Salvatore’s own scrawl. He turned his gaze away, staring back down at the blueprint, as Silvio tossed his head to sweep stray strands of black hair out of his eyes.

“Any thoughts on what other obstacles might be lurking inside?” Silvio asked, once he looked up from his notes. “Hired guardsmen? Alarms? Vicious traps to avoid?”

“Cristallobianco might have a night watchman or two employed,” Salvatore said. “I’ll try to ask around and see if anyone knows for certain, though you’re more likely to find out through your reconnaissance. As for alarms and traps, I doubt you’ll be dealing with tripwires or pressure

plates or the like, not with people going in and out of the archive on a daily basis. That would be too much work to maintain. More likely, they've had the Artificers Guild set their standard alarm on the vault door and individual traps in and around the drawers with the highest-valued items. Just basic deterrents. Needles dipped in a paralysis solution if you try to unlock them without the right key, or pouches of ink that burst if you pick the item up incorrectly. That sort of thing."

A thoughtful expression crossed Silvio's face. "I'll take particular care opening the drawer, then, as well as the vault door. Any chance there might be a master key to the drawers?"

"Probably. That's a hell of a lot of drawers to have individual keys to." Salvatore took a sip of his coffee. "I doubt that sort of master key is something a guardsman would have on their person, though. Probably just Cristallobianco's owner and their personal archivist."

"Why go to all that trouble to pinch a key?" Nico interjected. "Just wear gloves and duck to the side when you're picking the lock."

Silvio frowned. "Because I'd prefer to leave no trace of my acquisition, if at all possible."

"And nothing leaves less of a trace than using the actual key," Salvatore agreed.

Nico flicked his tail, clearly unconvinced. "But then you have to return it to exactly where you found it. Otherwise, they'd only have more reason to be suspicious. That defeats the whole point of pinching the key in the first place."

"That's true," Silvio said, "but the actual key shouldn't set off any traps, while picking the lock is likely to do just that. It's certainly a trade-off, but there's risk involved either way."

The thief didn't look particularly concerned about the potential hazards, Salvatore thought, but then again, Silvio had never displayed the same signs of anxiety or fear that other pickpockets and burglars often did. He was confident in his abilities, of course, as he had every right to be. But even when Silvio was an untrained youth, Salvatore had noticed a distinct, if

quiet, energy about him whenever the details of a heist were discussed. A tight coil of anticipation, perhaps, in the way his shoulders stiffened and his fingers tapped restlessly at the countertop, as if eager to wrap themselves around their next target.

He seemed a true *maestro-ladro* in those moments, brimming with the thrill of a stealthy sojourn into forbidden territory, the excitement of the execution of a theft, and the breathless release of a successful escape — the sheer, aggrandizing delight of breaking the law. It was an energy manifestly at odds with the serenity and kindness Silvio showed when discussing lighter matters or feeding Nico a treat, and it left Salvatore wondering at the contradiction.

By the time the mantle clock struck one, the coffee was gone, the *bussolai* consumed, and a basic infiltration plan had been hashed out. Despite the straightforward nature of the heist, the plan featured multiple options for getting in and out of Cristallobianco's archives depending on what hazards happened to present themselves to Silvio in the moment. Salvatore knew the thief had successfully improvised his way out of several tense situations before, including hiding inside a massive ceramic vase for several hours to avoid detection and climbing up a chimney to escape when he found all the windows in the room to be trapped. Still, Salvatore preferred the comfort of premeditated actions to the unease of spontaneous ones.

A quiet lull filled the Caveau once the decisions were made. Salvatore tapped his fingers absently on the side of the cooled porcelain cup, watching as Silvio returned his writing pad to its hidden pocket. "Be sure you're well concealed when you go out tomorrow," he reminded Nico. "Isola di Oro Rosa is not Opercolo. You're not liable to find any friends or easy bolt-holes there should you need to hide."

"I know," Nico snapped, but it lacked the dragon's usual bite. He flicked his tail at Silvio's rucksack. "I'll stay in the bag until we get up on the roof. No one will see me."

“And keep your paws to yourself,” Salvatore added. “Reconnaissance is no time for opportunistic pilfering. If something *is* reported missing, it threatens the success of the actual heist.”

“I know!”

“No need to worry,” Silvio said. “I’ll take good care of him, and I’ll make sure to return him in one piece.” Despite his sweet tone and smile, there was a mischievous glint in the thief’s light gray eyes, and Nico bared his teeth at him in a hollow threat.

“Both of you take care,” Salvatore muttered, and he looked away as Silvio’s expression softened. “This is a decent job with decent pay, but nothing to get yourselves compromised over, *capisce?*”

“Of course,” Silvio agreed. He stood, slinging on his rucksack and pulling up his hood. He nodded at Nico. “I’ll meet you at that one spot on Scoglio di Rubino at, say, ten o’clock, and we can cross the canal to Oro Rosa from there.”

“I’ll be there.” Nico’s tail swished across the countertop, ruffling the thin paper of the blueprint copy. Not for the first time Salvatore felt a pang of something like regret or frustration for not being able to say the same.

Silvio began to step away, but paused as the list of potential targets, still hanging from the wooden post, caught his attention. “Is this new?” he asked, and at Salvatore’s nod, Silvio leaned in to examine the list in more detail. Salvatore watched the thief’s parted lips move as he read the words silently to himself, his eyes flitting across Nico’s tiny handwriting. Salvatore’s disquiet gave way to amusement.

“Just take the paper,” he said as Silvio went to pull out his writing pad again. At his questioning look, Salvatore smiled and shrugged. “Hardly anyone else ever brings me what I

specifically ask for. Anything you happen to pick up, just cross it off the list and bring the paper back later.”

Silvio grinned. “And if I happen to cross everything off the list?”

“Then you’re just showing off.”

With a chuckle, Silvio pulled the paper off the nail, folded it, and tucked it away in a pocket. “I think I *am* in the mood for a spot of burglary before bed,” he said airily, the way another person might admit to wanting to do a bit of light reading. “So I’ll leave you to the rest of your work. *Arrivederci*, Sal. Nico.”

“*Arrivederci*.”

Once Silvio had departed, Salvatore did return to his work. He wrote several messages to foreign clients, stacked the prepared packages and letters up on the counter, and labeled, cataloged, and stored the items he had bought from Ysabel and Ruggero.

At some point, he felt a weight on his shoulders and the tiny pinpricks of claws, but he was too absorbed in his current task to really pay attention. When, around two-thirty, a brisk knock sounded at the Caveau’s door, Salvatore found that Nico was unable to answer it. He had curled up around Salvatore’s neck and was now fast asleep.

Unlike his fellow dragons, Nico’s scaly body gave off no heat — only reflecting Salvatore’s own warmth back at him — and no thin wisps of smoke escaped his nostrils from his slow, even breaths. Salvatore gazed out of the corner of his eye at the small head resting on his upper arm and the tail tip waving gently against his vest and decided not to question it.

Taking care not to jostle the dragon too much, Salvatore got up from his stool and walked over to the door himself. “Who is it?” he asked quietly.

“Edgardo, *signore*.”

Salvatore recognized the name and voice. He opened the door. “Come in,” he said, ushering the man inside. “The shipment’s ready. Just let me get her payment together.”

Edgardo worked for Elisa Andatura as a courier, and he was often the one tasked with picking up packages from the Caveau. Tall and well-built, he wore the sort of nondescript laborer’s attire that allowed him to blend in seamlessly with many populations within the city-state, from the artisan woodworkers and metalsmiths to the low dockworkers and fishermen. He followed Salvatore silently to the counter and began to load the shipment into his empty satchel without any questions or looking about. In his appearance and mannerisms, Salvatore thought Edgardo greatly resembled many of Elisa’s underlings: imposing without being an obvious threat and always highly obedient.

Nico stirred slightly at the clinking of coins as Salvatore filled a pouch with Elisa’s fee and passed it to Edgardo, who put it into the satchel with the packages. By the time he’d tipped Elisa’s lackey a few copper *basse* and Edgardo made his silent way out of the Caveau, Nico had woken up and jumped down from his shoulders.

“The goblet’s gone?” the dragon asked, stretching out his front legs and yawning.

“Yes,” Salvatore said sternly. “Put it out of your mind and go to bed. You’ll be of no use tomorrow night if you don’t.”

Nico sniffed and muttered petulantly, “*You* go to bed,” but Salvatore didn’t pay it any mind. It was, in fact, a good idea. The coffee Silvio had brought was beginning to wear off, and it was past time to close the Caveau for the evening. He had accomplished enough for one night.

Once everything was put away in its proper place and the doors and trapdoors were all locked up tight, Salvatore slipped through the dark back alleys to the *fondamenta*, hailed a gondola, and made his quiet way home.

Capitolo Tre

Gentle rays of sunlight and the cheerful morning chime of the clock tower bells roused Salvatore from his slumber, but only long enough for him to blearily roll out of bed, pull the dark curtains over the window, and climb back beneath the sheets. It was easy enough, after a lifetime of practice, to tune out the rising sound of bustling foot traffic from the streets below, but the light was harder to ignore. Salvatore closed his eyes resolutely and eventually drifted off once more, only waking again after the bells had declared the tenth hour.

Saturdays were traditionally half-days of work or school in the Isole Fulgide, with the afternoons and evenings given over to city-wide frivolity, to special open-air markets and annual festivals and all manner of indulgent entertainment. Though most of the shops surrounding the Antichità Manco were indeed open until midday, Salvatore couldn't be bothered to do the same. It simply wasn't worth the effort or the cost, and so he had settled the shop many years ago into a rhythm of five days open followed by two days closed.

After all, Salvatore thought sleepily to himself, the Caveau was open every single night of the week. There was simply a greater demand for his services as a fence than his services as an antiques dealer. He wasn't missing out on much, and the opportunity to catch up on missed sleep was too good to pass.

When he had finally slept his fill, he cleaned himself up and dressed for the day. Capitulating to the convivial atmosphere he was certain to encounter once he stepped a foot outside, Salvatore selected a slightly more elaborate ensemble than his usual workday attire. He had a rich olive-green jerkin that his mother, Sofia, had embroidered along the edges with a

pattern of pale leaves, and though he'd had it for many years and the fit was now a bit too tight, he thought the piece would suffice. He laced the jerkin on over a beige-striped tunic with dark brown trousers, planted a flat cap on his head, and slipped a few bronze rings on his fingers as an accent. That was about as much personal ornamentation as Salvatore could stand.

As he left his apartment, Salvatore could feel the sense of collective anticipation in the air. Already there were vendors setting up stalls in the Quartiere Verderame's main *campo*, raising high canopies of brightly patterned silk and filling portable display tables with goods from hand-drawn carts. A few sailors, distinctive in their loose linen tunics of mottled grey, white, and blue, had sauntered their way over from Riposo dei Marinai; they lounged by the *campo*'s central fountain, cheerfully heckling anyone within earshot. An adventurous seabird looking for scraps was chased off by a stray cat, which was in turn merrily pursued by several children, still in their school uniforms, who had slipped away early from their classes.

A sharp sizzle and the spicy scent of cooking hogget and pork wafted through the air. Salvatore tracked it to a large booth on the opposite side of the *campo*. The stall was operated by a young *dragadonna* wearing a broad neckerchief of culinary yellow and orange. Consistent plumes of smoke drifted from the slits of her nostrils, a clear indication that she was keeping the cooking flame going with her own fiery breath.

Salvatore admired the large slabs of seasoned meat as he passed by, but merely touched the brim of his cap to the chef and continued on. He knew she would not be offended. It was indecorous for humans to consume red or gamy meats, at least not in any great quantity. Though dragons had developed both a tolerance and a taste for a variety of edibles over their centuries living among humans, they still required a substantial amount of their native sustenance to remain healthy and strong. As there was no space in the lagoon-bound city in which to raise

livestock, all of the meat had to be imported at an immense cost, and first rights to all portions were subsequently reserved for the dragonic population. Most of the humans Salvatore knew never ate such meat, surviving contentedly on locally-caught seafood and the occasional fowl.

His morning appetite now sufficiently roused, he eyed a few of the opening stalls specializing in baked goods and considered whether to purchase something there or, perhaps, to fall back on his regular routine and stop at the Caffè di Palmieri. As he dithered, thumbs tucked in his belt, a small company of humans dressed in elaborate costumes of purple, green, and gold made their way into the square, calling out for the attention of the vendors and the passersby. The sailors relinquished their prime seating area with only a few blithe taunts. Once several members of the company began to leap and tumble across the tiled square and another started to juggle colorful glass orbs full of dragonfire, Salvatore found that his decision was made for him. He left the *campo* and headed east, making his way across the bridge onto Isola di Giada.

The wide *campi* of the Mercato Pietra were beginning to sprout transitory street booths of their own, but as the district was already populated by shops and places to eat, Salvatore found the transformation easier to endure. Close as it was to midday already, he abandoned his search for a simple coffee and *biscotti* and began instead to contemplate a true meal. He passed through several streets, uninspired, until he saw through their front window that the Avesani was not yet crowded.

The little *osteria* was humble in comparison to its nearby competitors; the head chef and owner, Patrizio Avesani, had not apprenticed with the Culinary Guild, but had earned a lesser certification later in life. Salvatore appreciated the relative modesty of its simple fare, however, and the fact that the server, Avesani's daughter, always knew to seat him alone at the small table

in the back corner. She didn't bat an eye when he asked after any surplus scraps of *carne rossa*, either, but said she would see what she could find.

He exchanged terse pleasantries with a few fellow patrons. When his food was brought out, Salvatore was able to eat in relative peace. The stew was clearly of the vegetable variety, with thin, pink slices of beef added on top as an afterthought, but the savory hint of the meat was enough to satisfy his momentary craving. He did get a few judgmental glances from the *osteria*'s other customers, but he ignored it in favor of polishing off the side of polenta.

Salvatore had just ordered *frittole alla crema* and coffee for dessert when, from outside, he heard the telltale protracted rumble of a horsehair bow across strings, the experimental staccato notes of other strings being plucked, and all the various sounds of instruments being tuned to perfection. He sighed and remained in his seat as the other customers left off their conversations and turned alertly to the window, a few standing up for a better view and one moving his chair to a closer table. As the tuning gradually ceased and there was a held breath of silence, Avesani's daughter rushed to the *osteria*'s front door and opened it wide, jamming the door in place.

The music sprang into being, a harmonious blend of strings and reeds and drums, and quickly took up a familiar tune. The audience was held captive, neglecting their food and their companions, and Salvatore waited with forbearance for Avesani's daughter to stop standing in the doorway and return to work. She did eventually, though only after the first song ended and the whole *osteria* had broken out in applause.

Both the *frittole* and coffee were hot when placed in front of him, but Salvatore consumed them with greater efficiency than he would have preferred. By no means were the instrumentalists outside *bad* — he could easily tell they were a professional group from the

Musicians Guild — and Salvatore certainly didn't hate a well-played tune. In fact, he rather enjoyed music, particularly of the softer variety, but only at the right place and time. But the delighted enthusiasm of his fellow customers irked him and left him unable to relax. Salvatore quickly finished his meal, paid his distracted server with exact change, and stepped out of the open door.

The musicians had set up in one corner of the small *campo* and had easily attracted the notice of everyone in the area. Stall vendors and their customers had paused to appreciate the music and so had many passersby, who stood around with their arms full of goods and commented to each other in quiet, respectful tones on the quality of the playing. The performers were resplendent in their regalia of pale blue, teal, and white, the colors honoring Ventocelesto, patron dragon of musicians and composers. The instruments they had brought with them glinted in the sunlight. Each had been crafted from the finest woods and metals, then lavishly decorated with elaborate enamel designs and cabochons of *dragovetro*.

As Salvatore left Avesani's, the group's viol player struck up a familiar jaunty melody and the rest followed him effortlessly into the tune. A trio of women, who had been waiting nearby, formed up beside the instrumentalists and broke into song, their voices rising and falling in perfect harmony with the music. Each woman wore a dress of pale yellow, coral, and white. These colors commemorated Golabrilietta, patroness of vocalists and lyricists and Ventocelesto's mate. The women, Salvatore noticed, had even dusted their necks below the chin in a silvery powder for luck. They had sung only a few lines before several members of the scattered audience joined in, and Salvatore felt the knot forming in his chest begin to constrict. He knew exactly what was coming.

Before the chorus even properly began, the whole *campo* was singing along and rhythmic clapping had risen to support the drummers. Men and women in flowing pink-and-white silks emerged from the crowd as if spontaneously manifested, their heads crowned in bands of ivory. They formed up in the open space in front of the musicians, and once they had all assembled, they simultaneously began to dance. Their quick steps were perfectly in rhythm with the musicians and the vocalists, which wasn't a surprise. Both their costumes and their skill proclaimed them devotees of Nuvolarosa, patroness of dancers and choreographers.

Salvatore struggled to make a path through the crowd. If he could just get to the other side of the *campo*, he thought, he could take a side street to Giada's eastern *fondamenta*. There was sure to be plenty of fresh air there, and many empty, waiting gondolas.

But then cries of delight and laughter broke through the music and Salvatore knew that the dancers had invited the audience to join in. He pushed through the throng as it surged forward to heed the dancers' call. Salvatore knew the song — he knew the music, the words, and even the steps, having been taught them decades ago in school — but he'd be damned if he let himself be drug into this foolishness again for no reason.

"*Cazzo!*" he hissed beneath his breath, fighting towards the edge of the *campo*, and chanted a low "no, no, no, no" of firm refusal as one of the dancers motioned for him to join an empty space in the dance. Movement grew easier the further away he got, but Salvatore felt his throat tighten up all the same.

When he finally made it to the side street, he looked back just in time to see the crowd break into the final chorus, all dancing in close step and singing along in between smiles and bouts of laughter. It was, Salvatore thought, as if it were perfectly natural to drop whatever you

were doing — no matter how important or time-sensitive — to share in the performance of a song and dance in public with a group of random people you likely didn't know.

The problem, Salvatore mused sourly, was that here in the Isole Fulgide, it was.



Loitering on the *fondamenta* and nursing his pipe, Salvatore watched the boats glide by along the Canale di Coroncina and pondered how to pass the long, stifling hours of the afternoon.

The waterway was bustling with all kinds of Saturday traffic. There were the sturdy guild-owned vessels, proudly emblazoned with their order's insignia and colors, carrying their precious cargo in padded crates strapped down to the deck and covered by canvas. There were also the private vessels with their lavish shaded *felze*, the cabin windows shuttered with louvered blinds to protect their occupants from the light of the sun and the eyes of the masses. Salvatore even spotted a few squat patrol boats keeping vigil on the far side of the canal, their snapping banners displaying the crisp white and ultramarine blue of the Guardia di Drago.

The gondolas, however, stood out amongst the colorful throng. Salvatore watched one of the sleek vessels cut through the shimmering waters like shears through molten glass, guided by the confident hand of the gondolier standing tall in the stern. The gondolas of the Isole Fulgide were all painted a cool bluish-black and decorated with metallic patterns, like a night sky full of starry constellations, and they carried all manner of commuters to their destinations. The gondolas' human passengers certainly had an easier time of it, though, Salvatore thought, as they could lounge on the sky-blue cushioned benches in comfort. Most adult dragons were so big that

they had to crouch so the gondolier could see over their heads, and they had to curl their tails around their paws to keep them out of the water.

As his gaze traveled lazily over the passing gondolas, Salvatore recognized one of the dark boats and its pilot in particular. The gondola was quite unique. Slender lines of silver leaf on the hull intertwined to depict a pod of female water spirits, their heads peeking up above the water line with curiosity. The fantastical creatures were ethereal in their beauty, an indisputable work of art, and yet inescapably ominous with their dark blank eyes and sharp silver teeth.

Emptying and stowing his pipe, Salvatore made his way to the closest docking station and threw up a hand to catch the gondolier's attention, soon receiving a signal of confirmation in return. A brief moment and a dexterous turn of the oar later, the gondola slid to a smooth halt at the end of the dock, right at Salvatore's feet.

"Signor Manco," the gondolier said, her voice husky and amused. She touched the edge of her wide-brimmed straw hat in salute. "Where are you headed this fine day?"

"The Quartiere Case d'Asta," Salvatore replied. He had spent many a Saturday afternoon over the years watching and participating in the art auctions on Isola di Indaco, and it sounded as good an idea as any.

"*Va bene.*" The gondolier nodded and waited until Salvatore had stepped carefully into the boat and taken a seat before guiding her vessel back out into the chaos of the canal.

Both were quiet for a minute or two. Salvatore gazed mildly at the boat's *ferro* — the iron prow-head was in the shape of an open-mouthed dragon — and the gondolier rowed in a comfortable silence. Eventually, the gondola emerged from a bottleneck of traffic into a less congested part of the Canale di Coroncina, and only when they had gained some space from the boats around them did Salvatore say, "Elisa. It's good to see you. How's business?"

Elisa Andatura laughed, low and brief. “Can’t complain, but I might anyway. And you, Sal? From the shipment Edgardo brought me this morning, you’re in for a right profit.”

“I should be,” Salvatore agreed evenly. “As long as everything makes it to its buyers in one piece.”

“No need to worry. It will.”

Salvatore peered up at the gondolier, squinting in the sunlight. Elisa Andatura was a tall woman, lean, and older than Salvatore by just enough years to make her his elder. Her black hair — thick and plaited in a loose braid that hung down past the seat of her trousers — was streaked with gray, and thin lines creased her sun-touched face in the corners of her eyes and lips. But she was strong and vigorous, with a vitality that Salvatore had never possessed even as a young man. She could steer her gondola through the twists and turns of the canals with all the authority, power, and grace of a regal swan.

She also commanded the most profitable gang of smugglers in the Isole Fulgide.

Elisa didn’t look the part of a prominent rogue in her gondolier’s attire: a straw boating hat, a white tunic, and dark fitted trousers, with a wide silk sash and trim hat band in matching cerulean. In fact, Salvatore had always thought Elisa cut a rather motherly — though certainly not matronly — figure, simultaneously easy-going, tough, reliable, and wise.

The image of the maternal gondolier, however, was as much a ploy as Salvatore’s doddering antiques dealer. At her core, Elisa was sharp, enterprising, and unapologetically ruthless. Slipping stolen or illegal goods past the authorities, through security checkpoints, and over watery borders without being caught was a trying task for any trafficker, but getting anything in or, especially, out of the Isole Fulgide was a smuggler’s worst nightmare.

To prevent knowledge of the existence of dragons from escaping to the outside world, every single letter, package, and human aboard the isles' trading vessels were scrupulously inspected, interrogated, and evaluated by the Guardia di Drago for any hint of potential treason. The punishments faced by anyone that garnered the slightest bit of suspicion could be quite dire indeed. Salvatore knew that Elisa had developed her smuggling enterprise with even greater caution and care than he had his own fencing operations. The Guardia as a whole was not known for being susceptible to bribery or corruption, and Elisa had spent decades securing trustworthy contacts and getting her own loyal lackeys into positions of power within the inspection offices, the crews of the trading vessels, and the Guardia itself. She was a formidable woman and had long ago earned Salvatore's confidence and respect.

"Any upcoming cargo I should know about?" Elisa asked. Her tone was casual, her attention focused on the canal, and she smiled and nodded to a fellow gondolier as he guided his own boat past them in the opposite direction.

Salvatore waited until they were alone again before answering. "Got a dragon's horn ring coming in from Cristallobianco." Elisa whistled, impressed. "Diamonds over fused glass. One of Stabile's pieces."

"Leggièri will have fun with that one," she surmised.

Salvatore gave a gruff sound of assent. "Signorina Constantino needs it before dawn on Tuesday, so if you could arrange pick-up and delivery..."

"Consider it done."

He leaned back into the cushioned bench. "Do you happen to know anything about the security there? At their studio? Anything I could pass along would be appreciated."

Elisa mulled this over for a moment before answering. “I have three or four of my people working in guard posts on Oro Rosa, but no one at Cristallobianco. There’s less active surveillance on that isle than you’d think, considering all the gold and precious gems they handle. They rely pretty heavily on their safes and vaults. That’s my understanding, anyway.”

“Mine as well.”

Elisa chuckled. “I can’t imagine your *maestro-ladro* will have any trouble, not with a few simple locks. That’s what I know of that. Anything else I can assist with?”

He considered the packages he still had to prepare and the letters he still had to write and shook his head. “Besides that, just the regular pick-ups this week. If anything changes, I’ll send word by Nico.”

Elisa nodded her confirmation, then twisted the oar in its *fôrcola* to swing the gondola to the right, heading east along the Canale di Coroncina.

To the north lay Isola del Porto Sicuro. Between the passing cargo vessels and other water traffic, Salvatore caught glimpses of patrol boats bobbing gently in their moorings, and of imposing buildings of stone and glass towering over the courtyards below. Porto Sicuro was the first isle that had been settled by the initial wave of human and dragon immigrants, and it had become the center of government and law enforcement in the Isole Fulgide. It was notably home to the grand Palazzo Ducale, the residence of the isles’ currently elected pair of *dogi* as well as the location of the meeting chambers of the lawmaking Consiglio dei Maestri and the judicial Tribunali. The headquarters of the Guardia di Drago, the Questura, was situated to the north of the isle, clearly marked by its banners of white and blue. Though hidden from Salvatore’s current view, he could envision the covered bridge that connected the Questura to the rocky islet upon

which crouched the Prigione di Punto Nord, where all of the isles' prisoners were securely locked away.

Salvatore, as a rule, avoided setting foot on Porto Sicuro whenever possible. He had toured the Palazzo Ducale with his classmates as a child, and he could remember the sensation of awe the building's many rooms had evoked in him, with their lofty, echoing ceilings and life-sized historical murals that depicted the founding of the city-state. He had even been inside the Questura before, but that had been decades ago now, and the memory of his forced march over the bridge conjured up a strong, metallic taste of dread.

As Elisa rowed them onward, the Basilica di Vetro del Creatore soon came into view. Its gilded façade, colossal arched windows, and glass-paneled domes shimmering with sparks in the bright sunlight. Salvatore squinted, shading his eyes with his hand.

Unlike the cozy, guild-run *santuari* that honored the inspirational memory of the isles' patron dragons, the Basilica was dedicated to the worship of *il Creatore*, the One who had Created All Things. Salvatore had attended many Sunday morning services there growing up, surrounded by his family, and when he closed his eyes, he could still see the open, airy interior with perfect clarity. Glass tesserae created dazzling mosaic patterns across the marble floor and up the soaring walls, climbing to touch the gold-rimmed domes, whose clear glass allowed celestial light to spill down upon the congregation far below. Small altars for each of the thirty-one patron dragons lined the nave, with Iridescenza's alter in the center, but above that stood the high altar for *il Creatore* with its ever-burning *fiamma eterna*, symbol of the act of Creation itself.

The centerpiece of the Basilica, however, was the giant rose window in the back of the apse, whose stained glass featured a stylized depiction of *il Creatore* as a massive gold, white,

and iridescent dragon. With a halo for a crown and fantastic outstretched wings sprouting from its back, the One who had Created All Things was forming the earth from a sphere of its own holy dragonfire. Even the Palazzo Ducale could not hope to rival the Basilica's incredible majesty.

"I wonder sometimes," Elisa commented lightly. Salvatore opened his eyes and glanced up in time to see her nod in the direction of the Basilica as the building grew smaller behind them. "Just how much *dragovetro* and fine gems are embedded in those walls. Not to mention all the artisan offerings left at the shrines."

"A god's treasure worth," Salvatore muttered.

"Indeed," Elisa agreed. "Any pieces from there ever find their way to the Caveau?"

Salvatore grimaced, turning to face the prow of the gondola. "Occasionally," he admitted. "Though most are too afraid to try. Too afraid that... I don't know, they'll drown in a canal or be consumed by dragonfire for their heresy." Elisa laughed. "Such pieces are too hard to sell anyway. Too recognizable in the isles and too dragonic to risk sending outside." Salvatore nodded towards the next isle approaching on their left, a small smile returning to his face. "I'd rather have all the treasure of Nebbiosa anyway."

The magnificent terraces of Isola Nebbiosa rose high above them. It was a rare spectacle in the isles, as most were modestly situated at sea level. Beyond the moored pleasure boats and private vessels, the elaborate upper registers of manifold *palazzi* poked up above the terrace walls, as if to peer with disparagement and suspicion on the humbler buildings of other isles down below.

For centuries, Isola Nebbiosa had been home to the elite of the Isole Fulgide: the members of the city-state's oldest artisan families, its government officials, its wealthiest

individuals, its most prominent glassblowers, and *draguomini* and *dragadonne* of every occupation and station. And it remained the single most luxurious and ostentatious place in the isles. Sumptuous banquets, exclusive gatherings, and decadent masquerade balls were commonplace occurrences, nearly nightly events, as they gave the residents of Nebbiosa the opportunity to show off their most recent renovations to their *palazzi*, their latest artisanal acquisitions, and the skills of their private chefs, wardrobe designers, and entertainers.

Despite the repugnant pretentiousness of the place, its people, and their parties, Salvatore couldn't help liking Isola Nebbiosa. As a fence, both his wealthiest clients and most profitable targets came from there, and so frequently did its inhabitants buy new glass pieces, jewelry, and other ornaments, that they often did not realize — for quite some time, at least — when a particular item had mysteriously gone missing. Though the constant patrols of private guardsmen and the nastily complex locks and traps of the Artificers Guild kept most potential burglars away, infiltrating most *palazzi* on Isola Nebbiosa was a breeze for Silvio. The walls were too easy for him to climb to be any real deterrent, and the frequent early-morning fog that gave the isle its name provided ample cover for his getaways.

If forced to move more visibly through the manicured courtyards and mural-lined corridors, Salvatore had no doubt that Silvio would blend right in with the esteemed residents and their incessant guests. The thief could smile with the same sort of confidence and walk with the same fluid grace, and his slender frame and delicate features would certainly win him many friends before he could even reach the door. There wasn't a single other thief beside Silvio that Salvatore thought capable of such of feat, but if luck remained on their side and every planned moonlight jaunt into Isola Nebbiosa continued to go as smoothly as they all had before, his theory would never need to be tested.

The Canale di Coroncina had grown crowded once more, and Elisa fought for room to maneuver her gondola out of the main thoroughfare and into a narrower canal on the left. For a moment, several cargo boats — smelling strongly of savory spices, tanned leather, and turpentine, respectively — created an inadvertent blockade. But after some irate shouting and aggressive hand gestures from their pilots, the tangle eventually sorted itself out and the gondola moved forward once more.

The canal separated the isles of Nebbiosa and Indaco, but several ornate bridges spanned the distance, connecting the two together. Elisa did not bother to duck her head as they passed beneath the shadows of the stone arches — they were too high to worry about — but Salvatore watched her lean hard into the final, sharp turn to the right with momentary concern. But of course she was as competent a gondolier as she was a smuggler and didn't fall. Instead, she guided her vessel with smooth precision into the first available docking station on Isola di Indaco.

Salvatore had hardly stood up from his seat before several young men and women, dressed in jovial silks and fashionable hats, were clambering to take his place. Unable to get in another private word, he merely shuffled through a belt pouch for his fare and passed it — along with a generous tip for both the ride and their continuous association — into Elisa's waiting hand. "*Grazie, signora.*"

"The pleasure is mine, *signore*," she replied in kind, tucking the coins into her sash and giving him a favorable wink.

Salvatore touched the brim of his cap and, heavy legs trembling just a bit from the long trip, stepped with care from the boat onto the dock. The waiting youths wasted no time slipping past him, climbing on board and falling happily onto the cushioned benches, never ceasing their

delighted chatter. One called for Elisa to take them to the southwestern tip of Isola di Smeraldo with all haste; they had tickets to a performance there in less than half an hour, and they couldn't possibly be even a minute late. With a final amused glance in Salvatore's direction, Elisa nodded to her new passengers in understanding and guided her boat away from the dock and back out into the canal.

With a small smile, Salvatore wondered how many extra *stagni* the gondolier would charge the youths for her haste. He wondered, too, whether or not the smuggler would allow them to depart at their destination with all of their many valuables intact.



The Quartiere Case d'Aste had once been situated far to the northwest on Isola di Ottone, where the Guardia's inspectors examined all of the isles' imports and exports before releasing them for internal or foreign shipment. As the centuries passed, however, the small isle of Ottone became too crowded as its Quartiere Finanziario expanded. The auction houses were eventually driven out, their halls and warehouses requisitioned for use by government clerks and inspection offices, but they soon found a new and more suitable home for themselves on the northeastern side of Isola di Indaco.

The new Quartiere Case d'Aste — the one that Salvatore had always known — was ideally positioned in the Mercato Brillante district, whose high-end clothing and textile shops had long catered to the wealthy residents of Isola Nebbiosa. It was also but a single bridge from the glassmaking center of Isola dei Vetrai and the culinary hub of Isola di Zafferano, and it was a short walking distance from the maskmaking studios of Isola di Alizarina and the jewelry studios

of Isola di Oro Rosa. The transplantation of the isles' auction district had benefited everyone involved and the auction houses were as profitable as ever.

Elisa had dropped Salvatore off quite close to the Quartiere Case d'Aste, and he had only to walk a few short streets to get to its main center. Those few streets, however, drove home quite clearly that he had left the familiar, everyday territory of Mercato Pietra far behind.

The vibrant extravagance and grandeur that permeated Mercato Brillante made Salvatore feel disconcertingly small and austere in comparison. The wide avenues here were paved with porcelain tiles, intricate patterns of deep blue overlaying the white glaze. Despite the constant tread of leather-soled shoes and clawed, scaly feet, they were kept immaculately clean through the constant attention of dedicated street cleaners. The storefronts — painted primarily in elegant shades of indigo, apricot, and rose — displayed endless racks of fine fabrics wrapped up in heavy bolts along with clustered baskets spilling over with skeins of freshly-dyed woolen yarn.

As Salvatore made his way down the street, slipping between clusters of humans in fanciful attire and dragons bedecked in sparkling jewelry, he passed a number of busy shops belonging to seamsters and tailors. They were easily marked out by the glass dragonfire lanterns hanging above their doors, each glowing a vivid orange even in the afternoon sunlight, the color honoring their craft's patron dragon Occhiarancione. The shops of the embroiders, weavers, and needleworkers were similarly easy to spot. Each featured sconces overflowing with fresh bouquets of flowers, and many had blossom-covered wreaths hanging from the doors and windows, all symbolizing their patroness Fioreseivatica.

Passing into the Quartiere Case d'Asta, Salvatore felt the tension in his shoulders relax. Here the conspicuously bright colors and insignias of the artisan guilds gave way to the more muted tones and simpler placards of the auction houses. The streets were still tiled with porcelain

and the buildings' facades were still grand, but he felt much less out of place and rather more in his element, walking as he was amongst secondhand buyers and specialist collectors. After a brief self-deliberation, Salvatore decided to see what the Casa d'Aste di Brusadin had up for sale that day. He climbed the short steps up to the familiar mulberry-hued building and made his way inside.

The man at the front desk recognized him on sight. "Signor Manco, *benvenuto*. You've arrived just in time; they're about to get started. Have you come to observe or to bid? We've several lots today that might be of particular interest to you."

"Let's say 'bid,' then," Salvatore replied. He scrawled his name — *A. S. Manco* — on the proffered list of auction participants and took the numbered bidding paddle that the man handed him. "Do you have a copy of the listing I could take?"

The man did, and he passed it over to Salvatore with a standard "*buona fortuna*." Salvatore nodded his thanks and exited the lobby into the main auction hall itself.

Brusadin's was not an enormous establishment, but Salvatore was able to find a good seat with ease. He sat down in a chair about halfway back from the raised platform where the auctioneer stood, leaning on his podium and waiting for the first lot to be brought on stage. There were perhaps two dozen or so other people already seated, mainly congregated in the front rows where it was less of a strain to see what was up for bidding. Most were dressed similarly to himself, in the nice but modest attire of shopkeepers, proprietors, and lessors. There were a few whose more shabby and flamboyant clothing, however, put him in mind of the fishers and dockworkers of Isola di Opercolo, perhaps relaxing indoors after a long week under the sun and hoping to snag a deal on some piece of necessary furniture.

Salvatore set his paddle on the empty seat next to him and pulled out his reading optics. He slipped them on and perused the day's listing. He could see why the man at the front desk thought he would be interested in bidding. Amongst the lots of bookshelves, bassinets, and paint-splattered easels were a variety of decorative vases, crates of small glass figurines, an incomplete set of ceramic dishware, and a deceased woman's locked jewelry box, presumably full of unrevealed treasures. Salvatore nodded to himself. Keeping the most intriguing lots' numbers in his mind, he stored his optics just as the auctioneer raised his voice to welcome the chattering crowd.

The next few hours churned by like a well-worn waterwheel. Lots were carried out and placed on stage for the participants to study while the auctioneer read their descriptions from the listing and provided a comment or two on the objects' origin, history, and present condition. Then the bidding began. Paddles were raised with more or less enthusiasm, quickly at first under the auctioneer's encouragement, then slowing down to a predictable crawl as each successive bid grew higher and higher. Eventually, all but one of the participants would shake their heads in dispassionate defeat, and the auctioneer would announce the winner to a scattering of polite applause.

Salvatore ended up bidding on several of the antiques, once he'd had a moment to assess them. He managed to get the crate of glass figurines at a decent price, but then again, they were small practice pieces, fancifully-shaped ornaments and paperweights clearly made by apprentice lampworkers. Placing them at regular intervals throughout the drab antiques shop, however, usually made them stand out to his customers and thus felt like wonderful finds. He bid on a few of the vases, too, until their prices exceeded what he knew he could resell them for and he dropped out.

The jewelry box, however, managed to cause some commotion. Since the key had not been found among the woman's belongings, the box itself was currently useless, but the clinking sound it made when lightly shaken was clearly alluring to many in the hall. A heated bidding war broke out between five of the participants, Salvatore included. It wouldn't take Silvio but a second to pick the lock, he reasoned to himself as he raised his paddle again and again; then he'd have both an intact mahogany box with detailed floral engravings *and* whatever mysterious baubles happened to be inside. Eventually, only Salvatore and a determined woman in the front row were left in the running, and when she called out a bid several *maree* higher than his previous one, Salvatore huffed and finally conceded with a dismissive flick of his hand.

Once the last lot was announced — a table and set of chairs he had no interest in — Salvatore got up and was able to slip out of the auction hall without attracting attention. He brought the paddle and listing back to the front desk and was already signing and paying for the crate by the time the hall doors opened, letting out the telltale rumble of conversation that signaled the auction was over. The man at the front desk assured him that his winnings would be delivered to the Antichità Manco first thing Monday morning, and Salvatore thanked him. He managed to leave Brusadin's before he could be roped into any sort of conversation or confrontation with his fellow bidders.

Though the afternoon sun had advanced far in its usual course, there were still a couple of hours left before it was appropriate to begin thinking about an evening meal, so Salvatore settled for a coffee and an almond pastry from a nearby vendor's cart. He stood beneath the shade of one of the auction houses' awnings for a few minutes, sipping and munching on his refreshments and assessing his options, when a passing cluster of humans and dragons caught his eye. The men and women wore elegant light ensembles that Salvatore knew to be the height of fashion,

while the dragons' scales gave off a polished gleam that matched their bright metallic bangles. All, however, were conspicuously sporting a fresh white carnation somewhere on their person, green stems tucked in their hat bands or vest pockets or threaded through a piece of jewelry.

Salvatore finished off his pastry as he watched them stroll further down the Quartiere Case d'Asta before entering a large and ornate auction house at the end of the street. Its façade was a luxurious pale goldenrod, its elaborate trim white, and its hanging sign depicted a blooming carnation above a name in looping script: *Garofalo*.

Why not? Salvatore thought to himself. He had the time, and it might be quite informative. He followed the path the carnation-wearers had taken and climbed the white marble steps, where, at the top, a uniformed doorman allowed him inside.

The lobby of Garofalo's was nearly the size of Brusadin's auction hall, and it was decorated with all of the sumptuousness of a *Nebbiosa palazzo*. The man sitting behind the front desk glanced up at Salvatore, assessing him through the gold-rimmed optics perched on the end of his nose, before returning to his discussion with the group Salvatore had followed inside. In an obvious snub, the man did not offer him a paddle or one of the carnations from the glass vase on his desk, which designated the participants in Garofalo's auctions. But Salvatore wasn't offended. He wasn't dressed in the sort of finery that conveyed great wealth, and Garofalo's specialized in the kind of high-end furniture, jewelry, and works of art that only the most wealthy could afford.

He wasn't planning on bidding anyway.

Salvatore threaded his way through the crowd, careful not to spill his coffee on anyone's fine linens, and slipped as unobtrusively as he could into the main hall. The auction was already in progress and the massive room was packed. He couldn't spot a single empty seat in the entire

house, and there were more humans and dragons standing along the back wall and in the side aisles. Salvatore made his way past several *draguomini* bearing carnations to a vacant space in one back corner, apologizing quietly as he went for the disturbance. The dragons didn't appear to notice him, however. At his height, Salvatore could hardly disrupt their view.

On stage, the current lot consisted of a large oil painting of a *dragadonna* reclining, its thick gilded frame nearly obstructing the display easel. Salvatore didn't recognize the subject matter. The color of her scales and the surrounding paraphernalia weren't consistent with the standard depiction of any of the patron dragons, and he had never seen this particular piece in any historical catalog. Salvatore supposed it was some recent portrait made for an affluent individual.

Regardless, paddles all around the room were flying up at dazzling speeds and the auctioneer was announcing each successive bid as fast as her lips could move. Salvatore raised an eyebrow as the price continued to mount. Here in Garofalo's, bids were more likely to rise in increments measured by platinum *lagune*, rather than more everyday currency like gold *maree*, silver *stagni*, copper *basse*, or iron *gocce*. He leaned against the wall, making himself comfortable, and took a long sip of his coffee. The auction had been going on for hours at this point, he was sure, but the audience showed no signs of fatigue and the bidding didn't appear to be slowing down anytime soon.

Eventually, only two bidders remained in the running for the *dragadonna* portrait, but they were clearly committed to the cause; each continued to raise their bids by dozens of *lagune*, clearly hoping to top the other's limit. An undercurrent of excitement buzzed through the crowd, people turning in their seats and craning their necks to watch the duelists, separated as they were by several rows of seats. Salvatore shook his head at the spectacle. He chuckled at the hushed

gasp of the onlookers as one of the bidders — a young man in a violet silk cap — hesitated for a moment too long before stammering out a weak counteroffer. Within moments, his opponent — an older woman with pearl beading in her coiffed gray hair — had secured her victory. The audience applauded with genuine amusement as the *dragadonna* portrait was carefully lifted by two attendants and transported offstage.

The next few lots consisted of similarly large oil paintings, several of them marine landscapes and one dramatic tableau of a famous death scene by Spettrocremisi, patron dragon of playwrights and directors. Then came an oversized writing desk, with *dragovetro* inlays and a low cushioned stool, fit only for use by an adult dragon. Then a tapestry depicting springtime revelers in a field of flowers, worked in lushly dyed thread by expert hands. Then a marble statue of a young woman cradling a dragon hatchling in her arms, the draping of her clothes and hair so finely carved and convincingly lifelike that it caused some mystified exclamations from the front row.

Each lot was rapidly fought over and won, abundant sums of *lagune* seemingly parted with without concern. Salvatore eyed the winners with honest envy. The man who bought the death tableau ordered a drink from a nearby attendant and sipped the red wine brought to him with serene poise, while the *dragadonna* who won the writing desk fanned herself calmly with a lacework fan attached by an elegant contraption to her tail.

Just as Salvatore was about to give up and make his way out, the auctioneer announced the next lot as a set of glass perfume bottles. He paused, then straightened up from his slouch, training his eyes on the mahogany tray an attendant was carrying on stage. All around him, humans and dragons were doing the same, leaning forward and craning their necks. The five bottles on the tray were sized for a human, and they ranged in shape from a slender alabastron to

a squat pyxis. All, however, were an opaque seafoam green, caged in gilded metalwork vines and enamel roses, and sitting upon golden pedestals studded with glimmering gems.

A collective hum of appreciation made its way through the crowd, and Salvatore tightened his grip on his empty coffee cup. He had to get his hands on those bottles. He had a foreign client that would pay through the nose for just such a set, and he watched intently as the bidding began, tracking the rise and fall of each paddle. He forced himself to relax, however, and assume an impassive expression. It wouldn't do for someone to notice and remember the humble antiques dealer in the corner showing too much interest, not if the glass bottles happen to mysteriously go missing from their new owner's estate sometime in the near future.

Within moments, the bidding war was over, and a middle-aged woman, coincidentally wearing an enamel rose hairpin, nodded graciously as the house applauded her victory. Salvatore didn't recognize her, so he memorized her appearance as best he could before turning his attention to the next item brought to the stage.

Following the glass perfume bottles were a series of lots seemingly designed to pique Salvatore's professional avarice. First, a delicate porcelain service for two made by celebrated ceramist Adriano Gronchi, each stark white piece bordered in lavender, violet, and gilt. Then, a full set of women's jewelry — necklace, earrings, bracelets, and broach — made of rose gold, pink sapphires, and shimmering *dragovetro* beading. Then, a collection of rare silk folding fans with mother-of-pearl inlays on the wooden guards. Then, a silver coffeepot with a curved walnut handle and dragon-headed spout, completed by a matching set of silver cups.

Salvatore committed to memory each lot's successful bidder. Several he knew by sight, though he was personally unacquainted — mostly public figures, prominent artisans from prominent artisan families and government officials — and those whose identity he didn't know

he could make a reasonable guess about based purely on their clothes and surrounding associates. Between the larger lots and furniture pieces, more ideal targets emerged: marble bookends shaped like exotic cats, a checkered gaming board with ivory and ebony pieces, an antique cittern with a lace-like rosette sound hole. Salvatore mentally sorted them by market value, potential buyer, and ease of illicit acquisition.

Certain items, such as the coffeepot, would be near treasonous to smuggle out of the Isole Fulgide. Any depiction of a dragon that resembled the real, intelligent beings and *not* the distorted, bestial monsters of the outside world's myths and legends was staunchly restricted, as were any enlarged items sized for an adult dragon's use. If Silvio could get ahold of the coffeepot and cups, though, Salvatore thought he might know a local individual who would be pleased to add it to their private collection. The perfume bottles, rose gold jewelry, and silk folding fans, however, were much higher on his mental list.

The auction drew to a close following a climactic scuffle over a fine applewood armoire with engraved paneling. There was an appreciative round of applause for the weary-voiced auctioneer. Since he had stationed himself close to the doors, Salvatore was one of the first to exit the room, and he loitered patiently near the front desk as the crowd streamed out into the lobby, abuzz with energy. Though he pretended to examine a painting hanging on the wall — a still life, featuring an excess of carnations — Salvatore kept his eye out for the victors of his favorite lots. The new owner of the rose gold jewelry he recognized as a notable choreographer once he saw more than the back of her head, and the winner of the folding fans was a well-known architect.

When he caught sight of the woman with the rose hairpin, he quickly averted his gaze and pretended to sip thoughtfully from his empty cup. She lingered in the lobby for so long,

chatting companionably with several other women and *dragadonne*, that Salvatore was about to leave to avoid looking suspicious. But then she finally broke away from her friends and approached the front desk.

Salvatore shifted his stance — his feet were aching after walking and standing for so many hours — and stared unseeingly at the painted carnations. Once he heard the scratch of a pen on the register, however, he rolled his shoulders with a casual air and turned, knowing he would have but a split second to spot her name.

Thankfully, her signature was large and legible, and Salvatore committed it, too, to memory. He strolled past her without another glance and left through Garofalo's opened doors.



Overhead, between the high eaves of the clothier and millinery shops, the sky had traded its pale shade of afternoon blue for a deeper, early-evening cobalt that was dappled with tufts of hazy pink and amber. The orange lanterns of the tailors seemed to glow brighter than before and many of the stores appeared to be nearing their hour of closing. All across the isles, Salvatore mused as he walked, the street vendors would be counting the day's profits and packing up their stalls and unsold goods. While Saturday afternoons belonged to the festivals and open-air markets, Saturday nights belonged to the private banquets and parties, the musical and theatrical performances, and the formal dances and masquerades.

Already Salvatore spotted a group of revelers heading north towards Isola Nebbiosa, clothed in frippery and gamboling wildly. The men swung their arms as they skipped, while the women linked their arms conspiratorially, tittering and snickering into each other's velvet- and

lace-covered shoulders. Their faces and identities were obscured by the masks they wore, each professional works of art. They had all been crafted and tastefully adorned with glass cabochons, gemstones, and feathers by members of the Maskmakers Guild, and though every mask was unique in design, all were painted a stark white underneath or were crafted from alabaster porcelain. The white base was traditional for Isole Fulgide masks; it purportedly mimicked the facial discoloration of Mascheravoria, patron dragon of maskmakers, tattooists, and cosmeticians. Salvatore stepped to one side of the street as the revelers passed by, as did several other pedestrians. It was sometimes difficult to see where one was going in full-face pieces like those, so it was best to give the masked plenty of space.

Now quite hungry and eager to rest his throbbing feet, Salvatore gave into temptation and crossed the closest bridge from Isola di Indaco to Isola di Zafferano. Silvio's trip to the isle for the goblet of Fogliatèverde had reminded Salvatore that it had been several weeks since he'd last gone to Zafferano for a meal. As he was already so close by, it seemed a shame not to stop there tonight.

The heart of the Rione Culinario and home to all of the food- and drink-related guilds, Isola di Zafferano had the indisputably best taverns, eateries, bakeries, coffeehouses, tearooms, confectioners, and pastry shops in all the isles. Trade vessels brought imported meats, fruits, vegetables, and spices directly to Zafferano's docks, and the fishermen of Opercolo carried their daily hauls straight from their boats across a single bridge — the Ponte dei Pescatori — right to the kitchens' back doors. These measures guaranteed that the chefs, bakers, and brewers of Zafferano always had the freshest ingredients to work with, and the guilds' rigorous apprenticeships ensured that every culinary artist was capable of producing dishes of the highest quality.

Such stringent standards, along with the isle's proximity to Nebbiosa and the Mercato Brillante, made Zafferano an expensive place to go eating and drinking. But there were ways to avoid paying a premium for similarly superior cuisine, if you knew where to go and what to look for. In his youth, Salvatore had spent much of his minimal free time on Isola di Zafferano, and he had discovered that many of the unassuming, hole-in-the-wall establishments in and around the guildhalls were actually run by advanced culinary students. In these guild-sanctioned spaces, the apprentices could practice making certain dishes for real customers until they achieved perfection, but since they had not yet earned their certification, they were forced to charge much less for their already skillful work.

With this knowledge in mind, Salvatore wound his way through Zafferano's twisting cobblestone streets, climbing frequent short flights of stairs and passing by shop after shop full of edible delicacies. Here, in the northwestern corner of the isle, the pastry chefs and confectioners reigned supreme. Their storefronts were painted in pale lilac, peach, and cream to honor their sweets-loving patron dragon Pannalavanda.

With every step, Salvatore's nose was assailed with a profusion of delicious scents. There was that warm and heady aroma Silvio had mentioned, baked bread fresh out of the ovens, and the dry, spicy tang of ground cinnamon emanating from the open doors of the bakeries. But there was also the sickly saccharine scent of sugar in the air, almost overpowering the earthy fragrance of roasted nuts and rich cocoa, that was both appealing and repulsive to Salvatore's empty stomach.

The brightly-lit windows of the shops displayed mounds of cookies, candies, and other goodies to the passersby, stacked in inviting pyramids on lace-covered stands or arranged artfully in woven baskets or beautiful glass jars. While many of the treats were formed into simple,

classic shapes — rectangular sponge cakes, round shortbreads topped with fruit jams, oblong slices of crunchy biscotti — others displayed the culinary artists' need for individual flare. In one confectioner's window was a bouquet of twisted liquorish sticks, which fanned out at their tops into slick black flowers, complete with veined leaves and fragile stamens. In the next shop — an upscale bakery — all of the raisin-filled loaves on display were braided into elegant and complex knots, each one lovingly crafted and completely unique. Passing one patisserie, Salvatore was almost sidetracked by a silver tray full of fresh dragon's horns, the spiral-shaped flaky pastries dusted with powdered sugar and stuffed to the brim with thick white cream. But seeing the price for a single pastry, he managed to pull himself away from the door in time, much to the visible disappointment of the shopkeeper inside.

As Salvatore continued his climb into the interior of Zafferano, the bakeries and confectioneries began to give way to stylish taverns, intimate *osterie*, and fashionable dining halls. His stomach growled anew as the cloyingly scent of sugar was overcome by the briny pungency of cooked fish mixed with the occasional whiff of grilled meats, fried onions, and freshly-chopped herbs. Most of the eateries he passed seemed to specialize in a particular kind of dish — various panini, perhaps, or pastas with a signature tomato-based sauce — but as always, a few establishments appeared more than willing to experiment with new kinds of fare every day of the week. The placards on their doors proudly proclaimed that evening's culinary undertaking. While a few of the dishes on offer didn't seem so bad, Salvatore nearly gagged at the thought of one locale's inventive use of oysters.

Dinnertime was well underway at this point on a Saturday evening. Salvatore could see many diners through the windows swiftly devouring their fine meals — painstakingly prepared and exquisitely arranged — in their haste to get to some performance or social gathering. The

packed dining rooms left the walkways fairly barren, though, and he made good time as he entered the streets surrounding the guildhall of the Cuisinier's Guild.

Here, the crisp oranges and yellows associated with Scintillagrume, patron dragon of chefs, adorned the façades of every eatery, and the aroma of citrus and mingled spices — pungent garlic, minty sage, floral-sweet saffron, and spicy black pepper — was much stronger. Passing down a familiar side street, Salvatore found the *osteria* he was looking for without trouble despite its lack of signage and the plain exterior that made it indistinguishable from the shops around it. He went inside.

The *osteria* was small and narrow, with barely enough room for five modest tables; it would have been a nightmare for a fully-grown dragon to visit. Salvatore was relieved to see that there was only one other customer at the moment, obviously a culinary student herself, who was deeply invested in a treatise on the uses of coriander. He sat down at an empty table and raised a hand in greeting to the youth who stuck his head out of the door in the back. Over his lemon-colored smock, he wore a white apron trimmed in orange and covered with a series of ominously dark stains. The apprentice nodded at his new customer in recognition and retreated back into the kitchen.

Salvatore relaxed, grateful to finally be off his feet. He hoped, as his stomach growled again, that the apprentice already had something good in the works back there. Whatever he was practicing to prepare tonight was what Salvatore would get, but at this point, the lack of options wasn't a problem. Almost anything sounded good at the moment. Fortunately, it wasn't long before the apprentice reappeared with a large dish in one hand and a glass of wine in the other, his expression deeply tired, harried, and frustrated. Something dark had stained wide swathes of

his skin and his rolled-up sleeves, all the way from his fingertips up to his elbows, and Salvatore leaned away from the apprentice's arms as he sat the meal on the table.

Agreeably, if unsurprisingly, it was a *risotto al nero di seppia*, the creamy rice dyed a stunning glossy black by the ink sacs of the braised squid it contained. Salvatore endured the apprentice's apprehensive stare and nervous babbling as he stirred the risotto pensively. He knew his honest assessment was expected here, even required. Salvatore carefully sniffed a spoonful, the way his childhood teachers had taught his class to do. The dish smelled like it ought to, salty and rich, and was topped with an appealing sprinkle of freshly-cut parsley. Salvatore took a small bite of the rice. Then, when he found it acceptable, he took a larger bite with a curled strip of the squid. The risotto itself was quite nice, its flavors well balanced, but the squid was a bit too chewy, if still edible.

Salvatore relayed his judgment to the apprentice, who seemed both mollified and resigned to the critique. Obviously, Salvatore thought, the boy would rather be off with his friends on a nice Saturday evening like this, instead of wrestling by himself with briny ink sacs in a tiny practice kitchen.

But completing an artisan apprenticeship, much less doing so at the highest level, required an incredible amount of dedication, labor, and sacrifice. Stifling an exhausted yawn on his mostly-clean shoulder, the apprentice thanked him and trudged back into kitchen so Salvatore could eat the rest of the risotto in peace.



When he was finished, Salvatore paid the apprentice and stepped outside the *osteria*, feeling much refreshed from the food and respite. The dark blue-black of night had nearly overtaken the sky, though hints of the stunning colors of sunset could still be seen out towards the west. Walking through the golden-lit streets of Zafferano, with its specialty shops and perpetual citrussy aroma, had reminded Salvatore of two things. First, he ought to get something nice to bring to tomorrow's noonday meal while he was still here on Zafferano. And second, Leandro Tosi had mentioned several nights ago that Carina wanted to see him, and there would be no better opportunity to visit her than tonight.

Salvatore took a different path back down to the canals, straying southward into the territory of the Brewers Guild. The air grew thick with the eye-watering scent of fermented grapes and bitter liquors, the earthy floral tang of dried camellia leaves, and the rich, delightful aroma of roasted coffee beans. White-flowered oregano, rosemary, and other herbs sprouted profusely from boxes beneath the windows of the taverns, tearooms, and coffeehouses, and flowering vines cascaded down from their rooftop gardens over walls painted in various shades of green and violet. The *caffè* were still hosting a modest number of customers, who calmly sipped their drinks and chatted, perused a book, or sketched lazily on some spare scrap of parchment. The taverns, however, were positively overflowing with more excitable patrons, many of which appeared several cups deep in their wine already. Loud, uproarious laughter, shouted private conversations, and mostly-rhythmic clapping spilled out from the taverns' open doors, nearly drowning out the strings, pipes, and drums of the night's hired entertainment.

The heavy clatter of toppling furniture caught Salvatore's attention, and he craned his neck to look in one window, where a *draguomo* was apologizing — between bouts of hoarse guffaws — to the barista and several soaked companions for his tail's willful carelessness.

Salvatore shook his head, adjusted his cap, and continued on. On Isola di Zafferano, the taverns could get quite boisterous, especially on Saturday nights when the patrons relaxed their inhibitions after a long week at work. But the tumult that occurred here was practically genteel compared to the rough behavior and disorder that could be found in the shadier, lower-class establishments on Opercolo and in Riposo dei Marinai.

Salvatore had been to such places himself — had, in fact, spent several years as a young man frequenting those dockside taverns nightly — and he knew just how dangerous they could be. In Zafferano, a drunken game of cards for a handful of *maree* could simply be an amusing diversion, but elsewhere, the stakes of such casual gambling were considerably higher and their consequences more dire, even with mere *basse* or *gocce* on the line. As comfortable as Salvatore was amongst the underground element of society, he still cringed whenever Nico mentioned going to the Levriero Zoppo on a Saturday night. The little dragon had plenty of friends at the tavern, to be sure, but Salvatore was quietly grateful that Nico was with Silvio on his reconnaissance tonight.

He stopped at the first reasonably-priced wine shop he happened upon. After a few minutes of browsing their stock, he purchased a small bottle of pinot grigio and accepted the padded canvas wine carrier the shopkeeper offered him. The bottle thumped lightly against his hip as he descended each flight of cobblestone stairs, tapping out an erratic beat to the soft chinking of the keys on his keyring.

He passed more taverns and eateries as he walked, each swarming with merry groups of humans and dragons intermingled, all talking and dining and enjoying each other's company. He passed clusters of revelers on the streets, many with faces concealed behind white masks, heading to or leaving from some dinner party or private gathering. He passed the bakeries and

patisseries and confectioners, and most of them were closed now, their lavish displays and sweet aromas still enchanting but no longer distracting. And then Salvatore heard the soft splash of water over the fading din and found himself once more at the canal between Zafferano and Indaco.

He had to walk only a block or so down the *fondamenta* before he sighted a gondola moored on his side of the waterway. A lantern encasing a dragonfire orb hung from the *ferro*'s iron jaw, and its soft glow lit up the spirals of silver leaf on the bow like lightning. Salvatore found the vessel's pilot lazing on the cushioned passenger bench. His legs were crossed at the ankle and one hand dangled over the edge of the boat to skim the surface of the cooling water. His straw hat was tilted down over his face. Salvatore couldn't tell if he was asleep or not.

He tapped the hull of the gondola with the toe of his boot. "Are you taking passengers, *giovanotto*?"

The gondolier stirred, then lazily raised the brim of his hat and squinted at Salvatore. "Does it look like I am, *signore*?"

Salvatore glanced around the *fondamenta*, but he didn't spot anyone staring at them or hastening in their direction. He also didn't spot any other unemployed gondolas nearby. "Have you been hired to wait for someone's return?"

The gondolier snorted. "What business is it of yours if I have?"

Salvatore sighed. He didn't recognize the man as one of Elisa's lackeys, so mentioning her name wouldn't get him anywhere. Reluctantly, he laid his hand against one of the pouches on his belt, causing the coins inside to clink together. "I need to get to Isola di Rame. Tonight, preferably."

A chuckle escaped the gondolier as he lowered the hat back down over his face. “That’s unfortunate, *signore*. You have quite a ways to walk. If you get started now, perhaps you’ll make it there before sunrise.”

“*Maledizione*,” Salvatore cursed. “What did they offer you to wait? Whatever it is, I’ll give you the same, plus the fare to Rame.”

From beneath the hat came a thoughtful hum. “But I am very tired, *signore*. I have been ferrying people from one isle to the next all day long. Back and forth, back and forth, under the blazing sun. It’s not easy work, you know.”

“Spare me,” Salvatore snapped. “It’s your job, so quit complaining. I’ll give you their offer and half as much more, in addition to the fare. That’s my final offer. It’s more than generous.”

The gondolier appeared to agree. Slowly he sat up, then yawned and stretched his arms. He straightened his hat, brushing strands of hair out of his face, and wiped his damp fingertips on the leg of his trousers. His exaggerated movements were aggravating. Salvatore was hard pressed not to kick the boat again.

“Alright, *signore*,” the gondolier said. He was still sprawled out on the passenger bench, but at least now they were talking face to face. “You’ve convinced me. My boat is at your command. Where on Isola di Rame do you wish to go?”

Salvatore fought to control his grimace. He could name the Quartiere Verderame and have the man drop him off near his apartment, but then he would still need to walk quite a distance in addition to overpaying the gondolier. He could name somewhere closer to his destination, instead — a street on Isola Topazio, perhaps — but then he’d already stated which isle was his objective.

Staring stolidly at the lantern dangling from the *ferro*, Salvatore swallowed down the lump in his throat and muttered, “The Quartiere Peridoto.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the gondolier stare at him for a moment before looking his new passenger up and down. He could feel the man assessing his round, tired face and the strain of his jerkin’s laces against his stomach. Another chuckle escaped the gondolier as he climbed to his feet and Salvatore felt his cheeks grow hot.

“Now, why didn’t you say that in the first place?” the gondolier said. He stepped up onto the stern and retrieved his oar, shooting Salvatore a knowing grin. “Don’t worry. You need to get there tonight, *signore*, I’ll make sure it happens. Climb aboard.”

With effort, Salvatore held his tongue. He stepped into the gondola and seated himself stiffly on the bench. He made sure to angle away from the gondolier so he wouldn’t have to look at the man’s smirking face.

Once he’d untied the boat from its moorings, the gondolier kicked off the *fondamenta* and turned the oar in its *fôrcola*, guiding the vessel out into the middle of the canal. Salvatore stared at the lantern in the prow as it swung lightly from side to side. He prayed the man was not one of the more talkative gondoliers.

As it turned out, the gondolier did keep his words to himself. Instead, he began to hum, just loud enough for his passenger to hear over the sloshing of his rowing. Salvatore quickly recognized the tune. He had heard it many times before, though only ever in the earliest hours of the morning in the sleaziest taverns the isles had to offer. He tried to not recall the lyrics, but failed. It was quite the lascivious song, and all the more memorable for its bawdy chorus.

Salvatore sighed and closed his eyes, though it couldn’t drown out the gondolier’s humming.



Night had fully descended by the time they reached the westernmost edge of the city. The obsidian black that shrouded the sky was reflected in the water below, and only a soft scattering of stars was visible further out above the open lagoon. The darkness made it easy for Salvatore to spot the first olivine lanterns, flashing and winking like cat's-eyes, on Isola di Rame's southwestern shore.

The gondolier had ceased his humming only once he'd steered the boat around the sharp southern tip of Isola di Indaco and found the Canale di Coroncina impassable. Every available docking station along the bank of Isola di Smeraldo was full of private vessels and hired gondolas, all staunchly waiting for their passengers to return from a dramatic or operatic performance. The center of the canal was blocked by even more boats, their pilots searching in vain for an empty place to dock. In the crimson and emerald lights of the nearest theaters and performance halls, Salvatore could see uniformed members of the Guardia di Drago standing on the *fondamenta*, waving their arms and shouting unheard directions to the heedless boatmen. With some skillful maneuvering, the gondolier managed to change their course before they became part of the blockade.

Instead, he steered the gondola south through a narrower but less crowded canal, turning west at the next available waterway, which snaked between the isles of Smeraldo and Acquamarina. Though the two isles comprised the entirety of the Rione Esibizione, their contrast was highly visible in the gathering dark. To Salvatore's right, the deep red and green lights of Isola di Smeraldo — occasionally interspersed with Mèchevioletto purple — signaled more

theatrical venues, acrobat rings, and illusion shows. To his left, the pale blue, yellow, and pink lights of Isola di Acquamarina designated the isles' main auditoriums, concert halls, and dance arenas.

Muffled music drifted out over the water, a confusing cacophony of moods and melodies. From one building came the blaring of brassy horns, joyful and bright; from another, a crescendo of nervous strings, apprehensive and wrought with fear. Booming percussion pounded out a relentless rhythm from inside one large establishment. The rising of a chorus of harmonized voices was barely audible above the persistent beat. The sound was raw and primal, Salvatore thought, like one of the old dragonic ballads or epics: something composed untold centuries before the Isole Fulgide was founded, back when the dragons lived in hiding on the mainland amongst the high peaks of the northern mountains. But the gondola carried Salvatore out of the rhythm's range before he could decide if it was a familiar song or a newer composition imitating the ancient style.

With adroit twists of his oar, the gondolier guided them smoothly around the serpentine curves of the canal. They soon passed by the main isles of the Rione Letterario. First, Isola di Zaffiro, home to the Poets Guild, its buildings largely painted slate blue and ashy gray in tribute to their patron dragon Cuorenembo. Then, Isola di Ametista, home of the Prosaists Guild, its buildings adorned in orchid purple and pale mauve to honor their patron dragon Porporazefira.

Most of the windows in the Rione Letterario were dark this late on a Saturday night, the humans and dragons who worked there engaged in other pursuits elsewhere. But Salvatore spotted the light of a few lanterns here and there inside the Grande Biblioteca degli Scrittori as they passed beneath its shadow. Half of the enormous library was built on Zaffiro and the other half on Ametista, with a massive multi-storied archway bridging the gap over the Canale di

Spaccatura that ran between the isles. Salvatore assumed the lanterns belonged to some dedicated readers too immersed in their books to notice the time, or perhaps to some writers scribbling furiously on their manuscripts, desperate to get the words in their heads down on paper before they faded away.

After angling the boat to the right and guiding them easily between Isola di Smeraldo and Isola Catecù, the gondolier steered them back onto the Canale di Coroncina. The traffic was less congested here and continued to dissipate the further they got from the center of the Rione Esibizione. The rest of the trip — around Catecù and through the isles of the Mercato Pietra — was swift and required no further detours. Before Salvatore could inwardly prepare himself, through the darkness came the yellow-green glimmer of a myriad of lanterns hanging all along the *fondamenta*.

They had arrived in the Quartiere Peridoto.

“Any particular place you’d like to be dropped off, *signore*?” the gondolier asked as he brought the vessel to a momentary halt. Salvatore could hear the smile in the man’s voice and it grated on his nerves. “Or would you like a recommendation? I could give you a few, if it would help.”

“Anywhere is fine,” Salvatore snapped.

But then he saw just how many people were loitering on the bank of the canal. Some were alone, leaning against lampposts and skulking in doorways, while others were in pairs or small groups, conversing and laughing loudly and cavorting down the *fondamenta* on unsteady feet. All were human — not a single dragon was in sight — and all appeared to be adult in age. By far, the vast majority were also male. Though a wide range of attire could be seen, from

shabby sailor's tunics to embroidered Indaco doublets, more than a few men were sloppily dressed or were obviously missing some critical piece of clothing.

Salvatore quickly amended his command, with a sharp gesture towards a spot further down the shore. "Around there, actually. Near... near there."

"Yes, *signore*." The gondolier propelled them forward and soon brought the vessel up to an open docking station in the vicinity he had indicated. Before Salvatore could begin to reach for his belt pouches, however, the gondolier had leapt from his perch and was beginning to tie the boat to the mooring.

"You don't have to do that," Salvatore said quickly, standing up. The gondola bobbed unsteadily beneath his boots.

The gondolier paused and glanced up at him, looking genuinely confused. "You don't want me to wait for you, *signore*? It's no problem." He shot Salvatore a persuasive grin. "I won't even charge you for the wait."

Of course he wouldn't mind, Salvatore thought sourly. The man wouldn't be sitting idly in his gondola; he'd be wandering around on shore, with more than enough to distract and entertain him in the meantime. It was certainly preferable to lingering around Isola di Zafferano all alone.

"I will be awhile," he told the gondolier, who only shrugged and continued to grin. "Quite awhile, in fact. Perhaps until the morning." The gondolier's eyebrows rose. He seemed almost impressed. For the first time, Salvatore wondered if the man hadn't been ridiculing him this whole time. Perhaps it had merely been friendly teasing. It was hard for Salvatore to tell.

"If you're certain." The gondolier helped Salvatore out of the boat, reminding him not to forget his bottle of wine, and named him a price for the fare. Even keeping their initial agreement

in mind, the length of the trip, and the time of the week, the amount was staggering. Salvatore dug through his pouches with clenched teeth, but managed to scrape up the necessary coin. Carina better make it worth all the trouble, he brooded.

The gondolier hopped back onto his boat, touching the brim of his hat to Salvatore with a grin. “Have a wonderful evening, *signore*.”

“I’m sure I will,” Salvatore muttered. Begrudgingly, he touched his cap in return and turned away from the gondola, stepping further onto the *fondamenta*.

The Quartiere Peridoto only truly came alive at night, but when it did, it assaulted its visitors with a wild riot of sights, sounds, and smells. The doors of every building sported at least one — though often a dozen or more — hanging lanterns in prismatic shades of chartreuse green, the color leaving no doubt as to the purpose of the establishment. From inside the various brothels, salons, and massage parlors came the muffled sounds of chatting and laughter, the beguiling strum of a lute or harp, and the occasional shouts of delight. Salvatore felt his throat tighten and his eyes sting as wafts of floral perfume washed over him, mixing oddly with the briny stench of the lagoon. He patted his belt pouches, reassuring himself of the presence of his pipe and *stramonio*, but didn’t light up. Instead, he relaxed his shoulders and strode a few meters down the *fondamenta* until he reached a familiar three-story building.

Like many of the establishments here, the façade was an inviting olivine hue, though the paint was less worn and chipped here than on other buildings. A profusion of yellow and green lanterns, some containing flickering candles and others steady dragonfire orbs, were hung or situated in clusters on the white marble steps. From boxes beneath the windows sprang well-tended miniature gardens, their tiny blossoms mingling pale yellow and cream. Over the emerald

door was a dainty sign, the words written in a calligraphic script that twisted like tendrils of vines.

Casa di Limetta

Salvatore glanced back at the gondola. It was still lingering by the dock, but its pilot was looking the other way, likely at the sloshed individual who had just walked headfirst into a lamppost. Salvatore mounted the stairs, opened the door, and slipped inside. The cleansing scent of citrus struck him immediately and he breathed out in relief, the knot in his chest beginning to abate. He compelled his mouth into a hesitant smile and looked around.

The large circular lobby of the Casa di Limetta was so richly and tastefully decorated that it could have passed for the entryway to some prestigious culinary artist's *palazzo*, rather than the reception area of a Peridoto bordello. Between the ornamental white columns along the perimeter of the room could be seen a faded but masterful fresco of an orchard in full bloom, the boughs of its lemon, lime, and quince trees heavy with ripe fruit and small perching birds. The floor beneath Salvatore's boots was covered in small white tiles, an elegant mosaic of green and yellow tesserae radiating out from the center like lacework. On the far side of the room, in front of a winding staircase, sat a sinuous desk of white lattice-like iron with a countertop of white marble. Matching chairs and benches with plush cushions of emerald silk had been scattered about the lobby with stylish discernment.

Salvatore saw that several of those seats were already occupied by patrons of the house. These men were dressed in finery ranging from middling to very expensive, reflecting the caliber of the establishment they had selected; one even wore an extravagant mask that confirmed, rather

than obscured, his identity as a wealthy man. While a few of the patrons seemed agitated, their fingers drumming the arms of their chairs in anticipation, most appeared quite happy and relaxed. They drank pale yellow or green liquor from crystal goblets with a sly, satiated air, or chatted coyly with several young women all at once.

The ladies who ran the Casa di Limetta were out in full force tonight, Salvatore observed, though he hadn't expected any different. Five or six were lingering around the lobby, posing seductively against the columns or lounging gracefully at a patron's feet, their folded arms resting on his lap. Consummate hostesses, they flirted and served drinks and listened to the men talk with apparent enraptured delight. One young woman, seated alone on a stool, managed to sing and play an enchanting song on her lute while making eyes at a cluster of besotted men across the room.

The women themselves were lovely to behold, Salvatore thought. It was a simple, objective fact. Though their features varied — some willowy and slender, others buxom and shapely — each was undeniably winsome and decorated as lavishly as their surroundings. Like tailors' mannequins in the midst of a project, they were sparsely dressed: all artistically-cropped skirts, low necklines, exposed corsets, and clinging fabrics, each piece of clothing teetering on the very edge of indecency. Their faces were adorned with shimmery dabs of colorful cosmetics, which glistened in the light of the glass chandelier overhead, and their long, soft hair was piled high and secured with enamel pins or combs. Their ears, necks, wrists, and fingers scintillated like dragon scales, ringed as they were in shining metals and polished gemstones.

Having idled too long by the door, Salvatore forced himself to walk forward into the lobby. A few men glanced at him dismissively before returning to their drinks or conversation, but the ladies were kinder, shooting him playful grins and winks as they recognized a repeat if

sporadic visitor. He even touched his cap to one young woman, whose name he knew to be Rossana, when she wiggled her slender fingers at him in greeting.

Schooling his face into an appropriately hopeful expression, Salvatore approached the front desk. Behind it sat the bordello's proprietress, Maitresse Vissenta Passero. She was older than the other women, perhaps around Salvatore's age, but she was just as handsome as the rest. Her bared shoulders were sleek and tan, and her long, dark hair wreathed her head in a braided crown. She was too busy perusing a velvet-bound volume — tragic poetry, by the look of it — to give any notice to his arrival.

The two guards stationed behind the *maitresse*, however, did inspect Salvatore. Their twin keen stares were full of scrutiny, and he held firmly onto his innocuous expression. Private hired guards were not uncommon in higher-end establishments like the Casa di Limetta. Their presence did, however, stir up in Salvatore certain feelings of unease.

Both women were outfitted in matching white breastplates adorned with stylized leaves and branches in bronze, and the light helms on their heads were plumed with brown and ocher feathers. Though the guards' stances were relaxed and their armor was highly decorative, the rapiers at their belts were sharp and Salvatore knew they had the training and confidence to wield them skillfully. He had seen the Casa di Limetta's guards in action twice before: once when they removed an overly inebriated patron via a swift kick out the front door, and another time when one pinned a surly and disgruntled guest to the ground while the other forcefully relieved him of his illegal paraphernalia. Salvatore had no desire to incur either the guards' suspicion or their wrath.

Neither woman approached or asked to search him, to his great relief. Before Salvatore could get Maitresse Passero's attention, however, a familiar voice called out his name.

“Signor Manco!” He turned to find Carina prancing toward him from a doorway to one side of the lobby. Her heeled sandals clicked merrily against the tiled floor. “Signor Manco!” she cried again, practically gushing, and held her arms out wide. She let Salvatore sweep her thin frame close with one arm, then kissed him enthusiastically on the cheek.

“Carina,” he replied, and found himself smiling with a warmth that wasn’t just for show. “How are you doing this evening?”

“*Ever* so much better now that you’re here,” Carina replied instantly. Dangling peridot earrings and chestnut curls, which had escaped from their pinned confinement, tickled the side of his neck as she laid her head rapturously on his shoulder. “I just *knew* you would come visit me tonight,” she purred, trailing one hand down the taut laces of his jerkin. Her long fingernails were lacquered a brilliant vermilion that matched her shortened skirts. “I was telling the girls earlier, I would bet a whole shiny *laguna* that Signor Manco is coming to visit me tonight — I just know, in my heart, that he’ll be here. I really said that, didn’t I, Lorita? Didn’t I?” The woman playing the lute gave Carina a concurring nod. “And I was right.”

“Signor Manco,” Maitresse Passero greeted. She had looked up from her poetry and was examining him with an air of mild approval. Salvatore knew he wasn’t among the most bountiful spenders to frequent the *maitresse*’s establishment, but he was generous enough with his coin to stay in her good graces. The praise he knew Carina spouted about him in his absence concerning his gentle and solicitous behavior could only solidify her favorable opinion. “*Buonasera*. We’re glad to have you. You’re here for some time with Carina, yes?”

“*Certamente*,” Salvatore agreed. Carina giggled, a little shrilly, in his ear. He fought back a wince and grinned at the *maitresse*, placing his hand low on the back of Carina’s slender waist. “How could I ask for anyone else?”

“Payment is required upfront, as you know,” Maitresse Passero said lightly and Salvatore nodded. Carina stepped out of his arms, allowing him space to retrieve the coins from a belt pouch. But she didn’t completely let go. Instead, she leaned against his back, resting her chin on his shoulder and laying one hand on his upper arm, watching impatiently as he handed Maitresse Passero her fee.

Salvatore wondered, with a hint of concern, why Carina was being so clingy. The behavior was odd, considering their many previous interactions, but perhaps he was reading too much into it. The other women of the Casa di Limetta certainly didn’t hesitate to touch their clients with such intimacy, and even more, out in the public space of the lobby.

“Please enjoy your evening, *signore*,” Maitresse Passero said, once she’d counted his fee for herself.

“I think I will,” Salvatore murmured. With a bright grin, Carina hooked her arm in his and guided him, heeled sandals clacking, to the stairs in the back of the lobby. There she took his broad hand in hers — so slim and feminine in comparison, he mused — and lead him up the winding staircase.

In mutual silence they ascended, passing the landing for the second floor and continuing up to the third. The walls were frescoed here, too, the cultivated citrus orchard giving way to an untamed forest. The wild trees tangled together in sensual knots, their branches drooping protectively over a shaded undergrowth thick with exotic foliage. No ladies or patrons of the house lingered in the hallways, though Salvatore could hear soft giggles and low moans through the too-thin walls of the rooms they passed. Beneath the citrussy fragrance that suffused the bordello, he could now detect the unsettling scent of sweat and bodily pleasure.

On the top floor, Carina lead him down a corridor lit dimly with fading dragonfire orbs. She didn't need to walk in front — Salvatore knew where they were going — but he trailed after her obediently until they reached a door at the end of the hall, which bore a plaque with Carina's name on it written in the same calligraphic script as the sign outside. She let go of his hand and reached down into her corset, pulling a delicate key out from somewhere between her breasts. Ignoring Salvatore's apathetic reaction, Carina grinned and unlocked the door, ushering him inside.

Her room looked the same as it did the first time Salvatore saw it, perhaps three or four years ago now. Though well-furnished, the windowless space was almost oppressively enclosed and warm. Dominating the room was a large four-poster bed of twisting dark walnut, its embroidered green curtains tied to each post with tasseled ribbons. A large matching armoire stood to one side of the room, and along another wall were a red-cushioned lounge and a round serving table. On the table sat two crystal goblets and several bottles of different liquors. A scattering of woven rugs covered the wooden floorboards and a small potted lime tree slouched in one corner, its leaves wilting from lack of sunlight.

On the bed, a long-haired cat with golden fur was curled up amongst the tangle of sheets, clearly fast asleep.

"There you are, Fiore," Carina cried, prancing to the bed. "You lazy thing! The *maitresse* was looking for you earlier." She waved her hands helplessly at the cat as it opened one eye and gave a sullen growl. "Get off of my bed! Bad boy! *Sciò! Scìò!*" Upon further encouragement, the cat unfurled itself and jumped off the bed, its gem-studded collar tinkling. It darting out into the corridor with a low wail of displeasure.

Carina quickly shut and locked the door behind it. “Now there’s fur all over my sheets,” she grumbled. She kicked off her heeled sandals with a grimace, flexing her ankles and toes, before striding back to the bed. “I’ll never have a cat of my own,” she declared with vehemence, trying to sweep away the strands of fur. “All they do is ruin every fabric you lay out, I swear.”

She glanced at Salvatore, who was still standing politely by the door. “Do have a seat, Sal, and make yourself comfortable. I really am very glad you’re here. Leandro got my message to you?”

Salvatore stepped over to the lounge and sat down. The velvet cushions sagged unpleasantly beneath his weight. He set the bottle of Zafferano wine on the floor by his feet and removed his cap, running his fingers through his sweat-slicked hair. “He did, yes,” Salvatore replied. And because he couldn’t help being curious, he asked, “Is he one of your clients?”

“Leandro?” Carina laughed. “The Tosi brothers couldn’t afford the newest girl downstairs, much less someone like me. No, I just see them outside some nights, Leandro strutting around the *fondamenta* like he owns it and poor Arrigo skulking along in his wake. I think they visit some of the cheaper houses by Riposo dei Marinai.” She shook her head and grinned. “No, I just flagged him down the other night and asked him to contact you on my behalf. I wasn’t sure he would. He begged a kiss for the favor, but I wouldn’t do it.”

A distinct change had come over Carina once they were securely ensconced in the privacy of her room. Her voice had lost its coquettish quality, deepening to a more natural and mature pitch, while her posture had noticeably relaxed. Sitting casually on her mattress, Carina pulled several pins out of her hair and shook her head. Chestnut curls spilled down over her shoulders and she massaged her scalp, humming in obvious relief.

“I assume you have something good for me, then,” Salvatore said. “Several somethings, in fact, of very good quality and very high value. Your *maitresse*’s fee is... extravagant.”

“We’re worth it,” Carina protested lightly. “Trust me. If you ever actually experienced our services, you’d understand.”

“There was a gondola from Isola di Zafferano as well,” Salvatore added. “Quite costly this time of night.”

Carina grimaced, then shrugged. “I can’t help that. But never fear, Sal. I wouldn’t have you go to all that trouble just to waste your time and coin.” She slipped off the bed, straightening the vermilion skirts of her dress. “Though our sessions *are* a nice break this time of night, I won’t lie. Could I offer you a drink before we begin?”

Salvatore glanced at the bottles on the serving table. He had refrained from drinking any great quantity of alcohol since Nico had come into his life, afraid it would drive him back into the dark, sleazy depths of the taverns. A cup or two of wine with a meal was one thing, of course, but hard liquor was quite another. “Just a small one,” he replied to be friendly.

Carina picked up a bottle that contained a very pale green liquid and uncorked it. “It’s our house-made *limettacino*,” she said, pouring a third of a glass into one of the crystal goblets and handing it to him. “Paolina mixes batches of it downstairs in her free time. Makes it with our own limes. A client of hers works on a trade ship and brings her the spirits himself. It’s quite as good as anything you’d get on Zafferano, I think.”

Salvatore took a small sip. The *limettacino* was sharp and bitter, despite the sugar he was sure it contained, but the tangy flavor was refreshing. Carina poured a more substantial drink for herself and took a large swallow before walking over to the armoire.

“Does Paolina have aspirations to enter the Brewer’s Guild?” Salvatore asked. He took another sip. It really wasn’t half bad.

Carina chuckled. Swinging open the armoire’s doors, she pushed aside a heavy row of dresses and began to fiddle with something out of Salvatore’s sight. “She’s not going anywhere,” Carina said, her voice muffled by the fabrics. “Her father has hauled fish his whole life, and her mother used to entertain at one of the parlors down the street, back when she was alive.” Salvatore heard Carina sigh. “Paolina wouldn’t know an aspiration if it spit lime juice in her face.”

“It must be tiring,” Salvatore observed. “Being the only one here with... a dream, I suppose.”

“Oh, they have dreams,” Carina said. She stepped away from the armoire and closed the doors. In her hand was a jewelry case, slim and rectangular and made of plain dark wood. Salvatore knew there was a compartment hidden in the back of the armoire where Carina kept the case, along with her most precious and secret belongings. He wondered if Maitresse Passero was aware of the compartment. Since Carina had not yet been caught, he supposed she wasn’t.

“They have dreams of seducing some young, attractive man,” Carina continued, “with his own *palazzo* on Nebbiosa and an endless supply of *lagune* to squander on them. Preferably a glassblower, of course, though any wealthy artist of some renown would do. Someone who could sweep them off their feet, shower them in jewels and silks, take them to concerts and banquets and masquerades. And they’d never have to entertain another man again.” Carina shook her head. “You should hear them natter on when the house is closed for the day. Paolina and Lorita and, oh, Rossana’s nearly the worst sometimes. She won’t say it aloud, but we all know she thinks of one of her clients as her lover. Such a romantic.”

From inside the jewelry case came the clinking sound of shifting metals. Carina handed the case to him. It was heavier than Salvatore had thought it would be. “The only one besides me with even a lick of real ambition is Gisella,” Carina added, “and she only calls herself a *prima donna* because the *maitresse* lets her go to the Santuario di Ombraverdina on Sunday mornings.”

It made sense, Salvatore thought, for this Gisella to venerate Ombraverdina. The patron dragon’s domain was dramatic performance, after all, which meshed well with the acting skills required to entertain libidinous clients. As there was no patron dragon specifically for bordellos, Ombraverdina had long been favored by the women of the Quartiere Peridoto, and many even asserted that the district’s distinctive lights were so colored in her honor.

The Actors Guild, however, was famously opposed to the bordellos’ appropriation of their patroness. Their *maestri* insisted that, if the guildless houses of pleasure even needed an idol to inspire them, they would fall under the purview of Mèchevioletto. The guilds who venerated Mèchevioletto generally gave their blessing to any bordello wishing to erect an altar in his honor, but the patron was not a very popular option. Though he was an inspiration to acrobats, illusionists, and entertainers of all stripes, Mèchevioletto was known to have been a silly and mischievous *draguomo* with nimble paws and a penchant for playing pranks. Ombraverdina, on the other hand, was famous for her dark beauty and feminine elegance, her alluring charm and imperious bearing. For the ladies of the bordellos, there was simply no contest.

The exception was Carina, who Salvatore knew had an old amulet for Occhiarancione — patron of tailors and clothing designers — hidden in the back of the armoire. The fabric pendant was frayed, its bright orange dye faded and its hanging tassel missing most of the skirt. But the disrepair was clearly a product of frequently handling, not neglect, the little icon cherished and

adored. Carina had shown the amulet to him once, when he had first agreed to serve as her fence. To see the reverence with which she held the small, tattered thing in her hands had left Salvatore with a strong and unsettling impression: that he knew Carina with far greater intimacy than any of her clients ever could.

Salvatore laid the jewelry case down on his lap and released its clasp. “Let’s see what we have here,” he said and opened the lid. The case was lined with a thin layer of shabby velvet, but the worn interior only highlighted the exceptional cache Carina had amassed. An impressed whistle escape Salvatore’s lips. An assortment of polished metals, gemstones, and *dragovetro* gleamed in the light of a nearby lamp. Salvatore could tell at a single glance she was in for a windfall profit.

Carina retrieved her goblet of *limettacino* and sat down beside Salvatore on the lounge. She crossed her ankles demurely and made as if to lean against his shoulder, but caught herself in time. She cupped her hands around the drink on her lap instead.

“I thought it would be prudent to pass this on to you as soon as possible,” she said quietly as Salvatore took out his optics and slipped them on. “I’m no appraiser, but even *I* know there’s several somethings there of ‘very good quality’ and ‘very high value.’”

“Indeed,” Salvatore muttered. He sifted through the trove. As he’d expected, there were the usual sorts of items he received from Carina, the kind of fine goods that could disappear in a brothel without raising much suspicion: metal belt buckles with decorative engravings, cufflinks studded with polished gemstones, stylish medallions bearing the symbol of an artisan guild, wedding bands in a variety of sizes and conditions. These items were easy for Salvatore to appraise on the spot, and they could be sold locally for a moderate sum in the Antichità Manco.

Amongst the typical goods, however, gleamed some truly unique finds. There was an elegant little penknife with three blue sapphires embedded in the silver handle and a coin purse with glass beading sewn into the silken fabric. There was also a broach in the shape of a dragonfly, a row of diamonds embellishing the insect's body and slivers of translucent *dragovetro* serving as its wings. Most striking of all, however, were several pieces of gold jewelry dripping in rich emeralds and peridots, with white lagoon pearls serving as spacers. Salvatore combed through the cache three times to confirm what he suspected. It was a complete set: choker, necklace, earrings, bracelet, and ring.

"Where in the isles —" Salvatore began, before cutting himself off. Unless the knowledge was truly vital, it wasn't polite for him to inquire where a thief had obtained their goods. He was a *ricettatore*, a middleman, not their employer. Most of his associates, however, had no qualms about sharing such information with him, especially when it gave them the chance to boast.

Carina chuckled. "The overseer of a smithy on Isola d'Acciaio — I won't say which one — left that penknife. I slipped it out of his belt pouch once he'd ditched his trousers. Beautiful piece, isn't it? Too dainty for a man like him. I almost wanted to keep it, but... The sapphires *are* real, aren't they? Not cheap forgeries?"

Salvatore held the penknife up to the light, tilting the handle. The blue stones sparkled. "Yes," he decided after a moment of careful examination, "they're real. Perfect oval cuts on all three." He ran his thumb along the side of the blade. It was devastatingly sharp. "It's in excellent condition. Your smith must be quite devoted to Artigliargenta's memory." The patron dragon of weaponsmiths, Artigliargenta, was strongly associated with silver and sapphire, the reputed

colors of her scales. “Whether he crafted it himself or commissioned it, he spent more than a handful of *basse* on its forging, that’s for certain.”

“See what you can get for it, then,” Carina said decisively. “I’d rather have the coin it brings than another shiny shiv. There’s a bolt of embossed velvet and some spools of thread I need to pay off.”

“And these?” Salvatore asked. He indicated the coin purse and the dragonfly broach.

“The owner of a mask shop on Alizarina,” she said. She reached over to gently stroke the pouch’s tiny glass beads with one finger. “He’s a little... odd. Not rough with me or anything. Just odd, and he has too many fancy coin purses anyway. I thought he could stand to misplace one.” Carina picked up the broach with a broad smile. She swiftly tilted it back and forth until the iridescent glass seemed to flicker like real insect wings. “This I got off a hateful bitch of a girl at a house down the way. You don’t happen to know the Boschetto delle Naiadi?”

Her sudden vindictiveness brought a smile to Salvatore’s face. “I know *of* the Boschetto,” he said, “but I’ve never been inside.”

“If you ever get it in your mind to visit, *don’t*,” Carina advised. “Their *maitresse* pays for singing lessons for all of the girls there, and they’re taught by this retired *maestro* from the Vocalists Guild. But the old man’s gone completely deaf; that’s the only possible explanation. The Boschetto gets plenty of clients, sure, but there can’t be a single ear for music among the lot, *Creatore* bless them.”

“How did you come by the broach, then?”

“This bitch, Narcisa,” Carina said, almost gleefully, “had the audacity to say my sunset dress — the one, you know, with the orange skirts and the navy corset, that I designed for my portfolio? It’s my favorite, I think, of all the samples I’ve sewn so far. Well, Narcisa took one

look at the dress and said, in front of *all* the other girls, that it was *dowdy*. Yes, that's right. *Dowdy*. Of all the... all the absolutely hateful things..."

Carina seemed to struggle with the profound sting of the insult, an aspiring artisan shaken to her creative core. It might have seemed a trivial thing to another person: a careless word from an irrelevant critic, an affront easy to dismiss and forget. But Salvatore thought he understood what Carina was feeling all too well.

"Anyway," she continued, once she had composed herself, "one morning, when I knew the bitch was at her singing lesson, I snuck over to the Boschetto. They only have guards on watch at night, so it was easy enough to sneak into her room and nick the damn broach right out of her jewelry box. It's the most precious thing she owns, you see, so it's only fair. She wears it — well, *wore* it — all the time. Some of her clients even call her their 'little dragonfly' because of it."

"Is there any chance she could trace its disappearance back to you?" Salvatore asked with grave seriousness. "I wouldn't dare sell it in the local market if there's even the slightest chance it could be recognized, but —"

"No," Carina replied. Her voice, however, wavered with some uncertainty. "I waited a few days after she... after she said that to me, before I did it. No one likes Narcisa. She's always saying nasty things about all of us other girls, but she gets by with it because she's her *maitresse*'s pet. So if she didn't mislay it, or it didn't get taken by one of her clients as a token of favor, then any one of half the women in the Quartiere could have made off with it."

"But you were hoping I would visit soon," Salvatore concluded, as she laid the glittering dragonfly in his palm. "That I could take it off your hands, in case her *maitresse* calls for inspections of other houses besides the Boschetto."

“Yes,” Carina admitted. Her relief — as Salvatore closely examined the broach, then nodded in acceptance — was palpable. She took a large drink of her *limettacino*, draining the glass. “That’s why I took a chance on Leandro. I could hardly sleep these last few days, knowing it was right there in the armoire so close by. I swear, I thought I could hear its stupid little wings humming.” She laughed at herself, embarrassed, but her smile couldn’t fully hide her shaken nerves. “*Grazie mille*, Sal, for stopping by. Really. I nearly fainted when I saw you at the front desk.”

“No need for that,” Salvatore replied evenly. “This is what I do.” Setting the broach aside, he picked up the bracelet from the verdant-jeweled set and held it up to the light, the better to admire its delicate craftsmanship. The gemstones were small but of good quality, and the pearls were all genuine. “I have to ask, however, where you got these. More salvage from Narcisa’s jewelry box?”

“Oh, no.” Carina chuckled. “They were a present from a client. Truly, they were,” she insisted at his incredulous expression. “He’s a frequent guest here, but he only comes to see *me*. He lives in a *palazzi* on one of the highest terraces of Nebbiosa, and *don’t* ask me who he is, Sal, I’ve already said too much.”

She stared thoughtfully down into her empty goblet. “But he’s trying to woo me with grand presents, and they’re not supposed to do that, you know? If the *maitresse* knew he’d given me something this nice, she’d have the whole set confiscated in a second. So if I don’t wear them during our next session, he can’t be too upset with me. I’ll tell him I have to keep them hidden from the *maitresse*, that I can’t risk exposing our little secret. He’ll forget all about them eventually.”

“An older man?” Salvatore guessed.

“No.” Carina appeared to take a good, hard look at Salvatore’s face. “Probably younger than you, actually, and not unpleasant to look at, either.” She shrugged. “He just has more coin to his name than he knows what to do with.”

Solemnly, Salvatore regarded the shimmering emeralds and peridots. “Are you certain you want to part with these? It’s a magnificent set, and recently crafted, I expect. The pearls still have that fresh luster you only see on newer work.” He hesitated. It wasn’t any of his business. However, he couldn’t help but add, “This is truly an extravagant present, Carina. This wooing... he must be quite serious about it.”

“If he was *really* serious,” Carina said, her voice growing low and cold, “he would have brought me carnelians and lapis lazuli instead.” She sighed, sounding tired. “And I have enough peridot jewelry already.”



He wasn’t certain how long he sat there on the lounge sorting through Carina’s lifted goods, appraising their quality and valuing them as accurately as he was able without access to his catalogs down in the Caveau. It was monotonous work, but not any great hardship. Salvatore found it satisfying, actually, to have the whole lot neatly organized — in descending order by maximum potential profit — in his mind. Once he had his ledger in hand, it wouldn’t take him long to write everything down.

While he worked, Carina appeared to make good use of her rare nighttime break. Pulling a large, battered folio out from beneath the bed, she climbed onto the mattress, crossed her legs,

and flipped through a series of loose and mismatched papers until she found what she was looking for. Then, settling the folio on her lap, Carina bent her head and began to sketch.

Salvatore could hear the sharp tip of her graphite stick rasping against the paper. Some of the scratches were soft and questioning, while others were short and quick with decisive intent. Occasionally, between appraisals, he would glance up, and he always found Carina deeply focused on her task, her dangling curls framing her face like self-imposed blinders. Salvatore caught only a glimpse of what she was sketching, but it was enough to know she was working on another dress for her portfolio.

Once she had drafted enough original designs and sewn enough samples, Carina could apply to join the Clothiers Guild as a delayed apprentice. This was an opportunity offered to adults rather than youths, and although they were not the preferred way for humans and dragons to join a guild, delayed apprenticeships were not uncommon either. Often, artisans in certain disciplines used the chance to learn skills outside their original sphere that would still be of benefit to their primary craft. It was customary, for instance, for members of the Poets Guild and the Prosaists Guild to earn lesser certifications in calligraphy or bookbinding, and Salvatore knew of more than a few jewelers with professional roots in metalworking or maskmaking. Artisans involved in physically strenuous crafts, such as boatbuilding, dancing, or smithing, often took on delayed apprenticeships in the more sedate arts as they aged, while others simply grew tired of their original crafts and sought a new means of creative expression. And then there were those like Carina, who had not apprenticed with any guild in their youth — who had instead fallen into one of the mundane occupations, like shopkeeper or courtesan — but still dreamed of working as a true artist of the Isole Fulgide.

It was harder for those with no formal artistic training to become a delayed apprentice. From what he'd seen of her work, however, Salvatore thought Carina had a decent chance of being accepted into the Clothiers Guild. Still, she needed high-quality materials to complete her portfolio and funds to pay for her application, both of which cost more coin than she could easily raise working at the Casa di Limetta. The *maitresse* of the Quartiere Peridoto kept a notoriously firm grip on their girls, restricting where they could go and what they could do, and this left Carina with few options for earning additional coin. Fortunately, despite these imposed limitations, she had proven to be a proficient pickpocket. Salvatore knew she saved every *basso* she earned from their illegal transactions in order to support her artistic aspirations.

Once he had completed his appraisal, Salvatore sat silently for a few minutes and sipped his *limettacino*. So intent was Carina on her work in progress that he found himself hesitant to disrupt her concentration. The woman was in her late twenties, by Salvatore's estimation. Curled up on the bed as she was, however, with her hair loose and face relaxed and contentedly sketching away, Carina seemed for the moment far younger than her modest years.

Still, when he saw her pause to reexamine her current design, Salvatore cleared his throat and informed her that his work was done. He didn't want to stay in the Casa di Limetta until morning, irregardless of the lie he'd told the gondolier. For a start, he couldn't afford to pay Maitresse Passero for an extended session, not with one of her more popular girls. Salvatore was certain Carina had other real clients to attend to on a Saturday night like this one. And he needed to spend a few hours tonight at the Caveau himself.

If she was upset by the interruption, however, Carina didn't appear to blame him for it. With a small smile, she stashed her portfolio back beneath her bed and listened attentively as Salvatore explained what he would give her for each of the stolen goods. Her grin broadened at

his generous offer for the gifted jewelry. She didn't seem to realize how well the set would sell outside the isles, where peridot did not suffer from the same associated with brothels. But Salvatore didn't think she needed to know that.

"If that's what you're offering, Sal," she said, upon hearing the total, "I won't try to bargain. You know what the lot's worth better than I. As long as you leave with that damn dragonfly, I'm satisfied."

"I'll be sure to find it a worthier owner," he promised stoically, which made Carina laugh.

Recalling what he owed her for her last batch of purloined items, Salvatore hunted through his belt pouches for the correct coin. The pouches were significantly lighter now than they had been this morning, but he managed to scrape up enough *maree*, *stagni*, and *basse* to pay Carina the exact amount. She grinned as he counted out the coins one-by-one into her waiting palm, appearing to admire their assorted metallic sheens. Or perhaps, Salvatore mused, she was just imagining the various fabrics and lace trims she could now purchase with the money.

Carina deposited her payment in a silk purse and locked it away in an armoire drawer. As she did, Salvatore stood up and began to fill his belt pouches with the jewelry, penknife, and other ornaments. Using several thin handkerchiefs, he managed to wrap each piece so they were protected from accidental damage and their suspicious clinking was muffled. Carina soon came over to help him. She carefully tucked her stolen goods into the back pouches of his belt, which were harder for him to reach.

Once all of the contraband was secured, Salvatore drained the last dregs of his *limettacino* and picked up his padded wine carrier, hanging the canvas strap from his shoulder.

When he looked up, he found Carina standing in front of him, his flat cap in her hands and an odd expression on her face.

“*Grazie*, Sal,” Carina said. At her gesture, he tilted his head forward and allowed her to situate the cap to her liking. Rather than positioning it straight on his head, she angled it slightly askew. Salvatore didn’t need to look in a mirror to know she was mimicking the way a debauched reveler would slap a cap on his tousled head, uncaring and inattentive. “You’ve no idea how much I appreciate what you do for me. I know it’s a terrible hassle. You don’t make house calls for any of your other thieves, do you?”

“I don’t,” Salvatore admitted, “but I understand your circumstances are different. You don’t have... the same degree of freedom as most of my associates. Yet you still manage to acquire quite the impressive collection of valuables. It would be foolish not to accommodate you.”

He grew silent and held deathly still as Carina untied the top of his jerkin. She slackened the laces, loosening the garment’s collar until the first dark, curly hairs at the base of his neck were exposed. He spoke again only when she began to artfully rumple the striped sleeves of his tunic.

“Besides, you need the coin, and I need a steady supply of untaxable goods, so it balances out. It’s just what I do.”

“Yes,” Carina murmured, “it is.” Her counterfeit dishevelment complete, Salvatore expected her to step back and survey her work as she always did before his departure. Instead, she gently laid her palms flat against his chest and gazed down at the jerkin’s embroidery with a demure frown.

When her touch not only lingered but remained, Salvatore felt his throat begin to close up and his face begin to burn, hot as a glassblower's furnace. "And what *I* do," Carina continued softly, "is entertain the men that come to visit me. When I'm not designing dresses and picking pockets, of course."

Though his lips had gone numb in dismay, Salvatore forced himself to speak. "I told you, when we first met, that I expect nothing from you. Nothing but what you lift from others."

"I know," she acknowledged. "And trust me, I relish the courtesy. It's... unheard of, in my current line of work. Nonsensical, really." A small, feminine smile graced Carina's face and she glanced up at him through her dark lashes. "But I can't help feeling like I'm cheating you, Sal. You're paying for services you don't even receive."

"I pay the *maitresse* for your time," he countered, "and for a private place to conduct our business. That's all. I'm not asking for anything more."

"Maybe not. But I'm offering."

Her words left Salvatore stunned. The expression on his face must have revealed as much, because Carina's coquettish demeanor evaporated as quickly as it had appeared. A genuine chuckle escaped her. "I mean it. Honest. Anything you want, Sal, and I'll be more than happy to do it for you. Or to you. Or with you. It's yours, with my gratitude."

Salvatore struggled to provide a coherent response. Her slim hands were diffusing warmth into his chest and the sensation, combined with the stringent aftertaste of the *limettacino*, was turning his queasy stomach in knots. "You don't want to do that, Carina," he said. "Not with me."

"Why not?" If Salvatore wasn't mistaken, she looked a little chagrined. She traced an embroidered vine with her fingernail, following its intricate twists and turns. "Look, it wouldn't

be some great burden for me. Just because I want to join a guild, that doesn't mean I *hate* the work I do here. Yes, I'll admit, some of my clients I'd... prefer not to entertain. But most aren't so bad. Just in need of some attention, a little physical comfort."

"That's not..." he stuttered. Salvatore took an unsteady step backwards, shaking his head. He felt a sliver of relief when Carina dropped her hands from his chest. "That sort of... intimacy. That's not something I need. Or want."

"Oh." Carina appeared to ponder his words. She slowly crossed her arms, cupping her elbows in a kind of self-embrace. Then she laughed. The sound was self-deprecating. "I see. *Spiacente*, Sal. I didn't mean to upset you. Truly, I didn't. I just thought... Well. I know you're unmarried. I suppose I assumed wrongly. Please, don't hold it against me."

"It's not you," Salvatore clarified with haste. "It's not you, Carina. You're... a very attractive young woman."

She chuckled wryly. "Just not attractive to you?"

"Don't think you're special in that regard," he replied, quite serious. "I've yet to meet a single person who is." Carina gazed at him quietly for a moment, and Salvatore wondered if he was, perhaps, being too honest. But, under the circumstances, he thought it was a necessary admission.

Then Carina smiled. "As many times as you've visited the Quartiere Peridoto," she said, "and you still haven't found anyone who peaks your interest? *Cazzo*, Sal. I hate to say it, but your standards are impossibly high." Her tone was teasing, but light and without malice.

Salvatore found he didn't mind the quip. The tightness in his throat had begun to recede and his stomach had started to settle. "Come now. You know what quality of goods I expect from my associates," he countered, trying a wry smirk of his own. "I only accept the very best."

Carina laughed. “All right. I understand now. I won’t offer such services again.” She stationed her hands, businesslike, on her hips. “Just keep in mind, I’m also *quite* skilled at massages — of the less-intimate variety, of course. If you’d ever like me to do a pass over your hands or feet, or your shoulders and back, *that* offer still stands. You wouldn’t even need to remove your tunic.”

“A tempting proposition,” Salvatore admitted. The ache in his feet, which had slackened while he was seated, had already returned in full force. “But perhaps another time.”

“If you’re sure.” Carina stepped to the door, laying her hand gently on the knob. She regarded him fondly. “Take care then, Sal, until next time.”

“And you as well. Will you be expecting my return anytime soon?”

Carina shrugged. “Probably not. Not for a few weeks, anyway. I don’t know how... productive I’ll be able to be, if the whole Quartiere goes on alert for that ‘missing’ dragonfly.”

“It might be best to lay low, for the time being,” Salvatore agreed. He touched the brim of his cap in farewell, remembering just in time not to straighten its position on his head. “*Buonanotte*, Carina.”

“*Buonanotte*.” She let him out into the corridor; then, perhaps noticing that the hallway was still deserted, Carina leaned casually against the door frame. “You’ll have to give me the name of your embroiderer,” she said under her breath, nodding at his jerkin. “That’s beautiful work.”

“I would, gladly,” Salvatore said, pleased by the compliment, “but she’s retired, I’m afraid.”

“Ah, well.” Carina gave him a small wave and a smile. Only after he’d padded quietly down the dim corridor and out of sight did he hear the sound of the door closing behind her.

Salvatore retraced their earlier route, steadfastly ignoring the occasional thumps and shouts that emanated from several of the rooms he passed. As he descended the winding staircase, the frescoed tangle of wild forest giving way once more to the tamed lines of citrus trees, Salvatore focused on relaxing the tension in his shoulders and on keeping his limp hands away from his belt pouches. He even attempted to add a lazy swagger to his step.

By the time he reached the lobby of the Casa di Limetta, Salvatore was confident that the expression on his face was a passable mimicry of the kind worn by the bordello's most recently satiated patrons. He'd had enough practice with this particular ruse over the last few years. Carina had once declared his imitation sufficiently convincing, and if anyone was qualified to judge this sort of performance, it was her.

The lobby had grown both quieter and more crowded since Salvatore's arrival. Most of the ladies of the house had dispersed, including Lorita and her captivating lute. Only two had been left behind to entertain the growing crowd of well-dressed men waiting, with varying levels of patience, for their turn for a private session. Rossana lounged by the front windowsill, chatting playfully with a few of her admirers and stroking the long, golden fur of Fiore, who had made a new bed for himself in her lap. Another young woman, stout but bright-eyed, pranced from group to group and cheerfully passed out goblets of pale liquor from a gemstone-encrusted tray. Salvatore wondered if this was Paolina.

Though he'd already paid for his session in full, Salvatore briefly paused by the marble-and-iron desk to pay his compliments to Maitresse Passero. His throat threatened to close up at the sight of the stationed guards, but it was customary for patrons to give their farewells before departing. Neglecting to do so would only garner their attention.

Thankfully, the *maitresse* replied to Salvatore's mildly droll praise with her standard, practiced gratitude, and he caught no hint of suspicion in her sharp dark eyes. She appeared curious when he inquired after the lobby's current server, but, after confirming his guess, made no further comment beyond wishing Signor Manco a pleasant night and instructing him to return soon. The guards looked him over, and he tried to gauge whether or not they were eying his belt pouches with skepticism or mistrust. It was a difficult feat to accomplish while also preserving his ridiculous expression, but neither guard made a move to leave their post, so Salvatore swallowed down his nerves and turned away.

Maintaining his satisfied, lingering gait, he ventured towards the front door. He tried to avoid the gaze of his fellow patrons, in case he somehow managed to arouse their suspicions instead. He was fairly satisfied he was safe, however; the men were all distracted by one thing or another. Salvatore grew confident enough that, when Paolina began to pass by him with her drink-laden tray, he followed his impulse to catch her attention, touching her lightly on the shoulder. She barely paused — her hand moved automatically to pass him a goblet — until Salvatore shook his head and leaned down to mutter in her ear. “Your *limettacino* is inspired, *giovane*. You should join the Brewers Guild.”

Paolina froze for just a moment, staring up at him with a mixture of amusement and disbelief, before laughing and waving away his suggestion with a merry sort of flippancy. Carina wasn't wrong, Salvatore thought as he finally reached the doorway. Ambition — at least of the artistic sort — was not in great supply in the Quartiere Peridoto.

Bracing himself against the expected assault of pungent fragrances and raucous sounds, he stepped out of the Casa di Limetta and ambled down its marble steps. The bottle of wine tapped rhythmically against his hip. The night had deepened and the briny air of the lagoon had

grown much cooler in his absence, and Salvatore welcomed the light breeze; it was a pleasant contrast to the stuffy warmth of Carina's room.

He paused at the base of the stairs, feeling a mental weight lift now that the *fondamenta* was back beneath his boots, and he allowed himself a moment to truly relax. Men young and old passed by him, unfettered by elation and liquor, shouting and barking with laughter and drunken confusion. The olivine glow of the countless lanterns cast a strange greenish filter over everything in sight, and Salvatore shut his eyes and tucked his thumbs into his belt.

Today had been a long day. Not a terrible one, by any means, or one overburdened with labor, but a long day nevertheless. And sleep was still several hours in the future, Salvatore told himself. He had work to do in the Caveau, after all. Lists of desirable auction lots to compose, stolen goods to record and store, and there was always the chance that an associate or two would stop by with items to sell, though most seemed to spend their Saturday nights in other pursuits. Nico and Silvio might even drop in, if just to reassure him their reconnaissance of the Cristallobianco archives had gone off without a hitch. He didn't expect to hear from either of them until Sunday evening, of course, but—

An awareness had been quietly growing in Salvatore's mind: the cacophonous masculine voices of the passersby suddenly lowering, sometimes cutting off entirely, and the slight vibration of measured yet inescapably heavy steps along the *fondamenta*. Salvatore had ignored the warning signs, however, until he became conscious of an undercurrent of hot, scorch-scented air and a rumbling voice muttering, several feet above his head. "Antonio...?"

Salvatore opened his eyes and looked up. He just managed to mask his bloodcurdling alarm with a more benign expression of bewildered surprise.

“Why, Efelidirame,” he said, feigning a small smile of delight, “what are *you* up to down here? And on a Saturday night of all nights.”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Efelidirame replied, low and stoic.

The *draguomo* seemed to tower over Salvatore, though he was in truth no bigger than the average adult male dragon. Still, the top of Salvatore’s head just barely came up to Efelidirame’s shoulder and the dragon had to crane his long neck down just to talk to him face to face. Salvatore held his ground, tense but not truly afraid. He could still remember a time when they were of the same height and, before that, when *he* was the one who had to look down into the young *dragazzo*’s gold and vermillion eyes.

But that time was decades past. Efelidirame was a *draguomo* in his prime, with sinuous horns that curved into blunt tapers and masculine ridges contouring his jaw. His scales didn’t boast the profusion of colors that many dragons bore, but the pattern of his two-toned markings was quite striking. Large patches of copper-orange scales ran from the ridge of his snout over his forehead, and all the way down his neck and back to the tip of his tail. A myriad of smaller blotches and spots broke up the white base of his scales, their size and regularity decreasing as they neared the dragon’s pale underbelly, until the lowest patches were mere flecks of reddish ginger. Similar tiny spots peppered the smooth white beneath Efelidirame’s eyes and along his snout like coppery freckles.

The dragon’s presence here in the Quartiere Peridoto was unexpected, to say the least. Salvatore looked around, hoping to spot a sensible explanation. “Surely you’re not on patrol right now,” he reasoned aloud. The uneasy atmosphere that had heralded the *draguomo*’s approach dissipated, and the shifting tide of human passersby now parted around them without any show of concern. Still, a man in an unlaced violet jacket happened to stumble by as Salvatore spoke

and, consequently, shot the dragon a guilty look before scurrying out of sight. “Not by yourself, anyway. And not out of uniform.”

Salvatore’s quick inspection had confirmed that Efelidrame was indeed traveling alone, and that he was not, in fact, wearing the heavy pieces of plate armor that signified his rank and status as a member of the Guardia di Drago. Missing was the iron helm, specially crafted to fit around his horns and spines, and the thick gauntlets encasing his front forelegs. The soft, white flesh of his throat seemed oddly unprotected without the usual large gorget, the metal emblazoned with his blue-and-white Guardia badge and its shimmering center of *dragovetro*.

“I’m not on *official* patrol right now,” Efelidrame replied. Salvatore watched the dragon’s eyes dart between each man that passed by. He could practically see the clockwork churning in Efelidrame’s head as he assessed each human’s physical and mental state, determined their likely motives, and allowed them to continue on their way unscathed. “But these nights can get a bit... disorderly, in some districts. I thought my presence might deter some trouble.”

“I’m sure your *commissario* appreciates your dedication to duty.” The comment came out more sarcastic than Salvatore had intended, and the *draguomo* unfortunately appeared to notice. His eyes narrowed, the pupils mere slits, and his nostrils flared. Salvatore caught another whiff of scorched air as the dragon leaned his head in closer.

“There have been a few reports recently of expensive items going missing in this area,” Efelidrame murmured. A chill went down Salvatore’s spine and he felt his throat begin to close in silent apprehension. He held perfectly still, willing Carina’s stolen goods to stay quiet in their pouches. “Mostly fine jewelry, but a few other artisan objects as well. Masks, articles of clothing, and the like.”

“Missing, you say?” Salvatore affected a frown of mild puzzlement and concern. “Are these robberies? Have people been accosted out on the streets? Or...” He furrowed his brow, feigning greater worry. “Are businesses being burglarized? Should I, perhaps...” He stared out across the dark water in the direction of Isola di Onice.

“Your shop should be safe,” Efelidirame said, quietly reassuring. “The items in question have all disappeared from... establishments in this vicinity of Isola di Rame. We haven’t received any similar reports from outside the isle.”

Salvatore nodded. He hoped he appeared properly chastised and contrite. “I see. *Grazie*, Efelidirame. That’s good to know.”

“Though I would still advise taking precautions,” the *draguomo* added. His golden-orange eyes shifted to focus on something over Salvatore’s shoulder. “Especially if you have plans to... spend any more time in the area. I wouldn’t carry too much coin on your person at once.”

Inescapably curious, Salvatore looked around and followed the dragon’s gaze. In the window of the Casa di Limetta, Rossana could still be seen, delicately posed like a shop mannequin on display. She was smiling in their direction, and when she caught Salvatore’s eye, Rossana gave him a friendly little wave, wiggling her fingers.

Salvatore turned back and grinned at the dragon awkwardly. “Oh, I’ve had my fill of the local entertainment for the evening. I was just about to head out. It’s been... quite the day.”

“*Hmm.*” Efelidirame’s ambiguous reply was less of a hum and more of a low growl in the depths of his throat. He’d shifted his attention away from the green-lit bordellos and out towards the dark lagoon, and Salvatore suddenly realized the *draguomo* was just as uncomfortable running into him here in the Quartiere Peridoto as he was bumping into an officer of the Guardia

with many *maree* worth of stolen goods in his possession. Though, Salvatore thought wryly, Efelidrame certainly had far less reason to be nervous.

“Well, then,” he said, finally allowing himself to straighten his cap, “I’ll hold your ‘patrol’ up no longer. *Buonanotte*, Efelidrame. I suppose I’ll see you again soon.”

“Yes. I suppose so.” The *draguomo* finally looked at Salvatore again. Apparently just noticing the untied laces of Salvatore’s jerkin, the dragon’s nostrils flared in some involuntary expression of revulsion and he seemed to regret ever greeting the human. “*Buonanotte*, Antonio.”

Salvatore touched the brim of his cap and Efelidrame nodded his large head in farewell. Too nervous to move, Salvatore remained where he was standing as the dragon passed by him, feeling the low warmth that emanated from his smooth, scaled body. Efelidrame continued to follow the *fondamenta*, men both drunk and sober quickly stumbling out of the *draguomo*’s path, and Salvatore watched until the tip of his freckled tail disappeared from view. Then he breathed a sigh of relief, nearly choking on perfumed and briny air, and found himself fumbling for his pipe.

Salvatore knew better than to store any stolen goods in the same pouch as his smoking accoutrements, so he retrieved his pipe, *stramonio*, and matches without issue and completed the preparations with practiced speed. Only after the bowl was glowing warmly in his hand and the smoke had cleared the worst of the constriction in his throat did Salvatore feel any measure of safety once more.

Perhaps he could close the Caveau early for just one night.

Capitolo Quattro

Sunday morning dawned far sooner than Salvatore would have preferred. Outside his window, the pale, cloud-dappled sky promised a day just as warm and fair as those that had come before it. Rather than fight the sunlight for a few more precious hours of sleep, Salvatore conceded to its authority and hauled himself out of bed. He traded out his sweat-damp nightshirt for a silk dressing gown, dark blue and brocaded bronze, then brewed himself an undoctored cup of dark coffee. Though the ground beans were of the standard high quality found in the local supply shops, Salvatore lacked the drive to actively temper its bitterness with any salt or sugar. He sat at the small dining table in his kitchenette and drank the coffee slowly, savoring the heavy flavor.

Midnight had come and gone by the time he'd slunk his way from the Quartiere Peridoto to Isola di Onice. Although the market-oriented isle was not a popular destination on Saturday nights, Salvatore had avoided the open *fondamenta* anyway, slipping quietly through the back alleyways to the Caveau's exterior trapdoor. It had been locked — Nico had not yet returned — but Salvatore's old, thin key also fit into an innocuous chink in the tiled pavement. He'd made his way through the aperture, down the ladder, and into the underground chamber in a few short moments.

The relief he'd felt upon unburdening his belt pouches had been overwhelming. There was a reason, Salvatore had reminded himself tiredly, that he kept to his fencing and left the smuggling to Elisa and her crew. A *very* good reason. But as he'd unfurled the handkerchiefs and arranged the goods on the cloth-covered countertop — the jewelry and the penknife and the little

dragonfly with its shimmering wings — Salvatore had experienced a small, warm thrill of pleasure that had made him smile. He'd wondered if it was anything like the sensation Silvio felt upon successfully completing a heist.

He'd recorded Carina's loot in the ledger, double-checking the estimated value of a few of the pieces in his catalogs, then tagged each item and stored or displayed them on one of the Caveau's many shelves. Once that chore was finished, Salvatore had written up the list of desirable objects he'd observed at Garofalo's, taking special care to note which patron at the auction had gone home with each lot.

Glancing back over the list, he'd been fairly satisfied that he'd remembered everything and that all of the details were correct. Salvatore had always been good at memorizing information, particularly numbers, even as a child. The skill had served him well in school, garnering him praise from his teachers and placing him near the top of his class, but his quick and accurate recall served him even better as a fence. By no means was it some extraordinary talent, but it was a useful ability to have at his disposal.

Once he'd wrapped up the night's most pressing record-keeping, Salvatore had not lingered long. No pickpockets, swindlers, or rogues had shown up at his door with fresh spoils to sell, nor had the click of tiny claws or the padding of soft leather boots signaled Nico's and Silvio's return. He'd half expected Giulia to put in an appearance, if only to beg for more coin and brandish her alcoholic stench about like a weapon. But the Caveau remained unmolested by her presence as well. He'd closed up shop within half an hour, making his way back out into the shadowed alleys and, walking slowly on aching feet, finally arriving back at his apartment.

The hourly chiming of the Mercato Pietra clock tower bells broke through Salvatore's coffee-induced reverie. As he took another bitter sip, he listened for and heard the echoing peal

of other, more distant bells. Each rang their own distinctive melody that, nevertheless, produced more harmony than discord. These bells belonged to the *santuari* of the patron dragons, and they called their devotees to Sunday morning services. There the faithful could rest, reflect on their work, and seek creative inspiration for the upcoming week through meditation, sermons, and other guild-specific rituals. From his apartment, Salvatore could just hear the light, familiar chiming of the bells from the Santuario di Ondasplendore, the deep, solemn boom of the bells from the Santuario di Bluoltremarone, and the unearthly, keening hum of the glass bells from the Santuario di Iridescenza.

Closest, however, rang the bells of the Santuario di Moltosabbia, singing out a serene and benevolent refrain. Salvatore grimaced into his coffee. A nagging tendril of guilt tugged at his gut, but he ignored it and batted it away with practiced ease. As a shopkeeper, he technically fell under the purview of the patron dragon of sundry arts, and though no law compelled his attendance at their Sunday morning services, Salvatore knew his absence would be noted by Moltosabbia's *sacerdoti*. Not that his truancy was noteworthy. He hadn't attended regularly since Signor Uberti had died, only putting in a perfunctory appearance every few months and on special holidays, like the annual Festival of Moltosabbia and *Capodanno* at the dawn of each new year.

The Santuario di Moltosabbia, nestled demurely among the countless shops of Isola di Giada, was a humble shrine as *santuari* went. Adorned in the neutral hues of her scales — umber-flecked sandy tan and soft ivory cream — the chapel would have been an ideal refuge for Salvatore from the isles' signature bright colors. However, evidence of the many good works the *dragadonna* had performed during her lifetime could be found on every wall and in every corner of the *santuario*, and the constant reminders disquieted him.

Closing his eyes, Salvatore could see the chapel in his mind, clear as glass. Along the back of the apse were shelves full of old, well-preserved volumes on a variety of subjects — history, medicine, geography, mathematics, trade — all handwritten by Moltosabbia's inner circle of human and dragon companions, like-minded scholars and philanthropists. In one nook was displayed her worn leather harness, darkened and cracked with age, by which she'd carried the tools and components of her mobile apothecary. In another hung a salt-encrusted net that she'd used while assisting the fishermen of Opercolo one season, when the lagoon had not produced its usual bounty; certain tears in the rope were alleged to have been made by her fangs. Paintings of Moltosabbia depicted her speaking with a group of attentive scholars, tending to sick and injured children, sorting scrolls with clerks and weighing coins with bankers, assisting merchants with their riotous customers, and carrying the heavy burdens of dockworkers, masons, and launderers on her shoulders, steady and poised. The statue in the altar gazed down on the congregation with a distinct air of benevolent grace, and even the *fiamma eterna* flickering at its stone feet had caressed Salvatore's skin with a mild, comforting warmth, rather than the usual blazing heat.

Unlike her contemporaries, who had poured both their souls and their dragonfire into the creative arts, Moltosabbia had devoted herself to the mundane, to all those uninventive occupations so necessary to the continuous operation of civilization. And she had, in the process, become something of an icon of charity.

It was that aspect of Moltosabbia's character that Signor Uberti had found so inspiring, Salvatore knew. He opened his eyes and stared down into his coffee. As the modest shopkeeper he had been, the old man would have attended every Sunday morning service regardless, but

Signor Uberti's admiration for Moltosabbia's selfless work had secured him a place among the most devoted of her followers.

But Signor Uberti hadn't needed to reflect on her memory for guidance, not in Salvatore's estimation. His natural state had been one of sincere kindness, helpfulness, and generosity. Signor Uberti had regularly donated both his time and his coin to numerous philanthropic projects, had been forgiving and lenient to those in his debt, and had always been prepared to help his neighbors out in whatever way he could.

Salvatore knew this first-hand; he had experienced as much of Signor Uberti's charity as anyone in the isles. The old man had offered Salvatore a job when no one else would hire him, even though he'd needed no assistant to help mind so small a shop. He'd been patient with Salvatore, teaching him about the antiques market and advising him on matters of business with quiet enthusiasm. Salvatore had never once heard Signor Uberti raise his voice, even when Salvatore arrived late or made some careless mistake, and he'd paid no heed to his new assistant's frequent bouts of bitter brooding.

Even outside of work, Signor Uberti had lent him support. He had helped Salvatore secure decent living quarters — the very same apartment that Salvatore still rented — and he had encouraged his assistant to join him every Sunday for the service at the Santuario di Moltosabbia. And Salvatore had complied, reluctantly at first, then with a quiet acceptance that soon became a habit. He would meet up with Signor Uberti each Sunday morning at the same Giada *campo* at the same ringing of the bells. He would walk with the old man to the *santuario*, sit beside him during the service, and try to listen to the *sacerdoti* with the same sort of rapt attention and understanding that was visible on the old man's face. He'd never gotten as much

meaning and inspiration out of the services as Signor Uberti had, but the old man hadn't seemed to mind.

Then he'd died. Numb, Salvatore had watched the old man's fellow devotees mourn his passing with tears and fond recollections of his kindness. The *sacerdoti* had been particularly distraught by the loss, for there had been an informal understanding between them that Signor Uberti would join the priesthood upon his retirement. Then, in accordance with his final will, all of the old man's coin and property had been divided up between the various projects he'd favored. Everything, that is, except for the Antichità Uberti itself, which he'd bequeathed to his stunned assistant.

Salvatore had known that Signor Uberti had no living relatives — no children, grandchildren, or younger cousins — to pass the shop down to, but this final act of generosity had struck Salvatore hard. For that reason and that reason alone, he still made the short journey to the *santuario* on the most important occasions and kept Signor Uberti's old Amulet of Moltosabbia hanging beside the Antichità Manco's front door. Upon hiring Teodora to help mind the shop, Salvatore had occasionally considered inviting her to attend Sunday services with him. He'd never gotten around to making the offer. He suspected Teodora already went to the *santuario* anyway, with her fellow students from the Università.

Salvatore finished the last of his coffee and, with a grunt, slowly dragged himself out of his chair. He could, of course, always attend the morning service at the Basilica di Vetro. Every citizen of the isles was welcome there, young and old, human and dragon, regardless of any guild affiliation. And unlike the *santuari*, where the devoted sought artistic inspiration through the memory of their long-dead patrons, the Basilica was a true center of worship dedicated to *il Creatore* itself. He didn't like going to the Basilica alone, however. As beautiful and majestic as

it was, the building evoked only memories of his childhood, of sitting snugly between his father Tommaso and his mother Sofia with his sister Marzia perched on their mother's lap, of listening in awe to the multitude of voices raised in song and prayer.

It wasn't as if he didn't believe in the existence of *il Creatore*. Truly, he did, though privately Salvatore had his doubts about how much the One who had Created All Things actually interceded in the happenings of the world it had created. The depiction of *il Creatore* as a winged dragon also seemed somewhat suspect. From what he'd heard and read over the years, *il Creatore* was also worshiped in other countries outside the Isole Fulgide, though in the aspect of a man or the sun or in no visible form at all. Salvatore supposed it made sense. To the rest of the world, dragons did not exist, so why envision *il Creatore* as a winged dragon of all fantastic entities? Still, the incongruity was strange, but Salvatore had stopped dwelling on such things long ago.

Shuffling to the wash room, he relieved himself and washed his hands, then regarded his reflection in the mirror. The dark bags beneath his eyes were unavoidable, but the ragged state of his hair could certainly be remedied with some lye soap and water. Salvatore ran a hand experimentally along his jaw. The bristles of his beard had grown longer than he preferred to wear them. He huffed; now that he'd noticed, he wouldn't be able to get it out of his mind. So Salvatore busied himself with an extended version of his usual morning routine, washing the oil and lingering hints of citrussy perfume out of his hair and trimming his beard back close to his olive-toned skin. He could afford to take his time with such things only on days like these.

When he finished, Salvatore reassessed his reflection and found his appearance had been decently improved by his efforts. So he shed his dressing gown and attired himself for the day, selecting a nice ivory tunic and a deep magenta jerkin stitched with pale pink thread, another old

gift from his mother. To avoid standing out amongst the humans in their best Sunday dress, he tucked a purple-dyed plume into the band of his flat cap and replaced the plain tunic cufflinks with ones featuring rose quartz cabochons. Figuring that was enough ornamentation to remain inconspicuous, Salvatore opened the large east-facing window and sat down on a chair beside it. He stared silently out at the buildings and rooftops across the canal, feeling the breeze on his face as he picked the gnarls out of his damp hair with a fine-toothed comb.

By the time his hair was untangled, brushed, and mostly dry, the bells in the clock tower and the nearby *santuari* had rung again, and Salvatore could hear the murmur of conversation begin to bubble up from the streets down below. Donning his feathered cap and settling the strap of the Zafferano wine carrier on his shoulder, he left his garret apartment, plodded carefully down the several flights of stairs, and stepped out into the gradually growing crowd.



The atmosphere in the Quartiere Verderame was not as exuberant and festive as it had been the previous day, but a sedately cheerful mood seemed to suffuse the air. Salvatore nodded pleasantly and touched the brim of his cap as he passed by familiar but nameless faces. Many of the morning services had already concluded and the olive-and-orange tiled streets were beginning to fill up with clusters of men in ornately-crafted doublets, women in finely-embroidered dresses, and dragons bedecked with stately glass and jewels.

Making his way southeast, he crossed a short bridge onto Isola di Giada. Deciding that he ought to bring more than just the pinot grigio, Salvatore spent a little time browsing the windows of the local bakeries and patisseries. Many devotees of Scintillagrumme and Pannalavanda flocked

to their *santuari* very early on Sunday mornings, closer to or even before dawn, so they had time to prepare certain popular foods and treats fresh for the midday rush. These shops wouldn't be open for more than an hour or two, though, as the chefs and bakers took the rest of the day off. So Salvatore made his choice — a delicious-looking apricot and almond tart in the window of a little lavender-hued shop — and quickly paid for the dessert before any of the other browsing customers could claim it. With the warm tart nicely boxed and secured in a square of white cloth, he left the shop content and continued southeast, rejoining the *fondamenta* as soon as he was able. He made a point to avoid the *campo* where the Santuario di Moltosabbia stood.

A single bridge connected the southernmost tip of Isola di Giada to Isola Catecù, and though the pathway over the canal was wide, Salvatore was still forced to wait for a large group of *draguomini* and *dragadonne* to move along before he could cross. Once he did, he became aware of the lingering scent of linseed oil and turpentine and felt the usual bittersweet taste of nostalgia on his tongue. He had now crossed into the territory of the Painters Guild.

Here, the galleries, studios, and exhibition halls of the isles' myriad canvas-daubers crowded out nearly every other business, and the facades of the buildings were more commonly painted with illustrative scenes than in solid blocks of bright color. As he ventured further in, Salvatore passed by many highly-familiar tableaux. There, on the outer wall of the Galleria di Moretto, was the solemn portrait of the first *dogi* of the isles — Doge Isacco Ferrari and Doge Cornaricurve — man and *draguomo* united in the noble dignity of their expressions. And there, beneath a studio balcony, was that mysterious mountain landscape with its snow-touched peaks and fog-obscured valleys. And even there, low at the foot of a supply shop's stairs, a miniature still-life of glass jars, pigments, and brushes, their painted forms real enough to fool the unknowing eye.

Strolling through the *campo* where the Painters Guildhall stood, Salvatore observed the life-sized mural of Ondasplendore adorning its most prominent outer wall. The centuries-old masterpiece was about due for another meticulous restoration, he noticed. Only the guild's top *maestri* were permitted to scourge the precious mural of its accumulated dirt and *aqua alta* watermarks and to retouch its surface with the best precision-mixed paints.

But even in its current state, Salvatore could tell it was a stunning simulacrum of a *dragadonna* who had herself been particularly beautiful. Reclining gracefully along a massive jut of dark rock, with sable-fur brushes clutched in one crossed front paw, Ondasplendore's slender, pastel form gleamed against a backdrop of dark lagoon waters and dawn-touched sky. Her patterning of soft blue, coral, yellow, and teal was distinctly unique and complimented well her pure white underbelly. Slivers of gold leaf had been used as highlights where simulated sunlight touched her scales, the delicate curves of her horns, and the light pink of her serene eyes.

Salvatore had always admired the mural. He'd come to know it quite well as a child, passing it almost every day on the way to and from school, and he'd learned more of its history over the years. The mural was one of the first and finest examples of the melding of contemporary human and classical dragonic painting styles. Curiously, Ondasplendore herself was painted in the human mode, with an eye towards the purest imitation of life, while the receding background was more dragonically textured and abstract, rough daubs of paint and broken lines miraculously resolving themselves into familiar forms only at a certain distance.

A few small mock-ups, composed by the original team of artists, were known to still exist, though their canvases had faded terribly over time. One was on display inside the guildhall's main gallery, while another hung in a nook of the Santuario di Ondasplendore. A third had once resided in the Nebbiosa *palazzo* of a prominent *maestro* painter, but was now

wrapped up lovingly in a sturdy, preservative case in the depths of the Caveau's storeroom. Salvatore had mentioned his fondness for the mural once in passing, and the very next night, Silvio had returned with the mock-up in hand and a highly satisfied grin on his lips.

Salvatore turned away from the massive portrait and let his feet take him along the old, winding path of cobblestone roads and alleyway shortcuts he'd walked so often in his youth. The throngs of humans and dragons thinned the further he went, until Salvatore found himself nearly alone on a pleasant, sunny side-street. Rows of old, three-storied, residential buildings lined both sides of the lane. The townhouses here were not overly large and were definitely best suited to human proportions, but the dwellings were generally well cared for and maintained. The alternating tints of their facades, all in the pastel hues of Ondasplendore, were interrupted by varying styles of painted foliage: elegant tendrils of ivy and climbing vines, bushes of tiny florets, marshy lagoon rushes, and profusions of wild, imaginary plants in bloom. These abiding ornamentations had earned the street its nickname of *il Percorso del Giardino*: the Garden Path.

Salvatore's feet slowed of their own accord as he approached one unremarkable townhouse partway down the lane. The rose-colored walls were dappled with faded buds, blossoms, and sharp-tipped leaves sprouting from painted thorny branches, the white-trimmed facade in decent repair. Live flowering plants drooped from garden boxes beneath the windows, and an old set of glass wind chimes tinkled lightly on their hook by the sage-green door.

On the front steps of the townhouse lounged an older girl, bareheaded and wearing a smart white dress embellished with tiny, seed-like beads of multicolored glass. At first she didn't seem to notice Salvatore's approach, as her attention was fixed on an open portfolio in her lap. Her hands continued to shuffle through a varied stack of papers, deviating only to brush long strands of brown hair out of her face. But when Salvatore finally came to a stop, she glanced up

at him briefly, then again with a start of surprise. A moment later, she snapped the portfolio shut, tossed it carelessly onto the steps, and leapt to her feet.

“Zio Tonio!” she shouted, coming at him in a rush. Salvatore barely got the covered tart out of harm’s way before she threw her arms around his chest in a crushing hug. He let out a strangled *oof* and chuckled, patting her back fondly as she leaned up to touch a swift, feather-like kiss to each of his cheeks. “I thought you’d *never* arrive. What took you so long? *Ooo*, what’s that in the cloth? It smells *sublime*.”

“I got here as soon as I could, Luce,” Salvatore replied, relinquishing the boxed tart into her impatient hands. He smiled as she held the package up to her nose and sniffed, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. “It’s apricot and almond,” he added. “Just picked it up fresh.”

“And it’s still warm!” Luce grinned. “Could I have a slice now? We’re having *gnocchi* today, but Mamma had just finished boiling the potatoes when I came outside, so it’ll be a while before we can eat.”

“That’s her call, *mia cara nipote*, not mine.” He followed Luce as she trotted up the front steps, grabbing the portfolio and tucking it beneath her arm as she went. “And why aren’t you inside helping her? I’m sure she could use the assistance.”

Luce glanced back at him, amused, and they shared a knowing grin. “There’s nothing *I* can do to help,” she retorted. “I didn’t inherit Papà’s talent, only Mamma’s lack of one. And I came outside to wait for you, of course.”

“Of course.” Salvatore stood patiently as his niece fumbled for the door with her free hand, then nodded as she held it open for him to go first. “*Grazie*.” He stepped inside into the front sitting room and was immediately surrounded by the warm, familiar sensation of home.



Salvatore had grown up in this house along with his younger sister Marzia. The property had not belonged to the Manco family for many generations — their father Tommaso’s father, a grandfather they’d never known, had been the one to purchase it — but Salvatore had always felt a strong connection to the house anyway. Marzia had been the one to inherit it upon their father’s passing, however, and as she had subsequently married Renzo Favero, the house now technically belonged to her husband’s family. But the place still looked, sounded, and even smelled to Salvatore much the same as it always had.

The sitting room was bathed in early afternoon sunlight. It streamed through the tiny holes in the white lace curtains and glinted off the frames of the innumerable paintings crowding the walls. Salvatore hung his cap on its customary hook beside the door, and by the time he turned back around, Luce had already fled the room with an unnecessarily loud cry of “*Mamma!* Zio Tonio’s here, and he brought dessert! Can I have some now?” Salvatore chuckled and shuffled his way through the small space, instinctively avoiding the easily-tripped corner of the old rug, its fibers worn and flattened from decades of trodding feet.

The sitting room was — as most sitting rooms were in the Isole Fulgide — more of a showcase of the residents’ artistic talents than a dedicated room for receiving guests, but it gamely served both roles regardless. His mother’s signature embroidery and lacework made an appearance on every pillow, curtain, and slip of fabric, while several of his father’s carefully-rendered still-lives — mostly baskets of fruit or bouquets of flowers — hung above the cushioned chairs. The lighter and more airy landscapes, however, had been composed by Marzia. She had, in her youth, favored charming views of the *campi* during festival days and the wide

lagoon dotted with fishermen's boats. Interspersed was the occasional portrait in Renzo's characteristic style or the bright, dragon-like abstractions that Luce had been fixated on for the last few years. Some of Salvatore's childhood artworks — observational sketches, organic and geometric forms, color studies — had once graced the sitting room as well. But they'd all been packed up or discarded, either at his father's or his own behest, many years ago.

Following the sound of his niece's voice, Salvatore ventured into the dining room; then, finding it vacant, he continued through the next doorway into the kitchen. More works of art adorned the walls in between the hanging pots and pans and the cabinets of glass and porcelain tableware. The stuffy scent of boiled potatoes, slightly scorched, hit his senses and he felt his empty stomach begin to protest its long overnight fast.

At the counter, Luce was in the process of unwrapping the tart with quick, eager hands. "It's apricot and almond, and it's still warm," she was relaying, "and *gnocchi* takes *forever*. I'll simply *perish* unless I eat something now."

"No, you won't. Set it aside, and we'll have some after the meal." Marzia was standing at the counter as well, her back to Salvatore, kneading the warm dough for the *gnocchi* with steady, forceful strokes. She had obviously been in a hurry to get the dumplings started, as she was still in part of the dress uniform she wore to her *santuario*. Marzia had, however, shed the velvet shoulder caplet, with its pattern of dark ultramarine-blue scales stitched in silver, and the matching white beret; both pieces were draped neatly over the back of a nearby chair. She had pulled her dark brown hair out of her face with a strip of ribbon, though a few wavy strands had already escaped from her vigorous movements.

A grin flitted onto Salvatore's face. He swiftly sidled up behind her and — just as she seemed about to turn and greet him — dove his hand beneath her arm, beginning to furiously

tickle. Marzia jumped and gave a wild squawk of surprise. “*Tonio!*” she shrieked, and before he could move aside, she elbowed him hard in the soft, fat center of his arm. With a wince, Salvatore stepped back out of his sister’s reach, then snorted in amusement as she made to swipe at him with dough-sticky hands. “*Dannazione!*”

“That’s no way to speak to your big brother,” Salvatore teased, “especially in front of your impressionable daughter. And on a Sunday, no less!” Luce was giggling at their antics, but immediately stopped when he turned in her direction and began to tickle the air threateningly. With a dramatic gasp at the betrayal, she ducked behind Marzia for protection before abandoning both her mother and the tart as she swiftly fled the kitchen.

“You’re one to talk,” Marzia grumbled indignantly, but there was a warm smile on her face and a sparkle in her eyes. Salvatore allowed her to catch his wrists in her sticky hands and graciously submitted to a familial peck on each cheek before returning the favor. “*Buon pomeriggio*. You look well today.”

He was glad he’d taken the time to groom his hair and beard that morning. “I suppose I am. And so do you, *sorellina*. As lovely as always.”

Marzia had been born when Salvatore was three years old, and since the moment their mother first placed the tiny, swaddled baby into his chubby arms, it had been obvious to everyone who saw them that they were siblings. They shared the same olive complexion, the same brown eyes, and the same dark hair, though Marzia’s had more of a tendency to curl like Sofia’s while Salvatore’s mostly hung straight like Tommaso’s. They were similarly stocky as well, with pudgy cheeks and an inclination towards portliness if their diet was left unchecked. It was a trait clearly passed down through the Manco line; their father had been built much the same. But Marzia had fared far better in that department than he, Salvatore thought with only a

touch of envy. Her occupation kept her active and strong, and as a result, what extra weight she did carry was negligible and mostly confined to her chest and hips.

Salvatore smiled, feeling fond. “So what inspired you to attempt Mamma’s *gnocchi* today?”

“It’s been awhile since I made it,” Marzia reasoned, then narrowed her eyes. “And what do you mean by ‘*attempt*’?” At his laugh, she tapped Salvatore’s cheek twice in mock outrage, leaving behind a trace of flour and potatoey residue. “I’ll have you know I remembered to leave the skins on before boiling them this time.”

“That’s an improvement.” He decided it was best not to question the scorched scent lingering in the air. “Will it be ready soon, or do I have time to take a nap?”

Marzia scoffed. “It’ll be ready faster if you help. Make yourself useful and chop those up for the sauce,” she said, nodding at the nearby cutting board. An arrangement of freshly-bought vegetables and herbs sat waiting for attention.

“*Va bene, va bene*,” he conceded. He set the canvas-covered bottle of wine down beside the tart and unbuttoned his cufflinks before rolling up his sleeves. “Now why has Luce been exempted from participation, but not me?”

“She’s working on some ideas for her apprenticeship portfolio,” Marzia replied. Her smile had grown soft, as Salvatore had noticed it always did when she spoke of her only child. “She seemed particularly inspired by the service today and I don’t want to break her concentration if she’s entered a deep focus. She spent most of the *sacerdotessa*’s sermon sketching.”

That wasn’t an unusual practice, of course. Most of the isles’ artists brought some simple tools of their trade with them to their *santuario* to make note of or experiment with any creative

ideas that the service might evoke. The *sacerdote* encouraged this habit, in fact, for it supported the very mission of the *santuari*. Salvatore had seen entire congregations with their heads down before, not in meditation, but buried in their personal drawing pads or notebooks, furiously sketching or writing away, as the priest or priestess continued to speak of their patron's inspiring words or works from their place beside the altar.

Salvatore took up the sharpened knife lying by the cutting board and began to methodically chop the first tomato into slices. "She seems more 'inspired' by that tart than a sermon right now, if you ask me," he remarked innocently.

"She had a good breakfast this morning," Marzia countered. "She can stand to wait."

When Luce had been born, she'd come out looking less like her mother and uncle and more like her father, with Renzo's lighter hair and skin tone and with a distinctly Favero physique. Regardless of what she ate, Luce was simply naturally slimmer, with a more ovate face, slender arms and fingers, and long legs made to run. But she still had the dark Manco eyes. Salvatore was glad there was at least one feature they shared, and that it was one of their nicer ones, too.

He pondered Marzia's words for a moment as he began to dice the tomato into smaller bits. "Why is she worried about her apprenticeship portfolio?" he finally asked. "She has plenty of time left before it needs to be submitted."

He paused, glancing up briefly in curiosity and confusion, at his sister's sigh in response.

"She's already sixteen, *fratello*," Marzia clarified. Her voice had gone strangely gentle. Salvatore felt a twinge of discomfort in his chest that soon rose to lodge uncomfortably in his throat. "She doesn't have that many months of school left before she receives her certification."

"Well," Salvatore began. Then he stopped, unsure of what he wanted to say.

He hadn't forgotten how old Luce was. Objectively, he knew his niece was sixteen, no longer a child but on the very cusp of young adulthood. And he was quite aware that most of the humans and dragons in her class were already sending in their best works to their guild of choice, hoping the *maestri* saw enough potential talent, skill, and originality in their art to accept them into the creative fold.

But even as a little girl, Luce had been an energetic whirlwind, spirited and loyally affectionate, and by some miracle she'd managed to retain those traits throughout the various hardships of her adolescence. Despite the physical changes time had wrought, her liveliness made it easy to ignore the passing of years.

And where the apprenticeship application process was concerned, well, it *had* been over twenty-five years since Salvatore had gone through it himself, and that wasn't a period of his life he wanted to reflect on if he could help it. Unpleasant circumstances had prevented him from having any involvement in Marzia's admission process several years later, and since that time, he'd had no contact with any of the guilds in that particular capacity.

After all, Silvio hadn't sought admittance to one of the artisan guilds when he was Luce's age. In arranging the youth's makeshift apprenticeship in all manners of thievery, Salvatore had not, of course, asked for any sort of formal written application. Silvio had proven himself a quick learner and a more than capable thief with the success of his very first heist, and he'd never given Salvatore any reason to doubt his commitment to his unusual education.

Nico, on the other hand, should have been accepted into a guild three years ago. But Salvatore had known such a possibility was never in the cards. He'd never even brought it up in conversation. He'd noticed the little dragon behaving strangely around his sixteenth hatchday,

alternating rapidly between irritable and snappish and a glum sort of mopiness, but Salvatore had never discovered the exact reason and he knew better than to ask Nico why.

Eventually, Salvatore gave his sister a sort of noncommittal shrug and returned to his tomato dicing. “A few months is still plenty of time.”

Marzia didn’t reply, and he kept his eyes carefully trained on his work, not wanting to see the expression she’d surely turned in his direction. A long moment passed, but then Salvatore heard her return to her rhythmic kneading and he felt the tightness in his throat abate. In the relative quiet, there was the muffled sound of Luce’s footsteps pounding up the staircase, the familiar creak of the floorboard two steps from the top. Salvatore supposed she was headed for her bedroom, perhaps to sharpen a graphite pencil or retrieve more drawing paper.

Upon thoroughly chopping the tomatoes, he turned his attention to peeling the fragrant bulb of garlic. He discarded the outer skin, then crushed and chopped the cloves the way Sofia had taught him. Marzia had moved on as well, forming the mass of kneaded dough into several long, rope-like cylinders. As she sliced the dough into small regular bites, she began to speak again, this time in an oddly mild tone. “So. I was speaking with Efe after the service this morning—”

An involuntary growl of discomfort escaped Salvatore’s throat, and he barely restraining himself from sighing. He had known, from the moment he felt the *draguomo*’s hot breath on the back of his citrus-perfumed neck, that it was only a matter of time. The interrogation, however, had commenced sooner than he’d expected. “How *is* Efelidrame doing?” Salvatore interjected quickly, chopping a little faster and trying his best to exude an attitude of jovial innocence.

“You should know,” Marzia replied. She seemed unfazed by his change in demeanor. “He told me that he ran into you last night.”

“Is that so?”

“In...” She hesitated briefly. Salvatore wondered if she was trying to mentally locate Luce’s presence in the house, to determine if her daughter was out of hearing range. That was a rather amusing thought, he decided, particularly after her previous comments about Luce’s age. Finally, Marzia concluded, “In southern Isola di Rame.”

“I live on Isola di Rame,” Salvatore pointed out. After a moment of silence, he glanced up, expecting a withering response to his deflection. Instead, he found his sister’s expression more concerned than irritated.

“Antonio,” she said. Salvatore shifted the chopped garlic to one side of the board with the flat of the knife, then started in on the shallots and the fresh sprigs of basil. “*Antonio*,” she repeated.

“*What?*” He raised an eyebrow. Marzia rarely called him by his full first name. Like everyone who had known him growing up, she mostly kept to the friendly nickname ‘Tonio’ or — in her case alone — the familial ‘*fratello*.’ As a child, even *he* had thought of himself as Tonio Manco. He could remember occasionally fretted over having the same initials as Tommaso, how that meant he couldn’t sign his artworks as ‘T. Manco’ without causing confusion. For the most part, ‘Antonio’ was saved for formal occasions or when he had made his father angry. Only his mother had regularly called him ‘Antonio’ out of love.

He had never gone by his middle name, ‘Salvatore,’ not until much later, and only after he’d begun to frequent the shadier taverns on Isola di Opercolo or in the Riposo di Marinai. For the first time in his life, he’d gotten a true taste of anonymity, and the sensation had been far more freeing than any masquerade disguise could ever hope to be. It was equal parts delight, at the newness of being unknown, and fearful shame, at the thought of being caught by someone

who knew him, that had led him to become ‘Salvatore.’ He would introduce himself as such to the barkeeps and his fellow patrons, and when he returned, night after night, they would recognize and remember him.

As the months had passed, he’d found himself responding quicker to shouts of ‘*Sal*’ than ‘*Tonio*.’ Then years had gone by, and he’d started receiving stolen goods, and ‘Salvatore Manco’ had made a name for himself among the thieves and the pickpockets and the smugglers, had developed a reputation as a reliable *ricettatore*, discreet, trustworthy, and fair.

Salvatore couldn’t remember the last time he’d truly thought of himself as ‘Tonio.’ He responded to the name automatically, of course, from his family, legal business associates, and childhood acquaintances. But these days it felt like ‘Tonio Manco’ had been another person altogether, a strange and distant dream.

“*What?*” he asked again, when Marzia didn’t immediately respond. With a little, self-deprecating laugh, Salvatore shook his head and returned to his chopping. “I can go where I please, *sorellina*. I’m not a child.”

“I know that.” She seemed frustrated. The slices of *gnocchi* grew more irregular as she began to cut quicker and with less precision.

“And I’ve no attachments to ward me away,” he added. Then, keeping his voice level, Salvatore asked, “I’ve committed no wrongdoings, *giusto?*”

“No, you haven’t.” Marzia sighed, switching to the next ropey length of dough. “You’re a free man, and if that’s how you want to spend your nights — and your coin — that’s your decision.”

Salvatore chuckled. “Then what’s the problem?”

“I just wish... you didn’t feel the need to visit those sorts of places.” Before he could respond to her phrasing with amusement, she corrected herself. “I wish you *did* have some attachment.” Marzia glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, and he saw the expression of concern had reappeared. “Tonio, you’re by yourself so much. If you’re not in the shop, you’re cooped up in that apartment. I just hate the thought of you spending so much time alone.”

So that’s what was truly on her mind, Salvatore thought. Despite the discomfort that it brought him, he found that he couldn’t be upset with his sister when she was only concerned for his welfare.

“*That’s* what’s bothering you?” he finally asked, with an air of lighthearted incredulity. “And here I thought you were afraid I was... *non lo so*... further sullyng the Manco name.”

“*Tonio*,” Marzia chided. “I’m serious. What do you do, besides mind the Antichità Manco and sleep?” It was hard not to interject, but Salvatore managed to stay quiet and continued to chop up the basil. “You never mention attending new exhibitions or performances. You don’t go to masques anymore, or share meals with any of your old school friends. I know you hardly ever visit the Santuario di Moltosabbia anymore... and *no*, don’t try to deny it.” Salvatore closed his mouth, swallowing his protest. “And now you even have that Orsini girl to help you run the shop.” Marzia sighed. “You don’t spend any time with others, *fratello*, and it worries me.”

It was true that Salvatore lived in relative solitude. He knew it well. But his situation looked much worse from Marzia’s perspective than it actually was. He had the company of Nico, after all, and he had his friendly partnership with Silvio. Not to mention his business associations with Elisa and Vittoria, and the amicable acquaintanceship of Carina, Giulia, Leandro, and all the

thieves he served as fence. But his sister did not know — and could not know — of any of these relationships.

“I’m not lonely,” Salvatore countered with reassuring cheer. “And I ‘do’ plenty of things. Why, I spent all yesterday afternoon at the auctions in the Quartiere Case d’Asta; I was hardly by myself there. Then I browsed the shops and dined on Isola di Zafferano, and after that, in ‘southern Isola di Rame,’ I—”

“I don’t need the details,” Marzia said quickly.

Salvatore laughed. He leaned over and nudged her playfully in the side with his elbow. “*Va bene*. But you needn’t worry about your big brother. He is perfectly fine.” His smile dipped a little as a mortifying thought occurred to him. “*Sorellina*, I hope you haven’t got it in your head again to find me some ‘companionship.’”

Throughout his late twenties and early thirties, Marzia had tried to introduce him to various unattached women of her acquaintance, with the obvious motive of ridding Salvatore of his bachelor status. They had all been nice enough, of course, around his age and generally on his level in terms of social standing and appearance. But never had he felt any desire to further develop these tentative connections, and none of his potential matches had seemed overly interested either. Each of Marzia’s attempts had grown progressively more transparent and awkward until she’d finally conceded defeat and stopped mentioning the matter altogether. It had been years now since she’d tried, but Salvatore desperately hoped she wasn’t about to renew her quest.

“*Il Creatore* forbid,” Marzia replied, mildly scathing. When she rolled her eyes, Salvatore smiled and allowed himself to relax. She finished chopping up the dough and began to score the raw *gnocchi* dumplings with the tongs of a fork. “No, I won’t ever make that mistake again.”

“If you must play matchmaker, why don’t you find a mate for Efelidirame?” Salvatore suggested a little snidely. “Then perhaps he wouldn’t spend his Saturday nights skulking around the Quartiere Peridoto, harassing honest businesswomen and their clients.”

“He wasn’t *skulking*,” Marzia said, with an awkward laugh. “There’s been some reports of theft in the area lately, and he told me he was conducting an unofficial patrol, just to keep an eye on things. On his time off, I might add.”

Deadpan, Salvatore stated, “How noble of him.” Then, swallowing the irony, he added, “As if anyone would commit theft under the gaze of a *draguomo* of the Guardia.”

Marzia, absorbed in her work, didn’t glance up. “You’d be surprised. It’s happened before.” His professional curiosity peaked, Salvatore waited a moment for his sister to elaborate, but when she didn’t, he let the comment go.

“Still,” he said, wiping the blade of the knife on a nearby cloth, “I’d say that’s a rather poor use of his free time. Even without his badge on display, he can’t exactly blend in with the crowd.”

The green-light district was perhaps the only place in the isles where it was strange to see a dragon, but the oddity of such an occurrence was magnified. There were no brothels that catered to *draguomini*, and no *dragadonne* courtesans. It was generally accepted, after all, that dragons did not crave carnal pleasure with the same frequency or intensity as their human counterparts. Though no true sense of superiority on the dragons’ part had developed from this biological and cultural tendency, it was understood that dragons rarely pursued satisfaction recreationally and, if they did, it was exclusively with their bonded mates. There was no obvious reason, then, why one might encounter a *draguomo* in the Quartiere Peridoto, and the presence of one could only invite suspicion.

“There’s no need for all this ridicule,” Marzia admonished, though Salvatore could tell she was suppressing a smile. She passed him a spare fork and he joined her in scoring the *gnocchi*. “Especially without him here to defend himself.” She shook her head. “Poor Efe!”

Salvatore snorted. “He shouldn’t try to tattle on innocent men to their little sisters, then.” An alarming possibility crossed his mind, and Salvatore glanced around the kitchen nervously. Though he didn’t see or smell any signs of roasting meat, he still had to ask. “He’s not eating with us today, is he?”

Marzia elbowed him lightly in the side. “No, Efe’s dining at the guildhall. I asked if he wanted to join us, but I suppose he’s seen enough of *you* to last the weekend.” Salvatore breathed a loud sigh of relief, earning him another playful jab.

Salvatore didn’t hate the copper-speckled *draguomo* — he held a rather favorable opinion of him, actually — but he thought he’d more than earned the right to tease Efelidrame with impunity. Since her first days of school as a little girl, Marzia’s most faithful companions had been the gentle and kind Renzo Favero and the serious and awkward Efelidrame. The three were all the same age and had all been placed in the same class, so they had soon become fast friends. And they’d stayed that way, all throughout their childhood and adolescence.

As a result, Salvatore had gotten to know Renzo and Efelidrame quite well in his youth. The boy and the *dragazzo* were frequent guests at the Manco household. They would often walk home with Marzia after Saturday morning classes and, at Sofia’s unassailable insistence, would stick around to eat a home-cooked midday meal. Then they would gather in the sitting room to chat or play cards or work on their lessons in companionable silence. On nice days, they often lounged on the front steps, enjoying the sunshine, or played spontaneous, informal games of *calcio* out on the street with other children from the neighborhood.

As Marzia's responsible older brother, Salvatore had been roped countless times into supervising the trio's various activities and inter-isle excursions. He'd accompanied them to *spettacoli* on Isola di Smeraldo, to festival markets in the Mercato Pietra, and to mock gladiatorial fights on Isola d'Acciaio. He'd escorted them to their first juvenile masquerades, silly and innocent affairs with children and *dragazzi* decked out in amateur, self-crafted disguises; later on, at Tommaso's gruff command, he'd been forced to chaperon many of the more formal and mature masquerades they attended as well.

On rare occasions, when the weather was just right and their collective mood aligned, Marzia, Renzo, and Efelidirame had pooled their coin and rented a small vessel on Isola di Vele, cruising the open waters of the lagoon for the rest of the day. Salvatore had been obligated to go with them, to ensure they didn't venture out beyond the boundaries of the isles' watery borders, but those outings he hadn't minded. To be honest, Salvatore had quite enjoyed them. There was contentment to be found in helping his sister and her friends unfurl the canvas sail and navigate the craft through changing tides and around invisible sandbars, the warm sun on his face, the cries of seabirds and the creaking of wood in his ears, and the briny breeze whipping through his long queue of dark hair.

The bond between the girl, the boy, and the *dragazzo* had transformed dramatically as they'd reached adulthood, but the connection itself had remained strong. After all, Salvatore reflected, upon graduating from their apprenticeships, Renzo and Marzia had married and become husband and wife, while Efelidirame and Marzia had become partners as newly-minted officers of the Guardia di Drago.

"Here, I'll finish these up," Salvatore said, nodding at the *gnocchi*. "You go change before you get anything else on your uniform." Startled, Marzia glanced down and shifted her

stance, trying to survey her clothing without further soiling the fine fabric. Amazingly, she had managed to keep the white fitted jacket and dark blue trousers free of boiled potato and flour, and when she looked back up and saw Salvatore's grin, she pinched her lips together and poked him on the cheek. "*Ahi*," he protested mildly. "I'm just trying to help."

"Fine, then." Marzia quickly washed and dried her hands, then gathered up her discarded capelet and beret. "Keep going, and I'll be back in a minute to get the water boiling." Eying his exaggerated pout, she planted a light kiss on the spot where she'd poked him, then snorted at his resulting bright grin. "*Fratello stupido*."

Once Marzia left the room, Salvatore allowed the smile to dissipate. He continued to score the uncooked dumplings as he listened to the tap of her polished black boots ascending the staircase, and he kept at the task in the following quiet. The movement required was repetitive and deeply familiar, and Salvatore lost himself for a while in the work.

Nestled in the silence, he caught the faintest, muffled hint of music. It was something brassy and hesitant, reiterating the same melodic phrase over and over with minor variations. A young musician, Salvatore thought, practicing in one of the adjacent townhouses. He wondered if it was someone Luce's age, preparing to perform before their prospective guild's application committee.



As a child, Marzia had shown no interest in joining the ranks of the Guardia di Drago. Salvatore was certain he would have noticed if she had. She'd voiced no desire to serve either in the naval Guardia di Mare or in the inter-isle Guardia di Terra, which she was a member of

today. Neither had she demonstrated any predilection towards Bluoltremarone, patron dragon of protectors and lawful order, the very founder of the Guardia itself. While Salvatore could recall Efelidirame having such ambitions even as a spindly *dragazzo*, his own little sister had never shared that goal.

Like their father and his father before him, Marzia had instead dreamed of joining the Painters Guild. As a child, she had spent years playing around with watercolors and oils and inks, experimenting with various combinations of pigments, brushes, and papers with a delightful sort of unburdened enthusiasm. And as she grew, Marzia had openly professed her desire to produce magnificent landscapes, stunning masterpieces of nature and civilization the likes of which the Isole Fulgide had never seen.

Even accounting for brotherly prejudice, Salvatore was certain she'd had the unique vision, the innate talent, and the technical ability to do just that. Tommaso had been a skilled painter, of course, but not a particularly inventive one. He'd been no *maestro*, but he had served the guild and his studio well as a competent reproducer, steadily generating replicas of great works by actual *maestri* with impressive accuracy and precision. In contrast, Marzia had possessed the sort of highly-sought potential that Salvatore believed would have caused a recruitment scuffle amongst the various guilds of the visual arts, if only they'd had the chance to fight over her. Marzia's aspirations had been the same as Renzo's — both of his parents had also been painters in the guild — and Salvatore knew their parallel desires had greatly enhanced their friendship and certainly contributed to their eventual romantic attachment.

But while Renzo had gone on to join the guild, complete his apprenticeship, and serve as one of the leading portrait artists at his studio, Marzia never even sent in her portfolio to the Painters Guild. Instead, she had applied for an apprenticeship with the Guardia di Drago, to the

great shock and confusion of her family and friends, her classmates, and her former painting instructors. In the end, Renzo had accepted Marzia's abrupt resolution with characteristic grace, Efelidrame with puzzled delight, and Sofia with sudden motherly terror over this new guild's requisite weapons training and nighttime back-alley patrols. Tommaso had been deeply disappointed, but hadn't challenged his daughter's decision. This was according to Sofia, at least, who had explained the situation to Salvatore some time later. He hadn't been around himself at the time to question Marzia's sudden shift in direction, and decades later, Salvatore still wasn't entirely certain what had prompted it.

He had his guesses, though. And if he was even partially right, Salvatore found the lingering uncertainty vastly preferable to any hint of confirmation.



Soon enough, the sound of footsteps on the stairs, lighter this time, signaled Marzia's approach. Salvatore smiled as she returned to his side with a playful nudge and prepared the old ceramic pot — the sides decorated with autumnal golden flowers — that their mother had used exclusively for cooking *gnocchi*. Out of uniform, Marzia looked more like her adolescent self, Salvatore thought, with her loose-fitting lavender tunic, sleek gray trousers, and silk-slipped feet. She had pulled her hair up into a braided bun, but thin wisps had already escaped their confinement to frame her face in dark, feathery curls. It was simultaneously easier and harder to see his sister dressed this way, out of her uniform whites and blues and in the comfort of her home.

After some lighthearted debate over the separation of duties, Salvatore took over the final boiling of the raw dumplings — a task that required *some* measure of culinary aptitude, he argued teasingly — while Marzia agreed to finish up the sauce using the ingredients he had chopped. While they worked, Marzia regaled him with stories of recent incidents she and Efelidirame had dealt with on the job, and passed on a few tidbits of harmless Questura gossip as well.

Most of the disturbances they handled were minor in the grand scheme of things: boat collisions in packed canals, heated arguments over the cost of materials or goods, drunken disorderly conduct at taverns and masques, and petty acts of sabotage between rival studios. Salvatore was grateful for their relatively trifling nature. Between the sheer number of weapons produced everyday in the smithies on Isola d'Acciaio and the innate sharp-and-fiery arsenal of the dragons, it was a wonder that violent crime was relatively uncommon in the isles. The same couldn't be said for most countries on the mainland and abroad, Salvatore knew.

So it relieved him to hear that Marzia's most noteworthy new tale involved a brief but impassioned squabble between an apprentice prosaist and an apprentice poet, which resulted into a spontaneous fistfight in the streets, after one knocked an open inkwell onto the other's freshly-completed manuscript. According to Marzia, the subsequent interrogation conducted by Efelidirame at the Questura had failed to establish whether the initiating act was premeditated or accidental, and both young men were currently cooling their tempers in separate holding cells at Punto Nord.

For the most part, Salvatore was quiet and simply listened to his sister's chatter, keeping a silent watch over the dumplings' second, swifter boiling. He only supplied a few stories of his

own — minor incidents at the Antichità Manco, their amusing or interesting nature exaggerated out of necessity — when Marzia’s face threatened to renew its earlier expression of concern.

When the dumplings and the sauce were nearly done, Marzia shouted up at the ceiling for Luce to come down and set the table. Salvatore chuckled at her daughter’s equally loud-but-muffled reply. Moments later, Luce descended the stairs in a careless thundering of feet and burst into the kitchen with an impassioned cry. “If it’s not ready now, Mamma, I’m eating the *gnocchi* raw!”

“By Iri, don’t act like I don’t feed you,” Marzia fussed. “Get the plates and silverware and then we can eat. How is your current design plan coming?”

“Fine,” Luce said absently, digging through one cabinet for a matching set of dishes. The sturdy ceramic plates scraped and clattered loudly against each other, and Salvatore winced reflexively at the cacophony. “There was *something* in the way the light came through that one window that really... just caught my eye, and... I’m trying to figure out what exactly it was.” She shook her head. “I *might* have captured a *hint* of it on paper, but I think I need a few hours away from the sketch for now. My head was starting to *ache*.”

Salvatore hummed, setting the bubbling cooking pot aside to cool. “It always helps to reevaluate a plan with fresh eyes,” he stated sagely. “You’re more likely to catch potential flaws at a distance.” The old blueprints of the Cristallobianco archives had come to mind. He wondered if Silvio and Nico’s reconnaissance had turned up any structural inconsistencies.

“Too true,” Marzia concurred. “And if we need to go back later today for you to observe some more, Luce, just let me know.” She was grating a chunk of hard, white cheese into a serving bowl, and Salvatore saw her pause briefly to gift her daughter an encouraging smile. “We have the time this evening; my next shift doesn’t start until dawn tomorrow.” She returned

to be grating. “Or you can go by yourself, of course. The place certainly won’t be empty on a Sunday, and the *sacerdoti* will be more than happy to accommodate you. Just try to be back before it gets too dark.”

“I *would* go this evening,” Luce said, hugging the plates to her chest, “but I think I need to see it in the mid-morning light. Specifically.” She sighed heavily. “So I’ll have to wait until *next* Sunday to finish the design, *unless*—”

“No skipping school,” Marzia declared sternly. She shook the block of cheese at Luce as if wagging a finger. “Not even for a portfolio piece.” At her daughter’s resulting pout, Marzia raised an eyebrow and stared her down, their matching brown eyes linked. “You can’t afford to miss a single class right now. If I hear *one* report of you—”

“*Va bene!*” Luce exclaimed quickly. “I’m *not* going to skip school! I was just thinking out loud, that’s all.”

Salvatore stirred the *gnocchi* absently. He wondered which window in the Santuario di Bluoltremarone had caught Luce’s attention. As with most parents who belonged to different guilds, Renzo and Marzia had taken Luce to a variety of Sunday morning services growing up, rotating weekly between the shrine of the guardians, the shrine of the painters, and the Glass Basilica itself.

Salvatore’s parents had done much the same with he and Marzia, though they had attended the Santuario di Ondasplendore the most, it being within easy walking distance of their house. At least once every month or so, however, they had made the gondola trip over to Isola di Alizarina, where Sofia’s guild held services at the Santuario di Fioreselvatica. Hers was a comfortable shrine, airy and full of sunshine, and her soft-spoken *sacerdotesse* were particularly kind. Salvatore remembered fondly the large, plush cushions — pure white and embroidered

with flowering wreaths — on the wooden pews. He'd been less fond of the strong, natural perfume that emanated from the shrine's abundance of sconced bouquets; the floral scent had often caused Salvatore's throat to close up in distress.

As for the Santuario di Bluoltremarone, Salvatore had never attended a regular service there, though he had been inside the building a handful of times, most memorably for Marzia's apprenticeship graduation. Bluoltremarone's *santuario* was by far the most stately one Salvatore had visited. The interior was solemn and austere, with richly-stained pews and dark blue curtains. A life-sized marble statue of Bluoltremarone, sitting stiff-backed and imposing, loomed over the nave from its pedestal in the apse.

Salvatore couldn't recall any particular details about the shrine's windows that might spark Luce's imagination. Several of them did, however, feature geometric patterns of blue stained glass, which cast a twilight hue over the congregation even at midday. Perhaps that was it.

Luce had disappeared into the dining room with the dishes, so Salvatore almost dropped the ladle he was holding when she suddenly shouted, "Mamma, do I need to set out a cushion for Zio Efe?"

"No," Marzia called back, tapping the last crumbs of cheese into the bowl. She shot a half-exasperated expression in Salvatore's direction and loudly added, "He's dining at the guildhall today."

"Thank *il Creatore*," Salvatore murmured. He tried to duck the sprinkling of grated cheese Marzia flicked in his direction, but only managed to get a light dusting across his jerkin rather than his face. Salvatore stuck his tongue out at her and spooned the completed dumplings into a serving dish.

Though he knew he had no real reason to be resentful, Salvatore had always been discomfited by Luce referring to Efelidrame as her ‘Zio Efe.’ Dragons, after all, did not regard their close kin with the same level of importance and fondness as humans traditionally did. As both of her parents’ closest friend, however, Efelidrame *was* practically another uncle to Luce. The *draguomo* did many of the things such a position suggested, bringing her gifts on special occasions, attending her childhood functions with Renzo and Marzia, and speaking of her artistic accomplishments to others with his own stuffy sort of pride. Salvatore thought Efelidrame’s contribution in this capacity was unnecessary — her ‘Zio Tonio’ was more than capable of doting on his only niece as she deserved — but, for a variety of reasons he chose not to dwell on, Luce’s family was quite small and Salvatore didn’t want his own petty jealousy to force it any smaller.

“Here,” Luce said, reappearing at his elbow, “let me carry that for you, Zio Tonio.” She attempted to pry the *gnocchi* dish out of his grasp.

Knowing her long arms would still be able to reach it over his head, Salvatore shifted the dish to his far side and turned in place as Luce tried and failed to snag it from across his broad belly. “No, that’s all right,” he teased. “I want to make sure these lovely dumplings actually make it to the table.” Marzia laughed as Salvatore continued to rotate away from his niece’s grasping hands, then lifted the dish out of reach as she reversed direction and lunged at her target behind his back. “You can carry the sauce, *mia cara nipote*.” Ignoring Luce’s indignant gasp, Salvatore sidestepped around her and slipped through the doorway.



The dining room was small, and, much like the sitting room, the floor was just a bit too crowded with heavy furniture and the walls with framed paintings of all subjects and sizes. Salvatore placed the dish of *gnocchi* on a woven pot holder in the center of the dining table. Set with four sturdy chairs and covered in a faded tablecloth — embroidered, of course, by Sofia, countless decades ago — the round table looked just the same as it had when Salvatore and Marzia had eaten their meals there as children.

He ladled a hearty portion of steaming dumplings onto each plate, and as Luce and Marzia carried in the other dishes and the bottle of pinot grigio, Salvatore settled himself into his lifelong, customary position at the table, his back to the nearest wall. His niece and his sister were still bickering lightly over the idea of skipping school to go sketch, and he smiled absently, amused at their chatter, tucking his linen napkin into his lap. Then, as Luce spooned the sauce over their *gnocchi* and Marzia poured the wine into their glasses, Salvatore made the unavoidable mistake. He looked up at the chair across from his at the table and, in doing so, at the portrait hanging on the far wall behind it.

Growing up, that chair had belonged to Tommaso Manco. His wife had sat to his left — to be nearest the kitchen — and his daughter had sat to his right, leaving his son directly in his line of sight. That hadn't been a bad thing, not when Salvatore was younger, anyway. A little intimidating, perhaps, but not bad. When company came over, the seating arrangements would shift slightly; additional chairs were brought in from the sitting room for humans and young *dragazzi*, while traditional dragonic floor cushions were retrieved for adult *draguomini* and *dragadonne*. Regardless, Salvatore would always end up right across from his father's piercing, indecipherable gaze.

Then things had happened, Tommaso's health had rapidly declined, and he had died, leaving his barely-grown son to stare at an empty chair and the old still-life hanging on the far wall: a bouquet of flowers Tommaso had once painted as a wedding present for his new wife.

And that chair had remained empty until Marzia's marriage, when the seat had been inherited by Renzo. By the time Luce was born and was old enough to sit at the table by herself, Sofia had moved into the retiree's quarters owned by her guild, taking the old still-life with her. Marzia had subsequently adopted their mother's old position at the table, surrendering her own childhood seat to her daughter.

There was something comfortingly poetic in the shuffling of chairs, Salvatore recalled thinking at the time. He didn't know how things had been during Tommaso's childhood, but it was as if one seat at the round table was meant for a father, one for a mother, and one for a daughter, and the last always meant just for him — for Tonio — whatever his position within the Manco family: as a son, a sibling, an uncle, or a brother-in-law.

Then Renzo had died.

His passing had been abrupt and without warning, and the chair across from Salvatore's had remained conspicuously empty for the last two years. Even when Efelidrame joined them for a meal, they only shifted their own chairs closer together to make room for the *draguomo's* cushion, silently and unanimously leaving Renzo's seat untouched. And he supposed it would remain that way, at least until the day Luce brought home some kind and gentle painter's son of her own.

Salvatore glanced only briefly at the portrait that had taken the old still-life's place on the wall. Before Renzo's death, the space had been filled by one of Marzia's landscapes, a charming view of the lagoon at midday. It was the last piece she'd completed before apprenticing with the

Guardia and Renzo had always declared his admiration of it in particular, how perfectly she'd captured the play of sunlight on each tiny crest of water. But following his passing, Marzia had replaced the landscape with her husband's own final painting: a group portrait of the Faveros, all three seated close together, the window behind them commanding an expansive view of the colorful buildings and blue canals of the shining isles.

Renzo had captured his family well, Salvatore thought, in the fine, delicate strokes of his paintbrush. The warmth of the colors, the relaxed intimacy of the poses, the details in their clothes and gestures and the reflection of light in his wife's and daughter's eyes. The composition spoke of Renzo's dedication and love with a depth that it seemed no amount of words could ever express. The portrait, however, was unfinished. Though Marzia and Luce had been rendered in stunning completion, the details of Renzo's own painted form were missing — his body and clothing only blocked in with swatches of color, his face a barely-touched blur of tan.

He had been in the midst of working on the portrait when he'd died. Marzia had discovered him in the private studio he'd kept in the attic room upstairs, still on his stool in front of the easel. He had slumped onto his palette table and his body had rested there as if merely asleep. The paint on the sable-furred brush he'd dropped had still been shimmering wet.

Salvatore could never gaze at the unfinished portrait for very long.



Marzia and Luce settled into their seats and, with a brief prayer of thanks to *il Creatore*, the three began their meal. At the first bite, Salvatore found himself grunting in appreciation,

both at the warm, chewy texture of the *gnocchi* and at the very taste of food in general. He hadn't realized just how hungry he was until now, and he soon found himself digging in with as much gusto as Luce.

Salvatore glanced up at his niece and held back a grin. She had topped her sauce-covered *gnocchi* with an appalling amount of grated cheese, and she paused every few bites to top it off again. Salvatore understood; there was that hint of something scorched in the dumplings that the cheese somewhat helped to mask. Marzia had clearly noticed the rapidly-emptying serving bowl, however, if the suspicious look on her face was any indication, so Salvatore could hardly follow his niece's example. He took a long drink of the wine instead.

Renzo had occasionally cooked *gnocchi* for their midday Sunday meals, Salvatore recalled. The man had put an excellent spin on his mother-in-law Sofia's recipe, pairing the dumplings with a flavorful white-cheese-and-spinach sauce of his own. Between he, Marzia, and Salvatore, Renzo had truly been the culinary artist of their generation. He wouldn't have made it into any of the guilds on Isola di Zafferano, but he'd had a solid instinct for cooking and baking and the position of the household's primary chef had been foisted upon him by default. Renzo hadn't seemed to mind. He'd appeared to enjoy the domesticity of the work and basked humbly in his family's praise for each simple, homemade dish.

Maybe next week, Salvatore thought, instead of buying dessert, he could try making something of his own to bring to the table. One of their mother's old recipes, perhaps. He was sure he had a few of her handwritten octavos in a trunk at his apartment, full of carefully-honed instructions for treats like cream-filled *castagnole* and raisin-dappled *zaletti*.

The stray thought was abruptly daunting, however, and Salvatore found himself unwilling to commit to the plan, even in his own mind. For a time after Renzo's death, Marzia

had occasionally offered, in passing, for Tonio to move back into the house, to reclaim his old childhood bedroom. He would be much closer to the antiques shop, she had mentioned lightly, and he wouldn't need to waste so much coin every month on rent. As much as Salvatore knew it would ease Marzia's mind to have her older brother more nearby, he couldn't bring himself to do it. It was taxing enough to have an officer of the Guardia di Drago for a sister, much less live in the same space as one. He would never have been able to explain the odd hours he kept, and using the Quartiere Peridoto as an excuse could only have worked so often.

Besides, Salvatore's old bedroom had been the attic room upstairs. He'd loved having the space all to himself as a child, with its wide window overlooking the Canale di Coroncina and the foundries of Isola dei Vetrai in the distance, the view highly-prized even broken up as it was by other intervening rooftops. Even if he'd wanted to move back in and had found a way to avert any suspicion, however, Salvatore could never have slept soundly there again.

There was nothing wrong with simply buying dessert for their Sunday meal, Salvatore told himself. Marzia and Luce had never complained. He quickly dismissed the idea entirely, assuaged himself with the acknowledgment that he would probably forget all about these sudden intentions in the interim.

Salvatore finished the rest of the food on his plate, then helped himself to another full serving, drowning the dumplings in sauce and adding only a sprinkle of grated cheese on top. "It's really good," he commented, catching Marzia's eye as she took a sip of wine. "The dumplings are just right."

Marzia smiled over the rim of her glass. Her gratitude seemed genuine, but Salvatore wasn't convinced that she didn't taste the scorched undertone, too. "It was a good team effort," she replied after a moment, nodding at him in acknowledgment. Salvatore chuckled.

“So how was your week, Zio Tonio?” Luce piped up between mouthfuls. She was ingesting her food with less vigor now, the edge clearly taken off her hunger. “Buy or sell anything exciting?”

Salvatore grinned. He refilled his wine glass from the bottle, imagining for the moment that it was the Goblet of Fogliatèverde, emerald and amethyst and shimmering iridescent.

“Just the usual this-and-that. Nothing too special.” He raised his eyebrows slightly, as if just recalling a memory. “Though Teodora *did* sell these two *cristallo* vases. Absolutely beautiful pieces, just stunning. I found them a week or so ago buried in the back of the storage room.” Salvatore added a light chuckle at his pretend good fortune. “Old Signor Uberti must have stashed them away decades ago, because I’d *swear* I’d never seen them before. They were so covered with dust, I couldn’t even make out the kind of glass at first. Then I cleaned them off and they had the most lovely pattern of peacock feathers enameled around the base. Almost *maestro*-level work, I’d say.”

“Oh, they sound *so* pretty.” Luce usually listened to his antiques ramblings with that strained sort of politeness that people typically used when enthusiastically presented with something horribly boring by someone they cared about and didn’t want to disappoint. It was a reaction Salvatore was both used to and prepared to expect; he could hardly blame her or feel offended. But this time, unless he was much mistaken, Luce actually sounded honest. “Are you still holding them at the shop to deliver later? I’d... rather like to take a look at them if you are.”

Salvatore frowned. Uncertain, he wondered if she was thinking about composing a sketch of the vases. Perhaps as part of a still life for her portfolio? “They’re already gone, I’m afraid,” he said apologetically. “The buyer took them with him when he left.” Luce’s expression fell only slightly, and she nodded in understanding as she stuffed another bite of *gnocchi* into her mouth.

“I have some other vases you might want to take a look at, if you’re wanting inspiration,” Salvatore offered. He tried to recall what was still out for sale in the Antichità Manco. He never paid as much attention to individual pieces in the shop above as he did to those on display in the Caveau below. “There’s quite a variety. A few carved from wood or stone, and an odd cylindrical one made of some dull metal. Most are ceramics, though, of course. Beautiful glazes in gradient, and only a few are chipped, just on the foot or lip, but that’s easy enough to ignore. I think I have them tucked away beneath one of the tables...”

“Any other vases in glass?”

Salvatore paused, humming thoughtfully, and took a sip of his wine. There were plenty of glass vases in the Caveau that he could sneak upstairs when Teodora was out for lunch, but they were all obvious masterpieces and tremendously expensive. He wasn’t worried that Luce would break them, of course, but his niece had a sharp eye for detail and a skilled hand at drafting, as good as or perhaps even better than her mother’s. Even a simple graphite sketch of the pieces would be easily recognizable, should they garner the attention of the vases’ original defrauded owners or, even worse, certain departments within the Guardia di Drago.

“Not at the moment, I don’t think,” Salvatore said. Still, ever attempting to be the benevolent uncle, he added with a smile, “Though if I find any more treasures like that in storage, I’ll be sure to keep them behind the counter until you’ve had a look first.” He winked, earning him a small smile.

“There’s plenty of other glassworks in your Zio Tonio’s shop, too, you know,” Marzia pointed out, glancing at Salvatore for confirmation. He nodded. “I’m certain he wouldn’t mind you stopping by after school to look around.” She scraped the last bit of sauce from her plate with the edge of her fork and licked the tongs clean. Unlike her daughter and brother, Marzia had

only consumed a single portion of *gnocchi*, and Salvatore felt unintentionally chastised. Her years in the Guardia had instilled in her an admirable sense of discipline and restraint.

“Of course you’re more than welcome,” Salvatore affirmed, turning back to Luce. “Anytime at all.” He leaned toward her and, in a mock whisper, added, “As long as it’s not when you’re supposed to be in class.”

When she was younger, Luce had occasionally visited him at the Antichità Manco after school let out for the afternoon. Though the journey to his shop was terribly out of her way, the route was quite safe and Luce always had plenty of energy to trek there and home again. She’d delighted in waking her uncle from his afternoon naps by jumping on his lap with a loud shriek of ‘*Ciao, Zio Tonio!*’ Salvatore’s customers had seemed to enjoy the little girl’s lively presence, chuckling as they watched Luce trail him through the shop, chattering away as she adorned herself with tarnished, mismatched jewelry and rearranged all of the knickknacks on the lower shelves. He couldn’t quite remember the last time she’d visited him there.

“You know,” Salvatore added thoughtfully, catching sight of one of Luce’s colorful abstract paintings on the wall, “I won a crate of glass figurines at auction yesterday. I didn’t get a chance to examine them in great detail, but most appeared to be those, you know... those amorphous forms you like. A wide variety of colorings, too. Opaque solids, twisted canes, speckled frit. Lots of oranges and red and yellows. Even a few *murrine* pieces. They should be delivered tomorrow morning, if you want to stop by after school.”

The figurines’ description seemed to have peaked Luce’s interest once more, but she only said, “I’ll see if I can,” with a somewhat awkward smile. The reply was noncommittal, but Salvatore didn’t allow himself to be hurt by it. He knew she had better and more important things

to do these days than hang around her uncle's dusty old antiques shop. "If I'm not able to drop in, though, will you set a few by to show me next weekend?"

"*Certamente.*"

There was a moment of companionable quiet, before she then asked, "How is Nonna doing?" Salvatore frowned over his wine. "It's just, with all the work I've been doing on my portfolio, I haven't had a chance to go see her in a few weeks."

"I... She's doing well, to my knowledge," Salvatore said slowly.

"Oh." Luce glanced down at her emptied plate, looking a bit uncomfortable. "*Spiacente.* You said you were at the auctions yesterday, so I thought you'd visited Nonna, too."

Salvatore set down his glass. A strong and sudden wave of guilt washed over him, leaving his cheeks hot and his throat tight with shame. "I didn't have the chance yesterday," he managed to explain, pasting on a strained grin. "I wasn't in the Mercato Brillante for very long. I got there late in the day, you see, and I had arrangements to dine with a few other business owners after the auction let out. And by the time that was over, *well*, it was quite dark. I figured Nonna was probably already in bed and I didn't want to disturb her."

It wasn't a very good lie, but to Salvatore's relief, Luce only nodded, acquiescing to his reasoning. Marzia, however, shot him a deeply disapproving look as she stood up from the table and gathered their empty plates before taking them back to the kitchen. He had already told her, after all, about all the places he had visited the night before. To his abrupt horror, Salvatore realized that Marzia thought he'd passed on checking in with their aging mother in order to patronize a brothel in the Quartiere Peridoto. He felt his face redden further as he swallowed down a muttered curse of frustration.

The truth was, the thought of visiting Sofia at her guild's communal living quarters hadn't even crossed Salvatore's mind yesterday, so caught up had he been with his own work and activities. It was an unusual oversight on his part, to be sure, but that somehow made it all the more shameful.

"Nonna was doing quite well, the last time I saw her," Salvatore reiterated, willing away the shameful heat from his cheeks. He shot Luce a more reassuring smile. "I'll let her know you were asking about her the next time I visit. I know she'll be pleased to hear you're working so hard on your portfolio."

Marzia returned from the kitchen then with the apricot tart in hand. Salvatore was never so glad for the arrival of dessert. "I hope you've saved room for this, after all of that *gnocchi*," Marzia told her daughter dryly.

Though no longer oven-hot, the tart was still pleasantly warm, the crust crisp and the fruit filling dense and fresh. Not bad for a small Giada bakery, Salvatore thought. Luce and Marzia appeared equally satisfied with his acquisition, and for a few minutes, they ate in a comfortable, companionable quiet.

As Salvatore stuffed the last crumbs of almond-flecked crust into his mouth, Luce broke the silence. "Zio Tonio?"

He paused, glancing up at the halting tone of her voice, and found that it matched her oddly hesitant expression. "Yes, *mia cara*?"

"Are you..." Her dark eyes shifted away from his briefly before returning and she sat up a bit in her seat, as if resolved. "Do you already have plans for next Saturday?"

Salvatore smiled, relieved by the innocuous question. “Not at the moment, no. Why do you ask?” He leaned back in his chair, hunger satiated and relaxed, and tapped a finger ponderously against the tabletop. “Is your class having another gallery showcase?” he guessed.

“No. Class is actually canceled that day. And I...” Luce paused again, this time glancing over at her mother. “There’s a guild demonstration that I want to attend, and I was wondering if you might go to it with me...?”

Salvatore blinked, surprised, and shot a puzzled glance at Marzia. She returned his gaze steadily over the lip of her wine glass.

Public demonstrations of artisans-at-work were commonly held by many of the guilds, particularly those dedicated to the visual arts. They were usually located at guild-run studios every other Saturday or so, with multiple displays of artistic prowess performed throughout the afternoon and evening. Although generally casual affairs, the guilds’ demonstrations always grew more frequent and elaborate in the months and weeks leading up to each guild’s newest recruitment of apprentices. Studios would hire out the best lutenists, horn-players, and drummers to provide musical accompaniment to their demonstrations, and the patisseries and confectioners’ shops would be overrun with orders for treats to serve the studios’ guests. Salvatore had attended countless demonstrations in his youth, thrilled to watch skilled artisans and the occasional *maestro* at their work. Although it had been a while since he’d been to one, he couldn’t imagine they were any different from what he’d experienced before.

“I’d be glad to accompany you,” Salvatore replied easily. Still, a touch of uncertainty lingered. He was unnerved by both his niece’s and his sister’s reticence and he wondered at its cause. Did they think him unwilling to attend? When had he ever shown any reluctance to visit the studios where the isles’ painters crafted their landscapes, still-lives, and portraits?

Then Salvatore's gaze fell on the empty chair across from his and he was certain he understood.

"Mamma is already scheduled to work that day," Luce added, as if she still needed to bolster her position. "So is Zio Efe, too, of course. And a lot of my friends from school are going to different demonstrations and I... I *really* didn't want to go by myself."

"*Ah*," Salvatore said, assuming a false expression of disappointment. "I'm your last choice then, am I? I see."

"*No!*" Luce wailed and, stumbling out of her chair, threw her arms around his neck in a dramatic embrace. "I didn't mean it that way at all! *Veramente!* I wanted *you* to go with me from the very beginning!"

With a chuckle, Salvatore patted her back. "*Va bene*. I understand." When Luce finally pulled away enough for him to see her embarrassed face, he added, "Now, two questions: When do I need to pick you up? And will there be free food available?"

Luce laughed, her shoulders relaxing. "*Grazie mille*, Zio Tonio! I have a leaflet with the details. Let me go get it." With that, she bolted out of the dining room. Her footsteps pounded up the stairs.

Salvatore turned back to Marzia, only to find her observing him with an oddly passive expression.

"Is this demonstration taking place where I think it is?" he asked quietly. If it *was* taking place at the studio Renzo had belonged to, as Salvatore assumed it would be, he could see why his sister would want him to accompany Luce in her place.

Marzia shifted in her seat. "Perhaps," she said after a moment. Then she sighed, the worry lines on her forehead deepening. "But I doubt it."

Salvatore frowned. Before he could inquire further, the stairs creaked loudly and his niece returned, brandishing a large, colorful leaflet covered in fine, elegant print.

“So I was thinking we might go to an *osteria* first,” Luce babbled, clearly enthused. “And then we could look through all the vendors’ stalls — I *love* seeing all the new designs — or maybe we can get some food *there* instead? That would be fun! And *then* we would go to the demonstration — I’m *really* hoping to talk to one of the *maestri* afterwards, though I’m certain they’ll be just *swarmed* with other people —”

As she placed the paper on the table in front of him, Salvatore retrieved his reading optics and settled them on his nose. It didn’t take him long to read the leaflet, but he had to examine it a second time before his mind could truly take in the words. As he did, Salvatore felt the blood drain from his face, a suffocating knot tightening inside his throat.

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~ at ~

Studio Artigiano di Scordato,

Isola dei Vetrai

this Saturday

~ from ~

one o’clock to five o’clock

Come See the Spectacle of Fire and Glass!

The Inimitable Dance of Human and Dragon

Creating Extraordinary Works in Perfect Harmony

The Finest Tradition of Artisan Craftsmanship

Unique to Our Own Beloved Isles!

For a moment, all Salvatore could hear was a muffled ringing in his ears, drowning out every thought and sound save for the loud, shuddering beat of his heart. He blinked back the sudden sting in his eyes and swallowed hard. He laid a ready hand against the pouch on his belt where he stored his pipe, waiting to see if the strangling sensation would subside on its own.

“— And I’m sure they’ll have free food, of course,” Luce was saying when Salvatore could finally hear again. “Though I suppose... that... Zio Tonio?”

“*Fratello*, are you all right?” Marzia was suddenly on the edge of her chair, a knowing and anxious expression crossing her face. “Do you need—”

“I’m fine,” Salvatore said, holding up his other hand to stop her. The words came out rough, a breathy wheeze, so he swallowed a second time and tried again. “I’m fine.” That was better, though Marzia hardly looked comforted. Luce had trailed off and was staring at him in blankly, so he cleared his throat and said, as steadily as he could manage, “Just choked on a crumb of tart, that’s all.” He gave a little laugh and removed his hand from the belt pouch, rubbing at the base of his throat as discreetly as he was able. Slowly, Marzia sunk back into her seat.

Luce smiled a little hesitantly and patted his shoulder, but her enthusiasm made a quick return. “*So*, what do you think? I thought, well, that we could make sort of a day of it, you know?”

Salvatore glanced back down at the leaflet. “Glassblowing, *hm*?” His heartbeat continued to thrum heavily beneath his fingertips. “*Well*. That’s... interesting.” He looked back up, locking eyes with his sister. Her expression had settled once more into measured passivity. “And at... at Studio di Scordato, too.”

“Their artists are simply the *best*,” Luce informed him excitedly, as if every human and dragon in the isles weren’t aware of the studio’s reputation.

Studio Artigiano di Scordato was the oldest glass foundry in the Isole Fulgide and was by far the most highly regarded. It had been founded centuries ago by Iridescenza himself, along with his human glassblowing partner, Lino Scordato. Known both for the inspired creativity of their *maestri* and for the flawless quality of their pieces, the studio had long dominated the sculptural glass market, forcing many of their fellow foundries into specializing in less exalted, more utilitarian works of glasscraft.

“I mean, I’ve seen glassblowing sessions during school visits,” Luce continued, “but nothing like *this*, you know? I heard from a friend of mine who went to one of their demonstrations last year that it was absolutely the most *spectacular* performance she’d ever seen, and *her* family runs the shows at Illusioni di Pavone!”

“Well. Then it must be spectacular indeed.” Salvatore managed to tear his gaze away from Marzia’s and fixed Luce with the most benign smile he could summon. “It sounds like you have this... excursion all planned out, then. It’s a good idea, of course,” he added brusquely, “to

observe the work of a variety of guilds, before settling into your apprenticeship. A very smart idea.”

“Oh. Yes.” Luce nodded. Her initial hesitancy seemed to have made a return. “I’ve been to *countless* painting demonstrations, you know. They’re always very interesting.” She paused. “So you’ll go with me next Saturday?”

Salvatore hummed. He looked down and picked idly at the gold-rimmed corner of the leaflet. “Well. Certainly we can go, *mia cara*. I’m always happy to accompany you.”

What else, Salvatore thought with sudden savagery, could he say? He’d already admitted to having no prior engagements, and he had agreed to her plan, without question, from the start.

Still, it was worth a try. “Hopefully no complications come up in the meantime, of course,” Salvatore lied. He took off his optics and faked a thoughtful expression. “I *do* have a few contacts at the auction houses that wanted to meet with me sometime this week—”

“I’m certain you’ll be able to work something out,” Marzia interjected. Her encouraging smile, however, was only for her daughter. “I’m sure you can make further arrangements later, after Zio Tonio’s had time to sort out his schedule.”

“All right,” Luce said. At the very least, *she* looked content, Salvatore thought. Folding up the leaflet, Luce handed it to him with a grin. “Here, you can keep this one. I have another upstairs.”

“*Grazie*.” Salvatore tucked the paper into a pouch on his belt, then scooted his chair back and pulled himself to his feet. “Well, the meal has been lovely as always, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to take my leave now.”

“What?” Luce stepped aside as Salvatore shuffled out from behind the table. “So soon? But... we just finished dessert. Don’t you want to play some cards or something first?”

On most Sundays, Salvatore did stick around after their midday meals. There was warm comfort to be found in settling into his favorite chair in the familiar sitting room, in listening to Marzia's stories and Luce's chatter and quietly basking in their company. Sometimes he stayed for just an hour or two, but occasionally, when the mood struck him or he accidentally fell asleep in his chair, he would remain at the house for the whole afternoon.

There was no possible way that Salvatore could do that today. He wasn't certain he could spend another minute in the house without falling apart.

"I would love to, Luce, however..." He struggled to fabricate a valid excuse as he brushed crumbs from his jerkin. "There are a few errands I need to attend to. Ran out of coffee beans this morning, you know, and I couldn't possibly... And I left some important papers at the shop that I really ought to retrieve. Need to fill them out before tomorrow morning..."

Looking both a little crestfallen and a little confused, Luce seemed about to protest, but Marzia interjected once more. "Don't pressure your uncle, *lucetta*," she said, standing up from her chair as well. "If he needs to head out now, you shouldn't guilt him for it. Besides, you should really use the rest of this afternoon to make further progress on your portfolio."

"Yes," Salvatore added quickly. "I'd hate to keep you from that piece you were working on. A short break is well and good, but you don't want to lose your inspiration now, hm?"

"Well... I suppose not." Luce threw her arms around him in a tight hug. "*Grazie mille*, Zio Tonio. I can't *wait* for next weekend. I promise it'll be a *lot* of fun!" Salvatore returned the embrace with less than his usual vigor, but Luce didn't appear to notice. "I hope you're able to sell lots of antiques this week. And set some of those glass pieces aside for me, okay?"

"I'll certainly do my best."

Having extricated himself from the table and his niece, Salvatore turned down Marzia's offer to take the remaining slices of tart with him and retreated with measured haste through the sitting room to the front door. He had donned his cap and was reaching for the handle when he heard his sister's footsteps behind him and felt her presence at his back.

"*Fratello*—"

"Don't '*fratello*' me," Salvatore bit back in what he hoped was a severe but discreet undertone. He opened the door and step out onto the landing, squinting his eyes against the sudden blinding brightness of the early afternoon sun. Tipping down the brim of his cap for shade, Salvatore turned around to face Marzia and found her expression conflicted, at once stern and apologetic and even a little pitying.

"Tonio, I'm sorry—"

"You should be."

Marzia closed her mouth, keeping back whatever she had been about to say. Salvatore breathed heavily. He stood on the top step and watched as she slowly leaned against the threshold and crossed her arms. It was difficult for Salvatore to remain composed at the moment, but composure was necessary. He wasn't sure what emotion would pour out of him if he couldn't keep himself under control.

"You should be," Salvatore repeated. He blinked. His eyes were still burning, even out of the sunlight. "You *knew*," he snapped suddenly, accusingly. "You *knew*, didn't you? Of all the damn places... *And you told her to invite me anyway.*"

"Yes, I knew," Marzia replied. Her tone was low and calm, far more composed than his own. "I knew she was going to ask. *But,*" she said, cutting him off, "I didn't tell her to invite you, Tonio. She decided she wanted you to come with her all on her own."

A nearly dragonic growl escaped his throat. “And I suppose you and Efelidrame *just so happened* to already be scheduled to work next Saturday—”

“As a matter of fact, *yes*, we *were*.” Marzia paused, and they listened for a moment to the muffled scrape of porcelain coming from the dining room — Luce clearing the dishes from the table.

“There’s... a bit of a shakeup going on at the Questura right now,” his sister finally said, even quieter than before. Salvatore felt some of the tension leave his body, even as his anxiety increased. This was sudden and unexpected news. She hadn’t mentioned anything about a ‘shakeup’ previously. “It’s nothing bad,” Marzia elaborated. “But... I’m not allowed to discuss the details with anyone outside the Guardia right now. Not even you, *fratello*.” She seemed honestly apologetic about keeping him out of the loop, though Salvatore had always avoided prying into such affairs too directly.

After a moment, he hesitantly conceded. “All right.”

“Anyway, there’s an important meeting that Efe and I *have* to attend next Saturday, along with... well, most of our department.” Marzia sighed. “So there’s not going to be as large of a Guardia presence at the demonstration as usual, and while I *know* it would still be quite safe for Luce to go on her own, I... would feel better if you were there with her. Events at... that studio tend to attract huge crowds and those can get so easily out of hand...”

“I know. I get it.” Salvatore wanted to be angry with her, regardless. Her reasoning, however, was too sound, and he found himself huffing more with frustration than fury. “But, Marzia, I... Why does she even want to *go* to a... a glassblowing demonstration?” he challenged. “Of what benefit would that *be* for her? She’s not... she’s not going to...”

“Oh, Tonio. Who *doesn’t* love watching Scordato’s *maestri* at work?”

The soft, meaningful look in his sister's dark eyes summoned that suffocating tightness in his chest back into existence. Stricken, Salvatore turned away. He continued down the stairs and into the cobblestone street. He threw up a hand in acknowledgment at Marzia's shouted farewell and her promise to get in touch with him in the coming days.

Salvatore walked. He was hardly cognizant of where his feet were taking him, much less aware of the cheerful humans and good-natured dragons who greeted him as he passed by. Without thought, he left the Percorso del Giardino and wound his way between gallery and studio and supply shop and guildhall, one hand tightened reflexively in the laces of his jerkin.

Only when the pervasive scent of linseed oil and turpentine retreated from his senses did Salvatore find he could breathe freely once more.



He spent the rest of the long, bright afternoon wandering the Mercato Pietra, deep in thought and trying not to think, silent and solitary.

In agitation, Salvatore paced the streets; he stopped periodically to peer into the windows of the shops and eateries like a potential customer, though most of the buildings were dark now, their businesses closed until morning. He strode along the *fondamenta* between Isola di Giada and Isola Topazio and watched the colorful boats skim along the canals. He paused beneath the long shadow of the clock tower to listen to its hourly boom, feeling the vibrations of the bells echoed heavily within his chest. Then he ventured out to the southwestern tip of Topazio, and when he found an unoccupied bench, he sat and stared out into the lagoon. He watched the light play across the shimmering water and charted the path of outgoing trade vessels. He wondered

what it would be like to stand on one of their decks and look back, to see the shining lights of the Isole Fulgide from the outside. His dark eyes followed the ships as they gradually shrank into the far distance and finally disappeared.

When at last the sun began to dip towards the horizon and the sky began to grow a darker shade of blue, Salvatore made his way back north, retracing his earlier steps. Avoiding with even stauncher determination the *campo* where Moltosabbia's shrine stood, he crossed the short bridge back onto Isola di Rame and made his way without stopping through the twists and turns of the Quartiere Verderame. He arrived back at his apartment building just as the dragonfire orbs nestled up high in the street lamps began to cast a more visible, tangerine glow on the tiny, multi-hued paving tiles below.

Salvatore trudged up the stairs, feeling a strange exhaustion drag at his limbs. He was deeply tired, both in body and mind, and yet he was still restless and wide awake. Salvatore decided this was a good thing — he had a long and hopefully productive night at the Caveau still ahead of him — and then decided to reflect on this exhaustion no further. A cup of dark coffee and whatever fragments of food he could scrounge up would suffice for dinner; then, he would change out of his Sunday best into less conspicuous attire and head back south to Isola di Onice. He would see how he felt after that before choosing whether to walk to the Caveau or hail a gondola.

He reached the final landing at the top of the staircase. The lone door was isolated in the dim, flickering light of a fading dragonfire lantern. Wondering if there was a similarly-sized orb in the shop he could borrow to replace it with — it would save him from another errand tomorrow — Salvatore pulled his keyring off his belt. Flicking through the mass of jingling

metal for the key to his apartment, his eyes fell on a small, rectangular form at his feet, leaning against the base of the door.

Salvatore stilled. Then, replacing the keyring on his belt, he bent down and picked the object up. It was an envelope, plain and thin and about the size of his hand, but made of the kind of soft, cream-colored parchment Salvatore was used to seeing on official documents and articles of provenance. High quality stationary, he assessed reflexively. Artisanal quality, and quite expensive. Not for everyday use.

Seeing text of some sort, Salvatore quickly took out his reading optics and slipped them on. *Sig. A. S. Manco* was written on the front of the envelope in sharp, meticulous letters. He didn't recognize the handwriting, though he was certain its author must be human, not dragon. The script was too small and too precise for the large paw of a *draguomo* or *dragadonna*. His brow furrowing, Salvatore flipped the envelope over and found it secured with a neat daub of sealing wax, a plain deep red. He squinted. The hue of the wax didn't immediately suggest any of the artisan guilds or, for that matter, any other business or individual Salvatore was familiar with. The impression pressed into the wax was a generic geometric pattern. A stamp with such a pattern could be easily purchased in any supply shop in the isles.

Salvatore's curiosity got the better of him and, breaking the seal, he withdrew from the envelope a single, bifolded slip of paper made of the same fine parchment. Flipping it open, he held the paper up to the flickering light and read — with mounting displeasure and unease — the message it contained.

Salvatore,

We are writing to you in regards to a potential commission; specifically, the acquisition of a certain unique item that is, at the moment, within the possession of a disparate party. Your sterling reputation in such matters has come to our attention, and we are certain that you and your associates are singularly capable of fulfilling this particular commission with the skill, delicacy, and discretion it requires. Upon your acquisition and our receipt of this item, you would be compensated handsomely.

Should you choose to accept this commission, our representative will meet with you to discuss further details at three o'clock next Saturday by the fountain near Studio Artigiano di Scordato, Isola dei Vetrai.

Regards,

La Fenice

Capitolo Cinque

Securely ensconced in the vault-like confines of the Caveau, Salvatore settled into his usual seat at the counter and reread the letter for the dozenth time.

From their very first word — “Salvatore” — the author had earned both their addressee’s ire and perturbation. Who would *dare*, he brooded angrily, begin a message using his underground alias, but then write his title, initials, and surname on the envelope?

Yes, his middle name truly was Salvatore; he would concede that much. It was present on documentation of his birth and on his official citizenship papers, printed neatly between “Antonio” and “Manco.” The key to the separation between his daily life and his nightly existence, however, was in strictly maintaining a societal disconnect between Tonio Manco and Sal the Fence. A message addressed to either of his identities was perfectly acceptable, but addressing both at once was, in Salvatore’s opinion, tantamount to a threat.

Were the envelope and letter to fall into the hands of the wrong people — namely, a member of the Guardia di Drago — it would take no effort at all to conclude that “Sig. A. S. Manco” and “Salvatore” were one and the same. With the content of the message itself so damning, Tonio Manco would hardly stand a chance against such evidence. And how easily it could have fallen into the wrong hands, too! Salvatore gritted his teeth. The envelope had been left beside his door completely unconcealed, where *anyone* could have seen it and picked it up. That his apartment was the only one on the top floor, and therefore far removed from casual view, hardly gave him any comfort.

Concerning the location where he'd found the letter, Salvatore discovered that the mystery it evoked shifted much of his heated indignation into vexed bewilderment. Had it been the sort of letter its envelope suggested — a simple message for the owner of the antiques shop on Isola di Onice — Salvatore wouldn't have found its appearance on his doorstep too strange. There was a generous number of people who lingered about the isles' *campi* — mostly poor layabouts or their children — that could, for a few coins, be hired to carry a letter or package to its destination. These unofficial couriers could reasonably be relied upon to complete these deliveries to the right location in a timely manner, though enthusiasm for such employment was varied. Salvatore could easily imagine a tired youth, irked from climbing so many flights of stairs for a handful of copper *basse*, simply leaving the letter on his doorstep rather than placing it in the adjacent letterbox.

This particular letter, however, was *not* a simple message for an antiques dealer. No, Salvatore thought wryly, it featured quite a distinct request for his services as a *ricettatore*. Its author proclaimed knowledge of — Salvatore squinted through his optics, reading the line again — his “sterling reputation in such matters,” and mentioned his “singularly capable” associates as well. Clearly a reference to Silvio, of course. His exclusive arrangement with the isles' foremost *maestro-ladro* was no secret within the underground community. And perhaps, Salvatore thought, a reference to Nico as well. The dragon mostly worked as his stealthy messenger, but Nico did the occasional breaking-and-entering himself, when his small, lithe body and sharp claws were required for tasks even Silvio couldn't perform.

He scanned the message again, carefully parsing every word. Regardless of the author's caginess and the peculiar formality of their language, the wording of the request certainly suggested some understanding of how to properly conduct illegal business with a fence.

So why, Salvatore wondered with a baffled sigh, was the damn thing delivered to his apartment and not to the Caveau?

It was inconceivable that someone so knowledgeable about every other aspect of Salvatore's work would not also possess knowledge of his base of operations, its location, and how to get through the back alley trapdoor. Even if Nico was not around to let the author into the Caveau itself, the letter would have been much safer left at the base of the trapdoor's ladder.

It was equally hard to imagine the author didn't have the common sense not to visit, in broad daylight, the place where Salvatore lived. Even the most greenhorn pickpocket would know better than to approach a fence outside of the security of their hideaway or, at the very least, outside of a dockside tavern surrounded by fellow rogues. Fences were vital contacts, the only ones who would pay them for their ill-gotten loot and would protect them from the Guardia, and they mustn't be compromised.

Salvatore doubted any of the thieves he worked with had any idea what place he called home. They had no need to know, for it wasn't somewhere they would ever have reason to visit. Once he had discovered the subterranean space beneath the storage room, Salvatore had even forbade his criminal associates from entering the Antichità Manco or from lingering around the entrance. Plenty of his newer associates probably didn't even realize the Caveau was connected to the shop above. So how did the author know to leave a letter for the fence on the doorstep of that particular apartment?

Salvatore slipped off his optics so he could massage the ache blossoming between his eyes. Setting aside the many paradoxes of the letter — the artisanal parchment and the cheap seal, the evocation of both identities, the author's discrepant knowledge of underground customs — the request itself was simple and straightforward. It was a standard heist. Following some

careful research and thorough reconnaissance, he would send Silvio, possibly with Nico in tow, to steal an object from a secure location, and when Salvatore delivered that item to its new owners, he would be paid nicely for a job well done.

Simple and straightforward indeed, he mused. The intentionally vague phrasing of “a certain unique item” within “the possession of a disparate party” was irritating, of course, but he could appreciate the author’s caution. There was no guarantee Salvatore would accept their so-called “commission,” after all, and every detail the author gave him could potentially be used against them in one way or another. They might be well informed about his nightly work, but they couldn’t know him well enough to be certain he wouldn’t decline.

For Salvatore had no idea who, in the name of *il Creatore*, this mysterious “Fenice” was.

Donning his optics again, Salvatore smoothed out the fold in the parchment and examined the signature more closely. He wracked his brain for any hint of recognition and drew only a blank. He knew what the word “*fenice*” referred to — in the mythological sense, at least — but its usage here, as a name or designation or perhaps a title, meant nothing to him.

Though wholly absent from traditional dragonic lore, the fantastic bird-like creature known as the *fenice* made occasional appearances in the legends of many human civilizations, often alongside another equally-fictitious beast: the winged dragon. According to the imported tales Salvatore had read as a child, the *fenice*’s body was composed entirely of roiling flame, its eyes like molten glass and its feathers like beams of sunlight. Supposedly, *fenici* could burn for untold centuries without end, though he recalled other myths of *fenici* dying, disintegrating into dust, before rising up once more from the ashes of their corpse.

What an odd legend for the letter’s author to evoke, Salvatore mused. Was “*la Fenice*” an arbitrary choice for an anonymous signature? Or was it deliberate, something of significance?

Salvatore had just begun to read the letter again when, without warning, a solid weight slammed down onto his shoulders. His body jolted in surprise, leaving him off-balanced and causing the stool he was sitting on to creak ominously. Despite instantly knowing the culprit, Salvatore felt his heart nearly fly into his throat.

“*MERDA!* Nico, what in the—!”

“*Ehi.* What’s that?” A sleek black tail thumped against Salvatore’s left cheek as Nico’s snout poked over his right shoulder. Extended his long neck, the dragon peered down at the letter with beady eyes. “A commission? What for? Who’s it from?”

“*Maledizione!*” Reaching above and behind his head, Salvatore seized Nico with both hands and pried him from his perch, wincing at the piercing sting of claws in flesh. Nico squawked, immediately indignant, his paws scrambling against Salvatore’s hair. “By Iri, stop it!” But Nico ignored him. He writhed in Salvatore’s grasp like a particularly strong and energetic eel, hissing and spitting at the unthinkable outrage. But Salvatore had years upon years of experience handling the small dragon and all of his moods, and he maintained his grip on Nico’s thrashing, noodley body until he could safely plunk him paws-down on the countertop.

“*Che cazzo?*” Nico snarled, almost shrill, skittering out of Salvatore’s reach. Every barb along his spine was raised and his tail thrashed in the air. “What’s your problem, Sal?”

“*You are,*” Salvatore immediately snapped. He rubbed the back of his neck with a wince. But then he sighed, feeling the fight drain away as the shock faded and his heart settled back into his chest. “How many times do I have to tell you? Don’t *do* that when I’m not expecting it!”

Nico’s body gradually relaxed, barbs lowering and tail slowing, as he peered suspiciously at Salvatore. “I thought you knew I was there.” Salvatore grimaced and shook his head. “Oh.”

After a moment, Nico sat down on his haunches, tucking his paws neatly in front of him. He looked away. “*Scusa*, I guess. Do you... need your pipe?”

“*No*,” Salvatore grumbled. “I’m fine.” Twice in one day, he was asked that: first Marzia, now Nico. Thinking of his sister, however, only brought to mind the folded leaflet tucked into his belt pouch, and he quickly shoved that line of thought away. He took a good look at Nico instead, checking his condition and judging it normal. It had only been two days since he’d last seen the dragon — not a long time at all — but even three years after Nico had abandoned Salvatore’s apartment to establish a small nest for himself in the Antichità Manco’s attic, it was disconcerting not having Nico close by him all the time. “I see you made it back from Cristallobianco’s in one piece,” he noted. “I trust Silvio did as well?”

“Course he did.” With a little snort, Nico turned his attention back to Salvatore. “Reconnaissance went fine, as always. We were there for about... five or six hours? Felt like days, though. Spent *forever* watching the entrances and exits from the roof of the studio across the street, and it was boring as fuck.” Nico rolled his eyes. “Only four people left through the front, all early in the evening, and no one came back. Very entertaining. Real riveting stuff. At least we could sort of hear some music from over on Acquamarina.”

“Well.” Salvatore ran a hand through his disheveled hair to smooth it. “Not every thief is lucky enough to get serenaded on a stakeout.”

Nico’s resulting snort was more like a laugh. “Anyway, when Silvio was finally satisfied with, you know, watching nothing happen, we snuck over and poked around Cristallobianco’s roof for a bit. Didn’t find anything useful there, though. Then we climbed down to street level and went looking for that side door that was on the blueprints, but it looks like they had it

boarded up awhile ago and sealed tight. Couldn't even tell a door had been there if you didn't know it was supposed to be."

"*Merda*. I thought that was going to be one of the better entry points."

"Yeah. It worked out all right, though," Nico added, "'Cause then Silvio spotted this crack in one of the second-story windows that we didn't see from the roof, so I climbed back up and slipped in and scouted around."

"The second-story... the studio floor?" Salvatore's already-present frown only deepened. "Was anyone there?"

"Just one human; I think you really overestimated how many jewelers are fine with skipping out on Saturday night masques. And that one was passed out at his workbench, completely out cold, snoring away." Nico chuckled. "I couldn't have woken him if I'd growled right in his ear. I almost tried, just to see what he would do, but I didn't."

"I appreciate your restraint."

"*Grazie*." A self-satisfied expression curled across Nico's scaly face. "So I found the closest staircase up to the top floor, and it was completely deserted, really dark. Got a good look at the vault door to the archive, and *cazzo*, it's a massive piece of work. But then I picked my way into one of the reading rooms—" He held up a single sharp claw proudly. "— and I was able to get the window in there unlocked."

"That's good," Salvatore admitted. "Good work."

Nico's tail wiggled against the countertop; Salvatore was certain it was an unconscious gesture. "So I went back the way I came to go tell Silvio. Then we climbed back up to the roof again and, when the street was clear, we swung down to the window with one of those silk rope rigs he makes. We spent maybe... ten minutes tops checking out everything on the floor,

especially the vault door. Silvio said it might take him awhile to open it with his tools, so we poked around what had to be their archivist's office for a bit, just to see if they'd left behind their keys, but we didn't find 'em." He shrugged. "Might have just gotten on with the heist itself right then if Silvio wasn't such a boring sneak. Said he wanted to refresh himself on the artificer studio that made the lock before trying to pick it."

Nico paused. "Oh, and then we left. We made sure no one'll notice the window's unlocked. Then Silvio changed out of his blacks and I climbed in his bag and we went to this patisserie on Alizarina I've never been in before. He bought us some fresh-fried *galani*." The little dragon practically beamed. "They were shaped like fishes."

"I'm glad Silvio was able to salvage your 'boring as fuck' Saturday night," Salvatore commented dryly, repressing a smile. Resting an elbow on the countertop, he leaned his face onto a fist and eyed Nico in amusement. "Will these *galani* count as his next 'password' or...?"

"Of course not," Nico countered immediately. He huffed as if the question was ridiculous. "Passwords can't be provided *in advance*."

Impeccable logic, Salvatore mused. "So... reliable access into the building has been secured and Silvio's examined the archive door for himself. Any idea when he's planning to go in for the real heist?"

"I dunno. He didn't say. If he wants to do more reconnaissance tonight, though, then it'll have to be tomorrow, or he'll run out of time before Vittoria's deadline."

If a patron dragon of thieves had ever blessed the isles, Salvatore would have sent them a silent prayer for good fortune on Silvio's behalf. Instead, he set the Cristallobianco heist aside in his mind — in the *maestro-ladro*'s capable hands, it was already as good as done — and turned his attention back to the strange letter still open in front of him.

“I received *this* today,” Salvatore said, sliding the parchment across the marble countertop to Nico. “Read it, then tell me what you think.”

His dark features lifting in interest, Nico picked up the letter and did as he was bade. While he read, Salvatore stood up and began to complete the various tasks he’d ignored earlier in favor of pondering the Fenice’s message — first and foremost throwing on his protective leather jerkin, should the dragon decide to pounce again. He had removed the Caveau’s ledger from its drawer and was unlocking its clasps when Nico set the letter down with a thoughtful hum.

“It’s obnoxiously cryptic,” he proclaimed, “but... intriguing, I’ll give them that. I’m real curious to know what it is they’re after. It’s gotta be something pretty special or expensive — or both.” Nico cocked his head. “Who is this ‘*Fenice*’ anyway? I haven’t heard of them before, and I don’t think you’ve mentioned them either.”

“That is exactly what *I* would like to know.” Returning the dragon’s quizzical stare, Salvatore picked up the envelope and handed it to him with the broken seal face-up. He wanted to watch Nico’s expression when he turned it over and read who it was addressed to. Salvatore wasn’t disappointed. As the dragon’s eyes widened and the barbs along his spine lifted, he added darkly, “I found it this evening on the doorstep... to the apartment.”

“*What?*” Nico hissed. “*Cazzo!* Who the fuck would... It doesn’t make any sense!”

“No, it doesn’t,” Salvatore agreed, taking his seat once more. He watched Nico toss aside the envelope in favor of reading the letter again, more slowly this time. It was consoling to know that Nico too grasped the strangeness and seriousness of the situation. It would make figuring out what to do next much easier.

“They...” Nico’s eyes had narrowed to slits. “They *can’t* be one of us. I mean, they know who we are, but... No one’s that stupid to... Even Giulia at her *fucking drunkest* wouldn’t think

to slap your real name on the front of a letter and then leave it where you live, if she even knew where that was!”

Salvatore grunted his agreement. “Whoever this is knows both too much and too little, and that concerns me.”

Nico snorted. “*That’s* putting it mildly.”

“The name — ‘*Fenice*’ — and the seal on the envelope are clear attempts at anonymity,” he continued, “but they slipped up with the parchment. The quality’s too fine. It doesn’t match.”

“You think it means something?”

“Well... they could simply be wealthy, and used what stationary they already had on hand without considering the implications,” Salvatore reasoned hesitantly. “Or perhaps they work with paper regularly — a bookbinder, or a poet or a drafter of some sort. Someone like that would have access to higher-grade supplies through their guild. The trade clerks would, too, of course, from their offices. That might explain the phrasing.”

“What about... a *guardiano*?” Nico asked, suddenly looking nervous.

“No.” Though his response was immediate, it took Salvatore a moment to piece together why he felt so decisive. “Unless they’re truly compromised, I can’t see a member of the Guardia writing something like this. This sort of... subtle entrapment is not their style. If one of them suspected me enough to take action, they wouldn’t have left a false letter outside my door. They would have been there themselves, waiting to take me to the Questura for questioning.”

From the perspective of a regular citizen, the illustrious Guardia di Terra was an omnipresent and omniscient force, a vigilant protector from all manner of local harm. But from Salvatore’s perspective, as both a criminal and the brother of a *guardiano*, their actions were actually quite predictable and strikingly blunt. To keep the peace, they relied heavily on visible

and routine patrols, the authority granted by their uniforms, and the mere threat of the weapons they carried but rarely deployed. More guileful investigations were rare, and Salvatore couldn't imagine anyone in the Guardia — the majority of whom were as serious and straight-laced as Efelidrame — coming up with a scheme like the Fenice letter.

Marzia's earlier warning, however, gave Salvatore a moment of pause. That Luce's glassblowing demonstration and the proposed meeting with the Fenice representative were scheduled for the same day, time, and location had not escaped his notice. The apparent coincidence was deeply unnerving, but Salvatore had chosen to set it aside for future deliberation. Marzia had stated, however, that there was a 'shakeup' going on at the Questura. Could this shakeup concern a shift in their traditionally forthright modes of operation?

Salvatore supposed it was possible, and that the Fenice letter was a first step for the Guardia towards more clandestine procedures. But why, then, would the author set up a meeting with him in such a public location during the height of festivities when the number of patrolling *guardiani* was apparently to be at its lowest? The reduced Guardia presence could be a trick, of course, meant to lower the guard of any suspected criminals, but if so, it seemed to Salvatore an overly complicated and highly fallible ploy at best.

And, he mused, if Marzia was even vaguely aware of such a plan, she would have forbidden Luce from even stepping foot on Isola dei Vetrai next Saturday, much less allowing her to go to the demonstration alone. Furthermore, the idea that his accompaniment of Luce to the Studio Artigiano di Scordato could be a ploy to ensure he met with the Fenice representative was frankly preposterous. Marzia would never let the Guardia use her daughter in such a way, even if they were inclined to do so. Besides, she had no idea of her brother's activities as a fence. Of that, Salvatore was certain.

So while it was technically possible, he found the probability of the letter being a form of Guardia entrapment low enough to completely dismiss it.

“No,” Salvatore reiterated, “It’s not the Guardia.” He laughed dryly. “I can only dream of having compromised *guardiani* as contacts, much less come across a wealthy one seeking our services.” He shook his head and glanced at Nico with a resigned smile. “Our work would be so much easier outside of the isles. Did you know? The *guardiani* there don’t have the same... spiritual devotion to their duties, apparently. They don’t have a patron like Bluoltremarone to draw inspiration from, just the fickle laws laid down by their authorities. So they’re much easier to blackmail and bribe.” He sighed. “Even a handful of *stagni* is supposedly enough to make most *guardiani* turn a blind eye to a known pickpocket, or to keep them away from a fence’s place of business.”

“Damn Bluoltremarone,” Nico declared. “*Vaffanculo!*”

Salvatore chuckled at the blasphemy. He felt a little bad about it for Marzia’s sake, though. If she had heard the little dragon utter such a thing, he would have been in for the scolding of a lifetime. If only Marzia knew you, Nico, Salvatore thought wistfully.

“So if they’re not one of us,” Nico continued, staring down at the letter, “and they’re not from the Guardia... then how did they know to contact us about a heist?”

“Clearly from whomever told them about our ‘sterling reputation.’” Salvatore turned to the ledger and opened the heavy tome to the next blank page. Retrieving his inkwell and pen, he began to record what specifics about the commission he could glean from the letter. “While I’m honored to hear that the quality of our work — and Silvio’s thieving — precedes us, I would very much like to know who is sharing such... delicate information with people not native to our community.” Salvatore’s hand grew still, already out of specifics to record. “Surely this

‘representative’ will not mind divulging *that* much, at least. I can hardly be angry at our mysterious recommender if the Fenice pays as handsomely as they seem to think they can.”

“Wait,” Nico said. “So... you’re actually going to do it?” At Salvatore’s silent request, the dragon handed the letter back to him and watched as he tucked it into its envelope, placed the envelope into one of the counter’s manifold drawers, and locked the drawer with a tiny key from his keyring. “You’re actually going to meet with some person you don’t know... on behalf of a group you’ve never heard of... on a Saturday afternoon in one of the busiest places in the isles... to *discuss a potential heist*?”

Salvatore chuckled. “You say that like it’s a surprise.”

“It is.” If he wasn’t mistaken, Nico looked rather upset. “This whole situation is off, you said it yourself. And you’re usually like—” He adopted an exaggerated deep growl. “—‘*Be more careful, Nico! Make sure you stay in the shadows, Nico! Don’t steal shinies during reconnaissance, Nico!*’” He sniffed, flicking his tail. “Are you sure you’re being, you know... ‘circumspect’?”

“Not your finest impression,” Salvatore commented dryly. At least it proved Nico listened to and remembered his warnings. Teaching the dark hatchling to be properly ‘circumspect’ had been a years-long endeavor, and Salvatore was glad he hadn’t completely wasted his time. “But caution doesn’t always mean inaction, not in this business. The most dangerous thing would be to ignore the letter. We would remain in the dark, while the Fenice would still know all that they do. If they deemed my silence a slight, they could easily take action against us, and there’s no recourse from an unknown enemy.” He sighed. “By meeting with their representative, I at least demonstrate I’m not hostile and that I’m willing to listen, and I’m certain to gain information about the Fenice in return.”

“Couldn’t you just... watch that fountain they mentioned from a distance, and see who shows up at three o’clock?” Nico countered. “Maybe follow them when they leave? Find out where they go? They’d have to return to their base eventually.”

He was thinking like a thief instead of a fence, Salvatore realized. And like an outcast, damned to the shadows, instead of a normal *draguomo*. Salvatore couldn’t blame Nico for that. “I won’t learn enough to properly assess the situation unless I talk to them,” he explained. “I’m not happy about the risk, but I had to navigate much more perilous situations during my first years as a fence. Trust me: despite how it may seem on the surface, this is the safest route.”

Nico’s dark frown remained. “Then *I’ll* watch you meet with them from a distance and follow them when they leave.”

“Absolutely not.” On this, Salvatore was uncompromising. “You said it yourself: the meeting’s in the middle of the day and half the isles’ population is bound to be roaming the area. If you went early enough in the morning, when the sky’s still dark, you just might find a decent place to hide. But then you’d be stuck there all day and you wouldn’t be able to tail them.”

He placed a finger beneath Nico’s chin and lifted it so the dragon was forced to return his gaze. “Promise me you won’t do it.” Nico growled. Salvatore felt the vibration through the dragon’s soft underflesh. He tapped his chin, scolding. “*Nicolò Gianni Manco*. I said *promise me*.”

Faster than Salvatore’s eyes could follow, Nico clamped his jaws fully around the offending finger. The pressure was just hard enough to prevent Salvatore from pulling away, but not enough for the tiny fangs to break skin. The dragon continued to growl, and Salvatore endured Nico’s anger — or whatever it was he was feeling — until it ran its course. Eventually,

the growl petered out, and the dragon grumbled a barely discernible “*vfaa behneh*” before releasing Salvatore’s finger with a glower of disgust.

Ignoring Nico’s exaggerated spitting and grumbles about his hygiene, Salvatore wiped the saliva off on his jerkin and said, “In the meantime, what I *would* like is for you to ask around and see if anyone we know has heard of this ‘Fenice.’ Discreetly, of course. And if the name itself means nothing — as I suspect it might — be alert for talk of any new interlopers or rumors of new high-value targets. You know what to look for.”

After a moment, Nico nodded. “I can hit several taverns a night. There’s bound to be someone who knows something. And if they don’t feel like sharing at first, I’m sure they’d change their minds after a few drinks.” A grin flitted across his features. “I’m sure a few of the *bariste* would be happy to keep an ear out for me, too.”

Salvatore snorted. Quite a few of the isles’ shadier taverns were owned and run by human women, and at each establishment, Nico was unanimously adored. Salvatore couldn’t comprehend why, but the *bariste* seemed to find the tiny, black-scaled dragon infinitely charming. Nico took full advantage of that fact, complimenting them and flirting uproariously with the suggestive swagger of a human rogue many times his size. Though Nico’s advances were obviously in jest, the women always played along, giggling and teasing him back and serving him free drinks in shot glasses. It was a silly game, but Salvatore didn’t doubt the *bariste* would agree to such a simple favor if the dragon asked.

“Before you commit to this meeting,” Nico continued, his serious expression returning, “will you at least wait and see what info I can turn up first?” Clearly sensing Salvatore’s imminent protest, he added, in an imploring tone, “*Promise me?*”

After a moment, Salvatore sighed and relented. “*Va bene*, Nico. But if we still don’t know enough about these people by Friday night, I’m going — whether you like it or not.”



The rest of the evening passed quickly, and Salvatore was able, for the most part, to set aside the infuriating and intriguing mystery of the Fenice letter.

Pickpockets and robbers came and went from the Caveau with the usual higher frequency of a Sunday night. They inundated the fence with an array of fine objects slipped from the purses of unsuspecting marks in festival crowds, lifted from the tables and carts of distracted vendors, and hijacked from drunk revelers in darkened alleyways: the spoils of a good Saturday’s illicit work. Nico manned the Caveau’s door, demanding passwords and accepting or rejecting the replies with nonsensical and ever-changing rationale, and Salvatore examined, assessed, and bought the thieves’ goods with minimal haggling before sending them on their way.

During the inevitable lulls in activity, however, the questions would resurface, and Salvatore would make records and sort items and respond to established clients’ messages with only half of his mind on the work. The other half would construct new theories surrounding the identity of the Fenice and of the item they wanted, and he would examine them from a variety of angles before ultimately dismissing them for one reason or another.

Sometime after the mantle clock chimed a quarter past two in the morning, a light knock sounded at the door, and Nico’s lively response upon answering it caught Salvatore’s attention. He looked up from his ledger to find Silvio stepping inside and Nico springing from the thief’s

black-clad shoulder up to the rafters, a sizable *tramezzino* — the sandwich doubtlessly filled with some manner of fish — clamped in his jaws.

Salvatore slipped off his optics and absently ran a hand through his hair as Silvio approached the counter. He felt a small smile curve his lips. Once Silvio threw back his hood and drew down his scarf, he found a cheerful grin directed at him in reply. “*Buongiorno*, Sal.”

“*Buongiorno*,” Salvatore said. “I heard the reconnaissance went well last night.”

“It did indeed.”

Silvio pulled his rucksack up and over his head, and as he did, Salvatore made a quick inspection of the thief’s mobility and form. His walk across the flagstones had been normal, each step quiet and light, and his arms moved with their usual strength and grace. Silvio’s pale face was also unmarred by any injury or hint of discomfort. Like Nico, the *maestro-ladro* appeared to have returned from the stakeout unscathed, and Salvatore sat back on his stool, pacified.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to drop by afterwards,” Silvio continued. He hefted the rucksack onto the countertop with a soft *thump*. “Nico and I went for a little post-midnight snack, and then there was some research I wanted to do. Before I knew it, the sun was already up.” He glanced at Salvatore through dark lashes, his gray eyes alight with some spark of mischievousness, and asked, “Did you miss me?”

Abashed, Salvatore chuckled awkwardly as he retrieved a white cloth from a nearby drawer, spreading it out and smoothing the wrinkles. “I wasn’t here at that time, anyway. I had a long day, so I closed this place down early for once.” He nodded at the rucksack, which appeared more tightly packed than usual, the sides straining against its contents. “I see you’ve been busy tonight as well.”

“Oh, *this*?” Silvio patted the rucksack fondly. “Most of this I actually acquired earlier today.” From a hidden pocket within his thieving attire, he produced a folded sheet of paper and handed it over. Reluctantly donning his optics, Salvatore opened it and was unsurprised to find the list he’d dictated to Nico on Friday, with all of the items he’d noted on his walk back from the Biblioteca. What *was* surprising was just how many of those items had been crossed off. “I was already on Isola Catecù,” Silvio explained as he undid the rucksack’s buckles, “and with so many of the businesses you’d listed closed until Monday, I thought it would be a nice time to do a little window-shopping... from the other side of the window.”

“I didn’t think you’d actually bother with, uh... smaller stuff like this until after Cristallobianco,” Salvatore said, scanning through the list. Trust Silvio to turn what was typically considered a shoplifting job into a midday burglary, he thought with amusement. And on a Sunday when most people were at *santuario* services, too.

“It was no trouble, really,” Silvio replied smoothly. “Actually, it was a nice warm-up. I should do this sort of thing more often.” Reaching into the sack, he withdrew from it a slender volume, fully bound in striking red leather, and placed it on the cloth in front of Salvatore. “Here’s the collection of scenes by Lucarno.” Immediately falling into his habitual mode of assessment, Salvatore examined the gold caps on the book’s corners — each in perfect condition — and blew away a few flecks of dust from the medallion embedded into the cover.

He was carefully flipping through the script, admiring the patterned endpapers and the clean gilt edges, when Silvio distracted him by placing another object gently onto the cloth. “Here’s the ivory inkwell.” Setting the book aside, Salvatore picked up the little jar instead, holding it up to the light. Through the supply shop’s window, he hadn’t been able to discern all of the details, but now he could see the engravings around the side clearly: elegant silhouettes of

gondolas topped by the smaller silhouettes of their pilots and passengers. “And the matching pen case.” Startled, Salvatore glanced down to find a slender box carved from a pale, soft wood, its beveled top inlaid with ivory fashioned into a gondola silhouette. He set down the inkwell and opened the case, finding inside an ivory-bodied pen nestled in a bed of plush blue velvet.

“And the architect’s compass.” Silvio laid out said drafting instrument on the cloth. Its platinum legs sported knotted patterns of sandy-red enamel. “I hope this is the right one,” he said with apparent concern. “There were several that actually matched your description.” Dumbfounded, Salvatore squinted at the tiny symbol of the Architects Guild etched into the tool’s hinge. Before he could reply, however, three more compasses of similar size and decoration joined the display, and Silvio added, “So I grabbed the rest just in case.”

“*Silvio...*” He’d meant to speak the thief’s name in admonishment — he hoped he wouldn’t need to lecture *him* on circumspection, too — but even Salvatore could tell it came out less like a rebuke and more like a growl of praise. From the rafters above him, he heard Nico snicker.

Silvio’s grin widened. Without breaking eye contact, he reached into the sack again and pulled out what appeared to be a small roll of white silk, about a foot tall and dappled with pastel dyes. Untying the tasseled cord that kept it closed, Silvio unfurled the roll across the counter to reveal an orderly array of sable-tipped brushes, each nestled securely in its own silken sheath. “The paintbrushes and carrier,” he noted redundantly.

“*Silvio...*” Salvatore tried again, shaking his head and suppressing a chuckle. Nico landed on his shoulders — thankfully, it was not a surprise this time — and interrupted with a delighted exclamation of “*Che cazzo?*”

The thief allowed Salvatore to inspect but a single fine-tipped brush — such an exquisite tool was not meant for the hands of an apprentice — before bombarding him with several more utilitarian objects of artisan craftsmanship in quick succession. Salvatore couldn't keep up, and Nico, who jumped down to the counter for a better view, seemed wholly diverted by the show.

He was inspecting the beautifully lacquered handle of a stitching awl when he heard Silvio announce, “And here's the dragon's horn ring,” but it wasn't until after he'd traded out the awl and was hefting the heavy, oversized silver band into his hands that Salvatore realized what the thief had said. He paused, then tilted the ring, watching the shifting hues of fused *dragovetro* shimmer and dance in the lamplight. As Nico let out a gasp, Salvatore slowly turned the band, counting the startlingly white diamonds encased within the glass inlay and coming up with eight. At this point, he hardly needed to check, but he did anyway, peering inside the ring and quickly finding *F. S.* engraved into the silver, the letters surrounded by a four-point star.

“*Maledizione*,” Salvatore said, and this time, he allowed himself a hearty laugh. “*Maledizione*, Silvio, you *ridiculous* sneak. How in *il Creatore*'s name did you already lift this from Cristallobianco's?”

“Let me see it! Let me see it!” Nico chanted, holding out his paws and grasping at the air. After another quick inspection of the antique horn ring's condition — absolutely flawless — Salvatore passed it to him with an eyebrow raised in warning.

“I arrived at Oro Rosa just before dusk,” Silvio said, his expression justifiably pleased. He folded his slender hands on top of the counter. “And I watched the building from the roof across the street until it was full dark. No one came or went, and I felt reasonably certain the place was empty. I assume Nico told you about the blocked street door, and the window on the top story?” Salvatore nodded. “When the street was clear, I swung down onto the ledge and,

fortunately, the window was still unlocked, so I was able to slip inside. I did a quick sweep of the nearest rooms, and when I found nothing, I got to work on the vault door.”

“Didn’t find any keys, then?”

“No,” Silvio said. He paused briefly, distracted, as Nico slipped the horn ring over his head. It went easily past the dragon’s straight, backwards-jutting horns to setting around the base of his neck with plenty of room to spare, and Nico had to maintain his grip just to keep it from sliding down any further. “No keys,” Silvio reiterated. “I assume their archivist must keep the vault keys on them at all times. It’s a smart move.”

“But an ineffectual one,” Salvatore noted. “In this situation, at least.”

Silvio’s smile returned. “My research into the artificers that constructed the door was beneficial. It’s an Inventori Karrasi piece,” he explained, and Salvatore hummed in recognition. “I know I’ve overridden several of their locking systems in the past, but it’s been a year or two, so it was worth the time I spent reminding myself of their methods.”

“They’re one of those studios that uses lots of useless moving pieces, aren’t they?” Nico piped up, still clinging to his giant provisional necklace. “Just to confuse you so you can’t tell which pins are part of the lock and which are part of a trap and which are just a waste of metal.”

“Yes,” Silvio said. “Their systems look impressive and intimidating from the outside, but when you know what signs to look for, it’s just a matter of paying close attention and taking your time. I was able to avoid setting off any of the four traps they had built into the door, which was nice.”

“How long did it take you to get into the archive?” Salvatore asked.

“Maybe... ten to twelve minutes,” Silvio replied ponderously. That was ludicrously fast for an Inventori Karrasi lock, Salvatore thought. It was common at festivals for Ribesquamo for

rival artificer studios to challenge each other to break their most complicated locking systems, but he doubted any of the artificers' own locksmiths could take down a Karrasi lock in less than half an hour. "It might have gone a little faster if I'd had time to practice," Silvio added, "but I knew you — well, *Vittoria* — needed the target soon, so I just went for it."

Salvatore could only shake his head. "And how was the archive itself?"

"Exactly as your blueprints depicted it." Silvio's gratitude for the assistance Salvatore had provided — meager as that assistance was — was evident. "I found drawer five-two-six-eight in less than a minute, and I was able to pick the lock in under two. It wasn't trapped; I thought for a moment that the drawer's bottom was a pressure plate, but it turned out to just be an uneven corner. I was in and out of the archive itself in maybe five minutes, and didn't take long to reset the door. They'll never be able to tell it was even opened." He waited until Nico was finished loudly protesting Salvatore's removal of the ring from his neck. "And just to be thorough, I locked the window on my way back out. Whenever they notice the piece's gone missing—"

"*If* they ever do," Nico interjected sullenly.

"—I'd hate for them to figure out how their thief got in and out of the building." Silvio leaned in and smiled, nodding at the ring in Salvatore's hands. "And that's how I lifted it from Cristallobianco's."

"You know," Salvatore pointed out dryly, "Vittoria doesn't actually *need* this until dawn on Tuesday, and I didn't tell Elisa I needed it delivered until then, either. You could have waited until tomorrow night."

Silvio shrugged, but his grin was unrepentant. “I thought you might enjoy the surprise. And it’s not like I don’t have other things to do tomorrow. There’s still a few items on that list that I ran out of time to acquire today.”

With a chuckle, Salvatore set the horn ring down on the cloth amongst the clutter of stolen shop goods. The *dragovetro* inlay shimmered brilliantly, casting flickering dots of pale light on the objects surrounding it, a true masterpiece among lesser treasures. “Those little jobs are barely worth your time, Silvio,” Salvatore asserted. “I’m glad to have these—” He swept a hand over the loot. “—don’t get me wrong, but this sort of shoplifting is clearly unbecoming of your abilities.”

The thief’s gray eyes brightened once more with that spark of mischief. “Do you have something more challenging in mind for me, then?”

For a moment, Salvatore considered mentioning the Fenice letter, or at least the promise it contained of an upcoming, highly-profitable heist. He decided it was too early, however, to tell Silvio about the situation. He didn’t have any concrete details about the object in question or its location — the exact sort of details a thief would want to know — and he hadn’t yet agreed to the commission anyway. So instead, Salvatore flipped through his ledger and pulled out the list of auction lots he’d compiled from his trip to Garofalo’s. “As a matter of fact, I do. And most, if not all of them, will require breaking into *palazzi* on Isola Nebbiosa...”

As Salvatore cataloged, tagged, and stored the shop goods, Silvio and Nico perused the new list aloud, conferring on the descriptions of the auctioned items and commenting on the affluent individuals who had won the biddings. Salvatore found the background noise of their voices soothing as he worked; Silvio’s soft, lilted tenor had long been a comforting and palliative sound, but even Nico’s sharp, snapping tone was reassuring in its own way.

Once the shop goods were dealt with, Salvatore wrapped the dragon's horn ring in protective material and packaged it in preparation for the following evening. He could always flag down one of Elisa's lackeys after closing up for the night and send the package out early, but Salvatore thought it would be good for Vittoria to experience some of the fear that went with a serious client's looming deadline. Maybe next time she would think twice before agreeing to such a quick turnaround for what could have been — without Silvio's skills and some luck — a difficult heist.

As the hour hand on the mantle clock crept closer to three, Salvatore was forced to call it a night. Shooing Nico off to start closing down the Caveau, he turned back to Silvio. After insisting on taking both the auction and incomplete shop lists with him, the thief had redonned his rucksack and pulled his hood up over his short black hair. Still, he lingered by the counter, as if reluctant to go. Salvatore wondered what exactly he was waiting for.

Before he could ask, however, Silvio spoke first. "Is everything all right, Sal?"

"Of course," Salvatore responded automatically. He paused, considering the oddly neutral expression on Silvio's face, then grinned, genuine and confidential. "That was excellent work on the Cristallobianco job."

"I know," Silvio replied easily. A little bit of his usual warmth returned, and he smiled softly. "You'll let me know when you need me for anything, won't you? ...For any heist," he amended.

"Always." The reply seemed to satisfy the thief, and with a parting nod, Silvio made his way toward the door. Salvatore watched him go, the mottled gray-and-black of his tight-fitted thieving attire transforming him into a slender, elegant silhouette. As Silvio reached for the door handle, Salvatore heard himself call out an impromptu "Wait!"

Silvio turned back immediately. “Yes?”

“Have you...” he asked, uncertain, “Have you ever heard of... a group calling themselves the Fenice?”

It was possible, Salvatore thought, that Silvio might know of such a thing when he himself didn’t. Despite their years of close criminal partnership, there was much of the thief’s life, both past and present, that Salvatore knew he was unaware of. Where Silvio lived, who he spent time with, and what he did when he wasn’t out thieving were all unanswered mysteries. Salvatore had his guesses, of course, from bits and pieces of things that Silvio would say or do. But in the end they were only guesses, undisputed and unproved, and as his fence, Salvatore didn’t feel he had the right to inquire for any answers.

One thing he did know, however, was that when sixteen-year-old Silvio had shown up on the Caveau’s doorstep — wide-eyed, tired, and dressed in odd lagoon-stained clothing — his most pressing need had been for forged citizenship papers. Wherever Silvio had come from and however he had gotten here, he had not been born in the Isole Fulgide, and there was always a chance that Salvatore’s ignorance about the Fenice was tied to his lifelong isolation in the isles.

After Silvio had taken a moment to ponder the question, however, his answer was an honest and curious, “No. I don’t believe so. Why?”

“Never mind,” Salvatore said, sighing. “It’s nothing important.”



On Monday, he arrived at the Antichità Manco hours later than he usually was. Salvatore was forced to fend off Teodora’s mildly concerned inquiry with a banal excuse and a laugh.

Even after he'd gone home for the night and fallen into bed, the enigma of the Fenice letter had kept him wide awake. He'd brooded over the situation until the first violet-orange hints of approaching dawn had bloomed in the dark sky outside his window. The expected delivery from Casa d'Aste di Brusadin had preceded Salvatore's arrival, and he let Teodora leave early for her midday break so he could unpack and inspect his auction winnings in solitude. The glass figurines turned out nicer than he'd thought they were during the bidding, and he was satisfied to have taken the lot. The balance within the ornaments' nebulous forms revealing vestiges of purposeful design rather than accidental shaping, and the warm hues were saturated and vivid. Picking the pieces that vexed him the least, Salvatore set them aside for Luce and distributed the rest among the carefully-maintained clutter of the shop. He napped on and off throughout the afternoon, and Teodora reassured him, every time he awoke with a restless start, that no one had dropped by asking to see him.

That night, one of Elisa's couriers — a bulky, square-jawed fellow named Ivano — showed up at the Caveau around ten o'clock to pick up the package for Vittoria. Salvatore tipped him well to ensure he delivered it to the Levriero Zoppo precisely at five in the morning, satisfying the deadline while still forcing the young fence to endure a whole night of nerve-racking dread. Around midnight, Silvio arrived with hot coffee, lemon-almond biscotti, and the rest of the shop list crossed out. As Salvatore inspected each item, they discussed the Garofalo auction and settled on pursuing the seafoam-green perfume bottles first. Just before closing, Nico made an appearance. He'd begun his investigation by making the rounds among his favorite haunts on Isola Opercolo, discreetly questioning many of the rogues he knew and trusted the best. None reported hearing of a group called the Fenice.

On Tuesday, Salvatore made a visit to the trade offices on Isola di Ottone under the guise of a flustered shop owner. He kept his story simple — a first-time customer had purchased from him a beautiful antique *cassone*, but she had neglected to specify where to deliver it — and soon enough he left with the address of the woman with the enamel rose hairpin. On his return to the Antichità Manco, Teodora glanced up from her book to report the miraculous sale of two large candelabras, slightly tarnished, that had languished in the back of the shop for eight years. Cheered by the long-time eyesores' departure, Salvatore asked if she happened to remember his niece, Luce Favero. Teodora said that she did, but that she hadn't seen the girl in quite some time. He informed her that Luce might be visiting soon and, if she happened to do so while he was napping or away, Teodora was to wake him up or encourage Luce to wait. His shopkeeping assistant agreed, then promptly returned to her studies.

Among the various pickpockets and thieves that visited the Caveau that night was Giulia, with a predictable ploy to swindle him for another small loan. She'd appeared to take Salvatore's threats seriously for once, however, and the old woman's usual stench of liquor and brine was nearly absent beneath a cloying mask of floral scents, spices, and lye. Acknowledging this as a step in the right direction, Salvatore accepted the pilfered knickknacks Giulia brought him and sent her on her way with another small allowance of *basse* and *stagni*. He sipped on the coffee and sampled the cherry-filled *occhio di bue* Silvio brought as they examined maps of the Nebbiosa district where the perfume bottles' new owner lived. As Silvio left to begin his reconnaissance, Nico returned from a night spent loitering at the most popular taverns in Riposo dei Marinai, on the lookout for new faces and listening for any whispered mention of the word "*fenice*." Through a mouthful of jam and cookie, Nico complained that the night's efforts had been in vain.

On Wednesday, Salvatore took a gondola back to the Mercato Brillante and spent much of the morning and early afternoon browsing a variety of shops that sold high-end cosmetics and their associated trinkets for human women. Each place he went forced Salvatore to concoct some new narrative — his sister's birthday was coming up, his aunt was ill and needed comforting, his wife of many years was finally expecting — and most shopkeepers were more than willing to help him after that. He managed somehow to escape every shop with his coin pouches intact and with a stronger sense of what the perfume bottles were worth. To assuage the guilt now associated with his last visit to the area, Salvatore made a brief detour to Isola di Alizarina to see his mother, but was informed by one of her guildmates that Sofia was currently at a meeting. Contritely relieved, he left a note for Sofia to let her know he'd stopped by, then returned to the Antichità Manco. Teodora informed him of Luce's continued absence before he had the chance to ask.

The Caveau was fairly quiet that evening. Halfway through the night, however, a hefty package arrived from Vittoria via another of Elisa's lackeys, a brusque, deep-voiced brawler called Biagio. Salvatore was pleased to find it contained his payment for the Cristallobianco job. Before counting the silver *stagni* and gold *maree*, he read and had a good laugh over the enclosed letter, in which Vittoria thanked him for his continued assistance in growing her operations and promised him a higher share in any future collaborations. Silvio, presumably out conducting reconnaissance, never made an appearance, but eventually Nico did. Carrying through on his previous boast, the little dragon had convinced several of the taverns' *bariste* to assist with his surveillance, but after hours of haunting some of the more notorious establishments, he'd hadn't managed to dig up a single hint.

On Thursday, Salvatore surprised Teodora by already having the shop open when she arrived in the morning. For an hour or two, he vigorously set about rearranging the stock and greeting every customer that came through the door, leaving his shopkeeping assistant with nothing to do but read her book. Eventually, Salvatore sent Teodora home, insisting that she would be able to study better that way and ignoring her hesitant query on whether or not she'd still be paid for a full day's work. He left the Antichità Manco only once, just long enough to grab some *bigoli in salsa* from nearby Passerini's, and glanced through the front windows at every human that passed by on the *fondamenta* outside. None of them were Luce. Before closing down the shop, Salvatore spent longer than he usually did standing on the doorstep, watching the sun dip down toward the horizon as, unrestrained by the ironclad laws of the isles, it traveled far beyond the lagoon to provide light to all of the other places and peoples of the world.

That evening, Silvio returned, bearing coffee and pistachio-topped *cannoli*, and as Salvatore worked through his usual chores, he listened to Silvio's description of their target's quaint but decadent *palazzo*. The thief's improvised vignette was precise when it came to technical details like the height of the surrounding walls, the locations of the *palazzo*'s doors, and the number and style of its various windows, but his words grew more evocative, almost dreamy, as he described the stripes of blue shadow cast by the loggia's columns in the moonlight and the earthy scent of the garden's well-tended foliage. Despite the success of the Cristallobianco heist, Salvatore insisted that Silvio spend more than a single night on the *palazzo*'s reconnaissance, and Silvio conceded to his judgment. Later, Nico arrived, tired and irritable, and quickly stated that neither he nor his current contingent of informers had turned up any information, before curling up in a scaly ball and falling fast asleep.

On Friday, things at the Antichità Manco returned to normal, apparently to Teodora's great relief. While she simultaneously read and manned the counter, Salvatore puttered around the shop and briefly napped in an armchair, but all the while, he was quiet and deep in thought. Finally, after Teodora's midday break was over, Salvatore informed her that he would be out for a while to run an important errand. Slipping the glass figurines he'd set aside into a belt pouch, he left the shop and wound his way through the streets, along *fondamenta*, and over several bridges to Isola Catecù. As he entered the Percorso del Giardino and caught a glimpse of the rose-colored townhouse, Salvatore felt a knot begin to tighten in his chest and he almost turned around and went back. Eventually, however, he forced himself to approach, and Salvatore sat down on the familiar front steps and pulled out a scrap of paper and a spare stick of graphite. The message he composed was impersonal and concise — *I'll pick you up tomorrow at ten. - Zio Tonio* — but even if he'd had the room to write more, Salvatore wouldn't have known what to say. He left the note on the landing, placing the glass figurines on top to keep the scrap from blowing away. Then he returned to his shop and helped Teodora close it down for the weekend.

The Caveau experienced its usual amount of activity that night. Salvatore was preoccupied with thoughts of tomorrow, however, and found himself paying for his distraction with little, irritating mistakes: incorrectly calculating numbers in the ledger, mislabeling goods, and even overcompensating one of his newer associates by several *maree*. Silvio dropped by only briefly on the way to continue his reconnaissance, but the coffee and pastries he left behind, as well as his jocund smile, were a welcome balm. The influx of visitors eventually slowed and ground to a halt, and when he was certain he was safely alone, he removed the Fenice letter from its drawer and read it again... and again... and again. But no last-minute epiphanies sprang into his mind, and when Nico finally slunk into the Caveau and dragged himself up onto the

countertop, Salvatore could see in the dragon's dark and tired eyes that he'd discovered nothing either.

"I'm meeting with the Fenice's representative tomorrow," he confirmed. Nico only sighed and nodded.



Salvatore knocked on the front door right as the clock tower bells rang in the tenth hour of the morning. He waited uncomfortably, thumbs tucked into his belt. As he was about to knock again, he heard the muffled pounding of feet on the stairs and a flustered shout of "*Un attimo!*" Salvatore steeled his expression into what he hoped was an embarrassed and repentant smile as he waited for Luce to open the door.

He'd hardly slept, and what little sleep he'd had was poor, leaving him restless and on edge. By the time the dark sky had begun to pale with the coming dawn, Salvatore had given up on sleep, and he had forced himself to prepare for the diverse trials of the upcoming day. That he would be compelled to step foot into Studio Artigiano di Scordato was mortifying, and being required to watch the glassblowers at their work was worse; the thought of it all was nearly enough to drive him back to bed. But his ire and curiosity — not to mention his sense of self-preservation — were stronger. The Fenice, whoever they were, were a greater conundrum now than when he'd first received their letter. Salvatore needed answers, and he needed them now.

Standing in front of his mirror, tired and cantankerous, he had brooded over the impertinence of the letter's author. What sort of criminal did these people think he was? Salvatore huffed. He was no cringing back-alley swindler, easy to manipulate and desperate to

please. He was a successful *ricettatore*, a long-standing and respected pillar within the isles' underground community! He was not a man to be trifled with, Salvatore told himself with bracing arrogance as he regarded his stern reflection. Whether the Fenice turned out to be his next illustrious client or not, they needed to understand exactly who it was they were dealing with.

The impression he made on their representative, then, was vital. Being awake so early gave Salvatore ample time to wash and comb his hair, trim his beard, and scrub his skin clean, and he did so before dressing in some of the finest and most lavish attire he owned. Over a tunic of deep teal silk he layered a snowy-white jerkin with tailored embellishments, and around his neck went a wide gold chain; a decently-sized ruby, oval-cut, was embedded in its pendant. The loud colors, lace-trimmed sleeves, and excessive frippery would not have been his preference, but they projected the impression Salvatore was going for — prosperous and proud — and he would be infinitely less conspicuous in the crowd this way. He allowed himself more comfortable, neutral hues for his trousers and boots, but he eventually conceded that his velvet maroon cap with the white plume was the best match for the rest. Once suitably attired, Salvatore had ventured out, shoulders back and stance straight. He had fortified himself for the day with a dark, bitter coffee from the Caffè de Palmieri before taking a short gondola ride to Isola Catecù.

When Luce finally opened the door, she did so slowly, peeking around the side as if uncertain who or what she would find there. Salvatore held his smile and furrowed his brow sheepishly. “*Ciao*, Luce.”

The girl's expression was wary, and she replied with a quiet “*ciao*” that felt more like a dismissal than a greeting.

“How are you this morning?”

“*Va bene.*”

“Did you get the note I left you yesterday?”

“*Sì.*”

Clearly, his erratic behavior last Sunday had upset her. And, Salvatore realized, not knowing the reason for his unusual response to her suggested outing, Luce had assumed herself to be the problem. He wasn’t pleased to have caused her such apprehension. But as much as Salvatore wanted his usually cheerful niece happy again, arriving to the meeting on time was a considerably more pressing concern and he couldn’t do that if they never even made it to Isola dei Vetrai.

“*Spiacente*, Luce,” he tried, glancing dolefully down at the toes of his boots. “I didn’t mean for you to think I didn’t want to go with you today. I have... had a lot on my mind lately.” That much, at least, was true. “And sometimes all those worries... make me say the wrong thing, or act the wrong way.” Salvatore looked up at Luce’s half-hidden face. “I’ve really been looking forward to spending time with you, *mia cara. Perdonami?*”

To his great relief, Luce melted at this confession. Immediately, she threw open the door and enveloped him in a tight hug. “Of course, Zio Tonio! I’m so sorry you’ve been worried lately. I had no idea!”

Salvatore returned the embrace, patting her back until she finally let go to plant a kiss on each of his cheeks. Before she could inquire further into his worries, he smiled and said, “It’s all right. Everything’s fine now. But tell me truly: do you still want us to go to this demonstration?”

“*Certamente!*” Now that he got a better look at her, Salvatore could tell that Luce had already prepared herself for their outing. She was wearing a light vermilion overgown atop her usual white smock, and though the gown was still ankle-length and utilitarian, its bodice was

adorned with spiraling embroidery and pale yellow lacing. Luce had plaited her hair with ribbons as well, a single braid hanging loosely down her back. To Salvatore's consternation, she actually looked her age of sixteen years.

Thankfully, Luce's enthusiasm quickly reassured him that she was still the same girl he'd always known. "I'm ready whenever you are!" She picked up a sleek leather satchel from beside the door and slung its strap over her shoulder. Salvatore assumed it was full of sketching supplies. A moment later he recognized the satchel, worn but well-maintained, as having once belonged to Renzo.

Holding tight to his smile, he offered Luce his arm. "Then let's be off. There's much to see and do today."



They crossed the bridge that spanned the Canale di Coroncina from Isola Catecù to Isola dei Vetrai. As they did, Salvatore imagined he was experiencing sensations similar to those felt by naval *guardiani* launching an attack on a threatening ship, or perhaps by foreign foot-soldiers marching into armed combat. Ahead was a loud, suffocating chaos from which he could not hope to escape unscathed. But retreat was not an option, so Salvatore continued inexorably forward — Luce clinging to him in excitement — able only to endure.

Isola dei Vetrai, home of the glassmakers, was by far the grandest isle in all the Isole Fulgide. Built atop the largest flat plot of marshy land in the lagoon, it was also the biggest and most cartographically central; from the maps Salvatore had seen, the rest of the archipelago more or less encircled the isle like protective hands around a precious flame. More than the Palazzo

Ducale or even the Basilica del Creatore, Isola dei Vetrai was the shining heart of the city-state. Its streets were lined with dozens of massive foundries and countless studios and galleries, all dedicated to the sacred art of glasscraft, and every building was adorned with ancient *dragovetro* mosaics and glass sculptural reliefs that outshone even the costly splendor of Nebbiosa.

Despite how early they had arrived, Salvatore could already hear the shouts and chatter and general clangor of a typical day on Isola dei Vetrai. That did not bode well for the upcoming afternoon, he griped to himself. Saturday festivities always drew larger crowds and the Scordato demonstration would only make it worse. He allowed Luce to steer them through the wide and bustling streets, passing between rows of shops and exhibits and showrooms, their display windows brimming with glass in all of its infinite forms. Here for sale was glass dishware made of stunningly clear *cristallo* and smooth glass mirrors backed with polished silver. There on display were glass vessels in a multitude of shapes, slender or bulbous or curiously inorganic, all striped with various hues of twisted cane. Here again were glass pendants, strung on chains of gold or ribbons of velvet, and intricate beads patterned with colorful *murrine*. And there were racks of glass optics with an assortment of lenses, some curative, others smoked or vividly tinted.

Around them on the street, humans and dragons went about their work or their leisure with a hopefully geniality Salvatore hadn't possessed in decades. Glassblowers, seeking a brief reprieve from the heat of the furnaces, strode about or lingered in clusters, metal blowpipes or punties casually resting against their shoulders. Young apprentices of the Glassmakers Guild, easily spotted by the shimmering crest on their tunics or neckerchiefs, trotted along prescribed paths to fulfill their errands without haste. Groups in fine dress, clearly here for the demonstration, chattered in excitement and pointed out their next glass purchases through the shop windows. Even the laborers, bent beneath the weight of the sand-filled sacks they

transported from docked boats to foundries, seemed unburdened by any discontent. The atmosphere grated on Salvatore's nerves. Unable to keep up a constant smile, he let it drop. He made sure to have another prepared, though, for whenever Luce glanced in his direction.

Every street they took brought them closer to the center of the isle, and soon enough they emerged out into the grand expanse of the Piazza di Iridescenza. Catching sight of the first of the *campo*'s signature tiered fountains, Salvatore felt the beginnings of a knot tangle up in his chest. The Piazza di Iridescenza was expansive, the largest open space of its kind in the isles, and it was home to an ever-changing roster of street performers, musicians, and glass vendors. On one side of the *piazza* stood the glittering Santuario di Iridescenza, the sacred shrine of glassblowers and framewokers; on its opposite side stood the imposing guildhall of the Glassmakers Guild, the columns of its portico made of massive stacked blocks of *lattimo* glass. And on the far side of the *piazza*, visible over the gathering crowd and in between the fountains, was the unassuming brick-and-plaster facade of Studio Artigiano di Scordato.

"There it is!" Luce exclaimed, squeezing his arm.

Salvatore grunted.

"You know, I've *always* wanted to visit the workshop there," she confided. "I mean, Iridescenza and Lino *actually* created glass together there. That's just so strange to imagine, *non è vero*? That they really walked those floors and tended those furnaces and people still do the same kind of work there today!" Luce sighed dreamily, resting the side of her head against Salvatore's shoulder. "But they're *so* secretive. They rarely let anyone from outside the guild go beyond the front entrance, unless it's for one of the demonstrations. They wouldn't even let my class go on a guided tour."

“Of course they’re secretive,” Salvatore said gruffly, taking in the endless flow of humans and dragons moving through the *piazza*. “And it’s not just the public that’s barred from going inside. It’s anyone from outside the studio itself — and guild members from other studios in particular.” At Luce’s puzzled expression, he grudgingly explained. “Studio di Scordato still has exclusive proprietorship over a whole host of techniques developed by Iridescenza and Lino. Even though it’s been centuries since that time, none of the other foundries have been able to figure out the exact process for replicating those techniques. And Scordato’s *maestri* want to keep it that way, because their continued dominance of the sculptural glass market depends on being the only studio in the world that can produce such work.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Luce said, nodding thoughtfully. She too seemed to be taking in the ever-shifting throng, but its cheerful energy only seemed to heighten her own. “It’s like our isles,” she added, and it was Salvatore’s turn to glance at her curiously. “Here is the only place in the world where dragons are safe to live,” Luce elaborated. “So to protect the secret, the Guardia di Mare keeps all of the other countries’ ships away, and no one from outside is allowed in. Unless they’re asked to come live here, of course.”

While immigration to the isles was strictly prohibited, it was true that, every year, a small number of foreign humans were invited by the *dogi* to leave their home countries and settle in the Isole Fulgide. It was not a privilege that could be applied for or bought, either with status or with coin, and the rare invitations were, without fail, granted only to exceptional artisans who were already *maestri* within their fields. Despite the subsequent restrictions placed on those who accepted the *dogi*’s call, Salvatore couldn’t remember the last time such an honor had been denied. And those restrictions, he knew, were stringent. The artisans in question were forced to cut nearly all ties to their original country — including any family they’d left behind — and all

communication they sent abroad was scrutinized with additional vigor for the remainder of their life.

“And if they do come here,” Luce added, matter-of-fact, “then they have to stay.”

That, too, was true. Once an outsider stepped foot in the isles and came face-to-face with their first dragon, there could be no turning back. Not even the occasional castaway — an even rarer sight than invited artisans — could hope to return home once rescued from the briny lagoon by a Guardia vessel. Foreign-raised or native-born, no one who knew the secret of the Isole Fulgide was ever allowed to escape from its custody. Not alive, anyway.

“Yes,” Salvatore said, staring at the distant building as the knot in his chest began to tighten. “That’s a good analogy for Studio di Scordato. A good analogy indeed.” He glanced over at Luce with his rehearsed smile. “Want to go see what the vendors have for sale?”

They wandered through the *piazza*, stopping often to admire some street performer’s art or to browse the wares set up beneath striped silk canopies. Salvatore let Luce set their pace and course, following the tug of her hand. He clapped along as she applauded the entertainers juggling glass orbs of dragonfire, partnered her in a spontaneous circle dance instigated by a troupe from the Dancers Guild, and he nodded and responded agreeably to her every comment, question, and exclamation.

As he waited for her to finish examining the fused-glass pencil cases at an apprentice’s booth, Salvatore surreptitiously surveyed the crowd for any sign of the Fenice or their representative. He wasn’t certain what he was looking for exactly. In spite of the paradox of their letter, he didn’t believe they were likely to announce themselves with anything too obvious. But they could very well be watching him even now, so Salvatore pretended to read a leaflet nailed to

a nearby post — the same one he possessed announcing the Scordato demonstration — and carefully inspected every person within his view.

After a minute or two of this, Salvatore felt certain that the Fenice were either not currently in attendance or were much better at concealing themselves than he was at spotting them. None of the humans or dragons loitering nearby were acting in a way that he would consider suspicious, and any gaze that happened to catch his own slid away without a flicker of recognition or alarm. After Luce finished her purchase and packed her new pencil case into her satchel, Salvatore allowed her to lead him away. He felt slightly less paranoid than before, but he stayed alert for any hint, no matter how small or unlikely, that the mysterious group might be lurking nearby.

His survey of the area had, however, confirmed two very interesting facts. First was the truth of what Marzia had said concerning the Guardia's presence today. Salvatore didn't think he'd ever seen so few *guardiani* in the Piazza di Iridescenza, especially on a Saturday. The dark blue berets and caplets of the human officers and the gleaming armor worn by their dragon counterparts were always distinctly visible even in a bustling throng, but Salvatore had so far counted only one *guardiano* stationed at the entrance they had taken into the *piazza* and only three *guardiani* patrolling the grounds. Each appeared to be on their own as well, rather than working in their usual pairs or triads. Whatever was going on at the Questura, Salvatore thought, must be incredibly important. He wondered if Marzia would be able to tell him later what the meeting was all about.

The second thing he noticed was likely a result of the first, and this was — for Salvatore, at least — a visible increase in the number of petty thefts taking place in the relative open of the festival crowd. Though he'd never been a pickpocket himself, Salvatore had gleaned much from

listening to Silvio's former tutors discuss the craft, and he found himself able to recognize on sight the most common setups and methods of execution utilized by such lifters. He'd already seen one man, dressed in street cleaner's clothes and ostensibly sweeping the tiled ground, cut away the coin purse of a well-dressed man distracted by the jugglers, then quickly do the same to the man's inattentive companion. Not long after, he'd noticed a pair of young girls in matching frayed dresses take advantage of an elder *dragadonna*'s kindness; one held the dragon's attention with false tears and blubbing for her mother while the other slipped a tiny hand into the *dragadonna*'s harness pouch, pulling out a fistful of *stagni* before squirreling it away.

It wasn't just the local pickpockets taking advantage of the current lack of *guardiani*, however. As Luce guided him towards a cluster of yellow, lavender, and green tents, from which emanated the delicious scents of varied foods, Salvatore caught sight of two familiar, roguishly-clothed individuals: Leandro and Arrigo Tosi. While his younger brother quietly slouched beside the wheel of a nearby vendor's cart, Leandro was engaged in animated conversation with a woman selling *dragovetro*-adorned accessories for different styles of caps.

The moment he identified the brothers, Salvatore casually turned his gaze away. Though he hadn't met Arrigo's gaze, he was certain the man had or would soon notice him and recognize Salvatore as their fence. He wasn't afraid of the thieves approaching him here in the middle of the *piazza*, however, particularly not dressed as he was and with what was clearly a young relative at his side. They, of course, wouldn't be afraid of Salvatore greeting them either, especially not with Leandro obviously in the middle of a lift. Unlike the Fenice, he mused wryly, the Tosi brothers knew how to avoid compromising their criminal associates. He made a mental note to prepare the Caveau for an influx of fine cap broaches and shimmering plumes.

Upon reaching the food vendors, Salvatore paused to survey and discuss their options. While there was half an hour yet before the sun would reach its zenith, he hadn't eaten anything with his morning coffee and his anxiety over the upcoming meeting had slackened enough for the moment to leave him hungry. Luce, always ready for her next meal, was happy to eat now as well and, after a brief deliberation, they agreed to share a motley repast assembled from the various *cicchetti* being offered. Handing his niece a small coin pouch, Salvatore sent her off to browse the bakers' and confectioners' tents while he visited the booths of the chefs. He managed to gather an array of savory portions, including some toasted cheese *panini* and crispy sardine *polpette* on sticks, then claimed the first empty bench he found. Though *cicchetti* was traditionally eaten standing up, Salvatore's feet had begun to hurt, the busking lutist performing nearby was playing a relaxing melody, and it would be easier to share the food sitting down. Spreading out his haul on a handkerchief beside him, Salvatore breathed a sigh and turned his gaze to Studio Artigiano di Scordato.

Their circuitous route through the *piazza* had brought them ever closer to the foundry, and now Salvatore could clearly see the entrance to the old, dusty-hued building. Two *guardiani* stood near the faded red doors — the only pair working together he had seen all morning — and Salvatore found the arrangement quite telling. Whatever petty crimes might be going on within the crowd, it was Studio di Scordato that was most deserving of the Guardia's protection.

The fountain closest to Studio di Scordato was also now within Salvatore's view, and from where he sat he could hear the steady murmur of its cascading water over the music and chatter. There were five fountains in the Piazza di Iridescenza: one near each corner of its rectangular expanse and the last in the *piazza's* center. While all were constructed of fine white marble adorned with *cristallo* and iridescent *dragovetro* reliefs, the four outer fountains were

smaller and featured three tiers each, while the central one was the largest with five towering tiers of sculpted glass.

Salvatore examined the current scene. Like all of the *piazza*'s fountains, the one closest to Studio di Scordato was currently surrounded by an array of festival goers, most sitting or reclining on its broad marble ledge and enjoying the sunshine. Two young *dragazzi* — barely old enough to escape being called hatchlings — had climbed into the fountain's basin and were cavorting about, much to the ire of their current guardian. Their pastel scales, rosy-lavender and golden-peach, glittered as they splashed each other and shrieked happily with a mixture of verbal shouts and dragonish yips. If any of the humans or dragons there now were the Fenice's representative, Salvatore couldn't tell. But there was still more than three hours until the meeting, and anyone lingering by the fountain that long would certainly attract the *guardiani*'s attention.

"*There* you are, Zio Tonio! What did you get? I got— *Ooo*, I love *polpette*!" Salvatore smiled as Luce joined him on the bench, her arms full of sweet-smelling paper sacks. She promptly dumped them on his lap and grabbed one of the sticks, biting into a freshly-fried fishball before Salvatore could stop her. He snorted in amusement as she winced, fanning her mouth. "*Fa caldo!*"

As Luce negotiated her stick of *polpette* with greater care, Salvatore unpackaged her finds — yellow *zaletti* cookies dotted with nuts, cream-filled *castagnole*, and thick slices of raisin *panettone* — and laid them out on the handkerchief with his own. "Good choices, *mia cara*." He selected a *panino* and joined her in the repast, and for a while, he allowed the food and Luce's company to distract him from his thoughts.

Together they made short work of the savory *cicchetti*, then delved into the sweets. Those also did not last long, and as Salvatore wiped the last yellow crumbs from his mouth, the glass bells of the Santuario di Iridescenza rang their eerie chime to signal the noon hour.

“Here,” Luce said, passing him the coin pouch he’d given her earlier. “Let me get that.” She gathered up the debris from their meal, and while she stepped away to find a place to deposit it, Salvatore absentmindedly hefted the pouch in one hand. It took him a second to realize it was heavier than he’d anticipated, and with a frown, he pulled open the drawstring and rooted around inside. Not a single coin was missing.

Salvatore experienced a moment of profound, blood-chilling panic before Luce returned and remarked happily, “Don’t worry, Zio Tonio, the treats were on me today! I’ve been saving up the coin I get from helping Signora Fiscella down the street water her plants, and I bought that pencil case for me today, and, well, I wanted to get *you* something for once.” Her smile grew a little shy. “You know, as thanks. For the glass figurines, and for coming with me today.”

“Of course. *Grazie*, Luce.” Salvatore stood and pulled her in for a quick, one-armed hug, planting a kiss on the side of her head. “That’s very sweet. I enjoyed everything very much.” *Grazie al Creatore*, he thought with a shudder of relief. If Luce had somehow and for some reason lifted the food instead of paying for it, Salvatore might have died on the spot. It was his own fault, though, he told himself dryly, for imagining such a scenario in the first place.

“Could I have *one* coin, though?” Luce inquired, clasping her hands together. He raised an eyebrow in question. “I want to tip the lutist. He’s been playing *so* beautifully...”

“*Certamente*.” Salvatore dug a silver *stagno* out of the pouch and handed it over, then followed a few paces behind as Luce trotted over to join the small group that had gathered in front of the musician.

He resumed his clandestine inspection of the *piazza* for any hint of the Fenice, and once again found nothing obviously amiss. So it was a moment or two before the gentle instrumental melody drew Salvatore's attention and he looked around at the lutist.

It was Silvio.

Merda, he thought instantly. Cold panic, so recently tamped down, threatened to flare up once more. A quick glance at Luce confirmed that it was too late to steer his niece away. She was already watching and listening in complete captivation along with several other young women and men, who all appeared equally entranced. Uncertain what to do, Salvatore tucked his thumbs into his belt and hesitantly returned his gaze to the *maestro-ladro*.

Silvio hardly looked like a thief at the moment. He was dressed dandily in a flouncy white chemise bedecked in bright pink and blue ribbon, and he wore matching blue knee-length breeches, white hose, and sleek slipper shoes. On Silvio's head was perched a floppy cap, banded in the same ribbon, to which he'd pinned a legitimate-looking busker's badge that Salvatore knew he'd stolen directly from the licensing office. The lute resting in his lap was a modest but striking work of art, with a mother-of-pearl fretboard and iridescent enameling around the rosette. Completing the guise was a portable stool and a ceramic bowl by his feet, which was partially filled with an array of iron, copper, and silver coins.

As far as Salvatore could tell, Silvio had yet to notice his presence. The thief's eyes were closed in concentration, his head bent and tilted in towards his instrument, apparently lost in his own music.

He played well, Salvatore observed quietly to himself, particularly for someone who had never apprenticed with the Musicians Guild. He had known that Silvio had a passing familiarity with the lute; he'd watched the thief occasionally toy around with some of the stringed

instruments that made their way in and out of the Caveau. But Salvatore hadn't realized the extent of his knowledge or skill. Silvio plucked the gut strings with complete confidence, his slender fingers never missing or hitting the wrong chord, and he varied the intensity and duration of each note in accordance with some instinctual sense of how best to impart the sound. It was clear now that Silvio had received professional instruction on the lute, though when, where, and by whom, Salvatore couldn't begin to imagine.

Though several of the melodic phrases he played felt familiar, Salvatore didn't quite recognize the song. It was a beautiful piece, however, with verses of light, jubilant staccatos merging gradually into a slower, deeper, and more melancholy refrain. Salvatore amended his earlier observation: Silvio didn't just play well, he played with *heart*. The music seemed to rise up from the depths of some emotion trapped inside him, leaving Salvatore to wonder if the song was self-composed or even improvised.

Already unsure and off-kilter, he felt a little entranced in spite of himself.

Following one last repetition of the wistful refrain, Silvio drew the song to a gentle but definite close. As the final note faded, his listeners immediately broke into enthusiastic applause. Salvatore politely clapped with them. A pleased smile crossed the thief's face and he opened his eyes, looking up at the small audience his music had gathered. With gracious nods, Silvio accepted their words of praise and rested his forearm on the curved edge of the lute. He murmured his thanks as the women and men tossed coins into the bowl before wandering off to find their next source of entertainment.

Luce was the last to approach him, still clutching the silver *stagno*, and Salvatore watched her drop the coin among the rest with a sincere proclamation of "*Bellissima!*"

Silvio smiled. “*Grazie, signorina.*” Then his gaze shifted, and his light gray eyes instantly met Salvatore’s.

Rather than look away, however, the thief’s smile sharpened into a sly grin. “*Signore,*” he added in acknowledgment. As Luce turned to trot back to her uncle’s side, he sent Salvatore an unmistakably coy wink.

This was Nico’s doing, Salvatore realized as Luce took his arm. He’d forbidden the little dragon from following him to the meeting today, so Nico had convinced the thief to keep an eye on Salvatore in his stead.

Salvatore wasn’t sure if he should be irritated with Nico for his meddling or not. He hadn’t wanted to bother the Silvio with the letter or its troubling contents. But the thief certainly blended in better here than Nico could hide, and Salvatore couldn’t fault the guise; there was nothing suspicious, after all, about a busking musician sitting in one spot for hours at a time. Despite the alarm Silvio’s presence had caused him, Salvatore found himself reassured by the knowledge that one of his two closest associates was nearby, watching his back.

He huffed and guided his niece away from the grinning lutist. If Silvio thought that wink would spare him a reprimand for speaking to his fence in public, then he was in for an unpleasant surprise.

“We should head on over to the studio now,” Salvatore told Luce. “If we don’t, we may not be able to get any seats, much less a spot with a decent view.”



As he stepped into the entrance hall of Studio Artigiano di Scordato, a wave of suffocating nausea washed over Salvatore, and it suddenly occurred to him that the foundry's private guards might bar him from venturing any further inside.

The lobby was already uncomfortably packed with a mob of people eager to watch the day's demonstration. Small children were lifted up to ride on their parents' shoulders and large dragons tucked their tails next to their bodies as the chattering mass shuffled closer together to make more room. Somewhere on the far side of the hall, where a set of heavy iron doors that were usually barred shut were currently thrown open, Salvatore could hear one of the studio's personnel shouting for the crowd to form an orderly line.

Luce's grip on his arm tightened, but when he glanced at her face, her expression was wide-eyed and enraptured. "Just *look* at that mosaic!" she exclaimed in his ear and pointed over the heads of the people around them to the long wall on their right. "Isn't it *amazing*?"

"Yes it is."

Salvatore didn't have to look; he knew well what the old glass mosaic depicted. It was the interior of a humble glassblowing studio, a real place that had once existed on the distant mainland coast of the lagoon. On one end of the tableau was a tiled rendering of an old man, small, thin, and white-haired. He wore round optics and a heavy smithy's apron and was clutching a blowpipe in both hands. On the other end was posed a magnificent *draguomo*, large and sinuous with straight, backwards-jutting horns. His iridescent scales were depicted exclusively with tiles of shimmering *dragovetro*. Between the two figures was the circular door to the studio's furnace, and the bright orange tiles, all gilded with gold leaf, appeared to glow like a miniature sun.

Ignoring the mosaic, Salvatore surveyed the crowd as best as he could, straining to see above the heads of taller humans and much taller dragons. After a moment of shuffling, he caught a glimpse of the person shouting for order, and was grateful not to recognize the young man on sight. Then, from inside the iron doors' aperture emerged a violet-and-slate dappled *draguomo*, stocky and muscular with thick, curved horns, and Salvatore bit back a curse. Of course old Maculatomarmo was here. The aging dragon had once been one of the studio's glassblowers, but now served as head of their private guard.

While Salvatore pondered how to explain his imminent removal from the premises to Luce, several more studio personnel arrived and managed to corral the excited mob into a semblance of a moving line. As each human and dragon ahead of them was briefly inspected and waved through the doors, Salvatore was swept inexorably forward. Then, he and Luce were suddenly at the front of the line. Maculatomarmo tilted his large head down to look at them, and Salvatore saw in the narrowing of the dragon's slitted maroon eyes that he remembered Salvatore, too.

"I'm taking my niece to the demonstration," Salvatore found himself saying. His own voice, dull yet pleading, sounded foreign to his ears. "That's all. She just wants to watch the glassblowers." *Per favore*, he thought, holding the *draguomo*'s judging stare. *Creatore, per favore*.

After a moment, Maculatomarmo's gaze shifted to Luce. While Salvatore dared not look away, he felt her trembling in excitement as she marveled at the engravings on the doors, completely unaware of the current standoff. "I can't *wait*," she squeaked, squeezing Salvatore's arm. "Zio Tonio, which *maestri* do you think are giving the demonstration? All of them are *so* talented and creative, I—"

“Go on in,” the *draguomo* growled in his deep, roiling voice, and gestured with a flick of his head. Not wanting to jeopardize his unlikely good fortune, Salvatore nodded his sincere gratitude and allowed the man shouting orders to shepherd them through the doors. He caught the flare of Maculatomarmo’s nostrils, however, from which rose a subtle curl of smoke. Salvatore knew the dragon would be tracking his every move until the moment he left the building.

Down a long, brick-walled corridor, he and Luce followed the line, and her expression of awe only increased as she read the plaques on each of the doors they passed. “...there’s storage for molds and blowpipes... and a coldworking studio... and storage for finished cane... and a room for assembling *murrine*...” The knot that had lodged itself in Salvatore’s chest began to grow and tighten by degrees, but he was able to fight off the nausea as they reached the end of the hall. Stepping through another set of opened iron doors, Salvatore found himself in the Studio Artigiano di Scordato glassblowing arena for the first time in twenty-two years.

The studio’s primary workshop was located inside a massive rotunda. Its curving walls rose up three full stories before melding into a domed ceiling at the top. Tiers of permanent benches lined the walls, creating on the stone floor in front of them the large circular stage where the glassblowers went about their work. In the center of the room crouched the giant furnace. The cylindrical brick structure was furnished with multiple round doors covered by insulating shutters, and its narrow flue reached up through the very center of the dome.

As the ambient heat of the furnace washed over his skin, Salvatore felt his throat constrict and he coughed once before smothering the rest of his hacking with his silk sleeve. The arena’s benches were already half full and the empty seats that remained were being claimed fast. Hired musicians had been directed by the studio’s personnel to the highest row, where they currently

sat tuning their instruments, and visiting dragons courteously settled in the upper tiers to avoid blocking the humans' view. When Luce leaned in to ask where they should sit, Salvatore could only shrug, so she took the lead and guided him through the milling throng.

Finding an open space on one bench three rows from the ground, they quickly sat, and Luce pulled a sketchbook out of her satchel and opened it to a blank page. She began to lay down light lines of graphite into what Salvatore soon observed was a fast rendering of the furnace. He glanced around, absently massaging the base of his throat and trying to even out his breathing. Luce was far from the only person taking advantage of this opportunity to study and sketch the secretive studio's workshop.

As the available seating rapidly diminished, the musicians finished their tuning and began to play a simple, repetitive melody. The plucked strings and low percussive drumming heightening the air of anticipation already suffusing the rotunda and the audience began to stir restlessly. From a set of doors on the far side of the room came several apprentices, all in Scordato colors, carrying racks and buckets of glassblowing equipment, and their appearance inspired a few claps and shouts of excitement that resulted in scattered laughter. The apprentices, apparently excited by the attention, smiled widely and waved to the crowd before trotting back to collect more equipment. Salvatore scowled and wiped his forehead, which had begun to bead with sweat. He wondered if the Fenice's representative was here in the audience, or if they were already waiting for him outside.

The anticipation reached a fever pitch as the last seats were filled and the iron doors from the lobby were pulled shut with a reverberating thud. The final pieces of equipment had been arranged on the circular floor, and Salvatore glanced over at Luce's sketchbook to see what she had added to the scene. She'd sketched one of the glassblower workbenches, with its

characteristic long metal arms on each side of the seat, and next to it on the floor a bucket filled with sloshing water. The marving table, its perfectly smooth surface made of polished marble, was just visible in the back with the standing rack of blowpipes and punties beside it. She had also sketched the closest tray on which the apprentices had laid out a wide selection of tools: blackened wooden paddles, thickly-padded gloves, spoon-shaped wooden blocks, and large metal jacks, pointed and tweezer-like. It was a great rendering of the scene for how fast Luce had produced it, and a churning sickness turned in Salvatore's gut that only worsened when he looked up to observe the real thing.

The musicians, directed by some unseen signal, all halted at once. The audience quickly realized what was happening and followed suit. As the babbling died, Luce gasped and shoved her sketchbook back in the bag, setting the satchel at her feet. Salvatore grimaced. All stirring and chatter ceased as every human and dragon in the room grew still and seemed to hold their breath. For a long moment, the only sound in the massive rotunda was the low, abyssal hum emanating from the giant central furnace.

Then the audience began to clap, all in unison, a steady, primal rhythm. It was a call, an invitation and a plea, to the artisans they had gathered here to see, entreating them to perform their life's passion and highest calling. Despite the intensity with which Luce and all the people around him were clapping, Salvatore resisted the urge to join in. Around the room, humans began to stand and add stomping to the rhythm, and then everyone was on their feet, clapping and pounding until the tiered benches shook with the reverberations. Salvatore gritted his teeth.

The far doors opened. The musicians launched into a triumphant fanfare, and as the first of Scordato's master glassblowers entered the rotunda and paraded out onto the open floor, the audience erupted in a deafening cheer.

“There they are! There they are!” Luce shouted in Salvatore’s ear. “Oh, *look!* I can’t *believe* it! This is *amazing!*”

The *maestri* stood out clearly among the flurry of attentive young apprentices that surrounded them. They were all older artisans, ranging in age from mid thirties to late sixties, and they walked in dedicated teams of two: one human and one dragon. The tradition of paired glassblowing had been established centuries ago, the precedent set by Lino and Iridescenza themselves, and no foundry in the isles exemplified the spirit of this tradition quite like Studio di Scordato. As the paired teams, four in total, spread out around the stage, it became clear that each human *maestro* was attired in the same colors as the scales of their dragon *maestro* partner.

“That’s Stefano, isn’t it?” Luce shouted, shaking his arm. “And Mielevampata, too! I was so *hoping* they’d be part of the demonstration, and *there they are!*”

Salvatore felt his face flush as one pair of *maestri* — a man and a *dragadonna*, both in their early forties — came to a stop in front of their section and began to wave to the cheering crowd. Yes, Salvatore thought. Though he hadn’t seen either one of them in years, that was Stefano Degnolupo and Mielevampata all right.

Spiral-horned Mielevampata was unmistakable, of course, as most dragons were, due to the unique patterning of her scales. The golden-brown patches along her forehead and spine dripped down into a vibrant cacophony of crimsons and yellows, before fading into a smooth, pale honey along her neck and underbelly. Her red eyes lit up at the audience’s approval and, baring her fangs happily, she let out a deep roar.

Stefano, however, looked more mature than Salvatore remembered him being, though he supposed that was to be expected. As a young man, Stefano had been tall, well-built, and considered quite handsome. Despite the deepened lines on his square-jawed face and the streaks

of silver that had crept into his dark, cropped hair, it was irritating to see that those descriptions still held. As the clapping continued, Stefano threw open his arms and did a little spin, easily catching the blowpipe tossed to him by an apprentice. Several women in the crowd nearby whooped gleefully at this, and Salvatore snorted in disgust.

As the audience's cheers finally waned and everyone began to retake their seats, the fanfare faded into a much softer refrain and the mood in the arena shifted. Around the stage, each pair of *maestri* had turned to face each other, the humans holding their blowpipes with both hands and the dragons standing tall on all fours. Salvatore considered leaning over to narrate and explain the ceremonial moment, but Luce was already fixated on the sight, open mouthed and unblinking, so he refrained.

Simultaneously each *maestro* bowed low to their partner in a solemn and universal sign of respect. Then, stepping forward, they each closed their eyes and pressed their forehead to that of their partner for a long and quiet breath. This was a gesture far more profound. The action, intimate and full of trust, was meant to express the perfectly synchronized harmony the glassblowers would have to achieve in order to produce their very best work. As he watched Stefano lay a gentle, steadying hand against the side of Mielevampata's dappled face, Salvatore felt his revulsion twist sickeningly into a knot-tightening tangle of shame and resurrected longing.

Then — as the breath of quiet ended and every *maestro*'s eyes flew open — the true dance of the glassblowers began.

In moments every *maestro* and apprentice on stage had assumed their prescribed roles with the precision of Ribesquamo's best clockwork. As the audience applauded and the musicians transitioned into a brisk, impatient tune, the human *maestri* approached the furnace to

collect their first gathers of glass. Apprentices used special hooks to swing open the shutters from a distance, and through the exposed apertures came the harsh glow of the molten material inside. The circle of intense light alone made Salvatore recall the searing, breathtaking heat, and he grimaced as he watched Stefano step right up to the opening and slide the blowpipe smoothly inside. Angling it down to catch the mixture simmering in its giant crucible, the *maestro* began to spin the pipe in his hands at an even and moderate pace. When he stepped back, a glob of liquid glass — thick, viscus, and glowing — had affixed itself to the end of the blowpipe, and the audience gave an enthusiastic cheer.

To keep the glob centered and prevent it from drooping, Stefano maintained his steady spinning, pausing only briefly to blow a quick puff of air through the hollow pipe. A tiny bubble formed in the material. Then he plunged the blowpipe back into the furnace to gather a second layer around the glob, then a third, until he was satisfied with its size and he nodded for the apprentices to close the shutters.

Moving to his workbench, Stefano rested the blowpipe horizontally across its arms and rolled it back and forth with the flat of one palm. He held out his empty hand and an apprentice immediately placed into it one of the spoon-like blocks from the tray, the bowl at the end of the handle dripping with fresh water. The glob of glass sizzled as it touched the damp wood, but it bent to the block's will, assuming the same rounded shape.

By the time Stefano handed back the block and blew another quick puff of air down the pipe, the glob's glow had nearly faded, the glass taking on a basic clear translucency as the material rapidly cooled. Noticing this development, the audience began to buzz with excitement, and Salvatore felt Luce lean forward in her seat beside him. As Stefano raised the solidifying

bubble high into the air, the crowd gasped as Mielevampata swooped in behind him like a burning shadow, opened her jaws, and released a jet of white-hot dragonfire.

On the surface, keeping glass hot while it was worked on a blowpipe seemed like a task almost any grown dragon could do. But in truth, there was as much art to the dragon *maestro*'s role in the dance as there was to the human *maestro*'s. To help her students understand how fire-breathing worked, one of Salvatore's childhood teachers had used singing as an analogy, and the comparison had stuck with him. Just as most people could carry a simple tune, most dragons could summon fire from their core in order to expel burning flames from their mouth; however, as with the case of singing, not everyone possessed the innate talent to do such activities well. In addition to requiring natural aptitude, any dragon wishing to pursue an occupation that made extensive use of fire-breathing — such as glassblowing, metalsmithing, and baking — was obliged to undergo a great deal of comprehensive training. Control over all aspects of one's dragonfire was the key. Only after years of instruction and dedicated practice could a fire-breather manipulate everything from the flame's precise temperature to the size, shape, and duration of the spray.

Mielevampata's mastery over her own dragonfire was obvious. Within seconds, the orb on the end of the blowpipe was glowing yellow-orange once more, and the audience clapped as an apprentice handed Stefano a set of jacks that he used to smooth the sides of the glass into a thick cylinder. Snaking around equipment and between apprentices with the choreographed grace of a dancer, Mielevampata bent her long neck down until her snout was on level with the horizontal blowpipe. As Stefano kept up the pipe's steady, rolling rhythm, the *dragadonna* clamped the very tip of her mouth around the end of the tube and released a narrow, concentrated stream of heated breath.

The tiny bubble in the cylinder quickly grew, pushing against its molten cage and forcing the glass walls to thin and expand. The friction of the metal jacks worked to cool the cylinder's sides and, after several more rolls, Stefano lifted the pipe again and Mielevampata reheated the glass with several controlled, staccato bursts of dragonfire.

As the cylinder continued to expand and lengthen through the *maestri*'s dual techniques, Salvatore saw the clear glass begin to take on the unique iridescent sheen of *dragovetro*. Each flash of fire from the *dragadonna* strengthened its shine, and when Stefano walked to the marving table to shape the material against its surface, the hot glass glittered dazzlingly in the light. How dragonfire transformed normal sand, silt, and quartz into the treasure that was *dragovetro* was not fully understood, but as Salvatore watched the glass under its shift, he felt the knot in his chest tighten once again.

All around the circular stage, the Scordato *maestri* shaped their glass through expert use of their tools, their breaths, and their fire, the intricate dance scored by the ever-shifting performance of the musicians. Each glassblowing pair and their assembled apprentices appeared to be working on different, individual pieces, and whispers began to wind their way through the crowd as the audience tried to anticipate what each team was in the process of making. At any other studio, it might be easy to guess and do so correctly, but so many kinds of sculptural pieces were produced at this foundry that the *maestri* could be blowing practically anything. But, knowing Studio Artigiano di Scordato, Salvatore thought it likely that each pair was actually working on one-fourth of a piece, and only near the end would all eight *maestri* come together to assemble their finished work into its ultimate whole. That would certainly be the most dramatic finale to their demonstration.

As three apprentices hauled a tray of prearranged *murrine* to the marving table — much to the delight of the audience, which was eager for the *dragovetro* to be given color — Salvatore found himself suddenly desperate to know the current time. It didn't feel like two hours had passed since the demonstration had begun, but there were no clocks in the rotunda and Salvatore knew he'd never be able to hear the bells of the nearby *santuario* over the music and the noise of the crowd.

Gritting his teeth, he glanced over at Luce beside him, and though he'd hoped his niece was thoroughly distracted by the show, Salvatore felt his throat close shut at the look he saw in her eyes. As Luce followed every graceful move that Stefano and Mielevampata made, awe and admiration seemed to radiated from her gaze, and when the *maestro* swung the blowpipe up to catch the iridescent glass in his partner's burst of flame, her expression shifted once more. In her dark eyes was a feverish chaos of hungry, soulful longing and sheer ecstatic joy. He had seen that expression before, years and years ago, in the silvery reflection of a mirror.

Oh, no, he thought. Oh, no. Not again. Please, not Luce. Anyone but Luce.

If the Fenice had not left a strange letter on his doorstep, Tonio Manco would have grabbed his niece's wrist and dragged her straight out of the arena, out of the studio, and completely off the isle. Ignoring any and all protests, he wouldn't have stopped until she was securely ensconced in her painting-filled house working on a portfolio to submit to the relatively safe Painters Guild.

But Salvatore had a meeting to attend at three o'clock, so he blinked back the sting in his eyes, prepared his excuse, and gently clasped Luce on the shoulder. Though her eyes didn't leave the fiery dance unfolding on stage, she nodded, and he leaned over to speak in her ear. "I'm

going to step outside.” He tried to feign hoarseness, but the constriction in his chest and throat had grown all too real. “You stay here and watch. I’ll be fine.”

After a long moment, she tore her eyes away from the demonstration to glance at him, dazed and uncertain. The crowd around them shouted in excitement as sparks flew from the friction of metal jacks against cooling glass, and Salvatore tried again, half mouthing the words and half pantomiming. “You stay here. Watch. I’m...” He laid a hand against his chest and winced as his breath caught. “Stepping out.” He gestured towards the doors they’d come in through.

Mielevampata held a mouthful of flames steady in the air, maintaining its size and shape as Stefano reheated the glass on the blowpipe within, and the audience roared in appreciation. Looking conflicted, Luce’s eyes darted back and forth, but eventually she nodded and turned her attention back to the show. Salvatore waited just a moment longer to see if she would ask how he was or if he wanted her to come with him. But she didn’t, so Salvatore stood and, crouching to avoid blocking the view of those behind him, shuffled to the end of the tier and climbed down to the floor. He kept as close to the rotunda’s walls as he could, wanting to attract the least amount of notice possible. When he reached the closed iron doors, one of the private guards standing sentry there looked away from Stefano’s blowpipe flourishing just long enough to pull the door open a crack, forcing Salvatore to awkwardly squeeze through.

Waiting for him on the other side was Maculatomarmo. Sharp maroon eyes narrowed and an ominous growl rumbled in the broad gray chest. The *draguomo*’s looming presence didn’t surprise Salvatore, but he clutched at the fabric of his jerkin all the same. “My niece is still in there,” he wheezed. “But I need to get some air.”

“I’ll escort you.” Maculatomarmo’s response was immediate and uncompromising. It was also clearly not a courtesy, but a threat. Fair enough, Salvatore thought. Walking as fast as he could without breaking into a trot, he retraced his steps along the corridor. The *draguomo*’s long strides easily kept pace beside him and he could feel the heat radiating from beneath the mottled scales. The two guards stationed at the end of the hall quickly threw open the doors at Maculatomarmo’s approach, and Salvatore allowed himself to be ushered into the studio’s lobby. There were less people milling about now that the demonstration had begun, so he was able to make it to the front entrance unmolested. He glanced back only once to see that Maculatomarmo had seated himself firmly in front of the double iron doors. The aging dragon glared unblinkingly back.



Emerging out into the sunlight and the pervasive iridescent shimmer of the *piazza*, Salvatore blinked and rubbed the sting from his eyes. He tried to breathe slowly and deeply, and as the knot in his chest loosened just a bit, he surveyed the area. The typical festivities of a Saturday afternoon were now in full swing, and everywhere he turned, there were humans and dragons of all ages browsing, buying, eating, talking, playing, singing, and dancing. Squinting up at the clock on the facade of a nearby building, Salvatore was both relieved and concerned to see that its hands registered twelve minutes until three. He removed his cap briefly to wipe away the sweat that had formed on his brow from the furnace’s heat. Then he made his way into the crowd, letting himself become part of its ebb and flow. He pretended to ponder the stacks of

sugar-dusted candies at a confectioner's stand while keeping the nearest fountain in the peripheral of his vision.

There were only a few festival goers lingering around the water feature at the moment. The playful *dragazzi* and their guardian were gone and, to the best of Salvatore's memory, none of the three people currently sitting on its ledge had been present earlier that day. None of these, however, seemed likely to be the Fenice's representative. The two women were seated together, chatting and comparing their new *dragovetro* bracelets, while a young *draguomo* wearing an apprentice glassblower's neckerchief was gnawing on a much larger and gamier version of a *polpette* stick.

Salvatore moved on to the next booth to consider their fruit-topped sponge cakes, then ventured to the next to examine their dragon's horn pastries. Through the shouts and shuffling of the crowd, he picked up the sound of a lute playing a jaunty tune with rhythmic clapping keeping the pace. A chance glimpse of a brightly beribboned cap confirmed that Silvio was still lingering in the area. Salvatore breathed deeply and exhaled, fortifying himself. Estimating that only a few minutes remained until the change of the hour, he turned his head slightly to look once more.

There was a man at the fountain that had not been there before. He was seated neatly on the marble ledge, his body facing Studio Artigiano di Scordato, and a book of some kind was open in his lap. Though his attire appeared well made, each piece was plainly colored in browns and maroons and was distinctly unadorned. The man seemed entirely unremarkable.

There you are, Salvatore thought.

Wandering away from the booths, he meandered in the man's general direction, attempting to draw near the fountain as if by accident. As he came close, he examined the ample vacant space around the man and, with sudden intent, approached the ledge. He sat down

heavily, not needing to affect his grunt of discomfort, about two feet away. With a tired hum, he stretched his back and relaxed into his seat.

The bells of the Santuario di Iridescenza rang three times.

Shuffling through his belt pouches, Salvatore retrieved his pipe and its accoutrements. Beyond the fact that his chest still felt as tight as a lute string, smoking would give him something to do, and he took his time filling the bowl with dried *stramonio*, then leisurely tamped down the leaves. Salvatore could see, out of the corner of his eye, that the volume in the man's lap was a sketchbook. What the man was drawing, he couldn't quite tell, but the pages of the book — soft, creamy, and artisanal quality — seemed auspiciously familiar.

As he made to retrieve a match, however, Salvatore found that the small case he kept them in was empty. With a huff of irritation, he snapped the case shut. As a *dragazzo*, Nico had gone through a phase in which he'd been obsessed with matches. The little dragon had been enthralled with striking them and watching them burn until they finally sizzled out. Not believing this to be a useful pastime, Salvatore had begun to restrict the little dragon's access. He had subsequently found himself running out of matches at inopportune moments as they were filched one-by-one from his case. This time, however, Salvatore had simply forgotten to restock, and in annoyance he stuffed the case back into its pouch.

Silently, the man reached over and offered him a match.

With a muttered "*grazie*," Salvatore accepted it. He struck the tip against the fountain's ledge and brought the tiny flame up to the pipe's bowl. As the *stramonio* began to reach its proper smolder, the man returned to his sketching. Salvatore exhaled a curl of smoke and felt the constriction in his chest begin to loosen. He gave a contented sigh.

“We appreciate you coming to meet with us today,” the man said. He didn’t look up from his book.

When the man spoke, it wasn’t in a whisper, but the tone was low, held in restraint. Over the steady cascade of water behind them and the general noise of the crowd, Salvatore was certain no one else could hear the words besides himself. The man’s enunciation was also oddly precise. He sounded, Salvatore thought, exactly like the sort of person who would have written that letter.

Salvatore hummed, considering this and staring blankly out at nothing in particular. He thought of Nico’s concerns, about the idea that this might be some sort of setup, and he knew that if he was going to feign ignorance and back out, this was his last chance to do so. He took another puff on his pipe.

“You have about five seconds,” Salvatore said slowly, “to explain yourself — who you are, and what you people want — before I go to those fine officers over there and report you for attempted pickpocketing.”

It wasn’t entirely an idle threat. He didn’t know the names of the two *guardiani* still standing near the foundry’s entrance, but they looked vaguely familiar. Salvatore was certain he could throw Marzia’s name around, at least for a little bit, to get them on his side. This man and the people he represented were not part of the isles’ criminal community, and Salvatore felt none of his fence’s obligation to avoid condemning them. They did, however, already have too much incriminating information about *him*, so Salvatore hoped the man simply understood that he meant business. He prayed he wouldn’t have to resort to false accusations.

The man chuckled. “There’s no need for things to come to that. We understand you must have questions for us, Signor Manco. I promise I’ll do my best to answer what I can.”

“You better start now, then,” Salvatore replied. “You have until I’m finished with my pipe before I get up and walk away.” He released a plume of smoke.

“My name is Mario Rossi,” the man began.

Salvatore snorted. A more generic name for a human man couldn’t be conceived. He was certain the client lists at the Quartiere Peridoto bordellos were full of ‘Mario Rossi’s all wishing to maintain their anonymity.

This so-called Rossi, however, appeared undaunted by his incredulity. “I am acting on behalf of a group that, to protect our interests, we may refer to with the designation of ‘*la Fenice*.’ There is a matter of delicacy that we require assistance with, and from our understanding of the situation, you are the best person to employ for this job.”

“Yes. I got that part from your letter,” Salvatore muttered sardonically. “You people need help getting your hands on a particular item you can’t acquire through more traditional means. How you knew to contact me, well, I expect an explanation eventually. And an apology, for leaving your letter on my fucking doorstep.” He breathed deeply, letting the *stramonio* do its soothing work. When he felt calmer, he continued. “For now, give me the details.”

“Very well.”

Rossi flipped to the next page in his book and began to add smooth strokes to a half-finished sketch. Salvatore used the flicker of movement as an excuse to glance more fully at the Fenice’s representative. The first thought that struck him was that the man’s attire wasn’t the only unremarkable thing about him. Everything about Mario Rossi seemed normal, from the olive-tan of his skin to his middling height and build. His dark hair was short, his eyes were brown, and the features of his face were curiously plain. He seemed almost too normal, and

Salvatore struggled to pin down the man's age. For all he knew, Rossi could be anywhere from his mid twenties to his late forties.

"The Fenice," Rossi said, "would like for you — or rather, your associate, the mysterious *maestro-ladro* — to infiltrate a private residence and retrieve for us... a certain glass statuette." When Salvatore didn't respond, Rossi continued. "The residence in question is a *palazzo*. It is located on Isola Nebbiosa in the Terrazza Apicale."

That certainly caught Salvatore's attention. Only the wealthiest and most prestigious individuals lived on Nebbiosa's highest terrace, and the majority of these by far were dragons. "Whose *palazzo* are we talking about, exactly?"

"The Palazzo dei Tralicci. Currently in the possession of a certain glassblowing *maestra* named Mielevampata."

Salvatore found his eyes drawn to the glass foundry, where the fiery-scaled *dragadonna* was still mesmerizing Luce and the audience with her fire-breathing and acrobatics. To keep an artist of her talent at their foundry, Studio Artigiano di Scordato would have to pay her an extraordinary sum, and Mielevampata was sure to have an absolute fortune in fine glass, artisan crafts, and pure coin all hoarded away in her estate.

Though he'd heard of the Palazzo dei Tralicci before and was certain he'd seen it from the outside, Salvatore had never coordinated a heist from the *palazzo*. As far as he aware, Silvio had never broken inside either. Still, considering its location and the renown of its current owner, the Palazzo dei Tralicci was sure to be heavily fortified. High walls, intricate locks, and devious traps were all but guaranteed, and Salvatore wouldn't be surprised if Mielevampata employed some private guards of her own. Extensive reconnaissance of the *palazzo* and its surroundings would be required. If he chose to accept the Fenice's commission, of course.

Salvatore rubbed a thumb thoughtfully against the bowl of his pipe. “Where is this particular statuette located?” he asked. “Do your people know? And I’ll need a *very* specific description of the piece. Size, form, coloring, distinctive features: the works. There’s no telling how many glass statuettes a glassblowing *maestro* might have laying around, and I can promise you now, *if* I accept your terms, my associate will only have one chance to retrieve the right piece.”

“That’s no problem,” Rossi replied. He paused to brush some stray specks of graphite from his sketch. “According to our information, the item in question is currently housed on the third floor in Mielevampata’s personal den, either on the mantle of the chamber’s fireplace or somewhere close by. Regardless, it should be easily visible.”

Salvatore had expected a treasure vault or a safe hidden behind a tapestry, not out in the open of a *dragadonna*’s bedroom. A dragon’s den was culturally considered a nigh-sacred place, however, the concept’s history extending back for countless dragonic generations. Salvatore could easily imagine that breaking into Mielevampata’s inner sanctum would be the most difficult part of the heist.

“As for the statuette itself...” Rossi paused, shifting the angle of the book in his lap. Breathing out a plume of smoke, Salvatore surreptitiously glanced down at the page and took a good look at the sketch. “It’s a sculptural vessel. Approximately one-and-a-half feet high, with a solid foot and a hollow, bulbous body. The neck folds upwards and narrows into multiple tips.”

The vessel Rossi had sketched evoked for Salvatore an abstract candle flame, its flickering frozen in time within the smooth curves of the glass. Beyond its fiery appearance, however, the statuette’s form seemed strangely familiar, though Salvatore couldn’t put his finger on why.

“The glass is primarily clear *cristallo* with intermittent stripes of red and yellow caning. The foot and bottom of the body, however, features an inner layer of opaque gold and scaled *murrini*.”

“A Mielevampata original,” Salvatore surmised. The statuette was surely no historical or inherited piece. It utilized Mielevampata’s precise color-and-patterning. Unless someone close to her — Stefano Degnolupo, perhaps — had crafted it in her honor, Salvatore was certain the *dragadonna* had blown it herself.

“Yes,” Rossi confirmed. “She designed and created the piece about seven weeks ago.” He began to deepen his strokes on the image’s outline, and Salvatore looked back out at the *piazza* and smoked his pipe. “The Fenice would like this statuette within the month. Upon its receipt, we will be transporting it to a trusted contact of ours on the mainland — quietly, of course. Is that a reasonable amount of time for you and your *maestro-ladro* to complete the acquisition?”

“It would suffice.” Four weeks for a heist was vastly preferable to four days, Salvatore ruminated with amusement. The Palazzo di Tralicci would be much harder to prepare for than Cristallobianco’s archives, but then again, Silvio had managed to complete Vittoria’s job a day before the absurdly short deadline without breaking a sweat. “I can arrange for the statuette’s shipment as well,” Salvatore added. “It’s not easy to export items like that beneath the Guardia’s nose, but another associate of mine can practically guarantee its safe delivery to your contact.”

“We appreciate the offer, but we have already secured its transport and are satisfied with the arrangements.”

That was unexpected, Salvatore thought. He wouldn’t have guessed the Fenice already had their own smuggler lined up. If Elisa was the one working with them, she hadn’t mentioned

anything of the sort. Then again, Salvatore couldn't recall asking her about the Fenice. He would have to discuss this with her later.

Rossi flipped to a new, blank page in his sketchbook. "Does this mean you accept our commission, Signor Manco?"

"Not yet. You haven't clarified what you meant in your letter by 'handsome compensation,'" Salvatore pointed out dryly.

"The Fenice discussed the matter and have collectively agreed to allow you to name your own price."

Salvatore laughed before he could stop himself. He smothered the sound with a cough, and waved his hand to clear the air of smoke. "*Merda*. Listen, 'Signor Rossi.' That's not how these things work. Just throw out a number. I need to know what you people are able to offer so I can decide whether or not this is worth any more of my time."

When Rossi replied, he sounded neither offended nor hesitant. His voice maintained its low, even tone, and he spoke with the conviction of basic fact.

"We are able to offer any amount you deem satisfactory. And I do mean any. I understand that may sound incredible, but the Fenice have ample means at our disposal when it comes to both influence and coin. What we haven't had, up to this point, is a means of acquiring what we seek when it cannot be gifted or purchased in an official capacity. So I can promise you, Signor Manco, that whatever sum you name, we can and will pay it."

For the first time since the meeting began, Salvatore felt he was no longer in control of the situation. The nervous unease the letter's appearance had instilled in him came back, and a chill ran down his spine. He found himself wondering once again what sort of people it was who comprised the Fenice.

Salvatore was quiet for a moment. He peered down at the bowl of his pipe and found that its glow was beginning to dim. “There’s something about this statuette that you’re not telling me,” he finally said. “Something special. And I need to know what it is. Otherwise, I walk.”

Rossi didn’t immediately reply. Salvatore listened to the scratch of his pencil gradually slow, then finally stop. “We’d hoped you wouldn’t demand further explanation, but... the Fenice was prepared for that possibility. Very well.” Rossi cleared his throat. “The statuette will need particular care taken with it, both during and after its acquisition. The glass was blown quite thin, so it will be exceptionally fragile, but we also expect it to be quite heavy. In addition, the walls of the piece feature a hollow cavity containing dragonfire. This will of course make the statuette quite warm to the touch. I would advise your *maestro-ladro* to wear heat-resistant gloves, if possible.”

The unease Salvatore felt grew with every newly-revealed attribute. Whatever drove the Fenice to pursue this particular statuette couldn’t be the dragonfire. The use of dragonfire-filled orbs for lighting was a customary practice, but encapsulating that same substance in a work of art was much less common. Even the longest-lasting gout of dragonfire would eventually burn itself out, and as talented a fire-breather as Mielevampata was, the flames inside the statuette could only be expected to last for twelve months at the most. After that, the Fenice and their mainland contact would simply be left with an extremely expensive vessel that, in spite of its beauty, would remain permanently dull, cold, heavy, and frail.

Unless, Salvatore thought as the color abruptly drained from his face, the glass statuette was not meant to be a permanent work of art. If the piece was meant to eventually crack open and break, it wouldn’t matter if the dragonfire faded, and the thinness of its walls would no

longer be a detriment. Salvatore recalled the familiarity he'd felt when examining the shape Rossi had sketched. Suddenly everything made perfect and terrible sense.

The piece the Fenice wanted wasn't a statuette. It was a *crisalide*. A glass chrysalis.

"*Mio Creatore*," Salvatore whispered. "There's a dragon egg inside."



The Isole Fulgide had been deliberately founded as a haven for both dragons and humans, where the two intelligent species could live together in harmony as equals. The new city-state's dragon citizens, however, had been vastly outnumbered by their human counterparts, and as the centuries passed, the population imbalance had only increased. Dragons, after all, did not reproduce as often or as swiftly as humans did. While biological tendencies minimized their natural desire to copulate, traditional cultural practices dictated that such an act occur only between bonded mates. It was a relatively noteworthy event, then, for a *dragadonna* to produce a clutch, and though clutches could consist of two or three eggs — each one smooth, white, and about a foot long — a single dragon egg was the most common result.

To protect the precious beings inside until they finally hatched, a number of communal hatcheries had been established early in the city-state's history, one on each of the largest isles in the Isole Fulgide. Once a *dragadonna* produced a clutch, each of her eggs would be individually encased in a *crisalide*, a thin glass shell made of *cristallo* with pockets of dragonfire folded around it. They would then be placed in a special chamber within the hatchery, where dedicated human attendants would care for them day and night until it was time for the hatchlings to emerge.

Dragon eggs required the constant presence of heat in order to remain viable, and of the many incubation methods dragons had employed throughout their history, the *crisalide* had proven the safest and most effective. The heat produced by *dragonfire* was consistent and the enclosed pockets protected it from being extinguished by outside forces. The clear *cristallo* allowed the attendants to conduct their observations, and when the egg was about to hatch, the thin glass of the *crisalide* was easy to break and dispose of.

Once newborn dragons were freed of their eggs, they were granted a suitable name by their sire or dam and were taken to live in the communal nursery adjacent to their hatchery. As traditional dragonic philosophy attributed little importance to kinship, the shared environment seemed an ideal way for the little ones to be raised. The hatchlings would stay in the nursery in the care of dragon attendants until they were considered *dragazzi* and *dragazze*; they would then join classes of similarly-aged human children at the nearest school and live in the provided dormitories. Once they graduated and joined a guild, the young *draguomini* and *dragadonne* were free to pursue their individual lives.

Mielevampata had apparently chosen a more unconventional route.

Through the numbness that had suffused his body and mind, Salvatore pondered this development with analytical detachment. Only occasionally did he concern himself with the societal goings-on of the isles' elite, so Salvatore couldn't remember who the *dragadonna*'s bonded mate was. But clearly Mielevampata had produced a clutch within the last two months, presumably consisting of a single egg, and rather than handing it off to the attendants at the sumptuous hatchery on Isola Nebbiosa, she'd taken on full responsibility for incubating the egg herself.

It was an oddly humanistic choice, Salvatore mused. It made sense for the glassblowing *maestra* to construct the *crisalide* herself and to incorporate her own trusted dragonfire, long-lasting and heated to the perfect temperature. By embedding her signature color-and-patterning into the shell, however, the *dragadonna* had laid a stronger claim on her offspring than the majority of expectant dams. That she had then chosen to keep the *crisalide* within the protection of her own private sanctum caused Salvatore to wonder if Mielevampata had made extraordinary decision to hatch the egg and raise her resulting hatchling on her own in the manner of a human mother.

Regardless of any possibly maternal intentions, the glass statuette in Mielevampata's den on the third floor of the Palazzo dei Tralicci was without a doubt a *crisalide*. A *crisalide*, Salvatore observed, that would one day break when the egg inside hatched, and from its ruins would emerge a tiny hatchling. A tiny hatchling that, with proper care and guidance, would grow into a large, intelligent, and powerful fire-breathing dragon.

And the Fenice intended to smuggle this glass statuette out of the Isole Fulgide.



"You're mad," Salvatore whispered. "You people are mad." Blankly, he stared down at the bowl of his pipe, where, in the absence of his attention, the smoldering *stramonio* had gone out. "Do you even understand what it is you're planning to do?"

"Yes," Rossi said. "We are well aware."

The calm and measured timber of the man's voice didn't waver.

“*Cazzo*.” Salvatore tried to wrap his mind around the Fenice’s apparent audacity. “Look, if this thing really is a... a *crisalide*...” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rossi give a brief, almost imperceptible nod. “This isn’t just some top-tier illegal theft-and-export. This is *treason*.”

“Indeed.”

Rossi offered him another match. After a moment, Salvatore took it. He struck the match and tried to relight his pipe, but found that his hands had grown unsteady. It took three attempts before the *stramonio* accepted the quivering flame.

“Although the Fenice had hoped to keep this aspect of the commission out of our negotiations, to avoid causing you undue distress,” Rossi continued, “several of our number — myself included — advocated for informing you upfront.”

“Very kind of you.”

“Upon your acquisition of the statuette, its nature would be easily apparent anyway.” The man flipped back to his sketch of the *crisalide*, and now Salvatore couldn’t see how he’d ever mistaken the glass piece for any normal work of art. “And I for one,” Rossi added, “believed you capable of understanding and commiserating with our intentions — even if you do not fully agree with their execution.”

“And how, exactly, did you come to that conclusion?” Salvatore bit out. He took a several short, agitated puffs on his pipe.

“As I’m certain you’re now aware,” Rossi said, “the Fenice has come into the possession of a significant amount of information about you, Signor Manco. Or, rather, both of you — ‘Salvatore’ and ‘Tonio.’”

A shudder went down Salvatore’s spine as his two names were spoken, although quietly, out in the open of the sunny, crowded *piazza*.

“While investigating our options for acquiring the statuette, we heard many tales of the great *maestro-ladro* of the isles, a mysterious man who can slip into any building and leave with any item, whose very existence remains unconfirmed by our illustrious Guardia. We heard, too, that this *maestro-ladro* works exclusively with a *ricettatore* called Sal, and so we knew that it was you we needed to get in contact with.

“It may relieve you to learn that we, as outsiders among your people, had quite a difficult time gathering enough information to positively identify you. Your many clients are quite loyal to you, Signor Manco; most were unwilling to part with any details that, I assume, they thought might jeopardize you or your operations.

“Still, once we were certain of both of your identities, we were able to delve further and so discovered the existence of another close associate of yours: a certain... oddly-colored *draguomo* of a rather unusual size.”

Salvatore felt his agitation shift immediately into defensiveness. “What does Nico have to do with this?” He glanced at the book in Rossi’s lap and watched as he added delicate curved lines within the confines of the sketched *crisalide*, tracing the ovoid shape of an egg.

“Yes. ‘*Nico*.’” Rossi made a thoughtful little sound. “Strange name for a dragon. I suppose that’s fitting, though, for such a strange dragon. Nevertheless. You hatched and raised him yourself, didn’t you, Signor Manco? All in secret.”

Though he wasn’t sure where this line of questioning was going, Salvatore didn’t think lying to Rossi would be wise at this point, even if he wanted to. “Yes,” he said. “I did.”

“And I’m certain you’re aware that such an act is consider just as treasonous as, say, the transport of a glass statuette of questionable contents outside the boundaries of our good city-state?”

“Yes,” Salvatore said. “I’m aware.”

“I thought so.” Rossi shaded the curve of the egg, blending the graphite with the side of his little finger. “Your dedication to keeping this dragon — ‘*Nico*’ — and bringing him up outside the guidance of his people demonstrates, from my perspective at least, both a fearlessness in breaking our isles’ most fundamental tenets and a willingness to part from traditional wisdom. This is part of the reason why I believed you should be informed up front.”

Despite his fear of the answer he might receive, Salvatore had to ask. “What is the other part?”

With a slight flick of his head, Rossi gestured towards the old, dusty facade of the glass foundry. The sign above the doors spelled out *Studio Artigiano di Scordato* in letters that were nearly too faded to read. “I thought, Signor Manco, that it would be obvious.”

Salvatore snapped.

“Enough of this,” he said, suddenly at his limit. He struggled to keep himself from turning, from facing Rossi fully and staring him straight in the eyes. “I’ve heard enough. You want my help getting the *crisalide*? Fine. You want to smuggle it out of the isles? That’s your business, not mine. But what *is* my business is how much you’re willing to pay me for the *Creatore*-damned work.”

“Again, you need only name your price. The Fenice will pay.”

“Fifty-thousand.” Salvatore spat out the number without thinking. Then, before Rossi could get the wrong idea, he specified, “Fifty-thousand *lagune*.”

It was an utterly outrageous sum. In all his years of fencing the most expensive artisan goods the isles could produce, Salvatore had never possessed that much platinum at one time. He could buy his own private *palazzo* on Isola Nebbiosa with that sum. *Merda*, Salvatore thought,

he could probably buy half a dozen of the smaller *palazzi* and have his own private terrace. That wouldn't be where he'd invest such a fortune if he had it, but the thought certainly put Salvatore's own impulsive demand into perspective. He waited for a look of consternation to cross Rossi's face, for the man to hedge and then propose his first counteroffer.

"I see," Rossi said. His tone, as ever, was even and serene. "Very well. Consider it done."

Salvatore snorted, releasing a mouthful of smoke. "There's no way." He briskly shook his head. "You people can't afford that."

"If your price is fifty-thousand *lagune*," Rossi said, "then that is what we will pay. I can assure you that the Fenice is able and willing to compensate you in full."

"No offense," Salvatore said, somewhat snidely, "but I don't blindly accept absurd promises from people I've never met and hadn't even heard of before last week. Much less promises from a man who thinks calling himself 'Mario Rossi' is a clever way to protect his identity."

A small smile twitched at the corner of Rossi's mouth. Apparently unoffended, he asked, "What can we do to reassure you of our seriousness in this matter?"

"I'll need a down payment." Salvatore stared at the smoke drifting from his pipe, thinking fast. "Fifty percent," he decided. This, too, was an outrageous demand, but now, Salvatore thought, was the time to be bold. "I want half up front, and when I have the coin in hand, my associate and I will begin our preparations. Once we've acquired your 'statuette,' I expect to be paid the other half immediately upon delivery."

"That... is a reasonable request. Would you prefer the twenty-five-thousand in platinum or in smaller denominations?"

“Gold and silver only,” Salvatore said firmly. Parading about with too many *lagune* in his pockets would be a great way to make the Guardia suspicious, but once converted into *maree* and *stagni*, the amount would be much easier to work with. The Fenice, however, would have an exceptionally more difficult time actually getting the sum to him. The sheer number of coins would likely fill dozens of large sacks. “And don’t fucking *dare* deliver it to my apartment,” he added, and quickly described where the Caveau’s exterior trapdoor could be found and how to get inside.

To his pleasant surprise, Rossi didn’t write the instructions down in his sketchbook, but when Salvatore was finished, the man nodded. “You will need this payment in a timely manner, correct?”

“If you want this ‘statuette’ within a month, then yes.” As a final test of Rossi’s and the Fenice’s resolve, Salvatore said, “My deadline is Sunday night. By the time the clock tower in the Mercato Pietra strikes twelve.”

“Hm.” Slowly, Rossi nodded. “Very well, Signor Manco. You will have your twenty-five-thousand *lagune* in gold and silver by midnight on Sunday. You accept the terms of our commission?”

Salvatore breathed in, closing his eyes. He envisioned the *crisalide* in Rossi’s sketch and imagined color suffusing the glass, the heat and glow of the dragonfire, the egg nestled lovingly inside. He imagined the look that might have been on Mielevampata’s scaly face as she held the completed *crisalide* in her paws, then envisioned it placed, like a trophy, by the fireplace in the splendor of wealthy dragon’s den.

A memory nearly two decades old crept into his mind: Nico, as Salvatore had found him — impossibly tiny, pitch black, and cold as death — within the dull gray shards of a small egg,

shattered and abandoned on the ground. Along with it came a memory not even two hours old: Luce, her eyes bright with longing and wondering, as she watched the glassblowers perform their dangerous, seductive dance of breath and fire across the ancient stage. And then, in the midst of his mind's chaos, came the repeated eternal memory, clear as the chime of a *cristallo* bell: the sun sinking below the horizon towards a world he was never allowed to see.

He opened his eyes and breathed out, releasing a final curl of smoke.

"Yes," Salvatore said. "I accept."

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Vita

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