

Renaissance

The Lupi family had always been knights, or at least, their right to the title had been uncontested for as many generations as anyone could remember. In the town square of Berona there was a mounted Lupi, and in the chapel—the oratory—a long line of kneeling Lupis served their maker, carved in stone—in their armor. At the Archaic gate to the town—the gate where the ancient statue of the Empress glowed, night and day, with the hermetical energies that the ancients had put into it—there, carved clearly in the ancient letters, it said:

C. AETRIO C F LEM TRIBU

LUPI

EQVO PVBLICO

IN QVINQVE DECVRIIS

PRAEF COH I ARELATUM

TRIB MIL LEG I ETRUSCAE

Tomaso was the last of the Lupis, and he had never quite managed to become a knight. It wasn't for a lack of interest, or education. He practiced in the tiltyard, had lessons with the sword; rode well and fenced better. He could speak intelligently about dogs and hawks.

He could sing, and even write a song.

Most of all, he could read. He *loved* to read. He had worked and worked on his letters, and proved so adept that his drunken father had sent him to a magister.

The magister had tested him, and laughed. “Never in all my life have I met a man so utterly without *potentia*,” he said, and patted young Tomaso Lupi on the head like a puppy. “Go swing a sword,” he said. “It’s all you are good for.”

And as Tomaso grew to adulthood, he could swing a sword—some accounted him a fine blade. He could read Archaic, both low and high—and that was useful skill in a priest or a magister. Sadly, Tomaso Lupi was neither a priest nor a magister. Nor did Tomaso’s skills run to the management of money, and he was the son and grandson of men whose skills had not included the management of money. Men and women who managed money better bought their town house, and then, when he was on the edge of adulthood, his father died and his mother collapsed in a wine-soaked frenzy of prayer, and Tomaso found himself penniless—and what is worse, he was publicly *known* to be penniless.

Their tiny keep—not even a castello—in the countryside paid for two funerals. Tomaso kept the last of the land. His father said the Lupi had owned the land since Archaic times. Tomaso often wished he had lived in Archaic times.

Tomaso had enough land to plow with an ox. He also had an ox.

In one winter, he sold the ox and lived well enough. He had kept his books—famous books, carefully written out by hand in a *scriptorium*. He didn’t tire of his Archaic masters. He didn’t do his eyes any favors, either.

Tomaso learned very quickly to live alone. He hadn’t ever expected to be *quite* so alone. One afternoon, his favorite among the older ‘young men’ rode into his yard. He was mounted on a fine Ifriqu’yan mare, and the horse’s furniture was worth more than Tomaso’s little farm.

Alfredo Frederico Alighieri di Tuva was an elegant young man with dark hair, fashionably cut, and a skin-tight *jupon* in the latest fashion, with a *cote hardie* over it so elaborate that the sleeves fell—unused, but edged in expensive silver buttons—almost all the way to the ground.

“People said you were living this way,” Di Tuva said. He didn’t dismount. “You have no money, I suppose?”

Lupi considered. “Perhaps I am practicing to be a hermit.”

The two young men had never been very close, but they had drunk a good deal of wine together, and chased their share of red-kirtled courtesans. To Tomaso, it seemed another age entirely. He couldn’t even remember what a red-kirtled courtesan was like.

Di Tuva smoothed his near-perfect pointed beard. “If I ask for a cup of wine?” he asked.

“It will be a horn cup,” Lupi replied.

Di Tuva shrugged. He handed a small package wrapped in silk. “A guest gift!” he said.

Tomaso Lupi pulled it open. Inside was a pretty copper rabbit, beautifully worked. A tiny silver spoon sat rested between the rabbit’s ears.

“Wild Honey from the Nova Terra,” Di Tuva said. “I love the stuff.”

Tomaso shrugged. “You know it doesn’t—affect—me.”

Di Tuva laughed. “Then I’ll come back and eat it myself!”

Two cups of wine later, Lupi leaned back. “You are the first visitor I’ve had—since my mother was buried.”

Di Tuva shrugged again. It suited him, with his hanging sleeves, his square, muscular shoulders and his air of indolence. He was good at shrugging. “No one speaks of you.” He leaned forward. “If you were

some kind of sexual pervert, perhaps people would visit you. If you had a hideous disease, people would come, if only so that later they could tell stories of your disfigurement.” He set his horn cup down with a snap. “But poverty—we all fear it more than we fear God, my friend. See that horse? My soon-to-be father-in-law purchased it. And all the buttons.” He looked up. “I miss you.”

Lupi’s heart swelled for a moment. He hadn’t expected Di Tuva to be—a friend. They’d been rivals. He couldn’t remember what they had been rivals about.

He poured more wine. It was good wine—Lupi lived in an area that had made wine since the Archaics had been there. “What are you doing?” he asked.

Di Tuva shrugged again. “Painting,” he admitted.

“Ah!” Lupi suddenly remembered the cause of the rivalry and he laughed aloud. They had had an argument over the new paintings in the chapel of Saint Georgio.

That seemed foolish, in light of recent events.

Di Tuva looked at him. “I—my soon-to-be new wife has a sister.” He paused. “You have an ancient name.” He shrugged. “I’m not doing this well. Really, after two cups of your wine, I’m ashamed of my errand. I’m ashamed I forgot you so quickly. What do you do here? Rot?”

Tomaso took him to the low house’s one window, where there was a reading stand.

“I read,” he said.

“All day?” Di Tuva asked.

Tomaso pointed at the sword slung by its belt on the wall over the bed. “When I can’t stay inside anymore, I fence with the old apple tree.” He tossed his head.

“Marry the girl. She’s plain—I confess she is plain. So what? She’ll have a dowry, and you won’t have to live like this.” Di Tuva finished his wine. “There, it is said. Christ, when my soon-to-be mother-in-law told me you lived out here in a hovel, I thought she was lying.”

For the first time, Tomaso was stung. “It’s not a hovel.”

Di Tuva nodded. “True. I’ve been in smaller brothels, but this is cleaner.”

“No,” said Tomaso Lupi. “No, I won’t marry some poor third daughter with almost no dowry. Let them put her in a convent. It will cost more, no doubt. But I won’t bring some poor girl here to pretend she’s a lady.”

Di Tuva got up. “It doesn’t have to be that way. Marry the girl and become family. Then—you have a sword. Use it.”

Di Tuva reached out and hugged the younger man, despite his homespun peasant’s cote and his undyed hood. “Don’t rot here,” he said.

“Thank you for coming,” Tomaso said, and he meant it.

Di Tuva rode away.

#

In the spring, Tomaso Lupi rented his fields to local peasants who knew what to do with them, and reserved to himself only the hill behind his little house. It was wooded, except at the top, where there was a fine piece of stonework—clearly Archaic. His grandfather had once told him that it was the ancestral castello, from a thousand years before. There was a tiny vineyard on the hill, and Tomaso worked this himself. Increasingly, as the spring turned to summer, the local men gave him advice—good advice—about props for his vines and a thousand other details.

Giuseppi and Giancarlo, the leaders of the local men, came and drank wine with him one evening. They talked, of all things, about the stars.

The next day, Tomaso found that girls in the market smiled at him, and his jar of good wine at the taverna cost less than it had a week before. He called to the wife of the tavern keeper, and waved a copper *solidi* at her.

She grinned. “Ah—Messire Tomaso. Giuseppe says you are people.”

And that was that. Tomaso walked home, wondering that it had taken him eighteen years to learn that peasants had a price for peasants and another price for the gentry. He knew the tavern keeper’s wife’s name now—Maria. Signora Maria.

They had a social structure all of their own.

He wondered where he fell in it.

#

He found out almost immediately, when Giancarlo, whose wine was considered the best in the valley, came to his door on a donkey. The man dismounted, accepted a cup of wine, and was delighted to accept a small treat that Tomaso had purchased—a single spoonful of Wild honey from the Nova Terra.

“This is how the nobles live, eh?” Giancarlo said. He licked his spoon for a long time, and then sipped wine and spat. “Bah! It makes the wine taste sour.” He laughed. “And makes all the colors so—so—alive!”

“Too much sweetness has that effect,” Tomaso agreed. He sighed. “It has no effect on me except to sweeten my tea. A friend brought it—he eats it while he paints.”

Giancarlo surprised his host. “Painting—ah! How I love it. On feast days, I sprawl on the floor in San Giorgio and look at the frescoes until a priest makes me get up.”

Tomaso covered his surprise by opening the little jar of Wild honey again. “I love painting too.”

Giancarlo nodded. “Good. You have a head on your shoulders.” He took another spoonful of honey and there was a long silence. Then he asked, “How are the grapes on your little mountain?”

Tomaso shrugged. “Heavier every day.”

“That is a good place. Your wine should be—as good as mine.” He thumped the ground with his stout staff. “Listen, then. I have a daughter.” He leaned forward. “She is quite—pretty. Men look at her.” He leaned back. “If they look too long, I hit them.” He looked at Tomaso for a reaction.

Tomaso spread his hands, as if to claim—what? Abstinence? Chastity?

“I would like to meet her,” Tomaso said.

#

By the autumn harvest, he had met her three times. To his immense surprise—and he was horrified by his own assumptions—she was charming, modest, and had beautiful manners, even by the standard of the castle-trained. Every day, he discovered that peasants were not what he’d expected. They were courteous in church. They were ugly when drunk, but then, everyone was. They had excellent taste—some of them.

Giuglia had wonderful taste. She dressed well enough that she might have been a poor knight’s daughter, or a merchant’s. Giuglia was also as lithe as a cat and as quick-witted as a magister. She could add and multiply numbers, and she could read—slowly, it was true, but patiently and with great focus. With her mother watching her, she came to his small house and read from his Petrarcha—his favorite book, about the lives of the great ancients. When she came to a word she had trouble with, she would bite her tongue, and the tip would emerge from her lips—

:You love me?" she asked, in wonder. It was the first day of the grape harvest. His grapes were ripe, and he needed men to help him pick them and a wagon to transport them to town, and her father provided both. She came on the wagon and they had their first long talk.

"I think I do," he said.

"My father only wants your stupid hill," she said. She put a hand on his hand, greatly daring. "I know you—expect better. But," she looked fiercely at his cottage, "but I can help you *make us better*." She looked around. "Listen—I thought I was damned to one of these louts, ten babies and never another book in all my life but what I might see in church." She made an odd face, half smile, half embarrassed frown. "This is too much honesty, I am guessing."

He looked away to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

#

The next day, with most of his grapes in, he took Giancarlo's wagon into the city for barrels. He didn't have to go, but the other men had all done little tasks for him and he wanted to prove to them that he was one of them.

He knew what awaited him there.

He waited in a line at the coopers. There were dozens of men and carts waiting for barrels—it was that time of year. A young boy came down the line with a wax tablet and asked him how many barrels he'd reserved. Tomaso was forced to admit he hadn't reserved any. He used Giancarlo's name. The boy's face brightened and some marks were made in the wax.

"This is what you preferred to marrying the Cavalli girl?" said a voice to his right. Di Tuva was leaning on his cart, arms and legs crossed, wearing a hooded half-circle cloak worth fifty ducats.

Tomaso Lupi made himself smile. "Yes," he said.

Di Tuva grimaced theatrically. “She’s not that plain.”

The peasants in the line were now eyeing Di Tuva—and Lupi—with some hostility. Di Tuva caught a look and brushed his sword hilt with his hand and a man went red in the face.

Tomaso, of course, was not wearing a sword. It was at home, hanging over the bed. But he put a hand on Di Tuva’s shoulder. “Relax. These aren’t bravos. These are peasants buying barrels, and you don’t belong here.”

Di Tuva shrugged out from under Lupi’s hand like an uncoiling snake. “Your new friends?” he spat and turned. Then he walked away.

No one would meet Tomaso’s eye the rest of the time he was in line. He collected six big barrels—four for Giancarlo, one for a neighbor named Giorgio, and one on his own account—the last provided with an ill grace and unaccountably more expensive than the others.

Tomaso paid without complaint.

He led his patient, borrowed farm horse to water, fed him from a nose bag, and headed for the gates well before the sun was due to set. It had been a dull day, and he regretted Di Tuva’s anger. He felt—alien. In his own city.

“All your money, messire,” said a man. He stepped out of an alley so narrow that a man’s shoulders would brush the houses. He had a soldier’s heavy dagger in his hand, and he reached for the neck of Tomaso’s homespun gown. He was moving fast—his eyes seemed to burn with fanaticism. He fairly shrieked his words. “All your money!” he shrieked again, rocking Tomaso.

Various instructors had taught a very young Tomaso about fighting, and one of the things they’d insisted on was that the stupidest thing a man could do was to grab another man’s shirt. Tomaso’s immediate reactions—fear, near panic, disorientation—were displaced by training. His left hand reached

out, he swung his hips, and the other man's arm broke—the snap audible in the street. With strength born of fear, Tomaso threw him across the street and into the stone wall of a nearby building for good measure.

He screamed.

Tomaso picked up his knife—a baselard dagger, and a very good one.

He felt the strangest urge to kill the man. The thief lay on his back, face up, like a sacrifice in the Archaic times.

A crowd was gathering. The man was whimpering—on and on. Praying to God. Begging forgiveness.

Before Tomaso could move his cart, three soldiers appeared.

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The Podesta looked at the knife, lying on the table between them. “If you are Tomaso Lupi of the noble house of Lupi, why are you dressed as a peasant?” he asked.

“I was buying barrels for my wine,” Tomaso said.

The Podesta sniffed as if he smelled something bad. “You see how a misunderstanding might arise,” he said. “The thief would never have attacked you if he had known you were a gentleman. My men would not have arrested you. In future, please dress to your station.” He slid the fine dagger across the table. “My first thought was that you were a spy for the Este.” He took his hand off the dagger—and grabbed Tomaso's hand at the wrist. “In which case, I would rip your arms off your body in no time. *Do you understand?*”

Tomaso understood very well—all the way back to the contada in the darkness. But he refused to surrender to all his new fears—he took the wagon to Giancarlo’s house, a fine snug cottage with six rooms and two hearths—the best in the village.

Giancarlo was waiting in the yard—with his staff in his hands. But as soon as the wagon entered his yard, he grinned. “I admit it—I thought you stole it. Wagon, animal, and our barrels.” He shrugged. “Where in the name of the Virgin have you been?”

Tomaso stumbled through his story, aware of Giuglia’s classical profile against a lantern inside. Giancarlo shook his head again and again. At the end, he said, “Show me how you broke the man’s arm?”

He was interrupted by a moan from the cart. “What’s that?” he asked.

Tomaso shrugged. “The thief. I claimed him.”

#

It took all autumn to heal the thief. His arm was badly broken and his shoulder dislocated, and he spent the first week in a state of suspicious hostility that seemed impenetrable. He spat—he swore.

Giancarlo would not allow his daughter to visit. Tomaso agreed.

The man was as much like an animal as any wolf Tomaso had known—his teeth gleamed and he seemed to give vent to his very feeling. He controlled nothing.

He feared everything.

Tomaso watched him carefully and locked him in a shed at night. And fed him.

His grapes had gone for juice, and the juice was becoming wine. The moneylender loaned him money against his wine, like all the other small farmers.

Tomaso thought a long time that fall, and then he sold his sword.

That night, he cried. Not because he was a great man-at-arms, but because of what it meant. As long as the sword hung over his bed—

It was gone. He tried not to look at the space on the wall.

#

At the edge of winter, Giancarlo suggested that they clear the old hilltop and plant more vines in spring. It was the best idea that Tomaso could imagine, and he forced the thief—Porto—to climb the hill with him. They worked for as long as the thief could stand, and then went and rested, and worked again.

After a week of this, Porto sat on a huge squared stone, and looked up. “You really aren’t going to kill me,” he said.

“I will if you don’t do better work than that,” Tomaso replied.

Porto shrugged. “I’m your slave?”

Tomaso knew a fair amount about slavery—from books. “I’ll pay you a wage like any other farm labour,” he said. “Right now—I’m too poor.” He cut with his borrowed axe—he didn’t even own an axe—at the roots of the brush he was trying to clear.

Porto laughed. It was his first laugh in two months. “I was looking for farm work,” he said. “Fuck my mother, I was looking for farm work, and some bastard threw it in my face, and I beat him to the ground and took his money.”

“Well,” said Tomaso. “I beat you to the ground and gave you farm work. The circle is complete.”

Porto laughed. “I like the way you talk. You’re a fucking noble, pretending to be a peasant. Why?”

“How about more work and less talk?” Tomaso said.

“You don’t talk like us,” Porto said.

Tomaso thought of Giuglia. “Many do,” he said. “You choose to speak that way. I choose to speak this way.”

Porto spat. “Like a priest? Fucking sodomites.”

But he went back to work.

And very quickly, Porto became part of his life. He hated to get up and he wasn’t ever enthusiastic about anything, but when his shoulder was fully recovered, he could lift almost anything and he would work—with a vicious stream of profanity and complaint—from an hour past dawn until it was too late to see the ground. He was, in some ways, the toughest man Tomaso had known. He would work in snow. He would work as the air bit his lungs.

He was afraid of books, and would not go near Tomaso while he read.

“You’re a witch, aren’t you!” he said one day to Tomaso.

Tomaso was trying to read a biography of the Empress Livia, and the Archaic was so complicated that he could only manage a few lines an hour, his finger moving along the script, his little bronze stylus cutting unknown words into the wax of his tablet. He allowed himself an hour a day to read—the brightest hour. He sat on Sundays after mass with the priest and went over his work. The priest always served him wine and treated him like a nobleman.

The priest’s Archaic was a shadow of Tomaso’s, but neither man mentioned it.

Tomaso sat with his hired man, with Giancarlo, and with Giuglia and her mother.

As the fasting of lent began, and the moneylender became arrogant, Giancarlo visited more often.

Porto laughed. “Just marry her and put us out of our misery!” he said. “She hates me, I’ll be back on the road—but I’m healed and I ain’t eaten this well in five years. I’ll go quiet.”

They continued to clear the hilltop. It was now possible to see a line of low walls, which Giancarlo began to improve—the ancient walls became the foundations for orchard walls to keep out sheep. But the process of pulling stones out of the central space was endless, and Tomaso lost nails on his hands from prying them out of the cold ground. He used a pry bar borrowed from Pietro down the lane and Porto hauled the stones—neat, square cut stones—to the wall where Giancarlo laid them into the neatest dry stone in the valley.

“If we find enough of this, we could sell some,” Giancarlo said. “This is fine stone.”

Tomaso was beginning to face the possibility that all their work was for nothing—because the stone went down and down.

The moneylender stopped by. “You now owe me ten ducats of gold,” he said. He shrugged. “Next time, I take things.” He had two thugs.

When they were gone, Porto put a hand on Tomaso’s shoulder. “We could kill all three. Bury the bodies—who loves a moneylender?”

Giancarlo stopped working on the wall, and they moved their clearing efforts by fifteen paces, to try and carve a plot out of the hillside below all the collapsed stone.

Spring began. Flowers bloomed, and Lent came at last to an end. The clearing began to look like a field, and Porto cut six trees to bring the sun. Tomaso sold his mother’s breviary to the priest and sold the heavy dagger that he’d taken from Porto, and paid the moneylender.

Giuglia came up the hill bringing water, wine, bread and oil one fine spring day, and stayed to work, sifting the fine dirt, carrying stones in her apron, and laughing. The hill was a dark place, and her laughter

worked like something hermetical, banishing the feeling of hopelessness that was growing on Tomaso. The only things he had left to sell were his books.

That evening, Giancarlo went off with his own hired man to help a neighbor, and Porto had begun to clear the last of the new ground and claimed he'd stay at it until dark. He'd found a silver coin in the dirt, and that had excited him in a way that nothing else had.

Giuglia wiped the hair out of her eyes in the last of the sun. Her hair was bleached to a light brown and her skin was unfashionably dark, and her kirtle—once blue, and now something like the sky on a sunny day—was sweat stained.

She sat on the low wall her father had started. “Are you going to marry me?” she asked.

“If your father will have me,” Tomaso said. “I’m very poor.”

She laughed—got up, and kissed him. And kissed him. And kissed him. “My mother said I’d have to do all the courting,” she said. “You are too courtly by half.”

There was a hollow sound—a thud, as if someone had knocked on a big oak door. Tomaso had just summoned up all his courage and put a hand on Giuglia’s breast—

“Master!” Porto shouted. “Messire Lupi!”

Giuglia slapped his hand in scripted admonishment and then joined him in a dash across the cleared ground. Porto was at the edge of the clearing under the remaining wall of the ancient edifice. He emerged from the shadows into the last of the sun, and he was smudged with dirt.

“The hill—it is hollow,” he said.

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“It's a door,” Giuglia said. She leaned close to the ancient wood. She had one hand to her throat and Tomaso thought she had never been so beautiful.

“It's a tomb,” the thief grumbled. “I won't go near it.” He stood outside the ring of stones by what might once have been a portico. But his words were lies—platitudes. The man was burning to open it.

Tomaso and Giuglia ignored him and worked in the dying light of the sun to clear the lintel. The door--if indeed it was a door--was slanted with the stones of the hillside, cunningly worked in among them with generations of soil on top.

Giuglia looked at the former thief. “He does no work,” she spat.

Tomaso was surprised at her tone. “He dug out this entire pit, my love,” he said. “He's tired.”

She shook her head. “He's afraid.”

As the outlines of the lintel and capstone began to appear, they worked with increasing intensity. When Giuglia's hand exposed the gleam of metal on the capstone, she shrieked and then went and fetched a wooden pail of water--they all drank, and then she poured some over the capstone of the arched door.

There were letters set in the stone. The letters appeared to be made of gold, or bright bronze--they were undimmed by time.

The former thief and the peasant girl turned to their educated companion. He looked at the letters as the last strong rays of the sun made them seem to glow.

“Witchcraft!” Porto spat, and backed away.

Tomaso reached down and touched them.

“Well?” asked Giuglia, her eyes huge.

Tomaso shook his head. "I have no idea," he admitted. "It is not Low Archaic or High Archaic. Indeed," he sighed. "Indeed, I have never seen these letters before." He smiled at his love. "But I agree that it is hermetical." He held his hand over hers, cutting off the sun, and she could see that the letters glowed an orange-gold in the darkness under her hand.

"Let's open it!" Giuglia said. She bounced on her toes in eagerness.

Porto took another step back and fingered his beard. He cocked an eyebrow at his master. "Tombs," he said. "Could be money." Shrugged. "Could be trouble." He pointed. "Can't you *feel* it?"

"What kind of trouble?" Giuglia asked. "Daemons from hell?" Her tone was dismissive.

Porto looked at the ground. "Maybe," he admitted. "Or curses or other magery. Master doesn't even know what the letters say."

Tomaso wanted to open the door. But he took a deep breath--and took two steps away from it, wary--from his reading--that the door itself might exert an influence.

"What if there's a treasure?" Giuglia asked from the portico.

"You have no idea what might be in a tomb," Porto said. "I don't know nothing 'bout magery, but I know this--once you open a box, it is fucking open."

"I need to get you home, my love," Tomaso said quietly. "Go lay a fire and pour us some wine," he ordered Porto.

"Smart lad," muttered the former thief, under his breath.

Giuglia was standing in the little pit they had carved out, actually standing on the door. She shook her head. "This is too exciting. My mother won't let me come tomorrow. She thinks we'll make the beast with two backs the moment we're alone." She smiled, as if to suggest that the thought had occurred to her, as well.

That smile penetrated whatever phantasm was on Tomaso Lupi, and he put a hand firmly on her arm. “As you love me, Giuglia--not tonight. Only a fool--or a man ensorcelled--would open this thing in the dark.”

Giuglia turned her head sharply away. “You are a knight--you are supposed to be brave.”

Tomaso felt the words as if they were a blow. But he had her arm, and he pulled. She stumbled and cursed him.

He pulled her right out of the pit--it was only a few feet deep and he was very strong from a summer of hard work. He carried her three full paces across the small clearing where they intended to put new vines, and set her on her feet in the first of the moonlight.

Before her feet touched the ground, she had stopped fighting him, and now she left her arms around his neck and kissed him. “By the Virgin mother, my love, I’m so sorry! Where did those words come from!”

He laughed grimly. “Sorcery,” he said. “The tomb wants to be open.”

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A dozen peasants came to gape at the door in the hillside. An hour after first light, Porto was on guard with an axe, and Giancarlo came with two of his larger cousins.

Giancarlo took Tomaso Lupi aside. ‘You were alone with my daughter for an hour,’ he said. His tone was serious, but not quite unfriendly.

“I would be delighted to marry her,” Tomaso said.

Giancarlo slapped him on the shoulder. “When?”

“Post the banns,” Tomaso said. “Six weeks from the Sabbath.”

Giancarlo sucked his front teeth for a moment. “Too soon—men will claim she’s pregnant. Twelve weeks. Is she pregnant?” he asked.

Tomaso sighed. “No,” he said.

He suspected his father-in-law thought he was a bit of a fool.

“Now the other matter,” Giancarlo said. “The hill. What do you think it is?” he asked.

Tomaso offered his prospective father-in-law a cup of herb tea. “I think it is a tomb from the very dawn of men,” he said.

Giancarlo thought a moment. “Treasure?” he asked with the practicality of peasants and great nobles alike.

Tomaso shrugged. “A powerful phantasm. Guiglia felt it.”

Giancarlo nodded. “If we don’t open it, someone will come and take it from us,” he said.

That hadn’t even occurred to Tomaso. He sighed.

He walked rapidly back down the hiull to his hovel, and fetched his pen case. And wrote a letter on Giancarlo’s parchment, to Altichiero di Tuva. To Giulia and her father, he said, simply—‘This is beyond me.’

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Di Tuva embraced him warmly in the dooryard. “What’s this about?” he asked. He looked at the ground. “I’m—sorry. I have been no kind of friend.”

Lupi embraced him again, a crushing, man's embrace. "Forget all that," he said. "I need you, and you come. That's enough, surely? And perhaps—just maybe—I am doing you a favor."

Behind his little stone house, Giancarlo stood sweating in his best cote and hood. Di Tuva was an aristocrat, and Tomaso knew that his father-in-law to be was damned if he was going to look like a laborer. By his side stood Giuglia in her best Sabbath clothes.

Di Tuva bowed to them as if they were courtiers.

"This is my intended bride," Tomaso Lupi said.

"Then I get to kiss her!" Di Tuva said expansively, and shocked a dozen Beronese peasants by doing just that. "Beautiful like an angel!" He turned and glared at Tomaso. "It's a wedding? I brought no present and I'm hardly dressed for it. And my wife will kill me—and you!"

Tomaso grinned and bowed his own courtly bow. "We will of course invite you to the wedding," he said, and Giuglia flushed—pleasure? Fear? But he went on. "I have a problem, and I wish your help." And they all walked up the little hill behind the house.

Porto stood guard. Just visible on the hilltop were Giancarlo's two tough cousins. Around the base of the hill, a dozen more local men had gathered. They were sitting in the shade, eating figs.

"What on earth is this? A wine tasting?" Di Tuva asked. He kept looking at Giuglia. When he and Tomaso were a little ahead of the others, he turned and hip-checked Lupi. "You dog! She's magnificent!"

Tomaso was too worried to smile or respond in kind.

"You practice a little, yes? When you paint?" he asked.

Di Tuva stopped. "Are we speaking of the science of hermeticism, or have you become a peasant?"

"Don't be touchy, my friend," Tomaso shook his head. "I need your access to the powers."

“What in the name of the saints is this about?” Di Tuva asked, and then they crossed the tiny clearing and he saw the glowing letters.

The moment his foot crossed the portico circle, he winced and stepped back. “Ah!” he said. “I see.”

“I think it is a tomb,” Tomaso said. He showed Di Tuva the lettering.

Di Tuva nodded. “Wonderful. Superb.” He turned. “We need Messire Petrarcha. He is a great magister.”

Perarcha was merely a name, to Tomaso—a man who wrote wonderful books. But Di Tuva grinned. “I’m painting his portrait for the tyrant,” he said. “I know all the great men now. Bah—he’ll have a cow. Let me fetch him.”

Tomaso began to breathe for the first time in two days.

“And some clothes. You will want to be *dressed*.”

#

The next morning a cavalcade arrived at Tomaso Lupi’s house. Thanks to Di Tuva’s help, the intervening hours had seen the Lupi sword redeemed from a pawnbroker and a set of plain but correct clothes—a tight jupon, a hood with a little tasteful embroidery, fine silk hose—arrive at the door. Tomaso Lupi stood in his small yard to receive his guests, and found himself holding the stirrup of the great man himself—not Petrarcha, who dismounted with Di Tuva’s help, but the Lord of Berona—sometimes called the Tyrant.

“Messire di Lupi!” the Tyrant said in his booming voice. “We have not seen you in attendance!” he laughed. “In some circles that might be taken as disloyalty!”

Tomaso Lupi bowed to the ground. "In my case, my lord, simple poverty."

The mention of poverty shocked some of the courtiers behind the two great men into silence. But the Tyrant met his eye. "Now that," he said, "sounds like the cold steel of truth." He nodded. "Very well, you are forgiven your absence. Take us to our tomb."

"My tomb, my lord," Tomaso said carefully. The words gave him a chill. *I have been thoughtless to speak so*, he thought.

The Lord of Berona looked at him a moment as if sharing his thought, but he nodded sharply. "Yes. Exactly. It is yours. I state it to be so, but within my domains."

But it was Messire Petrarcha who was the most eager. He was an older man with a tight-buttoned hood that hid most of his hair. His face was small and almost angelic, and the lock of white hair that escaped his hood made him look somehow otherworldly.

Tomaso bowed as low to him as he had bowed to the Tyrant of Berona. "You are most welcome here!" he said. "I have read all your books."

Petrarcha nodded, his eyes already on the hill. "Good. Now—take me. I can feel him."

"Who?" the Tyrant asked.

"The dead man," Petrarcha said. "The Ancient."

They walked up the hillside in the early light of morning—a dozen men and women from the court, dressed for hunting; Giancarlo and his wife and daughter, who were formally presented to the Tyrant—Giancarlo's satisfaction of the public betrothal of his daughter to a man who knew the Lord of Berona glowed from him like fire through a grate—and fifty local men and women.

Petrarcha sent his servant for his walking staff—he was easily seventy years old. And when he had climbed the hill to the ancient portico, he turned.

To Tomaso, he appeared taller and far more formidable.

“No closer. Indeed—indeed, good people, I would have you stand much farther away.” He motioned them down the hill.

No one moved more than three steps.

“Is it something evil?” Giuglia asked the old man. She dared—beauty has its own courage--and she was standing almost next to him. “Is it black magic?” she asked.

He looked down at her and smiled. “Magic does not have a color,” he said, to the consternation of the priest. “My friend Ali Rashid has proven that, and Harmodius the Great. Magic is merely power. There is immense power here.” He nodded. “And some of it is meant to—“ he breathed in, as if inhaling an odor. “Some of it is meant to manipulate the mind, which is never very nice, is it, my dear?”

He leaned on his staff for so long that some of the fairer ladies began to be uncomfortable with the sun.

“Is there a treasure?” asked Giancarlo suddenly.

Petrarcha did not move or answer.

“Do not disturb him,” Di Tuva said. “I beg you.”

The Tyrant began to fidget. “I thought we’d see—“ he began.

The world seemed to blink.

Just for the beat of an eyelash—for less than a single heartbeat—the world went. Or turned pale, or turned black, or filled with color—no two people experienced the event the same way, although men and women talked of it as far away as the county of Arelat.

Everyone flinched—relaxed—

There was the sound of thunderclap—so loud that it was greater than noise—and then a great sigh, as if the earth itself expelled air from its lungs.

The priest began to pray.

Petrarcha spread his hands. “Speak, if that is your desire,” he said.

The figures of three women rose from the doorway and seemed to float—fully realized, magnificently real, swathed in flowing garments lighter than the air around them but otherwise naked, standing on air.

One, by one, each spoke for as long as an orator would speak in any assembly. They spoke with joy—with vehemence. With magnificent gestures.

None of the mortals—not even Petrarcha—understood a word they said.

When they were done, the thinnest one, with black, curling hair that framed her face and long, elegant arms, stepped up on his toes and twirled, waved an arm, and all three—smiling—vanished.

And the door opened.

#

“Back!” Petrarcha insisted, and his voice cracked like a whip. The curl of raw *potentia* emerging from the top of his staff was probably more impressive than the voice, and the men and women—low born and high—froze.

Tomaso stepped forward. “I should enter first,” he said.

Messire Petrarcha looked at him. “You have no response to the *ops*, do you?” he asked.

“A magister once told me he had never known someone so dead to the occult,” Tomaso Lupi confessed.

Petrarcha fingered his beard and then reached out like a priest pronouncing a benison and touched his head. “Ahhh,” he sighed. “It was an unkind thing to say to a child. But in your case—so very true.” He smiled.

“And it is my property,” Tomaso said, a little insistently.

Petrarcha nodded again. “Most men rush to their dooms,” he said. “Do you know that there are malign things who listen for statements like *“this is my tomb?”*”

Tomaso paused. Petrarcha put a hand on his shoulder. The hand was as heavy as lead—as cold as ice. “I’m here,” he said. “Go in. Let us see what the first men—and women--have left us.”

Tomaso climbed down into the pit they had made where the ancient portico must have stood, and then he had—rather anticlimactically—to clear away some rocks that had fallen in the night, so that he could pull the door far enough open to enter.

Porto handed him a pair of torches, and a few brave souls pressed forward—Guiglia, Giancarlo, and Di Tuva. But the hermeticist trenched out his arms, and a narrow white line sprang up in a circle around the door—and filled in as if drawn by an invisible hand writing a pentagram and then annotating it.

The crowd sighed.

Tomaso took a torch. His hands were shaking, but everyone was watching and he knew that he had to be the first in—whatever followed. He used his shoulder to force the door back, and stepped down onto the narrow steps.

Nothing happened.

He took three more steps without a thought in his head, and then the smell hit him. It wasn’t a malevolent smell, but merely the smell of earth after a rain. And something else—some wisp of memory that floated into his brain through his nose. Cedar? Pine? A resin of some sort.

The entryway sloped down, away from the door but not steeply so. The sun penetrated only about the length of a horse and after that he was almost blind. He paused, blinked so that his eyes would adjust, and in his pause realized that the walls on either hand were painted in frescoes.

“Messire Lupi!” someone called.

“Tomaso!” called Giuglia.

“Send Di Tuva!” he replied. “I’m fine.”

His eyes had adjusted a bit. The frescoes were—incredible. Were he an artist, he’d have had words to say about what was right—but the proportions, the color of the flesh, the bunch of grapes—

The corridor had a procession carrying food on both sides. The food was beautiful—the trays gleamed.

He had never seen such paintings.

The nearest servant to him was turning to look over her shoulder, balancing a tray of sweetmeats with her tongue caught between her teeth, and the next servant had hesitated, causing the whole line consternation—all that, with a brush and pigments.

‘Oh, my god, my god,’ said Di Tuva’s voice from behind him. ‘Oh my god.’

Tomaso took another step and had to lower his torch to see a door set into the hill.

“Let me forward,” said the magister from closer than Tomaso had imagined. The little man with the wisp of white hair was at his shoulder, and Tomaso leaned against the wall to let him pass.

“Look at them!” said Di Tuva, his voice expressing wonder and despair at once. “How did they paint them?”

Petrarcha stood in the narrow vault and his staff suddenly threw a strong light. In the light, all the figures almost seemed to leap to life—but the bright light also revealed minute flakes where plaster had failed, and discoloration of pigment.

Tomaso found that he could breathe.

Petrarcha tapped the door once with his staff, and there was *music*. It was played on strings—somewhere in the air above them. The music was marvelous—familiar in tempo, alien in tone.

And the inner door opened.

“You first,” invited Petrarcha, his voice full of wonder.

Inside was a single room. On the walls were frescoes—couches with couples on them. There were two men on one couch, and two women on another, and all the rest of the couches held a man and a woman. Some kissed—one couple went further—some ate. And yet, so masterful was the painting that the viewer could see that every couple listened to something.

In the center of the wall in front of Tomaso stood a gargantuan figure—strong, reptilian, heavily muscled, with short wings and a marvelously inlaid beak and an erect helmet crest of fins, or possibly feathers, sitting on a couch, playing a lyre. And next to him stood the three women—the same three women—who had appeared in the air by the door. One held a harp. One held a scroll. One held aloft a brush, as if delicately painting the very scene in which she stood—the trompe l’oeil was so powerful that Tomaso had to blink.

Along the walls of the tomb stood urns and vases—magnificently figured in red and black and white and gold—with athletes and dancers and women weaving and men talking—and between them lay things of gold—a scabbard, a sword hilt, a woman’s necklace, now a thousand minute golden beads scattered on the floor with the red rubies like candies among them—a fortune in pearls lay as if cast before the proverbial swine, and a suit of Archaic armor stood on a stand of lacquered wood. There were two

statues, each with inset eyes of gold and lapis that seemed to follow Tomaso, and a woman's girdle set with carved stones—all of this he took in as he stepped into the light cast by the magister's staff.

“Blessed virgin, it's a daemon!” cried Giuglia from the doorway. She pushed into the room—

There was a crash—a clatter like the sound of an alarm in a military camp. Something moved—the magister's staff blazed like a standing bolt of lightning—Giuglia threw herself into Tomaso's arms even as he whirled and drew the sword at his side—

The passing of two thousand years had turned the wood of the stand under the lacquer to something like dust, and the breath of their arrival disturbed it. The armor stand had collapsed, and the clangor of the bronze was the only assault.

Lupi and Di Tuva eyed each other over their swords, and both laughed ruefully. Outside, there were cries.

Petrarcha calmed his staff and laughed. “Even for the old, there can come a few surprises,” he admitted.

Di Tuva stood in front of the left wall and moaned, the sword still in his hand. “Look at them!” he said. “No one alive can paint like that.”

Petrarcha smiled. “What the children of men have done, they can do again,” he said.

Tomaso Lupi stooped and retrieved a ring with a single ruby the size of the smallest nail on Giuglia's finger and solemnly placed it on her hand. “Your betrothal present,” he said.

#

Of course, everyone had to see it.

The Tyrant entered. He spent a long time, with Messire Petrarcha and Messire Di Tuva explaining things. Giancarlo stood at his shoulder—the two seemed to have some curiosity in common. Both of them inquired about the values of many objects.

The Tyrant declared a tax of ten percent on the whole value of the tomb. And claimed the armor for himself. He put a jocular, richly clad arm on Tomaso's shoulder. "You must share such wealth," he said with no apparent irony, and went to where a pair of courtiers held his horse.

Some of the value of the treasure was lost when Tomaso had to hire a dozen lances—mercenaries—from Messire Raoul de Cambrai, a Galle. But the Galles were good knights, and defended the treasure, and only stole a little.

Magister Petrarcha took many of the objects away for study.

'He'll never return them,' Giancarlo hissed. The presence of so much gold had caused a great deal of hissing; the presence of half a company of mercenaries, however disciplined, on the hill had drawn the enmity of the town, and Tomaso had rediscovered the high price that aristocrats paid for wine at the taverna.

"Pater—the magister will help me sell these things. Without him—what would we do? Wander the roads, hawking the ancient world?" Tomaso laughed, and Giuglia laughed, and finally, her mother and father laughed, too.

Di Tuva drew them a picture and then painted it in grisaille—of Tomaso and Giuglia hauling ancient vases on their backs on a dusty road. They laughed over it many evenings.

But when all was said and done—when they were wed, when Tomaso had paid his father's debts and his own, when he'd bought back the family house in Berona, striped with brick and marble, and purchased his wife a wardrobe to allow her to attend the Tyrant's court—when he had returned to fencing and jousting, and the date of his knighting had been set by the Lord—then he went to Petrarcha's tower,

high above the tyrant's courtyard, climbing a hundred steps, or so men said. The old Magister lived at the top. Men said that he flew.

The old man was alone except for a single servant. The servant bowed and withdrew, and Tomaso was alone with the great man.

"You've come for all the beautiful vases," the magister said.

Tomaso knelt. "No, messire. I rather hoped that you'd help me sell them—to collectors who would love them. I wish to keep two—because I love them."

The magister scratched his beard. In the light of a winter's day, he looked small and very harmless—his voice was weak and scratchy like any old man's, and weaker than many. His laugh was very small—almost as if he wanted to keep it secret. "I love them too," he admitted. "They make me greedy for their beauty."

Tomaso smiled. "Take one for yourself, then." He smiled. "In exchange, perhaps you can teach me to write history."

"You must have been a terrible peasant, messire. You have all the chivalric virtues. Which, let me add, were the ancient ones—loyalty, and generosity." The old man smiled. "Of course, I accept!"

Tomaso shrugged. "I think I was a pretty good peasant, messire. I found much to praise in my neighbors—but then, I married one."

Petrarcha nodded. "She—a peasant? Bah—an angel come to earth."

Tomaso bowed his head again. "But Master—I didn't really climb all these steps to arrange for money. I have wanted to ask—since the day we opened the tomb. Who were the women? And what did they say? And why—why did the world blink? What was in the tomb?"

Instead of answering, the magister got to his feet, scattering scrolls, and walked to his window—a great expanse of many panes of glass that looked down over the courtyard. In a corner, by the stables where the Tyrant’s horses were kept, there was a man standing in the sunlight with a tray of grapes. The sun winked off the metal of the tray. A horse length away, Di Tuva stood at an easel supporting a wooden board, drawing quickly in charcoal while a pair of assistants hovered.

The magister nodded, as if satisfied. “He’s been there every day the light was good, since the day we opened the door,” he said. He shrugged, gathered his robes, and sat. “If I were to ask your wife what was in the tomb—what would she say? Her marriage? And your father-in-law? And the Tyrant? They would say—Gold! And I will tell you that I don’t even know *what* language the lovely ladies spoke—only that they were great magisters speaking to me across twenty centuries. I do not know how to do that—but now I know it can be done!”

The old man leaned forward. His hands shook slightly. “Something very powerful was in the tomb. Now it is free.” He leaned back. “Not all spirits are malign. I will say no more.”

Lupi—soon to be Lupi di Alezzo—climbed back down the steps to the courtyard, and crossed it to where his friend stood staring at his own work.

“Your painting will smell like horse dung,” Lupi called, and Di Tuva laughed and threw a chunk of charcoal at him.

“What did you ask him? Christ risen, you are braver than I.” Di Tuva laughed ruefully. “I only approach him when I want to draw the vases—again.”

“I asked him what was in the tomb.” Lupi shrugged and looked at the charcoal. The servant with the tray relaxed.

“What did the old man say?” Di Tuva asked.

Lupi shrugged again and chuckled. “He spoke in riddles, like a magister.” He looked at Di Tuva, who was now the most sought-after painter and architect in two hundred leagues. “But he indicated that you knew the answer.”

Di Tuva smiled—not his sneer, nor his mocking smile or his defensive courtiers smile, but the pure smile his wife usually received. “I do!” he said.

“Well, then?” asked Tomaso di Lupi.

Di Tuva smiled again, and said nothing.