

α

TEMPEST

A BRIGHT FLASH of Heaven's spear forced *Padre* Umberto's eyes shut, filling them with pain and a red afterimage. Tautening his muscles, he forced his body upright as he skidded on the rain-slicked stone. The ache in his eyes intensified—but only for a moment. As the sensation faded, the lay priest opened his eyes, and cursed the fool who thought it wise to install the gas line outside.

Grimacing as the deluge drenched him, Umberto felt his way along the outside wall of the church, groping for the valve in the dim of the night. He found only rough-cobbled stone. Umberto paused. It had to be here. The priest slapped at the wall again and again, searching in vain. The rumble of the storm drowned the noise of his desperate panting.

The looming thunderheads loosed another volley

of lightning. Cracks of thunder quickened Umberto's heart into a rhythm of terror. His eyes snapped to Heaven, and the church's crooked crucifix confronted him, cast in silhouette by the electric chaos of the midsummer tempest.

The lay priest muttered a brief prayer. Padre Umberto was not a stranger to fear. Every day he lived in the shadow of the Almighty's judgment. The knowledge brought him faith and awe—even comfort. A God who judged was a God who cared. Umberto knew that he need only lay himself at the Lord's feet, and deliverance he would receive.

But tonight was different. The mere thought of what dwelt beneath the chapel cast a pall over his soul. For the first time he could remember, doubt itched away at the bulwark of his faith.

That was why he had to fix the lights.

Umberto shuddered, and came to his senses. He ventured another step along the wall when his toe struck metal. He knelt to examine the obstruction. It was an elbow of iron piping, sprouting from the ground and running through the ramshackle masonry of the church. The fitful light of the storm revealed a four-spoked bonnet protruding from the bend, and a rectangular stamp that read "A.D. 1490." Umberto allowed himself a small sigh of relief before going to work.

A squall charged the bald hill, pressing Umberto toward the wall as he adjusted the valve. The lay priest tightened his cowl, enduring the cold licks of rain against his skin, and continued his work. The wind subsided as he finished, and Padre Umberto rose to

discover a carriage slowing to a stop nearby.

Umberto could not discern the vehicle's features through the dark, and a hood blacker than the night itself cloaked the driver's identity. As soon as the carriage stopped, a tall man emerged and started toward the church. The priest craned his neck, anxiety rising in his chest.

"Who goes there?" cried Umberto, his voice muffled by the wind.

The man stopped. "I come from Rome." Though he did not yell, his voice sounded clearly through the storm. "I am told this parish is in need of my aid. Is that so? Name yourself!"

"Thank heavens!" Umberto rushed toward the tall man, splashing through the sludge to greet him. He looked up at the stranger, a hopeful smile—his first in days—breaking upon his face. "Our prayers are answered! You must be the Inquisitor! I am Padre Umberto—it is I who sent for aid! Thank the Lord, you're here at last..." Umberto peered at his guest. Even at this distance, and with the flash of lightning above, the man's features remained invisible. "Might I ask your name?"

"You may ask anything," replied the man, "inside."

Nodding, Padre Umberto turned toward the church. "Oh!" Umberto looked back at his guest. "Your carriage..."

"We have made our own arrangements. Shall we?"

Padre Umberto hesitated. He felt it rude, leaving the Inquisitor's transport at the mercy of the elements. But, with a flash and a crack of thunder, the storm put

an end to those thoughts. Umberto hurried inside, the church doors creaking as he opened them. His guest followed closely. Once out of the storm, he pushed the door shut, locking out the wind and the cold.

At once Umberto discarded his soaked cowl on the back of the pews. Immediately after he stepped to the gaslight by the door. He fished a match out of his robes and struck it. Carefully he held the tiny flame above the lamp. It danced and huddled, then vanished as a steady blue glow pooled within the lamp. At last granted some ease, Umberto sighed. He extinguished the match and turned to his guest.

The Inquisitor stood like a pillar. Though narrow of frame, he was tall—taller than any man Umberto knew. The man cut a shape in the world that captured the lay priest's eye like a magnet. His crown—bald save for a silver fringe—sloped into a long and rectangular face that could have been chiseled from stone. The man examined his surroundings from beneath a looming brow. Then his gaze turned toward Umberto, studying the plump lay priest without a twitch in his stony expression.

“I am Serafino,” said the Inquisitor. In a single motion, he unclasped his cloak and handed it to Umberto. Doing so revealed an attire befitting a cardinal: flat scarlet robes, gold chains hanging in their folds, and silver buttons fastening the sleeves and collar. From his neck hung a mangled iron crucifix. Umberto squinted at the icon, wracking his memory in vain to identify the design.

Serafino raised his left eyebrow. The motion, crisp against the stillness of Serafino's countenance, startled

Umberto. He collected himself and received Serafino's cloak.

The Inquisitor stepped forth, strutting down the short aisle of the chapel like a head of state on inspection. No detail of the church's interior escaped his gaze as his boots scraped against the stone of the floor. Serafino examined the cobbled-together masonry with a haughty eye. He glanced with disdain at the ramshackle altar with its rusted and half-rotten adornments, and gazed at the crooked pews with contempt. Padre Umberto stiffened with a different sort of nervousness than usual, and he was unsure whether or not he should feel grateful for the change of pace.

"Quaint," said Serafino, rolling the word in his mouth like he didn't want to touch it. The Inquisitor turned to Umberto. "Who are you again?"

"I...I am Padre Umberto, *signore*. I administer this church and its congregation."

"Of which order are you?"

"None, *signore*."

"A lay priest, then." Serafino's tone was sour. The Inquisitor, having reached the front of the pews, halted, spun on his heel, and paced back toward Padre Umberto, head bowed. "Your congregation?"

"Small, but close. We tend to the farmers of the Genoese countryside." Umberto breathed sharply through his nose as Serafino returned to his side. "Signor..."

Serafino whirled about to face him. The Inquisitor loomed over Umberto, transfixing him with a dark glare. "Tell me, *Don Umberto*, what need does a coun-

try church have of an Inquisitor? Lonely farmhands over-fond of tending livestock may be a sin, but it is hardly a heresy. Why do you insist on wasting my time?"

"It is not the congregation, signore," replied Umberto, his voice an urgent tremor. "It's..."

"Then what is it? Who is it? Answer me, so help you God!"

"I am trying to answer, signor Serafino! God help me, indeed!" yelled Umberto. His voice rang in the corners of the chapel. The tempestuous sky responded with peals of thunder, and the church lit up with flashes of lightning through the doorjamb and the tiny windows. Serafino kept his eyes on Umberto's. Unblinking. Relentless. Padre Umberto felt like a dissected rodent in the sight of this man. But there was no escaping the Inquisitor, nor his own unease over recent events.

The priest sighed and wiped the stinging drops of sweat from his brow. "Six months ago," Umberto said, hoarsely, "some of the acolytes fell ill."

"Black death," said Serafino, flatly.

"No, this was different. Their fever brought madness. They gibbered in tongues, babbled nonsense, screaming at demons only they could see. They vomited blood. They hemorrhaged from every pore..." Umberto clasped his hands over his face, trembling with the memory. "One by one, they passed away, howling in pain to the very end. Adamo—the youngest one, Adamo—was hit the worst. I was certain he would meet the same fate, but at death's door...he recovered."

"A miracle." Serafino pursed his lips ever so slight-

ly. "No doubt."

Umberto looked out from behind his hands, puzzled. "If you could call it that..."

He turned away from Serafino and drifted down the aisle. He stumbled, stomach and legs trembling, but caught himself on the pew. "Adamo was never the same after that." He steadied himself on the bench, as those ungodly memories rose in him like so much bile. "He did things, said things...portentous things. Prophetic things. Things I would never imagine in my worst nightmares. Thoughts I would dismiss as heresy—except, he knows..."

Umberto paused. Though his throat was dry, he swallowed despite himself. "He's made predictions, precise predictions," continued the priest. "He saw February's comet weeks in advance. He plotted its exact course across the sky days before it appeared. No mortal astronomer could accomplish such a feat! I have to know." Umberto gripped the pew even tighter. "I have to make sure his words are nothing but lies and blasphemy!"

Serafino glanced away in consideration, apparently unaffected in the wake of the padre's account.

"I will have to speak with him." Serafino's words held no emotion—only fact.

Umberto straightened. "May I be forgiven for heaping this task upon you." He turned to look at Serafino, his eyes wild like death's own visage. "God help you, Serafino! Merciful God, give him faith to withstand those words!"

The lower floor of the chapel was colder than even the storm raging outside, and darker as well. Only the yellow flame of Padre Umberto's torch cut through the black as he led Serafino down the narrow stair. Aside from their breathing and the slap of their feet against stone, silence reigned. Even the fury of the storm was muted, down below.

Not long after the pair reached the bottom, something squeaked and scampered by on tiny paws. Umberto froze in his tracks.

A whiskered vermin, no doubt, he assured himself. But he did doubt. He doubted very much these days. Fearing his guest's impatience, he braced himself and moved on.

Umberto stopped again in front of a door farther down the corridor. The small, wooden portal reeked with rot. A hefty iron lock barred any entry.

"This is Adamo's cell. It is locked, for...everyone's safety." Padre Umberto looked up to Serafino. The Inquisitor examined the door, looking the structure up and down as if recording every detail. The man from Rome showed no hint of emotion in his expression, much to Umberto's puzzlement. He watched the Inquisitor for several seconds, trying to discern any change in Serafino's composure. But he proceeded in perfect stoicism.

Having been denied a reaction, Umberto unfastened a key on his belt and presented it to Serafino. "Here is the key. Please be careful. He may be weak, but his tongue is more damaging than a bullet from a pistol."

"Hmph." Serafino took the key without looking

at Umberto.

The priest turned to leave, but Serafino's crucifix again caught his eye. For some reason, the design was easier to discern here. And it grew stranger the more he looked at it. A mass of tangled arms and other limbs formed its horizontal axis. At the intersection of its beams, a fist emerged, gripping a long sword, blade down. Its form made the vertical axis. From the pommel stared a naked eye, with a blood-red ruby for its pupil. Umberto had never seen such a design before.

"If I may ask, signore," inquired Umberto, hesitant, "to what order are you ordained?"

"The highest order," replied Serafino. "And perhaps now you will leave me to my work."

Padre Umberto scowled at Serafino's evasion, but turned to leave nonetheless. Then he stopped himself. "Do you require a torch to light your way?"

"The faithful do not require light to see." At that, Serafino wasted no time. He unlocked Adamo's cell and ducked inside, leaving Umberto behind as he shut the creaking portal.

It was indeed dark inside Adamo's cell, and Serafino did not sense a window. Fishing inside his robes, he drew a portable torch and pressed the lighter switch with his thumb. Sparks flew as steel struck flint, and the small firebrand hissed as the flame came to life. Its glow traced the gossamer outlines of toppled furniture and shattered icons. Beyond the sulfur from the torch, Serafino twitched his nose at the stink of mold and a foul, pungent stench, which he assumed had to be feces. After taking in the scent, he peered more closely

at the contents of the room, in search of this troublesome Adamo. He couldn't find any form that clearly belonged to a human, but a mass in an unlit corner caught his eye. Serafino took one step toward the thing; then a sound confirmed his suspicions.

"Who's there?" croaked a small voice.

The Inquisitor stopped. "I come from Rome. I am Serafino. I wish to speak with you on behalf of the Church."

He heard a shuffling in the corner, and then a padding of feet. A young man waddled into the torchlight. The lad couldn't have been much older than sixteen, but his state was appalling. He was naked save for a loincloth about his waist, and smeared with filth. An oily mess on his scalp passed for hair, and his skin sunk in pits between his bones. Serafino knew the lad to be alive, but had he not known otherwise he would have assumed him to be a corpse, pickled like a counterfeit mummy. The only thing lively about this body was its gaze. Its glassy brown eyes tracked Serafino as the youngster bobbed his head in a slow, hypnotic dance.

"Are you a man of God?" asked the boy, in a tone just shy of astonishment.

Serafino pursed his lips, ever so slightly. "Yes, I am."

The boy stiffened. His face twisted into a scowl. "Well be that way, fool! We'll all burn with you!"

Adamo turned tail and darted back into the shadows. Serafino followed. The light from the torch fell on Adamo, huddled in a bed of torn sheets and filth. He buried his head in his knees, his outstretched hands

clutching each other, as well as some other object between them.

A madman indeed, Serafino thought. It was amazing Don Umberto hadn't simply surrendered him to an asylum. But no matter. The Inquisitor would do the job he was sent for. "I am told you can see the future. Is this true?"

"I don't see the future the future sees me," rambled the madman, breathlessly.

"And what is this future which sees you?" inquired Serafino, softening his voice.

"It's not a future. There is no future. It ends. Everything ends. The Children of the Stars descend from the Cancer and lay waste to Man and all his works."

"Who revealed these visions to you? Are they a prophecy from God?"

Adamo leaped to his feet and stormed up to Serafino. He glared at the Inquisitor, nose to nose, fury burning in his eyes. "God," growled Adamo, "is dead!"

Adamo fumed before Serafino, snorting like an angry bull. Serafino did not flinch, nor change his expression. "What you say is blasphemy," said Serafino, calmly. "You must understand that. Do not fear, my child. God is very much alive, and He will save all who believe in Him and seek His forgiveness. Even the Children of the Stars which so frighten you cannot withstand His grace..."

"Oh, shut up, you imbecile!" yelled Adamo, gesturing wildly. "God's a lie and heaven's a lie and we're all but a drop of rain in a storm! What will happen has

already happened and what is happening has always happened and what's been done is happening again, and you're just making it worse by lying to us all..."

"What is that in your hand?"

Adamo froze. In his right hand, the madman gripped a strange cube. It was black and glossy—like obsidian. But that was not all there was to it. Etched on its surface were golden lines. They branched and merged at precise angles, and sometimes ended in golden dots. Serafino did not recall ever seeing such an artifact before. A great curiosity stirred inside him.

The mad acolyte must have sensed this, for he immediately hid the cube behind his back. "Nothing. There's nothing in my hand!"

"Show it to me." Serafino reached for Adamo.

"No!" yelled Adamo. He tried to twist away from Serafino's grasp, but the Inquisitor was too quick. He grabbed Adamo's arm and pulled the limb toward him. "You can't touch it! You'll break the clocks! Do you want to shatter all the bells? The noise, noise, noise! Dong dong dong dong dong!"

In the struggle, Serafino's hand brushed against the cube. Suddenly the Inquisitor stiffened. His eyes rolled up beneath their fluttering lids, as in the throes of epilepsy. Then, as suddenly as his episode began, he regained his wits. He relaxed, stumbled back, and dropped the torch on the floor.

Serafino panted as he tried to catch his breath. A frightened Adamo stared back at him, watching his every move. Serafino snapped his head upward, looking straight at Adamo. His once-stoic expression now

twisted into a wicked grin. His eyes glowed with mad revelation. He looked at the cube with a covetous gaze.

“Give me that cube,” demanded Serafino, his voice swaying sensually.

“No,” muttered Adamo, inching backward. “You’ll ruin the music! The spheres will...”

“Give it to me!”

Serafino lunged, but not at the cube. He grabbed the heretic by the neck and choked him with both hands. The acolyte thrashed and tugged at Serafino’s arms with surprising strength. But Serafino laughed. Serafino was stronger. He wrapped his fingers ever tighter around the infidel’s throat. He breathed faster and heavier, taking one breath for each he stole from the miserable heathen in his grasp. He luxuriated in the twisting and pulsing of each muscle in the wretch’s neck. He beamed with wicked glee as the poor fool gasped for air like some little fish trying to breathe on land—oh! And as Adamo’s last breaths shuddered through his body, the torch on the ground sputtered and died.

Padre Umberto knew he shouldn’t sleep now, but he was tired. And despite his misgivings about Rome’s emissary, the matter was under control. Though it was a fitful rest, he found his nightmares leavened by a ray of hope.

Nonetheless, his dreams confused him. Why was there the smell of smoke?

Umberto’s eyes snapped open. Flame consumed nearly every surface of the chapel. The fire roared about the altar and several of the pews. Smoke poured from

every door, and from the stair to the lower floor. A deafening crack sounded from above. Umberto looked, and to his horror saw the wooden icon of Jesus above the altar snap. The lower half fell to the floor, shattering into blistering shards, while the top half of the crucifix remained wreathed in flame.

Panic set in. Umberto stumbled off the bench and hurried to the church entrance. He pushed against the doors—thank God they weren't aflame!—but they would not budge. He pulled. He pushed again. He pounded on the gates with all his strength and all his weight, but they would not move. He screamed, "Help! Someone, anyone, please help!"

Over the roar of the inferno rose several voices from outside the church. Padre Umberto straightened upon hearing them. He scrambled about, trying the doors again. Then he remembered the eye-slots he had installed in the gates. He slid one open and looked outside.

Two carriages were now stationed before the church. Men in dark cloaks attended to the vehicles. A pair of them carried what looked like someone on a stretcher. Serafino stood before them all, directing the action.

Padre Umberto called out to Serafino. The Inquisitor turned around. Umberto himself did not know for sure what he yelled to the man. He was pleading for help, but he could barely hear his own voice. He had to tell Serafino the church was burning! *The door won't open! Please help me! God knows I'll die, so please help me!*

Serafino stared at Umberto dumbly, either not

hearing or not understanding. He appeared preoccupied with the black cube he held in his hand. Umberto yelled louder, begging for help. Then Serafino broke into a smirk. He put his back to the church, waved at his companions, and climbed into his waiting carriage.

Umberto screamed as loud as his lungs would permit. He breathed in to scream again, but smoke filled his lungs as he was seized by a fit of gagging. His eyes burned with tears and the fumes of the fire. Heat and pain shot through his skin as the flames took him.

Outside, while Serafino rode away in his carriage, the lightning stopped and the clouds parted. A gibbous moon doused the country in silver light. A common fool would have said that the storm was over. Oh no—Serafino knew, as he stroked the cube couched in his lap, that the storm was just beginning.

ONCE UPON A TIME, IN VENICE

Having so examined the properties of these various materials, known to science as having properties described as “magnetic” or “electric,” we find curious divisions in their behavior. The invisible attraction of some iron ingots and the properties of amber rods suggest the presence not of one phenomenon, but of two distinct and yet related forces responsible for electric and magnetic behaviors. While the evidence at present has yet to reveal a theory of their workings, we can hope that this research will open new and fruitful avenues of inquiry into such an elusive and confounding field of science.

“On The Separate Causes of Electro-Magnetic
Phenomena”

Scheduled for review on July 8th,

Year of our Lord 1491

ROSARIA ADALBERTO TOOK a deep breath through her nose upon concluding her presentation. The tension from making her oral arguments released itself from her body—but not entirely. Deep inside, one of Rosaria’s heartstrings pulled itself taught, as if a daemonic violinist held her in suspense.

As he well should, she thought. Few men had the stomach to face the panel of the four aging scientists who sat in judgment of her. Their bench, rising several

feet above the floor, loomed darkly against the bright midmorning rays shining through the windows behind it. The light's brilliance only enhanced the religious character of the presentation hall's archways and soaring buttresses. Rosaria had not been to church in a long while, but could not quite escape the notion that God Himself presided in her judgment as well.

If He was in fact present, He remained faithfully silent in his opinions, as was his habit. On the other hand, even in silhouette the panel shifted slowly in awkward skepticism. Rosaria bit the inside of her lip, hoping their doubt stemmed from purely professional concerns. Young, fledgling men of science often had to appeal their first dissertations before the Society for Natural Philosophy accepted them for publication. But the one standing before them today was *not* one of those fledgling men of science. She dressed in the fashion of a man: a brown tunic with gold lace and leggings to match. Standing slightly taller than average, of narrow yet muscled frame, and gazing back at the panel through piercing amber eyes framed against a pale, delicately featured complexion and tumbling tow-colored locks—Rosaria was obviously a different breed of applicant. She hoped against hope that the fact of her sex would not influence their decision.

After several plodding minutes, the head of the panel removed his round spectacles and stared intently at the folio before him. Square-faced, full-bearded, with tufts of grey peeking out from his solid crop of dark brown hair, the man furrowed his brow and pressed his lips together tightly, as if preparing to speak. Rosaria had met him in person only today, but she had known the name and work of Venceslao Scevola, the premi-

ment scientist and president of the Venetian Society for Natural Philosophy, since she was very young. She felt the grip of her heart's invisible violinist tighten.

Venceslao lifted his head, not quite looking up from his manuscript. "You've amassed a charming catalog of substances, *signorina* Rosaria," said Venceslao in a slightly hoarse, high-pitched voice.

Rosaria grimaced briefly when she heard the word 'charming.' "In order to better understand the nature of magnetic phenomena, I conducted extensive experiments on the interactions of different materials. The data are essential to my thesis, as I have explained in both the article and my presentation."

"So you say." Venceslao assumed a less-than-credulous air. He flipped over a few pages, pursed his lips, and then looked directly at Rosaria. "What leads you to believe that this...*research*...amounts to a meaningful breakthrough in the physical sciences?"

Rosaria shook her head, almost not believing her ears. "Investigation into magnetism in past years has proven difficult because we have assumed a uniform mechanism, and we haven't been able to find one that fits," said Rosaria. "If my hypothesis is correct, this places us one step closer to reaching a viable theory of electricity and magnetism."

Venceslao paused, his expression unchanging. He then sighed quietly. "I'm afraid our decision stands," he said, closing the folio. "The article is unfit for publication."

The unease in Rosaria turned briefly into fire. "On what grounds?" she exclaimed, her eyes flaring angrily.

The middle-aged scientist looked down on Rosaria with a chiding glance. "Are you seriously requesting a second appeal?"

"I merely request a proper explanation for your decision," said Rosaria, sternly.

Venceslao stood, holding the folio to his chest. The other panel members stretched and gathered their belongings. "I believe I explained sufficiently in my original letter."

Rosaria felt something sink in her stomach. The other panelists now rose from their seats. She had to say something, quickly.

"With all due respect," said Rosaria, "I have seen papers run in the proceedings of this society far more dubious and controversial than what I have submitted to you. And yet, in both our earlier correspondence and now, your justification for rejecting *my* paper has amounted to nothing more than vague skepticism. You owe me a reason, Don Venceslao."

All four of the panel froze. Venceslao stopped and stared coldly at Rosaria. "This society owes nothing to anyone," he said, leaning over the lip of the bench. "So understand that my explanation here is a kindness. Magnetism is a dead-end science. One might as well speculate on the existence of other worlds, or of daemons. Your efforts are better spent on more legitimate pursuits, signorina Adalberto."

"How can you say that when you have put so much effort into the subject yourself? I used your own research as one of my references in the paper *and* as a starting point for my own investigations! You may have reached an impasse, but even these preliminary

findings strongly imply a solution. How is this lost on you?”

The esteemed scientist’s frown assumed a hardened edge. “I would mind your tone, signorina,” said Venceslao sternly. “No one has put more effort into the question of magnetism than I have, and that effort has persuaded me of the futility of understanding the phenomenon in any useful fashion. Better minds than yours have failed to persuade me otherwise, and relented for the sake of more fruitful endeavors. If you wish to be taken seriously as a scientist, signorina Adalberto, you would do well to heed the lessons of your forebears.”

In the face of Venceslao’s condescending air, Rosaria felt as if she were shrinking to the size of a child. Her face turned warm and prickly, her heart churning with a mixture of anger and embarrassment. She opened her mouth for a retort, when another of the panel interrupted her.

“There is also the matter of corroboration,” said the other panelist—a tall, wizened husk of a man whose robes looked heavier than his own frame. “A controversial claim, such as your own, would carry more weight if another researcher reproduced your findings.”

“I thought part of the reason for publication was to seek corroboration, Don Antonio.”

Antonio glanced at his colleagues in an oddly cautious gesture. “What I mean to say is that your ideas would benefit from having a more qualified author.”

Rosaria stiffened, skin prickling. “I believe my research, my methods, and my results amply demonstrate my qualifications!”

The wizened scientist sighed. "How do I say this? While we at the Society may understand that the truth can come even from the mouths of babes, the public is not so wise. Publishing an article by someone such as yourself would tarnish the reputation of this organization."

"If it's my name that's the problem, I would happily use a pseudonym!"

"This Society holds intellectual honesty as its highest virtue! I will not permit any of our contributors to hide behind an alias!" bellowed Venceslao.

"Rejecting a paper based on its author, and not its merits, is the definition of intellectual *dishonesty!*" Rosaria protested.

Venceslao's previously subtle expression contorted into a hideous scowl. "That will be enough of this. The next issue's advance copies have already been sent out, and the final prints are already on their way to the presses. There is nothing more to discuss."

With that, Venceslao, Antonio, and the other panelists filed out from behind the bench and made for the exit. They were mostly quiet, save for some quick comments whispered between them. Rosaria stood in place, frozen, a thousand thoughts and feelings boiling in her soul. Part of her wanted to hide, but her body would not move.

Just then, two unrelated thoughts came together in Rosaria's mind.

The force of the realization sent Rosaria into shock. She swerved toward the departing dons, mouth agape in disbelief.

“The next issue is already going to print? You made up your mind before even listening to my appeal? Venceslao! Venceslao! Answer me, damn you!”

But her cries were in vain. The men did not even slow down as they left Rosaria alone in the presentation hall.

As she boarded the elevated locomotive, Rosaria’s spirits felt the way her body used to after fencing practice: worn, bruised, and aching all over. She had to admit she much preferred nursing her wounds after practice. Her old master, despite his abrasive personality, had always acknowledged her skill and growth in the end. The contempt she endured from the gatekeepers of her profession, however, she could never adapt to.

Rosaria sat herself in a cushioned seat by the window, cradling her swimming head with one hand. The ordeal hurt, of course, and the intensity of the embarrassment exhausted her. Still, she knew this rejection was not the end of the world. Slowly she turned her thoughts to home, where her notes, her lab, and possibly her lunch, awaited her.

The locomotive squealed as the steam engine revved up, and the whole cabin shuddered as the car lurched into motion. A great clatter sounded from the mess of gears hidden above the roof as the clockwork contraption drew the elevated car along the rail above. For a time, the walls of the station obstructed the view, but before long the car emerged into the daylight.

The beauty of the late morning warmed Rosaria’s skin, and her heart as well. The sun shone brightly through clear skies over the *Laguna Veneta*. In the dis-

tance, past the sprawl of buildings and canals gliding by underneath, the waters of the Adriatic shimmered in the midday sun. The sea today was calm. The glinting forms of steel ships inched toward the harbor, columns of white vapor billowing from their smokestacks.

Rosaria loved watching these metal boats cruise through the Mediterranean. Fifty years ago, what began as a rediscovery of the wisdom of the ancients of Rome and Greece blossomed into an era of astounding progress. In the span of but half a century, man cast aside the mystic platitudes of centuries past and sought to master nature with his intellect. Alchemy gave way to chemistry and metallurgy. Water mills led to steam power. The perfection of machinery gave life to a scale of industry unparalleled in all of history. Where one tailor once sewed one suit, and ten tailors sewed tenfold that number, one tailor now sewed ten, one hundred or even *thousands* of garments. And all of equal craftsmanship, no less. Venice, Florence, Naples, and Genoa were all players in this brave new world, and Rosaria's clan, as a noble family of Venice, were patrons of many factories and workshops. Whenever Rosaria gazed upon those vessels, chugging through the harbor, she saw the triumph of discovery beaming through their shining hulls. One day, she hoped the natural truths she sought would become as essential to the architecture of civilization as an alloy beam in the spine of a steamship.

But first, the matter of nature's coyness regarding magnetism. And there was also that other problem...

Her ride passed without incident, and soon the locomotive ground to a halt by a street-level platform near the harbor. Rosaria stepped off the train and strolled down the cobblestone avenue. The rows of wood and

stone houses to either side provided only a little shade with the sun so high overhead, but with the salty sea-side breeze Rosaria found she didn't need it anyway. A few minutes and several turns later, she arrived at the humble oaken house that she called home.

Taking care to be quiet, Rosaria gently unlocked the front door and slipped into the foyer. She glanced around the main room and saw no sign of Benito. *Good*, she thought. She had skipped breakfast that morning, and he tended to worry about such things. She sprang lightly up the stairs, past the second-floor balcony, and into the tiny attic she used as her study.

Rosaria discarded her overcoat on the cot she kept in the corner and seated herself at her desk. A breeze peeled the curtain away from the little window nearby, stinging her eyes with a bright crack of sunshine. Instinctively, Rosaria squeezed her eyes shut. By the time she opened them, the breeze had abated and the window once again was covered.

She turned her attention to last night's journal. It lay open on her desk, concluded midsentence by a bold streak of ink leading off the page. She had been exhausted and hadn't even had the strength to crawl into her cot, apparently. When morning arrived, her appointment at the Society left her without sufficient time to conclude the entry, despite her unusually early rise. She picked up her quill and reread the entry, hoping to finish now what she had begun earlier. A few smudged letters stood out on the page, suggesting that last night involved a less-than-graceful fall into slumber.

The attic door opened with a creak, and Rosaria turned to see Benito, her good butler, duck into the

room. He was a big man, and so kept a close eye on the silver tray of food he carried as he navigated the doorway. Once he cleared the portal he looked up and, seeing Rosaria had returned, stopped in his tracks. His expression, at first stern and slightly weary, immediately softened. He did not smile, but the creases near his hazel eyes deepened just a little.

The edges of Rosaria's mouth twitched. "*Ciao*, Benito," she said, her voice slightly hoarse. She leaned over her desk and cradled her forehead in her palm. "That is breakfast, I hope?"

"That was the intention, signorina. Had you returned any later, it might have become lunch." Benito set the tray on Rosaria's desk.

"Then it is fortunate I returned when I did," said Rosaria, her voice distant as she squinted at her journal.

"If you do not tend to your meal soon, you still run that risk," chided Benito. "I assume your appointment at the Venetian Society was a success?"

Shame stabbed at Rosaria's heart like a pike. "Bureaucracy is troublesome as always, Benito. I am certain you understand."

Benito nodded subtly. The edges of his eyes drooped as they might in a frown. Rosaria did her best to ignore him. She did not want to be pitied. Instead, she focused on her journal, doing her best to read and write in the dim light.

Her butler, however, seemed to disapprove. Benito stepped over to the window and threw the curtains open. The sudden burst of sunshine forced Rosaria's eyes shut again. "Heavens, Benito!" exclaimed Rosaria,

rubbing her eyes. “I could already see well enough!”

“And now you can see better, and breathe deep in the fresh Adriatic air.” Benito stepped away from the window and set about tidying a neglected corner of the study. Rosaria blinked her amber eyes open and squinted out the window. She had a good view of the Adriatic from here, still shining in the sun. Rosaria thought the steamships from earlier were still visible, shrinking to motes as they inched toward the horizon. A pang of longing gripped her heart, quickly replaced by a sense of determination.

“Perhaps you’re right, Benito,” Rosaria said with a sigh, smiling weakly. “It is much better to work by.”

“I believe you misunderstood me, signorina,” replied Benito. “I meant that you should set aside your work and tend to yourself.”

“I can’t,” said Rosaria, slapping her hands on the desk for emphasis. “There is work to be done, very important work.”

“The work will still be waiting for you tomorrow,” said Benito as he returned to his charge’s side. “And you need rest. God himself rested on the seventh day, following his creation.”

“You are well aware, as am I, that I am mortal and not a god.”

“And would do well to consider His divine example. Besides, isn’t tomorrow that holy Sabbath day?”

Rosaria groaned. “Please, Benito! Do *not* suggest that I subject myself to such a *tedious* thing as mass! I have spent far too much time bored to the verge of *insanity*, listening to moralistic platitudes and *dreadful*

hymns and...and...just *banal* lectures on theology and tithing. Or perhaps I should go to confession? Oh, that would be a hoot! What—should I confess that I have taken the Lord’s name in vain in creative ways while dodging exploding beakers? Or have witnessed obscene patterns on the insides of my eyelids while flushing acid from them? Or just tell them that I am that most wretched of sinners: a woman seeking to exceed her station? Is that what you are suggesting, Benito?”

Benito pursed his lips deeply, in that peculiar fashion that Rosaria suspected was a way of withholding laughter. “Perhaps you could begin,” said Benito, his eyes alight, “by confessing that you have been in the dark for so long, and haven’t a clue about how to enjoy your life. Though I admit, your other suggestions are *very* amusing.” At that, Benito crossed himself.

Rosaria sighed. “I don’t know, Benito,” she said, wiping her face with both hands. “I have not been to church for two years, and have never regretted the decision.”

“Well, if the Divine holds no sway for you, perhaps getting out into the world does.” Benito plucked a newspaper from his jacket and opened it. “It says here the Crown of Argon is bracing for war with the Mussulmen, the Medici foiled a coup in Florence, a church burned to the ground ten miles out of Genoa, Innocent VIII is pressuring the Holy Roman Empire to convene an Imperial Diet, *Donna* Lisa wore an exceptionally lovely dress at the...”

“Benito—please. You know how I hate society. All that preening and squabbling exhausts me. I’m sorry, but I would much rather return to my work.”

Benito set aside the paper. His mouth narrowed. "Then perhaps the piles of old mail would interest you," he said, a little more quickly than usual. "They are growing increasingly large."

"It's not so important. Paper is patient."

"The people who write them aren't," quipped Benito. "And the pile is getting quite large. Any larger, and they'll have to put it on the map."

Rosaria threw up her hands. "Fine then. You win. Why don't you read me the letters over breakfast?"

"I would be happy to review your letters *after* you eat and wash yourself." Benito leaned in, a glint of mischief in his eye. "You have ink on your nose."

Benito swirled around and strode out of the attic, leaving Rosaria speechless as his steps knocked down the stairs. Rosaria blinked several times, glanced aside, and lifted a finger to rub her nose. She looked at her fingertip, and indeed there was black on it. As for how it managed to find its way there, she couldn't say. Rosaria frowned and wiped her hand on the napkins Benito had brought up with the food, before settling down to eat.

Breakfast was a fresh *panbrioche*, served with olive oil and garlic. Hunger chomped at the pit of Rosaria's stomach, so she ate quickly. She wiped her mouth before sauntering down the stairs and into her bedroom. She went first to the washbowl by the mirror and set about rubbing off the miscreant ink on her countenance.

Rosaria had delicate features: a pointed chin with full cheeks and a small mouth. Her complexion was pale, a striking complement to her piercing amber eyes

and long, platinum locks. Rosaria was not a socialite, but when she did attend functions people often commented at length on her beauty. She found this fact to be an inconvenience.

Rosaria soon finished wiping her face and turned to leave. It occurred to her, though, that she would avoid some trouble if she changed clothes. Her tunic and breeches were dirty and stained with mud from the city streets, after all. So she slipped out of her formal garments and opened her armoire in search of more suitable attire.

The muscles in her arms rippled subtly as she flipped through her wardrobe. She gave a lopsided frown as she considered her options, but gave up and just pulled an outfit out at random. She donned the garments and adjusted them, glancing at the rapier mounted on her wall before heading out.

Rosaria was still fiddling with the lace cuffs of her more casual tunic as she descended the stairs. "So, Benito," she said, picking at a stray thread, "what have I missed?"

Benito stood by a round table in the sitting room below. He held several envelopes in hand, and a larger stack lay on the table. "First, an invitation from your uncle," said Benito, reading the first missive, "to a gala. Quite a special affair. Lords and ladies, parishioners, inventors, a deacon—the guest list sports some *very* important people."

"When is it?" asked Rosaria, scratching the back of her neck.

"This evening. Seven o'clock."

“I shall stay in. These parties only ever amount to a bunch of standing around and chatting about nothing. What else?”

“Some letters from your cousin Franco. Quite a number, actually.”

“Franco!” cried Rosaria, bursting into a smile. “I haven’t heard from him in forever. What has he been up to?”

“Let’s see.” Benito flipped through the stack of letters, while Rosaria peered over his shoulder. “Studies, studies, studies, drinking, studies, no good, studies—I don’t understand this at a glance, but it can’t be any good—studies...oh! He plans to visit Venice on break from the Academy.”

“Wonderful!” exclaimed Rosaria, stepping away to pour herself a glass of wine. “I look forward to his visit.”

Benito read the letter again, knitting his brow as he did. “His boat arrived this morning. About an hour ago.”

“You’re joking. This is incredibly short notice. When was the letter sent?” asked Rosaria, sipping her wine.

Benito flipped the envelope around. “One month ago.”

Rosaria’s eyebrow twitched. “Well, it’s not as if he’s *actually* arriving today,” she said in a sardonic drawl. “That boy is never on time when traveling...”

Just then there came the ring-ding-a-ling of the bell outside the front door. Rosaria rolled her eyes. “More mail, I suppose.” She set aside her wine and

tromped toward the door.

Benito craned his neck after Rosaria. "Signorina, I can answer the door."

"Please, Benito. I can manage mundane tasks from time to time."

Rosaria flung open the front door. It was, indeed, the courier: a nervous-looking young man with a hooked nose and a swollen, blistery pimple bulging from his cheekbone. The boy tightened upon seeing Rosaria, apparently going through the same existential crisis many encountered upon seeing the contrast between her dress and her sex. He nearly dropped the mail as he handed the stack of letters to Rosaria, trembling all the while. *Perhaps I should have let Benito handle this*, she thought.

The courier scurried away. Rosaria glanced briefly through the mail. It was mostly advertising, as usual. When she looked up, her jaw dropped in shock. The courier hadn't been her only visitor. A very tall young man now stood at the threshold. He was thin of frame, but not quite skinny. His face was handsome—narrow, but not too much so—and his features, though prominent, were not sharp. His warm, brown eyes would have appeared to smile even if he hadn't been wearing a bashful grin. He sported a shock of very dark chestnut hair, not quite neatly combed. He dressed modern-style, in a black suit with pleated cuffs, collar, and an azure cravat. Rosaria expected it to look too big on him, but the fit was perfect.

"Franco!" exclaimed Rosaria, at once gawking and smiling in elation. But then she turned serious. "This is a surprise."

Franco smiled a bit more broadly. "Did you not read my letter, cousin Rosaria?"

"Yes, some time ago," said Rosaria, hurriedly. "Which passed very quickly."

Franco shot Rosaria a stern look. Rosaria returned the glance with a cold glare of her own. Their eyes remained locked in contest, as the grandfather clock in the next room counted off the seconds with a loud tick...tick...tick...

Then all at once, their masks of contention disintegrated. The cousins leaped into each other's arms with whoops of joy. Franco lifted Rosaria bodily off the ground as she kicked the air, squealing as if her years of maturity were just a span of time between this reunion and their last. Franco laughed loudly, himself regressing into even greater youth.

"How've you been, *Rosarietta*? You look *wonderful*!" exclaimed Franco, setting Rosaria down.

"Been well. Franco! My *Franchetto*! It's been *forever* since I've seen you! Last I set eyes on you, you were but a gawky kid. Now look at you! Dressed so smartly!" Rosaria rubbed the cuff of Franco's suit between her fingers.

"The Academy's been good to me. I have proven popular amongst the Neapolitans."

"Oh!" exclaimed Rosaria, feigning shock. "So what now? You fancy yourself a big *Francone* now? *Franchetto* too small a name for you now, is it? Not good enough for big, bad *Francone*, is it?"

Franco grimaced and swallowed. "I'll have you know I am respected amongst my peers at the

Academy...”

“Well, send them to me, and I’ll correct that error, post haste!” Rosaria laughed, undeterred by Franco’s weary half smile. “Come!” said Rosaria, patting Franco on the arm. “Come on out of the weather!”

“But the weather is beautiful.”

“That’s no excuse!” exclaimed Rosaria. She reached behind Franco and gently pulled him inside. “Now come on in!”

Franco ducked through the entrance. While Rosaria closed the door behind him, he turned to Benito and smiled. “Ciao, Benito. Been well?”

“Quite well, signor Franco,” replied Benito. He did not return Franco’s smile, but there was a warmth in his eyes as he stepped behind the young man and removed his jacket.

Rosaria called after her butler as he put the jacket away. “Some food for our guest, Benito!” She then turned to Franco as she walked over to the wine bottle across the room. “Care for some wine, Francetto?”

“White or red?”

“Red—is there any other kind?” said Rosaria, pointedly. She poured a second glass and handed it to Franco. Then she refilled her own. The pair drew up some plush Persian chairs to the table where Benito had set Rosaria’s backlog of mail. She set the stack aside and gave her wine a sip, savoring the flavor. Franco himself took a long draught. Rosaria showed him a broad smile.

“You are a strange sight, Franco, and it is ever so welcome,” said Rosaria, shaking her head in nostalgic

reminiscence. “Do you remember, back when we were children?”

A muscle twitched in Franco’s neck and he smiled bashfully. “Do we need to remember so far back today?”

“Why not? Those were the days.”

“You *tormented* me!” said Franco, laughing.

“Oh, please. I was simply trying to keep your head from getting too big, so you wouldn’t become a big lug of a *Franconastro*. Fat lot of good *that* did.”

“You tormented me!” repeated Franco. “You were savage, and you relished it! The only thing you relished more than tormenting me was teasing that poor girl with the country house next to our estate!”

“Well, it’s your fault,” said Rosaria, casting Franco a sideways glance. “*You* kept following me no matter how much I abused you.”

“Well,” said Franco, his voice softening, “that’s only because you were always fairer, stronger, and more clever than I was.”

“Oh! *Please!*” Rosaria rolled her eyes, but made no attempt to hide her feline smile.

“I do not jest. I require an Academy just to learn my letters, but you’ve managed to assimilate the entire canon on your own! You are a *genius*.”

“You flatter me, Francetto,” said Rosaria, waving the compliment away. “I am only a *minor* genius.”

“Is there a real distinction?”

The look Rosaria gave Franco was suddenly serious. “You would be surprised to know.” She bit her lip, eyes turned away in contemplation. “So I wouldn’t worship

at the altar of Saint Rosaria quite yet,” she quipped, her good humor returned. “Besides, the Inquisition is gaining traction. In this world, it would be best for your religion to remain a one-man mystery cult.”

Franco smiled mischievously. “The thought does have its appeal.”

Rosaria laughed heartily. “So,” she said. “How about you? What have you been up to at the Academy, dear cousin?”

Franco opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by Benito from the next room. “No good,” said the old butler, gruffly.

“No, no,” said Franco, a bit flustered. “I have been up to good. Plenty of good, in fact. My tutors are most impressed...”

“Your tutors aren’t the only ones you have impressed.”

“Well...” Franco’s skin took on a distinctly reddish hue. “I do have business *outside* of my studies...”

“Tell me.” Rosaria placed her glass down and sat at attention, hands folded.

Benito popped in from the next room. “Rumor is young signor Franco is quite the libertine in Naples.”

Franco’s face drained of color. “Come now, *Benito!*” cried Franco in nervous indignation. “What do *you* know of rumors in *Naples?*”

“Only what you recount in your letters,” replied Benito, matter-of-factly.

Franco looked at Benito, then slowly returned his gaze to Rosaria. His face was a perfect study in the con-

tortions of a countenance uncertain of what expression to wear. Rosaria's own pale complexion flushed. "Yes, you mentioned in your letters. Which I read ages ago."

"Strange fact, signor Franco. Time flows much differently for signorina Rosaria than the rest of us. It is possible, in her world, for entire eons to pass in a matter of minutes."

"Benito!" exclaimed Rosaria. "It seems you were given to me because only I, out of all our family, am willing to put up with such cheek! Show some repentance."

Benito crossed himself. "Oh Father, who art in Heaven, forgive me, for I have sinned." And he stepped back into the next room.

"Well, you *are* a cheeky lady yourself," said Franco, recomposing himself for banter.

"Am I?" She scowled at Franco in mock indignation. "Is that the sort of thing you tell these loose women with whom you consort?"

Franco shrugged. "Some of them."

"And Benito had the *gall* to suggest that *I* go to confession today!" Rosaria gestured at Franco, mischief in her eye. "*Here* is a truly wretched soul in need of salvation! Just look at how he works his wiles, the great seducer Franconastro, who will sink to any depths to fulfill the carnal lust of any woman who catches his fancy! How many maidens, dedicated to virtue, were led astray by your rapacious lechery? And here I am. I've never known the touch of a man, yet I need confession. My dear *Franconastrocetto*..." Rosaria leaned toward Franco and stared him straight in the eye.

“What will your father say when he hears of this?”

“Publically, he will denounce me,” said Franco. “Privately, he will congratulate me.”

“Perhaps.” Rosaria was solemn. “And your mother?”

“Well...” Franco paused, his mouth spreading into a sly grin. “I would simply say that I was a slave of Love. After all, who am I to deny any woman her truest desires?”

Rosaria giggled. “You’re a proper libertine, all right. I never though it possible.”

Franco blushed. “Well, I’m a different man in Naples.”

“I meant for a libertine to be proper.”

Franco shook his head and shifted uneasily in his chair. “You are too kind, cousin Rosaria.”

“I think not. Another man, I might think less of. But it would take a great deal for me to think ill of you.”

They were quiet for a while. Rosaria took another sip from her glass. Franco watched, his face warm and the edges of his mouth not far from a smile. His eyes, though, drooped with a certain solemnity.

“On the matter of family,” said Franco, “my father has arranged a function tonight. Do you wish to accompany...”

“I won’t be attending,” said Rosaria, firmly replacing her glass. “My relatives are nosy at best, and I would dishonor them to describe them at their worst.”

“I know,” said Franco. “They’re my relatives too.

But Father worries about you. And Mother too.”

“Aunt Clarita *worries* about *me*?” Rosaria frowned skeptically. “Is this the same woman who described me as a ‘miserable spinster-in-waiting?’”

“Well, she has her *own* way of worrying.”

“Does she? I can’t say I appreciate it. Every conversation I have with her becomes a lecture on matrimony. Ever since I was sixteen she has subjected me to a *parade* of suitors—Heavens, Francetto!” Rosaria held her brow in her hand. “Half of those men thought me a decoration, and most of the other half thought me a pet. I don’t wish to begin that ordeal again.”

Franco knit his brow. “Do you at all wish to be married?” he asked, gravely.

Rosaria glared at her cousin. “Don’t tell me you’re on *her* side.”

“No, I’m merely curious. I don’t envy your being on the receiving end of Mother’s tyranny, but surely you’ve met, you know, *someone* who catches your fancy?”

“Franco...” Rosaria sighed. “I’m unsure of what to say. The interplay of the sexes simply...isn’t of interest to me. I do not hate men, though there are many I disdain. But I have no desire to couple with a man. Science is my first love, and I am married to my work.”

Franco nodded, an odd sadness about him. “You make a dutiful wife, in that respect.”

“Passionate, too—most days. Nature has been coy with her secrets lately. My data shows some promise, but I fear I might reach an impasse.”

Franco said little, tapping his fingers slowly on

the arm of his chair. "I should be away soon," he said, rising. "I have matters to tend to before tonight."

"You will be around for a while, I hope?" asked Rosaria, standing with a little smile. "I enjoy your company."

"And I yours, and I hope to be in Venice for at least a week." They both started for the door, but Franco hesitated at the portal. "Rosaria, I don't wish to pressure you, but Father and Mother *are* worried about you. And so am I."

"Francetto," chided Rosaria, shaking her head. "There's no need."

"None of us have had sight, or sound, or word of you for *months*. I have nothing but respect for your work. It's brilliant, and I'm sure I'm not alone in that thought. But you are *mortal*. You require society just as much as any of us. You needn't isolate yourself. You can keep human company and still remain faithful to your work."

Franco wasn't lying. Rosaria could tell. The lines of his slumped brow were clearly the work of worry. It was a frustrating feeling, having so many people concerned for no reason. But she couldn't feel resentment for long, not toward Franco. No matter how much he had grown, Rosaria still saw in Franco the little boy who worshipped her, scared to death for his hero. And for that, she pitied him.

Rosaria leaned forward and planted a kiss on Franco's cheek. He flinched at the touch, and his face flushed as Rosaria stood close.

"Take care of yourself, Francetto," said Rosaria

softly. "I will be seeing you soon."

Franco nodded with a sad smile before departing.

Benito did not make a show of it, but a slight frown belied his disappointment that Franco would not be eating his dinner. So Rosaria ate for two, as she was famished anyway. Afterward, she retired to her bedroom. She meant to tend to some of her effects then return to her study to analyze last night's data. But as she completed her chores, she felt ill at ease.

Rosaria found herself staring at the rapier on her wall. She removed it from its mount and held it, feeling the weight in her hands. The weapon was a work of art. Its basket hilt comprised gilded coils of metal, wrought in the shapes of dragons. The blade rippled with the flowing patterns of fine Damascus steel, from which it had been forged. At the base of the blade, two small-caliber pistols were mounted to either side—an addition of Rosaria's, inspired by the works of modern sword-smiths. Though of Venetian make, the blade incorporated materials, techniques, and elements of design from the Orient as well. Or so Uncle Domenico had claimed on her fourteenth birthday, as he presented it to her as a gift.

Rosaria took the blade and cut a half-moon in the air. She gazed at the sword wistfully. When Franco's parents took her in as a girl, they were very good to her. Uncle Domenico was so proud of Rosaria. He bragged, as her father had in life, about how strong, brave, and clever she was. "She's hale as a boy, and smarter too!" he beamed. "There's not a male child in Venice more studious than she! And she's no slouch with a blade,

either!”

Aunt Clarita tolerated his enthusiasm, while gently urging Rosaria to act more feminine. But Rosaria would have none of that. She continued to fence, to study science, and wore men’s clothing. As she blossomed into womanhood, Aunt Clarita’s concern grew into contempt for her niece. Whenever Rosaria dressed in her preferred fashion, Clarita would glare at her with tangible disdain. And as she approached full adulthood, even Domenico’s zeal dwindled. “Don’t strain your pretty head so much,” he would say. “Don’t exert yourself too much. There are men willing to help. Take advantage! Listen to your Aunt once in a while, will you?” Rosaria wondered why he ever had to change.

Rosaria replaced the blade, the soreness in her chest becoming too intense for her tastes. But that feeling remained: longing of the sort that broke men’s hearts.

A mote itched in Rosaria’s eye, and she wiped it away. She left her bedroom and started up the stair to her study. She was halfway up when she stopped.

Oh, what the hell, she thought. *Just this once won’t hurt.* “Benito!” called Rosaria, turning and descending the stair. “I require your assistance!”