

1481, Venice, Italy

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A Gory Find

'Master Bartolommeo, I'm here. Sorry I'm late.'

Jacopo put his hands on his hips, bent forward and took a couple of deep breaths.

'My teacher wanted to talk to me about a Latin speech I'd written. He was very impressed.'

Jacopo's chest swelled with pride. His teacher had said that it was an admirable effort for an eleven year-old. He had enjoyed the compliment but it had made him late for his training session with the local apothecary.

So, he had run all the way, winding through Venice's narrow alleyways and hurtling over the wooden bridges. He felt hot and sticky in spite of the cool autumn air.

Jacopo straightened up and gazed into the shop. It was empty.

'Hello?' he called.

No answer.

He frowned. Where was the apothecary?

He walked around the counter and entered the room behind. This was where Master Bartolommeo prepared the remedies and potions he sold in the shop. Three large earthenware bottles stood on the preparation table in the middle of the room, along with a funnel and a small glass bottle. The stoppers of two of the bottles lay beside the funnel. The apothecary was nowhere to be seen.

Jacopo stared at the table and scratched his head. Clearly his master had been about to mix a tincture. Something or somebody must have interrupted him. Where could he be? He glanced over to the door on the other side of the room. Perhaps that was where he had gone.

He approached the door, his throat tightening with each step. Behind it lay the apothecary's private room; not his sleeping area or the place where he took his meals. No, this was his secret work room.

Jacopo had never seen inside. Once or twice he had seen Master Bartolommeo come out of the secret room, tugging a scarf down from his mouth and nose and clutching a small bottle in his grasp, but the apothecary had always closed the door too quickly for Jacopo to seize a glimpse inside.

Jacopo put his ear to the door. He could hear something: one, no, two voices. That was strange. He had never known the apothecary allow anyone else to enter that room. He leant a little closer, straining his ears. The door gave way a fraction. Jacopo glanced down at the handle.

He held his breath and pushed gently. The voices were coming from the other side of the room, behind a shelf piled high with bottles and jars. He tiptoed inside and pulled the door closed quietly, behind him.

Jacopo's heart pounded. He stood still and surveyed the room. There was a large chest close to the wall beside the shelf.

'There should be enough space behind there for me to hide,' he thought.

He crouched down onto all fours and crept forwards.

'Now Master Bartolommeo, will you tell us where to find it?' The voice was silkily smooth, the vowels well-rounded and the consonants crisp, surely a nobleman's voice.

A shiver ran down Jacopo's spine. He heard a groan.

'Perhaps you need a little more encouragement.'

Jacopo slid across the floor. He had to find out what was happening. He reached the chest and squeezed himself behind it.

'Aagh!' Master Bartolommeo's voice!

Jacopo jumped. His left foot knocked against the shelf. A small wooden box slipped from its position on top of a pile of cloths and slid to the floor. He stared at it wide-eyed.

'What was that?'

Jacopo drew his legs up under his chin. Footsteps approached. He closed his eyes and held his breath.

'It's a box, only. It falls down. The old man, he must 'ave kicked out when I slice 'im.'

Jacopo's head spun. What had he said? It did not make sense but then the accent was foreign.

He squinted through the jars on the shelf beside him but they were too densely packed and he could see nothing.

'Now, Master Bartolommeo, let us return to business. Where is it?'

'Villain, I'll never let you have it.' Master Bartolommeo's voice sounded weak, but defiant

'You fool. We could keep this going for a lot longer yet you know. Can you imagine the pain?' The nobleman lingered over that last word.

'A thousand cuts. You'll be begging me to kill you in the end. Now, where is it? Where's the book? Tell me.'

'No,' Master Bartolommeo shouted.

Jacopo shuddered. He must find help. But, how?

'Don't say you was not warned, old man.'

Jacopo braced himself. Master Bartolommeo screamed. Someone cursed.

'You fool. What have you done?'

'I've moved, my master. I didn't mean to.'

'He's no good to us now. Search the place.'

Jacopo listened in horror. Books were being thrown to the ground, bottles smashed, chests' lids slammed shut. He held his breath. Would they want to look in the chest he was hiding behind? Would they find him?

His fingers felt moist. He looked down, then pulled up his hand in horror. A pool of blood was seeping under the shelf. He shifted away from it, and wiped his fingers on his clothes. His stomach churned. A metallic taste swelled in his mouth. The room started to swim.

He placed his other hand over his mouth and nose, trying to keep the salty smell of blood out of his nostrils.

Then he smelt something else and nearly choked. His eyes smarted. His chest tightened, as if rebelling from breathing the heavy air.

One of the men coughed.

'Aqua regia! You fool. Look.'

'What?'

Jacopo pulled his tunic up over his face in an effort to protect himself from the fumes.

'Aqua regia. Those bottles you've smashed. Their contents are mixing to form aqua regia.'

'Master, I can 'ardly breathe.'

'Precisely, fool. You have contrived to poison us. Cover your mouth and nose. We'll have to leave. Now, go!'

Jacopo peeked over his impromptu mask. Two men were hurrying out of the room. The first was tall, dressed from head to foot in the black robes of a Venetian nobleman. He was holding his cloak over the lower part of his face to shield himself from the fumes. A black mask covered his eyes.

Behind him came a shorter man, dressed in green and red livery. He had a shock of copper-coloured hair. He, too, had covered his mouth and wore a black mask.

'Master, the book, we 'aven't found it.'

'The apothecary is past telling us anything more. We'll return later, when the air has cleared. Now, come.'

The nobleman tugged at the servant's sleeve and strode out of the room.

Jacopo waited a moment and then emerged from his hiding place. His legs were cramped and he could hardly breathe.

His mind raced. What should he do? He needed to protect himself from this foul air. But what about Master Bartolommeo? He had to help him too.

The door to the street slammed shut. His mind cleared. The men must have gone.

Jacopo returned to the workroom, took a cloth from a nearby shelf and tied it over his mouth and nose. Then he went back to the secret room and approached the shelves near which he had hidden. His stomach tightened and his head felt light once again. What would he find? Was he too late?

He reached the shelves. Master Bartolommeo was lying in a pool of blood just

behind them.

He hurled himself forwards and sank to his knees. He leant over and placed his ear to the apothecary's chest. Yes! He was in time. The Master was still breathing.

Jacopo straightened up and lowered his mask so that he could talk. He parted his lips to speak and gagged. The fumes and the salty smell of blood were making him feel sick once more. He put his hand to the floor to steady himself. He must stay calm. He must concentrate. He must not pass out, as had happened so many times before when he had been helping his doctor father.

'I'm going to help you. Don't worry.'

Jacopo's mind raced. What would his father do? Find the wound. Staunch the flow of blood. Jacopo scanned the apothecary's body. His sleeves were rolled up and his forearms covered in small, neat knife cuts. His legs were bare to the knees and covered in cuts too. There were even cuts on his face. But none of these were deep enough to have caused the pool of blood. There must be another wound.

Master Bartolommeo raised his right hand and brushed Jacopo's.

'It's too late,' he whispered.

'No, I can do it.' Jacopo wiped his brow.

Gently, he eased the apothecary's body onto his side. Master Bartolommeo groaned.

There it was. The wound stretched right across his thigh. Amongst the flesh and blood, Jacopo caught a glimpse of the creamy white bone. He swallowed hard. He must stay conscious.

He pulled off his tunic and rolled it into a ball.

'If I can just staunch the blood,' he said, pushing the ball of cloth against the gaping thigh.

Master Bartolommeo gasped. A shudder ran through his body.

'Jacopo, stop, listen.' He fought for breath.

'This is important.' He paused again, his breathing was becoming lighter, his voice quieter.

Jacopo eased the apothecary onto his back once more and leaned nearer his face.

'Metaverus,' he whispered. 'The book. Luca. Warn sister'

Master Bartolommeo shuddered once more, then relaxed. Jacopo's body went taut. In spite of the heat, he felt icy cold. He looked down at the apothecary. No. This was not possible. What had happened? No.

Desperately fighting back the feeling of sickness, Jacopo lay his fingers on the apothecary's eyelids and closed his eyes. He stood up. His head spun and his knees buckled. He slumped against the wall.

'I must get out of here,' he thought.

He sped through to the shop and out into the alleyway beyond. The cool autumn air hit him. He staggered towards the nearby canal, bent over and vomited into the water.

Where is the Book?

Jacopo picked himself up and turned to look back at Master Bartolommeo's shop. What had the master said before he died?

'Metaverus. The book. Luca. Warn sister.'

Six words and none of them made sense. He knew, at least, who Luca was, although he could not understand why the apothecary had named him. Luca was a young apprentice painter and Jacopo's friend. He often visited the shop to collect supplies for his father's workshop. That was how Jacopo had first met him.

But what about the rest? The men who had tortured and killed the master had been asking about a book. They had not found it, but they had said they would be back.

Jacopo shuddered. Clearly Master Bartolommeo had not wanted those men to find the book. But could he find it?

And what about the other things the master had said: 'Metaverus' and 'Warn sister.' They made no sense at all. Jacopo had no idea who or what Metaverus might be, and he knew that the master had no sister.

He shrugged his shoulders. Those two would have to wait. He had to find the book before the nobleman and his servant returned. And the master had mentioned Luca's name. Maybe Luca could help him find the book.

With his mind made up, Jacopo ran off in search of Luca.

'And I'll tell father what's happened on the way,' he said to himself.

An hour later Jacopo found himself back at the apothecary's shop with Luca in tow.

'We need to be quick. I don't know when those men will return.'

Luca nodded.

'What was it like, listening to it all? Did the master scream a lot? What did the

men say? Was there lots of blood? What did he look like? How many cuts were there? Where was he cut? Were you sick?’

‘Luca, stop.’ Jacopo suppressed a smile. Sometimes his young friend seemed so grown up, for instance, when he was negotiating a price for raw materials. But other times, like now, he was as excitable as a puppy.

‘Why do you think the master mentioned your name?’

Luca shrugged his shoulders.

‘I don’t know. It doesn’t make much sense to me. I’ve never even been in the workroom let alone this secret room you’re talking about. I can’t imagine why he mentioned me.’

Jacopo sighed.

‘Maybe something will come to you when we’re inside. Come on.’

He led Luca into the shop.

The younger boy held back.

‘He’s not still in there, is he?’

His face was white.

Jacopo smiled.

‘I don’t think so,’ he said. ‘My father should have had the body removed by now. I think he will have taken it back to our house so that he can examine it and report to the city authorities.’

Luca nodded. The colour slowly returned to his cheeks.

Jacopo took a deep breath. The body may have gone, but he doubted that his father’s men would have cleaned up all the blood. He just hoped that his stomach could cope.

He entered the workroom and paused.

‘I doubt he would have hidden it in here. I think we need to look in there.’ He pointed towards the secret room.

Luca smiled weakly.

‘Let’s hope we can find this book quickly and get out. I don’t like it in here.’ He shuddered.

Jacopo entered the room and sniffed cautiously. The fumes had gone, leaving only a slight acidic smell to the air. He approached the spot where the apothecary had lain bleeding an hour or so before.

‘Be careful here, Luca. The blood is still wet in places. Let’s start looking on the other side of the room.’

He turned and looked back towards the door. Luca was standing there, his eyes wide open and his mouth agape.

‘What is all this?’ he asked. ‘What was the master doing?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve never seen equipment like this before.’

He approached a shelf filled with bottles and looked at the labels.

‘Aqua fortis, oil of vitriol, quicksilver. I know what these are but I don’t understand why they are here. Unless...’

Jacopo froze.

‘Luca, I think Master Bartolommeo may have been an alchemist.’

‘A what?’

‘An alchemist, Luca. A scientist who seeks to discover the secrets of life: to turn base metals into gold, to cure all sicknesses, to live for ever. I think that was what Master Bartolommeo was doing here.’

Luca’s mouth dropped open again.

‘Jacopo, do you think that was why he was killed?’

Jacopo caught his breath.

‘I think it could be.’ He shuddered. ‘You’re right Luca, this place does not feel right. Let’s get on with the search.’

Luca approached a shelf full of books, papers and manuscripts.

‘Jacopo, do we know what sort of book we are looking for?’

Jacopo stared at the bookshelf. His shoulders drooped.

‘I have no idea,’ he said. ‘But I can’t believe it can be on open display. Surely those men would have found it if it had been. It must be hidden somewhere.’

An hour later the two boys were still searching when they were interrupted by a noise.

Jacopo froze. His heart missed a beat.

‘What was that?’ he whispered.

Luca stared back at him, his face drained of blood.

The two boys remained motionless, listening intently.

The sound of a bottle being knocked over came from the direction of the shop. Jacopo and Luca exchanged glances. Then Luca mouthed something and pointed towards the door. Jacopo nodded. Luca tiptoed towards the door and looked around the corner. He looked back at Jacopo, shook his head, then tiptoed on into the workroom.

Jacopo’s heart pounded in his chest. Should he have allowed the younger boy to go? What if the men had returned? Would Luca be safe? He must help him.

He glanced around anxiously. He needed a weapon. Then, he spotted a broken chair leg.

‘That will do,’ he told himself, and armed with the chair leg he tiptoed across to the workroom door.

The room was dark but it seemed to be empty. Luca must have gone into the shop.

He heard another noise. His heart jumped into his mouth. He tightened his grip on the chair leg.

‘Luca,’ he whispered.

Luca appeared at the door, a broad grin on his face. He took one look at Jacopo and burst out laughing.

‘What is it?’ Jacopo asked.

‘It was a cat!’ Luca laughed. ‘Jacopo, you do look funny. What were you going to do with that chair leg?’

Jacopo looked at the chair leg, shrugged, swung it through the air and brought it down heavily against his own shin. He howled in pain, and crumpled to the floor.

Luca collapsed with laughter. Jacopo dropped his weapon and rubbed his leg. He looked at Luca and burst out laughing himself.

After a few moments he regained control. It was dark in the shop and there were

no sounds of passers-by in the alleyway outside.

'You know Luca, I don't think it's very safe here.' Luca nodded.

'I was thinking the same thing. If those men are going to come back, they're bound to do so tonight. We've spent an hour or so looking and found nothing. I bet those men won't find anything either. Let's try again tomorrow in the daylight.'

Jacopo paused. Luca was right. It would be easier to search in daylight when they were both fresh. And perhaps the men would not find the book in the mean time.

'I agree,' he said. 'Let's meet tomorrow at first light. Can you do that?'

Luca thought for a moment. 'I don't think so. Father is expecting me to help Matteo at the convent of All Saints. And surely you should be at school?' he said.

Jacopo sighed. His friend was right. His father would be furious if he did not go to school.

'Fine,' he said. 'Then let's meet after I've finished school. Shall I come and find you at All Saints?'

Luca shook his head.

'Come and get me at the workshop. I'll be back there by then and it's nearer anyway.'

Jacopo nodded. 'Till tomorrow, then.'

A Pleasing Discovery

Lisa hurried from the convent parlour back to the small room she shared with her younger sister, Bianca, clutching the basket of gifts their elder sisters had sent them. Her heart was racing. She had asked them to find her some books. The basket was heavy. There must be books inside, hidden beneath the red and white chequered cloth that covered it.

She paused outside the room and listened. There was no sound.

'Good,' she whispered.

Much as she loved Bianca, she did not want to share the contents of the basket with her, at least, not until she knew what was inside. Her little sister had no love of learning and would only complain that precious space in the basket had been taken up by Lisa's books.

Lisa opened the door and went in. As usual, her heart sank. Would she ever get used to this room? The bare stone walls and floor, the simple beds, the plain wooden chest, the single crucifix on the wall. Her sisters had done their utmost to enliven the room. They had provided brightly coloured silks to cover the beds, embroidered cushions for the chairs, even a small Turkey carpet to hide the chest. Superficially, at least, they had done their best to make the two younger girls feel at home.

But there was nothing here to satisfy Lisa's mind: no books, no paintings, no sculpture, except that rustic crucifix. Lisa glanced towards it and shuddered. Christ's feet were too big, the legs too long, the fingers looked like squashed meatballs. Ugh!

Then she remembered the basket and smiled.

'Let's see what they've sent me.'

She sat down on the bed and pulled back the cloth. First out of the basket came two handkerchiefs, one in red silk, the other, in cream linen; then a small package, wrapped in muslin.

'Honeyed almond pastries,' she thought. Her sisters always sent these.

A few more knick-knacks followed and then, at the bottom of the basket, Lisa found what she had hoped for: two books. They were both smaller than she had expected. One was bound in dark red leather, with delicate gold tooling; the other was blue, but similarly fine. She furrowed her brow. Surely the sort of scientific and philosophical works she had asked her sisters to find would be larger than these, and less exquisitely finished?

She reached into the basket and pulled out the red book. She opened it at random and read. She blinked, opened another page and read again.

No. This was not possible. It was a prayer-book. She flicked the pages over, revealing prayer after prayer, after prayer, some in Italian, some in Latin, but all prayers. She reached the first page and took a deep breath. Her mother had written a dedication. It was addressed to Bianca. This book was not for her after all.

Her heart raced. Could the other book be different? Could it be something that she wanted after all? Holding her breath, she lifted the blue book from the basket. She closed her eyes.

'Holy Father, forgive me. But please let this little volume be something else? Something by Aristotle, perhaps, or one of the other Greek masters.'

She opened her eyes and held her breath. Then she looked down at the book, turned to the first page and groaned.

She jumped to her feet letting the basket fall from her knees and threw the book against the wall. How could they do this. How could they be so stupid? Did they really not understand? Her brain was dying in here without her father's library. The only books in this convent were bibles and prayer books. The last thing she needed was another one.

She sank back onto the bed, put her head in her hands and wept.

Half an hour or so later, she was still slumped on her bed when Sister Clara entered the room.

'I came to find you to help me prepare some medicines in the infirmary,' she said. 'But what's the matter?'

The nun sat beside Lisa and put her arm around her shoulders.

'Come now, little one. Tell me about it.'

Lisa snuggled closer to the nun and sniffed. Sister Clara had befriended Lisa since she had entered the convent a few months ago. She was the nearest thing Lisa had to a mother now.

The nun extracted a linen handkerchief from a pocket hidden somewhere inside her robes and offered it to her.

'Blow,' she said.

Lisa did as she was told.

'There, that's better, isn't it. Now, tell me what's wrong.'

Lisa wiped her eyes on her sleeve and looked up at Sister Clara. The nun smiled gently and stroked her cheek.

'Sister, sometimes I find this so difficult. I know I should be a good girl and accept my parents' decision but it's hard.' She felt the tears starting to burn her eyes once more.

'I remember, my dear, how I felt when I first came here. But, it's not so bad, you

know. We have our little comforts. Look. You have these lovely cushions and covers.' Sister Clara patted the bed cover.

Lisa's throat went dry. Why did everyone think that all she wanted were these silly fripperies? Did no one understand? She shook her head.

'That's not the problem, sister. I don't care about those things. It's the books, I miss.' The tears began to dribble down her cheeks once more. 'My father had such a library, sister, but all my sisters think to send me is that.' She pointed at the prayer book laying open where it had landed.

Sister Clara removed her arm from Lisa's shoulders, stood up and walked towards the book. She picked it up and flicked through the pages.

'But this is a prayer book, and a rather beautiful one, too,' she said.

Lisa nodded. She should have guessed that a nun would not understand.

'But perhaps you wanted something else?'

Lisa looked up. Sister Clara smiled. Then she put her index finger to her chin.

'I wonder'

Lisa's eyes widened. Sister Clara returned to the bed-side and placed the prayer book back on the cover.

'Come along, then.'

Lisa hesitated. Did the nun understand that it was scientific books she wanted, not prayer books? She might. Perhaps she was different to the other nuns. After all, she was reputed to have more knowledge of herbal remedies than anyone else in the convent.

Lisa followed Sister Clara through a maze of corridors until the nun stopped in front of a door.

'Welcome to my humble cell.' She opened the door and gestured into the room.

Lisa entered, looked around and gasped. In front of her was the usual nun's room, with a simple bed, a chair, a table and a couple of wooden chests. What was not usual, however, were the walls. These were lined with shelves which were teeming with books, scrolls and papers. She took two steps forward, hesitated and looked back at the nun.

Sister Clara laughed, strode over to a shelf, ran her fingers along the volumes, then paused and removed a book.

'This might interest you, as a starting point.' She handed the book to Lisa.

Lisa took the book and turned it over in her hand. It was one of the new printed books, the pages made of paper, rather than parchment like so many of her father's books. She turned to the title page.

'Liber Pandectarum Medicinæ,' she read. 'By Mattheus Sylvaticus.'

Sister Clara nodded. 'It's a popular book of medicine. My predecessor here had a manuscript copy. I was lucky enough to have this one given to me by my brother. He bought it in Naples.'

Lisa offered the book back to the nun.

'Why don't you keep it for a while. It will help you aid me in the infirmary. And if I need to refer to it, I can always come and find you.'

Lisa smiled her thanks and opened the book at random. The first thing she saw were notes written in Latin in the margin. The handwriting was elegant and italic in style.

'Are these your notes?' she asked.

Sister Clara nodded. 'Here and there I have noted my own observations. I find it

helps to correct any errors one finds, or to expand on subjects where appropriate.'

Lisa felt a warm glow rise within her. She had only met Sister Clara a few weeks ago, when she had first started helping in the infirmary. She had assumed her medical knowledge was the homespun variety, passed down from mother to daughter, nun to novice, over generations. The revelation that the sister may have learned her skills from books and was so confident of her own abilities and knowledge that she felt able to correct them, was inspiring. Perhaps, being a nun would not be so bad after all.

'Excuse me sister.' Lisa's thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of another nun.

'Sister Elena?' Sister Clara approached the other nun.

'May I speak with you urgently, please?'

'Yes, of course.' Sister Clara turned to Lisa. 'Would you like to stay and look at a few other books for a moment?'

Lisa nodded and stepped towards the bookshelves. The two nuns left the room and closed the door.

She scanned the books. They were all in Latin, but this presented no difficulties to a girl who had been so well educated. She read out the titles.

'Herbarius, Liber de proprietatibus rerum, Opus ruralium commodorum.'

She licked her lips and reached for the Herbarius. The door opened and Sister Elena walked in.

'Lisa, can you leave now please. Sister Clara is feeling unwell.'

Lisa pushed the book back onto the shelf and spun round. Sister Elena was helping Sister Clara back into the room. The nun's face was white. She could barely support her own weight.

Lisa rushed towards her.

'Can I help?' she cried.

Sister Clara raised her hand weakly.

'I'll be alright soon, Lisa. Now, take the book and go, please.'

Sister Elena nodded. 'It's best that you go now, Lisa,' she added.

Lisa turned and left the room. She returned to her own room in a daze, clutching the book to her chest. When she reached her door she paused and listened. For the second time that day she prayed that her little sister would not be inside.