

1481, Venice, Italy

1

A Gory Find

'Master Bartolommeo, I'm here.' Jacopo paused, bent forward and took a couple of deep breaths. 'I'm sorry I'm late. I couldn't help it. My teacher wanted to talk to me about a Latin speech I'd written. He was very impressed. I've brought it with me to show you.'

Jacopo straightened up allowing his chest to swell with pride at the memory of his classroom triumph. His teacher had said that his speech was an admirable effort for a fourteen year-old and that if he carried on like this he may be able to enter the university early. Jacopo had relished the compliment and lingered too long chatting in the school room. Then a pang of guilt had reminded him of his after-school training session with the local apothecary

and he had dashed away, gabbling excuses at the stunned teacher.

And he had run, his long legs eating up Venice's cobbled squares and narrow alleyways with ease. Now, he felt hot and sticky in spite of the cool autumn air.

He took a couple more breaths and gazed ahead into the apothecary's shop. It looked empty.

'Hello?'

No answer.

Jacopo called again, listening more carefully this time. Still no answer

Jacopo frowned. In the year or so since he had been coming to learn the apothecary's craft, Master Bartolommeo had always been there. Where was he now?

Jacopo took a step forward. A gust of wind blew up the nearby canal and whipped across the tiny square in front of the shop. Jacopo shivered and resolved to get inside quickly before he caught a chill from his run.

Still shivering, he entered. The familiar smell, a complex mixture of mustiness, alcohol, vinegar, and incense, greeted him, but the shop was empty. The door to the preparation room behind the counter was slightly ajar allowing a thin strip of light to leak across the shop floor.

Jacopo crossed to the far end of the counter and slowly lifted the hinged wooden board that formed the entrance to the business side of the shop, anxious, for some reason, to minimise its characteristic creak.

He nudged the door to the preparation room open and peaked inside. This was the room where Jacopo helped Master Bartolommeo to prepare the remedies and potions they sold in the shop. A heavy oak table with a marble top

stood in the middle of the room. On it were three large earthenware bottles, 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 the master had been about to mix a tincture. Something or somebody must have interrupted him. Where could he be? He glanced across the room to where a small wooden door punctured a wall bristling with bottle-laden shelves. The door was closed.

Jacopo approached it, 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 in spite of having asked on a number of occasions. Once or twice he had seen Master Bartolommeo come out of the secret room, tugging a scarf down from his mouth and nose and blinking rapidly as if his something had got into his eyes. Often he would be clutching a small bottle in his grasp too. But the apothecary had always closed the door too quickly for Jacopo to seize a glimpse inside. Jacopo had often wondered why he was not allowed to know what went on in that room.

He put his ear to the door and held his breath. He could hear something. A muffled voice. He concentrated and listened again. No, there were two voices. He took a step back from the door. This was strange. Surely if the master would have allowed anyone into that room it would have been his trusted assistant, Jacopo. He leant towards the door once more, placing his hand on its surface for support. The door opened a fraction. Jacopo glanced down

at the handle and realised that the catch had not locked.

Holding his breath, he eased the door open. The voices were coming from the other side of the room, behind a shelf piled high with bottles and jars. Unable to contain the feeling of curiosity, tinged with a scintilla of jealousy, he slid inside, pulling the door closed behind him.

Jacopo's heart quickened. Something was wrong, though what, he could not tell. He stood still and surveyed the room. Directly in front of him was the shelf laden with jars, positioned, Jacopo surmised, to ensure that no one could see into the room from outside. To Jacopo's left, and immediately in front of the shelf, was a large wooden crate, full of earthenware jars of the sort that usually contained the alcohol used to make tinctures. Jacopo squeezed himself past it. There was just enough space for him between the wall, the shelf and the crate. He crouched down and wriggled into his hiding place.

'Now Master Bartolommeo, will you tell us where to find it?' The voice was silky, the vowels well-rounded and the consonants crisp, surely a nobleman's voice. Yet somehow, it did not sound Venetian.

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

'Perhaps you need a little more encouragement.'

Jacopo held his breath. His heart raced.

'Aagh!' Master Bartolommeo's voice!

Jacopo jumped, involuntarily. His left foot knocked against the shelf. Instinctively he looked towards the end of the shelves and watched a small wooden box slide, painfully slowly, off the top of a pile of cloths, topple at the edge and then clatter to the floor. He stared at it wide-eyed.

'What was that?'

Jacopo ducked down behind the crate. Footsteps approached. He held his breath and closed his eyes.

'It's a little box. 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 the matter in hand. 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.' The foreign voice again.

Jacopo thrust his fist into his mouth. Master Bartolommeo screamed. Jacopo winced. He heard movement and a groan and then a slap.

'You fool. What have you done?'

'Aiee! I am sorry, my master. 'e moved. 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 wrenched open, then slammed shut. His mouth went dry. Would they want to

look in the crate he was hiding behind? Would they find him?

A warm liquid began to ooze around his fingers. He glanced down, then pulled up his hand in horror. A pool of blood was seeping under the shelf. He edged away, wiping his fingers on his clothes. His stomach churned and 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, something sharp that seemed to eat away at the inside of his nose, and nearly choked. His eyes smarted. His chest tightened, as if rebelling from breathing the toxic 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 hardly breathe.'

'Precisely, fool. See that greenish haze? It comes from the mixture. It burns and it poisons. We have to get out of here. Cover your mouth and nose. 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 simple 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 hurried out of the room.

Jacopo waited a moment, listening for some sound to indicate that the men had gone. He heard the creak of the counter hinge. He rose slowly 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 stepped back inside the secret room. He looked to his right, where the small wooden box still lay on the floor. His stomach tightened and his head felt light once again. What would he find? Was he too late?

He approached the box and peaked around the end of the shelves. Master Bartolommeo was lying in a pool of blood just on the other side of the shelves to his hiding place.

Jacopo hurled himself forwards and sank to his knees. He leant over and placed his ear to the apothecary's chest. He felt the slightest rise and fall of the rib-cage. 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. I know what to do. 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 torn open and his forearms covered in small, neat knife cuts. His legs were cut too, his leggings lying in tatters where the blade had severed fabric as well as flesh. 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. Deep inside, he knew that his father would respect him if he could save the apothecary.

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 cut.

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. The painter helped. Warn sister'

Master Bartolommeo shuddered once more, then relaxed. Jacopo's body went taut. His hands felt icy cold. He looked down at the apothecary. No. This was not possible. What had happened? He had failed again. No.

Desperately fighting back the feeling of inadequacy and 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 tiny square beyond, panting for air. A cool autumn breeze wafted over him, cooling his burning eyes. He shuddered and his knees gave way once more. Summoning up all his energy, he staggered towards the canal. Reaching it just in time, he lurched forwards and vomited into the water.