



“Ornate, vivid, deeply colored, and so precise I could smell and taste the world...

The story of a dog crossing continents and centuries in search of the man he loves is moving and tender. I was captivated by its charm from the beginning.”

—Rachel Joyce, author of *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*

# TOMORROW



a novel

DAMIAN DIBBEN

CHAPTER 1 PREVIEW

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HANOVER  
SQUARE  
PRESS

## PROLOGUE I



*Elsinore Palace, Denmark, 1602*

IT BEGAN, THIS journey of many lifetimes, in an ordinary way: he and I went to pick oysters on the shore. He loved them more than any other food, loved the ritual of unlocking abrasive shells to discover a treasured interior, smooth alabaster and incorporeal liquor. And when he feasted on them, they had a transformative effect: his shoulders dropped, his brow unknotted and his eyes softened, sometimes to tears.

‘We shall have luck this afternoon,’ he said, pulling on his boots. ‘The tide is low. So low, we could almost walk to Sweden.’ He took down his cloak, shook it out and tied it at the neck, throwing the weight over his shoulders. ‘And I have a sense—’ He unbolted the front door and barged it open. ‘Yes, there is still a good light.’ When he realized I was not following, he stopped and turned, head tilted to one side, a questioning silhouette in the doorway. ‘Where are you, my champion?’ Even now the memory of his voice—

as deep and gentle as a forest ravine—makes my heart split like a husk.

I hung back in the shadows, half hidden behind the baluster legs of the great hall table. It's easy to believe—now half a continent and centuries away—I had a presentiment of dread, a doomy foreknowledge of what we'd discover on the silt flats below, but I had none. Neither did insolence nor stubbornness keep me there; I had yet to learn those traits. No, my reasons were less remarkable. We'd already been roaming that morning and soon evening would be drawing in. It was the time to build a fire in our oak-panelled parlour, or in the palace library, for me to sit beside it and feel the warmth against my fur, as he pored over the inscriptions in books, chatting along all the while.

He discovered me in the gloom, and the corners of his eyes creased with a smile. 'What a fuss is here?' He came to my side, knelt and ruffled my neck, making me tremble with shame. 'Where will life lead us if we hide behind tables? The world out there is where we will find answers. And joy. And oysters, my champion.' He laughed, turned on his heels, and this time I went with him.

Once outside I revived. A warm wind carried with it scents from inland, sweet pine, woodsia and wild thyme, and I realized, after all, it was far from darkening time: a benign rose-pink sun had only half descended. I stared for a moment, back straight, ears proud, surveying the coast from the castle walls to the open sea. In that time I knew no other place but the little town of Elsinore and its castle. I had no sense I was, in fact, destined to be a wanderer, perpetually travelling from one palace to another, and then from battlefield to battlefield. But that afternoon I remem-

ber being thankful for my lot: my home, my companion, my happy life.

He sensed the change in my mood and laughed again. ‘So you’ve come back to me have you, my virtuoso, who has nothing but sensibility?’ He picked up a bucket, swilled out the rainwater and we went side by side down the stone staircase to the shore. ‘Look, my champion, the ocean has all but deserted us! How kind it is to relinquish its spoils.’ Ahead was an endless plane of silver wet sand disappearing towards a dreamy mystery of horizon.

In no time he found a cluster of shells, crouched down, took a knife from his pocket and prized one apart from the rest. He tested its weight, examined it from all sides, his face folding this way and that. ‘Perhaps too timid for us? Or we too rough for it.’ He held it out for me. I didn’t care for oysters then, any more than I do today—their saline stench has always stuck in my nostrils—but out of courtesy I passed my snout around its form, making him chuckle again. ‘I agree wholeheartedly. A slip of a thing it is. We’ll return it to its family and wish it good luck. Onwards. Let us search for the bolder, brinier ones, the ones I truly love.’

We ventured further from the shore. The sand became stonier, colder and wetter underfoot, like unset cement. And the weather altered too; a chillier breeze crept in from the north. It seemed to wash away the colour from the sun, and from the sky too, turning it as hoary as the silt flats, making everything dimensionless. It was as if we were in one of those opera sets I would see later in my life—dramatic shrinking perspectives, alternate worlds in a box—two characters wandering a boundless landscape.

By the time my master had discovered the larger oysters,

started cutting them from their beds and putting them into his bucket, my mood had turned again. I looked back at the palace. It had a grim, inert air. Except for our quarters close to the kitchens, the windows were all dark. Most of the royal party had gone for the winter. Although my master had kept me largely apart from them when they were here, as I was still puppyish on my feet, I had nonetheless relished the sense of a pageant unfolding in the main part of the building, of cooking, children playing, a thrill of stewards and chamberlains, lutes and harpsichords and peals of laughter. Now, other than the old queen—for whom my master had stayed to attend to, in case she grew sick—only the dourest of staff remained: unsociable guards, washerwomen forever veiled behind wind-flapped cloths, and night-wardens with heavy sets of keys. I turned back to my master, hoping he would have finished by now, but found him standing bolt upright, arms out, with the bucket dropped on its side.

‘Sssh,’ he went as I padded towards him, his tone so sharp that my ears folded back and I wondered if I’d done something wrong. But his eyes were fixed on an islet of crooked rock some distance ahead. Usually it dwelt beneath the sea, but the low water had exposed it to its foundations. As a breeze sighed across the plane, one side of it stretched into a crescent before returning to its crooked form. I was startled and looked up at my master but he offered no explanation or reassurance. His eyes remained riveted. The wind whistled and charmed up ghoulish spectres of sand, sending them rolling past us. Once more the side of the rock heaved, but this time I realized that it was a shape behind it that moved: the sail of a boat.

‘Who is it? Who goes there?’ My master’s voice was stern and I barked. He took my head firmly in his hands. ‘Not

a sound out of you, you hear? Not a sound.' He continued forward, cautiously approaching until we had a view of the wreck: a small craft beached on its side, a navy sail strung between spar and stern, the underbelly holed and gaping open. There was a third weightier blast of air and this time it carried a smell with it, an acrid ammonia stench that stung my nostrils.

A pair of crates lay upturned in the sand, one intact, the other cracked in pieces, a rainbow mess of glass phials spilling from its interior. My master righted the undamaged box, wiped the mud from the escutcheon on the front and jolted in surprise. 'From Opalheim.' He turned to me, a peculiar slant in his eye. 'From Opalheim he comes.' I would hear the name spoken often in years to come and it always carried with it a sense of magnificent doom. The insignia showed three turreted towers below a crescent moon. My master's hand jittered over the flotsam of bottles, but he didn't pick any up. They were exactly the type he kept in his workroom, which contained quantities of powder or metal.

'Who is there I say?' he ventured again in what I came to know as his battle voice, but the only reply that came was the creak of ropes, the flutter of sail, and the irrefutable stink of putrefaction. By then I knew the scent, to a degree, from the odd dead gull or rat, but nowhere near as thick and pungent. My master must have also noticed how strong it was, for his hands shook and a faint adrenal surge lifted off him, the aroma of fear. We circled the ship and saw the body on the other side, legs tangled in rope and hoisted up towards the mast, whilst stomach and head were half sunk in the silt below. And as the boat groaned back and forth, so the corpse was dragged with it. My master smeared his hand up and down his cheek, pulling at the skin. 'My champion, what

are we to do?' Then, in a small voice that had, I fancied, an undernote of hope, he asked the corpse a question: 'So now you are dead, are you?'

He pulled himself together, squared his shoulders, marched over to the cadaver and hauled it on to its back. Instantly my master's face uncreased, the fear snapped from his eyes and a gasp came from him that sounded almost like a laugh, though I couldn't tell if it was from relief or disappointment. 'A courier,' he said. 'When I saw the intaglio, three towers, I—just a courier, though. Poor soul. Drowned. A courier returning my chattels that is all. It was so long ago I asked for them. I had all but forgotten.' That same curious laugh. 'The storm, you remember it? When was it? A week ago? Just a messenger returning my old compendium, poor thing.'

Close up, the stench gloved my throat. The body was monstrous, chest and face bulging and bloated, skin unlayered and marbled with veins. Its tongue was a coal pebble sticking out from a bone-white mouth, and its eyes were pale-grey glass.

'What shall we do with him?' my master was saying. He looked up at the waves breaking beyond us. 'If I drag him to sea, the tide will bring him back again. That is no end for a man. Not a good man.' After his fit of terror, he was practical now, as I had always known him to be. 'I shall do as the Romans did.' He cast his eye at the sun, split in half as it sank. 'Quickly, my boy, it shall be dark soon.'

He hurried homewards, but I stayed in front of the cadaver, as fascinated as I was repulsed. It did not *live* in the true sense, did not breathe, but somehow it seemed to exist with greater force than the other humans I had met. Perhaps because decay is the most virulent form of life, or perhaps

because nothing speaks more of the phenomenon of *being*, than the absence of it.

‘Do not get left behind.’ My master’s voice twisted away on the wind. He was already halfway home, cloak flapping from side to side as he dodged rock pools. I went after him.

He shouldered open the doors to our quarters and issued me in first. ‘You wait here for me, understand?’ I obeyed, reluctantly, stalling in the unlit hall as he hurried off down the passage. I started to sit, but the floor was cold, so I half hovered over it, cocking my ear to clanks of metal and screeches of wood that came from the boot room. He returned with a heavy jar and a tinderbox and as he rushed past, I caught the scent of lamp oil and tallow. ‘You wait. I shall return.’ And the door slammed shut.

My stomach turned. His footsteps descended to the beach again. The hall darkened and I circled, one way then the other, reassuring myself there was nothing to be afraid of, that my master would come home soon and all would be well—but still dread mounted. I cast my eyes to the statue enthroned at the base of the stairs, the sculpture he spoke to sometimes, an ancient, sad-eyed hound carved in marble (extraordinary that hands had fashioned those emaciated bones), its head turned as a man in rags approached from behind. ‘*Good Morrow to you, Argos,*’ he would say stroking the dog’s skull. ‘*How patiently you have waited for his return.*’

I had to see what my master was doing, so I slipped through a side door into the principal part of the palace and took the stairs up to the long gallery. I’d visited it once, in summer, when the building was lively. Now it was peopled only by statues. I mounted a chair and leaning on to a sill, I had a view of the ocean. In the distance, my master was a

shadow cutting across the mercury stillness of the silt flats. He stopped just beyond the crooked islet, busied himself around the boat, until moments later a golden light flared up. The glass panes of the casement shimmered with it. He was burning the body. I recall—how it seems like yesterday—my guts knotting as the blaze reached its apogee.

My master stayed there, dutifully waiting until the fire had diminished, before he turned and started to lumber back. I slunk down on to the floor and glanced at the congregation of sculptures: a bearded colossus wrestling a sea creature, a young lady reclining on a chaise with a lyre tipped from her hand, an old sage brandishing an open book. The night shadows bending over their contours made them all come to life in a monstrous way. And there were paintings too, even more illusive renditions of people, deceits of canvas and pigments: a gentleman in a fur-collared robe with a kestrel on his forearm, an old crone bodiced into a carmine gown, a young rake dressed in black and clutching a skull. All that time ago I had yet to travel the realms, to know the majesty and horror of cities, to witness war first-hand—its stench of hot metal and coppery blood—or to lose a friend I loved. I'd yet to learn also how centuries would pass for me, that I'd live and live. All that was to come. And yet, in that moment, amongst those ghostly watchers, somehow I felt the presage of those things weighing upon me. Dusk engulfed the room, sending me mad with fear—then at last I heard my master coming back in below. I bolted down the stairs two at a time. He had filled one of the crates with coloured glass, the phials that had previously lain strewn across the sand, and now he set it carefully down in the doorway. I leapt up, welcoming him with ecstatic barks and licks of my tongue.

'What a fuss is here! What a fuss,' he said, even though he too was shaken. I followed him into the boot room and watched him in the gloom as he washed his hands, and then to the parlour where he lit candles and shuttered the windows. Before he closed the last of them, he paused and peered out towards the crooked rock, still frightened it seemed by what he might have discovered.

'Everything shall be well, no?' he said, kneeling down and holding my skull in both hands. 'We are content with our lives, are we not?' His tone, the abrupt intensity of it, unnerved me and at once I thought of the body, of fat catching light and bones turning black as they incinerated. I thought of the statues and paintings in the dark gallery of the palace—the bearded colossus, the reclining lady, the rake with the skull—and they too seemed to belong to the world of the dead. It was only after he'd built a fire in the hearth and we'd sat in the warmth of it—he on an armchair and I at his feet—after the stone had heated beneath me, that my heart began to settle.

'No!' He sat up and looked round. I lifted my head to the door, wondering what he'd heard. 'The oysters.' He sighed. 'Left them on the beach. And our bucket too. The tide will take it.' He shrugged and sank back again. 'No matter. Tomorrow, we'll go once more. Maybe tomorrow we'll find finer ones still.'

I watched him from the tail of my eye as he fell asleep and his hands went limp at his side. Only then did I recall his strange behaviour on the beach. 'So now you are dead, are you?' he'd asked in as curious a voice as I'd ever heard from his lips. I wondered who he'd been expecting.

I would find out soon enough.

## PROLOGUE II



*Whitehall, England,  
five years later*

WE WAITED IN the cold at the gatehouse until a lady came to meet us.

‘Yes?’ she asked tersely. She was as thin as a bird, all in black and clutching a fistful of keys.

My master removed his cap and smiled. ‘Can it be you do not remember me?’

Her tiny chest jumped. ‘Not possible. The vanishing physician.’

My master smiled. ‘Forgive me, Margaret, for sending for you, but so much time has passed since I was here and I was unsure who remained from the old days.’

‘Indeed. I remain. I shall leave only in a box.’ She peered in disbelief. ‘How long? Fourteen years?’

‘Twenty-two.’

A gasp. ‘You lie. You are quite unchanged and yet I am an old maid.’

‘Nonsense, nonsense.’

Laughter.

‘And you come with a companion this time?’ She looked down at me and my tail swayed side to side. I liked her immediately; she had vitality. ‘What a handsome fellow. And how he seems to smile.’

‘Indeed,’ my master bragged, ‘he is all smiles, my champion; he has one for everyone.’ The compliment set my tail wagging at double speed.

‘Two decades, really?’ Margaret said. ‘How time slips through our fingers. Where on earth have you been gallivanting?’

‘I—’ His cheeks dimpled as they always did when he was unsure how to answer. ‘We arrive from Denmark. Before that Florence. A short stay in Madrid. And more—’ He gestured. ‘To travel is to live, is it not?’

I’m not sure if Margaret agreed, but her smile did not falter. ‘And now?’

‘Whitehall? If there is need of my services, lowly as they are. I have thirsted for London, above all places.’

Her delight was clear to see. ‘I could play the coquette, but I shall not. I have missed your remedies too greatly and I have more need of them than ever. I will find employment for you. New dynasty or not, you will note I still carry the keys. Come in, come in, you and your gracious companion—this chill is maddening.’ She motioned for us to enter, but my master paused.

‘Tell me first, did a gentleman come looking for me these last few years?’

‘A gentleman?’

‘By chance. I do not expect it, but you always followed so carefully the comings and goings—’

‘I recall no one. Is there some trouble?’

‘No, not at all.’ Though my master had brought the subject up, he now seemed to regret it. ‘My former associate in business, of years gone by, a chemyst such as I.’

‘Another of you, how thrilling. What is his appearance?’

‘Truly it is of no matter. He visited me here once, long ago, and I thought you might recall, but—forgive me. The long journey. I am at sixes and sevens. And you are right about the weather—lead the way.’

Margaret steered us round a cloistered quadrangle. The castle at Elsinore had been plain in comparison to Whitehall, which was a pale mountain range of halls, towers and colonnades, windows brilliant with multicolour stained glass, roofs fluted with a thousand brick finials.

‘You heard the news of course? The queen. Four years and I still fancy she will barge through the door and rail at me.’ She lowered her voice to a whisper. ‘Perhaps, if you had been at court, she would live. She would not be counselled on the matter of lead ceruse. They say it all but poisoned her. Her end, needless to say, was like a piece of grim and fantastic theatre. She ordered the removal of every mirror in Richmond Palace, took to the floor on cushions and lay for days, her fingers in her mouth, like an infant, still wearing that cartoon wig of hers. Eventually she pronounced, “I wish not to live any longer, but desire to die.” And she kept her word.’

‘She will not be easily forgotten.’

‘No indeed. And then, of course, last November’s episode. Did you hear of that?’

‘Varied accounts.’

Margaret halted, threw her eye around the cloister and held his arm. ‘Unspeakable, unspeakable.’ She had a playful quality that was a refreshing antidote to the long-wintered, wide-sky austerity of Elsinore. She resumed her march through the labyrinth of passages and courtyards, her voice sotto voce. ‘A time of horror it was. In the undercroft they found it, three dozen barrels or more. Pure gunpowder. Here, almost beneath our feet. A bedlam of interrogations followed, appalling torture, court writs and trials. The king himself attended, hidden behind a curtain. Can you imagine the scene? This entire court shredded to nerves. Everyone distrusting the other. Then the executions. Dear me. I would not attend. But the crowds that massed, to witness the dismemberments. Gruesome, gruesome. But imagine if they had been triumphant, the plotters? We’d be on another path entirely.’ We had come into a room with a fire. ‘You left him on bad terms, did you?’

‘Who?’

‘Your associate? I know how feuds develop. A dispute between two glassmakers in the Strand, over formulas, turned so violent one ended up in Newgate. Were secrets stolen?’ she enquired with an air of scandal. My master’s brow corrugated. ‘You poor creature. I’ll not extract it from you. What a gossip I am. Wait here, warm your bones, I shall talk to the powers.’ She lingered a moment. ‘My vanishing physician and his smiling hound. It is extraordinary how unchanged you are.’ And she went.

‘Let me see you,’ a voice said.

The chamber we’d been shown into was dim and so over-

ornamented with gilding and fretwork I hadn't noticed the man seated in the corner. A pale, paunchy face mounted over an elaborate lace ruff, heavy lidded eyes, thin beard. His clothes were fine, a complex symmetry of pleated velvet, but he had the fresh rotten smell of cheese. A wolfhound lay before him. She looked round at me and I bid her good day with a bow of my tail. To which she stared back so disdainfully I was embarrassed by myself, before she lay down again.

My master stepped forward. 'Sire.'

The man, King James, as I would soon learn, studied the vellum parchment that my master had given him. He'd inscribed it, in his steady slanting hand, on our passage over the North Sea.

'You were engaged in all of these palaces?' The king spoke with a cumbersome lisp, his tongue too large for his mouth. Dirt had caught in the lines of his hands, so that only his fingertips were flesh-coloured.

'In all the various courts of Europe, sire. And here at Whitehall too: six years at the service of your cousin the queen.'

'Then you know these halls better than I. Chemstry? Is that the magic that witches use? To make storms from the air?'

'That is not chemstry, sire, with all respect. Chemstry is a science. A sound and logical art. I am no magician.'

The king looked back at the paper and his head twitched in surprise. 'And in Persia too? Truly?'

'Indeed, sire. At the palace of Ismail in Tabriz.'

'Persia?' He was stunned. 'It is a world away from us. In that realm, for sure there is magic?'

'Mathematics perhaps. Wisdom resides in the very bones

of the Persians, sire. Ancient wisdom. There, far along the silk roads beyond the desert, I learnt the specialties of my craft, more than any other place.' In the years to come I would hear my master talk often of Persia, of Tabriz and mathematics, and he always shone when he did.

'And what age do you have?' The king shook the parchment. 'To be in possession of such a curriculum?'

'Fifty—' my master replied quickly, though it sounded more like a question. 'Or thereabouts.'

The king smiled at this and his teeth were as discoloured as his fingers. He pushed himself up and shuffled over to me. He was not old, but weak on his legs, ordinary-looking, like a street seller in fancy dress. He dropped his hand before my nose to let me sniff it. Out of politeness, I took in a draught, but it tanged of ink phenol and faeces. 'Welcome to Whitehall,' he said to my master, signalling that the interview had been successful. 'You and your hound.'

'The costume box city' my master called London. I have seen so many places since it's easy to forget how struck I was by my first true metropolis. Long squares of gabled houses, each a castle in itself, but joined together in miraculous geometrics of glass. And a new universe of odours. After the dull smokeries and fish hauls of Elsinore, the all-pervading rye-starch smell of painted timber, here the air was spiced with exotics: sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg, coffee and chocolate. The smell, I would come to recognize, of money.

And the humans that clipped on pewter cobbles along her avenues and through her colonnades were grand too, with their knowing confidence and froideur. It was the time of cartwheel ruffs, richly sombre fabrics and tall conical capo-

tain hats. Men were bearded, moustached, with hair swept back from the foreheads, some with lovelocks, many with short cloaks draped from one shoulder. And women, bodiced into gowns with high necklines and wings at the shoulders, were just as self-assured.

As he had been at Elsinore, here my master was always vigilant of new arrivals. In our lodgings, when boats arrived at the palace quay, he'd peer from the edge of the window, studying who came ashore. Or if he heard an unfamiliar voice from the courtyard, or the adjacent suites, he'd cock his ear to the wall. I was certain why: he was anticipating the person that *hadn't* washed up on the silt flats of Elsinore. The eyes of that stranger, the human I hadn't even met, seemed to stalk us wherever we went, even hanging, I fancied, in the darkness as we slept. I knew nothing more about him, other than that his seeming appearance had been heralded by that intaglio of three towers below a crescent moon.

A few years into our time at Whitehall, on a winter's day, we went to visit the frost fair on the Thames with Margaret. In fact, it was her idea to go. She and my master were firm friends, always laughing together and talking over each other, often staying up late, perusing books by candlelight, whilst sharing sweet snacks, marzipan and gingerbreads. I sensed an attraction between them that was distinct from friendship. My master was one of those rare humans who was naturally unmannered around women, innately gracious and thoughtful, yet virile enough to make even sour ones smile. It seemed to me that having Margaret as a companion put a spring in his step. So, at Whitehall, I used to wonder why he didn't allow their friendship to develop: for it was he, without doubt, that held it back. She was the one always

coming up with plans, always holding out her hand for his. In a few years I'd understand his behaviour completely.

The Thames had frozen over entirely, enough for horses and carriages to be able to travel along it all the way from London Bridge to Westminster. Here and there, ships had been encased in ice, their masts bare like winter trees. Hordes of people, red-cheeked and wrapped up to the eyes, bustled between the attractions—archery, bull-baiting, skittles and see-saws—whilst children skated about or pulled each other in sleighs. My human companions were thrilled by at it all, but I felt uncomfortable on ice, though I tried to keep it a secret. I never liked, not even today, the intense squeeze of cold against my paws, the odour—like sharp peppermint I always thought—and worse than all, the fear it might break at any time.

'Look, let us buy hats,' my master said, alighting on a stall. 'I know this gentleman. *The Masque of Queens*, that was you?' he asked the elderly stallholder, who replied with an ancient crinkle of a smile. 'The man is a genius, Margaret, a milliner. We shall have one each.'

'Not I, not I,' Margaret begged, but in no time he'd paid for two and crowned her with a headpiece of plumes in parrot colours, and himself with a turban studded with a glass ruby.

'You shall be the Queen of Amazons, or some such, and I the Sultan of Arabia.' It was so entertaining I barked, and forgot all about my fear of ice. My master loved putting on costumes. Whenever players came to a palace, he'd follow them round in an almost intoxicated state, only to become tongue-tied if any of them actually spoke to him. Once an earnestly drab playwright came to our rooms in Whitehall

and questioned him for hours about his work. During the interview my master was so star-struck, he seemed to forget how to speak, but for months after he boasted to anyone who'd listen: 'Did you know, Mr Jonson is writing a play about me? I shall be famous the world over.' (Unfortunately, when we saw the piece, he was shamed by the portrayal of a con artist masquerading as an alchemyst and slipped out of the theatre before the final song.)

We went on to watch a troupe of dancers. To the fast running of fiddles, they reeled in figures of eight. My master started to tap his feet as he always did when he wanted to join in. He loved dancing as much as dressing up, though in my opinion he was best left out of it, as he was inevitably the clumsiest on the floor. When one man stepped away, leaving a space, I thought he'd join in—but something at the edge of the river had caught his attention. The light dropped from his face, like a block of snow falling from the eaves of a house. His nostrils flared and a keen odour—of hysteria I fancied—lifted off him.

'We should return. This is meagre entertainment.' He set off hurriedly, not even making sure we followed. I tried to see what had stirred him so, but a group had pressed in behind us. He was so distracted that he slipped and knocked into one of the dancers, sending her off balance. She fell but my master didn't apologize or help her up, as he normally would, but forged on. 'Quickly,' he snapped. He'd dropped his turban and I was about to rescue it when he shouted again for us to 'hurry up.' With the happiness apparently gone from our day, the rabble seemed shrill and disobliging now, with all their clattering patterns, and I began to feel nervous again of the ice breaking, imagining how cold and dark the

river would be underneath. We came to a clearing and my master stopped dead and swore under his breath. ‘Why do I run? Face him.’ Margaret was nonplussed, as grimly he turned his body about. ‘How long has he been watching?’

That was when I saw the lone figure standing on the steps of the Embankment, his black cloak picked out against the snowy city. He came down on to the river and advanced towards us at a measured pace. Even at a distance, he was striking: broad-shouldered, confident, gliding swan-like across the ice, at a different speed from the masses swarming about him, with a different quality, in a different universe from them.

‘The gentleman you’d been expecting?’ Margaret asked, her wits always about her. ‘Your once associate? Is there cause for concern?’

My master made no reply, just shoved me behind his legs. The stranger halted some yards short of us and held out his palms.

‘So I find you in London?’

His smile was so self-assured I tingled. His face was hidden like treasure beneath a wide-brimmed hat with an ostrich feather plume, and by his hair; his ink-black curls tumbled to his shoulders. His face was not cold or pinched like everyone else’s; it shone with a Mediterranean light. He dripped in riches: a doublet of Prussian blue, velvet and satin dropped with pearls; floating collar of Spanish lace (the type that even the most fashionable courtiers were yet to wear); patent shoes that reflected the entire scene; a gold-tipped swagger stick; and an emerald about his neck. Another person may have looked gaudy, or effeminate, but not he. My master, who I’d thought of as handsome, with his large nose, oversized

hands and unruly scrub of sandy hair, was diminished in the other's presence. He stepped forward, inclined his head and spoke the stranger's name:

'Vilder.'

The stranger, who was slightly shorter than my master but with a stronger build, stared back, puffs of condensation smoking from his nostrils, apparently relishing the discomfort, before speaking. 'It is good to see you, sir.' Then he glanced down at me, eyes as glittering as coal pits, making me almost light-headed. 'He is yours?' he asked my master, before turning to Margaret with a slight but vanquishing bow. 'My old associate is a fool for the species.' He examined her with a wry twist of the mouth. 'I like your hat.'

Margaret had forgotten she was wearing it. I'm sure she longed to snap it off, but she endured, reddening slightly, and gave a comical shrug. There was an uneasy silence; three humans gathered on the ice.

'Have you travelled far?' Margaret's voice got stuck in her throat and she coughed, whilst rearranging her collar. 'Where is it you have come from sir?'

'The Hunsrück mountains. Rhineland. The *old country*.' He spoke graciously and smiled often, but his words were gilded with mischief.

'The Rhineland. A place of fairy tales surely?' Margaret rejoined.

I had the sense that Vilder was not one to make small talk, but he answered nonetheless. 'I would travel ten times the distance to hunt down my oldest acquaintance in the world.'

My master seemed to measure Vilder's words, as if they contained hidden meanings.

'An arduous journey from there?' Margaret said. 'And

you have a shared fascination with chemstry? With metallurgy and—and such matters? Where does *your* interest stem from, sir?’

Vilder regarded her with sunny disdain, before answering. ‘My parents owned mines, long ago. I inherited. A grimy business.’ He twisted an immense sapphire on his finger in a dazzle of light.

‘That would make sense, mines, and the materials that are found in them, for chemstry I mean. And you speak the language like a native.’ She was a magpie for facts but her persistence was making me anxious, and my master too.

‘My mother was English. And on her instruction I was tutored at John Balliol’s college in Oxford.’ He motioned at my master with a flourish. ‘He and I studied side by side—though I was far from a model pupil.’

‘Ah, all becomes clear: your connection, the university at Oxford—’

Vilder interrupted her with a tap of his swagger stick. ‘I so look forward to speaking to you at greater length, but you must excuse us. An age has passed since last we spoke.’ He gestured towards my master and Margaret’s cheeks turned the colour of boiled ham.

She nodded, mumbling an apology, picked up her skirt, left, realized she’d gone the wrong way, came back and departed in a muddled zigzag, her parrot headpiece going with her.

For some moments a magnetic silence held the men together.

‘I am pleased to see you well,’ said my master at last. ‘When I was in Elsinore I thought—’ Whatever he was going to say, he decided against it. ‘I was most grateful to you for

sending my materials. Though I was sorry to return such a grim report. You received it? Did you know the poor fellow who drowned?

‘Not personally.’ Vilder studied my master as a gentleman thief might peer through a jeweller’s window. ‘Well, as the lady noted, I have travelled far in this bitter cold. Invite me to your rooms?’ He nodded towards Whitehall, smirking. ‘The court of the Scottish king.’

‘May I offer you some refreshment?’ my master asked him as we entered our parlour. Vilder glanced about, noting the shelves of little glass bottles and phials that my master always assembled in his place of work.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Mix me one of your reviving tonics. I have missed them.’ Vilder kept his cloak on but removed his hat. I tried to see his face properly, make sense of the fragments I’d glimpsed beneath its brim—squared jaw, broad nose, heavy brow—but the room was too dark.

‘A tonic?’ my master asked.

‘Yes, with a dash of—’ Vilder shrugged ‘—some opiate or other. Laudanum if you have some?’

My master seemed unsure. ‘Are you ill?’

‘Do I need to be?’ My master lit the candles on the stand by the door and I crept forward to see the visitor closer, but he went to the window and became a silhouette. ‘Come now, don’t look at me like that,’ he said to my master. ‘A tonic would make me happy. Is that not reason enough?’

My master set about concocting a brew, first stoking the furnace, before collecting phials from his shelves and measuring out ingredients. Though he seemed reluctant to be doing it, he kept his tone friendly. ‘London, you will see, is

greatly altered. It is as Florence once was. There is zest here, enquiry, and such thrilling science that sometimes I cannot sleep with sheer excitation.'

'Scientists?' Vilder laughed. 'We are the most ill-gotten creatures of them all. The fool kings.' He nodded at my master's preparation. 'Why not put some hemlock in too?'

'What?'

'I'm joking with you, dear fellow.' Vilder chuckled again and turned to look out from the window. A pale winter sun slipped behind the forest of ship masts on the Thames. With the visitor's back turned my master quickly hid his red velvet wallet under the worktable pans. It was his only truly precious possession, containing two objects: a hexagonal glass phial with a dash of grey liquid in the bottom and a tortoiseshell case, the size of a snuff box, containing a quantity of grey powder with no odour at all, like dry dirt. I'd only seen him *look* at the things, checking they were there, but never once using them. I would learn later that this substance, in raw and liquid form, *jyhr* as it was called, would play a profound part in my life.

'Do you know how those people became rich?' Vilder said, tapping the top of his swagger stick on the window pane. 'The sea traders and the sugar hagglers there, where their wealth came from?'

'From foreign lands?'

'From death. It came from death.' He half turned his head to my master, and back again. 'The great plague of two centuries past, and all those since. The ruination of the species. The world diminished of people, but still bursting with treasure: iron, copper, gold. A void left just at the moment of

new invention. And who better to fill it, to capitalize, than merchants and spice men?’

‘A sombre subject, no? After all this time.’

‘And the plague not only made people rich, it made them clever.’ He deepened his voice ““If I—*everyman*—am to suffer an horrendous end, to be eaten alive by buboes in my groin and armpits, whilst my skin turns as black as tar, if my life will end *that* way, I must surely make something of it first. What if there is no paradise? What if this frail body is all I have?” Would Michelangelo have picked up his chisel otherwise? Would Euripides or Plato have recorded their thoughts? Or Spenser or Donne put ink to paper? Their endeavour to cheat mortality.’

‘Have you come all this way to talk of the plague?’ There was a coolness in my master’s tone that made the visitor turn back.

‘You are right. I have a purpose here and I shall be direct. Return with me to Opalheim. I have a commission for you there.’

‘Opalheim?’

‘You recall the place?’

‘Yes, I recall it.’

Vilder chuckled quietly to himself. ‘How bad-tempered you’ve grown.’

‘I will not go to Opalheim. I will not set foot in that place. It is your home and I do not wish to speak ill of it—’

‘You *are* speaking ill of it.’

An electric silence. The palace bells rang out. My master shook some powder from a bottle, sprinkled it into the pot and stirred. ‘What commission?’

Light from the furnace flickered against Vilder’s tourma-

line pupils, otherwise he was a magnificent shadow. ‘I wish you to perform a conversion.’

‘No.’

‘I would not trust myself with the procedure, otherwise—’

‘Nor should you.’

‘Otherwise I would not be seeking your help.’

‘I say no.’

‘And that is that?’

‘You are as qualified as I. You know how to do it. Do it. I will have no part of it.’

Vilder looked towards me, smiling subtly, and whispered, ‘It seems we’re no longer on good terms, my friend and I. I suppose time does that.’

‘Who is it you wish to convert, huh? A lover? Some caprice of yours? You joke of hemlock. It is no joke. And you wish me to put a curse on them, whoever they are? I’ll not. It would be unconscionable in the extreme, immoral, to burden another living thing with it—to find later you’ve tired of them, as you tire of all your caprices. No, I will not do it. You are irresponsible and you give our craft a bad name.’

‘He is no caprice.’

‘Well, I am no fool king.’ The fur lifted from my back: I had never heard my master shout before. He wiped beads of perspiration from his brow and stirred the pan. His hands were shaking. ‘All good, my champion, all good,’ he whispered to me. He presumed I was frightened by the visitor, but I was more intrigued than anything. He was like a character from a play or an opera come to life. From a piece that was full of tension and drama, where murder was in the air, and powerful women and flawed heroes whispered in dark palace rooms. Vilder possessed a quality, in his demeanour,

in how he spoke and moved, in the indefinable odours that sung from him, that I'd never encountered before and rarely since. I had no notion if he was brave and honourable—or a villain who took pleasure in enchanting others. The only other human I would meet, decades later, with such a quality of grave extravagance, was Louis, 'the sun king' of Versailles.

It was some time before my master spoke again to him. 'I wish I could help you. Truly.' His tone was at once conciliatory. 'You know I would assist you in any other matter, in profound matters if you asked me, but I *cannot* in that way. You know why. It is the only rule of my life.' He cleared his throat and funnelled the contents of the pan into a cup and set it on the table.

Vilder heaved a sigh. 'You're right. I should not have made the suggestion. The idea took hold of me and—' Now I know Vilder to be a dissembler, a double-dealer, who'll say one thing and mean another, but at the time I was amazed by how quickly his irascibility drained away, a seeming penitence in its place. 'I will think on it no more.' He took off his cloak and laid it carefully on the back of a chair. 'I have a better proposal: that we revive our old association. Too many years have passed for resentment.'

Vilder was so gracious, my master dropped his guard. 'Nothing would make me happier.' They embraced, only with a little awkwardness, before Vilder sat down and picked up the cup of liquid.

'Whether you approve of such tonics or not,' he said, 'you are the best of all at making them. Perhaps it is a deceit of the brain, but my own medicines never seem to work as well.' He studied it with his nose and used the tip of his finger to touch a single drop on to his tongue. Immediately his jaw

loosened, his shoulders dropped. After it had cooled a little, he drank the rest and sank like warm wax. My master watched him, with distaste I fancied, but when he poured two beakers of wine and they both toasted, their animosity was put away. They talked, more like friends: chemystry, silver mines, Florence, Rome, the dead queen.

Past midnight, both on the cusp of falling asleep in their armchairs, Vilder said: ‘His name is Aramis, my caprice. He is a soldier. And a fine man.’

I was woken by a tap of metal and a feather of golden light on my eyes. Vilder was retrieving his swagger stick. It dazzled against the dawn light through the window. He swept back his cushion of hair, put on his hat, curled his fingers through the feather. He looked down at the place where my master had hidden the wallet, a sliver of red beneath pans. He smiled, I think, but didn’t touch it. When he noticed I was awake, he bowed at me, then slipped from the room. My master was still asleep and I wondered if I should rouse him, but I had a more mischievous urge: to follow him on my own. I crept out of the door as it was closing. The shadow of the ostrich feather stole down the stairs and I went after it.

I trailed him out of the palace on to the Thames. Snow was falling and I couldn’t even see the south bank of the river, just an otherworldly swirl of blizzard, of shape-shifting silhouettes of lumbering morning people. Vilder strode across the ice, not slipping nor skidding. There was a moan of wind along the river and the tendrils of his ostrich feather shook against it and would have flown free had the unyielding shaft not kept them in check.

I went in his wake almost to the other side of the Thames,

longing for him to turn and see I was there, regarding me in that dark, extravagant way of his, that I might feel his grandeur one last time. In the end, I stopped. Vilder did not turn, nor break his stride, and it was almost painful watching him vanish into the white.

For a moment I was lost in a trance, then the sky must have darkened a shade, as I realized how cold it was, and that I was standing on the ice, almost alone on the river. I turned and found Whitehall vanished, consumed by white, and all of a sudden I felt a keen shame that I had somehow betrayed my master, allowing myself to be charmed by a man who clearly distressed him. I began to return, but the streak of superstition in me—that I always had and still do—made me think, for my disloyalty, there'd be a break in the ice, that a fissure would open and I'd fall through. I imagined the current taking me, and my body tumbling along beneath the bumpy ceiling of ice as I was carried away seawards.

I longed to get back to our room, to my master's bed, so he knew I hadn't left him, so I could show I'd never leave him, but it took me ages to cross back to the north bank. I kept having to stop, to summon my courage, shivering on the ice, appalled by how London had been stolen away from me, before marshalling myself to continue. At last the towers of Whitehall began to refigure, and I sped up and kept going.

I tore across the courtyard, up the steps, then drove through the door into our room—and relief. A shape still lay beneath the blanket, and that smell that was vital to me—like midnight in a tall forest, stiff parchment paper and a whisper of pine sap. My master.

I jumped up and he, half dozing, lifted the cover.

'All good, my champion?' He smiled, then added, 'How cold you are,' before he nodded off once more.

I burrowed down to his feet and lay there, in warmth, wild in my heart.

My home.

How many years ago was it now, that morning on the river? More than two hundred. In another age, at the beginning of my life. More than two hundred winters have come and gone since then, more than two hundred times the November winds have arrived from the north and humans have put on their furs and hats and lit fires in the streets. I have counted all the winters and always say the new number to myself when the day of the new year comes around. That's how I know my age—two hundred and seventeen.

The visitor, Vilder, would of course return to our lives, casting a shadow over everything, the man responsible—I have no doubt—for taking my master from me.

I often think of Elsinore and Whitehall and the other courts in which my master worked. I think too of our later years—those after the dreadful events in Amsterdam—trailing armies, the battlefield, the red-mist bone-smash horror of war. The memory of those decades spent together pulse through me perpetually. I dream of them every night, fantasies so vivid and intense, I struggle to believe they're not real.

As to why I, a mere dog, have lived for more than two centuries, that is a question to which I only have vague answers.

Of course, if I could find *him*, my master, who was no dissembler, or enchanter, or mystery-man like Vilder. Who

was honourable and constant and loyal to his core, a softly spoken angel too modest to ever tell the world how great he was. If I could find him, my beloved, if he is still living, somewhere—I might understand everything.

# 1



L O S T   S O U L

*Venice, May 1815,  
a hundred and twenty-seven years since I lost him*

## WHAT A RAVISHING MORNING!

For two weeks I've been cooped up in my den, watching from the entrance, as it's rained and rained, and cheerless huddles have sloshed back and forth, all wet hemlines and squeaking soles. But today, the air is newly spun from the Adriatic, and clean again.

‘*Buongiorno!*’ comes a voice and a pair of boots approach, the porter from the customs house. ‘A surprise for you.’ He crouches and slaps down a pie on the cobbles before me. ‘*Torta di fagioli!*’ he boasts with a kiss to his fingertips. I pass my nostrils over it. Spinach and beans cased in pastry, only a few mouthfuls missing. The porter, who’s as straightforward as the barrels he unloads all day from the merchant ships, often comes to chat, and sometimes brings me treats, but rarely anything this enticing.

*For me?* I ask with a studied lift of my brow.

He laughs, scruffing my neck in his giant palms. ‘*Si, mio signore*, who never leaves his post, who sits all day watching the ships arrive. To your feast.’ He does a comical curtsy and goes.

I press my snout over the *torta* and inhale. I’ve barely eaten in days and I could wolf it straight down—but I’ll ration myself: a quarter tonight, a quarter tomorrow, enough for a week if I’m disciplined. I come out into the sunshine and cast my eye along the quay: a ship setting sail, another docking, half a dozen crewmen winching crates down to the quay. *He* is not amongst them. I inspect the cathedral steps: a young priest ascends and slips through the double doors.

There comes a playful bark and a familiar dog trots across the port. I nudge my treat out of sight. Sporco, as I call him, ‘the messy one,’ a local stray who often hangs about the customs house, bothering for scraps. He’s the sort of creature I might have avoided in that splendid time of my former life, when I was a courtier hound, when I might have found him a little too much of an animal, a slave to mechanical urges, the permanent want of food. But nowadays, I am equal with them all, except in one way of course. In any case, Sporco had a dreadful beginning, which I myself witnessed.

‘Muggy today,’ he says. ‘We’re still in spring, but it’s muggy, no?’

I don’t reply, for it’s not muggy in the slightest. He snouts the air, but doesn’t realize there’s a *torta di fagioli* sitting right behind me. I observe him down the length of my snout. When he was a puppy, his fur was golden, but years on the street have matted it into dirty clumps. He’s half my size, but has uncommonly large ears that point up quizzically, with

tufts sprouting from inside them. He's scruffy and smells of canals, but fine dark lines around his eyes give him a touch of Arabian mystery. And he smiles, always, like I once did.

'Ah,' he gasps. I presume he's finally detected the *torta* and brace myself for an argument. From sheer persistence he usually wears me down until I give him half of what I have, or all of it. But something else has caught his attention—the appearance of another dog on the quay, a Dalmatian who passes from time to time with her master, each as sleek and self-regarding as the other. 'She is dizzying, isn't she? You see how she wants me?' Sporco boasts, pushing his chest in her direction and swinging his tail in virile strokes. 'She's crying out for me that one.'

He couldn't be further from the truth; the Dalmatian avoids him pointedly, often sailing past with a quip, 'What a sad little dreamer,' or, 'I thought it was August again and the canals were stinking.'

'You know where to find me. Don't be shy,' Sporco tells her, undeterred, as he is with every lady dog he badgers—and I've no idea if he has luck with any of them. He turns back to me. 'That reminds me. What of La Perla? She hasn't been by this morning, has she?'

'No?'

'Usually she's been and gone by now, hasn't she, her and Beatricia? But you haven't seen her?'

'No.' I make a point of not meeting his gaze, to avoid one of his long-winded musings about the comings and goings of dogs in the morning. Though he is right: she hasn't been. She and her mistress, Beatricia, almost always take their walk very early. La Perla is a nervy lapdog that has never once left

her small city quarter, but who carries herself with such resolute primness, I can't help but be a little fascinated by her.

'Is that meat?' Sporco says, finally spying my *torta*.

He tries to slip round me, but I block his way. 'I've told you many times, my friend: I don't eat meat.'

'Right you are, right you are,' he says, understanding nothing. He scratches his ear and I scratch mine.

'How would you like it if someone chopped you up and cooked you?'

At that moment, there comes a soft groaning of metal. The weathervane on the tip of the customs house, a sea-goddess holding out a golden sail, is turning. With it, a curious pang shivers through me, the tiniest twitch of some bygone rapture, intangible and elusive. The sounds of the city seem to fade away, and I stare at the vane, unsure what is so strange; I've seen her pivot round a thousand times. Then I realize: she's not turning with the wind, she's shouldering against it, as if she had a will of her own. For a while, she holds firm, before there's a crank and she rights herself once more.

'Just a morsel,' Sporco's saying. 'I'm half-starved I am. In three days nothing but fish bones. A couple of brutes have been stalking the wharves at night. Surly hounds from the coal yard.' He impersonates them by pushing out his shoulders and baring his teeth. It's almost impossible not to find him entertaining. 'Those wharves are ours by right. There's a pecking order. It is meat, isn't it? Can you spare a morsel?'

'No.' I nudge my treat to the back corner of my den and set off.

'Where are you going? Off on your travels?'

'The *torta* is mine, you understand?'

'Off on your travels, are you? Shall I come?'

‘No.’

He asks me every day and the answer is always the same.

‘Let’s play,’ he barks, blocking my path, ducking down and rolling his tufty brows. ‘Play! Come on!’ He thumps me on the snout, wheedling me with tricksy growls, before taking off around the quay in a figure of eight, and back to me. ‘Play! Huh?’

Part of me would like to. It seems decades have passed since I scrapped for no reason, for the thrill of bashing against another. But I’m too old for games and, besides, it’s better not to set a precedent. ‘Look, she returns, *tuo amata*. Now’s your chance.’ Sporco, flummoxed, glances from me to the Dalmatian and back again, his outsize ears pivoting in tandem. ‘Go on, before she gets away.’ He flies from the bridge in one leap and I escape across it and into the heart of the city.

I’ve lived so long in Venice, and seen it from the tops of so many bell towers—most particularly the Campanile in San Marco’s Square, the highest—I have a precise sense of its shape. In a lagoon of many far-reaching islands, Venice is the largest, a dreamy sliver of a city, a mirage, where land becomes sea and sea becomes land, as mysterious as the glass that’s furnaced in nearby Murano.

Venice itself is a fish-shaped island, marbled with canals and with a serpentine grand waterway bisecting it. The two halves are joined in only one place, almost in the centre of the mass, at the Rialto Bridge, a confection of white marble arches ascending and descending, on which there are shops, and almost always a heaving mass of activity.

Due south of it, at the edge of the water, are the principal institutions and buildings of the city, the doge’s palace—the giant cube of pink sugar—the old, Byzantine cathedral, the

Campanile and the prison, all around San Marco's Square. Whilst the *new* cathedral, *my* cathedral, lies opposite, on the southernmost slip of land.

Far east of the Rialto is the Arsenale, where the navy is stationed—whatever navy that may be, as there have been, in just fifteen years, variously a Venetian, French and Austrian one. North and west of the Rialto are the commercial areas, and the docks where most the ships come in from the mainland. It is to those that I head.

Though I live and spend most of my time in my den—the stone hollow in the side of the customs house, where rope used to be stored long ago—from it I have a view of the steps of the cathedral. *If* he comes, he will come searching for me there. It is where he told me to wait. But the northern port is the place where he and I first docked in Venice, and I've always thought that it would be miraculous if I could surprise him as he alighted from a ship. So I go to it every morning. I thread a time-honoured course around the maze of alleys and canal-ways to the fish market, turning north through the streets of Santa Croce and on to the port. The routine is sacrosanct. I've followed it day after day, week after week, year after year, decade after decade.

Occasionally I'm gripped by a need to visit *other* places, perhaps the *Arsenale*, or maybe one of the outer islands. But in general I'm too anxious to stray more than a few hours from my home.

I arrive at the harbour and head, as always, to a little terrace by a tumbledown church at the edge of the water. I'm about to sit when I remember the weathervane and, as I do, the euphoric throb comes again, like a door coming ajar, letting in a murmur of heat and light, before quickly press-

ing shut again. I stare fixedly across the lagoon towards the distant smudge of the mainland, alert, the fur on my back lifted, antenna-like. Along with these shivers of elation, the change in the weather, the guarantee of summer, I have a sense of optimism, of good things about to happen.

Unlike the quays close to my den, the western *fondamenta*, with its big skies and giant cranes, has more in keeping with the brash ports of northern Europe. Cologne perhaps, or Amsterdam. I stay much longer than I usually would, and even when I have the notion to leave, I find myself wandering along the quay instead, the image of the turning weathervane coming back to me time and time again. I watch a barge dock, its crew jumping ashore to hurriedly unload its cargo of boxes, whilst a supervisor in a top hat takes stock. The insatiable merry-go-round of trade and money. The boxes contain glass—I can hear it shiver as they're set down.

Five times I pad back and forth, for what reason I have no real sense. The city chatters and sings behind me. Its perpetual out-of-kilter peal of bells swells and wanes. Occasionally funeral gondolas, with their mournful awnings and flying-eagle figureheads, set off from the pier heading for the ‘island of the dead.’ Sailors and harbourmen, finished for the morning, gather in clusters: bottles of ale are uncorked, china pipes are lit, trails of tobacco smoke curl up to the sky. Grey clouds roll in and it starts to get cooler, no longer spring-like. I feel idiotic for staying so long, thinking that something miraculous might come across the sea. Why, after all this time, would he come today? I’m hungry and I decide to return home to my *torta di fagioli*.

As I reach the little bridge that crosses to the city’s final

promontory of land where I live, Sporco comes bounding towards me.

‘Quickly, quickly, something terrible has happened.’

Having just watched funeral gondolas processing across the lagoon, I get a shock to see one docked in front of a tenement that overlooks the side of the cathedral. An insistent barking comes from a top-floor apartment. It’s a voice I recognize: La Perla.

‘Beatricia, Beatricia, Beatricia,’ she’s crying.

On the pavement a body has been covered with a blanket. An undertaker is in conversation with two people I recognize: the hard-drinking son of La Perla’s owner and his efficiently unsociable wife. I don’t know the son’s name, but he’s one of those humans, cheeks permanently livid with irritation, who seem like they’ll hit you as good as look at you. Their presence there, the son already driving a hard bargain with the undertaker, along with La Perla’s desperate bays, can surely mean only one thing, that Beatricia is dead. Approaching and peering under the cover, my fear is confirmed: a polite sack of bones in a lace-fringed dress, a cobwebbed profusion of grey hair, all colour eviscerated from her face, even from her lips.

‘Is she?’ Sporco enquires, staying well back.

‘Yes. Gone.’

Sporco makes a pantomime expression of disbelief. ‘And what’ll happen to La Perla?’

I glance round at the son and his wife. ‘*Si vuoi una buona sepoltura.* If you want a good burial,’ the undertaker is explaining to them, ‘a plot on San Daniele—’

The son cuts him off. ‘Give me none of your sales talk. A hole in the ground is a hole in the ground.’ He bends down

and reaches under the cover to unclasp a string of pearls from Beatricia's neck, but his fingers are too thick for the job, and he has to tug it over the corpse's head, leaving its hair sticking up.

I cock my ear to La Perla's howling and take a deep breath, before passing on into the courtyard of her building. 'What are you going to tell her?' says Sporco, shadowing behind. I don't know, but keep going. We go up three flights of stairs. At the top, hearing paws clip back and forth along the tiles inside the apartment, La Perla's voice hoarse from constant wailing, my stomach gives a little lurch. She and her Beatricia have never left each other's side. I know those first hours are the most unnatural, the overturning of everything, the absurd reality—unthinkable even a day ago—that you'll never see your beloved again. I stand on my hind legs, push my paw against the handle.

'*Mamma!*' La Perla thrills as the door opens, skittering towards us. She halts when she sees it's me. She peers over my head—but her mistress isn't there either, just Sporco. Her eyes founder. I'm so used to La Perla being young, looking like a cotton ball, I often forget she's past ten now, her tight white curls gone sepia with age.

'How are you, Perlita?' I ask softly, slipping in. A thousand knick-knacks crowd the little place, amidst the smell of urine and lavender.

'How am I?' she trills. 'A fine question, I should say. Sick to my stomach I am. Have you seen my mamma, my Beatricia? They carried her away. Why?' She could be one of those melodramatic actresses that so amused my master, only her tragedy is all too real. 'Have you seen her?' She returns her

gaze to Sporco in the porch. ‘Who is that? He smells.’ She’s not so distracted that she can’t serve up an insult.

‘You know Sporco. My— for lack of a better word —my neighbour.’

‘No,’ she replies grandly. ‘I don’t believe we’ve been acquainted.’

This isn’t true. She’s clapped eyes on him every day since he washed up in our corner of town three years ago.

‘Hello, La Perla,’ Sporco chances, entering gingerly. ‘What a beautiful place!’ Sporco has never lived in a house and rarely gets invited into them. ‘You have a fireplace!’ He dashes towards it, before remembering why we’re here and stops. ‘Are you bearing up all right?’

She pinches her nostrils, pads round him on the balls of her paws and sniffs, just very lightly, at his behind. When Sporco tries to sniff back, she scuttles away. ‘I’m fine, just fine. But you shouldn’t be here. My Beatricia will be back soon and she doesn’t like *wild* animals in the house.’ She jumps up on to a little pink armchair and nestles into it, old and frail.

For a while it has concerned me about what would happen if Beatricia dies. Her ageing had seemed to accelerate in the last year: she’d grown paler, unsteadier on her feet, almost unrecognizable from the vigorous talkative being that used to dart about the city. But I thought, I hoped, she had plenty of years left. Even so, I’d formulated a plan, as I often find myself doing, for the inevitable day. I’d decided, even if the son and his wife deigned to keep La Perla, which was unlikely in the extreme, that it would be too cruel to allow it. Sharing my den was out of the question: not for the inconvenience to me—though that would be considerable—but because it’s just a plain hollowed-out cavity, an ut-

terly inauspicious place that smells of damp and rope—a residence that La Perla would deem far beneath her. Other options were limited. Despite her high regard for herself, La Perla's never been particularly pretty to humans, is no longer young, and is as obstinate as she's bad-tempered. In the end, I settled on the plan of taking her to the palazzo in San Polo, where an elderly foreign couple had accumulated a menagerie of abandoned animals.

'La Perla, your mamma's not coming back.' The phrase drops out of me before I can stop it. Sporco freezes, mouth gaping. He stares at La Perla, waiting for her reaction. 'There is no easy way to tell you, so I will just say it plainly,' I continue, 'your Beatricia is dead.' Her eyes muddle and darken. Sporco looks from me to her and droops his ears out of respect. 'We need to—to come up with a plan for what we're going to do now.'

She blinks but says nothing.

'La Perla, do you understand what I am saying? Your mamma—'

She sits up, stiffens her tail, bares her teeth—little nuggets of off-white—before leaping from the chair and nipping me hard. 'Kindly leave. Nobody invited you in.'

Footsteps come up the stairs, the door swings wide and La Perla lets out a squeak as she's thrust aside. The son and his wife stalk in. 'The state of it,' the husband puffs and his wife shakes her head in accord. 'And that silly creature of hers too.' The son scowls at La Perla, but gasps when he realizes there are two other dogs. '*Fuori di qui!*' He swats Sporco towards the door and kicks him in the backside. '*Pulcioso! Parassiti!*'

La Perla runs one way and then the other, before scuttling under the pink armchair. When the son tries to pull

her out, La Perla bites his hand. Furious, he turns the chair over, grabs her and throws her out of the door. She cart-wheels down the stairs, bumping against the landing banister. I rear up and bare my teeth at the brute—but stop myself. A hundred years or more have passed since I've drawn blood. The son actually looks contrite, but hides it with a laugh. I leave and he slams the door behind me.

Sporco is helping La Perla to her feet. 'I'm quite all right, thank you,' she asserts. 'No need to trouble yourself.' She gazes at the door, the entrance to her home, just a plain timber slab, but one that has been essential to her entire life—and she's still expecting a miracle, the poor soul.

'Come on,' I say and eventually she turns her back on it and we descend.

Going back to the quay, there's no way of avoiding Beatricia. But better La Perla sees her, and understands her mistress is not returning. She stops in front of the body and pauses, before pawing the blanket from Beatricia's face and revealing it to the midday glare. I brace myself for a scene. So does Sporco, his outsize ears doing a fretful caper. But La Perla just lifts her foot and prods the old woman's cheek. Solid. I wonder how long she's already sat with the body, and how much she comprehends the situation.

The undertaker and his assistant push through, load the body on to a stretcher and carry it off to their boat. Now La Perla will shriek, I assume, but she remains mute, watching Beatricia being loaded up as if she were some piece of furniture. I say very softly, 'Perlita, do you understand what has happened?' I press against her, so she can feel the warmth of my body, and her chest makes tiny kicks up and down. 'You're being very brave, but you don't have to be, if you

don't want.' After we've watched the black-sailed ship set off and turn out of sight, and still she's made no response, I say, 'Well, as it happens, I have a plan.'

Before leaving, I say to Sporco, 'You go back home.' His tail halts mid-air and begins to droop, until I add. 'You can look after my *torta* until I return. Make sure it's safe.'

'Yes, yes,' Sporco agrees enthusiastically, the hair about his shoulders puffing up with the pride. He goes, but comes back. 'Goodbye, La Perla. See you again soon.' He hazards one last attempt at smelling her behind.

'Goodbye, sir,' she says emphatically, avoiding him.

Crossing the city, La Perla trails a few steps behind me, head low, but otherwise continuing to show no emotion. I try to cheer her up, nodding at passing sights. 'Look at that cat watching the singing gondolier.' 'You see that funny lady with a ship-shape hat?' 'What a family, marching to lunch in identical outfits.' She doesn't involve herself in my conversation. And for my part, I grow more anxious than usual at being away so long away from my den, and wonder again if the creaking weathervane and my curious pangs had any meaning.

The Mulhernes, the people I'm taking her to, are a wealthy couple that settled in the city in their middle age 'for its art, its weather and its distance from the gossipers of County Cork,' I heard the wife comment once. She's tiny, always beautifully dressed in layers of silk and batiste, and as energetic as a clock spring, whilst her husband, a rangy, jovial mischief-maker, is blind. She acts as his eyes to the city. It's been at least a decade since they discovered me, at the entrance to my alcove. 'Poor creature, all on his own. What's

he waiting for?' she said. 'Someone coming on a ship? It breaks my heart.' Her husband got down on to the filthy flagstones to cuddle me. 'He's ever so noble,' he said. 'Let's take him home, my darling. Would you like to come home with us? You're quite enchanting.'

It was tempting—they were clearly kind-hearted and the golden barge they arrived to church in, with its crew of smartly dressed attendants, suggested a luxurious home—but I didn't go. Not then, nor on any of the subsequent occasions they tried to cajole me. They lived in the north of the city, too far from the cathedral to be practical for me. I did, however, occasionally take 'lost causes' to their door. Not dogs like Sporco, who are more or less happy on the streets, but ones like La Perla, who wouldn't stand a chance anywhere else.

'Isn't it a paradise, Perlita?' I say, once we arrive at the gates of the palazzo. 'You don't often find gardens like this in the city, do you?' No reply. 'And the Mulhernes, you couldn't have kinder people. They'll spoil you rotten. Dogs are their family. They adore them. Did I tell you about the food here? They have, I don't know, three chefs? *Tortine*, ah, like you've never had. Rich pies with ricotta and mushrooms and all sorts. That's right, you'll have to watch it, Perlita, or you'll get dumpy. You don't want to lose that figure of yours.'

She pivots one eye towards me and holds it there. 'If they're so kind, why don't *you* live with them? You don't have a master or a mistress either. You don't have a *real* home.'

Her barb catches me by surprise. I open my mouth to reply, but nothing comes out, so I push open the gate and motion for her to enter.

The gardens have got overgrown and I realize it must have

been a few years since I was here. Then, it was an organized riot of colour, now lanky weeds and nettles have sprung up between the terraces, and long fingers of ivy have entrapped the company of statues. For a moment I fear the couple may have moved on—or worse—when, amidst an excitement of barks, a pack of dogs emerge from the house and straight away engulf us. La Perla makes a display of distress as two terriers and old Spinone take the measure of her.

‘That will do! Quiet, you rabble.’ An old man chuckles, shuffling forth, feeling his way down the steps. ‘Enough of your histrionics.’ I don’t recognize him for a moment. His hair has thinned to nothing, his ruddy cheeks hollowed and I’m reminded, as I so often am, how quickly time does its work, on humans and dogs and all. That is their curse, the opposite of my own: the never-ending ache of long life.

‘What is it?’ says his wife, bustling out, a vision of tulle in peacock colours. She takes her husband by the arm to guide him down.

‘Something has caught the attention of these monsters.’

‘Good grief,’ she says, spotting me. ‘He’s returned.’

The husband stops dead. ‘Who? Not our friend from the cathedral?’

‘The very same. How old must he be now?’

Being blind, her husband looks to where he thinks I am and holds out his arms. ‘Welcome, friend. Our valiant Robin Hood. Have you brought us something, as you used to, years ago?’

‘He has,’ his wife says, her face muddling at the sight of my companion. I fear she may reject La Perla, who’s hunched up like an old cat, with an expression that is more spiteful than frightened. I have in mind to tell her to stand straight and

look more desirable, when the old man drops to his knees and, by luck, catches her in his arms.

‘She’s gorgeous, just gorgeous,’ he says as she tries to free herself. ‘We’ve room for one more, haven’t we, my darling?’

His wife gives a long-suffering laugh and rests her hand on the top of my head. ‘I’d prefer it was this one. Come inside all and let’s eat.’

I’m desperate to get back, but I go with La Perla into the palazzo to make sure she settles. Within, I find the same sumptuous pigsty I remember, a palace for animals, the entire piano nobile given over to their welfare, every priceless chaise and settee flattened, discoloured and furred by dogs and an assortment of other animals—cats, two rabbits in a birdcage and a parrot sitting on a perch by the window. (When I first came to the place, I was put in mind of Queen Henrietta Maria’s eccentric, unruly menagerie at Somerset House in old London.) The animals’ food is served up in grand, eccentric style in a string of mismatching china bowls in front of the fireplace.

‘I don’t like these people,’ La Perla asides to me, making a point of refusing her meal.

‘That’s not fair, Perlita, they’re very kind.’

‘So you keep saying. But I shan’t stay here. It doesn’t suit me.’

‘It will have to.’ The sharpness of my tone surprises her. I soften. ‘La Perla, this is a good place.’ I want to tell her that she won’t do better, that she’s old and difficult, too cowardly to scavenge for fish bones in the wharves and too fussy to eat them. I want to tell her how lucky she has been to have had Beatricia in the first place, when dogs like Sporco were

tied to a pontoon post as a puppy and left for dead. ‘You’ll have a chance here,’ I say. ‘You’ll make new friends.’

She shows her teeth and before I know it, she’s bitten me on the ear, sharply, drawing blood. She runs to a corner to sulk. My heart could break for her, the smallness of her indignation, the tininess of her existence. Poor soul. I go to her and sit with her a while longer. The lady of the house is watching us, brows bunched together as she tries to fathom who or what I am.

‘Now, where’s the new arrival?’ her husband is saying, holding up a treat as he feels along the litter. I kiss La Perla on the nose. ‘You’re a good sort, La Perla,’ I say and leave the room.

Hurrying home for the second time in a day, I’m so preoccupied by visions of her in her new home, keeping her distance from everyone, being brittle if they try to be friendly, even as she is breaking to pieces inside, that I make a wrong turn and find myself in the street where half a dozen butcher’s shops are bunched together. I always avoid this loathsome thoroughfare, revolted by the stench of meat, by the blood-sloshed, offal-coated cobbles, but now I must pass along it or retrace my steps entirely. It’s more frenetic than anywhere. Humans, with almost savage end-of-day urgency, thumb coins into butchers’ palms and take hold of packets of flesh, as packs of wide-eyed dogs linger about, spellbound by the trophies that hang in every window. ‘Some of that would go down nicely,’ or, ‘What I’d give for a piece of it,’ they murmur to one another, eyeing up headless rabbits and bolts of fatty entrails stockinginged in red string. I double my speed.

By the time I get back to Dorsoduro and crown the bridge before the cathedral, I’m morose to my bones. So often, even

after all these years, the phenomenon of the view thrills me—two great churches separated by the mouth of the grand canal, the forest of masts and rigging in between, the ever-changing miasma of odours that sweeten the air, the galleons gliding away, the sheer possibility of it all—but not tonight. I’m beset with indefinable anger. I study the front of my cathedral, scowling at the pale flight of steps, the bronze doors shut for the evening, and it could be yesterday that my master and I stood in front of them, when the building was brand new, he chatting along to me. *‘And the stone is Istrian, no? You see how the marble dust catches the light?’*

Sporco is waiting at the entrance to my den, lying with his head angled towards the place I stowed my *torta*. I know he won’t have touched it, in that way he can be trusted, but all the same I’m in no mood to be sociable. When he notices me approaching, he gets to his feet, tail spinning. ‘I kept an eye, just as you asked—all is safe.’ He licks his lips.

I push past him into my den and sink at the sight of it. It’s a prison: barely large enough to contain me, three decrepit walls that still smell, even after all this time of wet rope. This is how I live? This is what I have to show for myself? ‘Why don’t *you* live with them?’ La Perla had said before. ‘You don’t have a master or a mistress either. You don’t have a *real* home.’ She’s right. No matter the wonders I have seen, or the palaces I once lived in, I’m unrooted, a wanderer, a vagrant. ‘One day we’ll settle down. One day we’ll find a home,’ my master always promised. We never did. I have no home. *He* was my home. I paw the *torta* from the corner. This morning it had filled me with delight, but now it smells ordinary and stale. I slip down a mouthful, but all I seem to taste is the bile inching up from my stomach. Spor-

co's shadow hangs over me and his tail slaps, infuriatingly, against the wall. I catch up another piece and swallow. What does my master look like now? Is he changed? Is his aroma the same? Midnight in a tall forest, stiff parchment paper and a whisper of pine sap.

'It is meat, isn't it? You can't fool me.'

'Get out! Out!'

Sporco skitters away.

'A hole in the ground is a hole in the ground,' Beatricia's son had said earlier, pocketing his mother's pearls. If he had love for her once, it was gone. I bite into a piece of pastry, chomping joylessly, before I remember, as I always try to, the phrase my master always used when things didn't go our way.

*'Tomorrow we begin again,'* he'd say, sometimes over a trivial thing, a burnt dinner, or our coach getting stuck in mud, but other times, uttered in defiance, a call to hope, when something had shaken us to our cores.

I calm down, gradually, and a while later I look round for Sporco. He sits at a remove, hunched, ears wilted, eyes scooped together—no longer smiling. I should be kinder to him, for he is a lost soul too. 'I am sorry, friend.' I nudge the pieces of *torta* out into the open. 'Here.' At first he hangs back, but eventually his tail reanimates to a half-speed loop and he returns. 'Eat,' I say, stepping back. 'Finish it.' No sooner have I spoken, than a chunk has vanished down his throat, and another and another until it's all gone and he's lashing the cobbles clean.

*'Tomorrow we begin again.'*

A thought strikes me: that tonight, for once, I should treat myself. I should give myself a dose of splendour, of mag-

nificance, to remember the old days. That's what my master would do.

'I shall sleep somewhere else this evening,' I say to Sporco, hesitating before adding, 'come with me, if you like?' Sporco's ears stick up.

We go to the opera house on the other side of the Rialto. I know it's closed today, a Sunday, and also how to break in. Like La Perla, Sporco has barely ventured beyond the spit of land he inhabits, its little grid of streets and canals, and I have the sense, though he tries to hide it, he's spooked to venture so far from home, halting whenever he hears footsteps approach and backing into the shadows, until they've passed.

We steal along a ledge beside a back canal and under a gate into a vaulted space at the rear of theatre where the scenery is kept. I come to the opera from time to time, mostly lingering in the piazza at the front, craning my ear to the thrum of music inside, but sometimes I enter when everyone has gone for the night.

The scene dock is perky with aromas of flax, cedar oil and varnish. A silvery gleam filters through skylight. Painted flats, as high as the room, lean against the wall, cycloramas of faraway places, mysterious in the half-light. There's one of a turreted castle, nestled amongst white-tipped mountains; another of a terracotta palace rising up from an emerald jungle; a third of silver halls with onion-shaped roofs against an icy shoreline.

'What *are* those?' Sporco asks, tilting his head at them.

'Those? Those are the realms,' I say with pride. 'All the places you can voyage to. Though some of them have been lost in time.'

‘The realms?’ he says, enjoying the sound of it in his mouth, and repeating it. ‘I like them, I do.’

‘The world beyond our sea is a more surprising place than you could ever imagine.’

Sporco’s gaze lingers on a backdrop of a pine forest in winter, a winding path disappearing into the snow. ‘This is where we’re sleeping?’

I lead the way along a passage into the auditorium. Half a dozen theatre chandeliers hang at head height, extinguished for the night, groaning under their weight, brass branches and festoons of crystal drops, fantastical jellyfish in a dark sea. We jump down into the stalls and pass up the aisle, Sporco ogling the stage set, an audacious vignette of ancient times, columns receding in a false perspective.

I will never forget my first time in an opera house, in Mantua, how my fur tingled at the sight of a thousand golden stalls honeycombed to the ceiling, every box a secret in itself: a conjuration, two, three or four humans in their own little plays; candlelight catching the glint of enrapt eyes and tremors of gilt thread, the thrill of scandal whispered behind hands. When the curtains opened and the music began—when I first felt the soar of bow on strings in that room—my insides ached with joy. The piece we saw that night was as strange and beguiling as a dream. A young shepherd, a lyrist, takes a ferry to a treacherous underworld in search of his bride. He meets a god king there who has a face of shadow and a crown of fire and plays a melody for him—to win back his beloved. When I was very young, I hadn’t understood music, it was just an incoherent babble, but that night in Mantua I grasped the advantage that humans had

over our species, to create such marvels from contraptions of wood and metal, from mere thin air.

We go upstairs and nudge through a door into the royal box with its scent of beeswax polish, velvet, shellac. ‘Here we shall sleep,’ I say, nodding at the four silked armchairs. ‘Kings and emperors have put their backsides on those seats.’

Sporco giggles and in a flash he’s jumped up on one. He circles three times and drops down in a ball. He’ll be dirtying the fabric—artisans would have spent weeks working on the silk of that chair—but let him enjoy it. I mount the adjacent throne and survey the empty stage. The silence is surprising, the absence of water lapping against pier stones, a ringing, cushioned hush in its place. ‘We should stay every night,’ Sporco says and within moments his eyes are closed.

Yes, he is a lost soul like I.

I witnessed his abandonment. I woke at dawn, three years ago, at the entrance to my hideaway and noticed a young man waiting on a pontoon on the other side of the water. He was twitchy, kept looking at his pocket watch, a holdall slung from one shoulder and a bundle of books tied with rope from the other. A girl hurried on to the pontoon, excited and apologetic. She too had a travelling case, which he tossed into a boat, along with his own luggage. She was no more than fifteen, neat and timid, whilst he was older by a number of years, and had a kind of dishevelled self-importance.

I hadn’t seen the puppy—it had been enfolded under her cloak—but it yapped when she set it down, a bundle of gold wool skittering against its leash, a pup of five weeks. But the man refused to let him come. There was an argument, angry whispers echoing across the water. The scoundrel fastened the dog to a post and hastened the girl into the boat.

It devastated her to have to leave her pet, but she was too in awe of the rake. My breath quickened as he jumped aboard and cast off towards the sea, pushing hard down on the oars.

'No! Come back!' I barked and the girl, eyes stung with tears, looked round to see where the noise came from. The poor puppy pulled against its leash, whining as his mistress vanished round the curve of the water.

I set off immediately for the abandoned puppy through the city, over the Rialto, double backing, all to arrive at a short distance from where I started. I untied his leash and asked if he'd like to come with me, but he just sat, confused, his eyes on the horizon. Eventually, I returned to my own lookout. He stayed for days, on the opposite side of the canal. After a while I found it too heartbreakng to watch and found myself looking in the opposite direction. The next time I dared peek, he was gone.

Two months passed before I chanced on him again. He had filled out into a dog, caked in dirt and reeking of the street. And, though he was surly and streetwise to begin with, I made a point of watching out for him. I never once mentioned the pontoon to him and, though I always hoped he had somehow blotted the memory from his mind, I knew it certainly must lurk there. Worse: it probably shaped everything in his life.

Indeed, we are *all* lost souls. He, I, La Perla. And it gives me no solace that I have been lost longer than any, a hundred and twenty-seven years since my master vanished on our trip to the cathedral.

At once I recall the golden weathervane and the abrupt twitches of joy I had this morning, and fear wildfires through me: What if he comes tonight? Of all nights, when I'm sleep-

ing in another place. I sit bolt upright, resolved to return, then dismiss the idea, calling to mind the damp walls of my alcove. I'm being superstitious, that's all. I sit back down and curl up to sleep.

'Why, after a hundred and twenty-seven years, would he come tonight?'



HANOVER  
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Tomorrow

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