

VITTORIO THE BASTARD

BY

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Chapter One

The Schooling of a Thief

The ragged young girl huddles against the cold stone in the shadowed archway of the Piazza San Domenico. She attempts to make herself as small and as inconspicuous as possible. Trembling, hungry and weary to the point of despair, she tugs the dark woollen shawl tighter around her head and face. The street children, who earlier jeered and hurled stones and sticks at her, have moved on. Perhaps now she can safely abandon her temporary refuge and run for the sanctuary of the church no more than a hundred steps away. She rises unsteadily and painfully to her bare feet, because she can no longer tolerate the agony of shoes, and cautiously peers around the arch.

There is the usual flow of mid-day chaos: some merchants loudly haggling with one another over price and quality; masons and carpenters laboring on the construction of the new cathedral while mentally cursing the divinity who has doomed them to a life of hard work at so little pay; muscular workmen stumbling under hoods like inverted rooftops perched on their shoulders: and mud-stained muleteers furiously attempting to persuade their contrary beasts to carry their burdens just a little further and for just one more time, although both driver and mule know it is a lie.

The frightened girl sees no sign of her tormentors, so she steps cautiously into the side street. Despite each painful step she shuffles slowly down the foul-smelling passage toward the open piazza and the church named for Saint Dominic.

She no sooner abandons her hiding place, however, when a vicious wave of screaming, shrieking boys and girls like Grecian Furies pour from the streets and encircle her! She instinctively forms a refuge with her arms and her shawl to protect her face, trying to hide her scarred appearance, but she knows this will only arouse the little monsters to new torments. The helpless victim stumbles in her desperate flight and nearly falls, turning herself into the wall, trying to become one with it as her tormentors lash her with sticks and hurl insults which wound more than the beatings. Through her distress and pain she can hear them screaming "leper" and charging her of being in

conspiracy with malicious Jews who are planning to contaminate the city's wells and bring slow death upon their city.

Wrapped in this twilight sanctuary of her shawl, she is suddenly surprised to hear the screams and the insults dissolve into a low murmuring. She no longer feels the sting of the branches and stones. She becomes aware someone is gently touching her shoulders, and she is being slowly turned as if by some benevolent breeze. When she lowers her shawl she looks directly into the beautiful and serene face of another young girl.

It is not a human face. It is – angelic. It is the face of the Madonna in the duomo frescoes, the great Lady of the Rosary whose statue stands in the quiet, secluded side chapel. Her skin seems translucent, composed less of flesh than a soft light, and the compassionate eyes blaze with an all-encompassing love.

This benefactor, her head and shoulders draped in the white veil of a tertiary of the Dominican order, smiles to assure the leper everything is fine, and the world has been suddenly transformed into a universe of peace and eternal affection. Now, softly, delicately, as if fingering Brabant lace or fine Venetian crystal, the rescuer lightly touches the lesions, and the diseased young woman feels a surge of happiness and gentle peace sweep through her.

The touch is music, and the feeling it engenders is beatific.

The leper can now see beyond and around her protector to a small crowd of clerics and residents of the city. Then, almost as if on a single cue, an audible gasp swells from the assembly. The Dominican smiles again, slowly turns and strides quietly but majestically down the narrow street toward the piazza, followed by a legion of excited and babbling admirers.

The girl is left standing alone, and some of the ragged children who had been tormenting her earlier now stare, gaping, at her face, at her delicate hands, her ivory feet. One or two mutter a soft word and quickly bless themselves. Then they scatter in all directions, running as fast as they can from the incomprehensible.

The girl puts a hand to her cheek and touches velvet. Her fingers trace the straight bridge of her nose, the delicate line of her eyebrows, the curvature of her chin, the place beside her left ear where there had been an open and running sore only minutes earlier; but now there is no painful touch, no indication of lesions. Bewildered the girl falls to her knees in the middle of the muddy passage and breathes a quiet thanks to a merciful God for her deliverance.

In a nearby doorway, plump Sieneese women in greasy aprons, their matted hair tucked under scarlet kerchiefs, continue with her labors. One by one they seize the flabby fish and run their knives through them with an expertise born of monotony. They lift away the jewelled scales and then drop the naked fish unceremoniously into a large basin of once-clean water. One wipes the fish scales and blood from her fingers as she watches the assembly move down the street.

Another worker asks, "Who was it this time?"

"That nun from the hill church who, they say, bleeds from her hands and feet, the one you never eats. What's her name again?"

"Catherine?"

"That's the one."

"What happened?"

The fish wife emits a sigh of resignation and growls, "Another damned miracle."

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An oversized, brass statue of Santo Petronio, patron saint of Bologna, towers over the mass of humanity filling the Piazza Maggiore on this bright autumnal morning. The saint gazes without seeing beyond the stacked lumber and the marble blocks of his unfinished cathedral and seems oblivious to the two young thieves who presently share his pedestal.

Vittorio Romagna is robed in his customary rags, deliberately torn and stained to achieve maximum sympathy from wealthy strangers. He is in his 20s, helmeted with dark, curly and undisciplined hair which tumbles down to his broad shoulders. He could be considered handsome with high cheekbones and a strong, square chin burdened now beneath layers of carefully-applied grime and dirt.

He squats at the feet of the statue, focuses his wide, brown eyes on the multitudes of merchants, masons, scholars, clerics, fish wives, farmers, beggars and mercenaries who are now criss-crossing the square in the eternal game of looking terribly important and late for one thing or another. They move rapidly, avoiding eye or bodily contact with anyone else, but Vittorio surveys them with a thoroughness born of experience and a sharp attention to detail.

Now he turns briefly away from his scan of the people and glances up at the strong face of the statute, its cold eyes fixed on some distant horizon.

Do you look, the young man thinks, towards another and better world? And if so, what do you see that I don't?

The pretty, equally-dirty girl standing beside Vittorio appears better-fed than the young man and approximately the same age. Her head is crowned with cascading waves of red hair which embrace her bare shoulders and contribute to her nickname – The Flame. She is dressed, as her companion, in clothes stolen from wash-lines without regard for size or sex, mutilated and made filthy to evoke attention and, hopefully, monetary charity. The layered appearance disguises the sturdy body beneath the rags. There is something in her stance, one arm now draped over Vittorio's shoulders, which suggests she is a vital appendage of this young man. There is also something in Vittorio's posture which indicates he is indifferent to both the girl beside him and the bronze saint towering over them as his attention is again riveted on the passing parade.

He suddenly lowers his head and diverts his eyes as a detachment of armed, clean-shaven and muscular Breton mercenaries of the White Company sweep past the pedestal and head toward the stately palazzo beside the unfinished church, They quick-step in perfect unison leaving behind them an invisible trail of both admiration and hatred of the invaders.

After they pass Flame indicates an elaborately robed cleric now proceeding across the piazza on a magnificent white stallion as six hooded monks orbit around him like gaunt and ghostly spectres.

"How about a nice priest?"

"No," the young thief says softly. "The really rich clerics don't carry their gold with them."

"What do they do with them?"

"They hide them under their altars or in special graves in their private cemeteries."

"What good does it do them then?"

"They feel secure. Being thieves themselves, they think they have outwitted all other thieves."

"Where is this one going, do you think?"

"Probably on his way to somewhere he thinks safe. At least it's what he'll do if he's smart. The Visconti overlords have no fondness for priests."

The two are surprised, then, when the priest does not turn down the side street but reins in his horse before the structure which is now used as command post for the invaders. The churchman is assisted from the back of the stallion by two of his attendants while a third descends on hands and knees to provide a human step.

The pair of Breton mercenaries stand at the door of the palazzo under the white banners of their commander. They keep their hands on their sword hilts and glare at the new arrival, then they laugh quietly, push with their shoulders against the metal-sheathed doors, twice as high as an average man, and mockingly bow the abbot and two of his monks inside.

Flames' attention is now drawn to a thin, rat-faced merchant entering the piazza followed by a small caravan of five horses burdened with rugs and tapestries. She quickly determines the vendor is, if not rich, at least comfortable for he wears none of his wealth on his person. His clothing is simple, predictable and unimpressive.

"Him?"

"No," said Vittorio. "Isaac says more no more tapestries."

"Why not?"

"They are too easy to identify."

Now they see a mounted contingent of six armed men bearing white crosses on their tunics cross the piazza in escort to two wagons.

"More arms for the Visconti," Vittorio murmurs. "Nothing we can use there."

A quarter hour passes before the young male thief suddenly rises to his feet and smiles at the sight of a fat merchant in soft velvet and an embroidered cloak entering the piazza. The portly businessman is mounted on a gray Arabian mare bridled and trimmed in silver which capture the afternoon sun and generously distributes it to the spectators in flashes of light. The mare is linked by a tether to a trailing mule burdened with something bulky lashed under a canvas covering.

Behind the silently suffering animals shuffles a scar-faced guard who squints in the sunlight and appears to be scanning the surrounding buildings for possible trouble. Over his shoulder he carries a long, curved-bladed weapon mounted on a long pole. He

appears especially proud of this *bardiche* which, he knows, can serve as a spear or a grappling hook. He had traded a saddle for it with a Flemish mercenary when both men were equally inebriated, but Scarface feels he has certainly gotten the best of the bargain, because there is something about the weapon, he believes, which proclaims to all the world: "Don't mess with this fellow or you'll regret it. As a professional killer and a warrior, he is to be feared and avoided."

"Here's a fat pigeon!" Vittorio whispers to Flame, "and if I'm not mistaken, he's our old friend from Cortemaggiore with his shadow, the Bergamese."

"Oh yes," says Flame. "Signore Mucci, the walking miracle."

"Miracle?"

"Who would believe one could pile shit so high?"

Vittorio laughs and then commands, "Tell Francesca and Scarpio we found one."

Flame picks up the stained canvas sack, wheels and walks quickly up a narrow side street leading out of the piazza.

Vittorio whistles a melodic little tune which has become a familiar and satiric barb aimed at the French pope presently in Avignon. It is intended for a giant leisurely picking his teeth with a sharp stiletto while nonchalantly seated on the bloodstained execution block before the Palazzo di Renzo. Brakos the Greek, a massive figure of muscle and sinew, gives no indication he is disturbed at the site where many of his friends and associates died beneath the executioner's axe. He appears perfectly aware of where he is, and he considers his makeshift throne a direct challenge to the mercenaries who had just taken possession of Bologna and might very well behead him. He replaces his stiletto in his waistband as he hears the tune and sees Vittorio nod to him from across the piazza, and he snaps to attention.

Vittorio smiles and with a twist of his head indicates the mounted tradesmen. *Now do it right*, the dark-haired thief mentally lectures his associate, *and this time let's not kill the mule.*

Under the portico before the church of Santo Domenico, Flame approaches the two individuals kneeling in apparent prayer before the door.

Francesca Cassimo is a weary and world-worn matron slowly suffocating under the heavy woollen dress of a Bolognese peasant wife with appropriate black shawl and stained apron. She excuses her thieving as an honorable art form inspired by Saint Dismas. After all, he was a man who also stole anything not under lock and key and lived, supposedly, a life rich in debauchery and deception, and yet was rewarded with salvation by the Christos dying on the cross beside him.

Why wouldn't the saviour do as much for me?

Beside her kneels Scarpio Trigolli, the wiry, 30-year-old dwarf curiously dressed as a child. Short of leg but clever and blessed with a quick cunning, he is also the broker for the band of thieves and enjoys a reputation of never having been bested by a fence or a moneylender.

As Flame approaches, the two associates appear to be murmuring a prayer to Saint Dominic, entombed in the church behind them, for the success of their mornings' work. Now, upon seeing the girl, they quickly bless themselves and rise to attention.

Vitt6orio's found one," Flame tells them. "Piazza Maggiore."

"It's about time," grumbles the dwarf.

"Considering all the mercenaries in the city today, it's a damn miracle," says Francesca.

The matron and her dwarf-child quickly descend the stone steps and waddle up the narrow street.

Flame glances in all directions and then slips into the darkened church.

Here in the obscuring blackness of the confessional, she opens her sack.

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Back in the piazza, the scar-faced Bergamese guarding the body and the cargo of the corpulent senior from Cortemaggiore is both bored and annoyed. It is boring to guard a patron who has never been so much as threatened in two years. He reasons this period of relative peace is partly due to the sudden and mysterious departure of the notorious Vittorio Romagna and his band of thieves who had been operating at Cortemaggiore. It is also partly due, he believes, to his own terrifying appearance. He is uncommonly tall, obviously muscular and barrel-chested, and relatively ugly with an honorably-scarred face. If these features were not deterrent enough, the two unsheathed daggers nested in his waistband and the bladed weapon carried over one shoulder promise instant retaliation if his patron is so much as delayed.

He is mildly annoyed now because, after all these years of faithful service, and considering the unique nature of his weaponry, his patron still sees no reason to provide him with a horse or a mule. Consequently the burly man plods on foot behind both pack-mule and his master's horse. He carefully scans the piazza for possible threats while, at the same time, hopping and skipping to avoid embarrassing encounters with the abundant and generous contribution of the pack animals to the waste of the Bologna cobbles. In the Piazza Maggiore he sees nothing which might be interpreted as threatening. On his left a fish wife in shawl and apron drags a whining child with a shining toy across the square. He dutifully notes they briefly brush against the patrons mule for a moment, but then proceed, squabbling, through the piazza.

Suddenly on his right he sees a hooded monk in the soiled and rumpled black robe of a pardoner with the once-white cross emblazoned on it. He watches carefully as the pardoner approaches his master and keeps pace with the great Arabian mare. He seems to be babbling something, and although the monks' features are hidden in the shadows of his hood, there is something suspicious about the man, and instantly the guard moves closer to hear what is being said.

"These are perilous times, your worship," the monk lectures the merchant, "and who can protect an innocent man of business against the greedy Bretons in service to Milan who now occupy this city. Who can banish the thieves and bandits who inevitably follow these armies of rats? Only God surely! Provided, of course, your excellency is in the state of grace, for naturally God favors his own! Only three ducats, my lord, and I can provide you with a full pardon for all your sins and restore you to the loving embrace of our all-powerful divinity! Imagine, your worship, for only three ducats you can possess a full pardon signed and affirmed by no less than His Holiness! Surely a benevolent and just God would never let harm come to an honest and generous merchant who bears on

his person the sworn testament to his righteousness! Think upon it, my lord! A full pardon for all your sins and for only three ducats! Only *two* ducats for *you* on this beautiful God-given afternoon!"

The Bergamese guard knows his patron has no great love of pardoners, but even he is surprised when he sees the merchant actually withdraw his booted foot from the stirrup and kick at the cleric! He also immediately recognizes this as a mistake, because the black-robed monk suddenly seizes the merchants' boot with both hands and lifts him clear of the saddle! The shocked and portly rider wobbles a little and then slips to the opposite side of the Arabian who rears in confusion and fear! The tradesman is now in free-fall, but his left boot remains locked in the stirrup as the startled horse drags the rider, screaming, across the piazza!

Instantly the guard swings his weapon around threateningly and gives what he considers a terrifying cry. He charges the pardoner, but the cleric has already raised the hem of his robe and darted across the piazza and up a narrow side street. The confused guard momentarily considers whether he should rescue his master but decides his first duty should be to capture the evil monk, so he races up the passageway after the attacker. Consequently he does not see the merchant's cargo slide from the back of the muls nor notice the cinch has been neatly severed by the "shiny toy" in the hands of the dwarf-child! Nor is he present to see the fallen pack snatched up quickly and easily by the giant Greek and carried off in the opposite direction!

The panting protector loses sight of the black-robed monk as he rounds the corner into a much smaller piazza and finds himself before the church of San to Giacomo Maggiore. A young and terrified nun, hands clenched white in fear, trembles in the doorway of the church. Upon seeing the pursuing men with the deadly looking blade, she quickly points up the roadway to the left. The protector nods gratefully to the frail woman, swings his weapon around, and races that way.

Under the portico of the church, Flame removes her nuns' veil and then her black robe and stuffs them into her sack. Laughing, she wanders leisurely down the roadway where she is joined by Vittorio, the pardoner, who steps gingerly from the doorway and takes her arm.

"I would have made a fine nun," she tells her tutor, "if it wasn't for that damned vow of chastity."

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The tall abbot to the monastery of St. Apollinaire in Ravenna stands pompously and arrogantly erect before Bernabo Visconti, grand lord of Milan. The cleric appears oblivious and indifferent to both the noble and the rich décor of the intimate salon of the palazzo presently serving as the Visconti headquarters. He does not acknowledge the presence of Bernabo or his tall and bearded condottiere, Sir John Hawkwood, known throughout Italy as Captain Giovanni Acuto, commander of the White Company. He appears oblivious to Bernabo's aura of nobility in his fine velvet tunic, hose, blouse and heavy black cape. He notices Hawkwood appears as the quiet, deadly image of a

professional soldier, his white helmet under one arm, his hand always resting on the hilt of his sword.

In the dark shadow of his lord, the Venetian counsellor Augustino Bellemonte is elaborately robed in an embroidered greatcoat and appears anchored by a large gold-and-ruby medallion of responsibility suspended from his neck on a thick chain.

Bernabo has settled himself in an imposing chair bearing the family crest of the Visconti: a dragon with jaws spread wide to devour a human figure. He would claim the victim to be Saracen, but at the moment the abbot possibly identifies the potential luncheon as a Christian – and preferably a cleric. Nevertheless, the prelate gathers his great cloak around his shoulders and glares with obvious contempt at the bearded aristocrat.

The abbot asks, "May I be seated?"

"Can you – without cracking?" Bernabo replies with no show of emotion or interest.

The Visconti gestures to Agostino who, in turn, grins and nods to a mercenary. The soldier steps forward and quickly shoves a plain wooden chair beneath the abbot, forcibly seating him.

"Better?"

The abbot sniffs and spreads his cloak over the arms of the chair, revealing an undergarment of embroidered satin, wide sleeves lined with fur, and a jewelled girdle. A cross encrusted with emeralds is suspended from his shoulders on massive gold links which out-glisten the chain-of-office of Augustino.

"I come from His Holiness, Pope Gregory the Eleventh," the abbot proclaims. He announces this with an exaggerated pomposity as if numbering the waning days until the promised destruction of the world by fire. "His Holiness is angry you have invaded the Papal states and occupied his protected city of Bologna."

"I'm not acquainted with a Pope Gregory the Eleventh or any other number," Bernabo replies softly, "although I *am* familiar with a Frenchman named Pierre Roger de Beaufort who stole the papal throne by bribing several Cardinals. This de Beaufort is a sorry excuse for a prelate who keeps the Chair of Peter in French territory instead of in Italian Rome which has always been the home of the mother church. Is this the same man?"

The abbot sniffs. "His Holiness Pope Urban the Fifth attempted to return the papacy to Rome, but he was met at Leghorn by the Doge of Pisa and the English mercenary who stands beside you now – with a thousand of his bloodthirsty Bretons!"

Hawkwood starts to draw his sword, but Bernabo raises a hand, palm out, and the condottiere slams his weapon back into its sheath.

"I assure you, Father Abbot, speaking for Sir John here, his men thirst – not for blood – but only for the Gironde clarets your fat monks consume by the barrel in your protected abbey."

If the cleric is alarmed at the implied threat, he is not about to reveal it. "Naturally His Holiness did not embark at Leghorn," he continues still focusing his attention on Bernardo as if Hawkwood and Augustino did not exist, "but he *did* return and stayed in Rome for more than a year. Unhappily he found the city sunk into deep poverty and civil chaos, and its great monuments broken and scattered by earthquakes and neglect. Are

you aware, my lord, in Rome horses are actually stabled in some of our churches? You surely could not consider this a fit seat for the church and its pontiff."

"Christ's first home was a stable," Bernabo says quietly.

"Rome is an absurdity! What passes for streets are merely rutted and pitted cow paths lined with stagnant pools of stinking green water! It is buried everywhere under rubbish! The city has absolutely no trade, no civic pride and no universities, so it is totally unsuitable for the residence of the pontiff!"

"The reason Guillaume returned to Avignon," Augustino Bellemonte interjects quickly, "is because the French cardinals were less satisfied with the simple comforts and the plain food in Italian Rome!"

The abbot appears more bored than insulted. "To the point! His Holiness, Pope Gregory the Eleventh, wishes you, Bernabo Visconti, to return to Milan immediately and to leave this, the pontiff's protected city, in peace."

"Does de Beaufort also wish to dictate when I may piss, or will he permit me to utilize my God-given free will in this very vital matter?"

"I remember, Bernabo Visconti, you were also disdainful of the late Holiness, Pope Urban the Fifth! You arrogantly refused a summons to come to be justly sentenced for your debaucheries and your cruelties and your diabolical hatred of the church. It was your hauteur and arrogant disregard for the authority bestowed by Christ on his papacy which forced His Holiness to excommunicate you as a heretic."

"Hauteur," responds Bernabo. "Lovely word. From the French, of course. We Italians use more familiar vocabulary. We call a prick a prick."

"You might do well to remember you are in the presence of an emissary of His Holiness."

"His Holiness might do well to remember, Father Abbot," he smiles, "I made the messenger from Rome eat the bull of excommunication - including the silk cord and waxed seals." He leans forward in his chair, and the smile vanishes. "As for this man whom you called Pope Urban the Fifth, he was as dissolute and arrogant as de Beaufort is now. Both alleged popes openly kept mistresses and imposed severe taxes on the poor faithful while their Cardinals wallowed in luxury."

"I would advise you," the cleric retorts, "to be careful what you say. God will not take kindly to a man who speaks against his Vicar on earth and his priests."

Augustino smiles and starts forward, his hand on the hilt of his jewelled dagger, but again Visconti stops his associate with a gesture.

Bernabo rises and goes to the heavy desk in one corner of the room. He picks up some papers and turns to the abbot. "According to my agents in the holy city, priest, I am not the only one currently speaking against de Beaufort and his depraved clergy." He takes one of the pages and begins to read aloud: "Catherine of Siena and Brigetta of Sweden, both widely hailed as living saints, constantly complain about the worldliness of the papacy and the priesthood. Brigetta is even reported as saying under the present pontiff all the ten Commandments are reduced to one: bring me the money."

The churchmen glares at the noble. "I might point out both saintly women have now taken residence with - and advise - the man *you* call a papal impersonator."

Bernabo throws the paper back on the desk and resumes his seat. "I realize, of course, this makes the pontiff appear to be the more moral opponent in this conflict between us, but this will only deceive the ignorant. The knowledgeable are well aware of the debauchery of your French pretender and his fawning Cardinals."

Augustino feels compelled to elaborate. "Your deceptions are failing, abbot! Last year Francesco Ordelauffi publicly burned straw effigies of Cardinals in the marketplace in Forli and had a priest mutilated, causing the noble Franco Sacchetti in Florence to say *all* priests should be mutilated."

"I protest!"

"Protest all you wish!" Bernabo suddenly roars. "The papal indifference to the cruelty and arrogance of the clergy is beyond belief! Everyone knows in Perugia, the nephew of the Abbot of Montmayeur attempted rape upon a virtuous wife, and the lady, trying to escape the lecher, lost her footing and fell to her death! And what did the good Abbot say when informed of it? 'Did you suppose all Frenchmen to be eunuchs?'"

"A lie! Heresy!"

Bernabo again leans forward in his chair as a lion might prepare to leap on his prey. "Does this suggest your French Pope and his Cardinals are truly servants of God and heirs to heaven?"

The cleric's face flushes with anger "I see, my lord, it is useless to appeal to you as a child of the church and ...!"

"I'm *not* a child of the church!" Bernabo snaps. "I was excommunicated, remember? I find the condition consoling, since we now outnumber the faithful."

The abbot abruptly stands erect and sweeps his cloak around him as he imagines a Roman senator might do in the face of armed rebellion. "I have completed my mission! His Holiness has empowered me to inform you the armies of the Papal League, which were instituted by his predecessor, are prepared to march against you and severely punish you for your heresy."

Bernabo displays a crocodile smile and growls, "Indeed? This sham pope should be reminded Guillaume de Grimoard also preached a crusade against me, and not one Italian lord chose to participate in the misadventure."

"I see further negotiation is useless," the cleric snaps. He rises and produces a rolled parchment from the voluminous folds of his cloak as if it were a wand capable of changing the dragon into a mouse and slaps it against Bernabo's chest! "Here is the papal directive ordering you to leave Bologna immediately!"

Hawkwood would again draw his sword, but again the nobleman puts a restraining hand on his condottiere's glove. He nods to Agostino as Hawkwood sheaths his blade, and the Venetian scurries forward, snatches the parchment from the abbot's gloved hand, crosses to a fat wax candle and ignites the document! When the flame reaches his fingers he lets the remnants drift into a basin of water.

The Abbot, seething with barely disguised fury, turns to leave, but another nod from Bernardo, and the two guards at the door cross their pikes to prevent him.

"This meeting is concluded when I dismiss you, priest!" Bernabo turns quietly. "You came here uninvited and unwelcome. No truce has been negotiated on your behalf. Consequently, I am free to do with you as I wish." He sees the Abbot's face become a

pale mask. "I am a generous man. I will give you a choice. You may leave here in an urn like the document Bellemonte properly incinerated – or do as I suggest."

He goes to the side of the Abbot and whispers a proposition in the cleric's ear.

The Abbot's eyes first widened in shock and surprise and then become horrified

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The Flame and Francesca squat side-by-side in the dank underground tunnel connecting the Bentivoglio crypt to their family palazzo. Accessible only through the locked crypt in the Bentivoglio cemetery which Vittorio opened with a skill developed over years of determination and prowess, it has proved to be a safe meeting place for the division of their spoils - which is precisely why they are assembled now.

The two women examine the small crystal goblets passed to them following an initial examination by Scarpino the dwarf. Brakos loosens the last bindings of a large packet and opens the folds to reveal some rolls of embroidered Dutch lace, a jewelled and curved scabbard housing a dagger with an impressive ruby embedded in the handle, and a small statuette of a bearded man in a monk's brown robe, a ring of light encircling his head.

"These goblets are Venetian," declares Scarpino. "Probably from the Rondo, and this dagger is not from anywhere in Italy. It is Persian, I think. From the east."

Flame holds one of the fragile, transparent vessels up to the light of the torch and the faceted cut of the glass sends splinters of color dancing around the walls of the tunnel.

"Lovely," she says and trembles a little in the cold.

"The dagger has a jewel in the handle," observes the dwarf. "Isaac might have to give us a good price for that, but I'm not sure of the glassware. The statue is worthless."

"No!" Francesca roars at the little man. "My saint!" She snatches the statue and fondles it in her hands. "My name's saint! See! It's a sign! It means Santo Francisco approves of what we stole! He knows he is safe now and in more loving hands! It's a damned miracle!"

Flame laughs. "To you everything is 'a damned miracle.'"

"Because everything *is!* You find yourself alive for another day, and *that's* a damned miracle! The sun comes up, and the sky turns blue. It's another damned miracle! You manage to scrape together enough food to keep you breathing, and no one attempts to steal or beats you or tries to kill you! It's an even greater damned miracle! And if you find someone who pleasures you, and you enjoy one another, *that's* the greatest damned miracle of them all! Santo Francisco is worth all the glass in Venice! It is a damn miracle, I tell you! This is a sign from heaven!"

The giant Greek smiles at the woman rocking the image in her arms as if it were a baby. "Venetian glass should make us a little," says Brakos turning one of the cups over and over in his thick fingers.

"It would," Scarpio agrees, "if the people who can afford such nice things were still in Bologna, but they're not! They fled the city when they heard the mercenaries were coming. Isaac will argue there's nobody left to buy them."

"Vittorio says we should be leaving Bologna ourselves," says the Flame, fingering the lace. "He says there's not much left in the city to steal, and it won't be long before the mercenaries recognize our work and then they'll search us out and cut off our hands."

The dwarf looks around the dark interior. "Where *is* Vittorio?"

"At the university," the red-haired woman sighs. "Always at a damned university! That's why he moved us from Cortemaggiore two years ago," flame says. "Because Bologna has a university."

"What in hell does he do there anyway?"

"What he always does. He steals."

"What is there to steal in the university" Scarpio grumbles. "Quills and tablets?"

Flame sighs again and replaces the lace. "He says he is stealing tomorrow."

* * *

At that moment Vittorio is indeed approaching the university district of Bologna to steal. He works his way past the boisterous taverns and the ring of drab establishments encircling the hothouse of knowledge and argumentation. He trots past the run-down hovels rented to the less affluent students who cannot afford the dormitories. He slips between the narrow passages of the lavish Spanish fountains, the towering metal doors, under the graceful archways, and through the large courtyards before the houses of the wealthy benefactors who support the institution. The young thief, able to out-run a fox in heat and climb faster than a frightened monkey, has no difficulty in ascending to the roof of the main building by way of the drainage pipes. There he immediately crosses to an outlet of the ventilation system which is connected to one of the four lecture rooms in the floor below. He positions himself on his back against the tiles, one ear cupped to the air tube and listens. His attention is focused at first on the rolling canopy of gray clouds over his head warning of an approaching autumnal storm, and then on the exchange of views between the lecturer and the students in the room below.

Over the years he has been able to glean some modicum of knowledge from these university lectures, and more from what follows. While the classes are still more or less informal gatherings, the scholars who attempt to absorb what the instructor is telling them in Latin, then argue the propositions and theories among themselves in the neighboring taverns and in "the vulgar tongue." These debates frequently are wrapped in heated "discussions" which swell into "arguments" and ultimately into physical conflicts and an occasional death; because, unlike Florentines, Bolognese are permitted to carry swords.

Even as a boy in the village of Cortemaggiore Vittorio found it relatively easy to remember something overheard in passing. He absorbs not only the information but also the proper way to express it. He believes he can play a sham aristocratic role so well, because he has listened to aristocrats, not only to what they are saying, but how they say it. Now he can mimic a conversation between intelligent men of wisdom and

avaricious men of wealth with the proper verb forms and appropriate adjectives without thinking of it. Of course he can, and does, revert to the vernacular and the vulgar when it suits him.

Over the years and to his surprise, he has learned each class imitates the other. When a peasant wants to appear to be someone of means, he suddenly adopts a more pretentious and polysyllabic vocabulary; and when the noble wishes to appear as a man of the people, or in times of stress, his vulgarity and profanity would bring a blush to anyone compelled to listen to it. Because of his observation of such oratorical skills and due to his insights about the way people communicate, he has come to believe wasting such talents as his would be an offence against the gods who plot our earthly course and may, under proper circumstances, even prove profitable.

But not in Cortemaggiore.

He has so little regard for his birthplace, he has created an entirely mythical birthplace which he calls Gramante. It is a place no one has ever heard of and therefore it can be either a distant and exotic world of romance and culture or a stopping place for the sale of pigs on the high roads to Naples or Sicily.

Now, over the past two years he has been able to eavesdrop on some of Europe's most famous scholars who come to lecture in Bologna, some of them directly from the more prestigious universities in Andalusia and Paris. In addition he has frequently and surreptitiously "borrowed" texts used by the students and lecturers, works translated from the Arabic which are themselves based on ancient Greek texts on science, law, mathematics and the arts. He does not always understand what is being discussed in these overheard classes or what is annotated in the text, because the lectures and the books are in Latin, but over time he has learned enough of that language to recognize certain phrases. He considers these pretentious and of little value to a man of the streets, but essential to role-playing. Indeed, the only Latin phrase he genuinely relishes and occasionally employs is "*pons asinorum*" meaning "the bridge of asses." He feels it has a nice ring to it and conjures images of lawyers laid end to end over a yawning chasm.

If pressed on the matter, Vittorio can easily explain his persistent appetite to learn. He views life as a never-ending conflict between the possessors and the possessed, and he determines knowledge, or at least the appearance of it, is the weapon he needs to challenge the rich and powerful who lunge past him in the streets. He bows to no one in cleverness, but this excellent quality always seems to demand something more, like yeast to the kneading of bread.

That vital ingredient, he believes, is learning.

He notices of late the instructional sessions waste a great deal of time on vague theological or philosophical puzzles which seem to have no relevance to everyday life; like the persistent debate on "the number of angels who can stand on the head of the pin." He can easily grasp the concept of an infinite number of angels, having no corporeal bodies, achieving this feat, but he is puzzled as to why they would want to waste time gathering there in the first place. Squatting together on the pinnacle of the pin seems totally alien to his world and of little value to the everyday problems of the poor in a rich man's world.

Then again there are times when education of *any* kind seems irrelevant to his every-day life as a thief and a leader of thieves. Aristotle and Horace and Plato may have

been relevant to their time and place, and knowledgeable about what constitutes the nature of true art or how men should live, but Vittorio considers contemplation of such concepts to be a waste of valuable time. It is one thing to learn how to pick a lock on the mausoleum door and quite another to know true art must meet certain requirements.

His roof-top education is momentarily frustrated by anatomy lectures. These require his actual presence, but fortunately – later and in some quite corner table amid the bedlam of the inns – some of the medical students explain and demonstrate for one another the arrangement of the organs in the human body using cups and eating utensils.

The young thief is aware his quest for knowledge is actually an attempt to forge a weapon to use against the wealthy and arrogant, but on occasion it alienates him from most of his confederates who are content to merely survive as well as they can. Still he feels no responsibility for this lack of ambition among his peers. So what if the University of Bologna over the past two years has acquired an enthusiastic and unsolicited student who would normally have been excluded from education because of his poverty?

On this day and to his dismay, Vittorio listens as the lecturer demands an analysis of the nature of God according to Avicenna as compared to the *fins vitae* of Avicbron. Confused as to why this is vital to his own development, he surrenders to boredom, climbs down from his rooftop and mingles with some of the students who have also abandoned the lecture hall. These drop-outs naturally flow, as rivers to the sea, into the taverns and brothels to either continue the discussion or to alleviate the pain caused by having to submit to it in the first place.

Someday, Vittorio swears silently to himself, I shall know everything there is to know. Then, world, watch out!

Yes, a little voice within him comments, and someday pigs will shit ripe cherries.

* * *

The following morning the trumpets of the Breton company summon the people of Bologna to the piazza. This includes the guildsmen laboring at the construction of the church; the merchants haggling with the housewives of the price for beets or bread; the cunning thieves and their unsuspecting victims working in tandem without realizing it; noisy children at their games and gossiping young girls at the communal fountains; the farmers on their carts burdened with vegetables and leading livestock; the solemn and sleeping monks in pompous procession; the prostitutes lounging after their night-long labors; the off-duty mercenary soldiers; all of them – all – stop momentarily and flow toward the piazza. The pious and forgiving softly murmur the conventional prayer for the souls of the invader while the other, the majority, wish them deeper into hell with silent damns.

Some dissenters apparently decide to return to their labors, but the advancing mercenaries with their sharp pikes stretched before them prod the reluctant observers into the public square with the others.

On the top of one of the two principal towers near the palazzo, the Abbot of the monastery of St. Apollinaire in Ravenna stands wrapped now in torn and stained rags, one eye blackened and swollen nearly shut, a puffed lip and two fingers on his left hand in splints. He slouches between Captain Hawkwood and Agostino Bellemonte and blinks with his one good eye at the noonday sun.

"Now nice and loud, priest," Bernabo whispers to the Abbot from his position behind the beaten prelate, "or you shall provide further amusement for my mercenaries,"

The bruised and bloodied cleric manages to nod, steps uncertainly toward the edge of the tower and struggles to read from a parchment forced into his trembling hands.

"I, Giuseppe Fonducci ... "

"Louder!" Bernabo snaps. "It is mid-day, and the people are hungry and less attentive. Speak out!"

"I, Giuseppe Fonducci ... "

"Oh, much louder!" Bernabo commands. "Imagine you are demanding their money for the construction of a new church!"

"I, Giuseppe Fonducci ... !"

"Better."

"... Abbot of the monastery of Saint Apollinaire, hereby proclaim I – I serve a dissolute and wicked man, Pierre Roger de Beaufort, who calls himself Gregory the Eleventh - supposedly supreme pontiff of the holy Roman Catholic Church, but – but – who - openly purchased his position with funds provided by the French – and who – who sanctions the simony of his priests. This imposter – he dines at licentious banquets – while the poor starve. He – he resides in a great castle surrounded by rich, insolent and rapacious Cardinals – who – who dispense pardons and indulgences – for money or goods and – and live openly with mistresses – in violation of their vows before God of – of poverty and chastity."

"Bravo!" Bernabo whispers. "Continue!"

"I, Giuseppe Fonducci, hereby refute – the papacy of Pierre Roger de Beaufort and – and I – renounce my position. I will – I will – now retire to – to lead a life of piety – simplicity – and – and poverty – among the people."

Bernabo beams, lean forward and whispers in the prelate's ear.

"Absolvo te."

* * *

The assembly in the piazza below is unaware Vittorio and Flame are huddled together naked near an aviary on one of the palazzo towers. They waken under the four blankets they stole the preceding night off the backs of the condottiere's own horses. It was the insistent blaring of the trumpets which aroused them, because they had already silenced the bell which announces the arrival of messenger birds. Now they slowly stir

to life, cover their nakedness with the blankets, and half listen to the last phrases of the proclamation by the abbot on the neighboring tower.

The Flame murmurs, "What in hell is he saying?"

"Whatever the Visconti want him to say," replies Vittorio. The dark-haired young man stands erect, stretches and trembles a little in the cold autumnal air. He seizes the top blanket from under Flame who rolls from it and squeals. "Winter will be upon us soon." He turns to the girl who resumes her fetal position under the remaining blanket. "We should be thinking of moving somewhere else."

"Somewhere without a university?"

"Alright. I think I am done with universities for awhile."

"South – where it is warmer?"

"Somewhere."

"Gramante?"

Vittorio smiles at the mention of his imaginary world where he claims to have been born, and he says softly, "Not yet." He looks over the edge of the building at the people below. "By the saints," he says half to himself. "Everyone must have been commanded to listen, including the mercenaries." He turns and starts for the doorway. "That could prove convenient for us."

"Why? What are you planning?"

"I am planning to see what they there might be in the scullery of this palazzo for our first meal of the day. It is strictly for the mercenaries, so it may not be as rich and abundant as the Visconti's, but it should suffice."

He turns back, wraps a blanket around himself, picks up a pile of discarded clothing, and again crosses to the doorway leading down several flights of steps into the top floors of the palazzo

"I won't be long," and he disappears into the shadows.

Flame, trembling with the cold, quickly dresses and wraps the remaining blankets around her. She listens to the final words of the abbot's proclamation and prays Vittorio might return before the condottiere and his mercenaries discover her on their tower. She meditates briefly upon what the abbot has declared, and then dismisses her thoughts as the cold penetrates her rags.

Yes. Vittorio's right. We must move on, she thinks, but where?

A surge of disquiet passes through her, and she finds herself once more contemplating a better and a far different life; but the memories of the excitement and the unpredictability of their shared game of thievery and degeneracy dominates, and she simply sighs.

Be grateful for what you have, girl: an occasional good meal with wine, sometimes mating with your man of youth and strength and audacity, and the development of a sense of danger with the ability not to fear it. What woman in Bologna, in all of Italy, has as much?

Only a short time passes before Vittorio, again mantled in the rumpled black robe of a pardoner, appears at her side with the blanket folded into a basket. He spreads before her a loaf of freshly-baked bread, a pot of honey, a melon, and a bottle of dark wine. He draws the knife from his waist and cuts the melon into quarters. He tears a piece from the bread, drops it in the honey and has his breakfast.

The Flame quickly joins him, relishing the sweetness of the melon and the texture of the crusty bread.

Vittorio takes out the cork from the wine bottle, takes a long swallow and passes it to the girl. "Not bad," he says. "Ordinary. Definitely not Tuscan."

She takes a deep swallow, which warms her a little, and discovers a somewhat bitter after-taste. "You got some cork in it."

"Be grateful I'm sharing it. My thirst is twice yours."

Suddenly a pigeon with white-and-black markings swoops low over the heads of the people gathered in the piazza below. It banks, flaps its wings, soars to the top of the tower which houses its aviary and arrogantly positions itself on Vittorio's shoulder.

The young thief notices the small, square and sealed parchment tied by a ribbon around the bird's neck. He says, "A message for the Visconti. Let's eavesdrop."

"If the Lord finds out, it would mean the loss of our hands – or our eyes. He would be furious."

"Can you think of a better reason then?"

He carefully wipes his fingers on his robe, gently but firmly folds his hands around the pigeon, and Flame comes and unties the ribbon. Vittorio places the bird in the cage, takes the tightly-rolled parchment from Flame, draws his knife slides it under the wax seal. unfolds and reads it.

"What does it say?" Flame asks.

"It says the armies of Amadeus of Savoy has entered the Piedmont with Enguerrand de Coucy."

. "Who are they – this Amadeus and – what was the other?"

"Enguerrand de Coucy. He is a French lord who wants to keep the papacy in Avignon and away from Italian Rome."

"What does it mean?"

"It means they come – supposedly – to discipline the Marquis of Saluzzo for supporting the Bretons," Vittorio explains as he warms the wax with the heat of his thumb and presses it against the flap of the document. He reaches into the aviary for the bird. "Coucy is a very important fellow. Born to the gold and the power. I've heard of him, because his family supports some of the teachers at the universities."

"And the other? What did you call him?"

"Amadeus of Savoy, he's called the Green Count, because that is color of his armor. To the best of my knowledge, he leads a very small army, so he must have contracted with a condottiere somewhere to recruit more men and attempt this invasion." He reties the ribbon around the bird's neck and places it back in the cage. "We have to go,

Flame," he says. "I'll re-attach the bell cord, pull it and someone on the Visconti's staff will come looking for this bird. I don't want to be here when he comes.."

They begin packing the remains of the food and wrapping it in the blankets.

"What does it mean, this word – discipline? They come to – discipline?" Flame asks as they creep cautiously into the stone stairwell of the palazzo and slowly descend into its depths.

"It means they will pretend to march against the Marquis of Saluzzo who has offended the pope, but what it *really* means is: full war: the French against the Italians," Vittorio answers softly, "and it means the Visconti will probably now order Hawkwood and his mercenaries to leave Bologna and return to either Milan, his possession, or to Pavia were his brother reigns."

"Why? I don't understand."

"Because Bernabo Visconti won't believe these French armies are in the Piedmont to punish a wayward vassal of the Pope. He'll realize this is probably the beginning of a blood feud between himself and the Avignon pontiff and his allies. It is a question of where the papacy should be located, because wherever it is, either the French or the Italians will be in a position to control the seat of the Fisherman. Of course the Visconti lord lit the fuse himself, didn't he? I mean when he forced the pope's emissary to make the little speech we just heard."

"So – what does all that *mean*?"

"It means the Visconti will most certainly move Hawkwood and his forces to the north and west before Savoy and Coucy, marching under the order of the Pope, can attack and take his cities of Pavia and Milan."

They have to pause as they come to an open doorway in the second level and hear the laughter of some drunken soldiers inside the room. Vittorio immediately removes his black robe and stuffs it into a sack.

"A pardoner would not be welcome here," he says softly into her ear.

He gestures the Flame to silence and slowly peers around the framework of the door. Then he signals the girl to move quickly past. When she clears the opening, Vittorio steps briskly to the other side, and the couple resume their descent to the lower level of the palazzo undetected.

They step out into the cold air and casually began to stroll down the side street toward the Bentivoglio crypt.

"So it's war," says Flame, "but what does that mean to *us*?"

"Wars affect everybody," said the young thief, "but this one could prove a blessing for us."

"How?"

"The Bretons will probably move north now to Pavia, because that city is in immediate danger and it is the province of Bernabo's brother, Galeazzo. Hawkwood will push his men to move faster, so his mercenaries will be able to ravish only the houses along their line of march. They'll snatch what they can carry and hurry on. The wealthy

fat farts ahead of them will hear about their coming and run for whatever city can give them protection."

"So?"

"So they will take their gold with them, but they will leave the rest for *us*: tapestries, chalices, fine dishes and rich clothes. Things the owners may consider burdensome. So we follow the White Company, and as soon as they take what they want, there will still be plenty for us. Of course we may have to fight the *rascali*, the refuse of the streets, but they do not relish a fight."

Flame links her arm through his and leans into him. "You are amazing," she sighs.

"You diminish me!" Vittorio laughs. "In the words of our pious Francesca: I, my dear, am a god-damned miracle!"

* * *

If you enjoyed this chapter please let us know at: support@georgeherman.com

There can never be too many eyes in the editing process so if you find any errors please let us know.

Peace and happy reading

Tricia