

Jacopo's Contract

The sirocco tugs at the blinds and rattles the doors. The campanile of the Madonna still echoes with the unnatural sounding of its bells: purgatorial groans and laments; strange songs of loss and mourning. The studio walls are shaking, the foundations of the world made unsteady. Jacopo kneels, crosses himself. He prays first to the Saviour, then to the Madonna, then to the healing power of San Rocco. *Bathe me in your charism, do not let us suffer sickness and death, not now when I might become foremost in this city. Spare me that I may be your greatest servant, the truest depicter of your glory.*

Fortified, he steps out along the Rio Della Sensa, pushing his short, stocky frame into the restless day. The wind is vigorous and violent, a scorching dragon's breath that abrades his face. In the South, ramparts of purple cloud pile themselves upon each other, cutting the city off from the sea. The air smells of metal and vinegar, of marsh weed and sea spray.

The miracle of the bells is the talk of every corner. Some are confident that it's just the sirocco - an odd confluence of the wind's strength and bearing has infected the campanile with strange currents. Others are fearful - nothing like this has ever been heard before. If the hands on the bell-ropes are not human, then surely they must be infernal? Passers-by cross themselves at each new peal, muttering quiet pleas to their patron saints.

At San Marcuola, a ragged ferryman assures Jacopo that the bells announce the loss of the Alexandrian fleet. The Doge himself is bankrupted, half the city ruined. However spurious his news, the ferryman's voice is firm and certain and carries tones of grim satisfaction.

The glassware merchants around the Rialto have a different conviction. The bells announce war. The brittle peace with Turkey is broken. The Sultan's battle fleets are massing

in the Bosphorus. Certain market stalls stand empty. Jacopo guesses that Turkish traders are staying at home and out of trouble, waiting for these rumours to subside.

Sometimes, Jacopo thinks he hears the word *pestilence*. This is the word he dreads, the word he refuses to speak. The devil you fear most is the one most easily summoned by mention of his name.