

PROLOGUE

THE LUCKY DAY

The scent of fresh bread wafting past Tommaso was simultaneously blissful and painful. Though he was well-practiced at ignoring the angry pit in his stomach, today it was proving more and more difficult. If he didn't find a way to satisfy the ravenous monster within it was going to be a very long night indeed. The bread at this bakery must be especially good, he thought, because every time he passed, there was a line of people jostling for position, elbows ready for battle, eyes-on-the-prize pointed straight ahead. Manners and politeness in these cases usually preferred napping somewhere near the canal, where emerald water lapped happily against the moored gondolas and stone steps.

He racked his brain for options. He could linger on a crowded street, hoping to snag a loaf of bread out of some unsuspecting passerby's basket, or he could wander down one of the many calli where food vendors gathered. Tiptoeing undetected amongst the stalls was a particular skill of his, mouse eyes darting about and spotting discarded scraps. He was also adept at narrowing in on merchants too distracted with throngs of customers to notice his dirt creased hands. Occasionally he got lucky at one of the numerous churches if he passed at just the right moment and tugged on the garments of a busy seeming priest, who might direct him to some nearby source of sustenance. The ability to mention, "Father so-and-so said it's okay," sometimes prompted eye rolls, but it often forced a more sympathetic hand. He had learned to be careful though. Sometimes if a priest had enough time on his hands, he may just try to drag him away to one of Venice's orphanages. From experience, he knew that food was easier to acquire in that environment, but giving up his freedom to roam about the city as he pleased wasn't a price he was willing to pay, even if it did mean long stretches in which comfort and a full-belly were hard to come by.

Calli, plural for calle, is the name for a typical Venetian street, which often can be extremely narrow. It comes from the Latin word calle, meaning route or path.

The ten-fingered foraging often went best around five in the evening. Today, the late winter sun was setting in dramatic red swathes across the lagoon and the multitudes were out and about, scurrying along determinedly on their various missions — buying, selling, trading, gossiping, scheming, cheating, creating, dreaming. His dark, curly head and skinny limbs slid easily through the spaces in between. His height, stunted from malnutrition, was perfect for hiding amongst the clouds of clergy and nobility draped in voluminous layers of black cloth. His cat-like patience and pounce, per usual, went undetected amongst not only Venetians, but also the immigrants and refugees from places both near and far, who seemed to flow from one shore to another the same way the birds above them flew from one canal to another.

Victory number one was unexpected. A disgruntled baker rounding a corner not far ahead of him tripped and dropped the large bag draped over his shoulder. Out tumbled a cascade of hard biscuits. The baker, even more disgruntled looking now, grabbed the top of the bag, twisted it quickly and threw it back over his shoulder, heading in the direction of the Rialto. Tommaso raced forward and gathered the dropped biscuits into the fold of his shirt. A big smile crossed his face as he bit down ravenously on the first piece. Pan biscotti fresh out of the oven were rare. Gulping them down as fast as he could, he trotted toward Campo

Rialto: the major bridge that crosses the Grand Canal. Around 1500 this bridge was still made of wood and was a draw bridge. At the end of the 16th century the stone version we know today was erected

Campo, in general, means field, but in Venice it indicates a public square. Originally these spaces were real fields in which vegetables were planted or fruit trees stood, often adjacent to a church. With time they were covered over and only the churches or wells remain.

Sant'Agostin, his hunger slowly diminishing as his thirst quickly increased.

A few months before, he had found a chipped, but otherwise sturdy cup that had two handles, one on each side. Having looped a long piece of string onto each handle he could easily tie it around his waist and cover it with his shirt, making it less likely to be stolen. He had grown especially fond of this cup for some reason, with its green and brown fish painted on the base, and he often absent-mindedly found himself patting his torso just to make sure it was still there. Having inhaled the last of the pan biscotti he began untying the cup from his waist as he approached the well in the middle of the campo.

A *forestière* is a stranger or a foreigner.

A *forestière*, perhaps a slave, he guessed, from her ebony complexion, was at the well fetching water. Tall and lanky, the white's of her eyes jumped towards him as he came closer and he couldn't help but notice the pretty, curled lashes that framed them. He began to gather that she had just finished filling her fourth bucket of water and was preparing to pick them up. Pausing, she glanced at the cup in his hand and made note of his general condition. A sad smile crossed her face. She gestured towards a bucket near his feet and said, "Please, take some."

"Thank you," Tommaso exhaled, giving her the biggest, teathy-est smile he could conjure as he dipped his cup into the bucket. Number one gone in a flash, he glanced up and she laughed lightly, nodding her head. Two more cups of water down, he stood up and looked her squarely in the face, "Thanks again."

"You're welcome," she said, and leaned to gather all four buckets, then turned and began heading towards a large building in the corner of the campo. Tommaso suddenly wished he had not eaten the last pan biscotto so he could give her something in return, but then came to his senses and ran after her.

"Can I help you carry these buckets?" he asked.

"No, that's ok, it's that house right there. It's not that far."

"Really. I don't mind at all. Please let me help."

He grabbed the two buckets from her right hand before she could deny his help a second time and proudly marched towards the calle she was now waving him towards. He was shocked at how heavy the sloshy cargo was. Once there they stopped at a door that led to a slightly subterranean room, one he assumed was for storage or an entry way for the servants. Tommaso's new friend set the buckets down and gave him a little curtsy. He curtsied back to her.

"I suppose it's my lucky day," she whispered quietly, the former sad smile drifting across her face again.

"Mine too!" he exclaimed, hoping to brighten her expression, even a little. "Maybe we will see each other again?"

"I hope so." Extending her calloused hand towards him, she said, "My name is Sonia."

He lifted his bony one to hers for a tentative shake. "I'm Tommaso. Good evening, Sonia."

"Good evening, Tommaso."

He turned and began to walk away, stealing a last glance behind him, hoping to get one more dose of Sonia's eyelashes and quiet kindness, but she had already entered the building. Tommaso reflexively started checking for his cup. Within seconds he realized that he had left it by the well. He rushed to his former spot. There it sat, patiently waiting for him. Maybe it really is my lucky day, he thought, scooping up the cup and tying it back around his waist. He paused briefly to get his bearings, knowing it was only a matter of time before old monster hunger reawakened. "Best take advantage of good luck while one can," he whispered to himself, and off he went, headed in the direction of the Friari Basilica. There was often a lot of activity there, and the wheel of fortune seemed to be turning in his direction, so why not play it big.



A couple of cupfuls of polenta and some slightly dusty but tasty, fried sardines later, Tommaso rounded out his meal by ducking under a fruit seller's cart to grab a few fallen clementines before they got crushed in a stampede of feet. The polenta and sardines had come courtesy of a vendor who needed a wee but wanted someone to watch his wares for a minute. Thus far, the evening's efforts had not only been a total success, but

much of it had come easily. Meandering slowly amongst the dwindling crowds, Tommaso said a quick prayer of thanks because he knew all too well that some days were the complete opposite.

In the evenings, a gondolier named Francesco sometimes let Tommaso sleep in his boat, but he needed to intercept him at just the right moment, tying up the gondola near the Fondamenta dell'Olio. Once the boy had made the mistake of sleeping in the wrong boat, and in the morning he woke up splashing about in the Grand Canal after being unceremoniously dumped in by the real owner. Such mishaps were unimportant at the moment though, as the stored blankets Francesco concealed in various nooks and crannies of his gondola began to dance before Tommaso's eyes, a bit of warmth and the song of sleep pushing him down one calle to the next in a happy trance. It didn't last long. A fisherman ploughed into Tommaso from a side calle, snapping him out of his reverie.

Fondamenta = a pedestrian walkway along a canal

Scanning his surroundings, he saw he was near Campo Zan Degolà, several minutes northeast of where he wanted to be. There were rumors amongst some of the other orphans that a demon had taken a liking to the Rio Zan Degolà, now behind him as he walked quickly in the opposite direction. A ticklish breeze grazed the back of his neck. Wishing there were a few more people about, Tommaso rounded a corner and abruptly encountered an orange cat who arched its back, meowing loudly at him, as if in protest. The shock made him jump. He picked up his pace, but not until he reached the Fondamenta del Megio, a full rio to the west, did he breathe a sigh of relief.

Crossing the Ponte del Megio, Tommaso sped forward faster, hoping to catch Francesco in time. As he rounded the next corner a small flash of movement in an alleyway on his right caught his eye. Before he could whip around to see what it was, an enormous, beefy hand snatched his collar from behind, and then immediately covered his mouth and nose. He began violently thrashing about, limbs in every direction, but whomever had a hold of him seemed completely unaffected by his acrobatics. With his feather weight, he was soon being dragged in skids along the dirt walkway despite his continued attempts to break free. As he began to grow faint, the last thing Tommaso heard was the soft thud of his cup hitting the ground.

Rio = a small canal

Ponte = a bridge