



Cats And Architecture

by Chico Kidd

Part I

It was not carnival time in Venice, yet strangely enough a kind of charivari spirit seemed still to move along the city's narrow byways. Round the corner ahead you might hear the ghost of a laugh or a whisper of music, only to have it dissipate as you approached, or mutate into the soft plash of canal waters.

That the city is given to shades, and cannot escape its aura of being a place where time seems thin and stretched is not a reason for the existence of such phantasms, any more than the human body is the cause or creator of its own internal organs—

Jo da Silva put down her pen, her mind stuck in the groove of the movie *Don't Look Now*, and walked over to the window.

Out of season, Venice had indeed slipped back into the past which it inhabited after the majority of the tourists had departed, and become a village again. The stinks of high summer were gone as well, and a kind of comfortable melancholy imbued its misty vistas.

The apartment looked out on a small, terracotta-coloured piazza (or campo, if you wanted to be pedantic about it). Its normal tenants were visiting relatives in Australia, and Jo was not one to turn down the offer of a month's free accommodation in La Serenissima; although she had done precious little in the way of the writing she had intended to knuckle down to, in the week she had spent there. Its only drawback was her suspicion that the building harboured rats in its nether regions.

At the moment the campo appeared totally uninhabited, as if Jo were in a city on the moon, or perhaps a de Chirico painting. It was almost completely filled up with shadows, and most of the windows in the other buildings which surrounded it were shuttered, like closed eyes. Potted plants made splashes of colour here and there.

Despite the direction of her last thoughts, she was not really expecting to see sinister little red-coated figures. The campo was so sleepy, in fact, that she was not expecting to see anything at all, which is why a movement in her eye's corner made her jump.

Diagonally across the square, one shuttered window stood slightly ajar. The shutter, half-open, folded in on itself, as it were, gave a glimpse of darkness behind; and something whitish fluttered there. Not a curtain, for it had solidity. Not a person, either — but why had she thought that?

Ow, I seen it wive at me out the winder.

More ghost stories in her mind! That was *Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You*. On second thoughts, she rather wished that particular tale hadn't come to the surface.

...and I didn't like it.

Jo ran a hand through her short hair and decided it was definitely time to go and drink a cup of espresso, and possibly a glass of grappa as well. Or, even better, have a caffè corretto and combine the two — she liked the idea that coffee could be “corrected” by the addition of alcohol. Besides, she had to go past the building with the window to get to the bar, and could take, therefore, a closer look.

Out in the red-shadowed, deserted campo, her steps echoed hollowly. The shadows had put a chill into the square, although above her the sky was still a hazed blue, only just beginning to fade towards evening.

A dog came sniffing out of an alley, busy on its own affairs, and Jo smiled; she liked dogs, but wished this one would do something to earn its keep, firstly by going after the rats and then, probably, doing something to deter the supercilious white cat which she had seen slinking around the vicinity most nights, like a pathfinder from the Countess of Groan's entourage. In Jo's opinion it was white cats which should be witches' familiars, leaving their black counterparts to bring, like chimney sweepers, luck where they would; silent and sneaky as all felines, to Jo the ghostlike pallor of the whites was far more suited to a supernatural role. Darkness creeps on cat feet, she thought, deliberately misquoting, and smiled to herself.

Now she was in the building's shadow, she looked up. It was older — and grander — than she'd thought at first: almost a demi-palazzo, it could have dated from the eighteenth century, but Jo's knowledge of architectural styles was sketchy at best. The window, on the top storey, was tall and possessed of a tiny balcony too small to sit on, but just wide enough for plant-pots: indeed, others round the square were cluttered with flowers — the ubiquitous geraniums and petunias, whose hot pinks and reds clashed with the suntan-colours of the terracotta pots, and here and there a trail of magenta bougainvillea, like a Christmas paper chain.

Beside the front door, where now she stood, she saw a single bell-push — apparently the building had escaped being converted into apartments. After a moment's hesitation, she pressed it, hearing its dim buzz deep inside, like a trapped insect, but there was no reply.

She was conscious, then, of being on a cusp, presented with a clear choice between two routes. Either she could forget a thing, or a nothing, seen out of the edge of her eye in a building kitty-corner to her life; or, like the egregious Franz Westen, go in pursuit of it.

It brought a wry grin to her face. She may have been suffering from writer's block, but no-one had ever accused her of lacking imagination, and nobody would ever say she was devoid of curiosity. And tending still towards feline metaphors, the significance of *that* was not lost on her.

Between the campo and the bar she had claimed as her own she passed by a shop which sold masks, fantastical things of paste-board and feathers and sequins and enamel, like an Ensor dream. Its window was always brightly illuminated, so that the colours of the masks gleamed in the hard bright light like phantasmagorical beetle-cases.

The Phantom of the Opera is here, inside your mind.

Jo shook her head to rid it of the irritating tune, but all she could think of as a substitute on the spur of the moment was poor mad Lucia, fluting "*Il fantasma!*"; and the famous shot of Joan Sutherland, wild-haired in her blood-stained nightie, floated behind her eyes.

Reaching her destination, thoughts of corrected coffee drove out her introspection. Although the name *Il Bar Roberto* was written on the window in fading paint, the establishment was presided over by a tall thin unsmiling woman with an intimidating moustache; she was generally known as La Strega — although no cats, black, white or otherwise, were allowed past her door. Under her aegis a number of young women who were too much like her in appearance (although mostly lacking the facial hair) not to be her daughters bustled about, serving customers, ministering to the espresso machine, and gossiping at the tops of their voices. In one corner a television with the sound turned down always seemed to be showing a football match, and usually a number of men were clustered round it roaring encouragement, or otherwise.

"Does anyone live in the house on the corner?" Jo asked one of the daughters, who shrugged her shoulders and shook her head at the same time. An older sister, passing with a tray of dirty cups and glasses, was more knowledgeable.

"It belonged to an old boy called Della Quercia," she told Jo. "He didn't leave a will when he died; the children's lawyers have been arguing over the house for years. So someone's getting fat out of it. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," said Jo dismissively.

But when moonlight lay white on the campo that night, and sleep eluded her, she got up and padded to the window, and looked out to see whether any pallid thing was waving to her. The corner house was deep in shadow, and somehow that was more unsettling than seeing anything. Even when she finally drifted off to sleep, her dreams were populated with floating masks and pale shrouds on the shores of stagnant waters.

Mist, which really came on cat feet, transformed the city the next morning into a place of ghosts and shadows indeed, and smelling strongly of the sea. Jo skulked in bed, fatigued from her broken night, grumpy with lack of sleep; and then the phone rang.

"Pronto," she yawned into the mouthpiece. For a long time there was nothing but the rush and clatter of the phone line, and then, as she was about to hang up, very faint and far-away, a voice said, "Are you coming?"

"What?"

Another long pause, and then, "If you don't come to me, I'll come to you."

The line went dead, and left Jo staring at the receiver and thinking about M R James.

And then she jerked awake with the compulsive indrawn whoop of holding her breath too long, and stared round the suddenly unfamiliar room without comprehension for nearly a minute.

She got out of bed, the old linoleum cold beneath her feet, and walked through to the main room, where she trod on something sharp that made her hop and curse. Investigating, she found it was a necklace: a rather pretty antique thing of opals and jade with a vaguely oriental look. Jo picked it up and put it on the table by the telephone, catching sight of her sleep-rumpled face in the mirror above. Not a jewellery person at the best of times — her idea of dressing up was a clean pair of jeans — she was hardly tempted to slip the necklace over her head to see how it would look. Even the fact that she could entertain such a thought made her smile, and she crossed to the window.

Opening the shutter nearly dislodged the white cat, which yowled angrily and took its leave in the feline equivalent of a huff. Outside, the weather really was misty, so much so that the corner house was invisible and the sounds of people bestirring themselves were muffled, as if they had all put on boots of felt and decided, inexplicably, to speak in whispers; but then she heard the sharp bark of a dog, cutting through the dull cloud.

Not without suspicious glances at the telephone, Jo picked through the cards in the big dish beside it, until she found the one she was looking for.

"La Casa della Scala," said Maurizio Giordano, whom Jo had been told knew everything there was to know about Venice. "The House with the Stair." Expecting, for no logical reason, a kindly gnome of a professor, she had been surprised to find a lumbering great young man who, had he been a dog, would have been a St Bernard, possibly crossed with an Irish wolfhound. He was the proprietor of an establishment called The Arcane Library — though even a brief glimpse at the shelves made Jo think "eclectic" would be a better word.

"The House with the Stair?" she repeated, giving the words the same capitalisation.

"That's right, it's quite famous. All the guides take the tourists to look at it. If you go through the archway on the right of the house you'll find a spiral staircase leading up the back, with a thing like a dove-cote on top. It was built by a guy called Umberto Scimone, who most people think was as mad as a hatter. Because, you see, the staircase doesn't connect to the house at all, unless you want to jump two metres across and up or a metre down to get in through a window."

"So what's the story?"

"Well, he built the staircase for cats, apparently. He was potty about cats. You know M C Escher?" Giordano asked, with apparent irrelevance.

"Yes?"

"Have you seen that print of all the curly-up critters going up and down one of his stair-mazes?" Jo nodded. "That was the sort of thing Scimone had in mind. He even did a sketch of hundreds of cats doing much the same thing, up and down an endless stair. Though I don't think he was quite so fascinated by impossible geometry as Escher, being an architect, you see."

Behind the professor, the open window gave onto a properly functional balcony on which stood a wicker chair, a small table, and a bay tree with a spiral trunk in a Chinese pot. From not too far away came the sounds of vaporetta plying the canals, but their clamour was currently being contested by some enthusiastic Verdi from somewhere nearby. Early, she thought; *Ermani*, perhaps. The air felt damp, although the mist was mostly gone, risen into the sky to dull the late autumn sun and mock the eyes with air.

"And who was Signor Della Quercia?"

"As a matter of fact, he was my grandfather. On the wrong side of the blanket, though, as they say. But we're not yet done with

Signor Scimone. Would you like a glass of wine?” Jo assented, and was shortly presented with a nicely chilled Vernaccia. That done, the professor continued, “I assume you know what ley-lines are?”

“Sort of,” she replied. “Lines of... force, aren’t they? *The Old Straight Track*,” she added, the title popping up unbidden, although she had never actually read the book.

“Positive force, to be exact,” said Giordano, and waited for Jo to nod her head. Sipping his wine, he continued, “So it won’t have occurred to you that they might have a negative equivalent?”

“Not really,” Jo said. “I hadn’t given it much thought.”

“Well, Signor Scimone did. And he came to the conclusion that Venice was riddled with the things. Lines of bad luck, if you like. Interestingly enough, it seems La Fenice was built on one.” Jo, who still grieved at the loss of the opera house, nodded. “Scimone had quite a lot of... shall we say, individual ideas. Apart from the negative ley-lines, he used all sorts of arcane formulae to influence his work.”

“What, sort of eighteenth-century Italian feng shui?”

Giordano laughed, a curiously high sound from such a huge frame. “You could say that.” He got to his feet and hunted amongst his bookshelves, leaving Jo staring at a collection of what appeared to be grimoires. Finally he extracted a slim volume, the cover of which he showed to Jo: it featured the cat drawing he had mentioned earlier. It was called *Le Gatti e L’Architettura*; she missed the author’s name.

Opening it delicately, he flicked through pages until he found what he was looking for. “Here it is: *‘Scimone’s fascination with cats is well-known, but perhaps the full extent of it is less common knowledge. In a letter to Fiorenza Tevere, he proposed the somewhat Brunoesque view that he saw them as merely the earthly manifestations of huge and benign beings which had their existence in another sphere entirely. As such he believed their benevolence was a positive force for good, and planned every building to take advantage of this, especially those which had to be constructed on or near negative ley-lines.’*”

“A cat-flap in every palazzo?” suggested Jo, not without sarcasm.

“Actually it was Galileo who invented the cat-flap,” said Giordano, straight-faced, and Jo didn’t know whether to believe him or not.

Closing the book, he refilled their glasses, and looked at her expectantly.

“And I suppose the house is on one of these negative ley-lines?” she said.

“Exactly. Now listen, the plot thickens. Scimone built the house, properly the Palazzo Della Quercia, for one of my ancestors, carefully explaining to him the significance of the stairs, which were, in essence, a very grand cat-flap, allowing them to come and go via an upper floor.”

“But didn’t you say—”

“Yes, indeed. But originally the stairway *was* attached to the palazzo, by a sort of mini Bridge of Sighs. Which, at some time in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, simply disappeared. No-one knows how. Or when. Or why. But I think I can hazard a guess at the why.” He paused.

“To *exclude* the cats?” hazarded Jo, feeling a little like the straight man in a vaudeville act.

“Yes, yes. But if we accept Scimone’s use of cats as a kind of guardian against malign forces, removing the bridge very effectively cut off their protection.”

“But why would anyone want to do that?”

“Someone who wanted to contact the malign forces might. The Della Quercia family have enjoyed a... mixed reputation over the years. At one stage they were supposed to own some kind of powerful amulet brought back by Marco Polo, but nobody knows what became of that.”

Jo took a mouthful of wine and savoured the slightly metallic taste. “Are we talking of a Della Quercia warlock?”

“Not a warlock,” the professor corrected her. “A necromancer.”

There was a sudden silence, vaporetta and Verdi alike both mute for a long instant as a chill travelled down Jo’s back.

“Someone who talks to the dead...”

“Oh, more than talked, I think. And not to the dead, exactly,” said Giordano softly, and suddenly he didn’t seem a kindly figure at all.

Walking back from this meeting, Jo again felt surrounded by phantoms, but this time they had been conjured by speech and conjecture rather than atmosphere and legend ancient and modern. Things seemed to want to unravel, as if the knowledge of Scimone’s negative ley-lines had opened a third eye which was capable of seeing, or at least sensing, them all around her, an almost palpable cat’s-cradle in the air.

Her footsteps rang and echoed in the deserted campo, in the hollow of her head. She found herself, once more, standing outside the house with the stair, but instead of looking up at the windows (and whatever might be waving out of them), she followed Giordano’s remembered instructions and headed through the archway he had described, unsurprised to disturb the white cat which had been basking in an errant patch of sunlight. It shot her a very human look of annoyance at having its rest interrupted.

The tower struck her as a beautiful thing; somehow, in her speculations and imaginings, she had not been prepared for beauty. There was something so patently perfect about it that it took her breath away, yet absolute perfection was marred. Lacking its bridge, it was incomplete, like an unfinished song. Jo sighed, looking up at the blank brick back of the palazzo, all shutters fastened, all secrets hidden away.

But she could climb the tower, she thought. Perhaps from the top she would see something enlightening. Almost automatically she walked towards it, and set her foot on the first marble step. Dizziness enclosed her briefly, and a phrase of Giordano’s came to her.

Impossible geometry.

Jo shook her head to clear it, and began to ascend. An almost overwhelming sensation of déjà vu possessed her, instantly recognisable, unlike most such. Many years earlier, before the authorities closed it to the public, she had climbed the belltower at Pisa, had lurched like a spacewalker up steps that threw her balance from one side to another: up had not been consistently up, was sometimes almost down; just so would a climber of one of Escher’s edifices experience their endless turning, twisting stairs.

She tried to concentrate on the steps. They were not worn by the soft insubstantial tread of cats, with their feet as light as mist; nor was the marble furred with dust, for it shone whiter than the airy translucence of the Taj Mahal that looks, from a distance, like lace painted on the dawn. There was no handrail, so she trailed her left hand around the central column as she climbed — widdershins, of course.

With a suddenness which was startling, she reached the top, a circular chamber on whose floor the sun lay bright and striped by the shadows of the columns which surrounded it. Breathing a little heavily, she put her hands on her protesting thighs and bent slightly to recover.

It was strangely peaceful at the top of the cat tower. Across from her the blind facade of the palazzo loomed, uncompromising, shutters still covering its windows, one — she did a double-take and looked back at an area her eye had already passed over — slightly ajar. She walked to the edge and looked out over the void, drawn by the darkness behind the shutter. What wealth of secrets was hidden within? And what guardian might be set over them?

Vertigo tugged at her and she steadied herself on a marble column, gravity — and the human fear of it — reasserting itself as the sudden squeal of an angry cat captured her attention. Feeling a trifle embarrassed (she was, after all, trespassing), Jo descended the stair and crept back out into the quiet campo and home again.

Why did she still feel such a compulsion to get into Della Quercia's house?

If you don't come to me, I'll come to you.

Jo paced the room, nervily. Night had stolen up on her — night, and too much caffeine. She knew she wouldn't sleep in this state, and that irritated her further.

"Damn and blast it," she muttered, finding herself at the open window again, and staring out across the campo at the Casa della Scala.

All at once, she was convinced that there was someone standing behind her. No noise disturbed the silent apartment, no breath shared her air, but someone was in the room with her, and her back went icy cold. For no apparent reason, she thought of rats — rats in the walls.

She gripped the windowsill in unreasoning terror, and her blood thundered in her ears. Unwillingly, her eyes moved sideways, to look at the room's slanted reflection in the open window.

Nothing, nothing, nothing, went her thoughts like a mantra. The lamp on the table, the one with shade of Murano glass, shed a pool of soft light; all else was in shadow. She could see no-one reflected in the flat shiny glass. Yet she could not, physically could not, turn round, for fear of what stood in the room with her, watching.

Smiling. *Now why do I think that?* Jo shut her eyes, squeezed them tight, and the sense of being no longer alone vanished abruptly. Drawing a few deep breaths, she turned to face the room before opening her eyes again, and then scurried for the light-switch to turn on all the illumination she could.

As she came back to the table, strewn with her papers and notes, she saw a key lying beside her pen.

Her scalp prickled. She eyed the key suspiciously. It was a large key for a deadlock, much like the one which opened the main door downstairs. There was no doubt in her mind what door this one would open.

So she stretched out her hand to pick it up, only to jump back, startled into alarm by the sudden squalling shriek of an angry cat. Her heart tried to high-jump out of her chest, and she let out her breath in a sharp curse.

Up to her windowsill, ghost-pale like a spectre, leapt the white cat, its ears back, hissing defiance at something outside. Jo threw a ball of paper at it, which the cat ignored, and jumped down into the room, miaowing loudly at her. She tried to take evasive action, but it bumped her legs, twined itself round, its voice raucous in the silence.

"What do you want, Signor Gatto?" she asked, catching its tail, which it carried aloft like a banner. It continued to weave around her legs, and Jo sighed. "I haven't got any food," she told it. "Unless you like uncooked pasta."

The cat head-butted her in the shin. She sat down to stroke it, despite not considering herself a cat person, and it surprised her by jumping onto her lap and sitting there with none of the usual kneading.

"Oh, all right, if you insist," she said, and picked up the newspaper.

Morning light flooded in, chill and white, without a hint of fog. It brought with it an air so icy it might have come straight from the peaks of the Dolomites. Jo woke cold and cramped, but with a warm place in her lap that evoked a very recently-departed cat. Surprised, she stretched herself, got up carefully in case of cricked necks or other joints, and closed the window — not without a faintly suspicious glance out onto the campo. Which was deserted: she looked at her watch and found the hour ungodly.

Some time later, washed, brushed and flossed, she headed towards Roberto's with an extra key in her jeans pocket. She had also, for some reason, picked up the antique necklace.

There was a marked chill in the air, heralding that summer's tenacious rearguard might finally be admitting defeat. The bright sky was already clouded over, grey above the wind. Jo tucked her hands deep in the pockets of her duffel-coat, and walked faster.

In the steamy espresso-scented warmth, La Strega's daughter said to her, "I hear that house has been sold at last, the one you were asking about," and put a small cup on the table. Jo drank her coffee thoughtfully, and forgot to leave a tip.

At the front door, she paused to check whether she was observed; seeing no-one, she quickly inserted the key and turned it before she could change her mind. The door swung inward, its hinges creaking only very faintly, and she stepped inside as soon as the gap was wide enough. Behind her, it shut quietly, leaving her in a shadow-hung hall that smelled of mildew and the sea, musty and salty, damp and sharp. And under that, another, ranker odour, like something left to rot: a drainy, sewery stench.

Her feet crunched on the floor as she took a tentative step, and she looked down to see fallen plaster shards. They had flaked off the walls, leaving them with the look of diseased flesh. Further down the passage lay decorators' detritus: a pair of scabrous buckets, a grubby dustsheet piled in a heap, a paint-stained stepladder. As she started up the wide staircase she heard rain start to rattle outside. Vague ideas of accessing the cat tower flitted through her thoughts, but the pull of the open window was too strong.

Part of her mind noted in passing that the upward leprousness of the walls ceased halfway up the first flight of stairs, and presumed

that the house had fallen victim, during its disuse, to the curse of *acqua alta* — no respecter of persons or places, palazzi included. What she was noticing much more insistently, however, as she ascended further, was the smell. Now the sweetish stink of decay had gained the upper hand, making her try to breathe shallowly. But her heart was pounding with anticipation and her lungs wanted extra oxygen, not less; so she resorted to pulling a hanky from her pocket and hiding her nose in that. It had, unfortunately, very little effect.

Something's dead up here. The conclusion was inescapable. Jo started to sweat, felt it crawling through her hair. Suddenly she didn't want to enter the room, but her volition carried her to the door and put her fingers round the handle; even as she turned it, pushing the door open, her mind was telling her not to go in.

But the room was empty. Not even a curtain at the window which might have explained what she had seen from across the square. Jo came out, puzzled, and started to check the other rooms, feeling that strange reluctance to enter any of them. All she found were crusted paint pots, dirty rags and a glass jar containing a dried-out paintbrush that smelt faintly of white spirit. Outside, thunder rumbled and muttered.

On the topmost floor, at the back of the house, a long room ran the whole width of the building: the door to this stood slightly ajar. She pushed it, anticipating nothing again, but it swung in lightly and much further than she had expected. Something fell to the floor with a noise like the end of the world, making her swear explosively and get a full ripe breath of the foul stench, which set her coughing.

When her heart had stopped racing, she ventured cautiously into the room, and the mystery of what had fallen was solved: more decorators' debris in the form of a plank and two stepladders, which the door had caught glancingly and sent tumbling. But she forgot it as she saw what was on the floor in the centre of the room, clearly visible in the light that stole round the sides of the ill-fitting shutters at the windows.

There a figure had been drawn, a circle enclosing some other shape which was too scuffed to recognise, and in the centre of that, something flayed. Jo gulped, clasped her handkerchief more firmly over her nose and mouth, and advanced towards it.

The animal was unrecognisable, rags of decaying flesh and gobs of dried blood. It had been spreadeagled, pegged out by its four limbs, and eviscerated. Disgusted, she turned away, only to see a small pale pile of fur which had been flung to one side. She approached it, and almost stooped to look, but realised in time what it was and turned away, gagging.

It was the pelt of a white cat.

"Oh, shit," she whispered. "God, oh, that's disgusting." Why would someone do that? It was evidently a ritual of some kind. Divination by entrails? Summoning demons? What sort of demon would be impressed by the sacrifice of a cat? Unless, as Scimone had apparently believed, cats really were more than they seemed.

Don't be so damned stupid, she admonished herself. *The man believed in ley-lines. You'll be looking for aliens next.*

Although, in a house built by Scimone, the sacrifice might take on a deeper significance.

A necromancer... Giordano's words came back to her. She swallowed, suddenly apprehensive, and the back of her neck prickled; she felt sweat slide down her ribs. The stench of the murdered cat filled her nostrils, coated her tongue, making her want to spit. Moving her head from side to side, she moved towards the door, and as she did so some trick of the shadows made the walls of the room appear to bulge inwards for a second.

Her heart gave another unpleasant startled little lurch, and she paused her hand on its journey to the doorknob.

Whatever you do, don't open the door. The thought popped into her mind with such utter certainty that she stood stock-still, convinced beyond all reason that something inimical was outside. She knew it without needing to see it, just as she knew where everything stood in her own home, how to persuade the sticky back door to open in wet weather, and which stairs creaked.

From the hag and hungry goblin

That into rags would rend you...

Jo shook her head to clear it. Quickly, she crossed to one of the windows and peered out around the shutter. Rain teemed down outside, and she turned away in despair, believing herself trapped completely.

Her gaze flicked around the room, skittering away from seeing the cat's remains, but they were centre stage and not to be pushed aside. Perhaps, she thought, she could remove it, even — assuming she could get out of the building — give it a decent burial. The difficulty of doing this in Venice did not enter her mind.

To this end, she inspected the tumbled decorating apparatus by the door and found a paint-scraper and a tray encrusted with solidified emulsion. Armed with this, she advanced upon the pathetic little corpse.

But the moment her foot passed the smudged circle, the floor seemed to fade beneath her, and she fell, gasping with alarm, clutching at nothing — but it was not, she realised a second later, the dizzying headlong fall from a top floor to shatter on a pavement, but, incomprehensibly, more as she imagined freefall to be: buoyed on the air itself, floating on something completely insubstantial. Around her, a wind from nowhere began to blow, forming a spiral around her so that she drifted in the centre of a vortex.

And still she fell.

Part II Death in Venice

Por dinheiro bailo o perro

The dog dances for money

Portuguese proverb

A multitude of candles sputtered and smoked, so many of them that it might have been the inside of a church. The heat they gave off filled the room, and the ceiling above them was blackened; apart from the candles, the room was bare. It was a long room, stuffy and airless; heavy curtains covered its five tall windows, and the curtains, like the ceiling, were stained with soot. Despite all the candles, shadows lurked in its corners.

Leaning against the wall, Captain da Silva watched, a frown on his face, as Della Quercia inscribed an elaborate figure on the floor with chalk. He was an unremarkable man, not tall, his only memorable feature a pair of blue eyes — legacy of an English grandmother — but he had a competent, reliable look. Right now he was a little nervous, a little sceptical, a little annoyed; and more than a little

sickened, knowing what his employer intended to do with the white cat in the cage which stared out between the bars with golden-green eyes. And he badly needed a smoke.

Most of all, though, he wished very heartily that he had never got involved in this at all, but that would have been impossible anyway. He shook his head irritably, annoyed at wasting time on pointless speculation: Della Quercia owned him, more or less. Owned *Isabella*, his ship, anyway, even if she was mortgaged to the gunnels — like everything else the Venetian had left of his forefathers' empire. This house included.

Da Silva had spent most of his life at sea, and had thought he had seen and endured enough to be pretty much hardened to anything life could throw at him. Until Arturo Della Quercia had commandeered the *Isabella* and flung him into a world far removed from the mundane dangers of Cape Horn and the Roaring Forties; though he would prefer a hundred-foot sea or a screaming hurricane any day, given the choice. Which, of course, he wasn't.

Like Venice herself, the Della Quercia fortunes and influence had declined over the centuries, and a once-proud shipping empire had dwindled to a single vessel and a decaying palazzo whose ground floor was unusable thanks to the combined effects of *acqua alta* and neglect. Even here, on the top floor, a damp and stagnant odour lingered.

Della Quercia, now, like many a desperate man before him, intended to wager everything upon one last throw: to take a final gamble for all or nothing. Yet the stake the Venetian was playing with was a higher one than da Silva would ever hazard. He was wagering his soul.

Months before, he had taken passage on the *Isabella* to Macau — not, in itself, a particularly unusual thing for an owner to do. But he also had a task to demand of her captain.

It had been in this house, da Silva remembered, that the nightmare had begun. In the room directly below this one. And he hadn't even known it for nightmare at the time.

"I need your help, da Silva," Della Quercia said, twirling his glass in the lamplight so that the wine, quickened by the flame, turned a deep, translucent ruby. "Have you ever heard of Marco Polo's amulet?"

The Portuguese captain shook his head, and sipped at his own wine, an unexpected and uncharacteristic courtesy from his employer. "No, Signore. Is it valuable?"

A deep laugh shook the older man. "Yes, Captain — you might call it valuable. But suffice it to say that it was once in the possession of my family, and now it is not. I am told, however" — he looked at da Silva as if summing him up — "that it is, at present, in Macau." He drained his glass, and refilled it at once from the decanter.

"Was this thing stolen from your family, then?" da Silva asked.

Again, Della Quercia laughed, but there was no mirth in it. "Inasmuch as the person in whose possession it is now paid no money for it, yes."

Da Silva sighed, but soundlessly. Della Quercia liked this sort of game, got pleasure out of needling him. But he had learnt long ago that you did not show impatience, or for that matter any kind of expression or emotion, in the Venetian's presence. Not if you wanted to keep your freedom as well as your job. And da Silva had no wish to sample the hospitality of an Italian gaol, far less the hempen embrace of a noose. "Then I assume you wish to acquire it back from this person? In Macau?"

"Yes, Captain, I do. But I shall need you to do the 'acquiring'. Since the person is a Portuguese person and speaks no civilised language."

He did not mention at this stage that the Portuguese person was, in fact, a dead Portuguese person, nor that she had been dead for more than a hundred years. Not, da Silva thought ruefully, that it would have made any difference. When Della Quercia said "jump," all he could say, all he could ever have said, was "how high?"

The place they came to eventually, after many false meanderings, was deep in the maze of buildings around the docks, hidden in the twists and turns of alleys between the godowns. Unfamiliar stinks assailed their nostrils; and the place, though it seemed — but for the ubiquitous rats — deserted, was noisy in odd ways — bursts of confused shouting, snatches of song, strange brassy instruments being struck, even a roaring that sounded like some kind of engine. Da Silva did not know, and did not really want to know, how his employer had come by the knowledge that had brought them here. His revolver was in his hand, but privately he was more glad of the long knife he wore concealed down his back.

It was also darker than it had any right to be, darker than the inside of a coal-sack, and Della Quercia's lantern made everything around its cold beam even blacker by contrast.

But they had arrived at last, and the captain knocked at the door in a rhythm which had been described to him; presently a wizened, ancient Chinese woman, her face a mass of wrinkles, opened it a crack and peered out at them suspiciously.

"We came from the White Unicorn," he said, in Mandarin, as he had been told, and passed her an ivory chop.

Unsmiling, the woman nodded, and let them in, tottering on bound feet, although she wore the black pajamas of a lower-class Chinese. "Wait here," she said. The door banged shut behind them, and da Silva put his revolver back in his pocket.

They could see very little, although da Silva identified the place as a dispensary. The scent of dessicated herbs was very faint, but Della Quercia's lantern showed him labels on drawers: ginseng, phoenix heart, dragon's claw. Presently the old woman returned and beckoned to them, her own hand like a claw.

So far, so mysterious; but da Silva had moved easily through this world thus far, since it was a milieu with which he was familiar, and one he knew how to manipulate. At some point as they descended the steep wooden stair, however, he suddenly felt as though he had crossed a barrier: moved sideways, as it were, into some place that was not so familiar. His neck prickled, and he wondered whether his employer had felt the same thing; although he doubted it, Della Quercia being, he thought to himself, an insensitive son of a whore. But what manner of person would inhabit the cellar of a Chinese pharmacist's shop in an alleyway which was almost impossible to find? The answer came back at once: someone with something to hide.

He was entirely unprepared, however, for the sight that met him in the cellar. For though the floor was of hard-trodden dirt, a magnificent table sat in the centre of the room, and on it was a coffin. No, the word was sarcophagus: the great, ornate, glass-sided casket reminded him of nothing so much as the tomb of St Francis Xavier in the city of Old Goa, which held the saint's uncorrupted mortal remains.

Da Silva was not a particularly religious man, nor even as superstitious as most sailors, but he crossed himself before thought caught up with instinct, and muttered “Mary, Mother of God,” under his breath without even realising he had done so.

Beside him, Della Quercia breathed out in triumph. “María Alvares,” he whispered.

God gave the Portuguese a tiny country as their cradle, but all the world as their grave, thought da Silva sourly. The words were António Vieira’s but the sentiment was pretty accurate.

“So, with whom do I have to haggle for your charm, Signore?” he asked with as much asperity as he ever dared to use with Della Quercia.

“With her,” the other replied, gesturing at the coffin. Da Silva felt his jaw drop. “With María Alvares, the necromancer, who stole it from my great-grandfather.”

“I—” began da Silva, rendered, momentarily, speechless. “How?”

“Open it,” Della Quercia said. “Open the casket.”

The captain looked round, but the Chinese woman had vanished; so he found the catches which secured the carved lid in place and snapped them open, then heaved at the lid. It was so heavy that he was half-afraid its weight would drag out of his grasp and smash the glass side. But it opened smoothly enough, and rested solidly back on its hinges when he lowered it carefully down.

Instead of the foul miasma he had expected, the breath from the coffin smelt faintly of roses. He let out the lungful of air he hadn’t realised he was hanging on to, and looked down at the woman in the casket. A trickle of sweat ran down his face: he wiped it absently with his hand.

“The amulet keeps her uncorrupted,” said Della Quercia quietly; but *uncorrupted* did not mean *unchanged*, for the corpse thus revealed was exactly that: a corpse. María Alvares, whoever she had been, had mummified in her coffin, flesh shrunk off her bones, skin dried and tanned to leather that moulded the shape of her skull, the contours of the skeleton. Her hair still lay black as the night before moonrise, glossy and thick, but her eyeballs were dessicated in their sockets and her lips drawn back from her teeth.

She wore her funeral finery, a dress of black silk, and around her hollow throat was the amulet: a necklace of pale jade and opals with fiery depths which took da Silva’s breath away.

“It’s beautiful,” he said softly.

“Take it,” said Della Quercia. He hesitated. What was the catch? “Do it, da Silva.”

Grimacing, the captain reached behind the mummy’s neck to unclasp the jewel, forcing out of his mind the memory of living women around whose necks he had fastened trinkets of far less value; but the contact was too intimate and too similar to forget entirely.

Then the shrivelled eyes rolled round in their sockets, and a wizened hand gripped his wrist before he had time to react, the nails digging into his flesh like talons. The skull snapped upward, leaving the mass of shining hair behind like a pillow, and the dead jaw moved.

“And who, pray tell, are you?” rasped the corpse.

For a long moment he was quite incapable of speech, and then, shaking with horror, managed to croak “Luís da Silva.” He tried to pull away from her iron grip, but without success; then she sat up and seized the back of his neck with her other hand. The bones, in their glove of skin, clutched him like a vice and drew his face close to hers.

“Of what city, Luís da Silva?” Her voice put him in mind of stones clashing together.

“Lisbon,” he whispered.

“At last,” replied María Alvares, and he fancied he saw a topaz glint in her shrivelled eyes. Then, knowing it had to be done but dreading it with all his soul, he asked the question Della Quercia had brought him here to put to her.

“What price do you want for this necklace?”

María Alvares seemed to exhale a breath of roses; she seemed to smile. “A kiss,” she said, and pulled his head down.

Da Silva’s mind wanted to go away somewhere, the way the body fights dreadful wounds by shutting down; but quite to the contrary everything was terribly clear: her dried lips, her leathern tongue, her coated teeth, and worst of all, his own desire that rose treacherously despite the fact that he was being kissed by a corpse and that he could feel blood trickling down the back of his neck from her claws. With his free hand he fumbled for the clasp of the necklace, and managed to unfasten it; the amulet came away and María Alvares fell back into her coffin in sudden decay, the scent of roses turning mephitic in an instant.

He sank to the floor, his legs unable to support him, the opal and jade necklace clutched in his hand.

Della Quercia had never seen naked horror so clear on anyone’s face before, but the matter was of academic interest only to him: the Portuguese had retrieved the amulet from his long-dead countrywoman, and now it could return to its rightful place — and its rightful use.

Bending to retrieve it, he saw that da Silva’s eyes were still open, though the captain was surely unconscious; he shook him roughly by the shoulder. At length da Silva drew a shuddering breath, and sat up.

The edges of the jade circles had drawn blood from his hand, but the several little cuts from María Alvares’s fingernails hurt more. There were five blue crescents on his wrist and a further selection on his neck where they had dug into him. But that was not, would never be, the worst of it; for physical wounds always heal.

Da Silva had, without realising it, closed his eyes at the recollection; now he opened them to find that Della Quercia had finished his floorboard calligraphy. He ran his fingers over the faint scars on his wrist, and sighed, shifting his weight. A loose board rocked under his foot.

“Bring the cat here,” his employer instructed him, and da Silva walked over to the cage and picked it up, his jaw rigid with distaste. Like most sailors, he liked cats: they killed rats, which were such a vile pest on every ship that ever put to sea. But that, Della Quercia had told him, was precisely why a cat had to be sacrificed here; and why he had done away with the little bridge that had connected the house to that curious tower behind it, although da Silva was still not entirely sure he comprehended the reason for that. He did not know why it had been called the cat tower, nor of the architect Scimone’s philosophies.

However, he understood that it was some kind of rat demon that Della Quercia needed the cat’s death to summon, because that, apparently, was the purpose of the amulet. The necklace was its lodestone and blood its magnet; and, according to Della Quercia,

demons could be compelled to reveal the whereabouts of hidden treasure.

Nineteen years before, da Silva had killed a man whom he had caught in the act of rape — killed him with his long knife; yet the thought of cold-bloodedly slaughtering a cat made him squeamish. He did not regret his action, since he was still married to the woman he had helped that day; indeed he knew he would do the same thing again. Unfortunately, though, the man he had killed had been named Aldo Della Quercia, and his elder brother had witnessed the entire incident. His revenge had been nothing so subtle as the Bible recommended: Da Silva's sentence had been life, not death.

So he did not watch what the Venetian did to the cat. The poor beast's yowls were bad enough, and the iron stench of its blood.

At last the animal's sounds of pain ceased, and da Silva looked up, alerted by some sixth sense. His eyes narrowed, and he stared suspiciously past the blazing banks of candles. Della Quercia was still muttering in some kind of bastard Latin, but the quality of the darkness in the room's corners seemed to have changed. The shadows were thick and clotted, like congealing blood; the candle flames themselves looked blurred, as if they had slowed. A peculiar deadness crept into the air, a heaviness that was the opposite of languour, for it bred a reflex of fear, a desire to flee. Da Silva wiped sweat from his face, and found his hand was shaking slightly. His mouth felt dry.

Della Quercia finished his incantation, and held his hands up. His arms were streaked to the elbows with scarlet. For a bare instant, everything seemed to hold its breath, and then da Silva smelt, rich and corrupt, the feral stink of rats.

In the centre of the figure Della Quercia had drawn, where the bloody rags that were all that was left of the cat lay crucified, a form began to take shape. It coalesced, as far as da Silva could see, out of the very air itself; and yet, as it grew, it seemed more substantial, more solidly real, than the increasingly shadowy image of the Venetian.

He had been leaning against the wall; now he tried to burrow into it. What he saw was not, as he had expected, a monstrous rat: it was worse than that. Though it had characteristics of rathood — something in its stance, a hint of fang, of disease in its yellow eye — it was manlike in form, down to its dangling genitals. Da Silva shuddered, and growled like a dog, yet he found himself unable to look away.

The creature dipped its horrid head to the butchered cat, and da Silva heard an appalling sucking noise. He unsheathed his long knife, but gave serious thought to taking out his revolver too. Not for the rat-demon: he knew it would have no effect; for himself. It looked up then, and eyed him knowingly, drawing its lips back from long yellow teeth. There was far too much intelligence in that gaze, too much cunning.

From a long distance, he heard Della Quercia's voice, imperative in command although he could make out no words — he knew that tone well enough — and knew with terrible certainty that it would not work, that his employer could not compel this thing.

And then he realised what was wrong. For all that Della Quercia was the one with arcane knowledge, despite his having told da Silva what the amulet's purpose was, he had not put it within his diagrams of protection.

He was wearing it around his own throat.

Though the traitorous thought went through da Silva's mind that letting this rat-thing kill Della Quercia would solve all his problems, he let it slide by without considering it. As, within the barrier that he knew was useless, the creature flexed its corded muscles and prepared to pounce, da Silva crossed the room in two strides and knocked the Venetian to the floor, reaching once again for the clasp of the amulet.

But he was too late, for the rat-demon was faster than any man could be. It flung him aside, a clawed hand slashing casually across his face, and he crashed into the wall six feet behind with an impact that turned the world black for a second.

When he came round, an instant later, his left eye was too full of blood to see out of, and the pain took his breath away; but he saw the summoned thing, grown huge now, bend and suck at Della Quercia as lately it had fed off the cat's corpse. Which had, he noticed, vanished completely; though he did not think the rat demon had, precisely, eaten it.

It drank and guzzled for only a short time before looking up and meeting da Silva's eye again with that dreadful knowing expression, then licked its bloody lips with a pointed tongue that reminded him too much of María Alvares's and slid, in a way he could neither comprehend nor describe, into the body of Arturo Della Quercia.

Da Silva cursed weakly, tasting his own blood in his mouth. The offhanded way the rat-thing had thrown him against the wall made him doubt his capacity to fight it, but appallingly, he knew he had to try.

He retrieved his knife and staggered to his feet, gasping at the pain in his face and his eye. Perhaps the creature was still disoriented; perhaps it could not immediately co-ordinate the body it had seized.

And perhaps, again, da Silva thought wearily as Della Quercia lurched to his feet, this is just a novel way of committing suicide.

"Threaten me, little man?" It was Della Quercia's voice, but somehow distorted: the timbre hollower, louder, like a shout but with blurred edges.

"Oh yes," da Silva said, and lunged with his knife, opening Della Quercia's arm from elbow to shoulder. Blood followed the slash, but sluggishly. Da Silva would bleed to death quicker from his head wound. He ducked under a flailing blow and hit out again, catching Della Quercia glancingly in the neck — on the amulet itself, he realised at the sudden spark, and tried to follow it up, to hook the point under the chain, but the other grabbed the blade of the knife and twisted the stroke aside with terrible strength.

Wincing at the very thought of grasping the knife — he knew how sharp it was — da Silva fought just to keep hold of it. Sweat ran into his good eye, and he knuckled it away. He was close enough to the possessed man to attempt a knee in the crotch, but Della Quercia caught the blow on his thigh and backhanded da Silva across the face again. His fingers had to be nearly severed by now, but he seemed to feel no pain — unlike da Silva, who was almost blinded by the anguish of the last blow.

They were so close, now, that he could smell rat-stink on Della Quercia's breath, and see the yellow that had crept into his eyes. He had only one chance now, and so he let go of the knife-handle and used both hands to reach round the back of the Venetian's neck and unfasten the amulet once more.

It slipped from his sweaty fingers, and both he and Della Quercia went for it; but the moment it lost contact with the possessed man's flesh, he collapsed to the ground like a puppet whose strings have been cut. Da Silva kicked the necklace across the room, out of reach, then doubled over, breathing heavily, his hand over his face, trying to relieve the pain flaring through his head.

Looking down he saw brown suddenly bleed into the prone man's eyes again, and Della Quercia looked out of them for a final

time, his mouth opening and closing, but no sound coming out.

Kneeling, da Silva picked up his knife, drew back the man's head by its hair, and cut his employer's throat. The blade slid through his flesh like butter, but the blood trickled out so slowly that it reinforced his thought that Della Quercia had been dead for at least a quarter of an hour. Neither was he surprised when the corpse crumbled into dust much as had that of María Alvares; although he was relieved that no body was left to be discovered on the top floor of the palazzo.

He still had to dispose of the amulet, though, tired to the bone and in pain as he was; and covered in his own blood as he was, he had no intention of touching it. Getting to his feet sent him dizzy and staggering, and a floorboard creaked as he trod on it. By the door, he recalled, there was a loose board: he had felt it move earlier. It came up easily with the point of his knife.

Some months later, the one-eyed captain, Luís da Silva, left Venice for good, taking his wife and children to Lisbon aboard his ship, the *Isabella*.

In the walls of the Casa Della Scala, the rat-demon waited.

Part III

She was in a place of Escher architecture, a place of more than four dimensions. Whether that was the reality, or she was seeing by metaphor, she had no idea.

But real or imagined, her feet were on the ground again, such as it was, and it made her feel better. Her mind did not understand how she had got here, wherever here was, so she put that on the back burner and set about looking for a way out.

Instead of the stairs and interiors she associated with Escher, it was a place of bridges, interconnecting roads and paths, and cats scampering across them, pursuing rats hither and thither, up and down, upside down. White cats, black cats, piebald cats, grey cats; ginger, calico, tabby; tiger-striped and leopard-spotted.

It didn't take a genius to figure that one out, Jo thought, laughing.

So it was a dream, she concluded; and as if to reassure her that that *was* all it was, the scene changed. A pulse boomed in her head, centered on her brow, drilled through like a migraine, and a red mist suffused her vision. She blinked, and flinched back as a huge rat's face swelled at her and receded. It was hideous, but she was only dreaming—

—And she was back in the room at the palazzo and it was *still there*.

Jo backed away until she hit the wall, then realised that the giant rat was confined by the figure in the centre of the floor, which looked, now, fresher and sharper, newly drawn. Not only that, but the beast was fairly insubstantial: she seemed to be able to see through its edges, as though it were an image projected into the room.

But it was still pretty frightful, and an almost palpable stink of menace radiated from it like heat from a stove. It was because it was so *big*, she realised: almost any small thing blown up huge offends one's sense of what is right; as if it no longer fitted into the small rat-shaped hole in her map of the world, and that made her hackles rise.

Belatedly, she noticed that the flayed cat was no longer pegged out in the centre of the chalked diagram. Had it ever been really there? Or was she still dreaming? She still felt a presence with her, but could not determine whether it was *in* the house or *of* the house.

"Della Quercia," she said, and her voice cast strange echoes in the empty room, off the pallid faded walls, the stained ceiling. "Della Quercia, what do you want?"

Her mind answered: he wants you. And that seemed to clarify everything. It cut through her panic and left her head clear, as if she had woken healed after a long illness.

Keeping her eyes on the monstrous rat, she sidled to the tall central window and fumbled at its latches, finding bolts top and bottom in addition to the central fastening. Urgency pressed her, but she pressed it back firmly. The window open, she sought for catches on the shutter, and found those too after a moment. It banged back in the wind, and chilly rain blew in; the cold light illuminated the gigantic thing crouched scratching in the middle of the room, trying to dig through the barrier of air which surrounded it. It hissed at her as she looked in its direction and caught its malevolent yellow eye: the thought of its getting free, and the sight of it, insubstantial as it was, impelled her to urgency.

Skirting the circle, she crossed the room again. As she passed the prisoned rat, it started to fling itself against invisible walls in a frenzy, clawing at the barrier it could not pass, biting at it. The sight of its great curved fangs was the stuff of nightmare.

Trying to ignore it, and the horror it engendered, Jo examined the plank her entry had dislodged. It was about eight feet in length: she hoped it would be long enough. It was also heavy, and awkward to carry: in the end, she simply dragged it to the window and pushed the end out, balancing it with her own weight, towards the cat tower.

Slowly, infinitely slowly, and taking infinite care, she inched the plank across the gap. It was so heavy she had to struggle to keep control of it; the rain lashed at her, sweat ran down her sides, her arms shook with the effort, but inch by inch it moved across the gap. The opening she was aiming for was somewhat lower than the window, a fact for which she was extremely grateful, even though it made her worry that her bridge might slip when she tried to cross it.

As the end neared the cat tower, the plank grew more and more difficult to control. But at last it thumped onto the sill of the opening she'd been aiming for, and she breathed a great sigh of relief. At the same time, she felt rather than heard a sound like a chord of music, so great it could have been the plucking of the constellation of the Lyre, and the back of her neck prickled. It gathered momentum, swelled; became, suddenly, perfection: too much to bear, because she was only human. Tears sprang into her eyes at the sheer beauty of it.

And in that melodious instant, the bridge grew whole again, despite its being only a plank of wood. Stones grew around it, coalesced out of the air that was nothing, and nowhere, and endless, into the semblance of a real bridge; and as she watched, the white cat jumped up onto the far end and sauntered across, flirting its tail.

Following their white pathfinder came a feline army, more than her dream, dozens of cats, a myriad of them, moving purposefully and in silence across a road closed to them for more than a hundred years, coming to confront their old enemy.

Jo stood to one side to let the white cat spring lightly down to the floor, and as it did she felt a burning sensation in her back pocket, as if something in there had suddenly gone red-hot. She yelped and hauled it out: it was the antique necklace she'd forgotten picking up, and it burned her hand as she flung it away.

In mid-air it exploded, a flash of actinic light splashed with sparks like phosphorous and a number of lesser cracks that shot tiny burning shards of shrapnel across the room; and at the same time the cats launched themselves like furry missiles at the giant rat, straight through the barrier that confined it. It cowered back, squealing, as the cats tore it to pieces, and Jo fled from their fury.

She stepped up onto her bridge, and though she knew it was just a narrow plank and there was far too much air below her, she also knew that harmony was restored and the Casa della Scala was complete again, after too long in limbo.

Rain lashed through the open sides of the bridge as she crossed it, but she took no notice. At the other end she stepped through into the cat tower with a gasp of relief, then sank to the floor, her legs gone suddenly wobbly. She sat and hugged her knees, closing her eyes thankfully for an instant.

An insistent miaow brought her back to the present, and she looked up to see a pair of bright yellow-green eyes in a white-furred face. Jo stroked the cat, but it wanted to be away, so she got to her feet and followed it down the stair.

From below, it still looked like a plank, but if she half-closed her eyes and tried not to look directly at it, she could see a kind of ghost of what the bridge should be.

“Yes, I’ve got it,” said Giordano. “How remarkable. I wonder if my cousin Pasquale can see it.”

“Now it’s your turn,” Jo told him.

“I think you credit me with too much knowledge, if that’s not an oxymoron. I don’t know the contents of all the books in the library.”

“Maybe not,” she acknowledged as they walked along the calle that led to Roberto’s, “but I expect you have some family history you can delve into.”

“Well, I don’t know a huge amount about my wicked ancestor, except that he was said to dabble in black magic. Summoning demons, or trying to.”

Jo stopped, as she always did, to look in the mask shop. “He managed to summon one, anyway,” she said, watching her own reflection, a palimpsest on the display. “With that necklace, I think.”

The other nodded. “Yes, an artifact like that could well be used for summoning a demon.”

“He wanted me to put it on,” Jo said thoughtfully, starting to walk again.

“It’s a good thing you didn’t.”

“Yes. That rat-thing could have... possessed me?” The modern part of her mind expressed incredulity at the concept.

“Oh, I think so,” said Giordano. “Don’t you?”

She did not reply, and they walked in silence until they reached the bar. At the door she turned and asked him, “How did your ‘wicked ancestor’ die?”

“Arturo Della Quercia? Nobody knows. He disappeared. No-one ever found his body.” Giordano followed her in, saying “Ciao, Signora Renata,” in passing to the mustachioed proprietress.

When they had found seats, at a minute table by the window, Jo took the key out of her pocket. “I should give you this while I think of it.”

Giordano eyed it with suspicion. “If I were you, I’d throw it in the canal.”

“Okay,” she said.

Their espressos arrived, and Giordano spent some time sugaring his and stirring it. After a while he looked up and said, “Do you mind telling me where your family comes from?”

Taken aback by the sudden change of subject, she replied, “Well, Portugal, as you might guess from the name. Lisbon. But there was some kind of family feud and the parents came to England before I was born. Why?”

“Because you have blue eyes.”

“What?”

Her companion looked embarrassed. “It’s just that the captain of one of Arturo Della Quercia’s ships was called da Silva.”

“It’s a pretty common name,” said Jo, picking up her cup.

“Maybe,” Giordano agreed. “But they called this chap ‘occhio azzurro’.” He shrugged, and picked up his own coffee. “Perhaps it’s a coincidence.”

“But you think there’s a connection. Why? Why would Arturo Della Quercia want that —” she lowered her voice — “demon to do me harm, if I’m a descendant of someone he employed?”

Putting his cup down, Giordano eyed her levelly. “‘Harm’ is rather too slight a term, you know. When you think that ‘possession’ is another word for ‘owning’. Owning you, in life and death, body and soul. Forever. Whatever he had against the da Silva family, you were lucky to get out.”

“Well,” said Jo, looking out of the window at a white cat which had wandered into view, “you could say I had help.”