

Ancient Tales

HOUSE CONTADINO

– *Settembre* 306

It was a day of many firsts, but Lucien always looked back on it with a feeling of disquiet. The soft innocence of childhood had been snatched from him that day; things would never be the same again.

He'd started his physical training just after his eighth birthday. The Majordomo had taken to visiting his rooms once a week. The small talk was strained, sparse from the boy, dry from Demesne's warden. The seasons were on the change, ushering in winter with the shrieks of night-time storms. The days were an endless susurrus of leaves caught in autumnal winds. Lucien wondered if the castle would ever be warm again. He'd have happily stayed in bed until spring, nestled among sheepskins with the fire banked up. He'd not thought it strange to have his own apartment back then. It was all he had ever known.

The Majordomo entered the sitting room without knocking, as he always did. Lucien glowered at him, setting aside the oversized book of fairy tales. He'd been roused from his bed early that day, taken from sleep by nightmares. The book had been a comfort in the early hours of the new day. The armchair was a small fortress about him. He slunk from it like a reluctant hound, immediately wishing he hadn't. The Domo was tall in a way that was uncanny in Demesne, perhaps seven feet of ashen robes. His deeply lined face remained hidden under a heavy cowl, only his great chin jutted out, like some work of masonry. A purple rope served as a belt, holding together the many folds of fabric that comprised his attire. Skeletal hands extended

from voluminous sleeves, the skin on them stained parchment, busying themselves attending to the fire. Lucien stood rooted to the spot, unsure of etiquette, dread seeping into him for no discernible reason.

The Majordomo was the voice of the king, that shadowy recluse lurking at the centre of Demesne like a spider in its web. The four houses, and all of the houses minor, paled into insignificance when placed alongside the power and influence of the Domo. And here he was, banking the fire with desiccated hands, nails dirty and cracked. He spoke in a tired drone, like the buzzing of insects, enquiring about Lucien's studies. He looked ridiculous, hunched down at the hearth – the quality of his robes marked him out as beggar, certainly not anyone of substance. Lucien answered in single stunted syllables, chewed his lip, folded his arms.

'And Professore Virmyre is teaching you well, I trust?'

'Yes, and Maestro Cherubini too.' Who was far easier to talk to than the stern and unreadable Virmyre.

'And Maestro di Spada D'arzentia speaks very highly of you.' Just for a second there was the shadow of inflection. Lucien wondered if this was some slight or sarcasm.

'That's good,' he breathed, willing the gaunt collection of rags out of his apartment.

The hooded official finally left, staff beating out a slow percussion on the corridors. Lucien wasted no time finding himself a blanket to nestle under, snug again in the high-backed armchair. The life of an Orfano was a lonely one; he'd nearly finished the book of fairy stories when the next visitor arrived.

She leaned on the doorway, arms folded across her chest. Her hair was untied, thick corkscrews of rich dark brown falling about a heart-shaped face. Her hazel eyes were filled with what Lucien thought at the time was amusement, but would come to realise was tenderness. It was Rafaela's day off, but she looked much as she always did. She wore a cream blouse, rucked and ruffled where it met her black bodice, tightly laced. Her skirt was a rare shade of scarlet, the colour of cheap wine, and her lips. Buttoned boots peeked out from the demarcation of her hemline, heels adding inches to her height. At that time Rafaela

was fifteen or thereabouts; the first blush of womanhood had taken to her well. She had neglected to wear her apron, sending out a clear signal she was not present at Demesne to perform duty.

‘Ella. I wasn’t expecting to see you today. What are you doing here?’ He set the book aside and kicked off the blanket, becoming tangled in it a moment before finding his feet.

‘Come to find my charming prince, of course. What are you reading?’

‘Oh, just some nonsense for children.’ He shrugged.

Rafaela laughed and shook her head.

‘You are funny. The things you say. Come on, I’ll take you on an adventure and you can hear a much better story. How about that?’

‘Won’t we get into trouble?’ he said, glad to be released from being alone.

‘Not much.’ She smiled at him. ‘It’ll be fine.’

They left Demesne and Lucien was wide-eyed with excitement and more than a touch of fear. He’d not set foot outside the brooding collection of stones before. The towers reached into the sky, pointing at pale blue heavens. The last of the stars were fading and the moon remained only as a chalk smudge. The squat bulk of the *sanatorio* stood apart from the castle proper, with gargoyles flocking the roof, staring after them as they retreated into the countryside. Rafaela had dressed him in peasant’s attire when they’d reached the kitchens of House Contadino.

‘It’s a disguise,’ she explained. ‘Today you are not Orfano; today you can be a normal little boy. We’ll call you Luc.’

‘I’m not a *little* boy, I’m eight,’ he replied affronted and wishing he were already nine or even ten. He couldn’t even imagine what it must like to be ten. Incredible, most likely. He’d probably have to start shaving when he reached ten.

Cook Camelia had given them apples, watered-down wine, a good cheese and some bread past its best. She spoke quietly to Rafaela in that voice the teachers used, seemingly below the

range of children's hearing. Perhaps he'd learn how to talk like that too when he grew up.

The wind whipped about them and Rafaela concentrated on driving the cart, the mule plodding, perhaps less than walking speed. The countryside stretched away ahead of them, orderly hedgerows and drystone walls marking boundaries and paths. In the distance a copse of cedar trees clustered together, swaying at the dictates of the weather. Birds broke from cover in a commotion of wings and sleek bodies, flying in formation, wheeling about high above. They swooped and climbed, turning back to retake perches among the whispering trees. Lucien pulled the knitted skullcap down, clutching at the simple jacket he wore.

'Make sure you keep your hat on all day: it's cold,' said Rafaela. Lucien nodded, thinking this an obvious thing to say.

'Where are we going?'

'We're going to the Contadino Estate. It's where I grew up, where my family live.'

'Is your father a farmer?'

'No. Not everyone who lives on the Contadino Estate works the land or fishes the sea, just as not everyone who lives on the Fontein Estate is a soldier.'

'That's what I want to be. I want to be adopted by House Fontein when I'm sixteen.'

Rafaela laughed, her hazel eyes twinkling, 'And I'm sure you will be, if you practise with your blade and don't spend windy days reading fairy stories.'

Lucien blinked a few times, not sure if he was being chided or not.

They continued onwards, the cart creaking and rocking on the road, which was in good repair. They passed a small huddle of buildings, shuttered against the wind, smoke dissipated in a pale grey plume above the chimneys. Lucien spotted some boys playing outside, ragged-looking things, pinched and dirty. Their clothes were a uniform blend of dark grey and smudged brown. They wore no shoes, their feet pale underneath the mud that clung to them. Lucien said nothing and looked down at his boots, grateful for the thick socks he wore.

‘Why aren’t those boys at school?’ he asked.
‘Because their parents can’t afford it, most likely.’
‘What do you mean, afford?’
‘It costs money to send children to school, and not everyone has enough. Some people struggle to feed themselves.’
‘Who pays for me to go to school?’
‘Well.’ She paused. ‘The king, I suppose.’
‘And where does he get his money from?’
‘The king takes money from the people. Taxes.’
‘Even from people who don’t have enough to eat?’
Rafaela nodded.
‘Even from people that don’t have shoes?’
Another nod.
‘I don’t think I understand taxes,’ mumbled Lucien against the wind.
‘Few people do,’ said Rafaela, concentrating on the road ahead.

Finally they came to a building. Based on its size, Lucien guessed it was a barn. Moss had grown up one side of the structure, creeping across the stacked stones and feeble mortar of the bottom half. The top was constructed entirely of wood, caulked with flaking white plaster.

‘This is a strange building,’ whispered Lucien, not knowing why. Rafaela smiled at him and jumped down from the cart, unhitching it from the mule.

‘What makes you say that?’
‘Well, half of it is made from wood.’
‘Not everyone can afford a castle made out of stone, little prince.’
‘So it’s about money? Again?’
Rafaela smiled and nodded.
‘Everything is about money.’
‘Then why have I never seen any before?’ he asked.
‘The rules don’t apply to you; you’re Orfano.’
She tied the mule up and made sure it had access to water, then held out her hands to him.
‘Come now, jump down. I want you to hear this.’

They entered the building and Lucien struggled to breathe. Inside were close to thirty children, ranging from six to twelve years old. He'd not seen so many before, certainly not children who were anything but scullions or pages. Even in the training rooms of House Fontein the number rarely rose above fifteen of Demesne's privileged noble young. The children in the barn sat at small tables, chatting to each other and reading aloud from books. Some noted down single words on scraps of parchment and took them to a wooden board where they pinned them up. Most of the children had shoes, but their clothes were well worn and often threadbare.

Rafaela rested a hand on Lucien's shoulder, holding him against her. She was taller than him back then. He looked up at her, forcing a nervous smile.

A woman attired all in black clapped her hands twice. The children became hushed, folding hands neatly in front of them. Some couldn't quite direct their attention to the teacher, instead staring at the girl and the shivering boy who had just arrived.

'Today we have a special treat. Mistress Rafaela has come to speak to you. As many of you know, Mistress Rafaela works at Demesne, but once she attended this very school. She learned her words just as you now are learning yours.'

The schoolteacher nodded politely to Rafaela, a small smile stealing over her thin lips. She was a severe-looking woman, her black hair scraped back into an unflattering bun. She had an abundance of forehead and rather beady eyes. Lucien was glad she wasn't one of his tutors.

Rafaela ushered the children to one end of the schoolhouse, where they variously wriggled and bumbled about, managing to cram onto a broad, slightly mangy rug. Lucien perched on a corner near the front, not straying far from Ella. The children sat beside him and said nothing. They stared with owlish expressions or ignored him altogether, some more interested in the contents of their noses.

'Hello. My name is Rafaela, and this is my little friend Luc.' She indicated Lucien and he swallowed, felt himself blush.

'I've come to tell you a folk story today, and perhaps some history too. The problem is this all took place so long ago no

one quite knows what happened for sure.’ When she spoke loudly Lucien became aware of a pleasant timbre to her voice he’d not noticed before. Usually, when she was about her work at Demesne, she spoke in a respectful hush.

‘All we have is the story, and I will recount it as well as I can. Are you all comfortable?’ Ella smiled as thirty heads nodded; excited squeals escaping in anticipation of what was to come. Outside it began to rain, the drops drumming lightly on the wooden shingles above, the dull pattering providing a backdrop of sound.

‘A long time ago, perhaps three hundred years ago now, there were three great ships. They set out from a land a long way from here. Many, many miles. The ships carried people, dozens of people, even hundreds, and these people came looking for a new home. However, the ships were undone with bad luck. The captains, who were very old when the voyage began, died one by one. The first died in his sleep, the second captain collapsed while checking the maps. The last captain despaired. The ships had stumbled into a great storm, and it were as if many days had passed since anyone had seen the sun. In fact, many crew members on the ships were beginning to believe they were shrouded in constant night. When the storm reached its worst, the winds howling and shrieking like hungry ghosts, the last captain passed away. The crews of the three great ships were distraught, but the captain had seen a glimmer in the darkness before he died. With his dying words he gave orders to sail toward the blinking light. The glimmer was in fact a lighthouse, made to warn sailors that the coast was unforgiving and rocky, but the crews did not know this. Due to the storm’s great power, and the fact the crews were much diminished without their captains, the ships were wrecked.’

Rafaela paused. Outside the schoolhouse, the wind had picked up. Lucien could well imagine how frightening it must have been to hear that dire sound under darkness, perhaps feeling the ocean crashing against the cliffs. Behind him the children were rapt in silence.

‘All was not lost. By some great stroke of providence, the ships were not sundered on the cliffs, but instead washed up on

the beaches of an island. Almost all of the people on the three ships had been asleep, lulled to their beds by the constant night of the voyage. Many of the sleeping travellers were saved by soft blankets when the ships ran aground on the shore of the island. The crews however were not so lucky.'

Rafaela raised an eyebrow at this, before giving a sly wink to Lucien. A few of the children mumbled to each other about the fate of the crew and shivered at the thought.

'Eventually the storm blew itself out, exhausted and spent. Blue skies revealed themselves, but the people in the ships slept on, because there was no one to wake them.

By chance a clever and powerful man was out walking along the coast that day. He spotted the three ships, now wrecked on the beach, and took it upon himself to wake the people.'

Lucien fidgeted. The press of bodies behind had made him hot. He noted the schoolmistress had built up the fire. Sweat prickled under his woollen cap. He did his best to sit still for Rafaela, not wanting to be a nuisance.

'The clever man did not wake everyone all at once, for he only had so much food to share. He woke some and they made the first farms together. He woke some more of the slumbering travellers and they built the castle we now call Demesne. The clever man worked ceaselessly, until all the people on the ships were awoken and then he declared, "I am your king. You would not be alive if it were not for me, would not have farms to tend nor shelter from the rains. I am your king and I ask for your loyalty."''

A few of the children on the rug smiled, others looked smug. They were beginning to understand what they were being told and were making sure their peers knew that they had made the leap of logic.

'Of course the people could not argue with such a thing. They divided themselves by function: the most talented with wood and metal formed House Prospero, the fiercest became House Fontein, the most skilled with the land, House Contadino, and life went on. Eventually the clever man, whom everyone now called the king, became sick and retreated into the castle. He

couldn't tell the people his clever secrets, or share his wisdom with them, so he created House Erudito.'

This would explain why Erudito had no ruling family, and was instead governed by a board of directors, decided Lucien.

Rafaela smiled at her audience and the Orfano smiled along with her. He was at once entranced by her storytelling and unbearably hot. He slipped the woollen cap down from his head and balled the material up in his fist.

'And that is how we come today to live around the great walls of Demesne, and why the king never shows himself at *La Festa* or at parades. Now, who has questions?'

Lucien felt someone shift behind him and a knee in his back, not hard, but it surprised him all the same. He turned, coming face to face with a boy his own age holding up his hand limply. The boy had sandy hair and dull green eyes. He needed his nose wiped. There was an expression of absolute horror on the boy's face. Lucien looked around, noticing the same look seep through the crowd. Each face was caught up in it, a rictus contagion. Lucien became painfully aware all the children on the rug were staring at him, and had drawn back, revolted.

'Yes?' said Rafaela, her voice wavering with uncertainty. The sandy-haired boy flinched, his eyes flickered to her.

'I have a question.'

'Please.'

'Why doesn't your friend Luc have any ears?'