

San Casciano, Italy, 1513

The sun sets early on the winter, rolling hills. The sky is scorched a harsh orange, while the proud trees cast prison bar shadows on the wet, leaf-covered ground. The songs of birds and the playing bow of the gentle breeze is interrupted every so often by effort-fuelled grunts and the crash of metal on wood.

The leaves shudder, wood creaks, and soon one tree crashes onto the ground. Two men, with hunched shoulders and calloused hands, one tall and one short and both wearing muddy tunics and cloaks, wipe the sweat from their brow.

‘Nice work, Ercole,’ the tall one says.

Ercole just grumbles at Tommaso, and sticks his axe in the trunk. ‘You told me a bit of honest work would take my mind off the trouble. You know what would really take my mind off the trouble? Sorting out my trouble!’ he yells, and uselessly kicks some branches. Tommaso just groans, and sits on the stump, burying his head in his hands.

‘I still cannot follow what’s happening day to day, cousin!’ he pleads. ‘I cannot help by shooting flaming arrows into the dark.’

Ercole puts his hands to his eyes, and clasps them in prayer before his mouth as he looks to the sky. Animated by a saintly raconteur spirit, he then jumps towards his friend, and starts speaking in building tones.

‘You remember Bella’s old house? The one atop the hill?’

Tommaso nodded. Bella had been the old woman of the town since forever ago. Her house was new, but around it lay old stones and columns from the empire long gone. He remembered a day when Ercole went up to the house to visit Bella, and had met another woman there, younger, who could tell the time by the long shadows cast by the pillars against the hills and the other roofs. Ercole had come back, and promised to marry such a genius. ‘The sundial, yes?’

‘Yes. And of course there is Frosino, you know?’ The two men stare blankly at each other, before the short man holds out his arms and gives a mock lord’s walk, strutting and wobbling around the tree stump like an untalented actor with a sword to his neck.

Ah, yes. Frosino, once merely a blacksmith’s brother. He had somehow married the wonderfully beautiful and beautifully wealthy Panzano daughter, and now covered his anvil-like face and personality in fancy trim, cloaks and hats. ‘Poor, ugly, filthy rich Frosino,’ Tommaso ventures between laughs at the performance.

‘Yes, yes! You would think his eyes are too dull to read, but now he tells everyone he fancies all the new philosophies of Venice and France. Bruni, Pertricus...’

‘Petrach,’ Tommaso corrects.

‘Yes, Petrarch too!’ Ercole continues in his stride. ‘And now that his head has been turned upside down, he says that a new Rome must be built upon the hill to save all our souls, and that Bella’s house must be smashed apart.’

Tommaso gestures feebly in small, wheeling motions. He remembers the story after all. 'But Frosino does not own Bella's house, so he can stew for as long as he wants, cousin!'

'But that is the news,' Ercole says, sitting on the stump next to him. 'The Panzanos offered Bella some shreds for the house. A few florins, but nowhere near enough to make it fair.'

They both look up the hill, and search for the tops of the pillars and Bella's joyous smoking chimney between darkening branches. So intense is their focus that they fail to hear the footsteps behind them stop.

Then they both glance at the church, with new bricks and far-away saints carved into its alcoves. The coins are immaterial. To refuse Frosino da Panzano would be to refuse Cardinal Panzano. No good Christian would dare. Cardinal Panzano had spent a life putting fear into the God-fearing.

The birds keep chirping, and the orange leaves sway and start to fade into the blue of night.

'Why not outbid him?' Tommaso gently asks, and before Ercole can form the words for a retort, he quickly follows up, 'you yourself said it was a trifling sum.'

Ercole rolls some numbers over in his mind. 'It is an amount I could afford,' he admits, before looking away from his friend. 'But perhaps not one I could survive.'

Tommaso already thinks he knows the answer, but says anyway, 'you do know that you cannot ruin yourself and your sons just to keep someone else's home alive?'

'Marietta will never forgive me,' Ercole replies. The words land with a lead thud. Ercole had indeed married the girl on the hill in the end, and she had the misfortune of visiting the nearby town when the Black Death swept through, scouring the sinners, as the priests said. There were a few letters between the two, and a single, awful sunset, and then it was good night, Marietta.

That was years ago, and yesterday. Tommaso wouldn't tell a soul, but sometimes he visits his friend to surprise him, only to find Ercole has already poured another glass for an empty chair, or is lost in thought around the sundial stones.

'So I cannot keep my wallet tight. But I cannot loosen my purse, or it would end everything we both built.'

'But you can kill Frosino,' another man says behind them. The duo jump to their feet and Ercole grabs his axe instinctively, bandits are never far, and when they see a face they know, they are hardly relaxed.

'Niccolo,' Tommaso says tersely. 'How long have you been rudely overhearing your workers' conversations?'

Niccolo's wiry frame culminates in an embattled face: its bones and structure rest it into a grin, while the soul behind it permanently scowls, making his thin skin always look contorted and confused, and utterly inscrutable. He wears similar clothes to the other men, though his cloak could be argued to be fancier. Lengthily argued, probably. 'Counting my time spent in the corner of the tavern, listening to simple fancies?' he grumbles. 'Days.'

Rapidly, the two men roll back a few sentences. 'Wait on, foreman. Did you suggest...'

‘If you do not do anything, Frosino gets his way, and a new Rome is built over the grave of your wife.’ Niccolo states plainly. ‘My condolences, by the way. But if you try to outbid and ruin yourself, then you will be the one despoiling those years.’

‘Even if he is outspent in a fair exchange?’ Tommaso asks before Ercole can interject.

Niccolo sighs. ‘He is not bound by the law of men. Or, rather, he is bound by the law of many men, armed with halberds, and paid for by deep coffers. Thanks to that law, a husband of a sinner cannot risk disrespect by outplaying him at a rich man’s game.’

Ercole turns red in the face and points his finger at the foreman accusingly. ‘Who are you to throw around murder so lightly, as if this is some joke?’

He just shrugs. ‘I have watched the life drain from people’s eyes, and signed papers to scour thousands. Consider me an expert on the matter.’ Niccolo walks over to inspect the felled tree. ‘Italy is not what it once was. If some bandits waylay a common man, and the entire village, disliking him, swears blind they know nothing of the villain responsible? A tragedy, but hardly a rarity. Cardinals do not burn the world down to avenge a man that they also likely hate.’

Both men stare dumbly, and Tommaso lets out an empty, shocked chuckle. But Ercole is still raging. ‘I will not condemn my soul in this act!’

‘Then you waste Marietta’s memory. Tell me,’ the foreman says, suddenly towering over them both in the dark with gleaming, almost yellow eyes, ‘would that change your mind?’

‘No,’ Ercole spits. ‘Come, Tommaso. We are going to a different tavern tonight.’ He turns and leaves, and Tommaso follows for a few steps, then wheels around quickly.

‘I know you are an exile from different customs, but this is beyond the pale. Would *you* do such an evil act for so small a reason?’ His face seems unjudging. For the first time since his arrival, someone shows Niccolo something approaching interest.

‘Ercole will go home knowing that his misfortune is not God cursing him, but is the noble suffering of his own restraint. It is a better life, I think,’ he says, still wearing his thin, tortured expression. ‘And no, I have never killed for someone I love. I did, however, let a murderer live, once. If that is any better or worse.’ He closes his eyes, and allows himself to remember. ‘For the sake of my dear Florence.’

Tommaso sighs and turns to leave. ‘I have never met a lumber foreman so self-important. And deluded!’

‘Neither have I. The work continues tomorrow until the forest is cleared.’

They part.

Tommaso will go to join his cousin at the tavern, and Niccolo will return to his lonely house in the town, empty tonight as it so often is. He will eat, and drink expensive wine, as he does every evening, but tonight he will unlock the rarely-used door, and enter his personal room. Gently, so as to keep the rich carpet clean, he will

take off the mud-stained trousers, tunic, and cloak. With a clockmaker's care, each of the twenty candles will be lit, and they will bathe the cramped quarters with some kind of warmth.

Niccolo will open the chest on the ground, and pull out rich red clothes, with golden lace and thread, more valuable than Bella's house on the old Roman hill. He will dress in the memory of the old days, feel the old Florentine coins in his pockets and the fabric's weight on his shoulders. Alone in candlelight, he will make the statuesque pointing motion of the generals in the city square, or the sweeping gestures of an orator, until the village outside with its simple fancies is entirely in night, and the library of Ovid and Petrarch and the geniuses of a thousand years are in his sunlight. Once he is back home, dressed in the clothes he was when he was exiled, he will sit at his desk, and whisper of ends, and methods, and murders, and reasons.

He will open his book on rulers to the latest words, in the middle, and he will dip his quill in ink. Niccolo Machiavelli will begin to write.