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The Divine Engineer - Chapter one

The ornately engraved silver bracelet gleamed dully in the candlelight and with a loud click it snapped shut. Inside driven by a mechanism, the tiny oiled springs moved and the two glass needles plunged into the boy's wrist. He screamed.

It had begun.

"Bugger Easyjet!" The young assistant behind the desk looked temporarily startled at this. But then his eyes took on a glazed expression. A familiar resignation, with a hint of barely ill concealed contempt. Simon banged the counter top and spun round, the yawning queue silently parting before him like the Red Sea. The airport was hot, small and noisy. Bloody sorry for the inconvenience. Lying sods they didn't give a toss. It would have been more honest of them to say, "What d'you expect for thirty quid, service?" but it didn't help thinking that now.

He was stuck in Milan.

More to the point, he was stuck.

The early morning sun was fierce and he squinted, lifting his hand to shade his eyes. A taxi screeched up in front of him. The driver waved him to the door. "Signori?" and before he could rationalise his actions he stepped in and let his small bag fall to the floor. The driver sped off gesticulating to all around him and it suddenly hit Simon he didn't have a clue where he was going.

Collecting himself he asked the driver for a good guesthouse, which brought a huge grin to the man's face. "You speak Italian!" he said, his English instantly fracturing to the point of becoming almost comic, before launching into a stream of heavily accented Italian forcing his very hung over passenger to really concentrate to understand exactly what he was saying. Somewhere in heaven Simon's Italian mother probably shook her head.

The taxi picked up speed and soon the city lay far off to the left and he found himself in a non-descript suburb he was assured was right near a station into town should he desire it. He looked at the fading frontage and went inside.

The guesthouse looked quaint in a mixed décor sort of way. But it was clean and amazingly cheap not that that was an issue. For Simon nothing mattered anymore.

Meg was gone.

He was dumped.

Things had come to a head in more ways than one.

The room he was shown into was small and clean and furnished in an understated way.

Jesus, he thought, what is going on? And as if to reinforce that fleeting thought the sunlight winked off the small gold crucifix that hung above the bed, but useful at that point as it would have been, God didn't speak or send a sign.

When your life falls to pieces sometimes it really falls.

He rubbed at his throbbing temples. That first day of their holiday had gone pretty well. Shopping and lunch followed by shopping and dinner.

They'd made love that night, nothing special but nice all the same and then they'd talked. Big mistake.

He seemed to have an inbuilt system that made him sound evasive whenever the subject of the future came up. Normally Meg coped well with it, but for whatever reason, and now he would never know, her patience with him ran out. Outwardly she had remained calm but he could tell that all was not good.

The set of her jaw, the shrug of her shoulders all pointed to one thing.

He had finally blown it. And he had.

That night they didn't make love and all the next day she hardly spoke a word. That's when the idea of the ring hit him.

She had gone for a shower as the heat wave that sprang up after mid morning seemed to affect her asthma quite badly and as he mooched about the streets around the hotel he saw it, the tiny diamond sparkling in a window. Without pausing for thought he went in and bought it, a desperate speech already forming in his mind.

The shower seemed to perk her up and after the Museum of Modern Art and a craft market they returned to change for dinner.

They had booked the restaurant on arrival, seeing its grand sweeping entrance on exiting the taxi from the airport.

It glistened with marble columns and snowy tablecloths and just looked exactly like a very upper crust sort of place even down to the tail-coated waiters. It called out to be eaten in. Once he knew he was going to Milan he had promised his father, who owned an antiques business that he would check out a local Milan antique shop of some reputation he had read about. And so it was agreed that he would meet Meg outside the restaurant at 8.00 precisely, although he knew she would be late. Unfortunately the shop he'd gone to was closed and his stomach began to churn at the thought of his words of proposal and their import for his future.

Seeking shade in a nearby café, and with a bit of time to kill, he steadied his nerve with a quick brandy, followed by three more. Not good.

She looked lovely and he just looked drunk. There was nothing more to say. He fumbled the ring from his pocket and muttered something about being very sorry for even living and she had just shaken her head and angrily walked back towards the hotel. Seeing his gift spurned he had made to run after her. Catching his jacket in an ornamental bush he'd tumbled down the stairs eliciting a shout from the doorman who now ran to his aid.

Supine as he was he saw Meg looking at him from across the street and without slowing her stride she went through the front doors, ferociously shoving at them to open.

Silence.

She was furious.

It was over.

He slept on the small couch in the suite that night. And the silence continued all the next morning when suddenly she said she was leaving and pausing only to stuff her things into her case she hailed a cab and sped off. Head throbbing he'd paid the hotel bill and roughly crumpling his few items into his old holdall, followed her in a second cab.

But with sod's law in full overdrive the traffic held him up and upon his arrival at the airport he learnt that of the available economy flights back to London there was one ticket left.

And that had just been sold.

To Meg.

He peered through the departure gate but there was no sign of her.

This was not what he had expected.

Now what?

What the hell was he supposed to do?

In the street a horn angrily beeped and he jerked from his reverie. The small room was cool and now the sun shone on the closed blinds flooding the room with a soft pale glow. God this was a right mess. His head still ached and he sat up slowly, his mouth dry and full of a weird taste best left undescribed.

Phone home?

That's what he always did at times of crisis. Papa always seemed to understand. A thousand miles away an answer phone clicked on and he heard his father apologising for being absent. He didn't leave a message. Instead the early morning summer heat enveloped him like a fog as he stiffly walked out of the small lobby and down the steps. His heart briefly lifted as he saw the view from the corner of the street.

The road stretched away like a shimmering snake before him and the distant towers of the city rippled in the haze. But Meg's face filled his mind and a sudden wave of emptiness washed over him.

He really had totally screwed everything up this time - of that there was no doubt.

Life was crap.

No doubt at all.

And the year had started so well.

He'd graduated from University with a very good degree and been taken on by Dewson and Wilkins. Although they mainly specialised in historical restoration work, his vast knowledge of ancient and modern languages had particularly caught their eye when they received his CV. Add to this, the years spent in his father's antique shop and he was an ideal candidate. At last all those long Saturdays with Papa had paid off. He soon became their expert as they realised his knowledge surpassed that of even their own supposed seasoned specialists.

Salary rises quickly followed.

Then Meg.

It was at a party and he was contemplating going home early when he saw her stumble breathlessly through the front door.

She was apologising for being late, something she habitually did but her smile swept through him and he stayed. Four short months later she moved in with him. It was a very good year. But his late mother's words rang in his ears, "Why you never happy?" and she knew what she was saying. He never was. Even as a child. It was his curse.

No matter how well things were going he always managed to somehow not totally enjoy himself, convinced it wouldn't last or that it was just a passing thing.

That's why he had few friends. That's why he was alone in a room in Milan. He'd blown it all big time. The job thing hadn't worked out either. Boy had that imploded. It was soon abundantly clear that he'd not been up to the required level of obsequiousness in the presence of clients that was required. He'd actually questioned a minor royal about a point of translation on an old chapel rood screen. A parting of the ways had followed.

And then there was Meg.

He said he was committed, he acted committed, but he just wasn't, or at least not to her satisfaction. It was that curse of his. The sense of imminent doom that he was certain would arrive any moment. She'd put up with a lot, he knew that. This trip was a last ditch effort. But it had failed. It was so over it hurt to think about anything and so he stared up at the cloudless sky, his mind so full of thoughts his temples throbbed.

To a Buddhist it would have probably been a minor blip, a different path to walk, not a problem but a new direction. But to Simon it was a brick wall. He went back inside his guesthouse his whole body now one large ache. The room was close and after another hour restlessly trying to contain his fevered thoughts his eyes finally closed and he drifted off to sleep, a flickering set of images spinning through his head.

He dreamed or to be precise a part of his hung-over brain released chemicals that briefly conjured the past years events into a confusion of sensations and sounds that finally woke him with a start.

It was late or early, he couldn't tell, and blearily he squinted at the glowing numerals on the bedside clock. Ten a.m. Great.

He still ached all over although this was probably the result of him drunkenly falling down the stairs of the restaurant where he had intended to propose to Meg.

Definitely not one of his finer moments.

He could tell when she had kissed him that evening in London. She had come home late from work the month before and he'd sensed that she was preparing to leave him. He just knew it. Why she had agreed to the holiday trip he couldn't work out. Perhaps pity? But she had come all the same. And then the mad idea of a marriage proposal had occurred to him. Why not, it was Milan, it was spring, it was romantic.

She had seemed happy enough on the flight, enjoying it when he spoke Italian at the airport. His mixed heritage.

Father English. Antique shop owner. Expert in French and Italian antiques, specialising in furniture.

Mother Italian tourist. Came over on holiday and came into shop to buy small writing box seen in window.

Love at first sight.

Childhood and teenage years Chelsea, West London. Not a lot of opportunity to speak the language of his mother's heritage apart from on holiday and in local coffee shops or at home.

Fast-forward twenty-five years. Present day. No job. Meg gone. Finished. Dumped!

He took his late breakfast on the little balcony of his room and slowly began to formulate a plan. He had examined his finances, furiously scribbling on a paper napkin arriving at the conclusion that he had exactly three months before he would be flat broke and unable to pay his mortgage.

Time to go home and seek gainful employment. But as he looked out at the sun-drenched view before him and listened to the sounds of a waking city, a mad impulse entered his head. Return to filthy smelly Lambeth in London or stay in Milan. A water truck hissed its way up the street, a fine mist billowing from its rear as it washed the morning streets. The aroma of fresh bread and flowers floated in its wake. It was possible. Get Papa to rent out his flat. Find a cheap place out where he was. Why not? London didn't seem very appealing and besides apart from Papa and a few friends he didn't have any really pressing reasons to return.

A sudden unreasonable peace filled his mind.

Work in a bar, wait at tables, do anything, but stick around. Yeah! It needed a bit of tweaking but after a fashion it was a plan of sorts. His heart picked up pace and he felt his face flush.

He was decided, although he wasn't sure whether he had just began a new phase of his life or finally cracked.

Either way he felt a little better until he felt the ring box still lodged in the top pocket of his jacket. Oh bugger. He missed Meg right then so much it felt like his heart would explode, but he knew he just had to deal with it.

There was nothing else he could do and, gathering up his napkin with his new life plan, he paid for his breakfast and headed into town. But before he set off he suddenly thought maybe he should call his father.

“You what!” his father’s voice seemed to physically leave the phone earpiece and shake him. “What kind of idiot plan is that?” Simon mumbled a few things about Meg leaving him; his last job and his father sighed and then after a few more exclamations relented. “Okay it’s your life boy but Mama, God rest her soul, would spin in her grave if she knew what you were up to, it’d kill her if she were alive.”

Papa had a way of often bringing surreal thoughts of Mama into every conversation they ever had. It always made him smile. It was almost as if it were his way of keeping her with him when family matters were discussed and Simon felt strangely comforted by it.

After his father had calmed down he became very practical and Simon felt like a small boy on a school trip. Names, addresses, places had to be written down, people had to be called, old favours finally cashed in.

He knew his father loved him, he felt it every time they talked and he felt his eyes mist as he heard Papa call him by his childhood nickname.

“Okay Little Rocket, I expect a call every two days, if I’m not here leave it on the machine and please remember not to call so blasted early, I think you’ve got a screw loose but if you think you want to stay I suppose it can’t do any harm. Look I must go, there’s someone in the shop, and for God’s sake charge your mobile, bye now, love you boy.” and he was gone.

He surveyed the list and automatically plugged his mobile into the wall socket.

He was here. But now at least he had more knowledge of what to do next, the next thing was to actually do it! He still had plenty of cash and travellers’ cheques.

His heart ached as he realised he’d taken all this money out to show Meg a really amazing time.

But here he was alone.

So now the world was his oyster and all he had to do was figure out what the hell he was going to do with it.....

Across the city the elderly woman smiled and drained her wine glass. If only he that was beloved could have seen all this she thought. What would he have made of it all? But it was all so long ago. So very long ago. And the music from the worn stereo drifted out onto the tiny sundrenched balcony as she gazed out across the city. Milan hadn’t changed that much really. Without warning the boy’s ivory-skinned face swam in her mind, mother of God he had had the face of an angel she thought. Such a one.

And that silver circle. The bracelet, that clever stinging thing. But that was past now. The breeze stirred the fallen rose petals on the table, and a low chuckle escaped from her lips. Such a great gift she had accidentally been given and now it was nearly over.

But what had become of them all? Where had all the precious things gone to? The secret things that had changed everything. Hidden? But no matter now, for he that was beloved would have been so proud. Her old aching shoulder suddenly throbbed and the deep lines on her face creased as she closed her eyes. What an amazing time it had all been, praise the Lord, what a time!.....

The train clattered into the station and as Simon entered the bustle of the city he genuinely smiled for the first time in two days. Inwardly he told himself he was still in shock and in a way he was. He'd just lost a life. He'd just lost a love. But if nothing else it left a series of open paths to wherever he felt like going.

In a strange kind of way he felt liberated and as he walked and took in the unfamiliar surroundings his dark mood slowly lifted. He felt the ring box rub against him again and he took it out and left it on a low wall. Stupid idea anyway, as if that one gesture could have changed anything.

He was to blame he knew it, but painful as it was he had no choice. He just had to accept feeling terrible and then really hope it wouldn't hurt as badly for too long.

Walking away he didn't look back or he would have seen the small girl gingerly picking the box up and opening it. She raised her hand in surprise as the sun sparkled off the single small diamond but he was gone.

Milan was an amazing place. Full of contrasts. The old rubbed shoulders with the new and the place hummed with an undercurrent of activity. Simon mooched about, browsing in shops and stopping for frequent coffees and as the sun began to slowly sink behind the great dome of the cathedral he checked his map and headed back to his guesthouse. He had called in at various apartment rental agencies and been pleasantly surprised at the costs.

Compared to London it was very reasonable and judging by the pictures infinitely more pleasant.

The air grew cooler as he walked up the slight hill towards his lodging and he noted some interesting-looking old shops that seemed to slumber in the dying light of the day. They looked like they had been there centuries, their windows piled high with all manner of things and he realised they must be the equivalent of an English junk shop. How they stayed open was a mystery he thought but the owners probably also lived in the little buildings and been there for years. The family business. And his father's face came to him. Papa's little antique shop was in very upmarket Chelsea. Through a stroke of luck rather than forward planning his Father had bought the freehold on a small block and a four-bedroom house in the early seventies. Six shops ranged along its front including Papa's and Simon knew the place must be worth millions now not including the family home.

But Papa continued to work even in his sixties. Still he wasn't a fool. He knew what his building was worth but he loved his shop, the cut and thrust of the haggle. The rents he received from the other businesses were very healthy indeed. But his shop was his private passion. His true love was antique French and Italian furniture and decorative panelling but he also kept an eclectic mix of pieces, which he ferreted out of various sales from around the country.

He loved his work and it showed. Enthusiasm oozed out of him and he did very nicely indeed. But the smart fronts of Chelsea were in stark contrast to the sun bleached facades Simon now stood before. His stomach growled and he yawned, his thoughts turning to dinner and a good bottle of wine. Simon was still lost but now at least he knew roughly where.

Ten more days passed almost imperceptibly and he made his way into town each morning alternating between flat hunting and becoming pleasantly half drunk at a series of small cafés. He'd called Papa as he had promised who amazingly had found a friend's son in need of a flat and the agreed rent was more than he could have ever hoped for. Papa was a genius. They chatted and he admitted he still didn't know what he wanted to do but Papa seemed to understand. Putting the receiver down his mind seemed to focus and an old idea about writing a book re-surfaced. He couldn't help but think that all his years at university

had to count for something, had to be of real practical use. Maybe a book was the thing. This thought still churning in his mind he headed off to view a flat that was just a few hundred metres from his guesthouse.

He looked around the sunny kitchen. It wasn't that bad and the price was great.

"The bidet he not work but is no problem to fix." the letting agent smiled as he made his way back into the spacious lounge. The sun had filled the bright bathroom and Simon tried to hide his excitement. It was perfect and really cheap compared to London. The letting agent smiled again. Cash always said so much more than words. Three months rent up front plus a deposit. They shook hands and it was done. He had a flat with a balcony that looked out over a small river. Very nice.

Okay it wasn't that grand a place and the river wasn't very clear and did have some huge industrial looking buildings along it and was a bit run down, but hey, he had a new home. He felt a little giddy. Was this really happening? It was, he had the keys to prove it. Okay so the first step had been smooth, now for the next part of the plan. Simon had talked with Papa and told him his book idea and while supportive Papa had talked about practical things like earning money and managing his finances.

He did have a point. But what was available? A bar job, a business idea, maybe some of Papa's other suggestions might work? The thought still hung in his mind as he headed into town. This was going to be tricky. Fun but tricky all the same.....

Back in London the shop doorbell tinkled discreetly and Papa glanced up from his paper. His face creased into a smile. A young couple were intently studying some antique rings in the small window cabinet. The girl was staring wide-eyed as her boyfriend pointed out his choice. He turned and Papa nodded to him and putting his paper down he internally flexed his sale muscle. This wouldn't be difficult. The buying signals were there for all to see. A brief thought of his far off son tugged at the back of his mind. The boy would be fine he chided himself. Now to business.....

Unaware of his distant father's thoughts Simon stood smiling broadly. The girl at the University office couldn't have been more helpful. Yes she said they were always interested in new tutors and she complimented him on his perfect accent. Simon blushed and she laughed telling him how charming he was. This was going very well and after taking his particulars and filling out various forms she promised him that he would be hearing from them.

Suddenly he absolutely loved Milan. Its sunny streets, its food smells, the whole easygoing nature of the place. But he had an apartment with no food and he suddenly wished Papa was with him, as the market looked amazing.

Time to stock up. In a fit of extravagance he had taken a taxi home and he fumbled his new key into the lock. A thought occurred and he dumped the bags on the kitchen worktop. His life was suddenly moving along again and he was aware of how much he needed it all to work. He had to make it work. Everything seemed to be going so well, it was as if fate somehow had stepped in and guided him.

Then a familiar nagging doubt moved in the back recesses of his mind but he shook his head as if to dismiss it. Get a grip.

Granted his life had never turned on its head quite like this but it seemed to be turning out okay. He just had to keep his act together. He would get it right this time. He would.

That evening he chattered to Papa who seemed delighted at the prospect, no matter how slender, of a potential job at the University and once he had put the receiver down he went and sat out on the balcony.

Milan lay before him glittering like a lake of stars. A breeze ruffled the small plants on the little side table and he sipped his glass of wine, his heart for the moment at peace.

Chapter two

The great hall rang as the riders clattered in. The flaming torches winking off the breathless horsemen's burnished chest plates. Two sentries lifted their sharp halberds.

A herald shouted to the musicians in the gallery to stop playing, and Ludovico the Regent stood motionless on the raised dais, his dark eyes glinting in anticipation of news. The Moor as he was known because of his dark colouring, listened to the whispered information his face betraying not a single sign of emotion. He dismissed the men and calling to his retainers he swept from the room bound for the tower. This news had repercussions that needed to be understood and prepared for. Such was the life in Milan in 1485. It was the news Ludovico had been dreading. The Plague showed little sign of abating. He gazed out across the city and watched as fires continued to spring up from east to west.

Burn it out.

That had been the advice and it seemed to be having an effect but now he had other problems to attend to. Talk of war from France constantly hung in his mind, the Venice campaign still raged. It was all bombast and show, as ruler his spies assured him but his enemies drew closer in his mind. Like dark shadows they filled his dreams and his dreams were sometimes so filled with horrors he found himself waking in terror. He was no stranger to death however, he ordered killings on a weekly basis, such was the way of the region. Control meant being merciless and his reputation reached far and wide.

He had learnt much from his father who although now deceased still had an iron grip on his soul. The House of Sforza now his alone. At a nearby table a group of men pored over maps and plans and he saw the Florentine animatedly wave his hands about him. To Ludovico they were all an unnecessary distraction in some ways but he needed their counsel. He was planning such things that would set the city alive with chatter but first the damned plague had to be scoured from the place. He listened to the men's conversation and a smile played about his face. The damned Florentine was going on about drains again. The man seemed obsessed. It was unfortunate of course that the citizens died, he needed them to work, to till the fields to grease the wheels of the war machine but drains cost money and high though his taxes were, they weren't enough.

He clapped his hands together and the room fell silent.

The candlelight flickered about his face and he asked each man in turn his opinion. Hours passed as he covered a vast range of topics ordering his scribe to set each answer down and then once satisfied he set out his orders.

His empire would grow in time but it had to run on a daily basis. Inside his head he heard his father's voice and he felt the power he had run hot in his blood. He was the Regent and in his hands he had as much power as God but his fervour froze at this unbidden thought. Too far, never go too far, his dead father's shade seemed to say. He abstractedly rubbed the silver signet ring on his right hand, his father's ring. The page waved the men away, recognising the expression on his master's face and Ludovico stood at the table bristling with energy. The kingdom he had inherited would last; no man alive would take it from him. The House of Sforza would prevail. His leather-clad fist smashed down and the table jumped sending glasses flying to the floor. The scribe cowered in the corner his fingers tremblingly hovering above a blank parchment. Now the death orders would come.

In another part of the old city the buildings were wreathed in smoke as Giacomo headed back to the workshop. He just hoped the Master had been able to get some money from the old tyrant. Yesterday's greasy dinner still fought to escape and he longed for some really

fresh fruit. Still it was better than rotting in that tannery in Florence and he shuddered at the thought of having to return. He liked this new life, Milan was a pit but an interesting one and he caught the eye of a young nobleman whose rich textured cloak gave his position in life away stronger than any sign. He knew that look so stopping he made a short bow and scanning the street for passersby he acknowledged the return bow and sank back into the deeply recessed doorway of a closed merchants. This wouldn't take long.

The workshop was a hive of activity upon his return and noting a pig turning on a spit in the fireplace Giacomo felt his spirit lift. The recent doorway encounter hadn't been that satisfying and he'd only managed to extract three soldi for his trouble. Still, money in the purse, food on the table and a straw filled bed in the upper loft, things were definitely looking up. The scent of roasting meat filled his nostrils and he felt his mouth water. Then the Master entered and smiling called to him and following the pointing finger he knew what was required. Back to work and then dinner. It seemed a fair deal and he sat at the bench and picked up the sheets of leather and begun stitching.

Far out on the distant plains leagues from the city, the soldiers leaned exhaustedly against their spears. The night air was thick with smoke from the sentry fires and in the distance the drums had fallen mercifully silent. A lone voice sang in the cool breeze and a few other voices raggedly joined in with the familiar chorus. The riders would come soon with Ludovico's General's plan and the dawn would rise above them. And then God be with them all...!

All through that next morning the riders had delivered their news to him and he flung the scrolls onto the growing pile at his feet. Ludovico's face gave nothing away. The news was confusing. The battle was going well but no side seemed in total dominance although the signs looked favourable. The sunshine dappled through the leaves and Ludovico watched some children playing. A cough alerted to him to the presence of another. It was the Florentine with some more sketches and he quietly explained himself, his animated hands fluttering around him like a flock of doves. They took wine and the afternoon passed pleasantly as others arrived and saw the brilliance of the drawings set out before them. Bowing they all finally withdrew, the Florentine clutching a small bag of gold, which sent a small smile about his face. Ludovico leaned forward in his seat and below the city stretched out before him.

It was his city and it would rival Rome. Father had stood him here just ten years earlier and pointed out his inheritance; he would not sully his memory with half measures.

Work would soon begin and people would not believe their eyes. Hadn't he assembled the finest minds money could buy? He would bring the world to view it by confounding the doubters in his court. He chuckled at some of the Florentine's more outrageous ideas but felt intrigued. Did the man never sleep? Stories flittered about the court. He was a black magician, he had discovered the alchemic secrets of the philosopher's stone.

It was true he seemed to range all over the city. Watching just watching. He'd asked him about it and been given the strangest answer. "I want to understand so I observe." So much for the stories about the Devil! The Devil and all his legions wouldn't interest a man like that. The bag of gold he'd given him had been more than just a whim. Give a horse its head and watch it run his father had said. So he'd give the man's ideas their head. Who knows what use they might be, it could only be to the good. A shout from the children made him glance upward and he watched as a hawk plucked a fat pigeon from the air. He yawned and stretched his arms wide. This wouldn't do, dozing like a feeble old man in the afternoon;

jumping to his feet he called for his horse and guards. This was his domain! Keen eyes watched his every movement and he often felt them as he moved about the palace. Just like in his father's time the whole place seemed to run and thrive on intrigue. Well he'd show them just how intriguing he could be.....

In the distant plaza the church bells tolled dolefully and Giacomo quickly crossed himself as the cart clattered by. The plague still gripped the place and the smell of burning herbs hung heavy on the breeze. The workshop was closed on this holy day which meant a free day, not that the Master usually paid much attention to such things.

He was busy to the point of being frantic no matter what the day, although conversely he would sometimes just take himself off and simply sit and stare at a stream or a building for hours.

But today was a religious holiday and Giacomo felt a spring in his step at the prospect of a day out of the workshop. He smiled because Francesco had teased him all that morning about his new cloak and as he felt the softness of its silk lining he shivered with the pleasure of it.

He'd get his own back though he thought because Francesco was just as bad with his new woven hose. The Master had been typically generous with both of them. Others commented that they were more like quarrelling brothers than friends sometimes and as he turned out of the square he saw his co-worker lounging against a statue base by the walkway down to the river and he felt the blood move in his face.

He returned his wave and ran to him, his new cloak billowing out behind him like an inky sail. They were going to see the new wall relief at the Cathedral and they playfully mock fought as they wended their way through the teeming streets by the canal's edge. Smoke gusted from the funeral pyres and they covered their faces at the stench.

They held their breath just like the Master had told them to do, pressing the special wet handkerchiefs over their noses and mouths and breathing slowly as instructed.

All the apprentices had been given such kerchiefs. They smelt of some astringent that almost made their eyes water but they were glad of them. But the Master had singled them both out and they knew it, he often lectured them on being careful in the city. They were his favourites and to this end they valued the ingenious little leather purses with the wet cloths he'd insisted be sewn into both their cloaks. To lose them could mean the difference between life and death and they knew it.

Francesco was overseeing the final finishing off on the new panels in the merchant guildhall and he'd convinced Giacomo to come and see them later. The new paint process they were using was making the walls almost glow and he was very proud of them. He chattered on and Giacomo listened to his friend as they headed through the bustling city.

A day off was a welcome break from their labours but he knew how lucky they were. They could've worked for a cruel master and then life would've been considerably harder. He felt his hand ache and he sighed as he remembered the special task the Master had given him and all that it entailed. But he didn't mind really he felt trusted and cared for and it felt good.

But right then it was sunny he still had his three soldi and he knew a wonderful new place to eat in the market by the castle. A woman tugged at his sleeve imploringly and he pulled away from her seeing the telltale signs of plague about her throat. He pushed his face into his handkerchief and breathed in deeply. God help us all and keep us safe he thought and ran to keep up with Francesco.

The woman he had shrugged off nodded to the tall man and coins jingled into her hand. She was happy to point out the strutting peacock from the workshop where her daughter worked, what did he know what it was like to go hungry? The tall man was a young noble she could tell, his clothes so fine but black like a crow. But his eyes had startled her. Blue they were like starling's eggs. Chips of ice in a face that was expressionless. Her breath caught in her throat. Damn this fever, it would pass, it had before and she gathered up her skirt and leaned against the side of a small chapel, a prayer on her lips.

The great cathedral ceiling loomed high above them and Francesco pointed to the angels that were painted onto the huge column tops. He talked of his friend Marco and how the Master had commented on his techniques. They were not unlike the Master's work but seemed more restrained although nonetheless beautiful. They had been summoned for a viewing of the latest finished piece for the Father Abbot and they hurried on, eager not to keep the master waiting.

Giocomo twisted his neck back and took in the golden hues and scarlet reds all faintly luminescent in the light from the long thin windows. A choir sang a mass and they both crossed themselves as the voices soared echoing about the great space.

Truly this was a house of God. To Giocomo's astonishment he saw the young nobleman from the day before affectionately leading what could only be his mother from the side nave chapel. He felt his face flush and his heart jumped as he saw recognition in the young man's eyes. Acknowledging him with a tiny smile and a courteous inclination of his head he pretended that Francesco had called to him.

After a minute he peered around a column but the young man was gone. Francesco chided him and continued his description of the techniques and they whispered animatedly for a minute hour before they slipped quietly out of a side door and scampered to their appointment.

In the far eastern transept The Father Abbot gazed at the picture on the wall, his head imperceptibly nodding. It was beautiful. No it was more than beautiful it was, it was divine. It could not just be called a painting. Ludovico stood behind him and seeing the old man's normally iron shoulders sag he smiled. Damn that Florentine. Such ability in such a vessel. Truly the Lord did move in mysterious ways. The Father Abbot turned and to Ludovico's surprise he saw a wetness about his eyes. They were tears. He lifted his own steely gaze to follow that of the secretary scribe who stood as ever just off to his left, just far back enough to be aware of his master's mood.

The scribe looked questioningly at his Regent. Ludovico breathed in sharply, "Pay him and have him present himself at court this evening." Father was right, once you found fire it had to be enclosed or it would run loose and burn everything. But in this man it was more than fire he had found; this was something else indeed. Something quite extraordinary. And best of all it was his fire!

The workshop was silent as he returned and Giocomo worked quietly careful not to disturb the figure slumped in the chair. The Master was staring into the fire; he often did that after visits to the palace. What went on at those meetings he was never privy to but it often left the Master pale and agitated. The stories about the Regent were legion and you crossed him at your peril; he felt his heart ache for his protector.

To be alone with such a black creature.

He had often attended the palace with the Master at the open councils and he had felt the darkness that seemed to wrap itself around the room when the Regent entered. No wonder they called him the Moor.

Just once Giacomo had found himself held in those black snake eyes and he had felt helpless. What did a man like that dream of? He quickly crossed himself and shuddered. And now through destiny's twists he held the fate of them all in his leather and mail covered hands. They had all left Florence in search of greater commissions and all of them had looked forward to their new home. It was rumoured that the Regent had received the Master after letters had passed between them.

Things had started well and the workshop seemed to hum with efficiency as each new project arrived. There was now a powerful patron and best of all he was rich!

But as the months had passed he had sensed an unusual restlessness in the Master beyond his usual frenetic self. It was true payments had been forthcoming, indeed some could be considered generous, although the Master needed all his retinue of craftsmen and servants just to continue the works already underway. But still an uneasiness moved within him. Tales had been whispered to him by palace servants; such things he dare not repeat. And he had seen and heard plans describing things beyond his simple comprehension. Nothing was as it seemed anymore that much was clear but at least the gold kept coming.

Gold meant food and warmth and the occasional gift. More commissioned work led to more commissioned work, it was like a self-perpetuating sales campaign.

The other things were best not thought about, in fact were best left to be forgotten.

Giacomo sighed heavily at these thoughts and carefully moved the blank parchment sheets together and continued his stitching until he felt the strangest sensation that he was being watched. He looked up and smiled as he caught the Master regarding him with such tenderness he felt he would weep. He heard him call to him by his pet name, the name that he accepted as a gift of affection and putting down his work he walked towards the outstretched hand.