

Tales of Landfall

Prospero's Last

17 Ottobre 314

One

'Oh, it's you,' slurred Duke Prospero, holding the lantern higher. The corridor was a barely remembered passage in the winding sprawl of Demesne, a route for those who wished to pass unseen, or persons in no particular hurry. Infrequent candles lit wax spattered sconces, the flagstones were furred with compacted dust; rat droppings added to the miasma.

'You scared me half to death, hiding in the shadows like that.' Stephanio Prospero peered into the darkness, unsteady on his feet, breath heavy with the scent of wine. His flushed complexion and red-rimmed eyes conspired to make him porcine in the candle light. Cheeks glistened, difficult to tell if it were tears or sweat that that gave his ruddy features their sheen.

'I'm afraid I have sampled one vintage too many tonight.' The Duke grinned, his confession overloud in the corridor, words chasing each other, tumbling down the stone stairs at his feet, spiralling into blackness.

'You've never really been one for *La Festa*, have you?' Stephanio hiccuped. 'I can't say I blame you. *La Festa* is for lovers, for courting, for flirting.' The Duke stared off into darkness, mouth set to a pained curve

above the weak chin. 'Those days are long past for one such I.' A frown settled over the black beads of his eyes. 'If I ever saw them at all.'

A shaky breath escaped the Duke, he blinked twice before continuing.

'I asked Lucien to take care of my daughter. He's a good boy, a good swordsman, I hope he makes a good husband. At least he will if Giancarlo keeps his bloody claws off him. Perhaps you'd see fit to have a word? Your influence would be appreciated.'

A non-committal grunt emerged from the dark. The Duke nodded, imagining his request had been accepted.

'Stephania deserves some attention, she certainly hasn't received much from her mother.'

The candles guttered in their sconces along the corridor, swept into motion by a chill breeze, making the shadows writhe. Many of the bright tongues were extinguished, but the Duke's lantern remained. The golden light was small, threatening to flicker out in a heartbeat.

'Drafty tonight,' commented the Duke. 'Reminds me of another time, another *La Festa*, long ago.' The old man blinked and looked around, swayed and steadied himself with an outstretched hand. 'I'd invite you back to my sitting room, but this seems as good a place as any for a ghost story.'

The Duke took a step down the spiral staircase and released a sigh, which turned into a belch half way through the exhalation.

'Pardon me. The sweetmeats were particularly good tonight. Are you going to sit? No? Very well, suit yourself. You know best and all that.'

The corridor was lush with the silence of anticipation. Stephanio settled himself on cold flagstones cracked with age. Cobwebs fluttered and the old Duke shivered before beginning his tale.

Two

'Many years ago when I was a younger man, just before I married Salvaza, a curious thing occurred. It led to an event so monstrous I dare not speak of it, nor did I in the years that followed, not even to my closest friends, though I have enjoyed far too few of those. One afternoon my manservant, Moretti, was keen to walk the circumference of Demesne, just to see how long it would take. It tells you something of the many pressing duties I didn't care to fulfill. My father was still alive in those days, and unwilling to turn the reins of leadership over to me. House Prospero was alive with speculation regarding my potential marriage to Salvaza. She was a Fontein girl back then, spirited, arrogant, and breathtaking. There were rumours that she had feelings for Emilio Contadino, but I put no stock in them. Ours was to be a political marriage and she was a fine looking woman. I was confident we would make such a relationship work, that I might seduce her with kindness and generosity. How naive I was.

'I needed little encouragement to leave Demesne, if only for an afternoon, relishing the chance for time to think and breathe. My anticipation only encouraged Moretti, who was keen to sample the sunshine. Had I

known then what I know now I would never have set foot over the threshold of my apartment, let alone ventured beyond these old walls.'

The Duke stared at an open hand, as if the rest of his tale might be found in the lines of his palm, written in the whorls of his fingertips. The back of his hand revealed only blue veins filled with noble blood, the skin punctuated by age spots, annotated with creases.

'But venture outside we did. We stomped and strolled and tarried and drifted. Moretti had a sharp mind despite his low birth and was good company. We stopped to lunch from a pack, Moretti's foresight equaling his good manners. It was close to evening when we found the entrance to the tunnel, below my very own House!'

The Duke paused and cleared his throat, the sound filling the corridor like a rumble of thunder.

'I was curious, naturally. No one had ever mentioned an entrance beneath House Prospero, or any of the great Houses. Perhaps it was secret, concealed as it was by an overhang of rock and obscured by long grasses. We entered in spite of Moretti's reservations, my rank and fascination commanding us deep below Demesne. What a bore I was! What a bullish, unheeding fool. We progressed along the tunnel until both the light and my nerve failed us. There was something unnatural about that place, and not just the unholy stench.'

The Duke turned to his audience, obscured by heavy shadow beneath a pointed arch with an embossed keystone. The design featured a stylized cataphract drake biting its tail.

'The tunnel lingered at the periphery of my every thought, try as I might to forget it. The entrance beneath House Prospero opened a path to obsession, and whenever I fell to idleness I speculated and fretted and even worried over it, though I wasn't sure why. Fear kept me from returning, I confess. I've always preferred the company of wine and food to hardship and labour. I suspected I'd find both in the tunnel, and worse besides. So I had Moretti stand watch in the fields on a handful of nights. Best to place a guard if something untoward were to appear from below, some Fontein assassin, or low born Contadino with an agenda. But nothing happened. The abandoned tunnel was merely that, a passage I was too afraid to return to. And that's where the story should have ended.'

Three

Stephanio held the lantern up to his face, the light inside barely warranting the title of flame, a corpse candle under glass.

'Except the story didn't end there. Moretti's curiosity matched his tenacity. He returned to the tunnel mouth every so often, not daring to enter but keeping watch all the same. He took action, while as I was content to

fret in the safety of my study. And finally Moretti was rewarded, and on the night of the *La Festa*.'

The Duke's chest swelled, his frown an unwavering line.

'Salvaza and I had been married for two years at that point. She was playing the role of diligent mother, in public at least. I had no need to fake my enthusiasm, Stephania was everything I had never had the sense to wish for. Fatherhood changes one the most surprising ways. Once I had merely been concerned with profits and losses, costs and contracts. Now I had a reason for living that surpassed the recordings of my ledgers.

'*La Festa* was raucous, and I made free with the wine as is my want. Moretti pushed through the crowd, ashen faced, wringing hands that trembled. It was a masque that year and I chided him for not being attired correctly. I forgave him the instant he explained. We left *La Festa* immediately, gathering warm cloaks, sturdy lanterns and sharp steel.'
Stephanio ran a hand over the dome of his pate and cleared his throat. 'Not that I've ever been much of a swordsman, but a deterrent is often half the battle.

'My man had seen a suspicious figure, clad for intrigue, in a hooded robe, making his way without a torch so as not to draw attention to himself.

"Was only once he was in the tunnel that he lit a lantern. He must full well know how dark that place is," said Moretti.

'I had to agree. Even daylight had failed to reveal the tunnel's secrets, and now we were to follow an unknown bravo into its depths. It puzzles me

even now that I didn't call for guards. Surely common sense demanded that I enlist a stout arm and friendly face in addition to my servant. I can only conclude I was caught up the moment, a slave to both secrecy and mystery. This had been my obsession, mine and Moretti's. Perhaps I didn't care to share the discovery.

`Have you ever been beyond the castle walls after sunset? Demesne's windows shed little light over the meadows and fields. It is the very definition of absence, of light, of safety, of the known, of the real perhaps. I'm not sure how the commoners stand it, surrounded by unending darkness with only trees, and the occasional hedgerow or stone wall to break the dim monotony.

`Clouds smothered the stars like a blanket that night, and even the sharp sickle of the moon refused to cut through them. We were abroad and alone with only our lanterns and our wits to guide us, headed to the one place I feared most in all of Demesne.

`I confess, I had no sooner set my foot at the threshold of the tunnel that my courage fled entirely. The stone was just as weathered and pitted as I remembered, the smell no less fetid. The opening itself was the height of a man, yet we stooped, made small by a terrible dread.

“We must find this man, to make sure he poses no threat to my family, or the many good people of House Prospero.” I spoke more to encourage myself than Moretti, who was grim-faced and steadfast in the lantern light.

`Our feet found their way along the curved floor of the circular tunnel, and I was struck by the idea we were in the very throat of Demesne. Try as I might I couldn't shake the notion of being swallowed, of being no more than a morsel of flesh that catches between the teeth. Or perhaps this was the birth canal, a channel ready to disgorge some nameless infant into the myriad secrets of Landfall. The further I walked along the tunnel's length, the more I wondered which of the two ideas was the more likely. I was desperate to be free, the pressure building until I wanted to holler like a drunken fool.

`My relief was short lived when we reached the chamber. On the one hand we were free of those dark confines, yet a new horror awaited. Moretti stood open-mouthed and I muttered something foolish: "What witchery is this?" Or something similar.

`It was not witchery but machinery awaiting us, though I didn't know it at the time. The King's Machines, objects alluded to but never seen, spoken of only rarely, their purpose unclear. It might as well have sorcery, for all that I could understand it. Black glass sarcophagi stood in rows, like guardsmen on parade. They loomed to attention with an oppressive air, a single unblinking eye of amethyst staring out near the top. Seven feet of obsidian.

`Moretti estimated a hundred sarcophagi waited in the gloom, surrounded by a low dirge that set my nerves on end. Like a maudlin choir bereft of words; the sound emanated from the floor of the chamber itself. I

think it was a warning now I reflect on it, I hope to never hear it again. We edged forward, Moretti consumed with the counting and viewing of sarcophagi. Onward he went but I lingered, afraid we might become lost in this place of sombre shadows. I spent long wordless minutes waiting for him to return, his lantern receding in the distance. Of the hooded man we sought there was no trace.

“Come back,” I hissed, my brow slick with sweat, palms the same. Moretti turned and flashed a grin, looking hellish in the purple light.

“No need to worry.” His voice was loud above the dire drone. “I’ve found a door, but it’s locked. No one is passing through here to cause any trouble, my Lord.”

“Unless they have a key,” I replied. Moretti returned to me, at what I realised was the centre of the chamber.

“Perhaps these are sinners of days gone by,” said Moretti, stepping closer to a casket. The sombre black became translucent under the lantern’s nimbus.

“Why do you say that?” I asked, wondering what superstitious folderol he’d espouse.

“I heard tell of the wicked being buried feet first, so they have to spend eternity on their feet; no rest for those who aren’t laid down at peace.”

“I hardly think it matters,” I replied, “Dead is dead, everything afterward is pipe dream and cautionary tale.”

“Yes, my Lord,” he replied, not meeting my eye, his words at odds with his agreement. He raised a hand to brush his fingers over the smooth curving surface of the glossy stone and my heart kicked in my chest.

“Don’t touch it!”

“But why not?”

“I don’t know. But no good can come of it.” I felt ridiculous, the words hushed and pathetic. Perhaps Moretti didn’t have the sense to be afraid, or fostered some unblinking bravery that was foreign to me. Looking back I see he possessed a great many qualities I would never enjoy.

I decided it was time to leave, the man we sought was long gone, the atmosphere heavy with strangeness, my patience long depleted. I would return to *La Festa* for a fortifying glass, hoping the sinister chamber would not return to me in dreams.

We were just feet from the exit when it came for us. I heard, rather than saw, it attach itself to Moretti. I say attach as there can be no other word for it. Two eyes, as black as hell, stared at me. No whites, as if the creature saw the world through the same obsidian that formed the sarcophagi. There was no mouth as you might understand it, just horrible jaws, mandibles that razored and clamped onto the nape of Moretti’s neck, slick with blood, gleaming red in the lantern light. One sinewy limb was wrapped across Moretti’s chest in a parody of affection, the other grasped his sword arm, holding it firm so the steel remained undrawn. And yet more arms, one fixed to the top of Moretti’s skull, the other clawing at the man’s

tabard. I struggled to make sense of the unfolding atrocity. The forearm of each pale limb bore spines, like stiletto points full of lethal promise, not so different to Golia's. Was this an Orfano that remained apart, forgotten in the bowels of Demesne, preying on the unwary?

`Then a second of reprieve; the creature relaxed its bite. My relief was snatched away as the jaws pressed deeper. The light in Moretti's eyes dulled. He sank to his knees, a dry wheeze escaping his lips.

`I'd like to tell you I drew my sword and struck the creature, splitting its warped features open and cracking its skull. I'd love to tell you how the creature fetched up Moretti's blade and we dueled until we could barely stand, but it was my sword that was finally victorious. Or that I lured the creature outside, loping off limb after limb as I retreated down the tunnel. But none of those endings are mine, they belong to men with violence in their veins and heroic hearts. I have only the mind of an accountant, my fingers are happiest wielding the quill, not the sword.

`I ran down the tunnel, dropping the lantern as I went. A quite literal blind panic, hands held before me as if I might seize the exit and pull it toward me. I ran and stumbled, grazing knees and smashing my elbow into numbness, but I did not stop. To this day, to this very second, I do not know why I was spared, only that the creature must have dined on poor Moretti. I returned to my apartment and stayed there for all of the following day. Those who called assumed I was hungover. I feigned sickness the day after that, and you visited me yourself the day after, enquiring if anything

untoward had occurred. It was the way you said it that gave me pause. At the time I clung to my lie: I was ill and needed rest. I'd not had a chance to make sense of what had happened. Monsters only exist in wives tales. Creatures with six arms and spider jaws? Preposterous! People will happily believe in ghosts, and that the dead rise from the graves to feast on the living, but this? How could I convince people I had not lost my mind? And then there was your question, slender as a stiletto blade and just as pointed, "Has anything untoward occurred?"

I told no one. I didn't dare return and recover Moretti's body. I told my staff he'd gone off to the Previdente Estate on an errand, fobbing them off with more lies as time passed. In the end they stopped asking, but only after I'd received a lifetime's worth of dark looks. They assumed I had killed him, or sent him away in disgrace. Salvaza took it upon herself to question me, but I refused to be drawn on the subject. I had my daughter to think of; I knew to speak of it would lead to ruin for my family. And yet Moretti's death had only succeeded in making me more curious. Who were the dead buried beneath Demesne in those black stone caskets? What was the monster that lurked in the dark and fed on human flesh? Why was this happening, and who else in Demesne knew? I would have my answers, and though I couldn't afford the cost in bravery, I had other resources to pry open the truth.'

The Duke had settled into the flow of his story now, the sibilance of his drunken words less slushed, his voice deep and even. The faraway look to his eye had been replaced with a more intent glint. His gaze was not directed at the middle distance, but inward, the regard of introspection.

‘By now my father had passed away. House Prospero has deep pockets and commanded sturdy coffers. The matter of employing a few men to keep watch over the hated tunnel incurred no particular cost, buying their silence proved the greater expense. I felt the debt of Moretti’s death all too keenly and felt obliged to continue his work. That they stumbled across other secrets was small recompense, Demesne is teeming with the clandestine. And still I was no closer to understanding what horror made its home just a handful of floors below my own. It was the dark shadow that haunted my every step, the sound in the night that woke me to a cold sweat.

‘I spent a small fortune over the following year, and all to purchase yet more questions, any glimmer of explanation eluded me. My most trusted watcher, Vespucci, alerted me to a presence, running himself breathless to fetch me from my bed. Small fortune that Salvaza and I kept separate rooms, else I’d have difficult questions to answer come the morning. I ventured to the ground floor in my nightgown, bleary-eyed and tousled, down spiraling staircases just like this one.’ The Duke gestured to his feet, his eyes following the curved walls.

'We took our places by an old pantry window, arriving in time to witness a curious vignette. The clouds drifted clear of the moon at the dictates of a fortunate wind. The pale disc was almost full, bathing the field in silvery light. A wagon and horses waited in the field below, a score of feet from where the tunnel exited amid the long grasses and rugged stone. No simple cart, but a sturdy wagon. I owned many just like it, driven by teamsters ferrying goods from the estates the length and breadth of Landfall. What strange cargo was being dispatched so late at night? The horses were statuesque in build and many hands high, able to pull the heaviest loads. I looked to Vespucci but neither of us had much to say, worried a single utterance might alert the conspirator to our hidden presence. We did not wait long. A single figure all bound with ropes dragged a great burden, bent double with the effort. I squinted into the gloom, unsure what consignment could be attached to the ropes. Every step was a battle hard fought and twice the figure sagged, close to collapse.'

The Duke sat up straighter and turned to his shadowed audience.

'It was you I saw that night, fetching one of the sarcophagi from the chamber. How you dragged that staggering weight the length of the tunnel I can't imagine, but drag it you did. We watched, mute with equal parts horror and respect as you hauled the sarcophagus onto the cart. I fancied I could hear every grunt and curse, the creak of wood as the weight of black glass settled into place. And all the while one question rang in my memory with nagging intensity.

“Has anything untoward occurred?”

‘I realised you knew about Moretti, of course, but something else, something more profound, as well. You tackled this task alone and in the dead of night. You, who could command a score of men with a wave of a hand. We watched you climb atop the wagon and drive away to the south. You were not seen for weeks, and none knew why or even what task had taken you from Demesne. Some hoped you had retired, gone to die in a distant corner of Landfall, as if you might dig a grave and pull the earth over yourself as you lay down. Only I knew of the horses, the wagon, and the sarcophagus. Vespucci and I, who I sent with a fast horse and fat purse of denari to follow you. He never returned.’

Duke Prospero sighed and silence crowded in on the stairwell once more. A woman’s laughter sounded in the distance, fading with the footsteps that carried the revellers to bed. *La Festa* was winding down, drawing to a close for another year.

‘And to this day I still see Moretti being killed before my eyes, the flashing jaws dripping with gore. I still regret sending Vespucci on the road to slake my curiosity. I still wonder at the black sarcophagi beneath House Prospero. And not once have I summoned the courage to ask you, not until tonight, when I’m all but undone with wine.’

Duke Prospero craned his neck, looking accusingly over his shoulder at the shadows. It was a sober gaze that looked out from such ruddy features, easy to forget Stephanio had fervently claimed drunkenness just moments before. He dragged himself to his feet and stared into the unknowable face.

'What happened down there? What happened that night? What happens still? Will you tell me a fraction of it?'

The listener stepped forward, warm candle light doing little to cheer the mottled grey robes, hood pulled down low over unseen eyes, chin and nose blunt peaks emerging from the lined and craggy cheeks. A long-fingered hand clutched an oak staff, the amber headpiece giving a jaundiced glint. And at the edge of Duke Prospero's senses, stronger than even the wine that saturated him, was the rank smell of decay, of sickness, of all that was unwholesome and unholy.

'Fatherhood changes one the most surprising ways,' said the Majordomo, his voice a drone. 'The King himself has long fathered scores of children.'

'You mean...?' Stephanio's eyes went wide, the discovery at once obvious and yet loaded with surprise.

'Yes, the Orfano.' The Domo cleared his throat, his fingers clutching the staff tighter still. 'I too wished for one I could raise, a successor, a son. A Majordomo for the new century.'

'The creature below Demesne?'

'He is called Severino. He is not as I hoped he would be, but he draws breath, which is more than my previous progeny managed.'

'He couldn't speak—'

'Not with his...' the Domo waved a hand toward his mouth, releasing a sound somewhere between a sigh and a growl. 'He was of no use to me, and yet part of me. I hid him from the King, from the Houses, from the humans of Landfall. Until you interfered. You left me no choice, I had to set him free of Demesne and all its strangling secrets. I sealed him up for the journey, spirited him away to the *Foresta Vecchio*, and found him a home far from here.'

'And the remaining sarcophagi?'

'Are a tale for another time,' said the Majordomo stepping closer. 'That you know of my son is reward enough. It is information I have not imparted to a single soul, for I trust no one.'

'What happens now?' whispered Duke Prospero, staring into the darkness beneath the cowl, the cloying stench filling his senses.

'Now I shall I light your way,' said the Domo. Chilly fingers eased the lantern from the Duke's hand, the light inside dwindling with each passing minute.

'Then lead on,' said Stephanio with tears in his eyes, knowing he would not wake in his own bed. He would not wake at all. The Domo placed one hand against the Duke's chest and pushed. Feet slipped and arms struck out for purchase, finding only midnight air. The fall was long and punctuated

with meaty slaps, a whimper and curse, the brittle snap of bone. And then silence.

The Domo prized open the lantern's glass door, ignoring the searing metal as it scorched his fingertips. One quick breath and it was done.

Duke Prospero's light was extinguished.