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The Lizard's Bite

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Extract

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Part 1

THE INFERNO

1

In the shifting darkness of the vessel's bowels, low over the undulating black water, the dog waited, trembling. The man, the much-loved man, his master, worked around him, puzzled by the creature's fear, clucking sounds of consolation, not noticing events on the quayside above. Men possessed, the animal understood, a weaker, coarser form of consciousness. Sometimes it seemed they scarcely noticed the presence of blood at all . . .

For a moment the black breath of the sirocco eased. The Isola degli Arcangeli, small, solitary, shining in the brief glimpse of moonlight, was still. Then the night wind returned, more fierce and relentless than before. The fragile frame of the grandiose palazzo shook beneath the onslaught. Shards of brittle glass tumbled from shutters half-finished by the restoration men only the day before. Close by, clouds of sandy dust raked the golden stone of the Arcangeli's mansion, hammering at the ornate windows of the exaggerated first-floor viewpoint arching out over the lagoon. On the other side of the palazzo in the foundry, once the mother lode of the clan's fortunes, the blast chased down the single-funnel chimney, emerging to find every last corner, probing for some weakness, like a giant from the world beyond breathing into a fragile paper bag, rattling the high rickety doors, bending the misshapen glass roof with its brittle span of supporting ancient timbers.

The summer gale from the Sahara had been over the city for three days, rarely pausing in its relentless progress north. Dry choking dust lurked in its belly, working its way into the crevices of the *fornace*, disturbing the precious processes working inside, looking for something

clean and bright and perfect to despoil. The daily yield of good glass, which had never been on target of late, was as low as it had ever been. Disturbance was everywhere. Dust devils swirled over the canals and chased each other in and out of the island's constricted alleys. Beyond Murano, across the lagoon, in Venice proper, churning black water lapped insistently over the stonework at the edge of the Piazza San Marco.

The August storm had taken away the month's familiar enervating humid heat and put something alien in its place. Even now, at just after two in the morning, under the frank gaze of a full moon stained rust-coloured by the storm, the lagoon seemed breathless, starved of oxygen. Beyond the Isola degli Arcangeli lay an entire city choking on the sirocco's sand-filled wheezings. He listened to the storm's anger as it threw itself upon the fragile shell of the foundry. The wind's sighs seemed to vibrate to the rhythm of the deep, smoky gasps of the hulking primitive furnace in front of him.

Half loved, half hated, the leviathan stood at the heart of the solitary room, roaring as the wind's blasts fought their way down the crumbling brick chimney and raked their scorching breath across the embers. He didn't need to look at the temperature gauge to see the fire was too intense. The hemisphere of the interior was approaching a white, incandescent heat too painfully bright to look at. In its maw the costly crock of nascent slow-mix glass – ground *cogoli* pebbles from Istria and the soda ash of burnt seaweed, just what a Murano maestro would have demanded five hundred years before – was churning uncertainly, part of a mystery he directed but never quite controlled.

An hour earlier nothing had been out of the ordinary. Then, when he'd gone back to the empty office for a while and sunk a couple of glasses of grappa, trying to make the night go more quickly, she'd called, demanding he examine the fiery beast before his time, though her work here was done. She had given no reason for the summons to the *fornace*. And she wasn't there when he arrived either, after he'd splashed his face half clean in the office washroom, gargled some water around his mouth to disguise the stink of alcohol. He'd found

one of the double doors ajar, walked in, closed it behind him and met nothing.

He shook his head, wishing the effects of the drink would disappear. The furnace was always awkward; the archaic use of both wood and gas, part of the Arcangeli's secret process, made sure of that. But nothing now made sense. As he watched, the grunting, groaning monster roared again beneath the shifting bulk of the fenestrated roof then exhaled in concert with the wind.

Uriel.

One – or both – seemed to whisper his name, taunting him. His father had called him that for a reason. The Arcangeli were always different even when, before his father's time, they were just a bunch of bourgeois boat builders maintaining the last worthwhile *squero* in Chioggia. Growing up as a child in Murano, Uriel had been aware of the distance between the Arcangeli and their peers, always. You never met a Bracci or a Bullo who had to bear such a burden. They'd have been teased, without mercy, every single day in the plain, hard school by the church. Uriel Arcangelo was never mocked. Never befriended either, not even when he took one of them for a wife.

Maybe, the grappa said, laughing at the back of his head, they knew what the name meant.

Fire of God. Angel of terror.

It was just another of his father's cruel little jokes, to make every one of his four children an angel twice over each with their set role. Michele to succeed him as *capo*, 'like God'. Gabriele to be the strong man by the furnace, the maestro with the pipe, seeing that the clan prospered. Or not. Raffaela to intercede when matters went too far, to bring a woman's sense to their deliberations, to heal. And Uriel. The hardest, the loneliest of vocations. Uriel the magician, the alchemist, the family's *omo de note*, the Venetians' whispered, almost fearful name for a man of the night, keeper of the secrets, which had been passed on from the small black book that used to live in his father Angelo's jacket pocket, kept from the curious gaze of outsiders.

Uriel closed his eyes, felt the heat of the furnace travel the room and scorch his skin and recalled those last days with Angelo fading

towards death in the master bedroom of the mansion next to the damned palazzo – the money pit that had consumed them over the years. The image of that final night would never leave him: how the old man had ordered the rest of them out, made him – little more than a boy just out of his teens – read the pocket book, study its ancient recipes, commit those secrets to memory. Uriel had obeyed, as always. So well that Angelo Arcangelo had called a servant and had the book burned in front of their eyes, until it was just ash in an ancient pisspot. His father had laughed, not kindly either, for this was a test. The Arcangeli would be tested, always.

By midnight, his family at his side, Angelo Arcangelo was dead, a pale, stiff cadaver on the white sheets of the antique four-poster where each of the children had been conceived. In Uriel's head the scene was as real, as cruelly vivid now, thirty years later, as it had been that night. The recipes lay secure in his head still, living shifting potions of arsenic and lead, antimony and feldspar, each betokening a shape or a colour that would form within the substance of the raw crude *fritta* growing in the belly of the furnace and metamorphose into something beautiful when the next magician, Gabriele the maestro, with his steely arms, his bellows for lungs, his pincers and his pipe, worked the sinuous, writhing form in the morning. This was how the Arcangeli tried to put food on the table, not by building *bragozzi* barques for Chioggia fishing clans. Magic made them money, kept them alive. But magic was a harsh and temperamental mistress, demanding, sometimes reluctant to perform. Now more than ever.

Angelo had passed on those secrets with a cunning, certain deliberation. The memory of his father's skull-like face in those last moments – grinning, knowing – stayed with Uriel always, taunting, awaiting the time when the son would fail, as every *omo de note* did because theirs was an imprecise art, one which could be destroyed by an extra milligram of soda or a slight shift in the searing 1400-degree heat of flaming wood and gas. Even so Uriel had memorized the formulae, repeating them constantly, burning them into his synapses, swearing that a day would come when he would find the courage to defeat the demon of his father's last admonition: 'Never write them

down, or the foreigners will steal from you.' He was still waiting. Even now, just the thought of doing so, long after his father had turned to dust, made him sweat all the more heavily beneath the tan furnace apron he wore over an old, tattered cotton suit.

That time *would* come. But until it did the litany of recipes would race through his head automatically, unbidden, unwanted: when he woke up, head throbbing from drink, in the blazing light of their apartment in the mansion; on those rare occasions he wrestled with Bella on the old, creaky brass bed, trying to find some other kind of secret in her hot, taut body, wondering why this was now the only way they could converse.

'Bella,' he murmured to himself, and was shocked how aged and dry his own voice sounded. Uriel Arcangelo was forty-nine. A lifetime of working nights in the furnace, the cursed, beloved furnace, feeling the fire break the veins of his hardening cheeks, had given him the complexion and the dull, depressed outlook of an old man.

'What is this?' he yelled angrily to no one, hearing only the furnace's animal roar in return.

He understood this fiery beast better than any man. He'd grown up with it, fought for hours to control its tantrums and its sulks. He knew its many moods: none better than those long, torpid hours in which it refused to come to temperature. It had never overheated before. The fabric of decrepit iron and brick was too insubstantial, leaked out too much expensive energy through its cracked pores.

A thought entered Uriel Arcangelo's head. He'd been burned many times in the furnace. Once he had nearly lost an eye. His hearing was bad, his sense of smell ruined by another close call. But there'd never been a blaze, a real blaze, the kind that had put rival furnaces out of business from time to time. That meant the Arcangeli were lax when it came to precautions. They'd never followed the fire department's orders to the letter. It was always cheaper to send round the bribe than carry out the work.

The hose was outside, attached to the exterior wall of the foundry, a curling snake of dusty pipe. There wasn't even so much as an extinguisher close by.

Uriel coughed. There was smoke in the miasma issuing from the

furnace, a foreign smell too. Not thinking, doing this because it was, simply, what came naturally, he took out the flask of grappa clumsily and knocked back a swig, aware that a dribble of the harsh liquid had spilled down his front, staining the bib of his brown apron.

She'd know. She'd sniff and she'd look at him, that Bracci look, the cruel grimace of hatred and despair that spoiled her features so often these days.

A noise emerged from the heart of the furnace. It was a sound he'd never heard before, not from gas or wood or glass. A soft, organic explosion sent a shower of sparks flying out of structure's angry, orange mouth. The lights danced in dusty reflections across the ceiling. The sirocco roared and shook the foundry as if it were a dried seed head shaking in the wind.

Uriel Arcangelo took out his set of keys, walked back to the door and placed one in the old mortise, just in case he had to make a quick exit.

The furnace needed help. Perhaps it was more than one man could manage. If that were the case, he had, at least, a swift route of escape, out to the quay and the house beyond the palazzo, where the rest of them now slept, unaware of this strange event shaping just a few metres away on their private island.

2

They called Piero Scacchi the *garzone de note*, but in truth he was no boy at all. Scacchi was forty-three, a hulk of a man with the build and demeanour of the peasant farmer he was during the day, out on the low, green pastures of Sant' Erasmo, the farming island of the lagoon that provided Venice with fresh vegetables throughout the year. His hard-won crops of artichokes, Treviso radicchio, and bright red bunches of *peperoncini* were insufficient to keep even a single man alive these days. So, some months before, reluctantly accepting there was no alternative, he had approached the Arcangeli, spoken to the boss of the clan, Michele, and offered his labour at a rate he knew would be hard to refuse.

It was common knowledge the Arcangeli were short of money. The pittance they bargained him down to was insignificant, even paid in cash to circumvent the taxmen. It was simple work, with flexible hours: picking up wood and ash from farmers and small suppliers dotted around the lagoon, transporting it to the family's private island that hung off the southern edge of Murano like a tear about to fall. It entailed a little shifting, a little cleaning, and the occasional illegal disposal of rubbish. The work kept Scacchi on the water, a place both he and his dog liked, far away from Venice with its dark alleys and darker human beings. He'd grown up in the lagoon, on the solitary farm his mother had bequeathed him a decade before. When Scacchi was there, or in his boat, he felt he was home, safe from the city and its dangers.

Like him, the Arcangeli were different, but this bond never seemed to bring them closer. The family was insular, silent, in a way which Scacchi found sad and, at times, almost sinister. In spite of his

solitary life, or, perhaps, because of it, he was a talkative man, outgoing, fond of a drink and a joke with his peers. He never sailed home from the early morning market trips to the Rialto entirely sober. Piero Scacchi knew how to be sociable when it suited him. These talents were entirely wasted once the *Sophia* navigated its way beneath the narrow iron bridge that linked the private island the clan called the Isola degli Arcangeli – an artificial name he found pretentious – and moored at the small jetty between the palazzo and the house, Ca' degli Arcangeli, where they lived, rattling around like pebbles in its echoing, dusty corridors.

The family's story was well known. They'd come from Chioggia at the insistence of their late father, taken over the glass business, tried to turn back the clock and persuade a dubious world that it was worth paying double – or more – for a mix of traditional and experimental work that seemed out of place alongside the rest of Murano's predictable gaudy offerings. The early years of novelty and success, under Angelo Arcangelo, were long past. Rumour had it the family would go bankrupt soon or be bought out by someone with half a business brain. Then Piero Scacchi would be looking for other work on the side again. Unless there was a sudden rise in the market price of *peperoncini*. Or some other kind of miracle.

He pulled his collar tighter around his neck to keep out the dusty wind then groaned at the sight of the dog. It was lying flat to the planks of the motor launch, face buried beneath its soft, long black ears, quivering.

'Don't look so miserable. We'll be home soon.'

The dog hated the foundry. Scacchi had called the animal Xerxes because it was the master of the lone and desolate places they hunted together. The stink of the furnace, the smoke, the roar of the flames above . . . everything seemed designed to instil foreboding into its keen, incisive black head. Out on the island, or in the marshland of the lagoon, hunting for ducks downed by Scacchi's ever-accurate shotgun, the dog was in its element, fearlessly launching itself into chill brown sludge to retrieve the still-warm body of some wildfowl lost to view in the marram grass and tamarisk trees of the littoral islets. Here it cowered constantly. Scacchi would have left it at the farm if

only the dog would have allowed it. Just the sound of the boat's asthmatic engine was enough to send it into raptures. Animals had little understanding of consequences. For Xerxes, every action was a prelude to possible delight, whatever past experience dictated to the contrary. Scacchi envied the spaniel that.

'Xerxes . . .' he said, then heard a sound, a strange, febrile hissing, followed by what appeared to be a human cry, and found, for a brief moment, he shared the creature's fears.

He turned to look at the iron footbridge, one of Angelo Arcangelo's most profligate follies, a grand design in miniature, crossing no more than thirty metres of water using a single pier, reached on each side by identical, ornate cantilevers. The short central span was built artificially high on the southern side, close to the lighthouse by the vaporetto stop and the jetty where Scacchi was moored. Here it was surmounted by a skeletal extended angel with rusting upright wings a good five metres high, the entire sculpture constructed of wrought iron. It looked like a tortured spirit trapped in metal. Electric fairy lights outlined the figure. Its right arm was extended and held a torch which stabbed high into the air, a real gas flame burning vividly at its head, fed constantly from the foundry's own methane system, day in, day out, in memory of the old man.

Piero Scacchi hated the thing as much as the dog did.

He listened again. There'd been a human sound floating down from the island. Now it was gone. All he could hear was the iron angel wheezing over the blast of the wind, choking and popping as the fiery torch flared erratically.

He knew nothing about gas. He was the night boy, the lackey, someone who carried and cleaned, tapped gauges to make sure they weren't hitting the red and called on Uriel, poor, sad Uriel, locked in his office with a grappa bottle for the night, should something appear wrong. Piero Scacchi understood little about the various contraptions inside the foundry, only what he'd seen from watching Uriel work them, flying at the wheels and switches without a word, throwing kindling into the *fornace*, adjusting the all-important fires to his will.

But Scacchi was wise enough to understand when something was

wrong. The wind could, perhaps, extinguish the flame of the angel's stupid torch, sending raw inflammable gas out into the Murano night. Except that the problem seemed to be a lack of gas, not an excess of it. As he watched, wondering, the torch died suddenly, expiring into itself, with a sudden, explosive blowback.

The dog whined, looked up at him and wagged its feathery tail.

He'd every reason to go. He wasn't even supposed to be there. Scacchi had stopped by only to save himself some work the following night. The Arcangeli got their money's worth, always.

Then the hunter in him caught another sound. A human voice again, indistinguishable, whisked away by the sirocco before he could interpret it.

'Xerxes—' he said, and never finished the sentence.

Something roared into the night from the quay above him. A long fiery tongue of flame, like that of some angry dragon, extended into the black sky for one brief moment. The spaniel shrieked. Piero Scacchi threw his jacket over the small, trembling form, then fought his way up the slippery treacherous ladder next to the mooring, hearing the sound of a man's screams grow louder with every step.