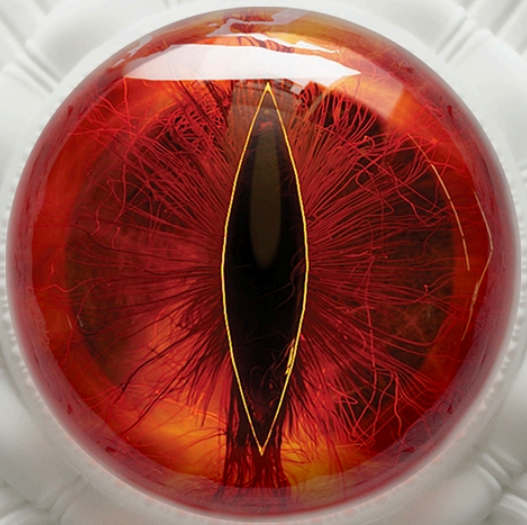
NAVOLA



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New York Times best-selling author of *The Wind-Up Girl*

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Chapter 1

My father kept a dragon eye upon his desk. An orb larger than a man's skull, gone milky and crystalline but still burning with inner fire as if it retained life. He kept it on his desk next to the quills where he signed parchment debts and took trading signatories on linen and raw iron and neru resin and cardamom and silk and horses. He kept it on the desk where he made loans for shipbuilding and war. The dragon eye sat beside a Sag dagger and the Callarino's golden sigil of high office.

Trading codexes lined my father's library, the records of all the promises that he kept in far-off lands. He liked to say that he traded in goods, but more in promises, and he never failed to collect. This was how he came to own the dagger of the Sag man and the Callarino's sigil—the collecting of promises.

But the dragon eye he had purchased from far-off Zurom.

Of the dragon eye's authenticity there could be no doubt. It was not round, as one might think; it retained tendrils of draconic nerves crystallized—fine shards, sharp as daggers—that trailed from hind the eye so that it was less an orb than a teardrop.

The sharp trailing nerves made it appear as if it were the burning comet immortalized in Arragnalo's sketches upon the ceiling of the Callendra's rotunda, seen in skies from Losiccia to Pagnanopol, and now fallen to our human earth. The eye seemed to glow with the very fury of the heavens—a vitality that could not be extinguished, even by death.

When I was a small child, I would play in my father's library with my hound, and sometimes I would see it out of the corner of my eye: a fossil that was not bone, a jewel that was not stone.

I called my hound Lazy, for she only roused herself to play with me, and never for any other. When I was close, her tail would wag and she would seek me out, and then we would run through the galleries of

my family's palazzo, up and down the wide halls, through the courtyards and porticoes and gardens, up and down the wide staircases of the living quarters, and round and round the tight spiral defenses of our tower. Our shouts and barks echoed across cobbles and parquet, bounced amongst the faces of my ancestors depicted in their portraits, and filled the frescoed rooms with their high painted ceilings where the Bull of the Regulai always paced.

We two had the run of the palazzo—and took it for granted as only the young and the innocent can—but when we were in my father's library, for reasons neither of us understood but somehow felt necessary, we were as silent as thieves stealing in the Quartiere Sangro.

The dragon demanded reverence, even from ignorant children and lanky-legged puppies.

While the authenticity of the eye was impossible to assail, its pedigree was less so. The trader my father bought it from claimed it came from a wyrm that had terrorized the sands and red cliffs of Zurom for more than a century before finally being slain by a great warrior with a blade cast of diamond.

The eye thence was offered to a rapacious sultan to forestall a terrible war and to rescue a princess. There was more to the story: the luminous beauty of the maiden imprisoned by the sultan, the lasciviousness and debauch of that cruel ruler, the nefarious sorceries the sultan cast to trick the warrior, the triumphant breaking of the maiden's chains, and the final tragic betrayal of the warrior. The fall of empires. The drifting of time and sand. The collapse of ancient cities into legend . . .

What could be verified was that the eye had been excavated from the crypt of a powerful ruler—with a touch of slip-speak as to whether this constituted scholarly discovery or outright looting—but in any case a turn of events that led to the eye falling into the merchant's caravan and traveling the trade routes over the icy Khim and Kharat passes, and thence traversing the whitecapped waves of Oceana Cerulea to our own fine city of Navola, the beating heart of banca mercanta for all the lands that spoke Amo's dialects, and finally to my father, Devonaci di Regulai, famous for his wealth and influence throughout the lands that touched La Cerulea's azure waters.

Whatever the merchant's claims about the eye's origins, my father maintained that the dragon's death had not come from a hero's sword but most likely old age. If a sword had ever pierced the great beast's

scales, it had occurred in postmortem butchery, not heroic battle. Dragons did not submit to the likes of human blades—not even diamond ones.

But he bought the eye anyway, paying without bargaining (and assuring the merchant's name for a hundred years with the price), and he set the artifact upon his desk. When men came to sign contracts and make promises, he would make them swear upon the eye of a dragon. In this way, business partners were adequately warned that they dealt not with some mere notary-silver in Quadrazzo Maggi but with Devonaci di Regulai da Navola and nothing would protect them when he sought a return on his promises.

My father had a dragon eye.

That long-dead sultan of Zurom did not have one.

The king of far-off Cheroux did not have one.

Our own Callarino of Navola did not have one.

In fact, no one could say they had one. Perhaps a scale of a dragon. Or sometimes, maybe, a fossil thing a man might claim was a tooth. But this terrifying crystallized memory of power, this was something different indeed. The cat's-eye iris still held its orange color, even though the surface had gone milky. It glowed with an inner light that even death had not extinguished.

Whenever I was in my father's library, the dragon eye always seemed to watch me. It seemed to track me each time I entered there, hungry. It frightened me, but, if I'm honest before Amo, it drew me as well.

When my father wasn't present, away on one of his journeys to meet with the promissories of our far-flung empire of trade, I would sometimes sneak into his library and stare at it: the milky sheen of the surface, the trapped flaming rage within its winking cat-slit eye. An eye as large as my whole head. Staring with fury at our quotidian human endeavors. Our buying and selling of bales of champa wool and sacks of wheat.

It frightened me.

And it drew me.

And one day, I touched it.

Chapter 2

But perhaps I should explain to you my father and my father's sphere. Who were we, indeed, who carried archinomo Regulai? Who were we that my father could purchase such an artifact?

The Regulai name was old, stretching back to the time before Amo, and over time it had become proud. My ancestors witnessed the great wave that swept away thousands when Oceana Cerulea lashed us with her wrath in the time of old empire. We survived Scuro's plagues when they ravaged our land, leaving black-pustuled corpses piled as high as rooftops. Like so many Navolese, we fled to the mountains when the great capital of Torre Amo fell to the Khur, and the empire of the Amonese shattered to pieces, and petty dukes, priests, and brigands all declared themselves lords, and wars were fought for glory and territory all up and down the Cerulean Peninsula.

And like so many, when the wars were ended, we returned to our beloved Navola by the sea.

In our earliest days, the Regulai were simple wool merchants, trading with the villagers and herdsmen of the mountainous Romiglia and then hauling that wool out of the wilds to sell to Navola's loom guild. Later generations learned the arts of abacus and letters. Gradually our people became less of the country and more of the city. We settled in Via Lana, surrounded by the clack of looms and the reek of linen dye and the eternal chatter of mercantae bargaining with the loom guild. We sent proxies into the wilds to gather the wool while we instead learned to write and stamp contracts, using our name as guarantee. We made small loans to other merchants, insured traders against bandits and beasts, and slowly the power of our promises came to be known.

But it was my great-grandfather who made us one of the archinomo of the city.

"Deiamo di Regulai," my father's numerari Merio said, "would be much offended at your complaints of boredom at doing the work of a scriveri."

I was quite young at the time, no more than eight or nine years under Amo's light, and I chafed at my writing lesson. I desperately wished to be outside in the sunshine with Lazy, my newly given puppy with her silly fat paws and her whiplike wagging tail. Instead I was trapped inside the dimness of our bank's scrittorium, sitting beside Merio, surrounded by scriveri, numerari, and abacassi, all of them scratching away with their quills and clicking away with their abacuses. Merio clucked his tongue at my handwriting. "Your great-grandfather knew every part of his business, and scorned none of it."

I stifled a yawn.

Merio flicked my ear.

"Pay attention, Davico. The sooner you are finished, the sooner you run and play."

I bent once more to my labor. Around me, adults worked steadily, adding numbers in their columns, marking down deposits and withdrawals for acconti seguratti, reading and responding to the letters that came and went throughout the day. The walls of the scrittorium were filled with the evidence of their work: account books, correspondence, contracts, guidance for numerari on the rules of exchange and the Laws of Leggus. All of this was bound in books, written on vellum scrolls, stacked in paper piles—scribbled on linen rags in a few odd cases—and arranged by region, commodity, and merchant. All of it was locked in iron-latticed cabinets to protect our secrets from would-be spies.

In this shadowed and stinking vellum world I toiled, kneeling upon a chair to gain the height I needed to work at Merio's desk, all the while acutely aware of the day passing, sunlight stealing across the floor as Amo drove his chariot across the sky.

Beyond the window, a cascade of shouts and calls, bleats and barks announced that the streets were full of life. Carts clattered, livestock groaned, roosters crowed, peacocks cried, and the conversation and laughter of merchants, peasants, archinomi, and vianomae filtered up to me, all of them beckoning, all of it accompanied by intriguing smells—ripe fruit, new manure, bright perfumed flowers—and none of it was I permitted to go and see.

My task that day was to copy a contract whose meaning I barely

grasped. The words were large, the numbers larger, and the terms of art abstract and cursed with hidden meanings. Words like *promissorio* and *fallimante.* Phrases like *usanza da Banca Regulai, controllar da Navola, cambio del giorno,* and *definis da Vaz.* Mostly, I remember the script as a tricksy serpent thing that led nowhere pleasant, and went on and on.

"Your great-grandfather understood that to practice every aspect of his business was not a duty but an honor." Merio peered down through the slit windows to the street below, each window designed very tall to let in light, but also very thin so a thief could not squeeze through. "From the most drudgerous to the most elevated, it was all his honor." He sucked his teeth thoughtfully. "*Tuotto lavoro degli scriveri,*" he said. "*Tuotto lavoro degli numerari.*"

He came to look over my shoulder and examine my progress. "Deiamo wrote this very promissorio that you now copy and turn to new purpose. Your hand follows his. Imagine that, Davico. A contract written by a man who has long ago ascended to Amo, and yet his words remain. His hand remains, reaching out to you from three generations past. His hand touches yours . . ."

I was not so moved to rapture as Merio at the thought of my dead great-grandfather's hand touching mine. The thought made me shiver and think of the catacombs below Navola where the bones of the ancient Amonese were stacked to the ceilings in dripping tunnels and crypts, but I knew better than to protest.

"Follow his hand, follow the grace," Merio said, his hand moving unconsciously as he paced back and forth behind me. "Follow and worship the smallest details of Deiamo's art. Give thanks to Amo that at this very moment your great-grandfather assists you."

At this very moment, I knew that my friends Piero and Cierco were in Quadrazzo Amo with wooden swords, playing at battle. At this very moment, Giovanni would be with them, sitting on the shaded steps of the Callendra, reading one of his many tomes. At this very moment, my friend Tono would be down on the docks fishing for Cerulean eyes. At this very moment, in our kitchens, Siana Brazzarossa was baking sweet biscuits with ginger and kha spice just the way my father's consort Ashia liked them. And closer to home, at this very moment, Lazy was sniffing around our palazzo's stables, hurt that I had abandoned her—

"Pay attention, Davico!" Merio flicked my ear again. "The details matter! Deiamo traveled far and wide to expand his mind. He was as

knowledgeable of the rats that infested the grain ships of Vesuna as he was about the wood used to repair the looms that weave the linen here in Navola."

Merio gestured at the papers and tomes that lined the walls. "You can still read his letters and see his mind at work. The knowledge he built. He sniffed the necks of women in Merai to know the fashions of their perfume, and he drank camel milk in the tents of Bedoz to learn the lives of caravanners. We continue his traditions: the letters we read, the knowledge we glean . . ."

He motioned toward his own desk, piled high with water-stained and torn correspondence from our far-flung partners. "This is the foundation of everything your family does, and so you learn, just as your father learned, and your grandfather before him, each of you in turn learning from the genius of Deiamo—Go on, Davico. Keep copying. Don't stop your work just because I talk. Three perfect copies, and then you go and play. One for us. One for the merchant Sio Tosco. And one for him to carry to our branch in Vaz, where Sio Tosco will receive our loan of Vazziani silver fingers to buy his horses. You know that they count their silver in fingers, yes?"

I nodded.

"And what do the people of Vaz call their gold?"

"Thumbs."

"How many fingers to a thumb?"

"Twelve."

"Good. Keep copying. You should be able to listen to me and keep up your work, Davico. If I were doing this, it would be already done—" He broke off. "Nai, Davico. Two *t*'s in *lettera di credo.*" His finger stabbed my work, smearing ink, ruining my copying. "See there? Two *t*'s. The details matter. The day of repayment, the weight of the silver, and the two *t*'s. Throw that paper away. Start again."

"My hand hurts," I said.

Now, looking back, older and wiser, I suspect I had copied very little, but I was young and naïve and felt as if I had been at my labors for days. Such are the feelings of children. A minute of boredom is an hour, an hour is a day, and a day is a lifetime, and we share our feelings openly, for we have not yet learned the art of faccioscuro.

Merio's voice took on an edge. "Your hand hurts?"

Merio was typically a cheerful man, soft and easygoing as men of

Pardi tended to be, with the plump flushed cheeks and rounded belly of someone who knows good wine and better cheese. But I had apparently found some limit to his patience, for his eyebrows went up and his eyes no longer twinkled. "If your hand hurts, think of all the men who labor around you. The ones who labor *for* you." He turned to the scriveri at the desks around us. "Are any of you tired?" He jabbed a finger at the nearest man. "You, Sio Ferro, are you tired? Does your hand hurt?"

And of course Sio Ferro said, "No, Maestro," and all the other scriveri smiled indulgently at me, and bent once more to their tasks.

"These men write all day. They read all day," Merio said. "Sio Ferro began learning his trade at your age, and he wrote all day even then. So. You will do no less. Do not tell me your hand hurts."

I knew better than to answer, but I was not happy. I started again on a new sheet of paper, stifling my despair at the copying that had been lost to my single mistake.

"Ai," Merio relented, seeing my misery. *"Finis. Finis."*

He laid his hand over mine. "Put down your quill, Davico. Come with me." He motioned for me to follow. "Ci. This is no punishment. Come with me. I want to show you something. Come come." He waved me off my chair. "Come."

Merio guided me down the wide wooden stairs of the scrittorium to the ground floor, where the abacassi flicked and clicked their way through our profits and expenses. We threaded between their desks and out into the racket of the street.

Just to our left, the gate to my family's palazzo was thrown wide. Merio led me through the cool stone passage to emerge in the palazzo's peaceful sun-drenched quadra premia, cooled by the splashing of its central fountain.

Lazy sniffed our arrival immediately and came scampering over from the stables, her tail wagging. I gathered her up in my arms, as happy to see her as she was to discover me. She wriggled and shivered, snuffling her nose over my face and licking my cheeks.

I expected Merio to take me farther into the palazzo, but he did not, instead stopping right there in the quadra, looking at me expectantly. I juggled Lazy as she squirmed in my arms and looked about myself, trying to understand why he was gazing at me so.

Here were the three arched gates that led through to the quadra

that held our stables, here were the quarters of our household guard along the street wall, with their upper and lower galleries. Here was the burbling marble fountain depicting Urula with her mermaids and her fishes, all their breasts bared and spouting water. The water was very nice and cool, especially on a hot day such as this. More arched passages pierced the farthest wall of the quadra, inviting access to the more private environs of our home, but Merio did not lead me farther. Instead, he pointed to the fresco that covered the last wall of the quadra. The solid wall that we shared with our bank next door.

"Have you ever looked at this?"

"Y-yes?"

I answered hesitantly, for of course I had looked at it. The painting was too large to miss, more than twenty-five paces wide, and tall enough that the only way to see the whole was to stand far back and crane my neck. It depicted Navola's battle against the invaders of Cheroux and Merai, and it was as unmissable as the fountain of Urula with her fishes and mermaids. But the fountain was at least good to cool my feet in, and even better for teasing Lazy with the splashes. And it was far less interesting than our stables full of horses, with colts and mothers and stallions, along with the pleasant smells of leather and the sweetness of hay and manure. I had seen this painting every day of my life, but I was wary, for I sensed a trap in Merio's question. Even at that young age, I knew when one of my teachers was about to sharpen a point, and knew to be wary of how it might prick.

"What do you see?" Merio asked.

"Navola and Pardi and Savicchi are fighting against Cheroux and Merai."

"What else?"

I struggled, my eyes moving over the clashing troops. Off to the right, Cheroux's objective, our own city of Navola, shone in the sunlight, perched at the juncture of Cascada Livia's river mouth and the vast Oceana Cerulea. The towers of our many rival archinomi rose high above Navola's walls, glittering in the sun.

Every child of Navola knew that this had been a desperate and important battle, but the painting was not something I liked particularly. My friend Piero, who came from nomo nobilii anciens and loved the lore of war, said that he would one day be a great general and fight

glorious battles such as this Defense of Navola, but I did not like the way the blood ran on the battlefield, nor the corpses that floated in the Livia. It was a triumphant painting, but also unpleasant.

"See here," Merio said, assuming the attitude of a teacher. "Not only are we fighting against the invasion of Cheroux. Look here, up high in the sky? Do you see how Amo brings his divine favor and support? How he rides in his chariot to our defense? We are blessed by Amo, and protected by him, for we are righteous, and Cheroux is a kingdom of dogs. See also how green is the field of battle and how blue are the waters of the River Livia, where Cheroux has been pinned. This tells us that Navola is blessed with the sea, with the trade of the river, and with fertile fields, all of which make a worthy prize for Cheroux. And look, the invading dogs from Cheroux are now panicking, diving into the river, trying to swim, drowning in their mail. And here . . ." He tried to reach up, but of course could not touch, being far too short and more than a little too heavy to reach his target. "Here is your family's sigil, the Bull of the Regulai, flying amongst the banners of the Navolese army."

He looked at me expectantly.

I stared back blankly.

"*Ci!* History! We must teach you more history, Davico!" He wiped the sweat from his bald scalp. His head was already pinkening in the sun's heat, but he seemed determined to instruct. I hugged Lazy to me and tried to be attentive as he began pointing at the various banners and sigils, some of which I recognized from other Navolese families.

"Archinomo di Regulai was not always so proud as it is now," Merio said. "Before your great-grandfather, the Regulai name was the name of a merchant trader, and merchants are not often held in high esteem, and certainly not in those days. In those days, archinomo nobilii anciens dominated Navola, claiming blood descent from the old Amonese. They were the ones who held rank and honor and influence."

"Like Piero and Cierco."

"Yes. Just like your friends. They are of the old names. Di Regulai was a street name, vianoma. But here, in this moment, your grandfather has raised his banner alongside the banners of nobles who trace their names all the way back to the Amonese—"

"Did he?" I interrupted.

Merio paused. "Did he what?"

I looked up at the vast painting, at the men, the horses, our own

banner, somewhat larger than all the rest, my grandfather upon his black charger Nero, his sword high . . .

"Was it really like this? Did it happen like this?"

"Why would you ask such a question?"

I wasn't sure. "Well . . . we painted the fresco. Maybe . . ."

"Yes?" Merio prompted.

"Maybe we make ourselves look powerful in the painting? The way Archinomo Furia hang their enemies from their palazzo walls until they rot and fall apart. To scare people."

"Go on."

"When people visit us here, they see this. It's the first thing they see. I've seen them look. And I've seen them whisper to one another. It means something to them. Maybe it is a message to them. Maybe it is more a message than real history."

"Ai." Merio beamed and pinched my cheek. "Just when I think that you are all wool between the ears, the glint of your father's mind pierces through."

"So, did we lead?" I asked, encouraged. "Were we part of the charge?"

"Does it matter?"

I hesitated.

"I don't know."

"Think on it then. Think hard. You like to read stories of legends. The journals of Marcel of Bis. Avvicco's *Travels*. I know you like the legends of the old gods. Are they true? Does it matter if they are true? Or does it only matter that they inspire a true feeling in you?"

I didn't know the answer. I felt happy that I had asked a question Merio respected, but now I had the feeling of swimming in deeper waters.

Merio smiled indulgently. "Think on it, Davico. It is a worthy question. One thing I can tell you, of a certainty, is that your grandfather was no coward. There is a reason Destino was called the Bull. He rode to battle, and he was party to the treaties after. As to the rest? Was his banner so bright and tall?" He shrugged. "Perhaps a wise man would say that we know that your family's banner rises high now, and the banners of the ancient names grow smaller with every passing year. But that is not what I want to show you. Come. Over here, at the bottom of the painting."

He walked the length of wall, pulling me along, all the way to the

left, far from Amo, down at my own eye level, bringing us at last to a foregrounded forest upon a hill, with men and horses hidden, many of them cleverly blended into the trees, shadow shapes, subtle and brooding. "What are these men doing?"

"Nothing."

At Merio's frown, I tried again.

"Hiding?"

"Better. Do you see the sigil, upon their shields?"

"It's a wolf."

"Indeed. A wolf. Do you recognize it?"

I shook my head.

"Compagni Militi Lupari. A powerful army of mercenaries. They are Cheroux's reserve, meant to smash us from behind as we attack Cheroux by the river. Cheroux sought to bait the battle to this place upon the river plain, and put their back to the water, drawing us to attack. The Lupari were supposed to sweep down from the trees and strike us from behind. Smashing us between the anvil of Cheroux and the hammer of the Lupari. But the Lupari do not charge. Instead, they only watch. Because of this man."

He tapped a shadowy figure in a black robe, his features hidden under a cowl, sneaking through the forest. One hand held a knife, the other a sack of gold with coins spilling out. The figure radiated malevolence. "This is Vessio. He was your grandfather's stilettotore."

I sucked in my breath. "Like Cazzetta?"

"Very much like."

This was all I needed to know. "I don't like him."

Merio laughed, a surprised bark of laughter. He ruffled my hair. "Nor I, Davico! Nor I!" He continued to chuckle, then grew serious. "But you should also know Cazzetta is absolutely loyal to your father, and a loyal dagger man is worth more than his weight in gold, no matter the unpleasantness he brings."

I nodded doubtfully, unconvinced.

Cazzetta came and went on mysterious errands, a malevolent figure who appeared at any hour of day or night, galloping into our palazzo upon a lathered black beast called Avinciius, seventeen hands high and a brute of fury. Cazzetta would dismount, throw the reins to a guard, and stalk off to find my father. I had seen him burst into my father's bath, scattering bathing girls and attendants. I had seen him stride into

the middle of a fete for the Callarino, sweating and stinking from his ride, interrupting music and conversation with his dark presence. And whenever Cazzetta appeared, my father would immediately sequester himself with the man. And then Cazzetta would disappear again, often that same night, like smoke, borne away upon the same ill wind that had summoned him.

But it was worse when the man lingered.

Cazzetta liked to play cruel games, and I was his favorite target. He would force me to test my speed in a hand-slapping game that he liked, numbing my hands with his blows. He would emerge by surprise from the shadows, threatening me with a stiletto that was hidden up his sleeve, or else the one in his boot, or else with the little punch daggers that he kept tucked into his stiff high collar. He would appear like a vicious fata, stepping from behind a column or looming out of a shadowy archway, and each time he would seize me and press his steel against my jugular, and then he would warn me that I was di Regulai and needed to be on my guard.

But for me, the worst was when Cazzetta brought me a white dove in a cage, as a gift. He gave me the caged dove, then he showed me a small golden thumb ring with a red gem. He flicked it open, to reveal a tiny needle. He reached into the cage and pricked the dove and the dove immediately collapsed, thrashing and dying of poison.

He then gave me the ring and told me to be careful with it. The ring was the gift. Not the dove.

Cazzetta was not a kind man, nor a good one, and I avoided him because of it.

Now I stared up at this other dagger man, Vessio, lurking in the forest with his stiletto and his bag of gold.

Merio said, "This battle was won not upon the open plain, but in the forest shadows. Not with the clanging of swords, but with the scratch of a quill. It was won because your family's promises were famous for their strength. As cold and unchanging as the ice of the Cielofrigo."

We both regarded the painting. I, the small boy, trying to understand. Merio, the numerari, perhaps considering how quickly he might have counted the gold necessary to buy the loyalty of the Lupari.

"But where is Great-Grandfather?" I asked finally. "You said you would tell me about Deiamo. But this painting is about my grandfather, the Bull."

"Why, all of this is your great-grandfather's work!"

Merio stepped back, gesturing at the whole of the painting. "His agile mind, his iron promises, and his contracts just like the one you are copying. Look up. Look, all the way at the sky. You see how our god Amo rides his fiery chariot through the clouds to battle on behalf of Navola? Now look who stands beside him in his chariot, the winged vincii there. The proud shape of the nose, the deeply set eyes—"

"Deiamo?"

Now that Merio had pointed it out, I recognized him from other portraits. Even the hunch of his body from long labor at the desk was captured, though in this painting he was winged and powerful and hurled a bolt of light.

"Deiamo," Merio breathed. "Indeed. The Bull raises a sword and charges into battle, but it is *his* father who hurls bolts of fire, and stands at the right hand of Amo. Imagine that. The Bull commissioned this painting, and yet he sets his father equal to the greatest of gods."

Merio's expression grew mischievous. "And I can tell you that Garagazzo considers this painting to be near-blasphemy because of it."

"He does?"

Merio winked. "Of course he does! Watch the next time you see him visit. See how the face of our canon priest purples. And yet still Deiamo stands, because your family wills it."

He crouched down before me. "Never forget this, Davico. Your family's true power comes from the unbreakable might of your promises, and the oh-so-tedious labors of your great-grandfather's quill. It is the foundation of everything." He clapped me on the shoulder, smiling.

"Now go and play. Tomorrow, you will copy that contract perfectly, just as Deiamo once did."

Born into a shadowy two-room apartment in Quartiere Lana, surrounded by clicking looms and the bustle and shout of traders, notary-silvers, and cartalitigi, Deiamo ended his days in a grand palazzo, draped in silk and attended to by the greatest names of the city. But even though he died surrounded by wealth, he remained vianoma in his heart, and always cared for the people of the street.

It was Deiamo who endowed the first colonnaded porticoes through-

out the city of Navola, providing vianomae with shade from summer heat and shelter from wet-season downpours, and it was he who first paid laborers to dig down and repair the ancient sewers of the Amonese that were hidden beneath the city so that filth could be washed away from the Linen Quarter, and all people from highest to lowest could walk streets free of ordure.

When a hunger for glory swept over the archinomi of Navola and every great name demanded war against Vesuna, it was Deiamo who raised his voice in protest. He stood in the center of the Callendra and warned that it was foolish, and he lost deposits and accounts because of it. And when we went to war anyway, and our vianomae died by the thousands in the marshes of Vesuna, stuck by arrows and drowned in the mud, it was Deiamo who built a convent orphanage for the children who lost their fathers. The Convent Contessa Amovinci stands to this day, and in our palazzo's gallery of ancestors, Deiamo was depicted seated upon the steps of that convent, surrounded by all the children he cared for.

Deiamo was followed by Destino, called the Bull, who played such a role in Navola's defense against Cheroux. Destino's portrait showed him astride his charger, Nero, his black beard shot with gray, his dark eyes blazing, his blade drawn and ready.

Destino traded in coin and iron, flax and wool and linen, armor and arms, wheat and barley and rice. He created permanent branches in cities as far away as Villion and Bis, Hergard, Neft, and Sottodun, and he carefully chose partners to run those enterprises in our name. It was Destino who moved Banca Regulai out of the old Linen Quarter and into a grand new palazzo, and he who first took seat in the Callendra as archinomo.

Destino was not only a warrior, nor only a merchant trader. He was also a lover of art and nature. It was Destino who hired the genius Arragnalo to design and construct the wondrous Catredanto Maggiore at Quadrazzo Amo, where the named Navolese all prayed, and it was he who endowed the statuary gardens that ringed the city for all the people to enjoy.

Finally, there was my father, Devonaci di Regulai.

My father was not as kind as Deiamo, nor as valorous as Destino, though both those aspects were contained within him. He was some-

thing else entirely, almost otherworldly in his intelligence. It was said that he began to work the abacus before he was two, and that he wrote in Amonese Anciens by the time he was three.

Brilliant, sharp, observant, tireless, unbending, unafraid. I heard all those descriptions attached to him, and more. I heard them from the vianomae of the street, and from the men who served him in our palazzo, and all of them spoke with reverence.

My father expanded our Regulai Bank to the far corners of the lands where Amo's dialects were spoken, and even beyond. Kings and princes begged for invitations to dine at our table. It was my father who convinced Madrasalvo to come down from his hermitage to complete the catredanto commission when Arragnalo passed of poison from his apprentice lover. Madrasalvo painted the cloisters and domes of the catredanto with his own hand and no one else's—a commission that took ten years to complete, and was his finest work.

My father fed the vianomae when Scuro's pox killed our farmers in their fields and all our crops failed, arranging at our expense to bring great ships full of wheat from the Khur Empire to Navola, browbeating ship captains to land at our sickened docks and to feed our people on threat of losing all future trade. My father stayed with our sickened city when other archinomi fled, though the blue blossoms cost him his wife, my mother. He raised a shrine to her in Catredanto Amo, and you can find her there to this very day.

Our name was intertwined into the very bones of Navola; my forefathers had influenced its architecture, its twisted streets and shade gardens, many of them named for cousins, sisters, brothers, sons, and daughters of our ancestry. Via Gianna. Via Andretta. Giardina Stefana. For generations, we had been building our name and influence.

By the time of my youth, banca mercanta and the Regulai name were nearly synonymous. Archinomo Regulai rang clear across the sea, up and down the fishhook of the Cerulean Peninsula, across the deserts and the steppes, into Zurom and Chat and Xim. It crossed the frozen heights of the Cielofrigo to the barbarian hair men of the north. Our assigns and proxies made loans, purchased and traded, insured ships and goods, spied on rulers, bought mines, sold cities, and my father presided over all of it.

But who was my father truly?

I think it is hard for us to know a person in their heart. What I saw

of him was different than what a notary-silver in Quartiere Lana saw in him, than what his consort Ashia saw in him, than what our Callarino of Navola saw.

I cannot speak for those others. I can only say that in my sight, he was a hard man, implacable in his business and unbreakable in his promises, but he was kind to me, and I loved him greatly.

Too, I would say that though he was powerful, he did not beat people about the head and shoulders with the stick of his strength. He was much concerned with preserving the pride of others, and so preferred polite agreement to outright demonstrations of power. He owned many a man's promise, but he did not seek to mud their cheeks upon his boot, not even when he collected their oaths. *Sfaccio,* it was called in the slang of Navola—to dirty the face—and my father did not take pleasure in such baseness. He was not one to force *sfaccire* without cause, not even when provoked by pettiness.

So, for example, in those days of my childhood, the Callarino was often at the palazzo on the business of the city. Unlike other cities, Navola had no prince or king to dominate us. Instead, we had a Callarino, elected by the archinomi, along with the guild representatives of our trades and crafts: the stoneworkers, the brickmakers, the wool collectives, the loom guild, the ironworkers' guild, the monastic leaders, and of course the district elected who represented the various quartiere of the city and the vianomae who resided there. One hundred men and sometimes women tasked with guiding the business of the city, a republic rather than a monarchy, with our Callarino at its head.

Navola in those days was civilized. We were utterly unlike the brutal principate of Gevazzoa, dominated by the Borraghese people with their blood feuds and revenge intrigues. We were wiser than the rash kingdom of Cheroux with its reckless wars and covetous king Andreton. And we were more content and civilized than the land of Merai, with its Parl who sat uneasily in his Red City and forever struggled to control his rebellious relatives. In Navola, the One Hundred elected the Callarino to high office, and with their guidance, that man ruled wisely and well. Borsini Amoforze Corso, the great Callarino of Navola, was elected by the many, obedient to the city, and guided by the interests of all.

So it was proclaimed by scholars, priests, and diplomats.

Now, often, the only warning of the Callarino's arrival would be

when my father's numerari Merio cleared his throat in warning, for the Callarino enjoyed arriving unannounced. The Callarino was not one to wait patiently, nor to defer his valuable time to others. Merio would clear his throat and a moment later the Callarino would come sweeping into the library as if he owned it, strutting in his red-and-gold robes of office and preening as if his name were written upon Amo's crown.

And in response?

My father would simply look up from his writing, invite the Callarino to sit as if he were an expected and favored guest, and motion Merio to summon sweet tea and bitter cheese.

Such was my father. He was mild, for he had power.

And such was the Callarino, for he had none.

And then, in a dance of exquisite politeness, the Callarino—without asking—would beg permission to use his own sigil, which sat upon my father's desk; and my father—without acquiescing—would permit its use.

The Callarino might say, "General Sivizza says that the weapons of the Lupari Guards are dulled."

And my father would say, "This is not something that the pride of Navolese arms can tolerate. Our loyal protectors must be protected as well. They should receive meat for their strength, the sharpest and strongest of arms for their art, and those that are married . . . they should receive a golden navisoli in appreciation. The general and his Wolves should never feel as if the city is not grateful for their protection."

And so, then and there, the Callarino would write a proposal to the archinomi of the Callendra—many of whose promises my father had also collected, and whose cheeks my father had also marked—and the Callarino would stamp it with his sigil, dripping red ink, smearing the chop with authority that he did not have, proposing precisely the amount my father suggested, and the Callendra's Hundred Names would then vote and agree, and my father and other archinomi of the city would pay the taxes necessary to keep our troops at readiness.

Or else, the Callarino might say, "The Borraghese have sent an ambassador offering trade to Navola." And my father would frown and say, "But do we trust Archinomo Borragha, truly? Gevazzoa is such an ugly city. Populo Borragha, a base people. They would touch a cheek to your boot and then slip a stiletto between your ribs when they rose to kiss your hand." And then he would make a face, as if he

had drunk from a bottle of poor wine, perhaps one of those famously cloudy wines of Gevazzoa, all murk and sediment.

In this case, the Callarino would drop the topic and move on to others, knowing that he had no authority to treat further with Archinomo Borragha.

Or else the Callarino might say, "The king of Cheroux wishes to send twenty scholars to copy the archives of the university and its knowledge of banca mercanta, litigi, and numismatica and would like to trade their texts of architectura and Amonese Anciens."

And my father would say, "Scholarship brightens all kingdoms who receive it, but even more those who provide it. Let the scholars of Cheroux come with the Lupari's guarantee of safe passage, but first let Andreton's son come to us and swear upon my dragon eye that they will never again make a blood claim upon our good neighbors in Pardi."

All of this, I would watch, and later Merio would quietly explain that ever since my grandfather had caused their defection in the war with Cheroux, the Lupari had become Navola's mailed fist—our soldiers exclusively, and paid well to defend our interests. But they were mercenaries at heart. They had come to us because we paid them better. What if another offer were to come? What if they were encouraged to change sides once more? What then?

Navola's archinomi paid well, and attracted the best from across Amo's lands. But these sell-swords were trebly valuable if they took wives in Navola and pupped new Wolves for the city—then they became bound to Navola not just by the suns and moons of our coinage but by blood. This was why my father gave the suns of Navola, navisoli, our gold, to those who made families. He sought to bind Compagni Militi Lupari to the city, to tie their survival to Navola. In this way, he encouraged the Wolves to fight not just for coin, but also for the survival of their own names and lineages, to become Navolese themselves.

Such was my father's wisdom.

"But why must the prince of Cheroux come and swear upon the dragon eye?" I asked.

Merio waggled his eyebrows. "Why, because if you swear an oath on the eye of a dracchus, you are bound to it, and it will burn you to ash if you play it false. A dragon sees into your very soul."

"Truly?"

I was much in awe then, and very frightened. Almost as frightened as I was when Cazzetta was about.

Merio ruffled my hair and laughed. "Ai, Davico, you're too credulous by half. How will we teach you, young princeling, to mask that open face of yours?" He sighed. "No, it will not burn you to ash, and no, it does not see into your soul. But still, it is a great fright to touch that which was greater than any man, and when you make an oath on such an artifact, you feel it in your bones . . ." He shivered. "You feel it deep. Symbol and ritual are as much a part of a man's promise as his coin and his stock of wool collateral and whether his cheek is clean of others' boot marks. When a man touches the dragon eye, your father watches him, to see how he shakes, to see if he hesitates. To see a little way into his soul."

Merio touched the corner of his own eye, seriously. "It is not the dragon who sees, Davico. It is your father."

This impressed me very much.