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The fog that fell upon Venice that evening was like a bandage wrapped round the town. First the spires of the churches disappeared. Then the palaces on the Grand Canal were pulled into the soft web of white. Soon it was impossible to see anything at all. People held their hands out in front of them and fumbled their way over bridges like blind men. Every sound was muffled, including the sighs of the steam-ferries nosing through the black waters. It would be an exceedingly bad night to fall in the water, for no one would hear a cry for help.

On the dark side of twilight, at the Fondamente Nuove, nine members of one family, dressed in their Sunday best, stood in the dim halo of a gas-lamp. They were arguing with an old gondolier standing in his boat below.

'We simply have to get across to Murano. Our daughter's to be baptized at San Donato during Vespers,' explained a studious-looking young man cradling an infant in a pink bonnet. Proudly, he held out the baby over the ledge for the gondolier to inspect. Being a Venetian child, she gurgled with delight at the waves crinkling beneath her.

'Not in this fog.'

'It'll lift as soon as we pull away from shore,' insisted the young man's brother. The whole family nodded vigorously.

'No one is going anywhere in Venice tonight, *Signori.*'

'But the priest is waiting for us . . .' pleaded a grey-haired woman, evidently the mother of the young men.

'I'll eat my pole if he is, *Signora.* He'll know that only a fool and his dog would set out in *this.*' The gondolier gestured into the whiteness.

Then the baby's mother spoke out in a low sweet voice. 'But are you not Giorgio Molin, *Signore*? I believe my second cousin is married to your uncle's brother?'

The gondolier peered under her bonnet. 'Why, Marta! The prettiest girl in Venice and you went off and buried yourself in the Archives,' he clucked. 'Imagine, a vision like you working there! Enough to give the librarian palpitations.'

At the word 'Archives', a look of anxiety crossed Marta's face. She quickly glanced around, murmuring 'Pray, do not mention that place here. Especially on this day.'

In the mist, the water stirred uneasily.

Suddenly the baby chuckled, stretching her tiny hands out toward the gondolier.

'Look, the little one knows her kin!' he grunted.

'I'm forgetting my manners, dear Giorgio,' said Marta, and she introduced her mother, her father, her cousin, her uncle, her brother-in-law and parents-in-law. 'And this,' she smiled adoringly at the studious young man, 'is my husband Daniele – that librarian you mentioned.'

The usual pleasantries were exchanged.

'So won't you take us, Cousin Giorgio?' asked Marta Gasperin, finally. 'It would mean such a great deal to me.'

'Family is family,' sighed the gondolier.

'Family is everything,' declared Marta Gasperin, bending to kiss the old man on the cheek, at which he flushed. She added, mischievously, 'Family and *books*, of course.'

'You've still got that teasing tongue, I see,' Giorgio Molin grumbled, handing her down into the gondola. 'You be careful or that baby of yours will grow up *clever*. And *that*'s no good in a girl.'

'Thank you, thank you kindly,' whispered each uncle, aunt and cousin as they climbed into the boat. Ten was a heavy burden for a gondola. But the Gasperins were a tribe of low height and delicate build. They arranged their party clothes carefully as they sat down.

The fog did not lift as Giorgio Molin kicked off from the sea wall. He set his face grimly in the direction of Murano. It would be kinder, he supposed, not to share his misgivings with the family who were now chattering about the supper that would be served after the baptism.

The thick white air churned around them. The waves swallowed up their words and laughter. The words and laughter sank all the way down to the sea-bed where a certain skeleton had lain twisted in chains for nearly six hundred years.

Magic loves fog and dark nights.

And magic can go either way. It is born good, but it can be baddened. Sadly, it was baddened magic that now swirled around the bones of the dead man. For nearly six hundred years his spirit had festered a hatred for the entire family Gasperin.

A tremor rattled through the bleached limbs. A red glow lit up the empty rib-cage. Bony fingers twitched, and an emerald ring sent a green light searching through the waves and shifting seaweed. Soon a dark, sinewy tentacle, long enough to encircle a house, came creeping over the floor of the lagoon.

Picture those gentle people in the gondola, warming up the mist with their laughter, handing the little baby from arm to loving arm, kissing her toes and fingers, whispering her name like a prayer.

They had but a few seconds more to live.



No one saw the seagulls approach. They cruised in silently from the Lagoon islands, looking for trouble and carrion. If they could not find something dead to feast on, then they were not too squeamish to kill. These were the birds known as *Magòghe* to the Venetians, ferocious grey-backed gulls of terrifying size.

The birds crested the rooftops of Murano and swept in over the cemetery island of San Michele. Their beaks twitched as they smelt the bodies freshly buried there. For a moment they hovered overhead, bruising the water with the menace of their shadows.

Then a voice clanged inside their heads. It howled, 'Minions! We have new corpses to make tonight!'

Foam flecked the yellow beaks of the *Magòghe*. Their cold blank eyes rolled up in their heads.

'O Master,' they thought. 'Tell us what to do.'

Now, from the soul of the bones beneath the water, came orders that soaked the gulls' brains with hunger and fury. They wheeled above the waves, shrieking with every breath.

But out in that fog-swaddled lagoon, the harsh screams of the birds were swallowed up in an instant. No one on Steam-Ferry Number 13 heard a thing.

The ferry had left the Fondamente Nuove just one minute after the gondola bearing the family Gasperin. It should not have set forth in the fog. But the captain himself was from Murano, and eager to get home that night. He had made this trip a thousand times. He knew that if he set course north-east across the lagoon and kept a steady speed he would skim the jetty at the Murano side in just six minutes. There would be no other craft in his way, not in wicked weather like this.

If the captain had held up his lamp at exactly the right

moment, then he might have seen the slender black gondola weaving across the water just in front of him. But exactly at that right moment the lamp was knocked out of his hand by the first gull. Then a dozen others swept into his cabin, ripping at his eyes and his hair. He fell against the tiller and slumped on the floor. The *Magòghe* swarmed over his body until they covered it entirely. Mercifully, he was unconscious when they started to feed.

Back in the passenger cabin everyone felt the lurch as the captain lost control of the tiller. Perhaps somebody heard the faint crunch of wood as the prow of the *vaporetto* sliced through Signor Molin's gondola like a sword. The passengers' own shrieks drowned out the pitiful sounds of the Gasperin family crying out for one another as the ferry passed over them and a vast green tentacle threw itself around the ruined prow of the gondola and dragged it deep down below the waves.

The last person to drown was Marta, and her last words, floating out over the heedless water, were 'Save my baby! Please save my baby . . .'

At this, a disembodied laugh rattled out across the lagoon, a sound even bitterer and uglier than the shrieks of the *Magòghe*. That noise alone rose above the fog, and echoed around the shores of Venice like the snarl of an approaching thunderstorm.

The ferry ploughed blindly into the jetty on Murano, splintering its rickety poles to matchwood. The passengers scrambling ashore soon discovered their dead captain. For the first few hours everyone was occupied with spreading the news of his unspeakable death and blessing their stars that they had all survived what might have been a dreadful accident.

No one was waiting for the gondola on Murano. Giorgio Molin had been right about one thing: the priest had long

since given up on the baptism and the festive supper he had hoped to join. He assumed that the fog had changed all the plans. The gondolier's wife thought nothing of her husband's absence: he often slept on his boat during those hot June nights.

It was only when the fog finally lifted, a whole day later, that questions began to be asked as to the whereabouts of the Gasperin family. And almost at the same time the first body was washed ashore at Murano. It was Daniele, still clutching the bonnet of his beloved Marta. She was found a few hours later, her skirts billowing like a beautiful jellyfish, in the bay of Torcello. Her father-in-law floated face-down close by.

They found all the bodies in the end, except that of the baby.

Stories flew about. 'Such a tiny little mite, the fish ate her,' people whispered.





. . . When Rats flee town on frightened paws . . .

. . . Come-to-life are Black Death's ancient spores

. . . Who shall save us from a Traitor's tortures?

That secret's hidden in the old Bone Orchard.



June 1st, 1899

The blow came without warning and from nowhere. Just one second before, Teodora had been happily browsing in an old-fashioned Venetian bookshop, a dim, crumbling building that spilled out onto a square with a canal at one side. This was no ordinary bookshop. For a start, it was lit only by whispering gas-lamps and yellowy candle-stumps. A large brass mortar-and-pestle stood on the dusty counter instead of a till. There were no piles of famous poets, or detective stories or fat novels for ladies. In fact, there was just one battered copy each of all manner of interesting books like Mermaids I Have Known by Professor Marìn. And The Best Ways With Wayward Ghosts, by 'One Who Consorts with Them'.

And the bookshop was empty of other customers apart from one fair-haired boy no older than Teo herself. He was elegantly dressed with a linen waistcoat, spotless boots and a cap at a rakish angle. He stood at a lectern, reading *The Rise and Fall of the Venetian Empire*, which was as big as a safe and had no pictures at all. Occasionally he looked up to give Teo a princely, disapproving stare.

For Teodora was not just gazing but sniffing at the tall shelves. Those shelves were like coral reefs, looming far above her head, full of deep, mysterious crevices. The shelves went so high up into the painted ceiling that Teo (being the kind of girl who liked to imagine things) could imagine fronds of seaweed waving up there. But down at her level – and Teo was embarrassingly small for eleven – somewhere between the books, and even over the tang of mould and the sweetish whiff of dust, she could *definitely* smell fish.

Indeed, she'd been smelling fish since she arrived in Venice three days before. She would not eat fish, because she believed it was cruel to kill them (Teo was a vegetarian), but *this* fish smell was so delicious, so fresh and alive, like perfumed salt – that she suddenly thought to herself: 'This is what pearls would smell of, if they had a smell.'

The fair-haired boy harrumphed and looked down at his book. In Venice, he seemed to be implying, one reads books, not sniffs at them.

Teo lived in Naples, hundreds of miles to the south. Her parents – that is, the people who'd adopted her – had brought her to Venice for the first time, and with the utmost reluctance, as it happened. Teo had been told that she was adopted as soon as she was old enough to understand it. But she'd never known any other family or any other home but Naples, and she'd always been perfectly happy with both. At least, until she was six years old. That was when she had found a book called *My Venice* at the library. Leafing through pages illustrated with oriental-looking palaces floating on jade-green water, Teo had felt a lurch just like hunger inside.

To get to Venice had taken Teo six years of skilful and dedicated nagging, with postcards of Venetian scenes left on the top of the piano, a Venetian glass ring for her mother's birthday and other hints that were far from subtle. Her parents, who normally loved to think up treats for Teo, had

always seemed oddly unwilling to bring her here, offering one unconvincing excuse after another.

There had been moments when Teo daydreamed of doing something outrageous, such as running away from home, and making her own way to Venice. She might even have done it, if only she'd had a friend to share the adventure with. But bookworms like Teodora are not generally known for their wide circle of adventurous friends. So they tend to have their adventures in their minds' eyes only.

At last Fate intervened. (Or so Teo whispered to herself when her parents couldn't hear. They were scientists, and prided themselves on being thoroughly modern and rational. In other words, they weren't great believers in Fate.) In the last few months Venice had been engulfed in a wave of strange and sinister events. Teo's ticket here came in the form of an emergency meeting of "the world's greatest scientists" summoned to save the threatened city. An invitation to her parents had fluttered into the letterbox.

To think they had *still* tried to keep Teo at home! At first, they had insisted that she should not miss any school. Although it was nearly summer, it was still term-time, and the examinations were looming. But her teacher had given permission instantly, saying in front of everyone, 'Teodora's excused the exams. She's going to write me a lovely story about Venice instead.' No one likes a teacher's pet: naturally the other children had glared. Teo was mortified.

Then her parents declared that the situation in Venice was so very dangerous at the moment. As if that would keep her away!

'No one has actually died yet,' she had told them.

They'd had to admit that was true.

So finally she was here, and the real Venice, despite or perhaps precisely because of its tragic situation, seemed at least twice as precious as she'd imagined.

Almost more than anything else she had seen, Teo loved this old Venetian bookshop. This was her fifth visit in three days. She liked the stone mermaids carved above the doorway, the reflections of water playing on the walls. She liked the old bookseller too, with his creased-up face, velvet breeches and waistcoat, and his scent of talcum powder and candle-grease. He sometimes peered at her with a curious expression, as if he knew her from somewhere but could not quite place her. He never told her not to touch. And even warned her to keep a grip on *Smooth as a Weasel and Twice as Slippery* by Arnon Rodent. 'It has a tendency to fly out of people's hands,' he mentioned kindly. She looked at him closely – or rather, just above his head as he spoke. For Teo had a very unusual gift. When people spoke, she saw their words actually written in the air above them. Also the manner of their speaking: some with the curt efficiency of typewriting machines, some like laborious handwriting, others with flourishes and heavy under-linings. The old bookseller spoke like a scroll of parchment unrolling, each word beautifully distinct and old-fashioned.

Teo didn't really know what she was looking for on those bookshelves, but she had the strongest feeling that there was something marvellous here, if she could only just find it.

'Teodora! It really is time to leave, sweetheart,' her father called from outside. Tommaso and Aurelia Naccaro, friends and fellow-scientists from Naples, were waiting for them back at the hotel. With their daughter Maria. At the thought of Maria, Teo's face knitted into a rather unbecoming frown.

Teo's parents were heartily fed up with this decrepit, dusty old bookshop. Being scientists, they liked things that were shiny and new, like the laboratory where they worked, and their home in Naples, which was a masterpiece of modernity.

'Just a minute,' Teo called to them. 'Just give me one more minute, please . . .'

And that was when it happened.

Teo was standing on tiptoe to reach for *Lagoon Creatures – Nice or Nasty?*, yet another volume by the busy Professor Marìn. Suddenly she felt a rush of air, and a sharp blow to the head, an intense pain and the feeling of warm blood falling down her face.

Then nothing at all.

'Is this what it's like to die?' was her last thought before she fainted away completely. Teo was not a melodramatic sort of child, but nothing like this had ever happened to her before.

That is, as far as she knew.

When she woke up, her parents were kneeling beside her, desperate worry written all over their faces. Her mother was wiping blood off Teo's face with the hem of her pinafore. The bookseller hovered with a silk handkerchief so worn that it looked like the wing of a white butterfly against the sun. But Teo herself was still remembering what she had seen while she was unconscious – vast beautiful fish-tails thrashing around, a sinister white hand, something dark and oily swimming right over her head, the creaking of wood. The face of that princely, fair-haired boy frowning at her. And a . . . dwarf ? Yes, most certainly it was a dwarf, but a familiar-looking dwarf, as if she might know some dwarves in her real life!

What had happened was simply this: a book, a solid little book, had fallen from the top shelf directly onto Teo's head and knocked her unconscious. When she came to, she was clutching that book in her hand, and her father was trying to pry her fingers off it. The fair-haired boy had vanished.

Once Teo was on her feet again, her parents started to fuss. In an effort to calm them, the old man handed Teo the book that had hurt her. 'Here, it's a gift. It is,' he told them humbly, 'extremely valuable. Indeed I never saw one like this before.

I can see your daughter truly loves books,' he added, pleadingly, to her parents. 'A true young scholar, you know, in the old-fashioned way, like the scholars I used to know. They all came here . . .'

The bookseller was lost in his memories for a moment. To call Teo 'a true young scholar, in the old-fashioned way' was quite blatantly the biggest compliment that he could offer. It was positively the oldest book she had ever seen, the leather all discoloured and the binding soft as velvet with age. The pearly fishy smell hovered around it like a halo. Strangely, there was no title, just a vivid little coloured picture inset on the front cover. It showed the face of a lovely girl or very young woman, just her head and the tips of her pale, bare shoulders. Her hair was brilliantly shiny, almost as if wet. She seemed so sad that it hurt to look at her.

But as Teo gazed at her face, the girl in the picture *winked at her.*

Teo's skin suddenly felt fragile and powdery, as if it could break up at any second, as if she was made of meringue. The girl had resumed her still, sad pose on the book's cover, but her cheeks were definitely flushed now. Teo quickly glanced around. No one else was watching. Her parents were still talking severely to the unfortunate bookseller.

'I'm perfectly well, Mamma,' she interrupted. 'Really! My head doesn't hurt at all,' which was not exactly true. It ached horribly, like a vast bell tolling in her brain, and her vision was more than a little cloudy. Nevertheless she looked at her mother in her most determined manner (usually reserved for people who wanted to copy her homework). 'This book is wonderful. *Please* mayn't I just take it?'

She held it up to her mother's nose. 'What do you think of this smell? Isn't it amazing? Like fish, only lovely.'

But her mother could not smell a thing. 'It must be the blow to your head, my love. Only *you* could get knocked

unconscious in a bookshop,' she chided gently. 'Let me have a look.'

Teo flinched away in pain. It hurt far too much to put her straw hat back on. Her parents hustled her outside before she could even open the book. Her mother's arm was around her, protectively, but Teo turned and gave the bookseller a little wave, keeping her fingers discreetly by her waist. He was standing in the doorway, looking back at her with an uneasy, slightly guilty look. His hand was on his heart, as if he was trying to calm its beating.

'Where did the boy go?' Teo asked, as her mother opened a parasol over her head. 'That very serious boy?'

'What boy?' Her parents exchanged worried glances, 'We didn't see any boy.'

They walked slowly through the clammy streets to San Marcuola to catch the steam ferry to their hotel which was just opposite the Rialto fish and fruit markets. A simple building set back from the Canal, it went by the strange name Hotel degli Assassini, which means 'Hotel of the Murderers'.

Teo's head was throbbing, and her fingers kept going to her head to feel the tender spot. Passing a shop window, she caught sight of her reflection. She was pale as a ghost, and there was still some blood matted above her ear in the brown curls that never *would* go into ringlets. Maria, whose dresses, hair and shoes were always as perfect as a wax-doll's, would curl up her rosebud lips when she saw Teo's ruined appearance. Of course Teo would have no trouble thinking up a retort. The problem, as always, would be finding words short enough for Maria to understand.

As they passed a toyshop at Santa Fosca, Teo heard music behind her. It sounded like a choir of rollicking schoolgirls singing lustily at the tops of their voices, but at a little distance, as if behind a pane of glass. The jaunty melody was familiar but Teo could not quite make out the words. She felt

as if she *should* know them; she felt sure that she did, but they evaded her, like the threads of a dream that you struggle to grasp after a heavy sleep. She twisted out from under her mother's arm and spun around. The music stopped dead. The street was deserted. The toyshop was closed. Nothing stirred, not even a rat, for which she was rather grateful, as the Venetian rats famously grew as big as cats.

'What is it now, Teodora, pet?' her father asked.

'Didn't you hear that singing?'

Her parents looked her with deepening distress. Her father growled, 'What singing? It must be this infernal heat, Leonora, on top of that blow.'

'Figure of a Pig! Utter bilge and old tripes too!'

The rough, girlish voice came from behind Teo's parents. It was obvious that they had heard nothing. Teo peered over their shoulders into the toyshop window. Inside, a wax mermaid doll rudely mouthed, 'Slow as slime on the uptake! Ain't got a noggin' idea, have they?'

Teo thought the better of mentioning the bad-mannered doll to her parents, who were now tut-tutting at the salt-eaten bricks falling out of walls and the blistered paintwork dropping off in pieces from the beautiful palaces they walked past.

On the ferry, Teo placed the book carefully on her knees. The pearly smell was really quite powerful now. Her parents sat beside her, absorbed in the programme for the gathering of scientists. Teo glanced around. Not one single passenger was sniffing or looking in her direction. It was safe to have a good look without drawing attention to herself.

The beautiful girl on the cover kept her eyes downcast. For the second time Teo wondered why the book had no title printed on the front. 'What kind of book,' she wondered, 'doesn't tell you its name?'

But the strangest thing was this: when she opened it up

Teo saw that *her own name* was written inside the cover in an antique hand script that had already gone brown with age.

'Welcome to Venice, Teodora-of-Sad-Memory,' said the book. *'We have been waiting for you a very long time.'*

