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University of Southampton

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

English

Minding the Gaps:

A novel, *Cagnaccio* and critical commentary
exploring the potential spaces of fiction and their influence on reader experience.

By

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

July 2025

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University of Southampton

Abstract

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This thesis is divided into two elements: a novel, *Cagnaccio*, and a critical commentary that investigates the potential spaces in the reader's relationship to a text that a novelist may utilise to influence the reader experience. *Cagnaccio* is a novel set in the late seventeenth century Italian Papal State that follows a troupe of Commedia dell'arte players and explores the nature and roles of the spectator and participant. An experimental novel, its structure mediates between playscript and novel conventions, demonstrating the nature of the reader relationship, by using a layered, metaleptic approach to the levels of narrative experience.

The critical commentary seeks to briefly discuss the critical context that influenced the decisions that resulted in the adoption of the novel's innovative structure and layout. It considers the implications of the reader relationship to the act of reading, including the dynamics of immersion and reflection, the role and behaviour of the reader, the proximity of space and temporal setting, and the transferability of a novel's themes into the reader's actual world, drawing on Winnicott's theories of potential space and the importance of playing as a catalyst not only for personal change but as a locus of cultural experience.

The commentary compares and contrasts the reader perspective with that of a theatrical spectator, drawing inferences from the spectator-to-participant continuum not just in the theatre but also in their correspondences to the reading act. By considering the nature of performance and identity, on- and offstage, it investigates commonalities between the doubleness of the actor, the reader, and the spectator. The commentary highlights the theatrical devices that helped shape the novel's final form and goes on to reflect on the novel's implications for future participatory fiction.

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Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: Andrew David Cliff

Title of thesis: Minding the Gaps: A novel, *Cagnaccio* and critical commentary exploring the potential spaces of fiction and their influence on reader experience.

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission:

Signature: Date: 23rd July 2025

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It seems strange to offer my gratitude to those no longer with us, but, as a mature student, the inspiration of two teachers has been a stay through much of my life; my work and my values are affected today by the tracks that they laid down.

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Cagnaccio

DRAMATIS PERSONAE**THE PLAYERS****CAGNACCIO**

Capocomico, head of a company of Commedia players. Once a legendary Arlecchino, now a celebrated Pantalone, the greedy, ageing, Venetian merchant.

IL DOTTORE

Known offstage by his character name. A waffling scholar of the law and letters. An old, bulbous windbag. An eager advisor even when not wanted.

CECCO: THE APPRENTICE

Apprentice to Cagnaccio. Learning the role of Arlecchino, the mischievous servant of Pantalone. 21, curious, eager to learn from the best.

BRIGHELLA

Servant to Il Dottore. Unscrupulous, wily, and cynical trickster and practical joker. Mid-twenties, schemer.

SIMONETTA

Plays the role of Colombina, housekeeper to the Dottore. Adored by everyone for her wit, her charm, and her affections. In her early thirties—buxom, clever, flirtatious, and teasing.

ROSETTA: the INNAMORATA: (ROSINA, FLORINDA)

Daughter of Emilia and the Capitano. Sister to Puccio. Plays the young female lover - the *innamorata*. 17, pretty, headstrong.

PEDRILLO: PEDROLINO

Innocent, smitten, madly in love with Simonetta. 20, respectful, optimistic.

IL CAPITANO

Edgardo, husband of Emilia, father of Rosetta and Puccio. Plays the role of Il Capitano, a boastful, cowardly soldier who despite his bravado runs at the sight of a fight. A middle-aged, timid man, known offstage as the Capitano.

OFF STAGE**DOÑA DONATA**

Long-serving member of the troupe. Mediator. Matriarch. Matron. Responsible for revenues, expenditure, and rations and keeping the company on the road.

BELNASO

Long-serving dresser of Cagnaccio. Errand-runner, and factotum. What he lacks in intelligence, he makes up for in loyalty.

PUCCIO

10-year-old son of Emilia and the Capitano, sister of Rosetta.

FIDATO

A *ciarlatano*, an ageing, itinerant physician, a peddler of potions, ointments and balms.
Opportunist.

LORENZO, ELIGIO, GIORGIONE, GIORGIONE'S SON.

The Carpenters and backstage staff.

SOME FOOL.

Setting:

The action takes place in and around Agnese, a small town in the Papal States, in the days before and following the festival of Sant'Agnese on January 21, 1679.

PROLOGUE

*A space. Timeless and borderless.
Suddenly, a place as FOOL enters.*

ENTER: a **Fool**

(Stumbling as if pushed in forcibly from the wings, he throws down the rucksack he is carrying and comes to sit crossed-legged downstage, clearly restless and fidgety. During his speech, he seems unable to keep still, leaning, lying, and sitting in different positions as if uncomfortable in every position and often casting an anxious glance back into the wings.)

Well, then.

(He looks out, bemused, at the audience as if scanning everyone's face.)

Whatever you were expecting, it's too much. I think that's fair to say. Expect nothing. Hard then to be disappointed. Life is so often disappointing.

(He looks off into the wings as if hearing a sudden noise, searching, then, reassured, relaxes a little and returns his stare to the audience.)

No point in making it worse.

So-to play. Come closer.

(He reaches behind him, extracts a scroll from his belt, unrolls it, clears his throat, and reads in a declamatory manner.)

Of the man, the real man, they knew little.

The best anyone knew was hearsay, no more than half-guessed-at truths.

His name, the one he was born with, no one seemed to know. Even the elders of his company, those who had followed him for years, confessed that even if once they knew it, it had long since slipped from their minds.

No, from where he came or what lay behind him, no one could say for sure.

Of his past, he was curiously silent, never tempted to share more than he need. If pressed, even the scant details that he would offer would hide more than they revealed. People tried, of course, stitching together overheard fragments to fashion stories they thought could be true, but they might as easily have been false.

No, of the man, the real man, they knew little.

And what then of this Cagnaccio, the legend they constructed, with all their cheers and applause? They happily built a myth, not a man; they saw only what they wanted to see.

So, with every caper and pratfall, with each twist and turn of a plot, whether in calamity or in triumph, they laughed this man into their hearts.

For them, the real man mattered little; they had pinned their faith on a leather mask to laugh off their shackles of oppression and the burdens from their pain-riddled backs.

This Cagnaccio and his company of players, fools, and scoundrels all, danced hearts, heavy from misery, to a land where they might be set free, where wrongs would always be righted, and the haughty would reap what they sowed.

Yes, Cagnaccio was the man that they needed, so this was the man that they made. The man who could do no wrong.

(FOOL stops, eyes the audience for reaction, and waits, impatiently drumming his fingers on the ground.)

What are you waiting for? That's it. If you're not interested, have the good grace to leave quietly. *(He waits.)* Very well, then we will begin.

This, then, is the story of two men: the one they called Cagnaccio and the one that got left behind. One body. Two people. One nightmare.

(FOOL looks to the wings as if expecting to be rescued. Nothing happens. He turns back to the audience.)

Look, choose whatever you wish to believe in, and the rest—well, fashion the rest as you will. Make it up. Do you really imagine I care? From the cobwebs of your imagination, find your own version of this truth—the one that suits you best. At least then, when the journey is over and the drama is all played out, we may part as cordially as we met.

(To the wings)

But listen, good readers—the time is ripe upon us—they are calling you to the stage. Go quickly; I think I hear your cue.

(FOOL stands, reaches for his rucksack, and slings it over his shoulder.)

Go! Now is the time to act.

EXITS right.

I

UPHILL

[1]

[You. Reader. Put your mobile away. Better still, turn it off. Now concentrate. It is nearly our time. Take up a blanket from the props table; you'll freeze your nethers out there. Quick, there's our cue; come on, we're on. Head for the shelter of those pine trees; there's no point in getting drenched. And watch your step; it's a quagmire over there. Here, stand close here; we can still see the wagons, but at least we'll be out of the wind. Shh—the narrator's about to begin.]

A voice. No, a scream. Ripping through the rain, distanced but distinct. A child's scream. Rising in panic. Cutting through the storm, there, again. Then silence.

'Puccio!'

'Emilia?'

'That was Puccio'.

'Are you sure?'

'You think I don't know my son? Move. All of you. Please, I beg you.'

'Puccio!' Lorenzo called out, staring deep into the forest.

'Puccio?' The Dottore mumbled, as if awaking confused from a dream.

'Puc-cio,' the Capitano bellowed, the echo bouncing off trees. 'Get your arse back here. Now.'

Our story starts with the man they called legend, and it starts with a boy and his screams.

It starts, not with the sun breaking through the branches of the tall pines to dapple the track etched through the overhanging forest, but already three days from Rome and still on the steep uphill haul to the hilltop town of Agnese, a good two days to the north. Nor does it start with a company singing lustily as they go, but with them drenched, world-weary, and starving, with at best three hours left in the day, as they shelter under the trees, shielding from the cruel north-easterly wind as it surges down from the Alps, whipping across the landscape, dragging rain behind it like curtains. No, it starts not with their spirits uplifted; it starts on the bleakest of days.

'Puc-cio. Puccio.'

'Madonna, Santa Monica, *per grazia auitemi!*' Emilia was shouting. '*Per favore—* have pity on my son.'

A barrage of questions followed from the others huddling around the fire.

'Where did you last see him?'

'Which way did he go?'

'What was he doing the last time you saw him?'

'*Basta. Imbecile.* Enough of all these questions,' her voice rising in alarm. 'One minute he was here... If I knew where he was... Look, don't just stand here. Move. *Presto.* You don't hear him? GO AND FIND MY SON.'

A poor time for a traveller, January.

No strangers to the vagaries of the season, nor to the hardship of these roads, nor even to the trudge to Agnese, this company of misfits, seventeen souls in the count, might have expected to be waylaid. The road was seldom a friend, each year throwing up obstacles to stall them as they navigated the toughest of terrain. Usually, it was the snow, driven by blizzards from the Dolomites, that tested their will for the climb. But not this year. The winter, unexpectedly mild, had kept the snow on the mountains, leaving the lowlands to the mercy of the tramontana as it howled its course southward, dragging rain behind it like curtains, a deluge that refused to abate.

For days, the deluge had fallen. As if the sluices of heaven had burst open, water teemed over the land, causing rivers to swell and to flood. Fast currents broke through the dams that the farmers had hastily erected to protect the first of their crops. Silt covered the fields. Land slid. Roads turned into furrows. The wagons of those stupid enough to even venture forth fought with the mud, their wheels sinking deeper with every turn, unable to gain purchase over the ground. Loads shifted as rocks and potholes took their toll. Mules, baying their discontent, refused to move one step more, and no amount of cajoling would spur them to the task. For three long days and two fitful nights, the players had moaned each league of their journey. Yet complain as they might, each knew as sure as the holes in their boots that whether it rained or it snowed, without good audiences in Agnese, without the prospect of earning good coin, their problem would not be the weather but how they were going to survive until the spring.

So remote was the town of Agnese, so dismissive of all but its own, that few strangers ever ventured there. The locals preferred it that way. They lived their lives unnoticed, suspicious of the world outside, not minded to offer it friendship, until each year on the twenty-second day of January, when they would abandon their doubts and misgivings and fling wide the gates of the town. The festival of Sant'Agnese; a time for masses, processions, and sin. A feast of excess and indulgence, it bridged the privations of winter with the promise of indulgence of spring, when Carnevale would sweep away prudence and coin would flow freer than wine.

'Puc-cio. *Puccio!*

A short distance away, Cagnaccio sat alone, whittling a puppet, watching the scene unfold as if he were a visitor at a rehearsal for some bigger performance to come.

As one, the troupe sprang into action, each player assuming a role. Lorenzo, the carpenter, ready to lead his backstage team, picked up a torch and lit it in the fire. *Spread out into the forest.* Pedrillo was quick to follow. Then Eligio, Gigione, and his son. Simonetta threw her shawl around Emilia's shoulders, holding her close. *You're trembling.* Rosetta, no stranger to her brother's mischief, sighed a sister's sigh, but seeing Pedrillo leave, she picked up her skirts and hastened after him, while the Dottore, reluctant to enter the fray, offered advice aplenty that everyone completely ignored.

'Don't you just stand there,' Emilia shouted, yanking the sleeve of the Capitano. 'There could be bears or boars or... Don't stand here dithering; go and find your son. And don't you dare come back without him.'

The Capitano rummaged in the undergrowth, testing dislodged branches by weighing them in his hands until he was sure he had one sturdy enough for a stave. 'Oh, I'll be sure to find him, and God help him when I do.' (*The Capitano goes to leave, muttering.*)

'Just you raise one finger to him, and you will find yourself dealing with me.' (*She pauses, then shouts after him.*) 'And to think you're the man I married...Beh!'

Sensing a need to take control, Donata set about organising the search, fashioning more torches from the driest branches she could find, wrapping them tightly with cloth, and lighting them in the embers of the fire. Hauling her skirts from the unforgiving mud, she passed the torches around. 'Go after him; take one,' she said to the Dottore. 'The fire will guide you back; we need everyone to go looking; if not, we could be here all night.'

Time was not on their side.

For players, the festival was a lifeline. Many a year it had saved them from starvation and despair. This year, it had never mattered more. Summer had been plagued by insects, harvests had been fruitless, and winter had gnawed them to the bone. The prospect of a good Agnese remained their only hope.

A good place to perform meant the difference between success and failure. A hall would protect them from the elements, and coin could be taken at the door. Rooms were always better than performing in a piazza. Better by far a covered room than coaxing a scudo from a spectator in a dank and wind-swept square, with any number of distractions, and when they could as easily wander away. No, if the players were to be sure of an income, they needed a roof over their heads, and even though the climb might deter their competition, that meant arriving early before the best of the options were gone.

Puccio. Puccio!

The calls rang out through the forest, each one moving further away from the camp as the search party spread wider to cover more ground.

Up on the road, charged with guarding the wagons, two young men also heard the boy's screams.

'They are looking in the wrong place;' the Apprentice argued, 'the shouts came from back down the track. Come on; let's go.'

'And leave the wagons?' Brighella said, slowly inching away. 'Are you mad? He's in a foul temper as it is.'

'So if one of us stays here, the other can go to look. Are you going, or am I?'

Brighella did not answer.

'Fine. You stay here, I'll go.' Tugging his cloak around him, the Apprentice hurried away down the road, dodging the mud-soaked tracks of the wagons, running as fast as the ground would allow him, back down the path they had come.

Seeing his Apprentice leave, Cagnaccio threw the puppet on the ground and set off in pursuit.

[Come on—stir yourself, friend. We'll have to follow. Stay close to the treeline; you don't want us to be seen. Whatever you do, don't speak. Come on—do try to keep up.]

At first, the Apprentice ran, but as the road rounded the hillside, the track became steeper, the ground uncertain and sucking underfoot. He peered deep into the forest, tracing it as best the light would allow him, searching for any movement or sound that might lead him to the boy. He had hoped to find the boy standing in the middle of the path, but as he stumbled on, it became more likely the boy had wandered off, tripped, or fallen in the undergrowth and was lying hurt and frightened. Far off, he could hear the calls of his fellows, but he was sure he was not mistaken. He stopped to catch his breath. Surely the boy could not have wandered that far.

'Puc-cio,' he called, straining to listen for a response. Nothing. Nothing, save the drips off the leaves as they fell on the bracken and ferns.

The ground was worse here. More exposed to the elements, the track had turned to mud, unyielding and almost impassable. He was on the verge of turning back when he made out a shape in the distance. A figure, no more than a shadow in the gloom. The size and stature were right.

'Puccio!' he called, hurrying over the ground. As if rooted at the edge of the forest, the boy was shaking and sobbing, his gaze intent on the forest. The Apprentice did not hesitate. He ran, slipping and grasping for balance, chancing his footing to fate, and as soon as he was within arm's reach, he gathered up the youngster, pulling him close to his

chest. The boy was freezing, shivering with the cold, with tears streaming over his cheeks. Seeing the terror in the young boy's eyes, the Apprentice, as if locked into his mission, did not wait but pulled his cloak around them, forced his feet hard into the mud, and started back up the pathway. 'Don't worry,' he muttered, 'you're safe now. Whatever put you in this state?' He glanced back, and while he thought something moved in the darkness, he could not make out its form.

Ahead, Cagnaccio was approaching. 'Good work. Take the boy back to his mother.'

'What else did you think I would do?'

Cagnaccio groaned and moved aside to let them pass.

He waited until they were a short walk away, then turned back to the forest, intrigued to discover what had terrified the boy. He abandoned the track and wandered through the bracken, scanning the darkness for movement. Something was watching him; he could sense it. And there, that smell—a stench hanging in the air like a damp shroud of decay. He held his ground, listening for the rustle of leaves or the crack of a branch underfoot as he scanned the shadows of the trees.

Panting; he was sure he heard panting. And there—a flash, a glint of light reflected in the gloom, and two eyes, yellow as sulphur, stalking his every move. Breaking out of the shadows, a wolf, head low and haunches raised, edging slowly towards him, readying to pounce. Alone, perhaps abandoned. Too old to be of value to its pack, and the more dangerous for it. Grey fur, torn and savaged, it bore the scars of battles to survive. More bone than flesh, its ribs protruding under its pelt, its movements stiff and measured. A wound, still open, a few days old no more, ran from temple to snout, its eye still weeping from the slash.

The beast snarled, drool running over its jowls.

As if by instinct, Cagnaccio snarled back, mustering all his resolve.

It took everything in Cagnaccio not to back away as the wolf cocked his head and fixed him with its intense glare, but as much as he wanted to deny it, he felt an uneasy connection with the beast—a recognition that both had fought and suffered and carried the scars of the pain.

He felt lightheaded. A voice was calling to him. A sweet voice in distress. Not from the depths of the forest, but from deep within himself: *Run, my brother, run. Run before they catch you. Run and never return.* And he had run. Run for her; run for his life; run to the hills; run never to return. Always, he had been running. Running from the voices in his head—the voices that called him *coward*, the voices crying *shame* and *disgust*—those voices that would not be silenced no matter how far he ran. And now that he had been running for so long, he had lost the instinct to stop.

For a moment, perhaps longer, he and the beast remained motionless. As if to mark the end of their enchantment, the wolf raised its snout and gave out a long, sorrowful howl. The sound pierced him so deeply that, though it ceased, its echo lingered, chillingly rebounding off the trees.

What was it about this wretched animal that fascinated him so much? For all the creature's ferocity, it was clearly alone, abandoned by the pack it might once have led, its force long since spent. A shudder traced his spine. Try as he might, he was loathe to leave. Instead, he waited patiently, watching for the wolf to leave. When it did so, it took only two paces, then stopped and turned its gaze on him, as if marking him one last time. It growled, then drooped its head to sniff the ground and slowly limped away.

Cagnaccio was struck once more by the warning that had been haunting him for days: *once the threads of fate are spun, they cannot be unwound.*

The boy back safely in his mother's embrace, the Apprentice returned to the wagons. However keen he was to boast of his exploits, his triumphs were short-lived. Brighella, seeing the hero approaching, rushed forward, scuffling his friend into an armlock, trying to force his friend's head down into the mud.

Their antics had not gone unnoticed. Cagnaccio, returning from his ordeal with little patience for frivolity and a renewed sense of urgency, was eager to get back on the road.

Cagnaccio

Belnaso. Come here. Move your ass. Have you seen these two imbeciles? *(He imitates a whining voice.)*
 'We're so tired, we're so cold, Cagnaccio, we cannot take one step more.' Rest, my poor, dead aunt. Go tell them, if they want my boot up the arse, they can have it. And if they damage anything on those wagons, they'd better start saying their prayers.

Belnaso looked flustered. Words had never been his best friends, for while he understood them well enough going in, coming out, they became so unruly that the more he tried to marshal them, the less they made any sense. In the early days, the others would taunt him, bidding him recite long, convoluted speeches, just to watch him stumble and fail. They called him a fool and belittled him. Over time, he had the last laugh; he found his own solution. Ignoring the words' meaning, instead, he memorised the sound and feel of the words as he washed them around in his mouth. Soon he became a master at

repeating verbatim even the longest streams of words. Who knew what Cagnaccio saw in his long-time friend all those years ago? But his instinct, as always, had been right.

For a moment, Belnaso stood silently, churning the sounds into place. Then, scrambling away up the bank, he slipped and lurched over the wet ground, repeating the message over and again, until, wheezing from his exertion, to the amusement of the young men, he blurted out the message intact. Triumphant, he waited for a response.

Brighella, looking back towards Cagnaccio, slowly took off his cap and, with the broadest and lowest of sweeps of his hand, bowed as deep as he could. The action was too exaggerated to be sincere, and pushing the Apprentice back behind the wagons, he unleashed a volley of lewd gestures, confident that their master would not see.

At the campfire, the spirits of the company revived, animated in body and voice, as they celebrated the return of the boy. Emilia struggled to keep hold of her son, who was flailing his arms wildly, desperate to escape from his mother's embrace, as she pulled him tight to her breast. Laughter returned to aching bones. If only they had looked closer, those who knew Cagnaccio well might have suspected he was distracted, but caught in the euphoria of the moment, they saw what they needed to see.

'What was it?' The Dottore shouted to Cagnaccio as he made his way to the road.

'A wolf. A mangey old thing—all bark, no bite.'

'Sounds oddly familiar,' Brighella muttered, not loud enough to be heard.

Cagnaccio

The rain is stopping. Everyone, back on the road.
Belnaso, spread the word. Put that fire out. I want
everyone back on the road. No more moaning. We're
going. Donata—get them organised. Come on, we're so
far behind. Load up. And make sure it's all
fastened down; I'm not stopping for crates flying
off the back. Belnaso, check that nothing's left
behind. Move it. Hitch the horses. There's ground
to cover before night.

Each person, familiar with their allotted duties, quickly adopted their role. The campfire was extinguished, and the items removed from the wagons were stashed again and secured. Horses were brought back from their grazing and harnessed, while mules were goaded and prodded to resume their place at the lead. Cagnaccio took the first wagon, climbing up on his seat, the better to see when they were ready to move away. Behind him, Doña Donata took the second, shouting instructions to make sure that every box was

tied down, and, when certain that they were ready, she gave the order to scramble aboard. Those who could took to the wagons, while the rest took to the horses or prepared to lead the mules. In no time, they were ready to depart.

Only Belnaso hesitated. Always the last one to leave, he skirted around the camp as fast as his bandy legs would carry him, until sure that nothing had been overlooked. He started to clamber his way uphill, only to hesitate as if aware of a place he had forgotten to search. Sliding as much as running, he hurried back to the log where his master had sat. He scrambled around, hearing the chorus of shouts as the wagons started to roll.

Belnaso looked around him; he could hear them calling his name. Although the wheels were moving slowly, catching on the thick tracts of mud, he had no desire to be left behind. Sure that everything had been stowed, he turned to leave when he noticed his master's abandoned puppet buried face down in the mud. He snatched it up, brushing off the dirt as best he could before tucking it into his pouch. With the puppet safe in his possession, he raced off to catch the wagons, sliding over the ground.

[2]

[Inside at last. At least it's warmer in here. Where did all these people come from? This inn is normally deserted. It must be the storm. Mind your step; the floor is uneven. Jump to it, or some sot will beat us to a space, and we'll be stuck in the back, in the dark. Get a place; he'll be here any moment.]

Host, more wine!

Shut up and wait your turn.

A roadside inn offers little to a traveller to endear it in winter. Seldom a blessing, a night spent itching and scratching from bugs is more likely than a good night's sleep. Expect the wine to be watered and the food meagre, costly, and bland. You'll find a warm enough fire and shelter to recover from the withering wind, but you had better keep your purse close, for swindlers and bandits come down from the hills and lurk in wait for the naive. If you have any choice, ride on my friend, but if not, then heed my advice.

Hugging the road to Agnese, one half-day from the town, *I Quatri Venti*, the Four Winds, was in every sense unremarkable. The ramshackle buildings—a barn, some stables, and a well—huddled around a courtyard at the head of which the large stone building sat. In summer the courtyard was favoured; in winter, guests suffered inside.

The hospitality was basic and cold. One long room, with a staircase at the rear, led to beds for those who could afford them or for those intrepid travellers who did not worry for their health. Downstairs, a band of girls, no more fastidious than the slops they served, bustled to and fro from the kitchen, teasing their patrons while replenishing flagons of wine

from barrels that lined the walls, simultaneously lightening purses as they passed. The stench of damp, stale sweat, and wet bodies added to the odour of overcooked food.

The late afternoon light struggled in tentatively through shutters of windows too high and too small, while candles guttered and flickered as they fought the draughts from the door. Wet boots turned the clay floors into mud. For those wealthy enough to sit close to it, a large hearth cracked feebly, threatening to flicker out, while the rest must huddle on benches, overturned barrels, or crates, vying for whatever comfort they could find in the shadows and the draughts.

The door flew open.

A young man, drenched from the storm, lingered uneasily at the threshold, hesitant to step inside. He squinted into the dimly lit room, struggling to see a space among the murky shadows. Every eye was on him, scrutinising every move. Sitting close to the fireplace was a lost cause; the tables were already taken by a Frenchman of noble bearing and a throng of obsequious servants. Clad in damask and brocade, the man was a figure of wealth and privilege, barking orders in a language foreign to the ear. Most of the other tables were taken. To the rear, three drunken louts were engaged in a game of *sette e mezzo*, becoming more raucous with each hand of cards, while a fourth man, his legs no longer fit to support him, was crawling inebriated at their feet, fingering his companions' purses to free them from their belts, only to face a salvo of punches when their owners discovered the ruse. Undisturbed, drunk, on a bench to the side, a mercenary soldier slept, lion-snoring his fantasies, while his boots, tossed off in a hurry, sighed their own stories of the road.

In the shadowy recesses at the back of the room, an aged man sat fanning his own importance, his thoughts straying far from the hubbub around him. Only at the sound of the door would his attention be sparked, his head turning with each new entrance as if hoping for someone to appear.

Dressed as if he wore all that he possessed, a sleeveless surcoat draped heavily over his shoulders, needing constant readjustment as it shifted over the layers beneath. Under, a jerkin hung loosely, its ill-fitting nature allowing glimpses of the waistcoat beneath. Tailored with once-fine embroidery, it now bore signs of wear; its fabric, tattered and worn, straining to hold fast buttons across a belly bursting at the seams. Around his waist, a sash of mud-brown silk, reminiscent of Ottoman fashion, was as functional as it was decorative, adding to the sense of restraint of the layers fighting to be freed. Underneath all, a once-white cotton chemise. Its billowing sleeves, visible from the elbow to the cuff, were so elongated that they persistently slid over his hands, requiring constant adjustment to put them back in their place. Atop everything, a velvet cap contrasted against the backdrop of greying curls that flowed down over his collar. This, combined

with an unruly beard that he frequently tousled to a point, added to the intrigue and spectacle of the man.

Sensing an opportunity, the old man gestured for the lost young traveller to join him. The traveller hesitated. A traveller's instinct is to be wary; the road is often perilous, and what appears to be a generous offer can easily turn into ruin. But with so few other options and an air of resignation, the traveller pressed his way through the crowded tables to the old man at the rear. Pulling up a crate, he exhaled heavily and sat down.

Fidato

Come, drink, young sir. Pass a while with a wretched old fool. While the wine may be watered and piss-thin and the bread as stiff as your boot, there's plenty of both to go around. Sit, good friend, well met. Set down the travails of your journey; lay down the burden of your load; and, out of the roar of that bitter north wind, rest your bones here awhile. Here, have the candle closer. We'll banish our woes to the shadows and feast on the warmth of our mirth. Drink, young messer; I implore you. Let the wine revive your spirits. Have them bring aquavit, and we will drown our troubles with that.

In a voice just loud enough to be heard above the din of the tavern, the weary traveller beckoned a serving girl to his side. "Roast lamb with rosemary, a bowl of briny olives, and bread." To ease the load on his digestion, he requested a bulb of fennel and wine to fill the flagon. Nodding, the girl hurried away.

Fidato

So, tell me, lad, where are you heading? Rome, is it? Or Agnese? I'm told there is treasure in that town if you've wits enough to untap it. That's surely where I am headed if Dame Fortune shines on my quest. Here, we have not been introduced. (*He extends his hand to shake.*) Bruni, Girolamo Amato di Bruni, most call me *Il Vero Fidato*; you might well have heard me as that? My reputation, I think, betrays me. Far and wide have I travelled across these diverse lands; my mission to bring relief to

the pain and sorrows of man. Across the billowing oceans and over the mountains of mist, I have traversed the wonders of the Orient to exotic and fantastic lands. What I have seen would astound you; the wonders I have beheld are worlds you could scarcely imagine in your wildest dreams. I have trekked the cruellest of deserts and foraged at the edges of this world to find the rarest, most exotic ingredients to bring relief wherever I can, to bring succour to wretches who suffer, comfort to the sick and infirm, and solace to the afflicted at heart. Perhaps you are in need? *(He pauses. No answer.)* Blisters or sores from the road? A purgative, perhaps once you've eaten. No matter, there is always time. When you find a need, call for Fidato. A name and a man you can trust. Your love is unrequited? No problem; I've got potions to arouse the passions of even the most obdurate heart. For all manner of ailments and discomforts, my unguents, my salves, and my potions are known to be the best in the land. Galen himself would spring up in admiration from out of his Sicilian grave to proclaim the excellence of my art. *(He leans over to tap the corner of one of his cases, rapping it with his knuckle.)* A few coins are all I ask for. Enough to replenish my stocks. A scudo or two. Come now, why suffer the pain and the anguish when help is so near at hand? *(He grabs the young man's arm tightly and leans in close to speak quietly as if sharing a confidence.)* All potions come with the blessing of his Most Illustrious Reverend Eminence, the Cardinal of Mantua, who attests to finding relief from his devotions with a poultice for his poor aching knees. Trust me, my lad. Of this, there is no doubt: my potions are the talk of the land.

The young traveller stifled a yawn, his eyes wandering to a vacant table nestled in an alcove. Seizing a moment, he gathered his belongings with haste, eager to break away from the man's monologue. Without a word of farewell, he slipped away, leaving the old man alone.

Fidato gazed out into the distance, his eyes fixed on a far-off point, questioning the manners of youth, until, with a shrug of resignation, he lunged forward to snatch at a hunk of bread, left behind by the young man in his haste to escape. He gnawed at the crust as if it might be the last he would eat, flushing it down with mouthfuls of wine to wash the crumbs from the stumps of his teeth.

But each time the door creaked or opened, his attention would snap again in that direction, as eager as a hawk for its prey.

[3]

The innkeeper, a man of stout build and a sharp tongue, cast his discerning eye over each of his patrons as they entered, gauging their worth in a matter of seconds.

He had seen enough to know that the gentleman at the hearth was a man of refinement, perhaps French, with an air of grace and a welcome abundance of means. The delicate scent, the lace cuffs, the gloved hands—all bespoke of a man accustomed to the finer things in life. His attendant, a fellow of unusual elegance for a servant, oversaw the presentation of dishes and the pouring of wine with the practised air of a seasoned professional. Once content that his master was satisfied, with a few sharp commands to his fellows, the attendant ushered his brigade outside to return shortly with an array of luggage in tow. Trailing at the end of the long column of cases and chests, two legs and two arms were struggling with a rolled-up mattress, the sign of the seasoned traveller, who, valuing his constitution highly, knew enough of roadside hygiene to take his bedding with him to be certain of a bug-free night.

The innkeeper, immersed in his endeavours to placate his guest, with his mind more on the clinking of coins and the prospects within his grasp, was oblivious to the clamour outside—the commotion of mules and horses, the rumble of wheels over stone, and the shouts at the arrival of the players. Only when the door was wrenched open with a violent gust of wind did he look up, startled. There, in the doorway, a waif of a boy, all elbows and knees, ragged and unkempt, his wide eyes scanning the room, his nose running freely as he wiped it over his sleeve, weighing up where he might sit.

Out of the darkness behind him, a dog, a feral, barking mongrel, lunged forward with such ferocity that it propelled the boy into the jamb of the door. Once inside, it snarled, baring its teeth to its audience, spittle dropping like molten wax to pool with the dirt of the floor.

The host, used to dealing with unruly customers, stepped forward unfazed. Pulling a cloth from his shoulder, he wound one end tight around his fist, lifted the other end over his head, and, with one swift blow, brought it down sharply over the snout of the dog. The

animal rocked for a moment, stunned, then yelped and bolted in retreat, but no sooner had the mongrel vanished than a figure materialised behind the boy. A figure with a presence much larger than its physical frame.

Cagnaccio, never one to miss an entrance, stood for a moment on the threshold, his knuckles white from their grip on the boy's shoulders. Then, with a surge, he thrust the lad forward with such force that the boy stumbled forward, hitting his head on a bench. A serving girl rushed to help him, but as she passed nearby, Cagnaccio reached out, seizing her forearm. The more she wrestled to free it, the more he tightened his grip. He yanked her so hard she lost her balance, and he pulled her close to his face, barking his demands, 'Bring food and water for the boy. Now.' The girl scurried away to the kitchen, rubbing the sting on her arm, muttering curses under her breath. Meanwhile, the boy, still scratching the pain from his head, noticed a bench near the wall with a gap between two travellers and, edging his way around the tables, wedged himself into the space, pushing the patrons apart.

Cagnaccio could feel the weight of attention on him as heads turned and eyes followed his every move as realisation dawned of the legendary player in their midst. Long gone were the days when he cared. Age had brought cynicism; for every plaudit, a jibe. They worshipped him as their hero, as if he could do no wrong. It mattered little how vicious or abhorrent he became; still, they took him to their hearts.

From the shadows cast by a row of barrels, an old man caught Cagnaccio's attention, half-risen from his bench, waving frantically and pointing to a space by his side. Cagnaccio might have balked at the invitation, sensing desperation in the act, but with few other options, he had little choice but to accept. With a mixture of reluctance and resolve, he made his way to the table, planted himself on the bench, and, throwing his cloak and his hat at his side, stretched out his road-weary legs.

'Fidato is my name.' The man stretched out his hand in welcome. (*Cagnaccio ignores it.*) 'Here, good sir, drink; I implore you.' (*Fidato offers him the wine.*) 'Pass a while with a wretched old fool. While the wine may be watered and piss-thin and the bread is as stiff as your boot, there's plenty.'

'Whatever you're peddling, you'll get no sale from me. Keep it for some other fool.'

'But, Signor Cagnaccio, you mistake me; I don't seek to sell you a thing.'

'Then you won't be disappointed.'

Cagnaccio did not stir at being recognised; it happened frequently enough in these towns that it ceased to be a surprise. He pointed across the room to the group huddled around the hearth.

'Who's the powder? Tourist? Merchant? Tax collector?'

'You have keen eyes, my good messer; I too have been watching our guest. French, I surmise. A nobleman. I counted four servants at least. An envoy, do you fancy? Not royal, but clearly from a court.'

The upright posture, the occasional touch of the nose with the index finger, and the delicate gestures of the napkin to the lackey sat to the gentleman's side, as if eager to anticipate every need. Cagnaccio watched intently, sensing an opportunity for the taking, and it sat right there by the hearth.

Across the room, in a corner, the young boy, still scratching the lump on his head, was sucking the flesh off a chicken bone, juices running over his chin and staining the front of his chemise.

As the host passed by, Cagnaccio grabbed him by the sleeve, but before he could utter a word, the host was already speaking.

'I want no trouble from you or any of that lot outside. Any sign of trouble, and you're out.'

'We're staying. No rooms. The others will billet in the barn. I'll take a bench in here. The horses and mules need stabling.'

'You're the one paying. And you'll be wanting food for that rabble outside, I suppose? You've coin enough for that? I'll see the glint of it before you order, or you'll get nothing.'

Cagnaccio had a way of staring at people as if they were not there. His eyes, intense in focus from many years under a mask, seldom showed what he was thinking but gave an impression of confidence such that their conviction was hard to doubt. Rather than answer, he pointed towards the noble.

'Who, him? French, I'd warrant,' the innkeeper said, glancing back to the hearth. 'Not that I'd know the difference. It's no dialect, of that I'm certain. Nothing from around here. Nor German, neither. We get enough of them Germans in these parts. Mercenaries down from the north. They drink themselves into stupor, then they refuses to pay. No, the Germans is boring.' He imitated a long, drawn-out phrase without rise or fall of inflection, like someone remembering the words aright, but completely forgetting the tune. 'Not Spanish, either. No, couldn't be Spanish. He's got little appetite for words. Prattle on like songbirds, them Spanish, all lispy, like their mouths are crammed full of seed. No, I'll wager he's a Frenchman. Bet your coin on it, I would. But then I might as easily be wrong. Could be Turkish, Egyptian, or Portuguese for all I know. As long as he pays, I don't care. I takes them as I find them, but I can tell you this for nothing; his servants are getting on my nerves.'

'Gentlemen, I think I can help,' Fidato interrupted, spluttering as he lurched forward.

He explained that as a young man, while a scholar at the University of Milan, aside from studying the physic and anatomy required of his profession, he had taken to learning languages, among them Spanish and French, in the hope of a retainer at court. Regrettably, on the horns of an unfortunate incident—the details too wearisome to share, save to affirm that all accusations were unfounded and an outrageous dishonour to his name—his studies were abruptly curtailed. Despite this travesty of justice, he had grasped enough of the language to perhaps intercede now on their behalf, to the pecuniary advantage of all. Matters were quickly and easily agreed upon. With the host to effect the introduction, Fidato, with the vigour of a man half his age, pressed his way to the hearth.

‘Monseigneur, permettez-moi de me présenter...’

At first, Fidato’s attempts at conversation met with a cold and perfunctory response. But Fidato was not easily deterred. Before long, whether from amusement at the buffoon’s antics as he scrambled to make himself understood in the smattering of French he spoke or from fascination as to where it might lead, the Frenchman fell under his spell. The old man reeled in his quarry with a focus that never wavered, his hands animated as he steered the conversation deftly towards the discomforts of the road, the blisters, the chafing, and the sores. *Did his Lordship know a solution was available? An emollient, surely, would help.* The most efficacious balm for such suffering, of which, by fortune and the good grace of our Lady, Fidato had a few phials on hand.

Business hastily concluded, Fidato stiffened, re-pointed the whiskers of his beard, and smoothed down the lapels of his coat, gesturing for Cagnaccio to approach.

The gentleman, it appeared, was an envoy, a confidante of the duc du Nevers, bearing messages of some urgency to the members of the ducal family currently residing in Rome.

Cagnaccio listened intently. Though he spoke a little French, he struggled to piece together the meaning from the few words and phrases he had picked up from his travels. It appeared that the nobleman’s journey had been fraught. A road over the mountains had been so treacherous, buffeted by the worst of blizzards, that they had feared that their carriage might be blown over and plunge into an abyss. Twice they had halted to secure luggage to save it from being lost.

As the story unfolded, a woman appeared, whispering urgently into the innkeeper’s ear. He was needed outside, where the unruly mob, clamouring for food in exhaustion, was threatening to erupt into a riot.

‘It’s your rabble—I should have guessed—causing trouble. Unless you’re prepared to pay for them,’ the innkeeper said, rapping Cagnaccio on the shoulder, ‘that company of yours can sleep under the bushes, eating leaves and dirt for all I care; I told you, I won’t have trouble in my inn.’

'Your company?' The Frenchman interrupted, 'But who is this company you speak of?' For the first time, the Frenchman looked directly at Cagnaccio, scanning him up and down. 'A company of actors, per-haps? Tell me—*la commedia Italiana, peut-être? Quelle chance!* No, we must speak only in Italiano. *Che fortuna!*'

'But this is the famous Cagnaccio, signor,' Fidato said, 'and a better Arlecchino or Pantalone never existed. His name and reputation are revered throughout the length and breadth of these lands.'

'I can speak for myself,' Cagnaccio said, pushing Fidato to one side.

New life flushed through the envoy; his flagging spirit revived. Gone in an instant were all thoughts of chapped and chaffed regions, headaches from sleepless nights, and being jostled and jolted on the road. Restored to life, he told how a troupe of comedians, no more than two summers past, had played at court and how they had so enchanted his master that the Duke still spoke of their presence with laughter and delight.

'But you must perform,' the envoy said. 'I entreat you. How can I sleep knowing such fine amusement is at hand and resting under the same roof? Go, please. Talk to your excellent people. Beg them to put on a diversion for us to lighten our fatigue. *Et puis*, if they are minded to share *un petit plaisir*, I will repay them with the compliment they deserve—tonight they will dine at my expense.'

The prospect of eating heartily for the first time in a week was encouragement enough. A short performance—no more than a couple of lazzi, some simple rehearsed antics bolted together as one—would be sufficient to impress.

'*Allors, allez, tout suite. Va adesso!* Go' The envoy shook out his hands as if banishing a bad smell from his nose. 'But wait, will there be sufficient light outside? Or will we make room in the inn?'

The innkeeper, sniffing a healthy night's takings and knowing how much actors could drink, stepped forward with the solution. Lanterns and torches aplenty could stay the onset of night, and blankets would be brought for shoulders to save the audience from the chill. He whispered to two serving girls, sending them hurrying upstairs. Moments later, a woman of some age and fullness came heavily bustling downstairs, dispersing those before her, to arrive on the innkeeper's arm, rocking back and forth uneasily at his side.

'Your eminence,' the innkeeper said, 'May I introduce my good wife, la Signora Bellrospo?'

'Your pleasure is mine,' the signora said, teasing the straggles of her hair into a place she thought they might stay while steadying herself from swaying by holding the corner of a table. She dipped as best she could, blaming her uneasy curtsy on the heady vapours of the wine—not from partaking, no, never partaking, but passing it off as one of

those inevitable drawbacks of maintaining a quality inn. Clinging hard to her husband's forearm, she tottered back to her feet. With a nod, she dispatched the serving girls, who returned shortly with blankets, shawls, lanterns, and several unlit torches tucked safely under their arms. As they neared, the signora tugged at the hem of her husband's apron, pulling his ear close to her mouth. She whispered. No sooner had she finished than, leaning back on his heels, the innkeeper thrust forward his belly and said, in a self-congratulatory tone:

Innkeeper

Forgive me, Magnifico, Monseigneur. My wife is, as usual, right. It displeases me to say so, but I have been remiss. (He bows obsequiously.) Such great an honour it is to have you here under our humble roof, bringing such blessings to this hearth, that in a spirit of bounden hospitality, my wife, who is never known for her graciousness (she goes to curtsy again but totters more than stoops), and I, humble innkeeper that I am, propose this night to dine beside you as a token of our gratitude and respect.

It was an old ploy, well-acted, but flattery often finds its reward. The Frenchman would pay generously for his vittels and for those of the host and his wife, who would dine not as they were accustomed but off the fat of the land, drooling with every mouthful at how much they had inflated the price.

[4]

[Come, quickly stand under these eaves, out of the bite of that wind. It's perishing out here; I wouldn't be surprised if it snowed. At least the rain has stopped. How quickly it's dark—it might as well be midnight. I don't know about a performance; a bonfire would be my choice. Here, come this way. From here, you can see the whole courtyard and who enters and exits the inn. What on earth's that noise?]

Outside: signs of unrest. From the barn, the sound of raised voices.

'It makes no sense,' Brighella insisted. 'You would have us sleep out in this cold wind, where there is shelter enough for four, maybe six if two sleep on the floor?'

'I do not care who you think you are, messer; no one is sleeping in my master's carriage.'

'Why not? He won't be using it.'

'Not him, and neither will you.' The Frenchman shifted his weight to put his shoulders squarely over his feet.

'Oh, come now. We will treat it as if it were our own. We're gentle folk, and we suffer enough for our art. Surely, the gentleman wouldn't wish us to suffer more?'

'My lord will not have to choose. It's me that is telling you no.'

'Then perhaps we should ask your master. Belnaso, run inside, find the best-dressed man you can, and ask him if we will take pity on us hard-working fools.'

'I told you; no one is going to touch this carriage.'

The footman snatched up a pitchfork while his companion, a step or two behind, brandished a coachman's long crop. Seeing a scythe hanging from a nail, Brighella lifted it down.

'If that's the way you want it,' he said, running his finger across the blade.

Behind him and eager to jump to the aid of his friend, the Apprentice set to rooting in the hay, feverishly hunting for a weapon of his own in case a battle ensued. Resolute and fearless, the coachman altered his stance and, passing the pitchfork between his hands, brought it close to Brighella's face. The movement was swift and final. Brighella, with the reflexes of an acrobat, swung the scythe so fast that it caught the horns of the pitchfork, sending it hurtling across the barn.

'My friend, I think we are the victors.' He patted the Apprentice on the back, 'Your carriage, sir, awaits.' No sooner had he said it than he found himself falling back under the weight of the charging coachman, and in the brawl, the scythe fell from his grasp, sending it clattering to the floor.

The excitement had not gone unnoticed. Other members of the company, on hearing the commotion and sensing a colleague in distress, started to form up behind them, as if mounting their lines of defence, shouting encouragement, and cursing loudly. Slowly, with the army against them growing, the coachmen were driven back until they were standing awkwardly against the closed carriage door.

'Enough. *Che cazzo...*'

At first, no one registered his arrival, but as soon as Cagnaccio shouted, a hush descended in the barn. In the awkward silence, tempers slowly cooled, reason returned, and the argument was quickly diffused. Tired and hungry from the day's labours, tempers were itching for war, but with the prospect of a hearty meal from the envoy, all spirits quickly revived. Enemies soon became friends, laughing, slapping shoulders, and boisterously shaking hands.

As peace descended, attention turned to the practicalities of putting on a show.

Cagnaccio

Sentite! Listen, all of you. This is what we will do.

Lorenzo. No stage—we don't need one—it is far too much bother to unload. Torches and lanterns will mark out an area on the floor. Knock up a frame for a backdrop—just two uprights and a crossbeam—and prop it up with hay bales or with anything you can find. Don't worry about the scene drops; take two plain canvases off the wagons and hang them side by side, so they form a split for entrances and exits.

Belnaso. Where is Belnaso? (Belnaso is lost in his own world, staring at the moon.) Belnaso, what are you doing? (Surprised, he turns back to listen.) We need a table and a bench—see if the innkeeper can help and ask his wife for a cooking bowl and whatever food they can spare—vegetables, soup, chicken—nothing will be eaten, so rotten and leftovers are fine. (Belnaso shuffles off.)

Music: Rosetta, grab my guitar from the wagon. Capitano—you take up the drum, and Simonetta—you take up the flute. Those not involved in the lazzo sing or clap stage right. For God's sake, make sure you musicians can be seen. I know that will be hard for you, Simonetta, but it's important that you are at the front (the others laugh), Donata, you do masks and props. Emilia: costumes.

I am thinking The Dottore's Repast—so, onstage, Pedrolino, Brighella, Arlecchino, and the Dottore only. Allora, move your asses. The sooner we perform, the more quickly we eat, so andiamo, presto, vai!

The lazzo was an amalgam of stock business, some pieces well-established with some tricks they had practised before but never used in this scenario.

'If you're a success, then they will cheer you; if you fail, they'll think it's part of the plot. Either way, they'll laugh, and either way, we'll get fed. Believe me, you'll be fine, and it'll be a triumph. Now quickly, go ready your parts.'

The actors hurried to the back of the barn to walk through the scene they would perform. Years together had taught them an unspoken language. A trust existed between them tighter than any knot, each so sure of the others' abilities that whatever their quarrels or humours off-stage, all would be left in the wings, and each could be relied upon to work together as one. Their characters were so embedded, their craft so honed over time, that their instincts and reactions were immediate, and provided they took account of each other, laughter would inevitably come.

From across the yard, a parade was approaching: a tabletop, two trestles, and a bench. Lorenzo gave instructions to assemble them downstage right. Belnaso, with the help of Puccio, had managed to gather a ladle, a bowl, a few discarded vegetables, and a loaf so hard it might bounce. Donata found a plate and a jug, and from her private stash of rations, she added a fennel root, a cabbage, and a swede. In no time, a small pile of props appeared off-stage right, which Cagnaccio set about sorting into the order he wanted them to be used.

'W-What do you want m-me to do?' Puccio asked timidly.

'Get your new uniform on. I have just the role for you.' The boy rushed away to change, then returned to find out his command. As soon as the performance was ready and the actors were costumed and masked, Cagnaccio ordered the lanterns to be lit, and with the band tuning up in the background, he called out for a drum. He hung its sling around the boy's neck.

'Now, our little Colonnello, it's time to bring you into service. Your mission, sir, is to march with confidence into the inn, beating the drum as you go. Hit it hard, get them to follow you, and then drum them back outside.'

Puccio stiffened, raised his nose in the air, and marched forward. Tum-tum-tadada-tum-tum, tum-tum-tadada-tum. The beat rang out, echoing around the courtyard, and the lead was taken up by the band. The flute started a fast tarantella picked up by the strumming of the guitar, while a lute provided the harmonies and a viola da gamba sounded the bass. The others, recognising the tune as a favourite, fashioned it into a song, each in turn adding a verse they invented, with the chorus taken up by them all. At the lure of the enchanting music, the guests emerged from the inn. The nobleman was among the first to arrive. To ward off the chill, he drew a blanket around his shoulders, catching it on Fidato, who, never an arm's length away, stood as close to the Envoy as his shadow, to be within whispering distance of his ear. Stepping forward to approach the young drummer, the envoy called for his purse. From the leather pouch, he fished out two silver scudi and placed them on the skin of the drum. Puccio, unable to believe his good

fortune, picked up the coins and bit them. He examined them both front and back, tossing them in the air to better gauge their weight. Certain, finally, that they were silver, he smirked, then, bowing to his patron, ferreted the coins under his belt.

The audience soon assembled. Some, whose hands were glued to their wine and reluctant to be prised apart, were puzzled to find themselves drinking outside on such a rude and bitter night, but sensing the exodus around them and not wishing to be left out, they too followed the procession. Others, excited and aware of the cold, started stomping on the cobbles and calling for the show to begin.

Cagnaccio nodded to begin.

Brighella stepped to the edge of the stage, tilted his head forward, and waited for all eyes to be on him. The lanterns flickered in the draughts of the wind, highlighting the contours of his half-mask, the deep furrows of his brow, the bulbous cheeks, and the plum nose that marked the servant as a rogue. Against his billowing costume, his white smock and pantaloons, the light picked out the green trim, the colour of jealousy and deceit. When he was certain he had their attention, treading lightly but with purpose, he crept to the centre of the stage. His bow was begrudging and dismissive. Reading the appetite of his audience, he beckoned them to come close.

Brighella

Forgive, forgive; I entreat you, and you, and you, and all. Forgive me for asking forgiveness for the need to forgive me at all, for the plea to forgive for forgiveness sake is a godlike gem in itself and not for a scoundrel like me, and so I hope that you will forgive my need for forgiveness and find it in your hearts to forgive and forgive me for droning on and beseeching your valuable time, but forgiveness is often not of the moment, and in this moment, I beseech you, forgive.

The speech heavy with his mock-Bergamo accent, prattled out so fast that while some tried to follow it, most just gave up and laughed. Even those familiar with the region strained to make out its sense. The fluent grommelot, the language all comedians used, was a mixture of dialect and gibberish; its meaning revealed through inflection, by the rise and fall of its telling, or by a gesture or tilt of the head. Hands held firm on his waist, Brighella continued, thrusting forward his hips.

Brighella

I confess that I may falter presently in presenting to you the scene we wish now to show, a show you will not have seen us show before, but presently we hope

to present, because our passage has been so long, so hard, so thrusting that we have ridden o'er every hole, and every prick and thrust has been hard, and now I feel like an ass, showing you the cracks of my life, and oh so my crack is battered and sore, and bidding me say no more save to plead humbly for your forgiveness, lest all get lost inside. (He turns, bends, and thrusts his backside out, slaps it hard, then spins around to lift his finger in the air.)

Your indulgence, good people, I crave. The master, my master, a master in his own belief of everything in his grasp or every matter out of it, a learned man of lessons who never lessens around the waist nor learns to stay his indulgence whatever the time of day, is calling, wailing, nay howling, demanding to be fed. If only words could be eaten, already he would be full, for of words he has aplenty, shared freely with all to hear, but his lessons, they fall on deaf ears, and his cook, not willing to be schooled, offered up one word only and stormed off up to her bed, leaving just me and my brother Arlecchino... (At the mention of Arlecchino, the crowd cheer. Brighella waits for the noise to die down, then continues.) ...leaving us to prepare the meal. We know not one thing about cooking, but if the innkeeper's wife can manage it, it obviously can't be that hard.

The crowd laughed, the envoy smiled, but the innkeeper's wife in the doorway bellowed loudest of all. When the laughter died down, Brighella continued,

Brighella

More hands will make the work easier. Pedrolino, come over here. (PEDROLINO is nowhere to be seen.) We need you. Pe-dro-lino. Pe-dro-lino. (BRIGHELLA leaps across the stage as if searching every exit, under women's skirts, and under any object he finds. Then directly again to the audience.) His head is so full of Colombina...

(BRIGHELLA rushes to stand at her side, lays his head on her breast, and looks mooningly up at her face. COLOMBINA bats him away with her flute.)
...Ah, his head is so full of Colombina he has no room for anything else. (Shouting) Pe-dro-lino.
(PEDROLINO enters via the curtain upstage centre. BRIGHELLA picks up an onion and tosses it in his direction.)
Eh, you should keep your mind more on our onions than serving the bulbs in your pants.

The scene that they enacted was a breath-taking act of juggling. Brighella, at one end of the table, would launch the ingredients for his master's meal to Pedrolino at the other. Rather than watching the vegetables hurtle towards his face, Pedrolino's eyes were more intent on Colombina, playing her flute at the side of the stage. Not knowing what to do with the onslaught of food and his mind on other things, he was growing increasingly irritable, and as soon as he caught a missile, he quickly tossed it back, only to find more heading in his direction. All this time, seated between them, Arlecchino, the worst person they could choose for the task, was ducking and weaving to avoid objects as he scrambled to prepare the master's broth. A small marrow, a cabbage, some fennel—he bit chunks off whatever he needed from the vegetables whizzing past his ear, then tossed the remainder back into the ever-quickenning stream. With the chain on the verge of collapsing under the frantic efforts to keep the food in the air, Arlecchino leapt to his feet to declare that the meal was finally prepared, but locked in the toing and froing, not wishing to be the one to drop first, neither Brighella nor Pedrolino could stop. When calamity looked inevitable, from behind the curtain at the rear, with a loud huffing and chuffing, the Dottore made his entrance, thrusting his belly before him as he swaggered forward to partake of his meal. Seemingly oblivious to the objects flying about him while skilfully dodging their paths, he sat down and peered into the bowl.

Dottore

This is no food for a gentleman, not even food for a rat.
(IL DOTTORE takes one look at the contents of the bowl before him and screams. He picks it up and throws it to BRIGHELLA, who, thinking it is part of the chain, throws it on to PEDROLINO, who, shocked at the size of the object, launches it into mid-air. IL DOTTORE rises to his feet just in time for the bowl's

contents, raw vegetables and a mush of wet bread, to fall with a splat on his chair. Unable to keep his balance with the items still skimming his face, he falls backwards to a roar of laughter from the audience. ARLECCHINO escapes, pursued by IL DOTTORE, the stains of food on his backside, as he shouts and rants around the stage.)

Es mundus excrementi! Alea iacta est. Arlecchino, when I get my hands around your neck... Es stultior asino. Futue te ipsum!

(IL DOTTORE gestures wildly, chasing ARLECCHINO on and off stage. PEDROLINO, oblivious, gazes at his COLOMBINA. BRIGHELLA steps forward towards the lights.)

Brighella

Now, my dear and welcome friends, for friends you will now surely be, as the cap, it passes amongst you, we bid you in friendship unburden and lift a little from your purse, and in the name of friendship, let us unburden you of the strain.

(BRIGHELLA shakes the purse on his belt.)

But notice as you do so the moral of our play: that old fools are the real fools, for this old fool got his meal in his end (exaggerates pointing at his arse), which was only what he asked for and is exactly what he deserved! And so, be generous, good fellows, as we bid you fools a good night.

Cagnaccio cued the music. The tune, a lively and catchy refrain, taken first by the guitar and the flute with a stirring beat on the drums, was joined by the hearty singing of the actors, who ran back to the stage for their bows, while beyond the makeshift footlights, the onlookers clapped as they sang along, none with more ardour than the Frenchman as he shouted over the noise.

‘Magnifique! Comme c’est splendide. Bravi, my friends, bravissimi. And now all must dine on me this night—though perhaps the hostess should cook?’

As the laughter rang out in the courtyard, the envoy returned to the inn, Fidato one half-step behind him, jostling for his position with the servants who pushed him away,

while the comedians began returning the courtyard to its usual purpose, their stomachs ready for their reward.

[5]

The prospect of food coupled with the success of the new lazzo dispelled all grumbles of the day and brought a new attitude to the troupe. Spirits lightened. Laughter and merriment drove away the gripes of the day as each of the players set about their own task of taking down the stage and packing away the equipment. As intricate as the lazzo, they worked as a choreographed whole, each person clear on their duties, each allotted a task, all part of a larger system that worked with speed and efficiency because it had been perfected on the wheels of time.

Cagnaccio, once sure that the ritual was proceeding, made his way to the back of the barn, where the players were undressing.

‘Pathetic, all of you. Do this in town, and we’ll be sleeping in the gutter, eating scraps tossed for the dogs.’

‘We earned a meal, didn’t we?’ Brighella said, without thinking.

Cagnaccio

Earned? Earned but not deserved. Arlecchino, what were you doing? Your reactions were leaden. If they get any slower, I swear I could replace you with a mule and see little difference. How many times do we need to go over this? It looks like you’ve never been taught. God help us. Oh, my poor, dear master. To think what he would say (*cradles his head in his hands*). When I think of all I’ve given you—the time—the teaching—the patience—never in my life have I... You arrogant, ungrateful wretch, look at me when I’m...

(CAGNACCIO breaks off, standing over the APPRENTICE, his fist forming at his side. He looks towards DONATA, who shakes her head disapprovingly. CAGNACCIO hesitates. Gathers himself, inhales deeply, then continues.)

Dottore, fine as usual, loved the roars; they were very authentic – and the Latin, inspired; keep it in. Pedrolino, good work, but make it clearer that you are besotted by Colombina, especially during the juggling part. Don't let your eye contact stray. Keep your attention focused, as it heightens the jeopardy of the throws. Brighella—fine, almost fine. But still, it needs more jeopardy. I want to feel the risk...

(CAGNACCIO gestures his irritation, and sighs, walking away.)

As soon as he was out of earshot, Brighella drew aside his friend. 'Why do you let him get away with this? Why don't you put up a fight?'

'Because he is right, Brighella, I could have done better if I'd tried.'

'If you tried, nonsense. The old sod's jealous, that's all. All he does is pick on you. For him, it's a kind of sport. *(He mimics Cagnaccio)*—*Lash the wastrel 'til it hurts*—well, more fool you, my friend, for letting him. He wouldn't do it to me.'

'He never does it to you.'

'No, because he knows what would happen if he did.'

'You're wrong. He is driven by perfection. How can that be wrong? I came here to learn from the best, and although he did not need to, he took me under his wing. What he teaches, no one else could. He wants me to be perfect, and I'm failing him. I still have so much to learn. Learning from him is priceless. He's a great man, Brighella. I am no more than his Apprentice. I'm honoured that he gives me his time. When we rehearse he could not be more tolerant, no, Brighella, I tell you, you've got it wrong.'

'That might have been true once, but not now. Now you have your talent. You've learned your lessons well, and it frightens him. Just listen to the audience if you doubt me. Who do they laugh at the most? Your Arlecchino or his Pantalone? You don't see it; you're blinded by the myth, but if you could only see how he looks at you, how he sneers, he cannot help it; he cannot hold it back. Under that faithful mask he wears, there is envy written in lines all over his face. He no longer sees a poor boy struggling to make sense of the moves; he sees his own successor, the death knell of his career. You owe him nothing; you've already repaid him in full.'

'I'm sorry, Brighella, but I owe him. All I can do; I do because of him. I still have so much to learn.'

'Then he has you where he wants you. But mark my words, my young friend, one day all this should be yours. If you've got the balls for the fight.'

[6]

Donata

Dottore, Puccio, and Emilia, can you bundle the costumes in canvas and pack them back in a trunk? Belnaso, help the Capitano—the table and bench go back to the inn with the lanterns and the rest of the props.

It might have been for moments such as these that the indomitable Doña Donata was born. Standing in the centre of the courtyard, she was firmly in control, barking out her instructions as she brandished a lit torch aloft. Her arm swept the air around her, the flame quivering in the cold night air, picking out the shadows that defined the contours of her face.

At one time she must have looked kindly, but the strain of the road had marked her, and with age she had grown more austere. No one who knew her doubted her. Fleet-footed and quick in thought, she would untangle the knottiest of problems, and in the reassurance of her strength, she had become a keystone of the troupe. Nothing slipped her attention; her grip was so sure that no task passed unnoticed and nothing short of her exacting standards would ever be allowed. Fierce in confrontation, canny in spotting the truth, she held the values of the company in her hands with a resolve so steadfast and certain that no one dared not conform. As a result, her practicality made her indispensable, her common sense made her wise, and her dominion over their rations, their purse, and their rewards oftentimes saved them from privation and kept their feet on the road.

Setting the tasks underway, she collected up the jettisoned vegetables—those still fit for use—and placed them in a sack to stow away in a wagon, away from prying eyes. When inevitably hardship would hit them, the company would be grateful for what she had done.

In no time, all was completed. The courtyard was once again as they found it—a stark, unremarkable space.

‘Find yourselves bedding; make comfort in the barn,’ Donata added. ‘Cagnaccio and I are eating in the inn; you will all eat in the barn together, here with the coachmen, so don’t go starting a fight.’

The decision was met with ambivalence, save for the Dottore, who made no bones about his preference to dine only with his own kind, and whilst willing to accept their hospitality, he would refuse to drink with any Frenchman on account of a longstanding feud, the details of which had become sketchy but, over the passage of time, had

hardened to an indefensible principle from which a prejudice had grown; 'excepting those present, of course,' he said as he smiled and nodded towards the coachmen sitting on the hay close by.

[7]

[About time, let's follow them back indoors. Besides, I'm freezing my jacks off out here. Food. We must eat. Gracious Lord, fill our empty guts.]

Inside the inn, the performance had breathed new life into the patrons. Wine was flowing freely once more, and voices filled the air with a new vigour. As Cagnaccio and Donata entered, the room erupted into a hero's welcome with thunderous clapping and stamping of boots. Donata, never one for the spotlight, ignored Fidato's appeals to join him and strode towards a table near the rear, to be greeted by two old women, cowering in black, wrapped tightly in their knitted shawls, waiting like scavenging crows to pick over the bones of gossip.

Cagnaccio was soon surrounded by a throng of adoring fans, each clamouring for his attention. Boisterous to the point of nuisance, the crowd around him was relentless in their efforts to keep him close, pressing him and jostling to get nearer as they joked and chanted his name. Out of the corner of his eye, beyond the arms and heads, he saw a transaction taking place at the hearth. The envoy signed a paper, then wafted it in the air and passed it to Fidato, who read it furtively, before folding it into quarters and secreting it under his sash.

Something was afoot. Cagnaccio could sense it. Suspicion is a nagging companion, and try as he might to ignore it, the old man's actions gave him pause. Perhaps he was mistaken; the paper might contain nothing more than a referral for a new client, but still, Cagnaccio could not shake off the feeling that deception was in the air. Forcing his way through the patrons, he was on the verge of asking what he had missed when the Frenchman jumped to his feet.

'And now, I am afraid, messieurs—such levity, such gaiety, at the end of a wearisome day leaves me, alas, quite drained. Forgive me. Now I will retire—I go to my rest in good cheer, for my head, it is still ringing with laughter. Sleep, I fancy, is almost within my grasp.'

At the foot of the stairs, he turned to address the room.

'Eat. Drink. I entreat you. Digest the mirth that you crave, for tonight you are my guests. Take whatever you need.'

The meal arrived quickly. A platter of polenta with mushrooms and garlic picked fresh with a goodly portion of chestnuts warmed from roasting on the fire. A leg of mutton with rosemary, bread, sheep's cheese, and chard, and a root of fennel for the gut. A large caraffa of watered-down wine to wash the whole meal down. Fidato, picking at the crumbs of a half-eaten shard of pecorino, slid across the bench to where the Envoy had sat, not to be nearer to his companion but to keep Donata in his view.

'Who is that fine woman?' Fidato asked, 'The one who followed you in? She reminds me of...'

'What did the Frenchman give you? I saw you squirrel it away. I warn you; I do not trust you, old man—what was it you didn't want me to see?'

'She is an actress, perhaps? She has the poise. Those Spanish women—how they taunt and tease your ardour, only to spit you out again. That hair, those eyes—eyes to bewitch an archbishop. She reminds me of my dear, late wife, Susanna. The road, my dear Cagnaccio, is no consolation for an empty bed.'

Once the threads of a story are loosened, they surely must be re-spun. His wife was taken by an ague—a fever that swooped like an owl in the night—and in the morning, she was gone. He could give her nothing to save her; neither phials nor potions or poultices could free the fever's grip. All that remained was to resort to prayer as she writhed and fought in agony, then, exhausted, she slipped away. The loss felled him completely, snuffing out his reason to be. For seven long years, he had borne the burden of his grief, with no family to anchor him and no friends to ease his despair. He drifted back to the road, sans friends, sans companions, and sans purpose, and while time may have taught him forbearance, it had never healed his pain.

'I tell you,' he said, pointing his glass in the direction of Donata, 'that fine woman intrigues me. Believe me, Cagnaccio, change is in the wind. Better times are ahead, and that dear woman...' He broke off, lost in the throes of his dreams.

'Whatever it is you're plotting,' Cagnaccio whispered, grabbing the old man's lapel and pulling him forcibly towards him. 'You wily old goat, you'll keep your grasping hands off Donata, unless you aim to get hurt.'

[8]

[Are you awake? Where did everybody go? It looks like it might be sunny outside. Wait, there's movement.]

Only the hardiest of sleepers could ignore the cockerel's crow piercing the silence. Slow to move, Cagnaccio, sprawled on a bench, squinted from the glare of the sunlight streaming through the ill-fitting shutters. Concerned, he reached into his pocket—there, the mask of

Arlecchino—his old mask, the familiar worn-out leather, the moulded features, supple and rubbed from years of use—and, reassured by its discovery, he relaxed.

At the back of the inn, a hunched figure flitted between tables, muttering and sighing as it scavenged for scraps of food. Cagnaccio recognised Fidato's stooped form, his tattered surcoat draped heavily over his shoulders. The old rogue tugged constantly at the cuffs of his too-long chemise, which fell in tatters over his hands. Cagnaccio watched as Fidato, like a crab caught in the tide, snatched up the leftovers, wrapping them in a kerchief and wedging them into his boxes, into any space he could find.

Cagnaccio saw his opportunity for sport—to give the old man a fright. Careful not to make a sound, he swung his legs to the ground and stretched his arms high in the air. Then, at the perfect moment, he brought his fists down hard on the edge of the bench, causing a sharp and sudden bang.

'Ah, I see at last you are awake,' Fidato called, quickly throwing down a handful of food. 'Good fellow. Fine morning. I'm preparing my boxes to leave. I was meaning to talk to you earlier. I spoke with the delightful Doña Donata, such a rare woman.'

'And the Envoy?' Cagnaccio asked, 'Still sleeping?'

'Gone. Gone well before first light. Anxious to get back on the road, he said. Pressing business in Rome. I'm surprised they didn't wake you. It's not that they were quiet. Coisineau. His name was Coisineau.'

Cagnaccio threw open the shutters and gazed out into the yard. The morning air was crisp and fresh, bringing the promise of a better day and, with it, a glimmer of hope. The heavy rains had finally blown through, and the sun was shining with a new-found warmth for the first time since they left Rome. The roads would still be sodden, but without further rain, they would soon be dry enough to make good progress. With a fair wind and few distractions, they might reach Agnese before midday.

[9]

[Fresh air at last. With the stench in that room, I couldn't wait to get outside. And you, dead-to-the-world, snoring fit for a boar—I thought you'd never wake. It looks like this lot has been up for hours. Come, shake yourself, and let's see what's afoot. Where first? The barn? Good choice.]

'I swear she does it on purpose,' Emilia said.

Her husband, the Capitano, pretended, as he often did, to be listening. Emilia adjusted her bulk on a bale of hay and, freeing her hand from the hose she was darning, thrust her needle in the direction of Donata.

'Why she must do this now is beyond me. She'll go filling the boy's head with nonsense; she will, now you mark my words.'

Emilia, outwardly amiable to all, in private nursed a resentment. No one ever doubted her skill, for she sewed with great neatness and skill, yet the praise and acknowledgement she yearned for always eluded her. So, while the actors received their plaudits, her tireless efforts to clothe them were largely dismissed or ignored. No one was more guilty of this disregard than Donata. And now, the subject of her discontent was fashioning a captain's uniform for Puccio—a faithful replica of his father's—so that, as the little Colonnello, he might lead the players' entrance, drumming them onto the stage. The garment was now finished, and Donata was fitting it onto the boy.

Emilia

Really, look at it. A blind fool could have better sewn those hems. Why she didn't ask me to do it, I'll never know; it should have been me by rights. Oh no, Emilia. You've got far too much to do, Emilia. By my aching foot and my thumb. Look. (She prods her husband.) Look at the horse's arse she's making of it; I'll have to unpick it, you'll see.

In a long series of bitter disappointments, the path of Emilia's life was far from the one she had dreamt of in her youth. Not the wandering course of true love nor the romance of life under the stars, her life had been one long scramble between towns, never staying long enough in each, at the mercy of the wind and the rain. Though she loved her family dearly and fought hard to keep them close, she had envisaged a home of her own, not corns, bunions, and fleas. A place of comfort and security where her children might grow and thrive, each raising a family of their own, she at the hub, keeping everyone safe. Was that too much to ask? And then her husband, the Capitano. How captivated she had been at seeing this man on stage—a man of passion, bravado, and eloquence. This man had captured her heart so completely that she did not venture to find out what lay behind the mask. Perhaps she did not wish to. But the man she married was artless and weak, a man whose fire flickered low.

Puccio ran towards his mother, excited at the prospect of his new role. 'Donata says I can go to the front of the procession with Papà. I will have the drum.'

His father reached forward, took the two loose cords of the boy's ruff, and tied them at the back of his neck. 'It will rub at first,' he said, 'but keep your fingers away or it will forever be working loose.' Emilia ran her fingers across the hems and tugged at the seams of the armholes as Donata approached.

'You should have asked me for help, Donata; you didn't need to do it all yourself.'

'Nonsense, I enjoyed it. But I wasn't sure about the hems? Do you think they are neat enough—will they hold?'

'How strange—I was just pointing them out to his father.'

Loud shouts from across the yard interrupted their conversation. Donata, suspecting that another argument was brewing, went to intercede.

'And you, young man,' Emilia said, sure that Donata was out of earshot, 'you can take that nonsense off at once. Get it dirty, and we will never hear the end.' Although she cared little if the uniform was soiled, she was eager to inspect its construction. 'Hand this monstrosity to me. Your own clothes are over there.'

'No. I'm in charge, and I'll keep it on.' Emboldened, he stood, legs askance, hands held firm on the tails of the doublet. 'I defend my right to wear it, and no one can tell me otherwise.' Emilia looked at her husband; some battles were worth fighting, some were better left to peter out on their own.

[10]

'Your mother was calling you,' Pedrillo said, forking the fresh hay into the stalls of the stable.

'Let her,' Rosetta replied. 'She only wants to drag me into an argument about Puccio. Or Donata. Or both.'

Even in the half-light at the doorway, as the sun brought out the copper of her auburn hair, Rosetta looked perfect for her onstage innamorata role. Her slight figure and the rich chestnut allure of her eyes gave her attractiveness a sense of intrigue, as though behind her natural, youthful elegance lay concealed a naughty, rebellious young girl. Leaning against a wooden post, she watched, fascinated, as the offstage man of her dreams, Pedrillo, struggled to pacify four ill-tempered mules that not even fresh hay would placate. How his muscles tensed and eased, how his leg muscles flexed in his breeches, how the frown lines criss-crossed his brow—each movement, each gesture, each utterance she memorised, ready to replay them over when the rest of the world was asleep and she lay awake in her bed, when her accomplice, the troubadour moon, would sing stardust into her fantasies and Pedrillo would finally succumb to her charms.

With a growing sense of regret, it occurred to her that his gaze would often drift out to the courtyard, where Simonetta was washing her feet.

'I think that one has taken to you,' she said.

'Simonetta? You really think so?' His excitement was obvious.

'I meant the mule, stupid.'

‘Besides, I don’t know what you see in her,’ she said, hoping he would confide in her. ‘She’ll never be interested in you. Simonetta will never love you. Hanging in the air, her unspoken words drifted on: *Not like I would love you if you would only give me the chance.*

A distance away, on a crate pulled down from the wagon, Simonetta sat with a bucket at her side, carefully mopping the dried mud from the hems of her skirts. As if she needed attention, the Dottore, a man whose advice was seldom sought but always offered whether welcomed or not, was leaning over her, his foot perched behind her on the crate to take the weight of his arm, as he followed her every movement, picking slowly away at her patience.

‘You could do worse than Pedrillo,’ he said. ‘He’s a kind, well-meaning lad. Not a bonfire of passion, I grant you; not the fearless adventurer type, nor the warrior ready for battle, but an honest and trustworthy cove.’

‘Pedrillo? Are you mad, old man? He may have the body of a fit young man, but he is barely more than a child. If and when I choose to settle, it will not be with some wide-eyed boy.’

‘You don’t fool me, Simonetta; I have watched you. You play him like a lute, plucking away at his strings. And what’s more, you love it. Admit it—you love the sport. You tease, he comes, and you reject him. Then you start all over again. I know you, Simonetta. You’re flattered by the attention. Come on, you know you are.’

‘And you’ll end with a slap on the face, old man, if you don’t keep your beak out of my business.’ She swept her arm back in readiness, waited for his reaction, and then, seeing none, returned it to her pail.

‘Ah, honesty, I find, is often painful. So, if not the boy, then who? A man with more before him?’ For emphasis, he thrust his hips forward.

‘A man more like yourself, perhaps? She focused her eyes on his groin. ‘You said a man with more to offer. I hardly think you are that. Dream on, old man, keep wishing.’ And with that, she pulled down her petticoats and strode off into the barn.

To an observer, Brighella and the Apprentice seemed busy lashing crates to the beds of the wagons, preparing for the company to leave, were it not that their attention was less on their work than on trying to overhear every word of Simonetta’s conversation.

‘To think, my friend, the fair Simonetta could be part of your plan,’ Brighella said, slapping his companion on the back.

‘Now I know you are joking. You take me for a fool. You and I both know she wouldn’t look at me.’

'What, you don't think she's worthy of the chase? Imagine her—that heat, that force of will—she is exactly what you need.'

'If you're so keen, you chase her.'

'Me? Not me. She is surely not interested in me. She barely notices I'm there. The rebelling son of a successful merchant family, a young man just playing games, railing against the obscenities of wealth—that's all she sees in me. But you, my friend, have prospects. You're exactly the man that she seeks. A man of talent and ambition.'

'Oh yes, and tell me, what ambition do I have?'

'Listen to me.'

Brighella

Now you are just the apprentice, but soon all of this could be yours. Cagnaccio's fame is fading. You only have to listen to the audience to know that. And he's not as agile as he was. Soon, it will be too much for him. The legend is fading before his eyes, and he knows it and is struggling to hold on. But times are changing. No one cares about the craft anymore; all they want is to laugh; arses, tits, and enemas to forget their misery for a while. They laugh, they pay, and we leave. This will be your chance, lad. With Simonetta by your side and me to guide you, the future is truly yours. The rewards are all in your hands.

'Maybe you're right, but I still can't accept he is failing. Even past his prime he would still be a force to be reckoned with. I hope he has years left before him.' And yet as much as he tried to defend his mentor, like seeds planted in fertile ground, the words sprouted a possibility so inviting that his thoughts were already racing, searching his memory for any shred of evidence to prove the prophecy feasible. Even so, he had never considered a life with Simonetta, a woman so of his reach. In the end he stopped himself wondering, brushing it from his mind, guilty at thinking this way of his master. Whatever would happen would be to come and the future could take care of itself.

So immersed were they in the world they were creating that neither of them heard the footsteps approaching nor noticed that they were no longer alone. Belnaso was standing a few steps away, anxiously toying with the puppet his master had left on the road, as if troubled about when to return it. Shuffling awkwardly, he was gazing down into the well, listening to what they were saying and trying to remember every word.

'That old guy,' Brighella continued, 'the one they call Fidato. The one you wouldn't trust with your spoon. I heard that Donata is letting him come with us. At least until Agnese. I spoke to him earlier, and that Frenchman we did the show for—he's an envoy for some French duc who is passionate about actors and, in particular, the Commedia and wants us to go there and perform. He's written a letter of introduction. After Agnese, we could be going to France.'

'Cagnaccio will never agree to that. Never. You know how he hates the French.'

'Cagnaccio can do what he chooses. The future is not his to decide. Mark my words, your time is coming. Faster than you think.' He threw his arm around the Apprentice's shoulder, 'There's money in these foreign courts. Money and prestige. And if they like you, they beg you to stay. Imagine that, my friend,' he said, pointing into the distance to trace an imaginary road. 'No scrambling up hillsides, no shit on your breeches and your boots. No dank and draughty outbuilding, but a solid roof over your head and a mattress under your arse. And food—yes, food so rich and plentiful it is enough to make your eyes melt.'

Clasping him by the shoulder, Brighella drew the Apprentice closer. 'And Simonetta? How do you think she would react? Do you think that she would turn down such an offer? We both know the answer to that. Just think: no more Lucca to Brindisi, no more Aosta to Matera. No more Carnevale in Grosseto or Vara in Messina. And no more bloody Agnese to freeze the balls in your sack. This is where it could start. But for now, I suggest we say nothing. Our thoughts are only for ourselves. There'll be time enough for action, but first we need to plan.'

In all the time they had been speaking, Belnaso, clutching the puppet to his chest, had inched his way around the low wall of the well, desperate to catch every whispered word. He was so engrossed in listening and trying not to be seen that he did not notice how close to the others he had become. As Brighella took one step backwards, he caught Belnaso by surprise. One moment he was listening, the next he was falling. Without thinking, he grasped with both hands at a wooden support and the puppet flew from his hands. The splash echoed down the well.

'No! God help me, what will I tell him?' He leant forward, peering deep into the darkness. 'It must be there; I heard it. It must be floating.' He grabbed the arm of the Apprentice, forcing him closer to the edge. 'You have to help me get it. Look, can you see it? Your eyes are sharper than mine. Porco Dio, the master, what will he say?'

'*Buffone*.' Brighella said, 'And he will be right. Now, move, you old fool. Must you always be in my way?'

'I'm not old.'

'No, nor young either.' (*Brighella pushes Belnaso aside and strides off into the barn, closely followed by the Apprentice.*)

As a shaft of sunlight hit the edge of the well, the floating puppet was revealed, staring up at Belnaso as he looked down at it, pondering what he should do.

In the courtyard, each member of the troupe was busy attending to their own well-rehearsed chores, a scene of such discipline and focus that it more resembled an army preparing to head off to war than a company of travelling players.

Only Belnaso stood apart, his mind still lost in the depths of the well. He had his tasks to complete like the others, but they were the furthest from his mind, for he was struggling with a dilemma he could not easily resolve. Should he tell Cagnaccio what he had overheard or keep it to himself? And what about the puppet? Should he tell him of its loss? Choosing the right time was crucial. Had it just been the loss of the puppet that he needed to report, he would have been fine. But with the sudden lurch forward, the words he was struggling to remember had also been launched from his grasp, and now he could not reassemble them in an order that seemed to make sense. Spluttering them out as nonsense could end in a cuff to his head. To make matters worse, he could hear the ghostly whispers of the puppet haunting him from the well.

‘Not working, Belnaso? Nothing to do?’ Donata came up behind him.

‘I have to tell him something, or maybe nothing. Or maybe all.’

‘Tell Cagnaccio?’ Donata asked sharply. ‘Have you seen him this morning? I need to have a word with him myself,’ and she strode off purposely to find him in the direction of the inn. Fidato was waiting at the door. They spoke briefly, nodding and smiling at each other, exchanging gentle touches on the arm, and as a joke passed between them, they laughed nervously. When Fidato struggled to pick up all of his cases, she leant forward to help, tucking the last one under her arm, and as she led him the short way to her wagon, her eyes followed his movements as he loaded the cases on the bed. She might have watched him more, were it not for the sight of Cagnaccio emerging from the inn.

‘Cagnaccio,’ she called, ‘wait. A moment. I need to speak with you.’

‘Belnaso,’ Cagnaccio shouted, ignoring her, ‘get everyone ready. We’re moving out now.’ Seeing her veering towards him, he put up his hand to distract her. ‘Whatever it is, it will have to wait. We must get back on the road.’

But Donata was never one to be dismissed easily, and quickening her step, she hastened to catch up with him. ‘Fidato is coming with us,’ she said confidently.

‘That old rogue. No. No way.’ He turned to see Belnaso still motionless, ‘Are you intending to stand there all day?’ he asked. ‘Set up the mules. Now. Move your pathetic backside.’

‘Whether you like it or not, he’s coming,’ Donata said. ‘I’ve already told him he can come. Besides, he’s earned his place. He secured us an invitation from that envoy for us to appear at the court of his duke in Burgundy. So, it’s the least we can do.’

‘He secured? I think you will find that it was down to our efforts, not the tongue of some oily lizard, trying to edge his way in. And France? You know my opinion on that. There is no way, in my world, that we are ever going again to that godforsaken country. And there’s an end to this invitation. You can tell him that from me. Now get this company moving; we won’t be going anywhere if we don’t get back on that road.’

[Here, quick, take my hand—climb up here on this wagon. They’re about to move off. What? Agnese? I’ll tell you about it as we go. Here, hold firm onto the rails; it’s sure to be a devil of a ride.]

II

Agnese

Enter **Fool**:

Good friends, in Agnese, now we find us.

A pitiable town at its best. A town of niches, alleys, and shadows. Acrest a hilltop, it perches, encircled by deep-footed walls. Walls to keep visitors out. Walls to keep residents within.

Agnese, a town so straining at the girth that it resembles the belly of a friar constrained from growing by its belt, if it wishes to grow any further, must set its sights to the heavens, with buildings piled upon buildings, each vying for their own piece of sky.

At the head of the town, the Castello, the seat of ultimate power. An imposing fortress of blank, rough-hewn stone, as fancy as the sores on my arse, with nothing to compliment it—no carvings, no statues, no art. Just a well-used dungeon and a court.

A forgotten town; an outpost. A dark and miserable place.

No one ever comes here. Not even the Dukes who own it. They might have come once, with fanfare and pomp and high hopes, only to find a welcome of moans and jeers in the streets that would send them hurrying back down the hillside as quickly as they arrived. Yet the last laugh would always be theirs, for they would snigger over the gold in their coffers as they taxed the poor bastards to the hilt, leaving them destitute and struggling to survive.

Twice, the plague took hold here, and no one ever forgets...

At first meeting, the folk here seem friendly, but be vigilant, be wary. Many are the stories of this place. Of locals eating strangers and spitting out their bones. Of forcing visitors into cages, though I fancy that all this is rot. Still, it does not pay to linger here longer than you must.

Except, of course, for the festival.

For three glorious days each year, for the feast of the blessed Sant'Agnese, doubt and suspicion are cast aside as the gates of the town are flung wide. Then all are free to enter, as long as they promise to leave.

Even so, few will take up the invitation. And for me, I fancy that's a shame. There, I admit it. For amidst the suffering and deprivation, some inevitably thrive, and when caution gives way to the chill west winds, the wine flows as freely as rain, and coins put smiles on the faces of many a down-at-heel player.

To Agnese, then...

Belnaso enters.

Fool: And here, a fool in the making. Lost, perhaps, Belnaso?

Belnaso: I know my place.

Fool: You mean you know what they have told you? And what they told you may not be true. Even the surest of stepping stones can slither from under your feet.

Keep your wits about you, Belnaso, for I can hear the whisperings of change, and where you stand tomorrow may be different from today.

Belnaso: Are you trying to take my place?

Fool: No, believe me, my dear old faithful, I would have to be a fool to do that.

But, quickly, friends, we tarry. The procession is about to begin.

Exeunt both.

[1]

[Here in this alcove, we will wait. When they move from the West Gate, we'll follow. Try to follow Cagnaccio; he's the Pantalone at the front. Look to your wits: as soon as the band starts playing, you'll be fighting your way through the crowds. If we're parted, we'll meet again in the central piazza.]

'Presto? Allora, andiamo!'

Cagnaccio bellowed the instructions. Belnaso beat the bass drum. The consort picked up the rhythm, and to the chorus of lusty voices, the wagons at last started to roll. Eyes peered from windows, and doors creaked open to the streets. Then, as if from out of the shadows, children appeared on the streets—not one or two but many—until it seemed that all the youth of the town had flocked to share in the fun. Old women tossed down their aprons, gathering in the doorways to watch, while mothers cradled their babies, rocking them in time with the beat. From every house and alley, they came. Traders left their shops unattended or cheered from behind their stalls, while men poured out of the taverns, still clutching their goblets to their chests.

The drab, winter town was again awash with colour.

Pennants, red, gold, and green, bobbing with the festoons of ribbons, fluttered in the breeze as the decorated wagons negotiated the uneven streets. Then red: the Capitano's tunic, and burgundy: the feather on his hat. Pantalone's scarlet doublet and hose, and yellow: Turkish slippers with curls that bounced as he skipped to the front. Azure: Rosina's bodice, blue: Colombina's skirt, green: the piping on Brighella's white smock, all chiming with Arlecchino's patches; the red, blue, and green remnants sewn into squares and triangles to cover every inch of his suit. Even the mules wore garlands of ivy.

The actors leapfrogged, frog-jumped, and cartwheeled, waving streamers of yellow and red, or juggled with bean sacks or coloured scarfs, as they sang their way to the square. Half masks on, save the *zanni*, the servants, who ran to knock on each door, they called out encouraging the children to come out and dance. To the drone of Lorenzo's bagpipe, and the strumming of the Dottore's mandolin, the company sang so loudly, that news of their arrival spread quickly through the streets.

For Agnese, they appeared like a miracle. Like a cornucopia of mirth. Like an inexhaustible banquet of spices, rice, and sweet treats. Smiles spread across the faces of the elderly, who had seen it all before but for whom they rekindled memories of happier, carefree times. And for the spellbound youngsters and lovers, enchantment was in the air.

Ahead, Cagnaccio, now performing as his inimitable Pantalone, was engaged in teasing his fans, chuntering under his breath as he shuffled his way down the street. What he said was undecipherable—nonsense spoken with inflection to resemble a merchant of

Venice, a man of grasping and greed yet a man of some station and wealth. Slumped forward, feet together, knees pointing apart to better emphasise his riches, he strode forward with purpose, as a spider might close in on a fly. The hooked nose of his blackened half-mask was always the first to arrive, pecking the air around him for the sniff of easy money or the whiff of a willing young girl. He would spread open his long black gown to reveal his scarlet doublet and hose and the enormity of his codpiece. He would juggle with the purse at his belt, so it clattered on a wooden dagger as if warning his enemies away. When he caught the eyes of his quarry, he would lurch forward, extending a bony finger, in the manner of Pope Innocent himself, to present a cheap metal ring, incised with a worn-away emblem that might once have looked like crossed keys. He invited poor sinners to kiss it, only to withdraw it as soon as they tried, retracting it at the last minute with a pointed grunt of disgust. Though an age-old trick, the outcome known to all, the audience still laughed along with it, everyone wanting to try, young and old, bold or timid, each clambering to be the next victim, pushing the others aside, a story simple in the doing that would be so much richer in the retelling in the taverns later that night.

Simonetta, as Colombina, was performing as only she could, flirting with all the young men. With her low-cut gown and apron, she danced as she played her guitar, taunting them, enticing them to come close, and offering them her promises with a passion hard to resist. She was the challenge to any suitor, one they could not surmount—the illusion of availability, the dropped gauntlet they could not quite grasp. She caught them and reeled them in, like trout to fresh-baited hooks. They would shout for her to notice them as they fought their way through the crowd, and she would smile as her eyes met theirs until she was sure that she had bewitched them, at which point she would abruptly turn away. Colombina was the true master of her art. She held and squeezed their lust in her hands; the fantasy was just out of reach, and many a love-sick youngster and many a wishful man had bought tickets for her performance and left with no more than a laugh.

At the tail end of the procession, a few paces behind their wagon, Rosetta was beating a large tamborello, swinging it wildly in the air to set its ribbons fluttering and its cymbals jingling to the beat, and singing at the top of her voice as she skipped in time to the music.

‘She is going to get hurt,’ Emilia said, her legs dangling from the back of a cart, pulling on the sleeve of her husband to bring his attention back. He, in costume as Il Capitano, was standing precariously at her side, struggling to present his character’s pose with a straightened spine and puffed chest, using the butt of his musket to keep his balance against the constant bumping of the wagons over the uneven cobbles.

Rosetta, dressed as the innamorata, glanced often in the direction of her beloved Pedrillo, who was walking a few paces to her side, as if all might be so perfect if only he...

'She is far too in love with that boy,' Emilia continued, 'and he doesn't even see that she's there. He's a fine enough boy, Pedrillo, but he will never see her like that. She's like his little sister. It has always been like that. You try telling her. I've tried, but no, she will not have it. Last time, she flew into a tantrum; I only mentioned his name.'

'Mentioned him or told her to avoid him?'

'She's young; how can she understand? I've nothing against the lad. I like him. There isn't a bad bone in his body. But he's far too wide-eyed and innocent. I tell you; it will end in tears.'

Carefully lowering himself to her level, he sat beside her, edging closer to his wife. 'Everything ends in tears. Nothing is truer than that. You know it. I know it. All these poor sods of Agnese know it. And Rosetta, in time, will know it too, but give her a chance to dream. Let her first taste of love be of rapture; the bubble will burst soon enough.'

'I'm her mother. You expect me to sit by and watch her get hurt? Someone's got to tell her. I doubt very much that it will be you.'

'See how carefree she is, just like you were at that age,' he said, his arm outstretched to embrace her, but she recoiled, shaking it off.

'Don't compare her to me. It's different.'

'But, dear one, why rob her of this moment of passion? You, too, were once young and foolish. Don't stifle her the moment the fire is lit. Look at her; she's smitten. The tears can come tomorrow, but for now, at least let her live.'

Perhaps he was right. And perhaps in her heart, Emilia knew it, but could not control how she felt. She could only foresee the disappointment, the heartache, and the regret of her own life. And she remembered that all too clearly. So while Emilia might have heeded her husband's advice, probably she would not.

[2]

When the procession arrived at the Piazza Maggiore, a small crowd was following in its wake. The piazza was neither square nor level underfoot, as the ground sloped away sharply from the steps of the Basilica di Sant'Agnese to meet the buildings, more functional than decorative, fanning out on three sides below. While the extraordinary contours of the hill on which it had been built might have contributed to the square's irregularities, the buildings clearly conformed to a deliberate design, one where the austere façade of the basilica with its oversized, carved-wood doors could sit in moral judgement on poor sinners passing by. Imperious, it stood ready to castigate those revellers who, filled with good cheer and bad wine, would stumble out of the tavernas and fall prostrate on the uneven ground only to glance up at the basilica above them and be

reproached for the shame of their sins. The flights of steps, rising steeply, stood as an earthly reminder of the sobriety and rectitude demanded to enter the Kingdom of their Lord.

At the lower levels of the square, the procession rested. Cagnaccio, freeing himself from his fans, waved for Donata to join him.

'Keep these crowds amused as best you can. Get the boy and Brighella to man the wagons. The Dottore can entertain the crowds; get the Capitano to help him.' He pointed towards Fidato. 'Watch that one doesn't stroll off with anything that's ours. Better still, I'll get the licence from the Vescovo; you take that old soak with you. Go and find a hall. Preferably one we can sleep in. If not, the hall is the most important; get that, and we'll find somewhere to doss down later. I'll slip down that alley to change.'

Time was against them. A good day's work stood between them being prepared for the revelries on Sant'Agnese Eve. All too soon, the piazza would start filling. Achieving a fair price for a room to perform in would be nigh impossible then, even if an amenable landlord could be found at such a late time, and without the licence from the Vescovo, they would not be performing at all.

Cagnaccio pulled his bundle of clothes from the wagon, then hesitated. Ahead, his Apprentice and Brighella were entertaining the excited children that had gathered around them like a swarm. Egged on by the expectant faces and buoyed by their success at the inn, they were juggling objects of different sizes, tossing them higher and higher in the air at each other, pretending to drop them as they fell, but catching them at the last minute to the whoops and cheers of the crowd.

'I'll keep an eye on them,' Donata said, reading the scan of his eyes. Cagnaccio watched as she strolled back to the wagon, where Fidato had opened a case of vials and was starting to spout forth his routine.

Fidato

Night cramps. Listen to me, good people. Night cramps—it is not widely known or recorded but proven nonetheless to be true—are caused by the dev37and his minions (he shakes his fist in the air). It is a condition most certainly not to be ignored, lest evil take a grip on your soul. For then you're lost, bound to the pits and caverns of hell for all eternity. There is no hope for you, then. Nothing I, nor a saint, nor physician can do for you then. And all because of a condition left

unhealed. Mark, good people; do not tarry. Catch the condition early, lest you fall under its spell.

You, sir. Do you awaken in the night in the coldest of sweats? Gripping in your ankles or legs? I tell you—beware, good people. Always be on your guard. I have seen the results with my own honest eyes, and I tell you, it is not a sight for the righteous to see.

Lady, yes, you signora, smooth that worry from your brow, for as fortune and coincidence would have it, the demon is easily expunged. Regular application of an ointment, the only one in Christendom proven to bring long-term relief, I now have available, through the grace of God, but for a short time and at such a remarkable price.

I cannot, in humanity, stand and watch you suffer. At this price, I am giving it away. Don't rush now. I can only give you two bottles each. In all good faith, I cannot let go of more. Come, now. Who will be first?

As Fidato attended to the small queue of purchasers, Donata came up behind him and touched the old man on the arm.

'Leave the devil to his mischief; you need to come with me.'

[3]

[Not much of a palace is it? The Palazzo del Vescovo. Just keep hidden, and when they let Cagnaccio in, we will steal inside unseen. We'll have to be sharp about it; these places are like warrens. If we get separated or someone asks what you are doing, tell them you're here to see the bishop's assistant with a message from Rome; no one will trouble you then. Shh! Cagnaccio's knocking...]

Cagnaccio beat loudly on the plain wooden door and waited. He was on the verge of knocking again when, to the rattle of rusted latches, a panel slid back, and a face appeared from behind a small grill.

'What do you seek at this hour?' The voice was reedy, with the inflexion of one roused unhappily from sleep.

'I come for an audience with the Vescovo. For a licence to perform.'

The panel slammed shut with a force that seemed to reverberate down the corridors. The door creaked open—not enough to enter but enough for the cleric to peer around. Huffing in irritation at the unexpected intrusion, he eyed the stranger up and down, clearly perplexed at the visitor's presence at such an hour. Everyone knew that His Excellency would be preparing for the evening's procession or resting by now.

'What business have you at this hour, disturbing the peace of the holy sanctuary?'

Cagnaccio edged one step forward, his hand braced on the door, ready to push it open.

'Tell the Vescovo Cagnaccio is here and that if he wants to strike a deal this year, he'll have to do it now.'

The cleric, still clearly annoyed, stood aside, swung the door open, and motioned for Cagnaccio to enter. The dimly lit entrance hall opened to a courtyard. A colonnade hugged the walls of the basilica, with offices and chambers leading off. Without a word, the cleric led the way, his steps slow and measured, as if trying to lessen the sound of his sandals, until he came to a halt, pointing to the last of a series of wooden benches.

'Wait here,' he said tersely before disappearing through an imposing door.

The early afternoon clouds were breaking, and a jagged beam of sunlight pierced the courtyard, cleaving the space in two. Cagnaccio felt an overwhelming sense of sadness, as if the weight of an uncomfortable silence was pressing down on him, like old memories stirring from their sleep. In the stillness of the cloisters, he could hear the rasp of his own breath mingling with the soft sound of a bird's wings fluttering. Two pigeons swooped to scavenge at the base of a statue of a girl, pecking doggedly at the carved stone flames surrounding the girl's feet. He felt heavy, as if the world were sitting on his back.

The maiden, the blessed Sant'Agnese, still tender and pure, wore a crown of laurels at her brow and clutched palm fronds to her chest. Despite the fire that raged at her feet, she remained serene and steadfast, her unwavering faith and devotion unshaken by the flames that threatened to consume her. Even in the face of humiliation and rape, she refused to abandon her faith. The virgin became a martyr, an icon venerated each year, and adopted as a patron of chastity, gardeners, and sheep.

The more he looked, the more the maid reminded him of his sister. The contours of her face and the strands of her long, tumbling hair. She, too, had been no more than a young girl.

He grinned, remembering their childhood as they huddled beneath a market stall in a crowded Neapolitan street. She would cajole him to pilfer a persimmon, the fruit she coveted most—a fruit they could scarcely afford. The mere thought of its flesh, its juices, would bring giggling tears to her eyes. Persimmons were always a luxury reserved for the

highest of days. Egged on, then, by her goading, he would wait until the moment arrived when the stallholder was distracted, when he reached up into the basket, to pluck only the ripest of fruits, testing each with a squeeze. All the while, she would kneel beside him, her hands clasped over her mouth, stifling her gasps of delight. And once the deed was accomplished, she would grasp the fruit in both hands, careful not to crush it, as if holding the rarest of jewels. Then, as if the wind had caught her, she would run for all her might, dodging through alleys and side streets, until, sure that they could not be caught, she would bite and again through its tangy flesh, till the juices ran over her chin.

He would get caught sometimes; it mattered little. To see the glee in her eyes at the simple pleasure it brought repaid any cuff around the ear. So few were the pleasures of their youth that he could hardly begrudge her that. He wondered what had become of her—whether she was lucky and found some happiness in the arms of a family of her own.

‘The secretary will see you now.’

The cleric led the way to the far end of the colonnade, where he opened a panelled wooden door. He stepped aside, motioning for the visitor to enter. In the doorway, Cagnaccio hesitated.

The room was poorly lit. Apart from the pooling glow of a smattering of candles, the light came only from high windows—small, shuttered openings that seemed to hold back as much as they allowed through. The long beams of the ceiling mirrored the dark wood of the floor, bringing the two closer together, crowding the space in between. An imposing stone fireplace, far too large for the room, was unlit despite the cold weather. The room was functional, no more, a solitary desk in the centre with two chairs. A third chair hugged the wall close to a side table, but aside from and despite its size the room was sparse and austere.

Seated at his desk, the Secretary to the Vescovo was deeply absorbed in his work, scribbling notes and shuffling through papers. Cagnaccio stood, waiting for an acknowledgment. The man’s saturnine countenance caught the guttering light of a candle, casting deep shadows under his brow and concealing his eyes from view. Shaved in a tonsure, his scant hair clung to the sides of his head. Through a thin-lipped mouth, he mimicked every syllable as he silently dictated them to his fingers so his quill could scratch them into the page.

That there would be a show of power and status was no surprise to Cagnaccio, who stood trying to restrain his frustration by reminding himself that waiting was part of the game. He knew that the secretary was observing his every move.

As Cagnaccio's eyes roved around the sparse chamber, he became aware of a faint commotion coming from the far end of the room. The sight of a half-opened door stirred his curiosity. From beyond, he could hear the sounds of mischief and play, the dulcet giggles of a young woman, and the bellowing wheeze of an older man struggling to stay in pursuit. Long shadows flickered from the movement of candles around the room, and as they passed, Cagnaccio could pick out the golden threads of tapestries and the scarlet brocade of a divan. Just as his curiosity was piqued, the door slammed shut to a volley of sniggers and laughs. The voice, the hee-haw, was as unmistakable as that of the Vescovo, the master of the house.

'I want to see the Vescovo. And I want to see him now.'

The hand shot up again to stall him, but this time Cagnaccio grabbed it, squeezing the knuckles together, until, sensing the bones might crack, he pushed it back to the desk.

'Enough of this nonsense. I want to talk with the Vescovo. I know he is in the other room. And enough of all this charade. If his Eminence wants to earn again what he received from us last year, by all that's holy, he'll see me now. And the sooner I get the licence, the sooner he can get back to the pleasure of absolving the sins of that girl.'

The secretary set down his quill and raised himself from the chair. In a hiss barely louder than a whisper, for lies are better veiled, he insisted His Excellency was busy in prayer and not about to be disturbed.

'I will not permit the intrusion. I manage the bishop's affairs, and it is I who grants the licences. Until I am ready to hear you, you will sit, and you will wait.' He gestured to the chair near the wall.

Cagnaccio had little choice but to obey; the granting of the licence was crucial; without it, they could not perform. The secretary reshuffled his papers and returned to his work. The squeals and shouting in the other room soon subsided, and a stillness returned, save for the scratching of a quill across parchment. Time dragged on until, at last, the secretary leaned back in his chair, reached for the sand, and set about blotting his work. Bringing it close to his face, he scrutinised the inked lines, rereading them with a critical eye. Then, with the voice of authority, he called for his assistant to come forth. As if he had been waiting eagerly outside, the young cleric entered to retrieve the sealed document and instructions, nodded once in deference, then turned on his heels and left.

'Now,' the secretary said rubbing the fingers of his hand, before waving Cagnaccio forward. 'If you are in better humour? What do you wish of the bishop?'

'I want to see His Excellency. In person.'

The secretary glanced towards the far door. 'The Vescovo is ensconced. Tonight, we have the procession, and there are preparations to be made. You will have to deal with me or wait until the festival is over. The decision is entirely yours. Make it, so I can return to my work.'

‘We need a licence to perform,’ Cagnaccio said, his patience wearing thinner by the moment. ‘We both know he will grant it. And we are busy men. Let me see him, and I will be on my way.’

The secretary hesitated, as if calculating his next move with care. ‘You do not need the Vescovo; he has delegated such permissions to me. But I must tell you, I am in no mind to grant you a licence. His Excellency is insistent that nothing should bring down the sanctity of the festival or sully the purity of the devotion—certainly not by depravity and the simulation of ungodly acts.’

His case, as he laboured to explain by quoting one erroneous Bible reference after another, offering chapter and verse, was that the presence of women as actors, especially given their sexual proclivities, could never be countenanced by the church.

‘The *Adfecti Sancti Grazia* of his Excellency, Bishop Vittorio of Spoleto, reiterating the edict of His Holiness Sesto V, is quite clear on this point. Such displays are tantamount to witchcraft and an inevitable precursor to satanic possession. That will not be happening here.’ Certain that business was concluded, the secretary drew a ledger towards him.

It made little difference that the Bishop had granted the licence on many occasions before or that Cagnaccio remembered seeing the Secretary himself laughing heartily in the front row.

Cagnaccio lunged forward, his face contorting in anger, as he grabbed the secretary by the collar and yanked him up from his chair. ‘Don’t play games with me, you miserable wretch. If I have to, I’ll find the Vescovo myself. We’ll see what he says, shall we?’

The secretary’s voice trembled as he replied, ‘I believe you will find him in concurrence.’ Cagnaccio tightened his grip so hard that the secretary, struggling to breathe, spluttered out ‘enough.’

Cagnaccio loosened his grip, and the secretary fell back into his chair.

‘In a spirit of Christian mercy,’ the secretary said, rubbing a red band that had formed at the base of his neck, ‘during this most sacred time, I am willing to grant your permit, valid only for three days. You can construe this as a concession, and you must leave strictly after it expires. The licence will commence no earlier than two days hence, once the Saint’s Day festivities are over. I believe this offer to be fair.’

‘Shame,’ Cagnaccio said, sitting down and stretching his legs out before him. ‘I was considering an act of contrition.’ He jangled the coins in his purse. ‘An appropriate donation of alms. For His Excellency to choose the cause. Such a shame, for if the licence were to start after the festival, the donation could then not be large. You see my predicament, I’m sure...’

And in that moment, the seeds of a truce were planted, not with swords drawn or voices raised, but with the mere whisper of concession and the reassuring clinking of coins.

‘Naturally,’ the secretary said, ‘the Vescovo would receive your offering with grace. Not on his own account, never on his own account, for such an act of simony could never be condoned. But as an act of earnest contrition and a sign of devotion and faith,’ he broke off to finger the crucifix hanging on his chest, ‘The repentant is to always be welcomed and embraced with humility and delight.’

And there, the deal was done. In no time, the sum was agreed, the licence was scripted and sealed, and the coin passed between hands. The only slight concession, a small point, hardly worth arguing; the licence would commence at dawn on the morrow and expire at sunset in three days’ time. Rather than continue to fight, Cagnaccio accepted the compromise; after all, it suited their purpose well; the troupe was weary from travel, and a night’s rest would help them restore. Besides, on the eve of the festival, crowds would flock to the piazza; it would be difficult to tease them away. No, better by far tonight just to show their presence, spread the word of their arrival, and whet appetites for the forthcoming shows.

The secretary took the purse in his hands, emptied the coins on the desk, and counted them into small piles until he was sure the requisites had been paid, the majority of which he returned to the purse, which he locked away in the desk. The remainder, a little more than a quarter of the spoils, he nudged into a heap, edging them to the corner of his desk and covering them with a sheet of paper. Sure that the fee was in order, the secretary thrust forward the licence, reluctant to release his grip.

‘I warn you, Cagnaccio, any trouble like last year and you and your companions are out. Your licence will be immediately revoked. I pray that we understand one another. We will countenance no blasphemy or depravity.’

‘Depravity?’ Cagnaccio said, turning back from the doorway, ‘You will judge that for yourself, no doubt—we’ll reserve your usual space.’

[4]

[Did he just look at you as he was leaving? Don’t make eye contact with him. If he looks at you directly, stare at the floor until he moves away. Outside again, I’d forgotten how cold it is. Keep close; for even at his age, he can still move at a lick.]

The break in the weather was fleeting. Upon his return to the piazza, ominous rainclouds hung heavily over the town, threatening at any moment to burst. The earlier crowds had

dispersed, leaving only a small cluster of loiterers with no other pressing plans than to linger in the square. Clustered around the wagons, some men jested with the Dottore, while the women circled Colombina, mirroring the sway of her hips as she taught them the secrets of her dance. Still others huddled together, intermittently clapping and cheering, their attention fixed on something happening behind the wagons.

As Cagnaccio drew closer, a group of eager admirers surged forward to meet him, calling out his name. If he intended to get closer to the wagons, it would not happen soon, for beaming with joy and excitement at the chance to speak to their idol, they blocked his way, greeting him as if they were long-lost friends. His charisma and his capacity to give them what they needed from him were undeniable. This was not the lofty, renowned comedian, but a man much like themselves, a man of struggle and perseverance.

‘Adriano, you old sot,’ Cagnaccio said, trying to push his way through. ‘I see from the rivers of stains down your front that you’re still spilling as much as you sup. And Gianni, how is that beautiful wife of yours? Tell her I’m coming to see her, especially when this old fool’s asleep.’ He grabbed Gianni by the ear and tweaked it playfully.

‘My mother was asking about you,’ a voice shouted from the rear.

‘Clearly a woman of taste. Tell her to come to see me—old, young, short, fat—it makes no matter to me—bring them all; they know there’s plenty to go around (he reaches down to grab his breeches and shakes). Ah, you—here again (*pointing at someone in the crowd*)—I’d know that belly anywhere (*he lunges forward to punch it gently as if testing whether it is ripe*)—It’s swelling more each year, I swear. When is the offspring due? What’s that—fine food and flatulence? Then remind me to lodge at your house.’

With each comment, the crowd laughed as they jostled to get closer, grabbing his hand, slapping him on the stomach, throwing their arms around him, and trying to ruffle his hair. Despite their boisterous nature, Cagnaccio took it in his stride; a broad smile lit up his face as he quipped and traded their banter. They expected it from him, and he was ready to perform.

Cagnaccio craned his neck, peering over the shoulders of his adoring fans, to catch a glimpse of what was stirring up so much excitement near the wagons, suspicious of each sudden burst of applause. He expected to see his Apprentice performing cartwheels or Brighella playing the fool, but a handful of children scrambling perilously over the wagons had captured the attention of the crowd. Their curiosity unleashed, the children rifled through the cargo, prying open crates and trunks, displaying the treasures they found—a wooden sword, a goblet, a bucket, a net, an oversized syringe—brandishing them in the air to the triumphant shouts of the onlookers. Belnaso joined forces with the Capitano in trying to keep the marauders away, shouting at them to come down while trying to stave off the stream of newly arriving youths.

While the players saw the dangers, they dared not spoil the fun, for actors know only too well the value of children; each little Carlo or Chiara had the power to become a wheezing organ, piping out news of their arrival to the farthest reaches of the town. Many a healthy audience had come through the urchins of a town, and later, returning to their communities, excited at what they had seen, the little ones would pester their elders until they agreed to take them to the show.

A scream, a gasp from the crowd, then wailing.

Cagnaccio started to run. A boy, no older than eight or nine, was so excited at his triumph at climbing to the highest point that he lost his footing on a crate, slipped, lurched forward, and, unable to catch his balance, fell headlong to the hard stone floor of the piazza. The sound of shattering glass and pottery bowls rang through the air like musket balls. Cagnaccio forced his way through the crowd. Gently reaching down, he lifted the boy into his arms.

'Clear a space,' he shouted. Donata rushed forward, unlatching the tail of the wagon for Cagnaccio to set the boy down. 'Belnaso, push back those boxes and crates.

'There, there,' Cagnaccio said, trying to pacify the boy, who was bawling and crying from the shock. 'What's your name, son?' He ran his hand reassuringly through the boy's black curls. Sobbing and panting from panic, the boy spluttered that his name was Livio.

'Then, *calmati, piccolo Livio. Andrà tutto bene*. Everything's going to be alright.'

Gently sweeping away the tears that streaked the boy's cheeks, he assessed the damage. A trickle of blood was seeping from a scrazed knee, but otherwise the boy seemed unscathed. Reaching into the recesses of his jacket, Cagnaccio pulled out a blue silk kerchief, which he skilfully bound around the injured knee.

'Such a brave boy deserves a special reward, wouldn't you agree, Donata?' She smiled warmly, instantly soothing the boy's agitated breaths, bringing them back to a calm rhythm once more. 'Belnaso,' Cagnaccio called, 'fetch me the puppet.' The flush of embarrassment on Belnaso's face told all that Cagnaccio needed to know.

'Very well then. You know, Livio, that brave young men are always welcome in our shows. Come to see us tomorrow and bring a few of your friends—a few, mind you, not the neighbourhood. This signora here will remember you; just bring along this kerchief, and we will let you and your companions in for free; you will be our honoured guests.

'Now, run along, young hero. Go and tell your friends.' He carefully lifted the boy from the wagon. The boy, excited at his reward, dashed off down an alley, his adventures and his wounds exposed to the breezes, jubilantly waving the kerchief aloft.

Cagnaccio kicked over the broken fragments of the debris, examining the breakages and listing in his mind what still might be salvaged and what must be replaced.

'Belnaso—make a list of what needs replacing and get all this back into order.'

'I need to speak with you.' Donata was insistent. He halted her.

'One moment, please.' He strode over to his apprentice and shouted for all to hear.

Cagnaccio

I gave you one job. Look after the wagons. Even a cretin could do that. But no, not my apprentice. He's more interested in himself and playing to the crowd to do a simple task. No matter that a child might get hurt. No matter that our props might get broken. Nothing else matters but you. (*The Apprentice smirks awkwardly.*) Oh, you think that this is funny? I will show you funny..

As if from sheer force of habit, the Apprentice instinctively hunched over, shielding his face with his arms and bracing himself for the assault. The force of a knee to his spine sent him sprawling to the ground, sputtering and gasping for air. Blow after blow, kick following kick, Cagnaccio pommelled the lad, seizing him by his tousled hair, yanking him closer, to a barrage of curses between tight-clenched teeth. Looking quickly around him for a weapon, Cagnaccio reached into the cart for a wooden baton, tugging until it came free. With swift and wild swings, he brandished it over his head to bring it crashing down over the back of the Apprentice, who cried out with each strike.

Although mostly hidden from the eyes of the onlookers by the high sides of the wagons, those who could see the attack shuffled awkwardly in silence. A murmur, a snigger, a nervous laugh. The crowd, unsure of what reaction to take but agitated by a thrill at the outburst, began to side with Cagnaccio, shouting excuses to justify what he had done. *He was right. That poor child could have fallen on his head. If that lad had been more vigilant instead of trying to act the fool, he would have seen the danger himself. Yes, beat some sense back into him; I would have done the same.*

As the crowd parted for Cagnaccio to walk away, one burly man slapped him on the back while others gleefully chanted his name.

'We found a hall,' Donata said, an urgency now in her tone, 'Not the usual one, but better, I believe. Bigger, certainly. And at least the roof is definitely not leaking, so no more horrors like before. It's closer to the square, and the procession passes straight by.'

'And we can sleep there?'

'No. The owner was adamant. But we've found two ground-floor rooms nearby at a ridiculously cheap price. Two alleys away. Nothing special, but better than a night under the stars.'

'So, how did you leave it?'

'I took the living quarters; I didn't imagine you'd be that interested.' Cagnaccio nodded in acceptance. 'But for the hall, I told the owner you'd want to see it and strike the deal yourself. I doubt he will move on the price, and you'll need to hurry to catch him. He said he would not wait long.'

As she started to give him directions, a better idea came to her. 'It's simple to find, but take Fidato. He went with me. He will show you the way.' Fidato nodded, smoothing the lapels of his jacket, straightening his cap on his head, and stroking the wires of his beard.

'I, myself,' Fidato offered, 'am not unskilled at negotiation. Cagnaccio, *amico mio*, count it my honour to assist.' While they were away, Donata would find a home for the wagons and arrange the stabling of the beasts. With Belnaso's help, they would salvage what could be kept from the debris strewn over the piazza floor.

'And when he's finished here,' Cagnaccio said, 'send Belnaso to find us, and we'll start unloading the wagons.'

'And don't worry,' she said as they were leaving, nodding in the direction of Brighella and the Apprentice, 'I'll keep an eye on these two.'

'Just keep them out of my way and make sure they do not shirk.'

As if to mark the end of the performance, Cagnaccio's departure sent the crowds sauntering away. Still stinging from the onslaught, the Apprentice kneeled, rubbing the wounds on his back.

'Then?' Brighella said, grinning, reaching to help his friend.

'Then, nothing. Just don't say it.'

'Why do you let him do it?' Brighella said, 'You're a fool. You know that by not defending yourself, you're giving him permission for more?'

'But he was right. It was irresponsible. Someone could have been hurt.'

'It looks as if someone was...'

How could Brighella understand? Coming from a wealthy family, it meant nothing to Brighella to buy his way into the troupe. At any time, if he swallowed his pride and returned the prodigal to his father, he would have all the riches he desired. This was merely his playground—a chance to cock his thumb against authority and the obscenities of wealth.

However, for an eager apprentice who has never known it, any means to advance is something that cannot be overlooked. His life had looked bleak and hopeless until, like a gust of the Maestrale wind, Cagnaccio blew into his life, and in that moment, his world flashed with possibility. Here was a legend and a chance. He did not need to think twice; this was the future he chose. For two long days, he laboured, mimicking the acting he had seen, and mirroring Arlecchino's gestures until they felt like his own. He did not rest, but deep into the night he practised, worried that Cagnaccio would leave town before he had the opportunity to show him. Blisters grew and cracked on his feet, and still he would not stop. But finally, he felt ready. He steeled himself and, catching the legend's attention, begged for a chance to impress. At first, Cagnaccio dismissed him, but the lad persisted, refusing to be cast aside. Perhaps the master saw something in the determination of such a wretch, or perhaps it stirred memories of how he too had fought for a chance. Either way, Cagnaccio surrendered and promised to watch the boy. Nervous and clumsy from exhaustion, he stumbled through his routine. Despite feeling embarrassed and clumsy, he still remembered his elation when Cagnaccio offered to engage him as his apprentice. Over the coming weeks and months, he became a part of the troupe as the master patiently taught him the skills of a player and the sanctity of the mask. With work, persistence, and repetition, he learned the techniques of the craft.

The Apprentice was under no illusion; he still had so much to learn. And so, what if Cagnaccio lashed out in anger? It was frustration nothing more. It was an exception—more often the man felt like his father with the diligence and care over his protégé. He could not count the number of times Cagnaccio had come to his aid, seeing off angry townsfolk, when he had got into a difficult scrape. No, the anger only showed that he cared. For Cagnaccio, commitment to his art was everything; to dedicate oneself to the craft, to strive always for the best, to hone skills to perfection, while honouring the tradition of the art, was to commit your life to its advancement while respecting the traditions of those who travelled the hard road before. If you made that commitment, Cagnaccio was the loyalist of friends.

'You don't understand, Brighella. I owe him. My life would have been nothing without him. Is it then asking so much to put up with a bruise or two? He gets frustrated, but underneath, he's good. He wants the best and won't settle until he sees it. Frankly, I wish I had his passion.'

'Believe that if you must. But mark my words, my friend, times are changing, and the masks are starting to slip. Cagnaccio won't last forever. But for us, our best years are ahead. We'll see who the people cheer for. Trust me, *pistola*, soon that stage will be ours for the taking. When that time is upon us, you had better be ready to act.'

[Do try to keep up. I know; it's farther than I expected too. But look, he's stopping. Up there on the right. Stay close and quiet now; we'll follow him in.]

The hall, larger than Cagnaccio expected, was not as close to the Piazza as he might have hoped but was central enough for their purposes. Better yet, it sat directly on the route that the procession would take that evening as it wove down to the basilica from the castello at the head of the town. Once a trading hall for a small guild, the room was long enough for a good audience but intimate enough to perform. High wooden rafters would dampen an echo to let the players be heard. The room looked solid, with no obvious signs of leaks. Well lit, with a row of upper windows letting in enough daylight from the street, the room seemed welcoming and bright.

He would construct the stage at the farthest end, which gave off to a corridor linking a series of smaller rooms, each valuable for storage, that led out to a courtyard that would serve as an area to change. Around the walls were benches, not fixed but easily moved, perfect for the front rows of the audience. Yes, he had to admit it; Donata had chosen well.

'A fine hall; she found you.' Behind him, Fidato spoke tentatively, standing on the threshold, debating whether to step in, as if unsure whether his presence was welcome. Cagnaccio had no time to answer.

'*Messeri*. Gentlemen.' The voice, booming and emphatic, came before the man. 'I heard your voices. I presume you are the people who want to rent my hall?'

Cagnaccio turned to see the landlord shuffling towards him from the courtyard, his belly squeezing the buttons of his waistcoat, his face so red and pockmarked it looked as if recently ploughed. He squinted, rubbing his eyes with his fingers; his hands were those of a blacksmith, misshapen, too large for his arms.

'Your friend is right,' he said, leaning back, pushing the fur trim of his surcoat behind him, the better to tuck his fingers under the broad expanse of a belt, his right hand coddling a leather purse that hung down low from his side. 'The room, *è buona, è addata s'?* Very good, very suitable for you. You will take it, of course.' He paused, as if weighing his chances for the price. 'Thirty lire only. Three days. No trouble. No dossing. No mess. Well, do you want it yes or no?'

Fidato stepped forward to answer, but Cagnaccio pulled him back. Regardless of how perfect the room might seem, Cagnaccio knew better than to accept the first terms. The haggling was brief, direct, and honourable. Cagnaccio pointed to the defects of the room, while the merchant responded jovially, highlighting its obvious strengths, and so the parrying continued until they reached the point of concession.

'Twenty-five lire. All upfront,' the merchant offered, 'That's the best I will do. It's that or nothing at all.' He held out his hand, and, in justice and dignity, the deal was finally struck, with the coins passed over as its seal.

‘And no one sleeps or dosses here. I told your woman the same. Be warned. If I hear anything to the contrary, you’ll all be out on your ear... And mind you, leave the place as you found it. I know you players of old.’ To the accompaniment of jangling coins, he mumbled a litany of wrongdoing that had occurred at the hall in the past as he mumbled away.

Donata, assuming command of a column, was the first to arrive, followed shortly after by the rest of the company and, behind them, a brigade of children, each eager to help, their little hands gripping whatever they could carry as the contents of the wagons were from the square. With a meticulous eye, as each consignment passed her, Donata assigned the boxes and baskets to their designated positions in the hall.

‘Belnaso,’ Donata called out, gesturing for him to approach. ‘Take a couple of people with you and move the wagons, horses, and mules to the East Gate. You’ll find an inn with stables; they’ve already reserved space. Ask for the innkeeper’s wife.’ Belnaso hesitated a moment, then, as if an alarm had been called, burst into action, tugging at the sleeves of stage hands and motioning for them to follow as he hurried out of the hall.

‘All unloaded?’ Cagnaccio asked as he returned from exploring the building. ‘Then let’s get on with the build.’

But Donata had been watching the faces of the companions as they passed—how haggard and exhausted they appeared from the gruelling uphill journey and several nights of fitful sleep. Better to rest, she suggested, if only to recover their strength.

Cagnaccio, as if for the first time, felt the fatigue wash over him, his limbs stiff and sore. The next few days would be challenging, and though his instincts told him to keep working, a few snatched hours of rest seemed like a sensible idea.

‘Very well,’ he conceded, ‘give them some time to rest, as long as we are ready by this evening. It’s the Eve of Sant’Agnese; the piazza will be throbbing; we cannot miss the chance of letting them know we’re here. In the meantime, I want to see where we are sleeping.’

‘Some have gone there already; it’s just a few streets away. Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘Fidato and I will guide you. We’ll all go as soon as we’re finished here.’

[6]

Three streets from the guild hall and the lodgings might have been in another world.

Nestled in a narrow passageway, they were approached via a space between buildings rather than an established thoroughfare. An acrid stench of days-old urine lingered in the air, infused as if ingested into the stones so deeply that no amount of rain

would wash it away. Perpetually dark, even when the sun was overhead, the height and proximity of the buildings blocked out any hope of sharing the light. For the most part decrepit and abandoned, the buildings huddled together, resisting their inevitable collapse as walls bowed and listed. From a distance, the lodgings looked uninhabitable, occupying the ground floor of a disused building, that owing to its pitiable state, Donata had secured for a meagre rent. Here were no flying pennants, no proud wives sweeping their steps, only the taint of squalor, hidden from the eyes of the town. Though the wind might sail through the cracks in the walls and the doors hang loose from their hinges, Donata assured him the ceiling was solid enough not to come down on their heads. While it might not look homely or welcoming, at least it would shelter them from the savage bite of the wind. Although some would grumble at the prospect, they could afford no better, and it would serve for a roof over their beds.

As they neared, their attention was caught by the sight of Rosetta standing alone in the alley. Clutching the fabric of her dress, she wrung at her apron as she walked anxiously back and forth, desperate to catch every word of the argument raging inside.

'It's Pedrillo and Simonetta!' she exclaimed urgently, her voice trembling with concern. 'Please, you have to help him. She'll kill him!'

A shrill voice pierced through the air; Simonetta's stream of invective was so loud it spilled out onto the street.

'Imbecile. You are a crazy boy; *sei pazzo, un vero cretino!*' she screamed. 'Why always do you do this? What is it? You do not understand the word "no," eh? Perhaps I should be the one to teach you, yes?'

Cagnaccio entered to see Pedrillo backed into a corner, unable to escape Simonetta's fingers that prodded deep into the boy's chest, punctuating the flailing gestures that animated her words.

'But I know you can love me, Simonetta, if you'd only give me a chance.'

'Love you? You're nothing to me. You think that I should look at such a pathetic, lovesick child? Bah, you want that I teach you some sense?'

To stand in the blast of her fury took courage, for Simonetta relished the fight. No stranger to a confrontation and never one to back down, the clash fed the fires within her. Some said her passions were the best of her, but they underestimated her skill. For while men would eagerly pursue her, intoxicated by the thrill of the chase, they would only find disenchantment as she toyed with their affections before discarding them as they wanted for more.

From what Cagnaccio could surmise, Pedrillo's admission of devotion had elicited an unexpected response. Never mind billing and cooing; whatever nest he had built in his imagination, however precious it may have seemed, might have better been left

unspoken, for now it lay shattered into pieces, its twigs strewn across the floor, to a battery of squawks and yells.

Other voices, from the next room. Leaving Donata and Fidato, Cagnaccio stepped cautiously forward to find a better vantage point. It came as no surprise to see Brighella in the adjacent room, craning his neck to catch every word as he laughed and sniggered with the Apprentice, aping the theatrics next door, Brighella as Simonetta, the Apprentice, her crestfallen beau. Cagnaccio had long sensed a malevolence in Brighella, a lurking cruelty, a sense that behind every action lay a motive and that rather than plead his own case, he would manipulate his fellows, pulling their strings like puppets, so they unwittingly danced to his tunes.

Enough was enough.

'Basta,' Cagnaccio shouted, '*Non rompere i coglioni—Mio Dio!* Asses, all of you. I don't want to hear any more. Just get back to the hall. There's work to be done.'

Cagnaccio stepped aside to let them exit. Pedrillo ducked as he brushed by, but no matter how much he shielded, he could not avoid the smack of Cagnaccio's palm connecting with the side of his ear. As if invisibly tethered to the boy, Simonetta shadowed Pedrillo, still hurling a battery of insults, as she kicked him out of the doorway and sent him stumbling to the floor.

'Pedrillo, are you alright?' Rosetta's voice trembled with concern as she reached out to help him rise, her hand lingering on his arm, reluctant to let go. 'Forget Simonetta,' she said tenderly. 'She is not the one for you. I've told you...'

'Leave me alone.' Pedrillo pushed her away, shaking off her grasp on his arm. 'Why are you always there, whenever I turn around? What is it you want? Stop following me. Why don't you go back to your mother?'

Rosetta, her world collapsing around her, ran off down the street, sobbing. Pedrillo waited for the alley to clear. With his pride hurt and his dreams in pieces, but his resolve undeterred, he slowly walked away.

From the other room, the Apprentice hesitated. Still sore from his earlier beating, he was determined he would not flinch, and with his eyes trained on his master's fists, he stiffened his spine to look confident and readied himself to run. Brighella was last to leave, strolling out as if from a mass.

'Watch yourself, Brighella,' Cagnaccio said, 'unless you want to get hurt.'

'Then we'll be watching each other, maestro. I'm learning so much from you.'

III

Preparations

Enter **Il Dottore** with a cane.

Ah, good readers, I caught you—not in the act but between them. You expected a fool? Alas, this time you have only me.

But no, I see I am mistaken. Here is the best fool now.

(BELNASO enters stage right with a large rolled-up scroll that he holds in front of him at shoulder height.)

To begin, then, with this elucidation.

(IL DOTTORE assumes a declamatory pose.)

Ah, love! How beguiling the humours of our hearts!

For love may harness a raucous army or rend two forces apart. It may join in the hush of a whisper as two breaths resonate as one, or it may end in anguish and bitterness, screaming and crying to be set free.

And so, I advise you, lovers, my fellow seekers of truth, that what you yearn for is seldom what it seems, for it may be an idyll, a warm bower for two souls, or else become a dungeon where the keys to freedom are lost.

So ends the Exordium, and now the Narratio presents:

Let us consider that love is like an ocean—a sailboat tossed on the waves, at the mercy of storms and tempests, or becalmed and drifting away.

Belnaso, please...

(BELNASO unfurls the scroll, letting it hang down from shoulder height. It has one large diagram with four quadrants, a picture of each humour in each. Il Dottore uses his cane to indicate the humour he will discuss. Throughout the speech, Belnaso mimes the actions before returning to stand upright, the scroll hanging as before.)

How fast the sanguine rises. Let passion be unconstrained. Surge forth our ship for adventure, with never a thought where our prospects might lead, but girded for trials and hardship, with only the far shores in mind.

(BELNASO mimes a lookout in a crow's nest.)

Or perhaps we take the phlegmatic to offer a different approach: a stable house, and comforts; abhorring every all conflict; like the patient fisherman, diligently repairing his nets in readiness to enter the water at the moment when all conditions are right. *(BELNASO mimes throwing out nets and then hauling them back, tugging to set them loose while catching on something.)* Then, with the ease of a well-seasoned hand, we haul our boat from the waters to watch the lapping waves, until sitting once more on the quayside we review all that we have done.

(BELNASO sits exaggerating looking out over the ocean.)

For some, an approach choleric is as tempting as a moth to a flame. These lovers seek no comfort; it is not blood that pumps that courses through their veins but ambition that drives them on. But as much as they are passionate to seize the helm, their crossing is often troubled, for them the thrills lie in the highest of waves and in the deepest of sloughs, and so much buffeting and crashing are bound to fray the nerves.

(BELNASO mimes vomiting over the side of the ship.)

Oh, but the melancholic. Recording every past failure, struggling with doubts of their worth. Yet find the right course and vessel, and watch as they stay the course, loyal to love's true bearing, with a commitment to follow where it leads.

(BELNASO mimes rowing with oars, straight ahead)

So, answer me this, good friends, when the dance of love is called—how will your humours respond to the tune?

Will you rush alone to the dancefloor, your arms awirl in the air, as if no one is around you, and wait to see who appears, or will you drag a partner with you as you saunter into the ring? Will you sit and assess the options, hoping that someone will come to ask, when your heart will flutter and follow, yearning that they are the one and that with them the dance will continue long after the music has stopped?

But wait, this is one simple transaction—a loving bond between two. We might yet add a third. A triangle of love, my inquisitive souls, is a notion curious to behold, a wellspring of comedy and tragedy, an unruly, uncomfortable form. For within that twisted geometry, how can a heart ever find bliss? And here, in the creases of a forehead, in the agony of a cry, and in the teary pool of wishes, the very substance of our performance can arise.

Pedrolino is besotted with Colombina, but Colombina wants him not a whit, and Rosina, the true Innamorata, is smitten with her Pedrolino, who does not give her a thought. Arlecchino and Brighella—well, they may have love in their loins, but for whom is anyone's surmise.

I ask you, within this field of battle, who would you have win the day? For in the end, as Commedia must, the tortured knot will unravel, and all must find its peace, with rightful bonds reunited and smiles left on every face. At least while the audience is watching.

(Voices off: Shouts of "DOTTORE".)

Ah, alas, the scourge. No time, dear friends, for this rhetoric. Abandoned Confirmatio, Peroratio et al. *(He sighs loudly.)* O tempora, o mores! And I was finding the wind in my sails.

But tarry, I must no longer—away to rehearsals go I. But before I leave you, fine people, heed this simple advice.

CAGNACCIO

Are you rehearsing for a life of wonder? Or an ever-growing chain of regret? For one thing only is certain: the moment that the drama is played out, all masks inevitably fall.

Exeunt Left

[1]

[It's busy in here. We need to stand out of the way, or we'll be dragged into it and believe me you don't want that. Try to keep hidden. Follow me.]

The hall was bustling with activity.

The carpenters, Lorenzo, Eligio, and Gigione, were shouting instructions to each other, vying to be heard over the banging of mallets as they lashed together the trestles to form a secure foundation for the stage. The Dottore, struggling to keep command of his troops and an excitable team of children, who, having carried the boxes from the piazza, had been dragooned into helping further, barked out orders as they unpacked props from the crates. Each item brought its own momentary distraction. While mock battles were raging with theatrical helmets and swords, or he valiantly tried to avert a catastrophe from pretend barber-surgeons with wooden cleavers and long fake knives, he serried the props into lines stretching the width of the floor, so awkwardly placed that everyone had to negotiate around them.

Emilia was flustered, hurriedly sifting through costumes, dividing them into three distinct piles: those in need of imminent substantial repair, those that might survive the performance with a minimum of stitches or a patch, and those that definitely needed attention but for the moment would have to suffice.

'Puccio,' she shouted, catching him from the corner of her eye. '*Smettila!* Stop that now.' Her son, still dressed in the uniform of the little Colonnello, having savoured the taste of authority and being reluctant to cast it off, was becoming a nuisance, running from one group to another, issuing orders to anyone who crossed his path. 'Puccio. I will not tell you again. I have no time for this. Husband. He's your son; you do something.'

Edgardo, the Capitano, rarely acted unless provoked, and even then, he tended first towards caution, but the tone of his wife's irritation and the potential for a backlash against him added an urgency he could not ignore. He beckoned to his son, calling for him to stop, but the words lacked conviction or impact. On stage, he could blag and bluster until the rafters fell from the roof, but as soon as his costume went back in the trunk, his confidence ebbed away.

Seeing her husband dithering, Emilia shouted to her son, 'If you don't return that costume now, you'll be running the alleys as naked as the day you were born. I warn you—don't test me, Puccio! I'm really not in the mood.' Then, turning to her husband she said, 'And that goes for you as well.'

The boy came to a halt, throwing his hands on his hips and flaring his nostrils in one last flourish of defiance. With a shrug of resignation, he looked down at his breeches, shirt, and jerkin and reluctantly started to undress.

Rosetta arrived fast on the heels of Pedrillo. At first, she questioned whether to leave him alone, allowing him time to recover from his ideal, but her heart told her to persevere. Besides, how could she abandon him just when he needed her the most? She had fought too long for his affections to surrender without a good fight. *He sees you only as his sister—no less and certainly no more.* The words of her mother, she had heard them so often they had started to feel like the truth. Yet as much as she might dismiss it, she could not shake off the suspicion that perhaps her mother was right. Even if Pedrillo could not see it, it was easy to see that Simonetta did not care for him, but the more Simonetta ignored his advances, the more captivated he became. If only Rosetta could show him the constancy of her love and lay bare the secrets of her heart, then at last his eyes might be opened and their bliss together could begin. Despite her doubts and impatience, she remained convinced that whatever the twists and turns of their plot, their lives were destined to entwine, the ribbons of their love so ardent, that no matter how stretched or tangled, once tied, they never would part.

‘Let me alone, won’t you?’ Pedrillo said, brushing her aside.

‘But, Pedrillo, I’m sorry—don’t be angry with me. I simply want to talk.’

‘Look, I know you mean well, but honestly—you are getting on my nerves; you’re always there—like a dog chewing at my ankles. Grow up, Rosetta. Is it so impossible for you to see I don’t want you around?’

‘But I...’

‘But nothing...’

He strode away towards the courtyard, leaving Rosetta crimson-faced and alone, and as the tears welled in her eyes, she ran off out of the hall.

It sometimes happens when many people are working together in one place that all work comes to a halt for a brief moment, as if orchestrated by an unconscious rhythm beaten out beneath their feet. In the backswing of a hammer or the dying echo from a shout, a space no greater than the pause between inhale and exhale causes a temporary lull. As if waiting for that moment, Simonetta, Brighella, and the Apprentice chose that moment for their entrance, accentuating the animation of their voices.

‘Oh, come now, Simonetta, we’re old friends; you can tell us, go on, admit it, secretly you’re mad about the lad.’ (*Brighella clasps her forearm.*)

‘Take your hand off me. You want me to break your wrist? You think I could love a boy like Pedrillo? I could not care less about the lad.’

‘And yet your actions give you away,’

‘They give nothing away, Bri-gh-ella, do you hear me? They give nothing away because they only exist in your pathetic, puerile mind. Your head is empty, like your soul,

so empty that it has to fill itself with such nonsense. *Im-be-ci-li*. Both of you. Stop your stupid games and leave me alone, or *per Dio*, I'll show you a game of my own.'

The Apprentice, laughing, tapped Brighella on the shoulder, as if to take his cue; 'So, Simonetta, today it's Pedrillo, but who will it be tomorrow? Tell me, tell Brighella, who is next in your queue?'

'Not you, for sure. Don't worry your head. You're just an *im-be-ci-le*—both of you—and imbeciles get what they deserve. (*She goes to swing for the Apprentice but he ducks. She storms away to the street.*)

'I told you,' Brighella said.

'You told me what?'

'She is playing with you—she's hooked. She has an eye for you; she just won't admit it yet.'

'Are you blind, Brighella? She went to smack me around the head.'

'And you're telling me you weren't excited? Didn't you notice her stifling a smile? Give it time—I tell you she's toying with you. She never meant to hit you. Honestly, do you think if she wanted to hit you, Simonetta would ever miss?'

The work progressed smoothly as the players, having shaken off their fatigue and with the anticipation of the performances ahead, dedicated themselves to the task and were working in earnest to be ready for the performances before they lost the last of the daylight.

Cagnaccio was making his rounds more to assert his presence than to provide new insights, so ingrained and rehearsed were each player's tasks. His sharp gaze scanned every detail, keen to see that his players made no concessions to their best work. As he ventured down the corridor at the rear of the stage, he heard the voices of Fidato and Donata deep in conversation. He felt light-headed. It dawned on him that, in the urgency to get the licence and then secure the room, he had not eaten all day. As he turned the corner of the side room, he felt the need to steady himself against the doorframe.

'Are you alright?' Donata said, noticing his distress and rushing to his side.

'Just hungry.'

Donata had been careful to make sure that everyone in the company had eaten when they first arrived in the hall, but she had not given thought to Cagnaccio, who had been so engaged in making sure everything was alright that she had overlooked him.

'Eat, take this.' She offered him bread and salami from her bag and a small flask of wine to wash it down. Cagnaccio sat down on a nearby crate and wasted no time in eating the food.

‘And you two? What are you doing?’ he asked, his mouth full.

‘Preparing for tonight. Nothing for you to worry about.’ Her voice was calming and certain.

Fidato hesitated for a moment, as if unsure what to do next. Then, regaining his focus, he resumed the task at hand. With Donata to assist him, he began diluting potions, uncorking a full bottle, and pouring out enough to make two more. Donata, positioned by his side, topped up each one with water from a nearby pail. Once filled, she returned them to Fidato, who promptly corked them, giving each a vigorous shake to ensure proper mixing before placing them back in the case.

As Cagnaccio savoured his meal, his gaze fell on Donata. If she were tired from the rigours of the last few days, she did not show it at all. Instead, from morning to night, she carried out her work with quiet determination, following the tasks for the day with unwavering dedication and turning her hand to whatever might be required. Although she accomplished much, much more than anyone else, she unfailingly downplayed her efforts, contending there was always more to be done. Her resolve and practicality earned her respect. Her position in the troupe was unrivalled; save for Cagnaccio himself, her presence was indispensable, so steady was her hand on the rudder that steered them through the hardest of times.

Cagnaccio knew of her past; perhaps he preferred it that way. Occasionally, he would catch her concentrating intensely and imagine her as a young, contented wife, diligently repairing fishing nets on a weathered harbour wall as she patiently awaited her husband’s return from the sea. Widowed so young and in such tragic circumstances, it must have taken its toll. When they met, she was all but destitute. At once, he recognised her inner strength and had no hesitation in suggesting she follow them. Perhaps in the early days, there may have been a glimmer of hope, an unspoken belief that love might blossom from the dust. However, the reality was that their close proximity and the roles they assumed simply pulled them apart. In those days, he was so ambitious that love was an unhealthy distraction. Perhaps she, too, misinterpreted his inaction as doubt.

A stranger entering the hall at that moment might have imagined Emilia and her family to be an inseparable quartet, bound together with love. But if they looked closer, they would see a wife scarcely listening and a husband unsure how to act, with a son desperate to run rampant and a daughter caught in a dream, her eyes not on her family, but absorbed by the young man on the stage, watching him climb a ladder, checking the surety of his foothold with every single rung.

As Simonetta strode back into the hall, Rosetta realised instantly what her heart was calling her to do.

'You cannot treat him like that,' Rosetta said, running after her, pulling on Simonetta's skirt.

'Grow up, Rosetta. You are better than him.'

'But I don't want anyone else, and you don't deserve him, and I swear, while there is breath in my lungs, you will not have him.'

'So, the little girl has spirit. Good. But believe me, sweet girl, if I wanted your Pedrillo, you would not get in my way. He craves a woman, not a child.'

'But you cannot play with people like that.'

'I'll do exactly as I like.' And tugging her from Rosetta's grip, she spun on her heels and strode off in the direction of the courtyard.

As if suddenly aware of the scene she was creating, Rosetta looked up at the stage to gauge her beloved's reaction, but Pedrillo was no longer there.

[Let's move. I'm getting tired here. There, against that wall, by the planks, that bench—that might be the best space. Move quickly, and don't look at Cagnaccio. We'll sneak across when no one is looking.]

With the trestles in place as a foundation, the carpenter and his team turned their attention to building two sets of stairs that would allow the actors to rise to the stage. Belnaso was hanging backdrops from a frame at the back of the stage, ready to be unfurled hastily whenever the action changed: canvases painted one as a room interior, the other to resemble a street, each with a slit down the middle through which actors could enter or leave. These were Belnaso's pride and joy. He looked after them as if they were his children, unfurling them at his cue, his role always being to change the scene, a task that filled him with pride.

Cagnaccio resumed his task, passing between the groups of workers, offering advice they did not need, and checking the quality of their work. He stopped in the centre of the room. Two characters were lurking, trying not to be seen.

[Look out; I think he has seen us.]

Cagnaccio

You two, yes, you. Don't pretend I can't see you.
Don't just stand around there; who are you anyway?
You've been following us around for days. You think I haven't noticed? What do you want? (He waits, but you do not answer.) Well, at least make yourselves

useful—take those planks to the carpenters. Don't
just stand there; move!

*[I told you not to look him in the eye. Now look what you've done. We'll have to play along.
Come on, you take the other end. You go backward. Be careful where you put your feet. Alright,
now together, lift...]*

In a corner, to add to the lightening mood, Simonetta sat composing a tarantella, first picking out its fervent rhythm on a guitar as she cautiously hummed a tune. Then, sure enough, she had it, setting the melody on a flute, its stirring rhythm and lilting melody causing others in the hall to whistle along or tap their toes in time.

A fine Colombina is a rare find. Simonetta stood unparalleled. Men, entranced by her blend of passion and aloofness, yearned to possess her. Women, equally enthralled, studied her every gesture, hoping to capture her secrets to use to excite their own men. Yet, behind the limelight, Simonetta's confidence wavered. Those who knew her well or watched her closely might glimpse a vulnerability behind the mask—that she craved attention too readily for it to be just a game, and her fierce rejections felt more like shields than whims.

With no assigned job of his own, the Dottore had resorted to teaching Belnaso the finer parts of the task he had nearly completed. The more advice he offered, the more flustered Belnaso became.

'Belnaso,' Cagnaccio called, as if seeing him starting to panic and offering him an escape, '*Vieni. Qui. Adesso.* I have an errand for you.'

Belnaso vaulted down from the stage with such force that he almost slid the distance to Cagnaccio. Cagnaccio reached into his purse, took out a few coins, and recited to the breathless man a list of items that were broken in the square and that needed to be replaced. Belnaso was no fool. His slow manner and his difficulties in speaking led some to believe he was an idiot, but his memory was razor sharp, and he knew the effect of his actions. He studied others' reactions so carefully that he knew how to play to their expectations. When buying, traders would either become so frustrated with him that, taking pity on the poor man's inadequacies, they would give him the item to get rid of him, or else they would get into a frustrating tussle in the face of such dogged ignorance that the other would inevitably surrender. The real fools were those who underestimated him. The truth was that while the world at large might discount him, no one would strike a better deal.

Belnaso stood, shuffling his feet, mouthing each word until he could recite the list by rote, fixing the list in his mind, before, with a nod of confirmation from his patron, he hurried away to the street.

Dottore

You two. Don't shirk. You heard what Cagnaccio said. There are plenty of planks to move. Step lively. That's right. Get them balanced. Step in time with each other. That's it. Let's see how well you have stacked them. You will need to get them all the same way up, or they will rock and be unsecure. Well, go on; get on with it. (He makes his way to the stack of planks and turns to inspect the pile.)

[Now. This is our chance. Drop that and run. Quick, while he's not looking, head for the courtyard, there's bound to be somewhere we can hide. Run!]

In the courtyard, Brighella and the Apprentice were masked and practising routines. They worked together, with Arlecchino adopting a different facial expression to cover every display of fear: trembling in fright, the fervour of panic, the exaggeration of shock, cringing, and cowering to appear scared. Each pose or gesture was so intricately reviewed and perfected before moving on to the next. Opposite him, for each of the apprentice's stances, Brighella would offer a reaction: a mocking gesture, pointing in condescension, or bending backwards, hands on hips, and exaggerating laughter; leaning in to be snide; wagging a finger to show his disdain. In this way, between them, they covered the gamut of emotions. These time-honoured drills, created at random for any emotional response, were fundamental to their art. Improvising grew from their mastery. Each finger, each twitch, and each tilt of the head were practised ceaselessly.

Standing in the doorway, Cagnaccio could see every flaw. He appreciated their diligence but not their readiness to settle for amusement to the detriment of building their skills. Too much of the work lacked integrity; he had always tried to instil in them that the humour must always grow out of the truth, no matter how grotesque it might appear. The characters must believe their own reactions, and as soon as they became only gestures, the players betrayed their art. Just as he opened his mouth to intervene, a voice from behind surprised him.

'You were right, of course.' Fidato, a man so fleet of foot, despite his age, that he had crept up unobserved, was observing the young actors over Cagnaccio's shoulder. 'You were right, you know. To unleash on him in the piazza. He got what he deserved. You have to show these apprentices. If not, they never learn.' 'There's an arrogance,' he continued, 'that will be the downfall of that lad. He acts without thinking. No respect for the tradition of his art. He doesn't realise his luck in learning from the best. All he wants is a

cheer, or a laugh, and coins to fritter on gambling or whores in the taverns at night.' His verdict announced, he clapped Cagnaccio on the shoulder. 'No, you were right to drum it home.'

Regardless of whether the old rogue was sincere, Cagnaccio was in no doubt that Fidato was no fool, he was clever enough to read the signs and turn them to his own advantage. But as much as he was suspicious of the motive, the sentiment was right. The pursuit of excellence meant everything. The audience might laugh, and the coffers might get filled. The people were easily pleased. But his success and reputation were built on a dedication to his craft, to learning the skills of his own masters and perfecting them until he was sore. He would never make it, they said. He would throw it all in with a tantrum and simply walk away. He showed them. There had been no shortcuts to his success—just diligence, hard work, and sweat.

Without that, what was the point?

[2]

[There's no point in staying in the courtyard; there's nothing going on out there. At least the hall is quieter now that the Dottore's gone. If we're quiet, we can watch them rehearse from here. There, that crate—let's hide.]

'Do it again,' Cagnaccio shouted. 'No, do it again.'

'But it's funny enough as it is.'

'Funny? You want to know funny?' Cagnaccio was reaching the point of frustration, where he always seemed to arrive sooner or later while trying to train the apprentice. 'Funny is the boy who pleads to be taken into the group to train "with the master, to learn from the best",' he said, mimicking the voice of the boy, then gives up at the first hurdle. Funny is the boy who thinks he knows everything but lacks the backbone to learn. Funny is the boy who thinks that laughter is the prize. Any fool can make them laugh. You, you ungrateful sot, are testament to that.' He could feel his blood rushing through his arms as his fists began to flex. 'Now. Do it again. And focus. Remember, it isn't funny for Arlecchino, so why is it funny to you? You want me to beat the stupidity out of you? Is that it? Now. Concentrate. Again.'

Unfazed by the tirades of his master, the Apprentice readied himself to start the lazzo again. The stock business was one of many lazzi that the players learned, rehearsing and mastering the tricks until they became insertable into any plot to generate a certain laugh. The lazzo of the spinning wine was straightforward enough, yet it

demanded an air of naturalness and a real artistry to perform. Precision was the key, if only to convey the exaggeration and implausible reaction of Arlecchino, the zany mischievous servant, who, with a brimming goblet of pilfered wine in his hand, hears the approaching footsteps of his master, Pantalone, throwing him into panic. In the face of the unexpected arrival, Arlecchino dithers, uncertain how to proceed. To convey his bewilderment, he executes two frog leaps in the air, his heels touching his backside, then backflips to seek refuge in a large, winged chair, all without spilling the wine. To Arlecchino the move seems reasonable: by synchronising his body's movements with the wine, its level should stay undisturbed. Only the audience sees his folly and sees the disaster coming. When Pantalone arrives, he cannot find his servant, grumbles to the audience, and exits the stage in a huff. In an attempt to get rid of the incriminating object, Arlecchino throws the goblet to Pedrolino, who catches it in mid-air. When Pantalone returns, Arlecchino is prostrate on the floor. He is about to chastise him when he sees Pedrolino with the goblet. Shuffling across the stage as fast as little steps will take him, Pantalone grabs the innocent Pedrolino, delivering a sharp slap around the head before exiting the stage with the goblet, only to trip over Arlecchino's outstretched foot, launch the wine into the air, and drench some unsuspecting front-row spectators. Speed and agility were of the essence, especially if they were to retain the wine; each action must not look choreographed but be a simple bodily reaction to the character's thoughts.

Cagnaccio

No. You're too slow.

You're waiting too long for the leap. It looks contrived. How often do I have to say this? Are you stupid? Do it all again.' (*The Apprentice steadies himself and tries the leap again.*) Better, better—no!

What do you think you are doing? Are you thinking at all? More height. It needs more height. Even a fool could do this. Lord in heaven, I hate to think what Il Maestro would have said. Now again, this time, and concentrate.

Yes, but you need more power on take-off. Use your legs and your back. (*Cagnaccio squats to demonstrate.*) Keep to the left; the flip is unbalanced, and you'll lose the wine if you're not straight. I think you are overcompensating. Again.

No. *Ma Dai*. This is wasting my time. Maybe we should forget the idea.

Yes. That's better, finally. Now, speed. (*Cagnaccio stamps on the floor in time with the jump.*) Bang. Bang, now flip. Yes. Yes, much better. How did it feel? The landing? Land in a heap, not straight, or your spine will likely give out. Do it over to set it. Do it twice more.'

It would be the same every time. Cagnaccio expected improvement, but the lad struggled to keep up with his demands. He pushed the boy relentlessly until the performance matched his expectations; the lazzo must thrill the audience by seemingly achieving the impossible, for then the audience would laugh. Cagnaccio cared only for the act, not the boy himself. He would immerse himself in the work with such intensity that his humour was always choleric, on the verge of a violent outburst, until Donata would have to intervene and suggest he let the poor lad rest. Disorientated, he would stare at the boy as if lost in time and space before awkwardly telling him to leave, when his attention would turn to Pedrillo.

Pedrillo, as Pedrolino, although his role was less demanding, was vital to the outcome of the lazzo. With his white-powdered and unmasked face, his expressions were essential for comedic effect. His role demanded precise timing: a moment of shock at the hurtling goblet, a wide-eyed surprise upon catching it, followed by panic to retain all the wine. To emphasise his agility, Pedrolino would spin as he caught it, his long sleeves billowing, until he returned to face the audience with pride and a grin on his face.

Despite being tough on his Apprentice, seeing much of himself in the boy, Cagnaccio showed more patience for Pedrillo. Had his circumstances been different, if he had raised a son of his own, he would have hoped for a boy like Pedrillo—a fine boy, ever hopeful, never easily knocked back, with a simple, unwavering faith in his own destiny no matter the obstacles in his path. Since joining the troupe, Pedrillo had charmed his way into all their affections, always ready and eager to help. He diligently learned his craft, never intimidated but applying himself calmly, keen to listen and learn, with no obvious ambition for fame or to become the best in the troupe, but with a pride in fulfilling his duty and a refusal to let others down. In quiet moments, you might find him practising by himself, working at some piece of business to ingrain it into his limbs.

Such ambition as Pedrillo had was vested in a life with Simonetta. It mattered little to him that she gave him no encouragement; he pictured a life for them of his own making, a world where they would be one, in which he would do anything for her, and together,

they would live all their days, content, forever in love. If she asked him for the moon and stars, he would scramble to lay them at her feet.

Cagnaccio

Good, Pedrolino, but spin less. *(He demonstrates).* Your spin is too elegant. Too perfect for a clumsy servant. Vary your stance, windmill your arms, and make them believe the wine will spill out. Watch. *(CAGNACCIO spins around slowly, his arms winging as if struggling for balance on a knife edge.)* You see, it's funny—not because it's precarious, but because by trying to stop the wine from spilling, you're actually making things worse. Try it again, but slower. *(He passes the goblet back. PEDROLINO tries again at half-speed. CAGNACCIO moves the boy's arm and leg, emphasising each action for the boy to replicate.)* Yes. Well done. Now try to build up the speed. Good. Yes. Better.'

When the Apprentice returned, he sat down with his back to the stage, the better to watch them rehearse, while he chomped loudly on a raw carrot stump. Whatever his intentions, it did not take long before his eyes followed his thoughts as they drifted to the back of the hall, to the enchanting figure of Simonetta, strumming her Spanish guitar.

'Are you joining us?' Cagnaccio said, kicking at his Apprentice's heels, 'If not, leave!'

The comment, innocent enough as it might seem, belied a different truth, for more often recently, Cagnaccio had found himself musing what life would be like without the boy and how the troupe might adapt. The boy was talented, undeniably. He had spotted it from the start, but his apprentice had developed so prodigiously that now his rise was a threat. For while Cagnaccio did not begrudge the time spent developing the boy and drumming into him high standards, it came with a double-edged sword: in realising the youth's potential, Cagnaccio had sown the seeds of his own demise. The day was fast approaching when the apprentice would outshine the master. Cagnaccio dreaded the arrival of that day, as if it heralded the toll of his death. As hard as he might fight to defer it, he knew, as sure as the creaking in his bones and the stiffness in his joints, that the inevitable day would arrive when Cagnaccio, the people's hero, would become Cagnaccio, the one who once was. Then only one question would remain, the one that haunted him most: what to do when there is no tomorrow but a line of faded yesterdays

and regrets for all that was lost? His reputation would outlast him—for a short while at least, he was sure—but without his prominence to nurture it, it would gradually dissolve into dust and become no more than a memory, an invention lacking any worth.

‘Both of you,’ he said, trying to shrug off his mood, ‘take it up onto the stage; see how it plays out there.’

They hoisted the large chair into position. Cagnaccio climbed up and, walking the width and depth of the stage, stamped on each of the planks, inspecting the carpenters’ work. A few of the boards seemed loose, with more movement in the structure than he expected. With the air of a man who knows better and tries to keep hold of his tongue, Gigione, one of the backstage team, pretended to listen to Cagnaccio’s concerns, then quickly dismissed them.

‘It is as it has always been.’

‘I don’t believe you. Go over every bolt and nail,’ Cagnaccio shouted, ‘and do it *now*.’ Gigione turned away, stooping to pick up a hammer and chisel, which he waved defiantly in the air, as he walked off into the courtyard.

‘And you two, what are you waiting for?’ As if on cue, Pedrillo threw an empty goblet to the Apprentice to start the lazzo again. They faltered time and again; either the Apprentice stumbled on the edge of a plank or failed to land a backflip, or Pedrolino’s spin became clumsy and too fast for him to control.

‘You two, you drive me to despair. We did it on the floor, per Dio; what has changed? Must it always be like this?’

He could hear the volume rising in frustration in his own voice; he could feel the stiffness growing in the nape of his neck and the bile rising within him. Good sense told him to walk away; he would regret it if he did not.

His footsteps carried him no farther than a few paces down the hall when a crash reverberated out from the stage. The Apprentice, his leaps off-balance, had landed awkwardly and sent the chair hurtling to the ground.

‘What in the name of...are you utterly useless?’ Cagnaccio spun around, already striding forward, when a hand rested on his shoulder, as if to halt his advance.

‘Leave them,’ Fidato said calmly. ‘Come. Let them work it out for themselves.’

‘Remove your filthy hands from me. Must you always sneak up from behind?’ Cagnaccio pushed the ciarlatano aside.

‘What in heaven is going on?’ Donata said, emerging from the courtyard. ‘I can hear this din outside.’

‘What does it matter to you? To any of you?’ In exasperation, Cagnaccio stormed off, grabbing his cloak from a bench and yelling as he headed out to the street.

‘*Vaffanculo*, the lot of you!’

'You go after him,' Donata said, grabbing Fidato's arm. 'He's exhausted, that's all. If I go, it will only make matters worse, and we will say things that both of us regret.'

'But I must prepare for this evening.'

'There will be time enough for that. I'll finish up here; Belnaso will help me. Anyway, it's too early yet for a crowd. Besides, should I remind you, he didn't have to let you come with us? Perhaps you have a debt to repay?'

Grudgingly, Fidato headed off.

[3]

[That must be our cue. They are bound to be heading for the piazza.]

It was early evening as the peasants returned from the fields, their faces drawn from the long, arduous day, but today their step was noticeably lighter, for even though they dragged behind them the darkening clouds of evening, an air of anticipation hung in the air. The sound of laughter and chatter filled the streets as families prepared for that night's festivities. Elderly women hastened to finish their chores, gathering water from the fountain or sweeping out their homes. Children ran from alley to alley, playing games and chasing each other, or helped their fathers and mothers by hanging the cherished flags and pennants, the faded remnants brought out every year, each betraying the wealth of its household, the finest gleaming and pristine, the ambitious exceeding their means with ostentatious shows they could ill afford, while those of the toilers were threadbare and the houses of the poor had none.

Expectations were also building in the piazza. From the hidden recesses of alleys, market stalls of every trade began to emerge, taking their places around the perimeter. Some were in the course of construction, their unsure frames hastily lashed together with rope, the easier to disassemble, while others were no more than tables, dragged out, their rickety legs scraping over the cobblestones in protest. Merchants eager to make the most of the opportunities to sell their wares busied themselves to be ready for the crowds that would flock to the square. Soon the streets would come alive, bursting at the seams with the townsfolk, eager to spend what little coin they had saved. Temporarily unburdened from the weight of hardship, they would rush from stall to stall, their eyes wide with delight, as the enchantment of the festival would dance once more into their hearts. But for the moment, the piazza was quiet, save for a scattered few who wandered furtively, as if mapping a course they later would take to the bargains they hoped to secure.

Fidato and the pacified Cagnaccio approached the larger of the two erected platforms at the lower end of the square. 'Donata was right,' Fidato said. 'It's much too early for an audience. A drink?' He led the way across the square into the shady alleys.

Cagnaccio always felt more at home in the lower parts of the town, with the ever-present odours from the houses, the shouts of women to each other across the streets, and the sounds of babies bawling to be fed. He did not belong to the upper town, with its wealth, pomp, and lies. No, he felt comfort in the honesty of poverty. It reminded him of his youth in Naples and the dignity of the poor as they worked to eke out an existence, struggling to stay alive.

Following the maze of gullies, they finally turned a corner to find themselves on a terrace on the eastern outskirts of the town. At a taverna there, Fidato ordered a flask of wine, and they sat outside on a bench, overlooking the parapet. For a while, neither spoke, but sat watching the last of the daylight as the murmur of starlings danced, twisting clouds in the soaring draughts of air.

'You know,' Fidato said, 'Brighella and your apprentice—they're just young. They can be stupid, yes, but all they want is to impress the great Cagnaccio. They think a lot of you...'

'If you believe that, then you're the fool, not them. Those two, they'd smile at your face, then dance with the devil at your back.'

'But weren't we all the same at their age?

'I had no time for stupid games. I was too busy trying to stay alive.'

'But in the early days, surely? In your childhood.'

Cagnaccio did not answer, but, rising from the bench, he went to lean against the wall.

'If your childhood was anything like mine,' Fidato said, 'trying to live up to the expectations of your parents, encouraged to follow pathways you had no desire to be on, when every instinct was to rebel.'

Cagnaccio remained silent, his gaze fixed on the horizon as he rose from the worn-out bench and ambled over to the nearby wall, as if drawn to the landscape beyond.

'They must have wanted something for you?'

'I doubt they ever wanted me at all,' Cagnaccio mumbled.

'You say that, but surely you had a dream? Wouldn't they be proud of you now?'

'My father wanted me dead. The feeling was mutual. That old bastard drank his way to hell and took us all down with him. My mother? Dreaming? Her only dream was to stay out of the reach of his fists. And my sister? God knows what became of her—assuming she managed to escape. The scars she must carry. So, no dreams; only nightmares. And we lived those every day.'

'But you got out in the end. You survived.'

‘Survived or escaped?’

‘And what of your Arlecchino? And they can’t get enough of your Pantalone; surely that is success?’

‘For whom? Perhaps for Pantalone? For the audience too, maybe, but for the puppet beneath the mask...’ He stopped, remembering where he was. He drained the wine and set down the empty flask on the wall.

‘I’m bored of all this talking. It’s time we started back.’

At last, the hall was ready, and the players were donning costumes; their attention turned to the festivities ahead. Although there would be no performance, a piazza filled with people was too important an opportunity to pass up. Each in the guise of the character would mingle with the crowds, doing tricks and tumbles, busking, and dancing as much to spread the word of their arrival as to earn some extra coin.

The young women pulled on their full skirts that showed their slender figures, choosing their low-cut bodices deliberately to accentuate their curves when they danced to the rhythm of the beat. Arlecchino, wearing his traditional motley, the once bright patches faded from washing, busied himself in securing the belt around his waist. He meticulously brushed down the nap of his white felt hat, smoothing the pelt of the foxtail tip dangling from its brim. Tucked inside his belt, he placed his faithful slapstick, the two slender wooden paddles bound together, ready to deliver resounding thwacks on unsuspecting victims.

Brighella, irritated at the unhelpful scrutiny of the Dottore, who sat like a raven on a fence, adjusted his white smock while Emilia diligently sewed two of Brighella’s emerald trims back onto their rightful seams, her nimble fingers working with precision.

(Entering with Cagnaccio, Fidato hurries to Donata.)

‘Did you and Belnaso manage to sort my cases?’

‘We did. They’re here.’ *(She points to the cases beside her, against the wall.)* ‘You might want to check them. Not that I would know, but they all seemed fine. One or two needed were half-empty, so Belnaso topped them up with water. He can show you which ones.’

‘Perfect. You learn quickly,’ he said without thinking. ‘I mean, some are quite concentrated elixirs; water will hardly dilute their potency, if indeed at all.’

‘I’m sure,’ she said, smiling to herself as she left him to his potions.

Near the stage, scrubbing the dust from his boots with a piece of ragged pennant that he must have found in the street, the Capitano rose uneasily, his belly working counter to his feet until, with an effort, he managed to prise himself upright. Patting his hands on his stomach, he picked up his boots and tottered barefoot to Cagnaccio.

‘May I speak?’ he said, his voice no more than a whisper, ‘That fellow, Fidato—I confess I do not trust him, and I do not like him one bit. Decry me if you must; the Lord knows it is your right, but my nose detects a certain unease whenever he appears. And you know, my friend, this beauty is seldom wrong.’ He tapped the large strawberry in the middle of his face, a testament to wine and sack. ‘As I said to Emilia—he is entangling Donata in his web that one, and—you watch—that poor, kind-hearted woman is succumbing to his charms. I tell you, he has bewitched her beyond reason. I’m on the verge of telling him straight, I am. If he wants to pick a battle, the Capitano is the one for the job. Trust me, Cagnaccio, my intuition about him is not wrong. My nose has never been wrong.’

‘Never wrong, but only half-right!’ Cagnaccio playfully slapped the Capitano on the back, as if to assuage his fears. At first, he too harboured doubts about the *ciarlatano*, but the more time he spent in his company, the less suspicious he became—after all, he was only like them, a poor traveller trying to eke out his way. But even as the words left his lips, Cagnaccio’s gaze shifted, catching sight of Fidato delving deep into his jerkin to retrieve a folded parchment, which he discreetly passed to Donata, who adeptly concealed it in her skirts.

‘The rumours circulating,’ the Capitano asked, ‘are they true?’ Are we truly bound for France? Emilia said I was being stupid, but I know what I heard. I’m only asking because we’ve been with you so long, and know what you think about that place, that we could not believe it to be true.’

‘Then your instincts were right all along,’ Cagnaccio replied. ‘We most certainly are not journeying to that godforsaken hole. Not while I live and I breathe.’

[4]

[Smell. Ah, that sweet nuttiness—chestnuts roasting over a fire—no matter where you go, it always reminds me of Agnese and the piazza on the eve of the festival. Soon it will be heaving, so try to stay close—there’s much for us to see.]

Year after year, the scene played out unchanged. On the eve of the feast of Sant’Agnese, a palpable sense of anticipation hung in the air. But none were more excited than the maidens of the town, for legend decreed that should a young maiden faithfully adhere to the age-old rituals—a day of complete fasting before taking to her bed, unclothed, her back to the mattress, her eyes towards the heavens—then she would be blessed with a vision of the groom she would wed, who would arrive with the tenderest of kisses and a banquet, miraculous to behold. Knowing that destiny can be fickle and dance to its own

tune, an industry grew around the myth to help it on its course with potions, talismans, and spells to help ensure the man in the vision was the one that she held in her heart.

Not only were the maidens excited, but spilling out into the neighbouring streets, the sounds of a town in celebration rang out in the chill evening air. Tradesmen, beggars, and pilgrims, along with peasants from surrounding villages, all converged on the town. Hawkers, their voices soaring above the clamour, vied for attention, eager to sell their colourful wares. Amid the commotion, nestled in a corner, a knife grinder drew a modest queue, sparks dancing from the spinning wheel as blades were sharpened and honed.

A tall figure with a pheasant feather in his hat skilfully cranked a hurdy-gurdy, his wiry fingers tapping on the keys to produce the melodious drone of a bergamasca, as he sang at the top of his voice, while a young girl, no more than a child, danced with a performing monkey, to the amusement of the children in the crowd. Around the piazza, as if out of thin air, merchants emerged, their stalls laden with a tantalising array of provisions. Meats and long salamis swung gently from wooden frames, while bakers arranged their trestles with the day's second batches of bread and pastries, as if money had never been tight. Trade was brisk and thriving. Tomorrow, it would be the same when the saint's procession would lure the crowds back to the square.

Cagnaccio climbed the grand steps of the basilica, the better to identify his players among the sea of heads. The festival elders, wise in their ways, had erected three platforms strategically placed across the square. Two were small and occupied by mountebanks and storytellers; they offered no competition. Yet the other, a larger platform, gave him pause; although currently empty, the thought occurred to him that it might have been erected for a rival Commedia troupe, poised to steal their audience. He anxiously scanned the bustling piazza. Meticulously, he viewed the crowds, looking for the tell-tale signs, but the more he looked, the more he felt reassured, as the only ones in costume were members of his own company.

Behind him, a voice, plaintive and forlorn, was begging for his indulgence. Cagnaccio had seen so many beggars, some authentic, most feigners, that the sight of a shocking ailment never caused him to stir. Some were of such skill that they made his own acting efforts seem poor, for water and saffron, to the uninformed, could easily pass for jaundice, and an egg broken on a bandage made an impressive, festering sore. He had learned that the heart of a three-day-old piglet, tightly bandaged behind the knee, gave off such a putrid odour that it could be mistaken for gangrene.

Although he was no stranger to beggars, as he turned, the sight of a feeble figure before him caused him to start—a frail, old blind woman crouching, huddled in layers of rags. Beggars were a common sight, and many of them were old, cast out beyond their usefulness when they lost the strength to work, but the garments the old woman wore, as even a cursory glance could tell, though faded and worn, were once of such fine quality

that they told a tale of their own. Once, unmistakably, she had come from means, but now her garments spoke only of decline, and though defiled, unclean, and torn, in spite of her altered circumstances, the woman clung to her pride. Her words carried a quiet nobility, but her hands betrayed her agitation; the rawness of her skin bore witness to the continual wringing of her hands, and the etched path of a thumbnail across the width of her palm told of her distress. Despite her shabby appearance, her eyes glinted with fiery intensity, brimming with anticipation and concealing the depths of her despair. Draped in tatters, her worn shoes falling apart, she wore a modest necklace—a string of obsidian beads, its cord frayed and soiled—which she occasionally toyed with as if to reassure herself of its presence, a poignant reminder, perhaps, of a life that had long since slipped from her grasp.

She reached up, fumbling for his face, marking out his features as if to get her measure of the man. Placing one hand on each of his cheeks, she drew it closer to her own. Her breath was acrid and repulsive. He struggled to break free, but she kept her hands firm around him, tilted her head, and peered so intently at him that he swore that she could see.

‘Drop the knife, sweetie. You don’t need it any more. No longer will it serve you. Drop it and be done.’

How she knew this and how it applied so fittingly to him that it could only have come from someone intimately connected to his life made him shudder at the force of its truth. The blind possessed insight—everyone knew that—the guardians of a wisdom impenetrable to most. Yet still, he could not help but question how she understood him so well. He had never spoken of this to anyone. Or was he being foolish? After all, these were merely words. Though they might have significance for him, they could have been so artfully chosen, their meaning so ambiguous, that if spoken to anyone who crossed her path, they might believe they applied equally to them. Nevertheless, as much as he might reason otherwise, he could not shake off the thought: what if she had spoken the truth?

From his purse, he gave her two bright scudos. Tears welled in her eyes. Over and again, she thanked him, reaching out to grab his sleeve and squeeze as hard as if he were her saviour, before she scurried off into the crowd, clutching the coins to her breast.

As was common on high days, the basilica swung wide its doors, and the revellers rushed inside, the usual thresholds of sanctity forsaken. Traders flocked to fill the side aisles, transforming them into bustling marketplaces, while in the heart of the nave, a young busker belted out verses with his lute, weaving tales of desire and lust. In a modest side chapel, a beggar convulsed on the ground, his limbs writhing uncontrollably and foam issuing from his mouth. The effectiveness of a piece of soap was known to all good

scoundrels. The crowd around him hesitated, uncertain whether to intercede to help a soul in torment or dismiss it as an act. At the appeal for a merciful gift of a silver coin *to bless him in this place*, the symptoms miraculously eased.

Closer to the altar, a band of pilgrims knelt in prayer, but such was the din around them that even if their God were listening, He would not have heard their appeals. In a quieter nook of the basilica, away from the general throng, five capuchin monks intoned their chants, their heads dipped, the hoods of their simple, brown habits hanging down their backs, their unkempt beards cascading over their chests, as their bare feet inched along the cold floor.

Cagnaccio had neither prayer within him nor even the will to try. All he saw was the townspeople's hypocrisy and the baseness to which they could succumb. Despite his best efforts, the blind woman's words lingered in the back of his mind. Ahead, two inebriated men in the chancel, near the ambo, were eagerly pointing in his direction, flapping and flailing their arms, their actions drawing the attention of a sea of other eyes. He had no patience to be accosted. For now, he needed to breathe and order his thoughts. Sensing a rising tide of excitement and the imminent onrush of admirers, Cagnaccio knew to retreat, but as he stepped out into the cool evening air, he was faced with another crowd growing by the moment as people thronged into the square.

[5]

In the heart of the square, the Apprentice, as Arlecchino, was improvising with the Dottore. Arlecchino, in his usual mischief, was slyly trying to steal wine from the Dottore's goblet using a lengthy, hollow straw that snaked over the Dottore's shoulder, encouraging the onlookers to distract the old man from his ploy.

By the far wall, a hand emerged above the crowd, accompanied by the rhythmic slapping of a tamborello. Simonetta, in her role as Colombina, with bells on her ankles and ribbons on her wrists, danced gracefully, swaying her skirts to the thrum of Brighella's guitar. Her movements captivated her audience, which could not resist stamping their feet or clapping in time with the beat. One by one, she drew men from the crowd to join her before discarding them for the next.

[Keep up, will you? Come over here. What are you looking at? Eh? Oh, don't bother—whatever it is, I'm not interested. Our story's over here. Do try to keep up.]

Seeing Belnaso standing near one of the raised platforms, Cagnaccio realised the ciarlatano had begun to assemble an impressive audience for his wares. The vigour with

which Fidato waved his arms in the air, the declamatory tone of his voice, the authority, the certainty, and the presence of the man made it impossible not to become enthralled. A drape of dark red velvet embroidered with three large mystical symbols in gold thread served as a backdrop. Moving and bending with an agility Cagnaccio did not expect, Fidato flew from one side of the platform to the other, his voice ringing out clearly above the calls and heckles of the crowd. Cagnaccio edged his way closer to the dais to pick out what the old man was saying.

Fidato

Gentle folk. Rejoice. In honour of our blessed Sant'Agnese, I bring to you salvation from worldly and spiritual ills. You, Messer, yes, you. Are you taunted by demons that rob you of your sleep? Are you teased and taunted by the pain of unrequited love? Do your limbs ache as much as your heart aches? Good people, I bring you cures and remedies for all ills. From the dangerous plains of Arabia Felix to the treacherous Chaldean heights, from the far Orient and worlds newfound, I bring treatments and salves of such power and potency that I must warn you not to take them lightly. Do not delay, good people; salvation is at hand. These—the products of expeditions into the jaws of death. Plants torn from the jaws of fantastic monsters at the ceiling of the world. Scales pulled from the backs of dragons in lands far, far away. Bones ground down from hideous sea goats caught riding the tempestuous waves.

I bring cures for all diseases, physic or spiritual, brought to us by braver men than you or me, men willing to risk their lives and limbs to help their fellow men. These unheralded paragons of courage—here their dangerous cargo, here their healing balms—step up before they are gone, sir. No longer suffer in silence; the time for a cure is now. There are no diluted, watered-down wares here Signora.

All remedies come with a guarantee. If you have any reason to be dissatisfied, try them for just one week, and if you feel no benefits, I promise to return what you paid—no questions, no quibbles, no arguments—the very next time I see you. Can I say fairer than that?

So, come, who is deserving of aid? Stand forward, good people; tell me what ails you, and I will end your pains.

As if to mark the end of the speech, the ciarlatano raised his right arm in the air, spun around on his heels, swinging his cloak above him, and then, with a flourish, brought it down in a low sweep over the heads of his audience, picking out individual faces and gesturing for them to step forward.

'I'm even tempted myself,' Cagnaccio said to Donata, who had spotted him across the crowd and come to stand by his side. 'He's a silver tongue, that one.'

'It's his trade. He's good at it. I suspected it from the start.'

'And you two? You seem to be growing very close—anything I should know?'

'Nothing, and whatever you have seen, you are mistaken.'

'Well, whatever it is, be careful. I do not trust that man.'

'You never trust anyone. Why should you be any different with him?'

'And what was that nonsense about the invitation to some French court? When were you thinking to share that with me?'

'It's no secret. And as you profess to know everything, I assumed you already knew.'

'France? Of all the places, how many times do I have to say it? I refuse to take one single step inside that heathen land, and there's an end to the matter. Rip the invitation up. Burn it. Eat it if you wish, but don't try to sway me, Donata, or use those charms of yours. This time, I'm adamant. I am not going. And I warn you, if it comes down to a choice, regardless of what you and your new friend may try to scheme behind my back, you will end up disappointed. We are not now, nor ever, going to France. Is that clear?'

'I think you made your point.'

On the podium, the ciarlatano was still in full flow.

Fidato

Boils? Scabs? Itches that drive you to frenzy and beyond? Here—a tincture of only the finest ingredients: betony, apple, devil's horsewhip,

adiantum, and rosemary, mixed with an element so magical, so potent, and so secret that I dare not utter its name lest it find its way into the hands of lesser medical men. Safe to tell, plucked from the verdant gardens planted by Semiramis herself at midnight by an ageing eunuch, then laved in the crystal fountains, sparkling and weeping in the moonbeams of the three-day-old crescent moon.

Signore, Signori, don't keep me waiting. Such an item. Buy while you still have the chance. A snip only ten little lire a phial.

Hands shot up around the crowd. Fidato handed Belnaso a wooden casket containing the small, dark bottles. Trade was brisk. The ciarlatano, eager to capitalise on the enthusiastic crowd, which was growing every minute, moved on to extol the merits of a powder to cure night sweats, and was waving the folded leaf of paper high in the air when he stopped abruptly. Cagnaccio turned to see the Vescovo's assistant, accompanied by four castle guards, pushing their way to the stage. Fidato, in a fluster, shouted his apologies and, gathering his boxes and jars, dashed from the stage to disappear into the depths of the crowd, leaving Belnaso alone, unsure what to do. Donata battled her way to the side of the podium.

'Belnaso, do what you do best,' she said, barely stopping as she passed him by. 'Stall them. Don't let them come after us.' Belnaso nodded, but she was already through the crowd, following the last sighting she had of Fidato down an alleyway leading from the square.

'No selling licence either? Why am I not surprised?' Cagnaccio spoke from behind, striding to keep pace. 'At least he is nimble on his feet.'

[6]

[Quickly, I can't hear anything from here. Go. While they are not looking. There—a table... Try to sit in the shadows. We need to hear but not be seen.]

In the dimly lit recesses of a taverna, the three figures huddled together, picked out by the guttering candlelight, as they sought solace from their woes. Fidato, despite his attempts to brush aside the ignominy of his abrupt retreat from the square with copious amounts of wine, could not wash away the bitter aftertaste of embarrassment, especially at being

seen by Donata. Head bowed; he was muttering under his breath. Donata, on the other hand, appeared genuinely amused.

'A good runner, then?' Cagnaccio joked, slapping Fidato on the shoulder. 'With agility like that, you'd make a fine Magnifico or even a Pantalone. Perhaps I'd better look out.'

'Hasty retreats: a regrettable evil. If you're wise, you learn that skill fast. It's easier that way.'

'Did you ever think of buying a licence? It might be easier on your feet!'

Cagnaccio was teasing; he knew only too well how stringent the licence conditions had become. Only after a rigorous evaluation of their wares—a meticulous inventory of each component, its quantities, its cited purpose, its application, and recognised testimonials from professionals or high-ranking clients—would a licence to sell be granted. The ordeal was fraught with corruption. Theft of recipes was common; as a consequence, most chose not to apply, relying on their quick wit, the sharp eyes of a good lookout, and their facility at running away. Instead, potions were purchased from apothecaries to be resold in nearby towns, or else concocted by the *ciarlatano* himself from a mixture of roadside herbs.

'These people just want to buy hope—and that is exactly what I sell them.' He sat back, watching them intently for a reaction, then, with a sense of urgency, he leaned closer to Donata and whispered, 'That Belnaso—I suppose he can be trusted? He has the money we took.'

'No more than yourself,' Cagnaccio replied with a grin. 'Be at ease. Belnaso will do what Belnaso does best; he will spit out a flurry of incoherent words that will leave the Vescovo's hounds feeling so baffled and confused that they will throw up their hands in despair.'

'The boy is honest,' Donata said. 'Do not worry. Although he may be anxious about where you have gone and what he should do next, stress follows him like a shadow. I should head back to the piazza and find him. I'll bring him back here.'

'No,' Fidato said abruptly, 'or we'll drink every coin that we earned. Take him to the hall.' I promised him one coin in ten; give him that. Keep the rest until I return.' Donata rose and made her way out to the street.

'Another flask, Cagnaccio,' the old man said. 'We have much in common, I fear. Two old men, two challenging roads behind us. Come, my friend, let's drink to wash away the injustice of our lives. Here, we'll eat.'

To the waft of garlic and oregano, a young servant girl, a sprig of rosemary tucked behind her ear, set down the food before them: two steaming plates of tripe in a tomato sauce, a platter of fennel in olive oil, and a wedge of that morning's bread. Distracted, she laid them down, her cheeks flushing as she focused on the young men in the corner.

'Your heart's not in this,' Fidato said, noticing his companion looking down ruefully at his food and moving it around the platter.

'What the food? It's fine.'

'Not the food. This. Your art. This life.'

Cagnaccio shook his head as if hoping to silence the conversation.

'Something happened. You're different. Someone or something has unsettled you.'

'Perhaps you're right, but what's the point? It's too late now to change; the performance is almost done, and I've struggled so long to get here that to give it up for nothing would be the act of a fool.'

'Did you ever have a dream?'

'I followed it—at one time, staying alive was the best I could dream for.'

'And now? Now you have success. Many people envy you for that. Your fellows see how much your admirers need you and how you make them feel, and they are envious of you. That's a weighty responsibility.'

'It is what I must do.'

'And yet, as much as these people need you, I sense that you need them more. So again, I ask you, "What will be the next part of the dream?"'

'Beyond survival? There is no dream. Isn't that enough?'

'Some yearn for the security of a family, a home, or a place to set down roots. To anchor their lives without running, to live an honest life that they chose rather than one forced upon them.' Fidato paused, reaching for a drink.

'To be like these poor wretches?' (*Cagnaccio points to the other patrons.*) 'Drinking away their woeful existence because hope abandoned them long ago?'

'Everyone is fleeing something, my friend, everyone, even you. One day, you will have to stop running and be ready to confront the truth. Your body will not last forever.'

Cagnaccio picked up a sprig of rosemary and examined it.

'What is it you're thinking?'

'I'm thinking about an old woman and a wolf.'

'A wolf, you say. Then, for sure, you are not nearly drunk enough. Waiter! (*He calls for another caraffa.*) Here, we need more wine.'

Pedrillo leant against a wall, watching Simonetta as she captivated the crowd with her performance. It was no more than a spectacle designed to tease and to taunt yet it filled him with disgust. These men saw her only as Colombina, not for who she truly was. To them, she was merely a conquest, an object of their lustful desires. If only they could see beyond the act to see the Simonetta he knew—a strong woman, yes, but vulnerable and deserving of love.

They were meant for each other. Perhaps he had always known it. They clashed. To an outsider, their differences seemed so far apart that any union seemed laughable, but to him, despite the fighting, nothing was unsurmountable, and though others might mock him for his conviction, he only saw a bond too valuable to ignore.

While Simonetta danced, Brighella perched on the end of a bench, his back to a table. Behind him, four mercenaries were playing cards, coins clashing as they tossed down their bets before slamming their cards down on the tabletop. Every time the winning hand was laid down, the three losers reacted angrily, labelling the winner a cheat.

Out of the corner of her eye, Simonetta saw the opportunity. Dethroning Brighella from his bench, she stepped up to claim the middle of the table. She sat down, stretching her long legs across the table, her eyes fixed on the youngest of the men as she slowly teased up the folds of her skirts, unveiling the supple curves of her calves. Lowering the hem of her bodice to emphasise the fullness of her bosom, she reached down, plucking a silver coin from the table. Bringing it tauntingly close to the mercenary's face, she smiled coyly and spun the coin in the air, deftly catching it and secreting it away in her purse. Swinging her legs to the floor to the jangle of the bells on her feet, with a low bow and a broad sweep of her tambourine, she sauntered her way through the crowd.

'Are you alright?' Pedrillo asked, running to keep pace with her.

'Get away from me if you don't want to feel my fist.' She drew her hand back, poised to deliver a resounding slap, but as her palm neared his face, she altered its trajectory, so it merely tapped him lightly on the cheek. Gripping his shoulder firmly, she spun him around and, using her foot to nudge his backside, propelled him forward, much to the delight of the crowd. Smarting from the blow to his dignity, Pedrillo retreated behind a merchant's stall, from where he could still watch her without incurring her wrath.

As Simonetta brushed past, Brighella reached out to grab her arm, his fingers pinching her flesh.

'He'll never be good enough for you.' (*She frees herself from his grip.*) 'The boy will never grow up, Simonetta. Pedrillo will forever be a buffoon, a capon with straw brains. So I ask you, after all this playing with him, do you really need another toy? Or would you prefer a man?'

Grasping a handful of his tunic, she yanked him close to her face.

Simonetta

A man like you, perhaps? I'd rather go with a toad.
(She spits.) You are all alike. Did I ask for your
 help? I don't think so, *grazie*. Never did I see
 such a thing. *Che bello!* To get such advice from
 one with so much wisdom, I fall to my knees in
 thanks. Such a blessing. *Gran cazzo!* To the devil
 with you. Keep your precious words to yourself.
 They have no value here.'

(She pushes him, he falls to the floor.
SIMONETTA exits, laughing. PEDRILLO,
seeing her depart, pushes through the
crowd to follow her.)

'You certainly captured her heart,' the Apprentice said, coming to gloat after spotting his friend on the ground. 'What on earth did you say to her?'

Brighella chuckled, his eyes sparkling mischievously. 'I told her she had the most captivating smile I had ever seen,' he replied, brushing the dirt from his tunic.

The Apprentice shook his head in disbelief. 'You never cease to amaze me,' he said, grinning.

'What can I say?' Brighella shrugged nonchalantly. 'I have a way with words. But I tell you one thing: Pedrillo will never have her. Not that one. She's far too fiery for him. But for another man, a man with promise in his future, a man who could stand up for himself, there could be a reward for that kind of man. A man with the audience on his side. Yes, that man would be a good match. An heir to the throne of Cagnaccio. Such a man might succeed in winning her—the woman who couldn't be won.'

A hundred images flashed through Brighella's mind—rehearsals of the man he might be and how she might be alongside him—and for the first time, it felt less like a fantasy than a possibility almost within his grasp.

And the Apprentice had the same thought.

[8]

[He's on the move. Yes, I know it's colder, but it's not my fault. And no, I have no idea where he is going, but we won't find out if we don't follow him. Move it; he's getting away.]

After the earlier excitement, a hush came to Agnese. The alleys were largely deserted, the doorways and shutters all closed, save for the last few inebriates who stumbled from wall to wall, trying to find shelter for the night. In the distance, the sound of a wolf howling echoed through the empty streets. The moon, hidden behind thick clouds, cast an ominous shadow over the dilapidated buildings. Cagnaccio loved this time of night. He spent so little time alone that, in the calm night air, he could claim these small hours as his own; beyond the worries of the day, he could find solace in his own thoughts. But as Cagnaccio walked through the deserted streets, he was restless and uneasy.

He was exhausted but knew he would not find sleep; the voices in his head were too loud, the images too vivid, and their accusations were so insistent that they tormented him in the quietest moments, even when awake. There, as always, was his father, eyes wide in anguish as he gasped the last of his breath. Had Cagnaccio killed his father? Somehow it did not seem to matter, whether the old sot died, only that Cagnaccio would forever see himself—a poor boy standing in terror as his father's life ebbed away, to the desperate screams of his sister and the wailing of his mother, her body shaking uncontrollably as she cowered at the foot of her bed. And Cagnaccio would feel his knuckles as they retightened on the blade and the warmth of the blood on his hands as his fear gave way to horror and his conviction gave way to doubt.

As he passed through the high town, at the end of a small gully that led from the Castello, the glint of a lantern threw flickers of light out into the street. Half in, half out of the building, Pedrillo sat on the floor, bleary-eyed, his back propped up by a pillar, his knees close to his chest.

Cagnaccio moved the lantern forward and sat down next to the youth. For a long time, nothing was said; the lad intent on gazing at the square metre of the floor before him. Cagnaccio watched as a draught guttered the flame in the lantern, casting shadows on the opposite wall.

'It's turning cold again,' he said. 'Tomorrow will be snow; mark my words.'

Pedrillo did not answer.

'You're out late? (*He pauses, waiting for a reaction.*) Peaceful up here. Here, you can hear your mind. Only the whispers of the wind disturb you.'

'I love her. I—I really love her.'

'I know, lad. But...'

'I had a dream. A premonition. I saw her walking away.' The boy was shaking with fear. 'And I sensed it, as surely as I know myself, that Simonetta would never be mine.'

'Who knows what is in our destiny? But this—it is not you, Pedrillo. You always were a fighter for your convictions,' Cagnaccio said, his voice full of compassion. 'Yes,

you had a dream, a premonition. But how easily we cling to these visions of our path, certain they are the roads to take, only to discover that when we take our steps, they lead us only astray. I know so little about this love. Except that love is a journey—complicated, full of obstacles and pratfalls—and it is the battles that make it worthwhile.'

Pedrillo looked up, his eyes searching for reassurance. 'But what will happen if I am wrong? What will happen if I ignore this feeling and end up losing her?' (*Cagnaccio places a hand on Pedrillo's trembling shoulder.*)

'In love, you have to take risks, my boy. Have faith in the future and be ready to face the unknown. If Simonetta means that much to you, then fight for her. Follow your heart, regardless of your doubts and fears. Where is your resilience, Pedrillo? The boy who has only hope in his heart, who refuses to see the darkness but only the light ahead.'

'I suppose my dream could be wrong.'

'Ecco—there's the Pedrillo, we all know.'

'You're right. Love is worth fighting for if it has to mean anything. I would give her...'

'You would give her the moon and the stars; I know.' Cagnaccio smiled, his eyes gleaming with pride. 'I've always thought, Pedrillo, that if I had a son...' (*His voice trails off, stifled by emotion.*)

'Thank you, sir. Your wisdom has given me strength. I will fight, and she will one day be mine.'

Cagnaccio slapped Pedrillo on the back. '*Vai, ragazzo*. Go, it's time for you to rest—tomorrow will be a big day.'

As Pedrillo reluctantly turned to leave, with all the talk of destiny, Cagnaccio's mind drifted inward. He felt nervous to think of his fate. He was not as fit as he once was, although he knew better to manage his body, and despite his years, there was still agility in his legs. All the same, he could sense the changes coming. Many times, he had thought of walking away and leaving this false world behind to live a simpler life. But without the troupe and the audience, what was he worth? What did he have but this? He had poured years of sweat and toil into building what he had. To lose it would render it as hollow as the leather mask that he wore. His name would fade into obscurity, leaving only a figure—a man without means or prospects, plagued by shame and remorse, haunted by regret. No, he had staked too much on his choices to surrender without a fight. He resolved to be vigilant and strong. After all, it was Cagnaccio that they all came to see.

IV

Reaching for the Moon

Enter FIDATO with a flask.

How mercurial time is. How mischievous for
wandering feet! Leading us ever down uncharted
pathways, away from those that we would seek.

We travel the world as outcasts, our wont but to
serve, but with such scant reward for our efforts,
our hearts are bound to our feet.

We have only the road to rely on.

Our consolation: that the bastard hope of better
lies somewhere over the next hill.

That such good men as we, poor hard-working souls,
should find no comfort or relief.

Ingrates, all, the lot of you.

*(FIDATO comes forward to lean into the
audience.)*

Ah, my soul, the injustice.

But, no, the wheels of our fortunes must roll on
until that blessed moment, when, as if plucked from
the belly of sleep, our eyes are prised wide open
to be reminded of this travesty that we live.

Ah yes, and to come the great unmasking. Pity me,
pity us and pity yourselves.

For Time has delivered us here, to this wretched,
impotent moment, to count the years that have spun
by blindly, to find we arrived where we never
intended, old, and weary, and alone, in this place
where the wine is piss-weak,

(FIDATO takes a slug from the flask.)

...where the company is rude and uncouth,

*(FIDATO indicates the audience, sneers,
and turns his face away.)*

...and where opportunity slips through your fingers,
if it deigns to ever arrive.

(FIDATO belches loudly.)

EXIT RIGHT

[1]

[Ah, at last, good morning. You slept? Here, we need to keep out of the way; we don't want to get pulled into the action because tempers are likely to flare. There, under the apron of the stage. No one will see us there; they'll all be too busy to notice, and we should still see what's going on.]

The ancient ovens of the bakers knew well the festival of Sant'Agnese. Long before the break of day, they were lit and stoked, eagerly awaiting the batches of freshly kneaded dough. The blades of the butchers' knives knew it also; each whetted and honed until sharp, only to dull throughout the morning as their blades wore done on the bones. Awnings were unfurled across the square, ready to be lashed to their stalls. The spirit of festival was thriving and spreading throughout the town. In the homes of the wealthy, furs were groomed meticulously, their pelts smoothed and teased, while fingers fanned out the vanes of feathers to attach to bonnets and hats. In houses across the town, rich or poor, lace headdresses, carefully preserved, were rescued from their hiding places. Tenderly, they were dusted off, their delicate threads caressed with gentle fingertips. Intricately embroidered skirt aprons, under the scrutiny of critical eyes, told the age-old stories of artisans in an annual rite of respect, with no stitch left unexamined and every thread bearing the weight of its past.

Amidst these tender preparations came echoes of longing and love. The guardians of cherished family memories, the *nonnas*, their visions as vivid as yesteryear reflected on days long past, and of their husbands, taken too soon. And in every corner of the town, women traced their fingers over the supple leather straps that would encircle their calves and ankles—these sturdy, humble fastenings that would keep their slippers on their feet when they surrendered to the rhythm of the music and danced until first light, unperturbed by the wind and the rain at their backs, but with love and glee in their hearts.

But the most frantic action occurred in the homes of the young women, those who had performed the rituals and prayed to Sant'Agnese and now, overjoyed and excited, were eager to shout to the world that their wishes had been granted and their future husbands confirmed, or else were comforted by mothers, grandmothers, and aunts offering words of reassurance to inconsolable young maidens, who had taken to their beds in despair, at having their dearest wishes dashed.

At the castello, bagpipes too, the troubadours of celebration, were not immune, as they underwent their only annual cleanse with rags passed down through their pipes, then washed and left out to dry. As for the drums, their taut skins were scrutinised for thinning, while their frames were garbed in the Duke's livery of red and yellow and gold, ready to unleash the thunderous beats that would herald the advance of the Saint. Flags were

lowered from the castle walls, to be brushed off and tied to their poles, ready to be rehoisted to herald the procession through the streets.

Within the hallowed walls of the basilica too, the sacristans flitted about like fireflies, readying for the early mass of dedication, checking and double-checking the preparations, polishing and repolishing each article with reverence, as if a touch, a rub, or a gleam could illuminate the divine. With the utmost devotion, they tended to the articles of their faith: the plate, the chalice, and the statues of Our Lord, replacing the crystals in the censer with those from the finest stock, those reserved for the holiest of days.

In the hall, nerves were building. Cagnaccio made his last inspection of the stage, then ushered the troupe together to set them to work.

‘We know what is at stake. We need this audience. Work hard. Keep your eyes open for opportunities. Capitano, Puccio, Belnaso, you take the large drums. Go. Be ready. We’ll join the procession outside and follow it down to the square. Space yourselves out, everyone, and as soon as the mass is over, we’ll draw as many as we can back to the hall.’

‘And make as much noise as you can, everyone,’ Donata added, moving to his side. ‘Alecchino and Brighella, you need to get the lazzi going early, but keep it on the move—we want the audience here, not in the piazza’.

‘Carpenters,’ Cagnaccio shouted, ‘did you fix the stage? (*The head of a carpenter appears around the stage and nods.*) Set out three rows of benches.’

Donata stepped forward. ‘And if you can find a table or something to block part of the entrance, so they enter one-by-one—no one enters without paying.’ (*The carpenter disappears back out of view.*)

‘So, as we all agreed, it’s *Pantalone Promises the Moon*,’ Cagnaccio said. ‘I’ve already worked out the schema—I’ll nail it to the back of the stage.’

The skeleton plot would mark the start point and the end of the performance, with its plot twists and machinations. Below would be the lazzi he proposed. ‘As usual,’ he said, continuing, ‘improvise around the lazzi I’ve chosen, keep your wits about you, and let’s not stray too far off the scenario. We want at least two shows today, so save yourselves and keep it sharp.’

‘I know that we’ve rehearsed it,’ Pedrillo said, edging forward, ‘but we’ve never performed it before. Are you sure?’

‘We have been through all this. We have to perform it sometime. Here will be the first.’

The gist of the plot was simple: Pantalone has a vision in a dream that, despite the discrepancies in their ages, he is to take the young and innocent Isabella for his bride.

She, in love with his servant Arlecchino, refuses his entreaties, and to quell his ardent passion, she teases him that she will continue to rebuke his advances until he can gift her the moon. The old man, in his arrogance, orders Arlecchino to catch the moon using a fishing net on the end of a pole. Arlecchino, seeing the obvious danger, convinces the eager-to-please Pedrolino to do the quest in his stead, but when the Dottore (who always imagined Isabella for his own son Oratio, a scholar away in Milan) overhears Pantalone's intentions, he devises a plan of his own, one to favour his son. The bones of the plot were set; the action would tie itself together in confusion until, with a simple revelation, the knots would all fall away, the way clear for a happy ending, with the servants taking the day.

Cagnaccio walked through the show in front of them, pacing it out on the floor, playing each of the characters, reminding them of the plot while explaining when to employ the lazzi and which props and backdrops would be used. A stony silence met his announcement. Faces and spirits dropped. Brighella was the only one to sit staring up at Cagnaccio as if waiting for something to change.

'Why?' he asked.

'Why what?'

'Why this one? Pedrillo is right. We hardly know it. The lazzi are not well rehearsed either. I still think we would be better with *The Teeth-Puller* or even *Arlecchino and his Twin*. Those are both well set, and we've been working on some new lazzi. So, why this? And now of all times.'

'Do you think that this is the time, so late? We talked about it earlier, and this is the show we will perform.'

'You talked, and we all listened. You didn't want to hear what anyone else thinks.'

'You think I have to justify myself to you? These people, these audiences—do you think they come here for you? Be careful, Brighella; be minded, or you'll be shitting into your hands. And for your information, not that you seem to remember, we did the *Teeth-Puller* here last year.'

'And the audience loved it.' Brighella got to his feet. 'They won't remember. All they want is to laugh. They won't care if we do the same as before.' He hesitated. 'And we don't care either. This scenario is not ready. Choose another show. Just let's make them laugh.'

Cagnaccio hesitated and watched around the company as heads bowed, feet shuffled, hands fidgeted, and only one looked him in the eye. Brighella. Smug, smiling as ever.

'It's my decision, and I've chosen.'

'So we see,' Brighella muttered, then turning to the others, 'well, it seems as if it's *Pantalone Promises The Moon*, then.'

The echo of drumming far off, towards the top of the town, signalled the start of the procession.

'Move, everyone,' Cagnaccio called. 'Be ready. Take your places outside—remember, space out down the street. Go.'

[Quick, the procession is coming. If we stand at the back of the crowd, then when it's passed, join on the tail; if we get separated, I'll be outside the basilica.]

The narrow, cobbled streets reverberated with the heavy beat of drums and the plaintive drone of bagpipes, their harmonies leading the official procession down towards the town square. A throng of onlookers lined the walls, eager to witness the unfolding spectacle. Children, perched on their parents' shoulders, waved flags and began to cheer. Despite the overcast sky, the resplendent costumes of the musicians, a kaleidoscope of blues, yellows, and reds, shone in celebration at making it through the winter once more, with the promise of spring in the wind.

Each dressed in attire as befitted their lofty status, the officials, dignitaries, and heads of the guilds marched the procession forward with exquisite poise. Rich damasks, shimmering silks, and opulent furs bore witness to their influence and rank. They walked, heads held high and eyes fixed ahead, never deigning to cast a glance sideward, yearning to be envied while refusing to be engaged. Behind them, the invited children of merchants, adorned in regional costume, were held in check by the firm hands of their godfathers at their backs, keeping them focused on their task. Of the virgins, only a few of those who received unwelcome news took part, putting devotion ahead of disappointment, while those still rejoicing in the images revealed by the saint beamed from under their veils as they glistened in their flowing white gowns, crowned with laurels and white winter flowers, exuding ethereal innocence and inspiring visions of heavenly grace.

Walking behind crosses came the solemn ministers of the church, dressed in the finest of their robes, swinging censers that filled the air with the scents of lemons and pine. Priests and sacristans strode ahead with purpose, paving the way for the bishop, who bore the mantle of spiritual devotion with unwavering resolve.

The statue of Sant'Agnese, its plentiful gilding donated by the Duke, sat on a square dais, fixed firmly to a wooden platform. Long poles, passed through well-worn holes, held the platform secure on the shoulders of eight men who carried her, garlanded in olive leaves, jasmine, and white hellebores, through the busy streets. As the centrepiece of the parade, the magnificent statue triumphed; defying the buffeting and rocking, their patron stood serene and poised, as if compassion reigned in her eyes. From her vantage point, she stared out over the procession, renewing her annual blessing on the residents of the town.

In their wake, the procession assumed an earthier tone. A group of farmers, gardeners, and their peasants strode on with purpose, as if to honour the God-given gifts of the land, carrying their hoes and pitchforks aloft, as pristine as if newly forged. A short distance behind, following their patron saint, a herd of fifteen unruly sheep were resisting their herders' attempts at restraint, while two seasoned shepherds cracked whips to drive the beasts on, while their dogs snapped and poked at hooves to keep the sheep in their flock.

At long last, the townsfolk, who had eagerly lined the streets, merged seamlessly into the procession. Their voices charged the air with excitement as whispered prayers battled to be heard among the animated chatter as they strolled downhill to the basilica, their footsteps echoing across cobblestones and down through the annals of time.

As soon as the main body of the parade passed them, Cagnaccio signalled for the players to join. Only Donata and the offstage crew hurried back into the hall to finish the last of the preparations.

[2]

[Still there? I thought I might have lost you. Sneak in past Donata, and we'll meet at the side of the stage. Just don't get seen; I don't want to get dragged into this drama.]

'The mass is almost over. Donata, Is everything ready?' Cagnaccio tried to catch his breath after running back from the square.

'Everything but you. Your costume?'

In his haste, the fact that he needed to change had completely escaped his attention. 'Emilia!' he shouted.

'It's all laid out in the courtyard. I checked it over, and it's fine; it's just waiting for you.'

'And Belnaso?'

'In the square where you left him? Come on, then, I'll help you get dressed.'

Emilia's voice registered her annoyance at being unfairly distracted from her work.

He needed to calm his nerves. Everything was in order, as it always was, but no matter how often they performed, the dryness would come to his mouth. As soon as he took his first steps onto the stage, he would be in his own world, but until that moment arrived, he felt unnerved, as if it were too late to escape his entrance, yet too early for it to occur.

'It feels tight,' he said.

'It's the same as ever.' Emilia felt the seams of the red tunic, testing under the sleeves as she teased the close-fitting suit over his arms and pulled down the back.

'It feels stiffer than usual.'

'Must be your aching bones.' (*She pulls at the fabric.*) 'Are you alright now? Do you still need my help?' (*Cagnaccio shakes his head. She goes to help elsewhere.*)

The broad shoulders of Pantalone's long black coat sat awkwardly; as he moved, they drooped backwards and had to be tugged back in place. His hose had fared no better, for a hole had emerged at the toe, where it snagged the inside of his slippers, pinching and threatening to grow. He pulled at his doublet, straining to fasten the buttons, his chemise poking through the gaps. It felt tighter than before. He moaned. The costume had been packed so poorly that a film of dust lay over the fabric, which he struggled to brush off with his palms. He remembered the red as brighter, more vivid, and alive, not the faded and sagging cloth he held in his hands. Like time-worn shoes, as much as he recognised the need to replace them all, he was reluctant to set the pieces aside. He vowed that with a good couple of shows and a fair haul of coin, enough for a bolt or two of new cloth, he would replace all the worn-out costumes and breathe new life into their act, but some pressing causes always arose that needed to be addressed first.

Pulling at the seams and smoothing out the folds, Cagnaccio returned to the hall, where some of the players were returning to muster behind the stage and had started their own preparations, stretching and flexing their limbs.

Emilia finished repairing a tear in Brighella's sleeve, ripped off the surplus thread, and tucked the needle into her cap, but before she could return it to the courtyard, the Apprentice intercepted her. Cagnaccio watched them both: Emilia appearing flustered, the Apprentice fidgeting with his hands as he whispered in her ear, their eyes darting around anxiously. Despite the Apprentice's attempts to reason with her, she simply shook her head. As Cagnaccio approached, the conversation stopped abruptly, and Emilia hurried away.

'What was that about?' Cagnaccio asked him.

'Nothing.'

'Don't lie to me. Just what are you cooking up?' (*Cagnaccio grabs at the Apprentice's collar.*)

'I tell you, it's nothing. And don't rip this. I don't have another.'

Cagnaccio swung and hit his Apprentice hard on the ear. The boy staggered forward, dropping his cap to the floor, and just as he tried to pick it up, Cagnaccio cuffed him on the back of his head.

'And where's the pin in your cap?' Cagnaccio shouted, 'How many times do I have to tell you? Go, do it. Now.' The lad, apologetic and hunched over for his own protection, ran off to the courtyard and the safety of the backstage rooms.

Cagnaccio could no longer ignore it. The hushed conversations. The evasive behaviour around him. At first, he dismissed it all as exhaustion from the gruelling trek from Rome, but he was starting to suspect there could be more. At one time, the others would jump to action at this word; now all he faced were endless questions and impudent remarks. His authority was slipping; he could sense it. But what had changed? The dissent, the curt responses, the resistance—perhaps he was mistaken. Something told him he was not.

[Time to move. Hurry. The far side of the stage will be good—from there you will see the stage as well as what's happening offstage. Quick. Stay close.]

To the boom and thud of his drum, the little Colonnello, the Capitano at his side, beat the march back to the hall, leading the excited townsfolk back towards the hall. They had been fortunate to find a place to stand close to the basilica doors, from which elevated vantage points, Columbine, Brighella, and the Dottore had caught a sizeable shoal, which needed little persuasion to follow them the short distance to the hall.

As the phalanx approached, Donata, waiting patiently at the door, shouted over the heads of the crowd. *No money, no entrance. Get your coins ready.* So eager and rowdy were the first to arrive that it took all of Donata's resourcefulness and the Capitano's mock sword to stem the rush into the room. In a short time, the hall was filled with a steady flow of patrons. Yet Donata kept a wary eye, knowing old tricksters would try to sneak in on the sides. Although some drunkards would try to hide themselves as the crowds surged through the door, Donata, ever vigilant, knew how to catch those who didn't pay, tossing them quickly out to the street, much to the delight of those queueing behind. With each eviction, they cheered boisterously, praising the audacity of the attempt while commending Donata's strong arm.

From behind the curtain, Cagnaccio eyed the crowd. For the first time in days, he felt relieved. He knew that if the first show was successful, the word would spread; some would return, but even if not, the news would spread through taverns, bars, and neighbouring streets, tongues loosening under wine, recounting the great Cagnaccio's exploits in such vivid detail that others would be inspired to come.

At the back of the hall, a movement distracted him. Fidato, coming to stand close to Donata, was pointing to the small stack of coins at her side. Donata knew better than to count money at a table on the street, and as always, she buried the takings in cavernous hidden pockets sewn into the inside of her skirts. As Fidato moved his hands closer to the pile, she swiftly pushed him away, much to the old rogue's chagrin.

Perhaps, Cagnaccio thought, he had misjudged her, for no matter what she felt about the quack, Donata could be relied upon to always put the company first. Too often

her resourcefulness and loyalty had saved them from disaster for him to doubt her now. And yet, the more he saw of the potion-pusher, the more suspicious he became.

In the courtyard, the players were assembled for the parade to the stage. Cagnaccio gave the signal. As one, the musicians began. Il Colonnello, with his small drum, led the way down the side of the hall, parting the audience in the centre to lead the procession down. The crowd cheered at the boy's arrival. Seeing the impact on the crowd, Cagnaccio reached forward and held the Capitano by the arm.

'Wait. Let him enter alone. Give him a moment on his own, then go when he reaches the aisle.'

The boy beat his drum so hard and sang so loudly that the audience clapped in time to the beat. Soon, everyone was singing along, joining in the tune. Moments later, the others arrived, weaving their way through the crowd, singing at the top of their voices, with Brighella on the small guitar, Colombina on her lute, and Belnaso with a zampogna, the double-reeds of the bagpipe droning out the chords. Those players with less prowess took up tambourines and castanets, waving them wildly in the air as they spun and tripped along the hall, halting occasionally to draw forward an audience member, encouraging them to dance.

Much to the amusement of those around her, Cagnaccio flung his arms around an elderly woman who was hesitant to come to the aisle but eventually succumbed to his insistence and the encouragement of the crowd. Cagnaccio threw wide his coat and stretched out his right leg, as if to bow low, but instead made out to peck as he cawed along to the music. The crowd laughed as he skipped and bounced, his nimble feet dancing frenetically beneath the crusty, dodderly frame—here was their Pantalone, the old rooster they had grown to love. Not to be outshone, the old woman, her nose in the air as if she were the Duchess herself, lifted the hems of her petticoat to dance with such vigour and vitality that she put the youngsters to shame. As the parade moved on, Pantalone bowed, then, pulling her fast towards him, planted a kiss on her cheek. However, she clasped him so tightly to her, refusing to let go, that he struggled to escape her clutches. When he finally managed to break free, he hobbled away, visibly exhausted, as if the woman had drained every ounce of energy from the poor Pantalone.

Slowly, the actors made their way to the stage.

The COMPANY divide into two columns to use the steps on either side of the stage. The MUSICIANS move upstage left.

BRIGHELLA, ARLECCHINO, PEDROLINO, ROSINA and COLOMBINA form a ring in the centre of the stage and start to dance. PANTALONE, IL DOTTORE, AND IL CAPITANO stand downstage right and left, urging the audience to clap in time with the beat. One by one, the actors break away and exit until only BRIGHELLA and PANTALONE are left. PANTALONE signals for the musicians to stop, then exits right. BRIGHELLA comes downstage and leans into the audience as if to confide in them.

Cagnaccio watched from the wings, careful not to be seen, measuring the reaction of the audience by how vociferous and boisterous they became. The early scenes played out as expected, with the afternoon crowd lively and eager to participate in the fun. Never a performance went past when two or three ruffians, their tongues loosed by wine, would shout rowdily to the performers to throw them off their stride, but the actors relished the interruptions. Colombina thrived on their calls, using them to bandy and embarrass the hecklers, but Arlecchino or Brighella would acknowledge them heartily, thanking them for their advice and commending them on their intelligence, then deliberately ignore what was said.

Despite the audience reaction, Cagnaccio sensed all was not well. The pace was wrong—a reticence, a sluggishness in attack. Even from a distance, he could tell that Pedrolino was distracted and Brighella lacked his customary vigour. While an outsider might not have spotted the difference, Cagnaccio could see it in the adolescent's sloppiness of gesture as they fought to throw and catch the improvisation between them. The Dottore, too, seemed to have picked up on the reluctant tone of the youths.

Had he been wrong to insist on the new scenario despite the resistance? Perhaps, but if the company was to survive, he knew it must evolve. The troupe that never pushed forward was doomed to fade into dust. Acting would grow jaded, and audiences would drift out the door. Their whole existence was precarious. Complacency would tip them over the edge. No matter how unwelcome or unpolished the scenario, he was convinced it was the right one to choose.

ARLECCHINO (downstage) invites the help of the audience. They are to count: uno, duo, tre. On three, he blows into the sheep's bladder. It grows. He looks at it. Asks again for their help. The process continues until the bladder is bigger than he expects. He looks at it, astonished.

BRIGHELLA enters upstage right with a long spike. He bursts the balloon and exits. ARLECCHINO gulps, puffing out his cheeks as if he has inhaled all the air. He runs manically around the stage, trying to force it all out. He ends up in a heap on the floor.

Enter PANTALONE who pulls back the centre curtain, lifts the tails of his coat to emphasise his bright red hose, hunches forward, and struts downstage centre, stepping over ARLECCHINO as if he is not there. Downstage, PANTALONE peers forward as if unable to find the audience. He has an idea. He takes his spectacles from his pocket, rubs vigorously at them with his coattails, examines them and returns them to his pocket. He sighs in relief—at last he can see the audience but seems to have forgotten why he is there. Remembering, he sneers and makes an obscene gesture to the audience. He spins quickly to face upstage. As he walks away upstage, he repeats the gesture behind his back. He steps back over ARLECCHINO, as if he were not there. PANTALONE exits upstage left.

Offstage, Cagnaccio was furious. Onstage, he had not noticed, but watching from the wings, it became obvious that his Apprentice seemed intent on seizing every opportunity to draw attention to himself, paying no heed to what others were doing and returning often to the front of the stage to confide directly in the audience. Despite the audience reaction, opportunities were being missed. The boy was either following his own agenda or had momentarily lost his mind.

IL DOTTORE makes to grab ARLECCHINO, who ducks, slips around him, and kicks him on the backside. IL DOTTORE staggers, nonplussed. ARLECCHINO brags to the audience. As IL DOTTORE approaches, ARLECCHINO leaps and hurriedly exits stage right.

No sooner had Arlecchino left the stage than Cagnaccio was at the Apprentice's side.

'What do you think you are doing?'

'They love me, don't you hear? They're really loving the show.'

'They might be, but I'm not. And you won't either if you continue to upstage the others. They did not come here to see you, lad; remember, you can be replaced.'

'They might not have come to see me, but they definitely won't forget me, and, who knows, next time it might be me they shout and scream for.'

'You ungrateful sot...' Cagnaccio swung his fist at the boy but caught the curtain first.

The centre curtain opens to reveal PANTALONE offstage, about to hit ARLECCHINO. Startled, ARLECCHINO crawls away on all fours, gets to his feet, and runs around the stage. PANTALONE, IL DOTTORE, and COLOMBINA, evidently surprised at the entrance, try to apprehend him but miss each time. ARLECCHINO exits right. PANTALONE, exasperated, waves his fist in the air, screams, and exits in pursuit.

'Where is he?' Cagnaccio snapped, the sound bouncing around the wings. He forced his way through the others waiting for their cues, with one ear to the business on stage, lest he miss his own. At the rear, Donata foresaw the looming danger and stood, ready to block his way. She grabbed Cagnaccio by the shoulders.

'Calm down,' she said. He tried to push her aside, but her hip was lodged firm against the stage trestles, and she would not let him pass. 'Not while the show is on. Let me speak with him. You concentrate on the show. Leave the rest to me.'

Cagnaccio could feel his anger rising. 'No. Woman, move. Let me at the mongrel.' Donata stood her ground, shifting her posture to block his way.

'You will do no such thing. If you think I'm going to stand here and let you launch into the lad now, you'll have to fight me first.'

With the spate of entrances and exits and the rapid movement of props, a small group had formed behind the stage. Over Donata's shoulder, Cagnaccio saw his Apprentice skulking at the entrance to the courtyard, smiling and flirting with Simonetta. Noticing he was being watched, he adjusted his posture to appear as if he were talking about the show.

'I swear I'll...'

'You will do nothing. Concentrate on the show.'

'Like that worm is doing—look at him. What is all that about? Him and her?'

'Oh, something and nothing. Let it be. You know Simonetta and the boys; well, that boy is fool enough to believe.'

Cagnaccio felt a flutter of satisfaction. Although he would never confess it, his mistrust of the boy was growing with every performance. And if Simonetta rejected the boy, what did he care? The young dolt deserved it. The only person missing was Brighella, who was locked in his business on the stage, but Cagnaccio would have wagered handsomely that the thoughts tumbling in his Apprentice's rambling, love-sick mind were not his own but rather had grown from seeds planted by his friend.

'He's just an apprentice, Cagnaccio. Let the stupid fool be.'

BRIGHELLA is alone on stage with PEDROLINO. PEDROLINO is standing bolt upright, as if frozen to the spot. His eyes and mouth are wide open. BRIGHELLA comes close to his face and shouts loudly, as if berating him with a long stream of nonsense. He stops abruptly. PEDROLINO does not react. IL DOTTORE enters stage left. BRIGHELLA moves away upstage left. IL DOTTORE comes close to PEDROLINO'S face. Berates him. PEDROLINO does not react. IL DOTTORE moves to join BRIGHELLA.

IL CAPITANO enters stage left, comes close to PEDROLINO'S face, berates him longer than the other two had done, then stops abruptly. PEDROLINO does not react. IL CAPITANO moves to stand with the others.

PEDROLINO turns and takes two exaggerated strides to stand facing the others. He leans slowly forward. He yells at them, blasting out a vast stream of words without stopping to take a breath, then stops. Pause. As one, BRIGHELLA, IL DOTTORE, and IL CAPITANO fall about shocked. PEDROLINO frog-leaps, grins towards the audience, and runs off, exiting stage right.

At the foot of the stairs to the stage, Donata and Cagnaccio were watching the entrances and exits. As Pedrillo bounded down the steps, he stopped, suddenly spying the Apprentice and Colombina deep in conversation.

'And here's another one that's stupid,' Donata said, nodding to indicate Pedrillo. 'It won't end well; mark me.'

'He's been distracted by her for the entire show,' Cagnaccio said. 'Well, I'll give him something to distract him.' Cagnaccio marched across to where Pedrillo was standing, seized him by his chemise, and forced him against the wall. 'I'll teach you to concentrate, my lad. What do you think you are doing? I've told you before to keep your eyes on the performance.'

As each blow connected with the youngster's ribs, feeling the thrill of knuckle against bone, his frustration eased, as it had done many times before. Again and again, he drew his fists back, as if his arms had a plan of their own, then, with a force he barely recognised, returned to unload on the boy, ashamed of every strike but unable to resist. Why would nobody stop him? When the boy faltered, he pulled him nearer. There, in the boy's eyes was no agony, only surprise, no blame, but merely bewilderment. Pedrillo stood motionless, accepting every blow as if it were a fitting punishment for some unexplained indiscretion. As Cagnaccio felt the boy slump in his grip, he let the youngster drop.

(Jeers are heard from the audience.)

IL DOTTORE, seeing himself alone, comes forward and takes the opportunity to lecture the audience on the reasons why wheels must be round, never triangular or square. He lectures, his reasoning full of academic references, arguments, and counterarguments, as if what he is teaching is new to everyone present. As he talks, he shuffles around the stage, moving in a figure of eight. He swaggers; his fat belly droops forward. He bombasts the audience for their contempt, waving his cane and folio wildly in the air.

‘Wake up,’ Cagnaccio snapped. ‘Wake up, son; concentrate. The only thing you have is this, right here, right now. Set your delusions aside. I tell you, Simonetta will only cause you grief. Now, keep your mind on the show.’ He pulled Pedrillo to his feet, dusting down his chemise. ‘Get ready for your cue.’ Walking away, Cagnaccio turned to see Pedrolino pull back his shoulders and slap himself on the arms before stretching and climbing the steps. Pedrillo hesitated a moment at the sight of Rosetta, who was already in the wings, waiting for Rosina’s entrance. As she turned to see him, he winked, then, hearing his cue, broke through the gap in the curtain.

Enter PEDROLINO. ARLECCHINO slaps him on the shoulder. Explains that PEDROLINO must do a task for PANTALONE, but they need to find a ladder first. Exeunt both, stage left.

Enter the INNAMORATA, searching for her lover. She asks the audience if they have seen the object of her heart, the white-faced PEDROLINO. Seeing ARLECCHINO and PEDROLINO return with a pair of ladders, she runs to hide behind an armchair.

‘A rage indeed...’ The arrival of the Capitano at his side was as welcome to Cagnaccio as the callus on his foot, where his boot had rubbed it raw. To think my daughter is in love with that boy. Go easy on him, maestro. Quiet life—you know, Emilia and...’

'Move out of the way!' With a single swipe, Cagnaccio pushed him aside, perhaps harder than intended, for the Capitano reeled and had to reach out for the wall to steady himself. He might have thought to retaliate, but Cagnaccio was already away, mounting the steps to the upstage curtain, craning to hear his next cue.

PANTALONE enters, sees the ladder blocking the downstage right exit and, with great difficulty, moves it stage left. He goes to the wardrobe at the back. PEDROLINO pushes him into it, closes the door, moves the ladder back and exits around it stage right.

Donata was waiting in the wings for Pedrillo. She held the boy's face. He smarted at her touch. Bringing her hand to the nape of his neck, she drew him in to her and whispered in his ear. Seeing the smudges on his white face, she called for the carton of powder and padded it softly on his cheeks. As he backed away, he nodded and smiled.

PANTALONE frees himself from the wardrobe. Puzzled, he sees the displaced ladder and goes to examine it. ARLECCHINO enters upstage, and seeing his master, he hides. From behind a chair, he observes as PANTALONE again tries to push the ladder stage left. PANTALONE, visibly exhausted, crosses to exit stage right. As he leaves, ARLECCHINO shouts off for PEDROLINO.

Hearing Arlecchino call him, Pedrillo ran back towards the stage, only to bump into Cagnaccio coming down the stairs.

'You're late.' Cagnaccio said, but Pedrillo had already taken off and was dashing onto the stage.

'Better now?' Donata said, grabbing Cagnaccio's sleeve as he hit the bottom step.

'Arlecchino mistimed his entrance. And Pedrillo was late. Again.'

'Well, don't take it out on Pedrillo; the lad's already shaken. It's not his fault. He's a good boy, that one, even if he is stupid in love. Your argument isn't with him, and you know it.'

‘Calm down? Don’t tell me to calm down. I’ll crack open the head of that bastard Apprentice like the two halves of an egg when I get my hands on him.’

‘Of course you will. But wait until you’ve calmed down first.’ Donata went to steady him by holding his shoulders, but he pushed her away. Fuming, he flailed his hands and was close to slapping her face, but she caught him firm at the wrist.

‘Don’t you ever dare to touch me.’ She was trembling. ‘Now go—get on your stage; your audience is waiting for you.’

And so the show would continue, as it had so many times before. And the audience would watch on as they always did, lost in the currents of their mirth, oblivious to the world beyond the stage. They would watch the scenes unfold before them, marvelling at what they saw—how illusion became one with reality—a sense of wonder so desirable, so intoxicating, and so uncommon in the dull rub of their lives. To stare wide-mouthed as the players cavorted, each frenetic movement so deliberate, so extreme, it hardly seemed absurd. And in their imagination, they too could caper and dance as if on the stage with the players, revelling in their new-found freedom, unable to contain their delight as they followed the antics of the actors, mirroring every conceit.

If they saw the irony of their own lives playing out onstage, they dismissed it without a care. They would see their plight before them—the mockery and futility of their lives—and would shrug and laugh at their lot, as if the world had grown too serious and balance was being restored. For not to laugh would be an indictment, a surrender to the coarseness of life. Their escape was through innuendo, reaching places they ought not go and thinking thoughts they dare not utter. And they revelled in their own vulgarity with never a whisper of shame. If the miraculous appeared from nowhere, if intrigues suddenly untangled, no matter how impossible it might seem, they would know, as sure as their breathing, that in the end, all would be right. With every hero’s entrance, a sigh would rise up in their hearts—the gentle reassurance that all hearts beat as one.

And as sure as they knew that the dawn would pierce the stormiest night, they would believe it entirely possible to reach out and capture the moon. All that was needed was to climb the ladder and believe, and stretch out for the painted disc that bounced in the makeshift sky, strung by a line from a pole. Of course the moon could be stolen and placed under Pedrolino’s arm; no one would ever doubt that because everyone wished it to be true. So, they would climb the ladder with him, following every precarious step; the frame so rickety, so decrepit it teetered from side to side. And they would hold their breath

with him fearing the ladder might collapse. They would gasp as Pedrolino faltered or his foot misplaced the next tread, and they would laugh as the boy toppled over and the moon flew out of his hand. They would hear the crack of a head meeting wood and see the body as a heap on the floor. And they would laugh and holler as they had never laughed before, with tears over swollen cheeks, their hands clutching their sides, right up to the moment they saw it—the steady stream of blood that was creeping slowly towards their toes, and before them, a boy writhing in agony, imploring for someone to help. And hilarity would turn to horror as reality once more prevailed and they were dragged fast back to these walls and this floor, feeling guilty and exposed.

They would watch as a woman, visibly shaken, hurried to kneel by the poor lad's side, holding her hand to his head and mopping his wounds with her skirt, while an older man who seemed familiar, whom they believed they had seen in the square, a man of potions and promises, and another, a simpleton, would lift the boy into their arms and carry him off behind the stage.

And perhaps they would feel confused as Arlecchino rushed back on stage, oblivious to the unfolding drama, leaping and tumbling like before, drawing them back to his world, where everything was conceivable and nothing was as it appeared. And perhaps they may have noticed Brighella urging him on with a whisper, a gesture, or a nudge, but, then, they may not have noticed at all. They may have sensed that the performance ended briskly, that the intrigue unravelled in haste, and that despite the final flourishes as if nothing unusual had occurred, the actors looked distracted, regardless of the applause. And if the closing chorus was less hearty than they remembered, they could so easily have been mistaken, for memories often play tricks.

And if they were ushered out briskly into the fresh, chill wind of the day, they left with doubts and with fears, unsure whether their world had been righted so that their dance with life could resume. Perhaps some felt cheated. Perhaps they felt at a loss. And as they would drift away down alleys, struggling to take in what they had seen, they might ponder if tomorrow would be different. If they came again to the next show, would everything turn out the same? Had it all been part of the show?

[3]

'Move him,' Donata said, tending to her patient. 'Gently now. Hold his head, Belnaso.' The Capitano took his feet, Fidato and Belnaso reached under Pedrillo's arms, and Donata cradled his head while holding a remnant of calico, already ruby with blood, tight against his wounds.

'Better, I think, to leave him.' The Dottore, by virtue of the profession of his character rather than any knowledge of his own, stood at a respectable distance to offer his considered advice, scanning the injured body to inspect every angle. 'Are you sure movement at this juncture is sensible?'

'Shut up and grab an arm.'

Pedrillo moaned as they hauled him off the ground. With every step, with every jolt and jerk, the boy screamed in agony as he tried to break free from their hold. Twice the boy tried to push Donata's hand away from his head, but twice she fended him off, keeping the pressure tight on the gash. They walked slowly, taking each step deliberately, careful to minimise the shock as they carried him the short way to a backroom behind the stage. The storeroom, full of wood, tools, and properties used within the show, was the domain of the carpenter and his team, who, seeing the approaching cortege, laid out a makeshift bed from planks stretched over two rails to raise his body off the cold floor.

'Fetch blankets,' Donata shouted to Belnaso, who, still clearly in shock, was dithering, deciding where best to stand, his gaze unable to leave the growing pile of blood-stained cloths. 'Find Emilia. Tell her to bring as much calico as she can find.' Gingerly, they lowered Pedrillo to the makeshift cot. As soon as his legs and arms were free, he fought to get to his feet, but Donata held him fast.

'Leave me. Let me go,' Pedrillo said, reaching to touch the wound. As he brought the bloody fingers in front of his face, the colour drained from his cheeks, and he fell back onto the bed.

'No!' Rosetta was screaming, fighting her way through the crowd at the door. 'Not you, Pedrillo.' 'What happened? I heard the crash, but I was out in the courtyard. I should have been there.'

'Rosetta, listen to me.' Donata did not look up; her gaze was intent on the wound. 'You cannot help him right now; he needs peace, and we need to work. I will call you if we need anything.'

'This cannot be happening. Tell me he'll be fine. He looks so pale.'

'We have everything in hand. He had a bad fall. He's bleeding; he took a knock, but you need to go. Give him some space. We'll call you when you can see him.'

'I've got to tell him I love him,' Rosetta said, tears streaming down her face, unable to look away.

'I'm sure he knows, child. Now, please, he needs our help.' She turned her attention back to Pedrillo, who groaned, his face contorted with pain. 'Get water.' Donata said to the Dottore, worried the boy might collapse. 'You. Now. Go.' The Dottore, who had assumed she meant someone else, jolted into action. Spinning on his heels, for the first time in decades, he ran. 'Water, where can I find water?' he shouted, disappearing down the corridor, his ruff bouncing under his neck as he reached down to pick up two pails.

'It's deep. We need help. Send for the surgeon. Tell Cagnaccio. He will have to pay.'

Donata gestured to Belnaso, who returned moments later with Cagnaccio two steps behind, flushed, rubbing the redness of his knuckles. He pushed the others out of the way and squatted down to examine the boy. Calmer now, but drowsy, the boy was one moment reviving, the next blacking out.

'Well done, lad,' Cagnaccio said, tapping the boy on the shoulder. 'Soon you'll be back on your feet. Rest easy. It's only a skin wound; it'll heal. You'll be up on your feet in no time.' (*He turns to the sea of faces at the door.*)

'I'm sure it doesn't need everybody here. Give the poor boy space. Besides, we've got another performance later—are we resetting for that or not? Move your arses now.'

He took Donata to one side.

'Is he going to be alright?' (*Donata shrugs.*) 'But the next performance? Will he be...'

'Are you mad? What do you think? Does he look as if he could cartwheel? The boy needs a surgeon, and he needs him now.'

'Now who's mad? Who is going to pay for that? You know the situation as well as I do. A surgeon will charge beyond all reason, especially at festival time. Just mop his brow, patch the wound as best you can, and I'm sure the boy will be alright.'

But Donata was not sure. Disgust showed on her face. 'If a surgeon cannot be afforded, then an apothecary must be found.'

'Perhaps, as a solution,' Fidato said, appearing as if from nowhere, 'I might offer my own humble services. I have had some not-inconsiderable experience with wounds. I studied, as you know, with experts in the medical school in Milano. There, I received the approval of several leading surgeons for my skills and intuitive care. Let me treat the boy. We'll call it a repayment of favour.' Cagnaccio looked down at the boy. The gash looked more serious than a flesh wound. 'Look here; I know the apothecary in this town. He's a man of ill humour, a scrawny wretch of a man, a bundle of ancient bones, a man nearer his grave than his patients, a man riddled with self-interest, lacking any of the skills he once had, if he ever possessed them at all. His ways are those of antiquity; they have not kept pace with the times; merely leeches or amputations; even his potions are watered down. I swear to you, Cagnaccio, that man cares only for his pockets, but I care for the health of this boy. All I need are some tinctures. If Belnaso can purchase them from the old fool, then he won't have to get involved. I'll give Belnaso a list.'

Cagnaccio reluctantly agreed; the ciarlatano would tend to the boy.

'But think on,' Donata said, wagging her finger in Cagnaccio's face. 'This boy will not be performing, not today, and likely not tomorrow.'

'Just see to the boy, both of you, and leave the rest to God.'

'Don't you dare dismiss me. This is entirely your fault, and you know it. If only you hadn't been so hard on him. If once you thought of someone other than yourself...'

'I suppose you think I pushed him off the ladder?'

'You might as well have done,' she muttered, then louder, 'Why don't you leave the lad alone? Go, clear out. You are not helping. Leave us to do what we can.'

Cagnaccio was more inclined to fight than walk away, but the pressing tone in her voice told him now was not the time to argue. One look at the boy could tell this was no scratch wound, and although he was reluctant to admit it, Donata was simply saying what he was thinking himself.

In the doorway, he bumped into the Dottore, returning breathless, wheezing from the effort of carrying two full pails, the water slopping as he half-ran, half-staggered his way back to the injured boy to drop the buckets next to the pile of calico.

'And I will stay and help,' Rosetta said, tears welling in her eyes.

'This is no place for you, dearie,' the Dottore said, trying to lead her away. 'Let's you and I leave Donata to take care of him; they will call us if we can help.'

At that moment, Emilia appeared at the door. Seeing her daughter in distress, she threw her arms around her shoulders and drew her into her chest. 'Oh Rosetta. I'm so sorry. Come, come with me. We'll sit together in the hall.'

'I cannot just abandon him, mother. I have to be by his side. I should have told him sooner. Now he may never know.'

'Come there; don't go getting upset. He knows, I'm sure. And he's a strong lad, with lots of fight in his veins.'

'No. I promise I won't leave him. I want to stay by his side.'

'Don't be silly, Rosetta. Donata needs her space. She has enough to do without you snapping at her heels.'

'I won't give up on him. He has to know how I feel.'

'And he will. You watch; he'll be fine. Now, let Donata work in peace.'

'You promise?'

'We'll see.' She reached for the girl's shoulders. 'Come away now.'

'You never wanted me to love him. Now I suppose you're delighted.'

'Rosetta, you know that's unfair. I just...'

'Leave me. I don't even want to see you.' Rosetta pushed her mother away and ran off into the hall.

'But Rosetta...'

Fidato, his attention returning to his patient, asked for the room to be cleared, save for Donata, who might be usefully employed in administering to the patient.

'Belnaso, go fetch two of my boxes, the small green one and the black one with leather straps; they are under my coat at the back of the hall. Quickly, now, don't tarry.'
(*Belnaso scurries away.*)

'You are sure that you can help him?' Donata asked.

'To stem the blood, yes. But the rest is in our good Lord's hands.'

'Did you hear them, Brighella? Did you hear how they laughed?' Unable to contain his excitement, the Apprentice had grasped Brighella's sleeve and was shaking it frantically. 'I swear they were calling for me. The first time: Arlecchino, Arlecchino. I heard them shout it, I swear.'

'The first time. And certainly not the last.' Retrieving his sleeve, Brighella undid the buttons of his jacket, removed his mask and his cap, and flung them on the floor. He shook his tight black curls loose and rubbed his cheeks vigorously to erase the pressure lines of the mask, where the leather had cut into his skin.

Cagnaccio was on them in an instant.

'You.' (*He seizes the collar of the Apprentice.*) 'Courtyard. Now. What in hell was that? Don't you think I've got enough to contend with? Have you seen that poor lad in there?' Without releasing his grip, he turned to Brighella. 'And you should watch out too. I saw what was going on. Watch yourself, Brighella.'

Spotting Belnaso foraging through the *ciarlatano's* boxes, Cagnaccio called to him, 'When you've finished with Fidato, I need you in the courtyard.'

Not waiting for an acknowledgement, Cagnaccio stormed out of the hall, dragging his Apprentice at his heels.

As Simonetta stood at the threshold, watching them attend to the boy, she felt only guilt and shame. Was she the cause of his fall? Ever since their stupid argument, the boy had seemed distracted. Had she been too harsh with him? What if his mind was so full of the pipedreams in his head that he lost his concentration and missed his step on the rung?

The same questions ran over and over in her conscience. *What if she had acted differently? What if she had not been so harsh?* However much she reasoned, she could not help feeling responsible. Pedrillo was too kind to blame her; he had never uttered a spiteful word in all the time she had known him. Yet, as much as she wished she loved him, the simple truth was that she could not. How simple her life would be if she had loved him, and in another world where they were of a similar age with similar aspirations, perhaps it might have been different, but he was too young for her. She resented the emotions he stirred in her, for she knew she lacked the courage to confront them. Flirting

gave her confidence, and she asked nothing more. She meant Pedrillo no ill will; she felt flattered by all that he said, but still, even the thought of commitment scared her. Besides, she could not live in a world where she could not feel free, and the prospect of losing control—no, she was not ready for that.

She stood uneasily at the door, unable to step in, reluctant to step away, for fear of admitting to herself, if not to him, the fears she fostered in her heart.

In the courtyard, Cagnaccio was inspecting Pantalone's slippers, rubbing at a single crimson spot on the saffron silk.

'A mark?' Belnaso said, leaning in.

'Blood.'

'Do you want me to rub it?'

'No, give it to Emilia; she will know what to do.'

Belnaso took them from him and, after carefully examining both shoes, laid them down on a bench. He lifted the cloak from his master's shoulders, folded it neatly, and set it down with the rest of Pantalone's costume as Cagnaccio undressed. He felt awkward, wanting to fill the silence, but he struggled with what to say. He undid the buttons on his master's doublet, revealing the red-raw knuckles of his right hand.

'Sore?' he asked.

'What?'

'The knuckles—only I saw the Apprentice holding his head; we nearly bumped into each other.' Realising he was on dangerous ground, he broke off. Usually, at this time, he would mention the show. In the end, he asked what he wanted to know.

'Is Pedrillo going to die?'

'Die? No. Who told you that nonsense?'

'I just wondered if...'

'Wonder what you wish. Pedrillo will be alright. He will have to be.'

'Perhaps we chose the wrong scenario? That's what people are saying—they say it needs more work.'

'Then they are fools. Enough. Just take the costume to Emilia and get out of my sight.' Cagnaccio collected his things and adjusted his attire as if preparing to leave.

'But where are we going?'

'You are going nowhere. I'm going to get some air.' And brushing past Belnaso, he strode off into the hall.

[Why would I know where he is going? Look lively. And don't make a sound; we don't want to get him riled. Tuck in behind me. He walks fast, so do try to keep up. Wherever he goes, follow him.]

Time left him. The tight streets, the crowding buildings, all merged. Lost in his thoughts, Cagnaccio had no idea where he was. But as he turned a corner, the realisation struck him that he must be at the top of the town. At a parapet, he slumped forward, letting the weathered stones bear his weight. Not yet evening, the storm clouds had brought such a cloak of darkness that it might as well have been night. Oblivious to the droplets of rain flicking across his face, he stared out. He stared but did not see. Had he been attentive, he might have traced the shifting shadows of the dark clouds as they raced across the horizon, carried closer by the gathering wind, or traced the outlines of the fields, forests, and hills etched out as contours breaking through the gloom. The sight of a wing of rooks struggling to hold to their course amid the eddies and swirls might have captivated him. The marvel of how they adapted as they battled the currents of air—all these things and more might have held his attention—were he not so inwardly absorbed. He looked out without seeing, absorbed by the currents of his thoughts—voices clamouring and jostling, each demanding to be heard, each bitter with accusation, each vying to assign him the blame. Even the howling of a wolf in the distance, as if calling out to him, passed him by unnoticed.

The show that night would have to be cancelled. Donata would have already done it. That much was evident; as much as he resented passing up the opportunity, there was no other way. No matter how he tried to jumble plots and lazzi, the absence of Pedrolino made them unworkable at such short notice. Besides, tonight the whole town would be drunk. But tomorrow, with the festivities over in the piazza, the townsfolk would return, eager for one last diversion before the drudgery of their lives reappeared. The boy would be better by then, he was sure. If, by some miracle, the ciarlatano possessed even a hint of competence, the lad would be back on his feet. Not fit enough for acrobatics, granted, but the lazzi were interchangeable, and with a change of scenario, Pedrolino could take a lesser part. At least tomorrow, there would be options.

For a man so connected to his public, Cagnaccio felt utterly alone. The world he had worked so hard to create was crumbling before his eyes. His legs, arms, and shoulders felt heavy—not for the first time—and he knew he needed to rest. Not since being an apprentice had he felt so exhausted. Then, hungry to learn and with an appetite that would not be suppressed, he would work every minute, rehearsing each discipline over and again to win his master's praise. Respect had driven him on—respect for his master, for the craft, for his art. And now he could almost hear his master's fingers drumming in disgust.

The rain was becoming heavier, a sharpness to the bristles of the wind. Perhaps he was not even aware that he had drawn his cloak tighter around him and pulled down the brim of his hat. Maybe instinct turned his heels and led him away from the wall, down a long slope of steps, and under a low arch. Watching him, a greyhound, more bone than flesh, sat on its hindlegs and growled as he approached.

The door he guarded creaked open, and an old woman emerged, staring into space as if listening for the slightest sound. He recognised her from the square, the obsidian bead necklace glinting around her neck as she moved. Using a besom as a cane, she stepped out onto the steps.

‘What is it, boy? Rats again? Where are they, Juke? Show me.’

As she turned to sweep around her, she lost her balance on the slippery steps. Cagnaccio ran forward to help her, grasping her by the arm.

‘Ah, not little rats. One big one with two legs.’ The old woman, dressed in black from head to foot with a shawl to cover her head, grasped his upper arm. ‘Be quiet, Juke.’ The hound stopped barking and loped off into the house. ‘I was wrong,’ she said, stroking the wet cloth of his cloak. ‘No rats tonight, Juke lad; tonight we’ve caught us a wet fish.’ She turned back in Cagnaccio’s direction. ‘Come on inside then. Fishy. If the storm has blown you here, I suppose you’d better come in.’

He went to lead her to the door, but she pushed him aside with the broom. ‘My eyesight may not be good, but I am not blind yet. Come on in then.’

He had no intention of entering, and yet he followed her as if on a leash. The room was small, and without windows, the only light was the dim light that wheezed out of the flagging fire. Fumbling in the darkness, she found a bundle of candles, examining each by fingering along its length. Selecting one, she teased its wick upward, thrust it into the fire, waited until it caught, then set it in a holder at the side of the table.

‘Sit,’ she said. ‘I cannot offer you much, but you were kind to me in the square, so there’s broth alive on the hearth.’ From a pot over the fire, she poured three ladles of the liquid into a wooden bowl, retrieved a spoon from the shelf, and made her way back to him. He had been so busy with the performance that he had not eaten all day. The broth, thin as dishwater, tasted better than it looked, and the sweet tang of herbs revived him.

‘You’re lost, though, fishy. Out of your water. Lucky you swam this way.’ She pulled up a chair and sat opposite him. Her face was round—almost too round—with a complexion littered with scars, pockmarks, and boils. The candle flickered in the draught, catching the surfaces of the beads and causing shadows to fall unevenly on her face, which before had seemed without contours and now rose as subtle cheekbones to emphasise her aquiline nose and the milky clouds in her eyes.

‘What brings a fishy out of the storm on such a holy night?’

He did not want to explain. 'I went out walking and somehow lost where I was.'

'And who are you to be lost, blown in by the storm?'

He told her his name was Cagnaccio. She sniggered to herself.

'A dog-fish, eh? That's rare. Do you hear, Juke? He thinks he's one of yours.' The dog sniffed and adjusted its position near the fire.

'We met in the piazza. I am Cagnaccio. From the Commedia. Maybe you've heard my name. We come each year for the festival. I am their leader, the *capocomico*. And Pantalone. Everyone knows who I am.'

'People's mouths are too eager to spurt nonsense. You're old enough to know that. No, fishy-dog, I've not heard of you or your silly games. To me, you're like the rest of us—another peasant in the making, but one with an audience at his feet. And yet, there's some kindness in his heart, Juke. So, tell me, Il Famoso Signor Cagnaccio, or however you choose to be called, what name were you born with?'

He felt himself bristle with defiance.

'That name is long forgotten. A boy's name, no more; never destined to be a man. Cagnaccio is my name.'

The woman looked deep into the distance as if listening to voices on the wind, and as she gazed, she caressed every ridge and fold of her wizened hands as if secrets lay between the wrinkles waiting to be exposed. At the nail of the last finger, she reached down into her skirts and, to his surprise, drew out a blade and slammed the tip hard into the table so that it quivered where it stood. He could leave. He could simply walk out of the door and into the storm, and yet, as much as he wanted to do so, his curiosity would not let him go. He pulled up a stool and sat.

She did not look in his direction, nor did she register any concern; her eyes locked on the wall behind him, never moving. 'Do you want to take it up?' She pointed to the blade. 'Will it make you feel better?'

'You see me as a half-blind, half-mad woman. Yet I see more than you. I see an old man, his beard hanging down his chest, his chair close to the hearth, and a young girl at her grandfather's feet. Elissa, we shall call her—a name she was born with and no doubt would keep all the days of her life. "Come closer, sweet child, and listen," he says. "Come closer to the warmth of the fire, for this is a cold, cold story." He tells her of wars and squabbles, tales of battles lost and won, the bravery of heroes, and how the glint of glory all too soon loses its sheen. He tells her of death and suffering, of illness, pestilence, and disease, and how fate can spin like a spider to rob you of all that you have.'

'He told her to love dearly and freely give of her heart but to watch for the betrayal of friends and how hope can turn to regret. He taught her the lessons of loss and mourning, of the sadness of being alone. "And yet, my sweet Elissa," he said, tears welling in his eyes, 'when I look at the bloom of your youth and the tenderness in your

gaze, I see the prize of heaven right before my eyes.' And he cupped her cheeks in the chill of his palms with such softness that she thought that she might cry.'

The old woman paused, lost in the worlds of her words like the folds of a majestic cloth.

'What happened to the child?' Cagnaccio asked.

'The girl looked into the eyes of her grandfather and saw he was close to tears and, in that moment, knew what she must do. If all his pain and suffering were lifted by seeing her that way, then she would remain that way forever. She resolved, for his sake, that she would never grow up. And from that day forward, the old man would go about his tasks, collecting the wood from the forest and hunting for rabbits and birds, never travelling far from their home in case he came back and found her gone. But Elissa was true to her word. Whether the old man realised that the girl remained always the same and chose to ignore the signs, or whether as age crept over him his eyesight started to fade, I cannot tell, but they lived that way, doting grandfather and granddaughter, in peace and quiet contentment until the old fool died.' The old woman looked away as if she had awoken from a dream.

'What happened to the girl when the old man died?'

'Elissa was left all alone. So used was she to being the flame in her grandfather's eyes that even as her limbs developed and flowered into a woman, she could not escape feeling as if she were still that young girl. She lived in her past forever.' She shrugged as if to lay the story back into the annals of time, then, toying with the cloth in her hands, turned her attention to him.

'Such a sad story.'

'But one with the ring of truth.'

As he searched for the question to ask her, the one nagging at the back of his mind, she tugged at the handle of the blade, drew it from the table, and placed it flat on its side. She looked around at the fireplace, where the dog was fast asleep.

'You should go now—go and swim back to your shoal. The storm is all but passed.'

She said no other words to him, nor even acknowledged his leaving; she simply took up the basin, wiped it with an apron, and put it back on the shelf. He wanted to say something to thank her, although he did not understand why, except that it felt as if a weight had been lifted. On the threshold, he turned to bid her farewell, but she simply motioned for him to go.

Despite the storm abating, the wind was still cutting through the streets, ripping pennants from buildings and tossing them into the muddy pools where the rain found uneven

ground. Cagnaccio tugged down the brim of his hat, pulled his cloak tight around him, and set off in the hope that some landmark would help him understand where he was.

Time and again, he heard the words that the woman had said—words that had made such perfect sense at the time but now sat heavily on his mind. His thoughts turned to Pedrillo, to the boy who would not grow up. For all the folly, Cagnaccio envied the boy. How could he chastise Pedrillo when, if only the cards had fallen differently, he, too, would have played the same hand? To refuse to see the world's faded glories, with all its suffering and strife, but resolutely fix his aim on the future and the purity of a heart—that felt like a life worth living, a life so far from his own.

Not for the first time in his life, not even for the first time that hour, Cagnaccio felt like a prisoner, trapped in the cage of his fame. His wish, with all sincerity, was that Pedrillo would always be the same, untainted by the reality of the world, ready to reach for the moon.

[5]

[I ask you, what's he got to be so miserable about? He's famous, for God's sake. What about us poor mortals? Just leave him to mope. Self-indulgent brute, Let's head back to the hall. Yes, I'm worried about Pedrillo as well. Let's run. It's starting to rain again.]

'Tell everyone,' Donata whispered to Belnaso, 'the rest of the performances are off today. As for tomorrow, tell them I don't know what will happen, but tell them to enjoy themselves tonight. And tell them to keep out of our way.'

'But...Cagnaccio?'

'But nothing. Leave Cagnaccio to me. Go now; make sure everyone knows.'

She heard him skid on the floor as he hurried out of the hall. A hush descended once more.

Donata gently mopped her patient's brow. She had not seen Cagnaccio for hours. He would be sulking somewhere, as he always did when trouble struck. She had been too harsh on him; she knew it as soon as she had said it, but, after all the antics of the day, she thought he deserved some of the blame. After all, he had beaten Pedrillo, and perhaps that had left the boy dazed, but all the same, he was right; Pedrillo had been distracted, and it was his obsession with looking at Simonetta that was the real cause of his slip.

Using blankets from the lodgings, she had bolstered the bed as best she could, but now, feeling the cold of the stone floor under her, the only warmth being the lamp at her side, she took a blanket for herself and wrapped it around her shoulders. Her legs were

numb from kneeling, but the position of the boy made it hard for her to move without disturbing him, and he had been so fitful before that when he finally became drowsy, she could not bring herself to move. She returned the wet rag to the bucket, wrung it hard, and placed it folded on the rim of the pail. She shifted her weight slowly to let the blood run back to her legs, but as she did so, the boy murmured. By resting her hand on his shoulder, the boy eased once more.

'How is the patient?' Fidato said under his breath as he came to squat by her side.

'His brow is hot; I've been mopping it, but now he seems to be more rested.'

The ciarlatano edged his way around the bed, careful not to disturb the boy. The poultice was holding. The mixture—moist bread, linseed, comfrey, horseradish, woodsage, and ragwort—was pounded into a paste and applied directly to the gauze to keep it close to the skin. Seeping through the bandage, the concoction seemed to be covering the wound well enough. In time, another would have to be made, but for the moment, sleep was the best remedy for the boy. Fidato sat down, brushing the dust from his coat. He prised off his glove to test the back of his hand on Pedrillo's forehead.

'He is choleric. The fever is resisting.'

A long shadow cast across the boy's body. Simonetta, standing in the doorway, looked awkwardly down at the boy, unsure what she should do. The smell of smoke and wine, like chestnuts roasted on the fire, wafted in behind her as if the pursuit of pleasure had followed her from the revelries in the square to entice the boy away. Tentatively, she edged a step forward, stopping only on seeing the crusted bandage and the stains of dry blood.

'I didn't realise...' she said, unable to look directly at the boy but settling on a box to the rear.

'Leave him. Let him be,' Donata said. 'Save what you want to tell him for later; for now, it's better to let him sleep.' Simonetta needed no other telling; her expression gave her away. She had not wanted to see him, but her guilt had forced her to come.

The sound of Simonetta's voice roused the boy as surely as any elixir. Forcing his shoulders off the makeshift bed, he looked over at her and forced a smile. Donata took up the cloth from the pail and swabbed his brow. The boy was gaunt and pallid, his skin too warm to the touch, his lips struggling to form words, and his eyes fixed on the blurred image in the doorway as he fought to lift himself up. Fidato leant across him, holding his shoulders down, to ease him back to the bed. The boy slumped back with a groan.

In the doorway, Simonetta was fretting nervously, shuffling from foot to foot, her hands wringing in front of her, and her head awkwardly turning behind her as if voices in the distance were beckoning her away. She garbled an apology, spun on her heels, and left.

The boy fell quiet, exhausted. Hearing the boy wheezing, Fidato suggested turning the boy on his side to alleviate his breathing. Carefully placing the boy's shoulders, Donata supported his ribs with her hand as they pulled the boy to his side. He groaned as he tried to settle, but steadily his breathing improved. Setting him on his side exposed the bandage to the light. The gauze would definitely need replacing. Donata thought to adjust it, to move it a little better to cover the wound, but a hand caught hold of her arm. Pedrillo, mustering what strength he had, drew Donata down to him until her ear was close to his mouth.

'She loves me, Donata. She does. She really loves me.'

'Yes, yes, be quiet now.' Donata nodded, tenderly stroking his cheek.

'She came. She really came.' And he surrendered once more to sleep, a faint smile forming on his lips.

[6]

[Where are we going? The Piazza? Fine. I think we were right to leave. We would only get in the way. Let's find the others. There are stories everywhere here. Besides, I'm starting to feel hungry, and after everything that's happened today, we've earned a drink or two.]

In the piazza, the festivities were in full swing. The closure of the doors of the basilica signalled the shift from the sacred to the profane. On the steps, a juggler was drawing a large crowd by tossing flaming torches high into the air, while on the raised platforms, a monk was preaching the virtues of chastity to a largely oblivious flock as he competed, in vain, for attention with a singer of epic songs, who, to the vocal encouragement of the crowd, recounted and suggested the actions of Dioneo's lusty tale. Around the square and in the network of streets leading away, taverns, heaving under the demand, were so full that they burst out into the streets, with servers bringing wine in large jugs to satisfy the need.

At one large taverna, a regular haunt of the players, tucked into an alley off the main square, the Apprentice and Brighella sat close to the door. The Apprentice felt exhilarated; he had never received so hearty a greeting on walking into an inn. The eager patrons took his hand in theirs, shaking it wildly in disbelief that here was the same Arlecchino, the one on everyone's lips. Some begged him to relive a trick or a lazzo. Part of him wanted to oblige, but with gratitude and as much grace as he could muster, he graciously declined. Even those who had not seen the performance seized him by the shoulders, slapping him on the back, begging for him to join them. Tonight, he was one with his audience; tonight, he knew he had arrived.

Although he hesitated to admit it—the accuracy of the backflips, the spins, and the timing of that business with the oversized syringe—he could not have performed them better. Granted, the split-second upstaging of Pantalone might have been a step too far, but still, the audience laughed. And wasn't it he who jumped forward to rescue the show when Pedrolino fell from the stage? Without so much as a blink of an eye, he made it seem part of the fun; the audience laughed so heartily that he swore some of them called out, *Arlecchino! Arlecchino!* He could still hear them chanting his name. No, tonight, not even Cagnaccio could deny that his Arlecchino was sublime.

He felt sorry for Pedrillo, of course, but bruises were part of this life. The boy was distracted; everyone saw that. One moment Pedrolino was on the ladder, the next lying huddled on the floor. No, if anyone were to blame, it was Cagnaccio for choosing a scenario that was under-rehearsed. And wasn't Cagnaccio the one berating Pedrillo so hysterically? Arlecchino had rescued the show, but where was Cagnaccio then? No pat on the back, no compliments. He might have hoped his maestro would be proud, given all those times Cagnaccio had drummed on about perfection, but now, only to ignore him—where was the justice in that?

'Brighella, did you hear them?' He reached over the table and grabbed his friend by the arm. 'They were cheering for me, Brighella, not for Pantalone, but Arlecchino' (*He repeats the name over and over again.*) What do you make of that?

'And Cagnaccio? Your surrogate father, what did he have to say about it?'

'Cagnaccio's not my father, nor would I want him to be—he seemed angry; I didn't wait around to hear why.'

'Strange. I would have thought that, as your teacher, the bastard would have been impressed. At least enough to say something encouraging for once. You're right about one thing though,' he said, leaning in, laying aside his wine. 'It wasn't your fault Pedrolino fell.'

'Why would I think that?'

Brighella sat back, his fingers steepled in front of him, drumming them lightly together. That they all felt guilty for the accident was inevitable. No one wished the boy harm. Perhaps the Apprentice, as Arlecchino, was so shocked by the audience reaction that he went out of his way to play to it, paying no regard to his fellow players, to Pedrolino least of all, but this was true for everyone on stage.

'If anyone must accept the blame,' Brighella said, looking his friend in the eye, 'it is Cagnaccio. And someone ought to say something. You—you should challenge him; he will listen to you.'

'Now I know you're joking. He would as soon listen to me as to cancel another performance, and you know he is not going to do that.'

'All the same, it might work to your advantage.' (*The Apprentice looks at him quizzically.*) 'And Simonetta? Did you see the way she looked at you as they started cheering your name.'

'Nonsense. She would never look at me.'

'What, never look at the ascendant star, Arlecchino? Are you sure? All she needs to see is that you are a man, not another lovesick boy. Standing up to Cagnaccio might show her you've got mettle in your bones.' Brighella pushed the jug of wine across the table for the boy to refill his glass. 'I have been wondering...' he said, then hesitated as if considering the best way to proceed with the boy hanging on to his every word. 'I have been talking with Fidato and Donata, and we...'

The sight of Simonetta fast approaching left the sentence hanging in the air. Visibly shaken, she slid onto the bench beside the Apprentice, snatched his glass from his hand, and, checking the quantity of wine inside, swallowed it in one gulp.

'How's Pedrillo?'

'Let's talk about something else. Wine? Yes. Lots of it.' She nudges Brighella as if someone has caught her eye.

[Don't look now; they are looking right at us. Oh, no, she's going to...]

'Who are you two anyway? You've been following us around for days.'

'Yes, you two,' Brighella shouted, 'don't pretend you're not there. Do you want to drink with us? Here, come. Stick your hand in your purse and buy us another couple of carafes, and we will be your friends for the night.'

[Lord save us. What did I tell you about getting involved? Well, you can stay if you want to and drink yourself to oblivion with these wastrels, but I'm going back to the hall. Make your choice. Stay or come—I don't care what you do anymore.]

[7]

The main hall was deserted. The bustling atmosphere had dissipated, the stage stood bare, the backcloths struck, the props removed, and all that was left was a bare wooden frame, ready to hang the next show. Just a few hours prior, the hall had echoed with laughter and the peal of thunderous applause; now all that remained were memories and the unbearable weight of silence, emphasised by his hollow footfall sounding off the walls. At the side of the stage, he stopped, his attention drawn to a pile of sawdust, which masked the dull stain where the blood had pooled on the floor.

Outside in the courtyard, sitting against a wall, Cagnaccio was surprised to find Belnaso, his legs tucked against his chest, his head resting on his knees. Weary and sorrowful, Belnaso lifted his head, his eyes heavy with exhaustion.

'It is going to be alright?' He murmured, his words tinged with sadness.

'I know,' Cagnaccio said. (*He sits down next to Belnaso.*) 'It feels like everything is changing. But why are you sitting out here all alone in the cold?'

'Donata cancelled the show.' (*He waits for a reaction from Cagnaccio, which does not come.*) 'I wanted to be close in case they needed me. No one runs like Belnaso. You know it to be true, Signor Cagnaccio; I will not dally, and no one, but no one, makes a deal like Belnaso.'

Cagnaccio nodded and tapped his friend on the shoulder. 'Sometimes, Belnaso, you put us all to shame. How loyal you are!'

Belnaso was not sure he understood; he only did as he was bid, but all the same, he had feelings. 'I'm scared, Maestro.' (*He points along the corridor.*) 'It's too quiet. For too long. I don't like it. I don't like it at all.'

Whatever Cagnaccio said, however much he tried to reassure him, Belnaso still looked ill at ease. Doubt creeps easily on pure minds, as does fear once it has taken hold, and no amount of fine words or reason would extinguish what Belnaso knew to be true from his own experience sitting there: that the cries, the sobs, and then the painful silence of the young man lying in that room had crept along the corridor and sat so leaden at his feet that he could not kick them away.

'Let the boy sleep,' Cagnaccio said kindly. 'In the morning, you'll see, Pedrillo will be fine. Everything will look better in the morning. I'll go check on them. But try to get some sleep. Tomorrow we've got a show to sort out.' Cagnaccio watched as his sentences floated past Belnaso's eyes, heard but not taken to heart.

Inside the small room, shadows mingled, reducing the room to one pool of light flickering from the drowsy lantern. Out of the path of draughts, the room was stifling at first entry, with the odour of herbs and stale sweat suffocating the room. In the centre, the boy lay peacefully on the slats of the hastily constructed bed, like a corpse prepared for a pyre.

Cagnaccio, overcome momentarily in the fug, reached for the wall, but, finding it clammy to the touch, wiped it on the side of his breeches. Donata was asleep, her head bowed over Pedrillo, as if sitting in prayer for the boy. Fidato was stretched out on the ground, his spine awkwardly following the line of planks piled up behind him, and his head flopped back, snoring gently and rhythmically, as if marking a patient's pulse.

He did not want to wake them. He turned as if to go back to Belnaso, but a hand caught the hem of his cloak.

'He's weak.' Seeing Donata struggle to move, her legs cramped in one position for too long, Cagnaccio reached across the boy to steady her as she tried to rise to her feet.

'You cancelled the show.'

'Hours ago, yes.'

'Did I tell you to cancel it?'

'The time came and went. Someone had to make the decision. I can't believe you would even consider another show today. Have you no compassion? Do you think anyone had the heart to perform? Clearly not you—you weren't even here. So I cancelled it and sent them to drown their spirits; I needed them out of the way. And don't start on me now, Cagnaccio. I'm tired, and I'm worried about Pedrillo.'

'He's weak?'

'Very weak, Cagnaccio.' She stepped over her patient's body and gestured to lead them both out of Pedrillo's hearing. 'It will be a long night. I fear he won't make the morn.' She meant to whisper, but unused to the sound of her voice in the room, it came out strident and clear.

'The ciarlatano lived up to his word, then!' he sneered. 'I did warn you...'

'We owe him, Cagnaccio; you owe him. He has been a marvel; without him, it could have been so much worse. At least, there is still some hope, even if it is fading by the hour.'

'We should call a priest.' From behind them, Fidato, awkward in rising and using the shifting planks for support, dusted down the lapels of his coat and came to join them.

'No priests are to be called.'

Cagnaccio was adamant. The boy showed no signs of any religious devotion; in all the time he had been with them, he had never stepped inside a church other than to drum up an audience. The sight of a priest looming over him would be enough to startle the poor boy into death. All priests were hypocrites. Besides, he knew that the boy would recover. Donata and the ciarlatano had spent so long together in the room that they interpreted every grimace and whimper as a sign of further decline. Gloom closed in around them and the stench of death hovered in the air. He bid them take a walk, to stretch out in the air, to catch the air on their cheeks, and to clear the stuffiness from their lungs. Leaning against the doorframe, he called to Belnaso. He took up the pail at the boy's feet and wrung the flannel hard, dowsing it in water before setting it down on Pedrillo's brow. As the droplets fell across his face, the boy murmured.

'Belnaso, go quietly. Fetch water. Cool, fresh water will revive him.' He handed over the bucket. Needing no persuasion, Belnaso ran off in the direction of the square.

'You will have to cancel the show tomorrow,' Donata said.

'We will see. The boy will revive.'

‘Are you out of your wits, Cagnaccio? Even if the boy could stand, you cannot expect him to perform. And who could take his place?’

‘And the licence? You know it will expire.’

‘And what if the boy expires? What then, Cagnaccio? What then?’

Cagnaccio dismissed it without thought. The show could not be cancelled. They would have to find a way. Tonight, of course, would be impossible; with the boy lying in a pool of blood and everyone distracted, how could they ever go on—but tomorrow? Tomorrow was a different story. Tomorrow, the boy would have slept off the fever and would no doubt be back on his feet. The alternative was not worth thinking about. Pedrillo might have a sore head for a day or two, and they might have to modify his act, but if he could stand and gesticulate, they could easily find a way. They had faced bigger calamities than one boy’s sickness. They would choose a different scenario, one that used Pedrolino less; they would reallocate his involvement in the lazzi. All was possible if the boy could just stand and speak.

The more Cagnaccio thought, the more he convinced himself that the problems were surmountable. Let the boy rest. He would take a turn at the vigil without danger of falling asleep. Grabbing them by the arms, he bundled Donata and Fidato out into the cold air of the hall and bid them go and rest, the better to tend to the boy when they returned.

‘Belnaso and I will watch him. I promise you, the boy will come to no harm.’

V

Performing

Enter a FOOL.

You're here. At last.

They're waiting, my friend Arlecchino.

Can't you hear time rubbing away? All the while you are dithering, they're eager to see you onstage. And yet, right action, they say, comes with right timing. When to wait or when to step forward, when to fight, or when to retreat?

(FOOL Goes to leave. Stops. Returns downstage, scratching his head. In the next speech, he occasionally steps towards the wings, then back downstage as if anxious to move on.)

How will you choose to enter? Will you enter at all? Are you going to keep them waiting until you finally decide to appear? Strange place, the wings. Step forward, and you step into the spotlight. Step back, and you merge into the dark.

Our lives are determined by such moments.

Here, like the hinge in the doorway, a single swing marks the past from the future, between what was and what yet might be.

(FOOL pauses. An idea. Makes a deep bow and flourish.)

You could caper ahead with confidence, announcing your arrival as you go, or you could stand for a moment here in silence, trying to work out where you stand. Some confident souls will rush into the future headlong; others, those with their minds in the past, will taint the world before them, enslaved by their scars and their doubts.

(FOOL runs towards the wings. Stops with his head offstage and body onstage. Reverses back on stage. Comes back downstage.)

Still pondering? Well, here to guide you, let's introduce two of your constant companions, your sirens, on your passage through life.

Let's hear it for the beauty of Expectation who approaches you from the front.

(FOOL approaches downstage right as if announcing an entrance.)

Eager for you to step forward, with excitement thumping in her chest, she smiles the charms of becoming as she wide-eyes the future for your path, prospecting for your next adventure, sifting the softest of melodies to spin them to tunes of your choice, so you may dance to the whim of your fancy wherever it happens to lead. Her strains sing of innocence, enticing you to come forth.

{FOOL stops as if in rapture. Suddenly, as if startled, he looks over his shoulder as if someone has entered upstage left.}

But then, as forceful as Expectation, from a step or two behind, like a stench from out of the gutter, Distrust, her whining sister, is unrelentingly hissing your name.

(FOOL moves back and aside as if suggesting someone is walking slowly downstage.)

Cloaked, she drags behind her the ponderous chains of your past, mumbling low of those lessons you vowed you would learn but didn't have the courage to try. She stares, then points at the trail of regrets marking the path you have come, then runs her chilling fingers over your shameful bruises, picking at the sores of your woe.

(Fool stops a moment as if transfixed by something stuck on the floor. He shivers and returns downstage.)

And yes, you might choose to ignore her. But you know she won't leave you for long. Scavenging the depths of your folly in believing your triumph is near, she'll remind you that you'll most likely fail.

So, which of your companions will you favour? Amid this hurly-burly, you alone must decide.

(FOOL slaps his hands together as if refusing to get involved.)

So, don your chequered costume with its threadbare patches and hems, and shield your face with your mask. Hide your reservations. Smile as you step into the light. Sometimes, you likely will prosper, if luck looks kindly on you, and sometimes, you will undoubtedly fail. Then you'll fall to your knees in supplication, praying for forgiveness for the stupid choices you made that could oh so easily have been avoided if only you had taken a breath. If only, like the hinge in the door, you'd have swung forward when the timing was right.

(FOOL starts to move upstage left as if slowly edging away.)

So, press on, my friend, my Arlecchino, press on, and choose what you will do. For your audience is growing impatient.

Can you hear the bells of destiny peeling?

The time to act might be soon.

(FOOL creeps away, exiting upstage left.)

[1]

[So what if you hardly slept? No one slept. How could I sleep with someone moaning and prowling around most of the night? What—you're hungry? Welcome to a life on the road. There's bread; it's stale, I expect, and some half-rotting fruit on the side. Not much, but better than starving. Help yourself. We'll be staying here for a while.]

When dawn breaks, it falls as unequally as destiny. For some, it heralds a beginning, brushing clear the cobwebs of dreams so that, fresh-eyed and with a slate washed clean of fears, new adventures can commence. For others, it marks no more than the turn of the clock, as day follows night in one ever-unfolding drudge to be confronted, embraced, or endured.

Whether or not the first rays of sunlight brought hope back to the hall, it seemed at least as if Pedrillo had rallied. In the early hours, the battling had been fierce, with the boy fighting against the fever, rallying like a man. Just before dawn, Donata returned, eager to place her body where her thoughts had been all night long.

For Cagnaccio, the new day brought a lingering, stifled despair. While the boy was at least no longer delusional, he was far too weak to perform. No amount of praying that he might recover would change that. The fever had not abated and, if anything, had taken more hold. If the boy still had the fight in him, the next few hours would tell.

A night of pacing, praying, and pondering had robbed him of his sense of time. Soon, much sooner than Cagnaccio anticipated, the others arrived. From seeing their leader, dishevelled and despondent, his head bowed, strolling aimlessly around the hall, they might have expected the worst, but even the relief of Pedrillo's revival seemed to bring no optimism to his mood. Many of the players chose to keep their distance, recognising only too well the perils that came when Cagnaccio's choler was high. Those who set store in loyalty saw only anguish in their leader and made valiant attempts to reassure him; the Capitano, the Dottore, and even Belnaso tried to lift his spirits, but all to little avail.

In the courtyard, Cagnaccio watched from a distance as Simonetta, perched on the edge of a crate, was washing her calves with a flannel, her skirts hoisted over her crossed knees, her foot dancing with the movement of the cloth.

'A pretty sight,' Fidato said, coming to stand next to him.

'Don't tell me,' Cagnaccio said, taking a seat on a wall. 'They hate me. They're blaming me for all this. That's how it usually plays out. Anger always needs a target, and

the target's the grumpy old man. They play it so often on stage that they think it's true even in life.'

'And you don't deserve it? We are not so different, you and me, but while my frustration turns inward, yours heads straight to your fists.' Fidato turned so that they were face-to-face. 'You know, I might have a powder that could help you with that.'

'And you can keep it to yourself. No, you are a newcomer. They will always hate me more.'

'I've no doubt. Here, I'm just the annoying pedlar with potions, cures, and herbs. I'm the oddity, the stranger. But you, Cagnaccio, are the master of their fate. Is it any wonder they look up to you?'

They watched as Simonetta finished her ablutions, let down the flounce of her skirts, and, bucket in hand, went back into the hall.

'And Pedrillo?'

'The same.'

The boy's condition was one thing, but both men understood well enough that Cagnaccio, guilty or not, had his mind set on performing and how they could put on a show.

Cagnaccio had waited at the youngster's side for much of the night, praying for the boy to revive and wishing him back on the stage. Without a Pedrolino, they could not go on; they needed the extra character. Long and hard, had he deliberated to find a solution, but all of the best scenarios needed the extra man. With a scenario found, they could rehearse; they still had time, but it would need commitment from them all, and with tempers already flaring, he doubted that they would be willing to try. Even if he begged them to do it for the sake of their friend, he could imagine the moans and complaints.

He could cancel. Again. Some would undoubtedly expect it, praising his compassion for showing respect to the ailing boy, but, later, when Pedrillo had recovered, and with saddlebags still empty of coin, sans food, sans shelter and sans hope with three long weeks until Carnevale, how would the company survive? The coin they had already taken was barely enough to see them through a couple of weeks, let alone until the spring. They needed at least one more well-attended performance—without that, it did not take a fortune teller to see how their future would unfold.

How strangely our senses can revive us! Like the touch of cool water from a flannel, they can cleanse our vision, washing the grit from our eyes. While his thoughts were entangled in unpicking the knots in his mind, going over options in the hope of seeing them anew, the subtle scent of camomile wafting from the ciarlatano's coat caught his imagination, transporting him far beyond the walls of the town to the meadows and valleys below. In that split second, the solution came to him—a possibility so obvious that it had been sitting next to him the whole time.

'Instead of a Pantalone, you must play Magnifico,' he said, clutching Fidato's arm. 'I will take up my Arlecchino once more. My Apprentice can easily play Pedrolino; he rehearses with him every day; he must know all of his moves.'

Whatever reservations Fidato might have about his ability to take to the stage or about learning the actions required in time, they were washed away as easily as the grime from Simonetta's calves. Cagnaccio was insistent; he could easily teach the old man all that he knew, enough at least to get by, and they would limit the lazzi to ones where he was the brunt of the joke and he would only have to react. He could easily delegate some of Pantalone's usual business to the Dottore, and as Arlecchino, as master of ceremonies, he would be there in the midst of them to make sure all worked out.

'I can see you up there, Fidato. You would make a great Magnifico, official, self-centred, and loud. It's made for you. He hardly moves, and when he does, he only walks slowly, so it will be easier to grasp than Pantalone.'

Fidato, hesitant at first, had little option but to surrender. The solution was, after all, the best option. The only issue would be one of practicality. The costume. Emilia would find something, and Cagnaccio was sure they had an old mask. So, despite feigning resistance, Fidato, feeling at once indispensable, leapt eagerly at the opportunity, not just envisaging the applause of the crowd but imagining Donata's gratitude for stepping in to save the show.

Cagnaccio was startled more by Donata's response than by the fact that Fidato had rushed to tell her his news. Watching from a distance, he saw it. There was something in her look—a strange knowing, as if she were hiding a secret that she was on the verge of disclosing—a sense that she had anticipated Cagnaccio's decision and that it too was part of an intrigue, long in the making, that was now playing out as she had planned.

All the same, she masked it well. She had never been an actor. She had never expressed any desire to take to the stage, and despite Cagnaccio's coaxing, she had always politely refused. He had even offered to create a new character for her: an ageing Marcelina, a foil for the stupid old men, as a schemer to rival the best of them, intent on prospering her fortunes and those of her nephew in Turin. She had quickly turned it aside.

How careful and clever she was. She could see Cagnaccio watching them, so she nodded, half-smiling, as she knew he might have expected, then deftly manoeuvred Fidato in front of her so that her expression could not be seen. Only when Fidato reached forward to grab her arms did she suddenly break away. She was frowning.

'It's done. It's agreed,' Fidato said, returning to Cagnaccio. 'Donata said not to worry Emilia, who will be busy enough trying to get the blood out of Pedrolino's white smock and take it in for the Apprentice. Donata will put together a costume for me herself;

she can sew it as she tends to Pedrillo. She said you'll also have to ask Emilia about your Arlecchino costume, but that you probably still have your old one, if it fits. If anything needs letting out, you may be doing it yourself!

The announcement of the Fidato's inclusion in the performance spread quickly throughout the troupe and, by and large, was greeted with excitement. The opportunity to see and work alongside Cagnaccio's legendary Arlecchino for one last performance was too irresistible to miss. Only those close to the Apprentice seemed muted in response, attributing the sudden changes not to Pedrillo's sickness but to a stay on their friends' ambition on account of his recent success. One thing was for certain: if the show were to go on that afternoon, time was not on their side.

Cagnaccio lifted his old wooden chest from a stack piled up in a side room and, finding a quiet place in the hall, rummaged to the bottom to pull out his Arlecchino costume. He had not seen it for years; the old canvas suit had retired from the role with him. No one would ever wear it—no one but him. So precious to him, so redolent of former glory, that although faded and fraying, the clothes seemed no different from when he first sewed the patches together. Each seam, each repair, told a story, conjuring places and people from his memory and stirring emotions deep within him to emerge from the fog of the past.

He set to work, as he had done all those years before, running his fingers over the tunic and pants, examining the patches of red and yellow triangles—remnants cut from a hundred other cloths—as he felt each seam for holes or unpicked threads, adding stitches wherever required. Concentrating on the movement of the needle, he might as well have been sewing those first stitches all those years ago, with the cloth draped over his lap. He, a useless young lad with little skill for sewing, just the determination to please his maestro.

The extraordinary Signor Chiavaroli—*Il Maestro*. He owed everything to that man. A man of such gentleness and compassion. An artist of the stage, he teased the best from everyone he met, who responded equally to his goodwill. Cagnaccio worked without cease for the man for seven long years, eager to repay the opportunity that had opened the door to his fame.

'One day, my boy,' he had said, looking sternly in the young lad's eyes, 'if you work hard, with patience, and set your mind to the task, you may just about be worthy to honour the memory of those who went before, those who also wore these clothes.'

And Cagnaccio toiled tirelessly. Those days were arduous and unyielding, but with unwavering determination, he refused to succumb to defeat. Instead, he redoubled his efforts, until gradually he showed the welcome signs of improvement that earned the maestro's nod of approval.

In the quieter moments, by a crackling night-time fire, he would sit and watch as sparks escaped from the embers to etch the blackness of the sky, alone with the Maestro, listening to the sounds of crickets as they sang to the sputtering of the flames. Here, he was accepted without speaking. Here, he need not run. Here, he had found a home. Never once did the old man seek to discover the boy's history or the path that brought them together; his gaze was so sure on the road ahead and on the ground now under his feet.

Until there came the argument.

An actor, a loud-mouth, full of self-importance, dared to challenge the Maestro's wisdom. Snide remarks heard offstage were like daggers through Cagnaccio's heart; no longer could he stand by silently to see his mentor treated with such disdain. The Maestro, steadfast to the last, uttered not one word in anger to the actor, refusing to submit to his taunts, but as their relationship soured, disharmony spread through the group.

Cagnaccio could hold back no longer. To defend his master, he lunged at the actor, raining down blow upon blow, until, blood splattering around them, bystanders hauled them apart. The seeping wounds on the actor's brow, the closing, swelling eye, the rivers of red as the lip split—Cagnaccio would have done it again in an instant. He felt proud of what he had done.

Yet his pride was destined to be fleeting.

The Maestro expelled Cagnaccio.

'Do you think it is your role to defend me? Did I ask you to do that? This is my company, and I will lead it as I see fit.'

The maestro would hear no excuse. Perhaps Cagnaccio should have apologised and gone down on his knees and begged, but he did none of those things, for he could not accept he was wrong. Instead, he walked away, stubbornly vowing to show his master that he would become the best Arlecchino ever seen.

The split was inevitable; it had to come one day, and with time, Cagnaccio came to wonder whether his mentor foresaw it and orchestrated the sequence of events. The time had come for him to cut free; he had learned all that his master could impart. The remainder would come only through experience.

From that day on, he did not see his master again. And yet, he often wondered what he would say to him now—would the Maestro approve of his renown? Had he finally realised his promise? Would the old man be proud?

Cagnaccio turned over the patterned tunic in his hands. He pulled at a yellow triangle, the edges fraying and loose. Taking up the skein of cotton, he threaded the needle and set to sewing the hems.

The remainder of the morning was dedicated to helping Fidato learn the role and idiosyncrasies of Magnifico. As he did so, Cagnaccio, watching on, was putting himself through a routine of stretching and limbering, attempted to regain the suppleness of his youth. As time passed, his confidence in the performance grew. Gathering the company together, he outlined the scenario they were to present. Despite looking crestfallen, even Arlecchino accepted the challenge in view of Pedrillo's illness and the company's need to eat. Only Brighella remained indifferent, hardly uttering a word, keeping his opinions hidden while smugly seated at the rear.

The scenario—*Magnifico's Unhappy Marriage*—was largely greeted with approval. A few whispers of dissent went unnoticed, as Cagnaccio insisted he was right in his choice. With so many opportunities for lazzi, the complicated plot was just what they needed. Magnifico unwittingly marries Arlecchino, who, through a series of misplaced promises, has been forced to disguise as the Dottore's ward, Florinda, to distract the stupid old fool, so that in turn, Florinda can marry her lover, Camillo, in secret, before the true identity of Magnifico's bride is revealed. The scenario, a favourite of the older actors in the troupe, was seldom performed but guaranteed to raise good laughs. Better yet, it offered Arlecchino the ability to orchestrate events, to which Magnifico needed only to react. Besides, the more bewildered Magnifico appeared, the more credible the plot would become. As thoughts turned to the choice of lazzi and the props the scenario would need, Donata came into the hall, carrying an old, worn mask, black breeches and doublet, and a loose black cloak for Fidato to try on.

'How is Pedrillo?' Rosetta asked anxiously.

'You'll have to ask Cagnaccio for slippers,' Donata said, handing the costume to Fidato try on. 'There's no time to make them for you now.'

'Please tell me,' Rosetta said, gripping Donata firmly by the sleeve. 'How is Pedrillo today?'

Donata smiled silently at the girl and nodded, then hurried back to her patient.

'This performance is for Pedrillo,' Fidato shouted.

For Pedrillo, the cheer came back.

It took until late afternoon before the actors were finally ready and rehearsed, the stage was set, and the lazzi chosen. Tension was mounting as they approached the time for a show, but Fidato, for one so unused to acting, had taken to the role as if it had always been his, and this seemed to quell most nerves. Sensing the need for succour, the Dottore offered a prayer for Pedrillo, a deeply felt invocation to Sant'Agnese that brought tears to many an eye. With a stirring *amen*, the company, committed to doing the boy proud, prepared for the procession into town.

Cagnaccio

Go and show them we're here. Make them see that everything is normal. Remember, it's all about laughter, so leave all your concerns at the door and give of your best, I beg you. Puccio, be the perfect Collonello—I need you to make an impression, so drum your heart out today. Let's let them know we're still here. If only for Pedrillo.'

Cagnaccio would stay behind with the crew and Emilia would put the final touches to his costume, with Donata insisting her place was at the boy's side and she had no intention of deserting him.

Puccio picked up his drumsticks, beat wildly on the oversized drum, then settled to a regular beat, lead the way to the piazza. The others fell in line, each with an instrument or tamburello, as they danced and sang their way, adopting the bravest of faces they could, towards the square.

[Go with them if you wish. I'm staying here. It's freezing outside, and it's starting to snow. Besides, nothing will happen. If it does, we will no doubt hear all about it when they get back.]

Even after the parade had left, Emilia stood, her eyes fixed on the open door, listening to the sounds of the drums and the singing disappear down the street. Cagnaccio came up behind her so silently that his presence startled her.

'I need your help,' he said.

'That poor girl, she's taken it so hard; do you think she will be alright?'

'Could you sew the leg seam? I think it needs to be sewn while it's on.'

'I told her it was a mistake. Her father told me not to get involved, but what kind of mother can stand by when their baby is in such a state?'

'Only I need it done right away.'

'Take them off. Somehow, I'll manage. I'll bring them back to you. Oh, here we go again.'

'Emilia?'

'You want me, Donata?'

'Yes. You will have to be on the door. I'll get Belnaso to help you. I can't leave Pedrillo now.'

'But I'm sewing this hem—unless you'd rather that Arlecchino goes on naked.'

‘With your skill, I’m sure it won’t take a moment. And you’ve a little time until they return. Come to the door; I’ll show you what needs to be done.’

[Is Donata motioning to us?]

‘And you two, make yourselves useful—take that table to the door for Emilia. Well? What are you waiting for?’

[Too late. We may as well help. Come on, you take that end. Just do it.]

‘Come on. We’ve no time for idling. Get it moved. Now.’

[And—lift. Go on. You first. I’ve got this end. I’ll follow you. Ignore Donata; she has other things on her mind. Don’t answer her and don’t look at her. Let’s just get this done and get away.]

Emilia’s heart quickened at the sounds of the procession returning. Anxiously, she stared at the empty doorway, her concern not for a healthy audience but for the safety and well-being of her precious Rosetta. She scoured the parade, eagerly searching for the sight of her beloved daughter. At the sight of her daughter smiling, she eased.

‘Rosetta, are you alright?’

‘What is it to you? And what are you standing here for? Tell me it’s not for me.’

‘I’m here to collect the coin. I’ve been given my instructions and told what to look for. Donata told me *at length*. I offered to stay with Pedrillo; after all, I am a mother, but she insisted *she* must stay by his side. And who am I to contradict?’

[2]

When Cagnaccio peered through the back curtain, he was greeted with a surprise. He had not expected such a large audience, nor one in such high spirits, each person clapping and stomping to the steady beat of the drums. For the first time in hours, he smiled. He should have expected them to come. The word had spread, he reasoned, of his dusting off of his Arlecchino, to the excitement of his fans.

‘*In bocca al lupo*,’ his Apprentice said, coming to stand at his side.

‘We have no need for luck. Turn around.’ Cagnaccio carefully examined Pedrolino’s white jerkin, raising and dropping his Apprentice’s arms as he circled around him. ‘It’s a good fit. Emilia did well to get rid of the blood.’

‘She scrubbed it for an age. I feel naked without the mask.’

'The powder is blotchy.' Cagnaccio removed his glove and started to rub the white powder better into the Apprentice's skin. 'What did you put this on with, your fist? Come here. Have you seen Magnifico?'

'He's at the far side, waiting. With Brighella. He's nervous but ready. Donata found an old ruff. She did a great job; his costume could have been made for him. She's with him, waiting for his first entrance.'

'And Pedrillo?'

'Sleeping, I think.'

The music ends. BRIGHELLA enters and moves downstage to begin his opening speech. MAGNIFICO enters. He has a letter to write. BRIGHELLA sits at a small desk with piles of scrolls and takes up a quill. MAGNIFICO explains that BRIGHELLA must deliver a proposal of marriage to FLORINDA to her guardian, IL DOTTORE. MAGNIFICO dictates, BRIGHELLA scribbles, then sands, waves in the air to dry, rolls it and seals it with a ribbon, tucks it under his arm, and is dismissed. BRIGHELLA exits right. MAGNIFICO at the desk rifles through the scrolls and, finding one he wants, exits left.

So long had it been since he had last played Arlecchino that Cagnaccio could feel his legs twitch as the cue for his entrance neared. The lazzi, the tricks, the acrobatics—everything could so easily go wrong. He adjusted his slapstick, his faithful bataccio that he had fashioned himself all those years ago, making sure it was secure in his belt.

Wait, wait, and ...

EXTERIOR: STREET. ARLECCHINO enters, goes to address the audience, but is interrupted by BRIGHELLA and PEDROLINO. BRIGHELLA explains his master's plan. PEDROLINO suggests that BRIGHELLA deliver the proposal, but he has a plan to keep FLORINDA from marrying such an old bore. They agree to meet later. ARLECCHINO exits.

There, that was not so bad. All those years, flooding back. The cheers, the echoes of the past. Happy, hopeful days. The calling out of his name. Their excitement at seeing him again: Why had he been so

anxious? He felt the years float away as the memories of countless performances re-enacted in his limbs. So what if he jumped a little lower, if his turns were not as quick as his youth, if his backflips were ugly and ungainly? He never registered them as such. He was reliving every movement, as vivid and as real as if he were once more young. He could have been performing anywhere, in Venice, in Mantua, or in Rome.

INTERIOR. FLORINDA is with COLOMBINA, who is adjusting the young maiden's hair. BRIGHELLA enters and tries to explain his master's proposal. FLORINDA is horrified as she explains she loves CAMILLO and they are secretly to be wed. FLORINDA panics, searching for a hat. Lazzo of the hats.

If Cagnaccio only saw his triumphs, the audience saw the truth.

Before them, they witnessed a man reliving his former glories while lacking the bloom of youth. Where Cagnaccio saw perfection, they saw only declining years. Where Cagnaccio saw perfect timing, they saw momentary lapses, the movements stilted and stiff, and a sluggishness in the leaps. Very soon the audience quietened, their laughter not raucous but muted, their cheers replaced by applause.

It was neither the first nor the second exit from the stage before Cagnaccio noticed anything was wrong. Even then, he thought he was mistaken, that surely he must have misheard, as, with growing suspicion, he overheard the whispers of the crew as eyes averted his gaze. At first, he felt embarrassed and searched his costume for a hole, but no, the costume was intact.

His cue came quicker than he expected, and without a second thought, he scrambled out onto the stage.

ARLECCHINO enters as if pushed out suddenly. Tells FLORINDA that CAMILLO is waiting for her in a monastery just outside town and wants to marry her tonight. FLORINDA panics again. COLOMBINA tries to calm her down. BRIGHELLA tells ARLECCHINO that PEDROLINO has a plan, but they have to work fast. BRIGHELLA and ARLECCHINO exit stage right.

No, it was all wrong. The performance felt different; everything had changed. Onstage, he had always felt so alive, as if suddenly awakened to life—that vital feeling of excitement coursing through him. There—upon that stage—that was his only home. One little stride forward from out of the wings, and all his troubles fled. But not today. Today there was no magic, just a dull and meaningless ritual of action and reaction, as if acting out a chore.

His movements wound around him as he moved, but there was no life within them—only the ghostly remembered trails of former days, hanging like wisps in the air. Now his eyes were open; he saw what everyone saw. The imperfection, the indignity of his leaps, the misshapen line of his body that, despite his best intentions, refused to bend as before. His mind worked feverishly, flying one, two steps ahead, reworking the business before him, modifying it to be less demanding, and adjusting to what he now knew.

Then something pushed him onstage.

EXTERIOR. ARLECCHINO enters, then trips. ARLECCHINO looks startled. He comes down to the audience. Lazzo of laughing. Begins like the audience, nervously, then builds into a guffaw. PEDROLINO enters. Seeing that ARLECCHINO cannot stop, PEDROLINO goes to help him, and grabbing ARLECCHINO's belly from behind, he pushes hard, as if to emit the laughter. ARLECCHINO, all the time laughing hysterically, becomes irritated at PEDROLINO's over-physical attempts to help, and a fight starts between them. IL CAPITANO enters, tries to break up the fight, but ends up taking up most of the blows himself. ARLECCHINO and BRIGHELLA exit laughing in opposite directions.

When Pedrolino signalled his lazzo with Colombina, the cheers from the audience grew deafening.

Cagnaccio, gasping to regain his breath, listened intently from the wings. Had the rest of his performances been as weak? They had laughed at his Pantalone, he was sure. Fatigue—yes, that was the answer. And the business with Pedrillo—it was bound to take its toll; he

had hardly slept sitting at the boy's side—and what with coaching Magnifico, he was bound to be more sluggish. Of course, his body would complain. And yet, no matter how much he dismissed it, he could not shrug off the doubt.

To make matters worse, Magnifico was a triumph. From his first entrance, it was clear he was a natural performer. How easily he had become the old fool, blustering about the stage. Adept at selling potions above the noise of a crowd, his voice boomed right to the back of the hall. His voice was perfect, and with such a good ear for dialect, when he spoke the grammelot—the nonsense all actors employed—so effective was his Venetian accent, that even those acquainted with its lilt swore it all made sense.

MAGNIFICO slips and falls on the floor. Unable to get up or right himself, his arms and legs flail in the air, like a giant beetle. He calls for BRIGHELLA to help. BRIGHELLA enters nonchalantly, eating a chicken leg. Not willing to give up his food, he tries half-heartedly to help MAGNIFICO to his feet, but halfway up he slips, and both end up on the floor.

'Did you see that?' Donata said, appearing at Cagnaccio's side.

'Che Dio, where did you come from?'

'He's definitely a quick learner. Looks like you've taught him well.'

'I didn't teach him that.' He could feel her looking askance at him. 'And the boy? How is he now?'

'The same. Drifting.'

'Shouldn't you be with him?' (*Donata does not move; he looks at her, but she shows no reaction.*)

'It's a very strange audience today,' he said.

'They seem as usual. Better even; I could hear their cheering from the back.'

'No, it's not the same.'

'It's not, or you're not.'

From below the stage, Belnaso was anxiously trying to attract their attention with a series of muted whispers and urgent taps on their heels, gesturing towards the back room.

'And that must be *my* cue.' Donata hurried down the steps and away to tend to her patient.

Cagnaccio traced the rough patchwork of his tunic, running his fingers over the seams. Despite the action all around him, he felt alone and unsure. He should not take it out on Fidato; the man had at least done them a service, but all the same, he felt uneasy, unable to dispel the suspicion that in some way it had all been contrived. Since that first day in the inn, he had felt uneasy about the man, but lately he had grown more familiar, like being accustomed to a blister from an ill-fitting, worn-out boot that for the moment must be suffered and could not yet be replaced.

And what of Donata? That Fidato had a plan of his own was obvious, but Cagnaccio would wager any amount of coin on Donata's loyalty to the troupe. He and Donata, like the trestles that supported the stage, were the strength that held the company together. She would never fall for Fidato's nonsense. Charmer he might be, but Donata was smart. She would never renege on her loyalty. Not for the likes of Fidato.

On the stairs, Belnaso appeared, carrying a large wedding dress.

'I've come to get you ready.'

'You are too early. Wait, that's me...'

ARLECCHINO enters upstage right. Sees MAGNIFICO and tries to hide. MAGNIFICO tries to find him; a chase onstage and offstage ensues, each time entering from a different place from their exit. Finally, MAGNIFICO catches him. Out of breath, he tells ARLECCHINO he suspects a plot. ARLECCHINO says he knows nothing, and rather than go himself to try to find out, he insists it would be better if MAGNIFICO were to argue with Il DOTTORE himself rather than sending his servant. Lazzo of Objections: MAGNIFICO goes to leave but finds umpteen objections to come back, but ARLECCHINO is adamant. Giving up, MAGNIFICO exits. ARLECCHINO confides in the audience that, once again, he will win the day. ARLECCHINO exits upstage right.

'That was a mess,' Cagnaccio said, no sooner than he was back in the wings.

'You always think the worst,' Fidato said. 'Listen. They're laughing and cheering aren't they?.'

'Not at me; they are not.'

INTERIOR: Dottore's House. DOTTORE is watching FLORINDA as she keeps going to the window. He asks who or what she is looking for. MAGNIFICO enters, sees FLORINDA and goes to stand at her back. COLOMBINA enters with IL CAPITANO, who introduces himself and asks for the hand of FLORINDA. (During the next business, MAGNIFICO at every opportunity, moves to stand within inches of FLORINDA, COLOMBINA seeing MAGNIFICO's advances, moves to place herself between FLORINDA AND MAGNIFICO, which despite his efforts, she always manages to do.) MAGNIFICO calls effrontery, questioning IL DOTTORE's honour, challenges him to a duel. DOTTORE calls for PEDROLINO who enters slowly, listens as if bored, and then argues the duel must be with Il CAPITANO. The duel is set for later that afternoon. All exit, leaving FLORINDA all alone and crying at her fate.

'It's not as it usually is,' Simonetta said to the Apprentice as the descended from the stage. 'It feels strange without Pedrillo.'

'You are joking? Listen—they adore me. Didn't you hear the cheers? They could not get enough. Maybe I should drop Arlecchino and only do Pedrolino in the future. And did you see Magnifico? He's amazing. For a first time on stage? I thought when he had you pinned tight against the wall, I was going to have to intervene.'

'I think I can handle Magnifico, thank you, without Pedrolino's help.'

'What the hell is going on?' Cagnaccio said, approaching and squaring up to his Apprentice, 'You, you miserable urchin, Your timing is

pathetic. If this is your Pedrolino, then I can tell you it's absurd!

(Cagnaccio prods the Apprentice hard in the chest.)

'They seem to be enjoying it,' the Apprentice said, pointing towards the audience. 'I've never heard such cheering.'

Cagnaccio

You think you are the star,
maybe? I'll tell you now. You
will never amount to anything
if you only think of yourself.
And you, Simonetta, you're
distracted. Where do you think
you are? Il Dottore looks more
of a novice than Magnifico, and
he just looks grotesque. What
was I thinking when I imagined
him in that role? Look at the
walk. *(He points onstage.)* Look
at that stance. He looks
constipated, not miserly. It's
nothing more than a mockery.
And that lazzo with the
objections—even a fool could
get more laughs, but I don't
know why the audience was
laughing; I was ready to cry in
despair. Useless, *completamente*
inutile. All of you.

'What's all this noise?' Brighella said, climbing up to the wings,
'You do know you can hear it onstage?'

'I don't care if the Pope can hear me, sitting in his palace in
Rome.' *(Cagnaccio turns to walk away, then returns.)*

Cagnaccio

You think I want to prance around
this stage as Arlecchino, aching
in every limb? *(He grabs the*
Apprentice's smock, pulling him

*closer.) And you—you are pathetic,
you always were and always will
be. You make me want to...'*

*(He goes to strike the
Apprentice, but Simonetta
stays his hand.)*

'It's attitude like that,' the Apprentice muttered, 'that caused poor Pedrillo to fall.'

He waited defiantly for the blow, but none came. Instead, hearing his cue, Cagnaccio spun on his heels and strode back onto the stage.

[I think now might be a good time to move. Quick, follow me—the backroom.]

The shouts and echoes of laughter bouncing off corridor walls were enough to revive spirits.

In the back room, Pedrillo, hearing only the cheers, was straining to sit up. Donata took up the moist flannel and mopped the beads of sweat from his brow.

'Be easy, boy, be easy.' Her voice, low and lyrical, soothed him. As he turned his face towards her, she caught her reflection in his eyes. Replacing the flannel in the pail, she ran her fingers across his forehead, teasing the long strands of fair hair away from his eyes and face. He was calmer now, on the verge of sleep, but as she ran her fingers along his hairline, he reached and grabbed at her arm. The strength of his grip on her flesh surprised her, but the more she tried to free herself, the firmer his hold became. Gently, he coaxed her towards him until her ear was close to his face. He whispered, his speech frail at first, then growing in animation.

'I love her—Simonetta—I love her. I think I always have. Since the moment I first saw...' He paused, his breath weak, struggling to find the strength to continue.

'I know, lad, I know. But rest now; there will be time enough.'

But he would not rest. She watched as he grimaced in pain as he mustered his courage to turn towards her, hauling himself upward by tugging on her dress. So purposeful, so intent were his eyes that she wondered if it was Simonetta he saw sitting beside him.

'Relax, my child,' she said, 'be easy.' (*Pedrillo releases his grasp.*) Instinctively, she withdrew, then, guilty at not letting the boy hold her; she reached down to take up his hand. He squeezed her palm with his fingers.

'I had a dream,' he said. 'I saw the future as clear as glass. We were together; she loved me, and I loved her; our love was so obvious to see. Even though our lives were not easy. I saw us scrimp and save, taking on extra jobs in the towns we visited to add a few extra coins to the pile. We were going to be so happy. When the children came, we would settle. I saw us buying a small farm. We're both still young; we could easily learn a new trade. So, we work hard, planting our own produce, tending to the hens and the goats, and I manage the flocks on the hills, but at night we sit down together, tired and aching but content. And I sit and ponder how lucky I am to have caught the uncatchable prize. And we are so in love. And the bambini, when they come, two or three of them are busy pecking at our feet, the sun rises and sets, and life is exactly as we dreamed it. And my beautiful Simonetta, still as fierce and strong, she is calling out my name across the fields. She's smiling. I see her. It's our destiny. I see us frail and old; the children have grown into good, honest citizens, prosperous perhaps, but settled and happy with what they achieved. I know she loves me, Donata, and I know that one day she'll be mine, in this world or the next.'

He fell back, weakened from the exertion.

She watched as he slumped, the effort exacting its toll, the lad's face ashen, little more than a ghost. All the time that he had been speaking, she felt herself drifting into the shadows of her own dreams, tracing the imprints of her life and its illusions, comparing them to his reverie, weighing them milestone against milestone. Was there a grand design for her life also? She wanted to believe that all lives were destined, and given the twists and turns of her past, she earnestly prayed it was true. Not one for moping, she steadied her life with her hands, putting them to work wherever they were needed, doing sensible, valuable tasks that distracted her from far vistas to the practicalities within her grasp.

She glanced down at the boy, his hand resting on her knee, his eyelids struggling to stay open. The boy was lucky. Nothing was more certain to him than the simple resolution that he would be with his love, and whatever hardships might befall them, his faith in that would be enough. Pedrillo never doubted who he was or who he wanted to be. She envied him that certitude.

She tried to lift the boy's head enough to give him sips of the broth that, although cold, might soften his cracked lips. A loud cheer rose up in the hall. She watched as his eyes flickered open, animated once more as if watching the action on stage, following every gesture in his mind, and recreating the movement of the actors from the sounds of their feet on the boards. Then suddenly, he paused and brought his gaze to her.

'It will happen, Donata. And it will happen for you too, I know.' He reached again for her arm and muttered, 'You deserve such happiness for your kindness.'

'It's too late now. What may have been is gone,' she said. Feeling the weakness in his fingers, she brought the blanket over them. 'The past—well, the past can never be

retrieved. What's to come is an idle distraction like that played out on the stage, never real, never likely to become so, only there to tempt us to dream.'

'But Donata, she loves me—Simonetta—yes?'

'Rest now, son, be easy.' She eased his head back to the bed. He offered no resistance.

Out of the corner of her eye, a shadow crept over the stone floor. The face of the Apprentice tentatively peered around the doorpost, unsure whether to enter or speak. Donata put her finger to her lips; no point in agitating the boy further, better to let him rest. Smiling, she gestured him away.

'Isn't that your duel coming up?'

'Cazzo!' he whispered.

And no sooner had he said it than he was gone.

EXTERIOR. MAGNIFICO and IL CAPITANO stand on opposing sides of the stage, posturing. PEDROLINO, as the padrone stands between their seconds, ARLECCHINO behind MAGNIFICO and BRIGHELLA behind IL CAPITANO. Each reluctant to advance, they bandy words, growing louder and louder and inching nearer to each other until suddenly MAGNIFICO raises his sword. IL CAPITANO exits, running. MAGNIFICO praises his second and exits, boasting of his triumph.

ARLECCHINO, BRIGHELLA and PEDROLINO, downstage, fall into hysterics. Each laughing like a mule, bending forward and backward, mimicking a sword fight between them, when PEDROLINO rises abruptly and catches ARLECCHINO's mask, which dislodges. PEDROLINO tries to replace it, but ARLECCHINO exits offstage, visibly angered. Exeunt BRIGHELLA and PEDROLINO in pursuit.

'Come here, you—you ungrateful little bastard. This, you think, is funny, no? You break the rules of Commedia to humiliate me like this? If you touch my mask again, I'll kill you. I swear, I will tear off your hands from your arms.'

'My hand slipped, maestro; it was just a mistake.'

'I will show you a mistake.' The punch met the youngster's jaw with such force that it thrust him backwards. Only Brighella's actions in catching him stopped him from falling to the hall floor.

Cagnaccio did not wait, his rage uncontrolled from the frustration of his own inadequacies and his embarrassment at being unmasked. Shouting and barking orders at anybody he could find, he chastised every minor flaw that might otherwise have been ignored. His words hissed like flames. Players and crew ran for cover, disappearing quickly behind doors, not wishing to be the spark that caused the next barrage of fists, knowing that blame must always find a home.

In the back room, tucked away in the gloom, while Pedrillo flinched at the raised voices echoing down the corridor, Donata hardly stirred. Checking if she could leave her patient, reassuring him with her touch, she hauled herself up and, in two strides, positioned herself in the doorway. Resting both hands high on the frame, she leant forward to bar the way and waited for Cagnaccio to arrive. Cagnaccio was too entrenched in criticising the Dottore for standing in a spot offstage where he could still be seen from the audience. The point, debatable though it was, was greeted by the Dottore with silence and a token sidestep to the right.

Donata waited patiently for Cagnaccio to turn around. Enough was enough. As he turned, she stiffened, bracing herself, her eyes locked onto his. Calmly, in a measured tone, so as not to disturb the boy, she bid Cagnaccio to come closer. Dutifully, if with some resistance, he conformed.

'Santa Maria Vergine,' she snapped, her voice no more than a whisper, 'what in hell is wrong with you?'

'Did you not hear them? Imbeciles the lot of them. And that little shit unmasked me!' He seemed to be about to rant, but she stopped him, cutting him off suddenly, pinching his lips together hard.

Donata

There is a boy in here struggling for his life. I know you have no conscience, but while in earshot of the boy, you will show him some respect, or it will be me you'll have to contend with. Is that clear?

Look at yourself; look at what you have become. You're nothing, Cagnaccio, nothing. A shadow of the man you were. To think that we looked up to you.

Look at you. A bully. A brute. A farce. Call yourself a great man; you are acting no better than a child. You always say you want respect. But how can anyone respect you when you carry on this way? So, go. Run away, little boy. Just as you always do. Beat your chest if you want to; scream, shout, and curse. Go on. No one here is listening. We have seen it all before.

Take your tantrums elsewhere. A boy is sick in here. Fighting for his life.

Cagnaccio did not move.

She could see it behind his eyes—the furnace ready to blast, the thoughts chasing how best to respond—to run or to stand and fight. With a deliberate inhale of breath, he raised himself to his fullest height.

Cagnaccio

You would be wise never to talk to me in this way again, woman. *(He leans in close to her face.)* Remember, I know exactly who you are. I know what you'd rather forget. Do not think to preach to me. Without me, you would be nothing—an old whore in the gutter, selling your pox with every trick. I see you, Doña Donata. You think I don't, but I do. I know your games—trying to be in control and twisting everything to your own ends. Well, I tell you here and now, old woman, if you do not like the way this company is run, you are free to pack up and leave. Now. Don't let me stop you. And as you seem to care so much for him, take your patient with you.

She could not believe his arrogance. Nothing would move her from that spot. Despite the stench of his rancid breath, she refused to flinch but instead held his stare. Neither of them moved. Each held their ground, knowing that if the tension between them reached a breaking point, neither side would give in, nor would they risk going further for fear of crossing the irreversible line where words would turn into wounds that left a lasting scar.

They would hold this position until the moment of deadlock was acknowledged, when no one could leave as the victor, but the best that might be achieved would be to leave with honours equal. Within hours, it would all be forgiven; nothing surprising had been said; it was a dance trodden many times before; after all, it was in the heat of the moment; a normal peace could return. Recognising no one's triumph and placidly accepting a draw, Cagnaccio sloped away slowly, and Donata returned to her charge, while Belnaso, standing anxiously in the wings, was struggling with an oversized wedding dress. As soon as he saw Cagnaccio, he gestured wildly, summoning him to the stage.

"Alright, *va bene*, I'm here. What is with the panic? Did I ever yet miss a cue?' He lifted his arms for Belnaso to throw the dress over his head and pull it down over his Arlecchino costume. 'Where's the veil? Why isn't everything ready for me? *Dio salvami*—have mercy on my soul.'

Interior. IL DOTTORE, MAGNIFICO and BRIGHELLA, dressed as a notary are finalising the contract. COLOMBINA enters stage right to tell them that FLORINDA is ready and waiting outside.

Exasperated, he grabbed the veil out of Belnaso's hands, adjusted it over his cap, and stormed out onto the stage.

ARLECCHINO enters in disguise, wearing a wedding dress and veil. The contract sealed, PEDROLINO arrives with FLORINDA. ARLECCHINO throws off his veil. MAGNIFICO swoons momentarily, then recovers. COLOMBINA explains the deception. BRIGHELLA throws off his disguise. MAGNIFICO chases ARLECCHINO and BRIGHELLA. Exeunt ARLECCHINO and BRIGHELLA.

Cagnaccio was still fuming. Under both the wedding costume and Arlecchino's tatters, the heat was rising in his veins. He tore at the dress to remove it, throwing it at Belnaso, who beat a hasty retreat. Dejected and angry, he did not know who to blame most—Pedrillo for causing the whole sorry mess or his Apprentice for upstaging him. Whenever he tried to ignore the cheers, to put them out of his

mind, he would hear the voice of his father, the familiar cringing tone barracking in his ear: *You will never amount to anything, you worthless piece of flesh*. Perhaps his father had been right.

'I think the audience is being too generous,' Fidato said, climbing the steps to at his side. 'They seem to have taken me to their hearts.' No conceit lay in his voice, more surprise at the audience reaction. 'Still, I bet you can't wait to get back to your Pantalone. This must all be an awful strain.'

Cagnaccio said nothing and did nothing; he just stared blankly at the stage.

'You seem agitated, distracted, my friend. Not on stage; on stage, you are perfection, but here, now. You know that you can trust me if you need to talk. In the end, you have to trust someone. No one here is against you.'

Cagnaccio hissed for him to be quiet and focus on the business on stage. 'Of course,' Fidato continued, 'we'll continue this after the show.'

The performance was drawing to a close, and the audience, as all audience will, when sensing the ending of their merriment, cheered and laughed boisterously as if to make the warm feelings linger, before reluctantly heading out to the cold, dank air of the streets. The cheers for Magnifico were only outmatched by those for the Apprentice, whose Pedrolino, displaying greater dexterity than Pedrillo ever had, was destined to be the talk of the taverns for many days to come. Only Cagnaccio's reception had been muted, so far removed from his usual reception that the applause was at best polite. Where he had expected a sea of laughter, now he marked the contours of each face staring back at him, scanning for their approval. From some, he thought he saw kindness, but from most, he found boredom or regret.

He made the decision quickly. He would not return to the stage for the final dance. Despite Belnaso's insistence, he would not take the bow. When the other players looked in anticipation, awaiting his arrival from the wings, he waved them on without him.

He wanted to be alone. He signalled for the music to start, and hearing its lusty refrain, he climbed down the steps and headed off to the courtyard to change.

As the players onstage formed a ring, dancing to the lilt of the flute and the guitar as the drumbeats lifted their heels, Cagnaccio felt the outsider, his beloved perfection fading before his eyes like the diamond shapes on his costume, going through the motions while no longer being there. The sounds of the show grew louder. He could

imagine the Capitano and the Dottore raising the audience to their feet, encouraging them to sing at the top of their voices and dance to the pounding of the drums, gesticulating like windmills with their drumsticks from the front of the stage. To those happy folk in the audience, the old and young alike, the scene would be one of jollity, laughter, and mirth, and if they must soon leave this world and go back to the brutality of their lives, they would not show it; they would savour every moment and take it into their hearts.

As the final notes rang out and the cheering filled the hall, in a dark back room, Donata called anxiously to Belnaso to fetch Fidato from the stage.

Softly singing along to the music, she cradled the boy in her arms as, ghostly, he gasped for air. She doused his brow with water and held him close to her heart, but to the sounds of mirth and laughter, Pedrillo gave up the fight.

[3]

[Feeling awkward? It's difficult to know where we stand. Do you think we should try to do something? But then, one thing leads to another, and before you know it, you're involved. And who knows where that might lead? Let's just watch for the moment and see]

The authorities would have to be called, and the boy deserved the last rites. So, setting aside her emotion, Donata turned to the practicalities, making the boy comfortable and covering his face. Aware that the audience was leaving and the actors were still in high spirits, she called calmly for Belnaso, but it was Fidato who appeared at the door.

As if in answer to his unspoken question, Donata shook her head. Throwing down his mask, he came to kneel clumsily beside her, and as he reached forward to embrace her, resting her head on his shoulder, she could not stem her tears.

'We'll need to send for the priest,' she muttered.

'Leave it to me; I'll attend to it all. You're exhausted. You need to rest.'

'I need to do my duty by Pedrillo. I owe him that at least.'

Fidato held her tighter around the shoulders and pulled her close to his chest.

Time stuttered as Belnaso arrived. With the boy's lifeless body before him and tears streaming down the old woman's face, his heart began to pound faster as he struggled to understand what it meant. His first inclination was to run, to avoid what he knew was coming, but as much as he wanted to leave the room, he could not, his gaze drawn to the sight of the woman weeping. At Fidato's prompting, he nodded and shuffled silently away.

At the foot of the stage, sobbing and gasping for breath, Belnaso cradled his face with his trembling fingers and waited for his master to come.

'He's dead,' he said.

The words resounded like a tolling bell, and the world around him paused. Eyes trained on him as if, with two simple words, he had conjured time itself. Then, as though searching for confirmation, each person looked to Cagnaccio, to the architect of their fate, who knew what to do in any scenario and would surely guide them through this shock.

But Cagnaccio stood frozen, seized in that moment by fear. The tides of fortune had turned, and in their ebb and flow, Cagnaccio found himself floundering on wave after wave of doubt. A heaviness had descended as if clouds had gathered overhead, pushing down upon them, dark and insistent clouds hovering above them like a shroud. The air, once charged with hope, now had the taste of regret. The world, as they knew it, had shifted to expose the fragility of their lives.

Pedrillo, the embodiment of vitality, who lived only for tomorrow, unconcerned by the shadows of the past, shone with the brightness of a beacon. The irony. If anyone had warranted a full life, it should have been Pedrillo, whose dreams danced unfettered in the hopeful dawn of each new day.

As is often the case with tragedy, the desire to be there at the site of the occurrence is so strong that it cannot be ignored. One after another, the other players flocked to the back room, perhaps compelled to be present, as if their presence might render the boy's death more meaningful, as if in the act of sharing, their own grief might start to take root. So, singly and orderly, they came to the scene as they might approach a shrine to see three figures so tenderly locked together in grief, like a mother, a father, and a son.

Soon a small crowd had gathered at the door, and when they saw Rosetta attempting desperately to push her way through, they parted. At the doorway she hesitated, girding herself to peer in.

Rosetta was inconsolable. It took all of Emilia's strength to keep her daughter from throwing herself on the floor.

'Prove it to me. That's not Pedrillo under there; it can't be. Pedrillo is still alive; I can feel it in my heart.'

'Come away, Rosetta. There's nothing we can do.'

'Take your hands off me. You never did approve, and now look...'

'But, Rosetta, *cara*, I would never have wanted this. I loved Pedrillo; we all did.'

'You love nobody but yourself.' And with that, she ran off weeping, leaving Emilia unsure what to do.

Simonetta found it hardest to make the short pilgrimage to the door, but as much as she wanted to resist it, her feet took one slow step after another right up to the

doorway. It was her fault; she knew it. Feeling faint, she pushed herself against the doorframe to support herself.

‘Thank you, Donata,’ she said, although she was not quite sure why she had said it, for gratitude seemed inadequate. She should cry. She should cry for the boy who loved her. Just as easily, she might laugh, if laughing would ease the tension inside and give her emotions a place, an order from the confusion she felt. But nothing. No tears. No words would come to mind.

‘He loved you so much, Simonetta.’ Donata said pointedly, ‘You were in his dying thoughts.’

Simonetta looked around her, scanning for a friend, a sound, or a clue as to what she was supposed to do next, but if she did not hold fast to something, anything, she was certain she would collapse. It was her fault, she was sure; Pedrillo might still be alive today if she had not let him fall in love with her. She wished she had put an end to the poor boy’s fantasy as soon as it had begun.

Perhaps, at first, flattered by his attentions, she had glimpsed the seeds of a future together, but they were as broken shards of glass in sunlight, glistening attractively for an instant until the clouds of reality returned. She cared for him as she might a young brother; she bathed in his zest for life, with its innocence and promise. That he had mistaken her affection for love could not be her fault. And yet, as much as she knew she did not love him, she still felt feelings of remorse. How simple her life might have been if she had been able to truly love him; if for one moment she had been able to let down her defences, a new Simonetta might emerge, one that needed no other verification than the purity of his heart, then everything might have been different. Pedrillo had no right to die.

Donata, finding distraction in duty, dismissed the players, sending them away into the town to get out from under her feet while she sent for the required officials and the services of a priest.

Alone on the stage, Cagnaccio looked out over the empty hall and could find no justice for the boy’s death. It was all so futile. Again and again, he replayed the accident in his mind. Perhaps he had made the wrong choice of scenario, or perhaps it was too under-rehearsed, but whatever the cause, the boy should not have fallen, let alone died. And to die to a background of cheers. It offered no solace, and not even the most seasoned player could find consolation in it. But he could not find the audience to blame for cheering. The audience was unaware of the price being paid in an insignificant room at the back let alone the tragedy of a life cut short in the name of winning a laugh.

He, too, might have been that boy once. Accidents were part of the training. All the same, how many times had Cagnaccio stood at a distance, enviously watching the boy?

Marvelling at the Pedrillo's character, the resilience of the lad, his eyes fixed forward in time, like a window into another world of warm hearths and a family, his hands calloused from the virtue of hard work. Never a shirker, never moaning, not even in the face of defeat. Cagnaccio knew only too well the feeling of dreams unfulfilled. So while he might weep for Pedrillo and for his passing, try as he might to deny it, he knew he was grieving for himself.

On top of the performance: his lukewarm Arlecchino, the triumph of the ciarlatano and the Apprentice, then the clash with Donata, and now the death of poor Pedrillo. He felt the sudden urge to tear it all down—the backcloths, the hangings, the stage itself—and crush it into the ground. He snatched a pail from off the stage floor and hurled it with all of his strength against the wall with such force that it broke, narrowly missing Donata, who emerged from behind the stage only to avoid the wooden fragments falling at her feet. Rubbing her brow, she looked up wretchedly at Cagnaccio. She had been crying. He wanted to apologise to her, to take back the things he had said, but she gestured for him not to speak. Exhausted, she could barely stand.

'Go and take off your costume,' she said quietly, 'you will only tear the seams. Go. Leave Pedrillo in my care. I've let the others go. Belnaso has gone to notify the authorities. I will wait here with the boy. Go. There's nothing you can do for him now.'

And Cagnaccio did just as she had said.

[4]

Enter BRIGHELLA who steps forward:

And now the time has come, good reader. Enough of this watching and waiting; the time for action is ripe. My goal? You need to ask? Why the fair Simonetta, of course.

Not Pedrillo's Simonetta, but the vixen that she is, the woman of fire and passion, a worthy and enviable match. Can you imagine what we, in union, might achieve?

That such a one as she might look fondly toward me. I grant you, but there is advantage in solace, and as she and I are the same—two victors in search of a conflict—how much better then that we take up our arms to work together as one?

Not now, not yet, I grant you. Now the hour is too early for the chiming of my bell. For first, she must cast off

her vision of Simonetta as a pleasant and peaceable wife, settled and deeply in love. *Boh!* Such a Simonetta, I do not know.

So, let her play out her Simonetta; let her winnow the mists of her sham, for what remains will be the true woman, feisty and ready for sport, not ignorant of the foibles of men but shrewd and primed to use them to fashion them to her own ends. And when the illusion is shattered, around her she will look, unsure of who she has become, and I will be the man that she sees her, the one who was there always, the one she never doubted but saw always in the cloth of their birth, and in that moment of annealing, when her mettle is tempered and chased, at last her eyes will be opened to the battles yet to be won and to the devoted and willing ally standing at her side.

I know my Simonetta, and though, as yet, she shows me little regard, in her disdain, she keeps me near, careful not to stray far. For a man set to inherit, a man of ambition and means, she would throw off this life in an instant to play in a larger court, especially for a man so honest in affection and so certain of the qualities of his wife. For this, Simonetta might be persuaded. And God rest those who get in our way.

But first, there's the tiresome business of rubbing the dust from her eyes, and for that, we have the Apprentice. But soft—ironically—he appears:

'Were you talking to someone?' the Apprentice asked.

'Musing only to myself. What news?'

'Cagnaccio stormed off again, and the others are wondering whether to take down the stage, what is left of it after his tantrum. No one knows what to do; everyone's wandering around in the piazza as if they are in a trance.'

(Here. Why are these two ensconced? Whispering to each other. Can we sneak around the back and sit on those benches? Make out as if you are not listening.)

Brighella moved closer to the Apprentice, careful not to be heard.

'You realise that your time is fast approaching,' Brighella said, moving closer to the Apprentice, shielding their mouths from watchful eyes, his voice low so as not to be heard.

'I don't know, Brighella; it feels unfair to take advantage, especially at a time like this.'

Brighella

When the time is right, seize it, or you may never see it again. The opportunity is before you. Like never before. The company is in tatters. Cagnaccio is losing his authority by the hour. Everyone blames him for the fall, and the more that he is absent, the more questions will be asked. Others will start to doubt if he still has the ability to lead them. You heard them. Even the audience—that reaction must have hurt. I feel sorry for the old sod, but his time has gone. And we have the golden opportunity being waved before our faces. France. The chance of stability and wealth, of appreciation and respect, and of esteem and notoriety. Are you going to pass that up?'

'Then what do we need to do?'

'We? Oh no. Not we, but you. The others will never look to me to lead them; most of them would not trust me if I were the only person in their lives. They trust me onstage because they have to, but it's all a performance; I'm good at what I do.'

'Did you hear the way they cheered for me?'

'You are no apprentice. How long are you going to play along with his stupid game? Cagnaccio is afraid of you, of what you might become. He has been holding you back, seeking even more perfection. Nothing will ever be good enough. Surely you can see this? Now is the time to act.'

'And do what?'

'Show them the man that you are. Take the reins. Guide them; they want to follow a man of strength.'

'But what about Fidato, or Donata even?'

'Fidato, a chancer, a charlatan? He's no more than a novelty; they would never follow him. They would follow Donata in an instant, but she would never lead. That's not

her way, and you know it. If you win her support, show her a better vision of a life where her talents are valued and considered, and I know she will fight for your cause.'

'But Simonetta? And the others?'

'Simonetta. Yes. I was meaning to speak with you of that.'

Brighella

Imagine the scene, my friend. Simonetta, a woman of passion, a woman with ambition, a woman that everyone else idolises, imagine her by your side. So what if she is a little older? What fault is there in that? Simonetta will see the possibilities. She will see that you are in earnest and ambitious for success. You are young, fit, and handsome. How can she, in faith, resist?

'She'll do what she usually does, have her fun, and then spit me out.'

'She'll do nothing of the kind. And if she does, I'm here, beside you.'

'But now? Do you think we are right to take advantage, especially when Pedrillo can't fight back? You heard how he spoke about her; it feels awkward to carry on with the plan when he has only just died. Besides, I doubt Simonetta will play along now. Look at her; she is ridden with guilt. Wouldn't it be better to wait?'

'Pedrillo? His mumblings? Just the musings of a lovelorn loon, a heart-sick, delirious youth—nothing more. Do you think she would ever have looked at him seriously? You already know the answer. You heard the bickering and the arguments. She likes attention, no more. I don't care if the lad is dead; he brought it on himself. If he hadn't been so stupid, he would still be alive in this hall. Pedrillo was pathetic—the tragic fool who saw only what he wanted to see. But you, my friend, are not that boy. Simonetta needs a man—someone strong enough to hold her. A man not so different from you. A man with his heart on a prize. A man she might rely on and a man to stand up to her games.'

'Simonetta will never look at me. Not in that way, at least. You've got more chance than I have, and that's not saying much.'

'If you want to lose the wager when you are so close to snagging your prey, then, by all means, my friend, go on. I'll take your coin now if you're ready to surrender the hunt. But I confess, I thought you were a fighter. Come to think, perhaps you are right. Maybe you too are not man enough; perhaps you still are a boy.'

'Very well. But I'll be the one gloating, Brighella. I'll have her just to shut your mouth, and then we'll see who's a man.'

'Then follow my instructions, and all will play out as I planned. But for now, keep our strategies between us; do not try to advance on your own. Be confident; I will be beside you to tell you what to do and when. But for now, we need to get the company together. We need to organise a vote.'

And with that, Brighella went to find Donata to win her over to the plan.

[5]

Despite the pockets of frantic activity, the atmosphere that greeted Fidato was subdued. Tasks kept fingers busy and distracted while bodies moved trance-like across the room. Words, such as he heard, were scarce; muted instructions given or received, no one interesting in talking; each member of the company, lost within their thoughts. Even Lorenzo and his team of carpenters had lost their usual repartee, going about their labours as quietly as they could, taking pains with their hammers not to break the sombre mood, as if the whole hall were bowed in dignity, paying their respects to the boy laid out in the backroom, grieving for what they had lost.

The work was already advanced. The stage was almost struck. The stagehands removed the planks and trestles and laid them on the hall floor in orderly piles, ready to be carried back down to the wagons for loading. Under the supervision of the Dottore, drapes were rolled up and tied. The little Colonnello, too, was hard at work, collecting props for his father to check for damage or wear, sorting those in need of attention apart, and packing the remainder into waiting baskets to keep them safe for the journey. Those items easy to repair would find willing hands to fix them; those beyond saving would need to be replaced.

Each of them knew from harsh experience that the company must always be prepared, and that the chance to raise a coin or two could happen at any crossroads, not just in the festivals and towns. Belnaso, his brow low, was immersed in investigating each discarded prop, his mind slow-ticking over the details of every object and piece of furniture, committing those beyond redemption to memory so that he might scavenge for them later from his secret sources in the town. Emilia, her daughter helping, took to laying each costume out carefully on the floor, scanning for anything that needed mending, for holes that needed to be darned. With them, Simonetta, in body if not in spirit, was cast in the role of helper, her movements vague and sluggish as she stared at the items in her hands.

At the far end of the hall, the Apprentice was anxiously passing amongst groups, eager for any task he could find. His eyes glanced occasionally towards Simonetta, then

as quickly back again. As if to punctuate his thoughts, from time to time he would wander to where Brighella sat, and a flurry of whispers might be heard, but whatever it was they were plotting, no one could entirely make out.

'The guards were looking for you,' Donata said, meeting Fidato in the centre of the hall.

'For me, why?'

'To arrest you. "Selling and administering curatives without a licence granted by the town." That is what they said.'

'The apothecary?'

'It seems so. He sent a note to the guard after Belnaso bought the tinctures.'

'The old sod. I should have guessed.'

'They said that they would be back.'

'Well, they'll have to catch me first.'

'I'm surprised you didn't see them; they've only just left.'

'Then they won't be back for a while. And they'll have to catch me first.'

'And the boy?' Fidato asked.

'Laid out in the back room on trestles if you want to pay your respects. The carpenters made him a casket from old planks from the stage. Belnaso made a deal with a travelling priest for a funeral, hopefully two days hence. The cemetery is not far from the walls, and now that the snow is starting to melt, at least the ground should be easier to dig. Everyone is packing. We'll leave straight after the funeral; so we will take the loaded wagons with us, ready to be on our way.' She stopped suddenly, her voice broken and hoarse. She wiped her hand across her lips, straightened up her spine, and girded herself for what might follow.

'I think now is the time,' the Apprentice said, approaching. 'You know, as we talked about—France.'

'Very well, call them together,' she said. 'We'll put it to them for a decision, then what will be will be.'

'Everyone's here but Cagnaccio,' she said, 'but maybe it's better that way.' So all might hear, she shouted, 'Can everyone come and sit around? We need to make a decision.'

Despite puzzled faces, each member deserted their tasks and, sensing the gravity in Donata's summons, came to sit on the benches and piles of wood.

'Perhaps I should explain as I have the letter,' Fidato said, tapping on his chest. 'We have an exciting possibility that Donata and I believe...'

'There is no Donata and I,' Donata said, interjecting.

'But I thought that...'

Brighella jumped to his feet. 'Then, what you thought was clearly wrong. You seem to be mistaken, my fellow.'

'If you come with us,' Donata continued, 'you will do so as an actor and a member of the company. Nothing more. Is that understood?'

'You heard Donata,' the Apprentice said, taking his place at the front. 'Now stand aside, or better sit. We will take it from here.'

Donata

Listen, everyone. I want to talk to you all. What I have to say is serious, and you must be clear: our future depends on what you decide. I know from the whispers that some of you are aware that we have an invitation to perform in France, at the court of the duc de Nevers. The Duke is an important man, wealthy and influential at the King's court and, to our advantage, he is a fan of the Commedia. Be clear: on offer is the chance of a handsome reward. Of stability. Of regular payment for performances without doubting whether we will be paid. Who knows, we may even be offered a residency or employed by the Duke himself. But I want you all to think carefully, as ultimately you must decide.

'And Cagnaccio?' the Dottore asked. 'I can't see him going to France. You know how he will react.'

The Apprentice stepped forward. Donata nodded and took a step back.

The Apprentice

There are going to be some changes. Time cannot stand still, and our lives cannot be tied to a wheel that is rooted in the past. Our world is changing around us and our audiences are changing. We've all seen this. Cagnaccio is a man I respect most highly, a man of skill unsurpassed, but we need to face the facts: he is not getting younger, and he is not as agile as he was. If we doubt that, look at his last performance; the audience barely clapped. Don't get me wrong. I want Cagnaccio to

come with us, but we need a new direction, and I believe that direction is France. What say you?

A sudden round of applause and nodding only served to strengthen his ardour.

Cecco

And another change I will make. From here on, I will not be the apprentice. Henceforth, you should call me by my name. Not Apprentice, not boy, not Arlecchino. Cecco is my name, and from this moment on, I will only respond to that. So tell me, what do you all think of this proposal? Brighella? Dottore?

'Can I keep my drum?' Puccio said.

'Of course you can keep your drum.'

The Dottore hauled himself to his feet. 'The prospect of a residency seems too tempting to pass upon lightly, but caution is better than impetuosity; we need to consider every option. I am minded of Horace: *Cautus enim metuit foveam lupus, accipiterque suspectos laqueos, et opertum miluus hamum* — 'The cautious wolf, he fears the pit, the hawk suspects the snare, and the fish the hidden hook.'

'And I'm sure we all thank you for that.' Simonetta said, tugging on his coat for him to sit down.

'And you, Simonetta,' Cecco asked, 'what say you?'

'I say we go. Good coin. New opportunity. Ready audiences. I have no reason to say no.'

'Well, I will not leave.' Rosetta spoke up. 'I wish to stay here forever. Here is where my Pedrillo will lie; here is where I must be.'

Emilia went to put her arm around the girl, but found it quickly brushed away. 'Rosetta, poor child. We are all grieving; it's true. But you cannot stay here all alone. Don't be silly. How would you survive?'

'I don't care if I live or die. I want to be with my Pedrillo.'

'And grow old and wizened and all alone? Some sad old woman with no family and no hope. Daughter, please think on what you are saying.'

'I won't be alone. I will be with my Pedrillo.'

'People will laugh at you.'

'People laugh at us now.'

'That's different, and you know it.'

'It's really no difference in the end...'

Emilia sighed and looked to the Capitano for support, but he only shrugged and smiled.

'Lorenzo,' Cecco asked, 'what say you and your team?'

After a moment of muttered consultation, Lorenzo delivered the verdict: 'We're in,' he said, and would have said more if Mauro had not grabbed his forearm as if to remind him of what they had agreed: 'Oh yes—we're in if everyone else is.'

'Then I think we are all agreed,' Cecco said. 'No, wait. Belnaso, we have not heard from you. What do you want to do?'

Belnaso hesitated. 'I want to know what Cagnaccio would say.'

'What Cagnaccio would say about what?' No one expected Cagnaccio, or even noticed that he had arrived and was standing at the back of the hall. 'Can someone explain exactly what is going on here?'

Donata was the one who stepped forward.

'We are deciding whether to accept the invitation and go to work in France.'

'We are not going to France, not now, not ever. I think I have made myself quite clear on this point. No company of mine will ever set foot in that godforsaken hole. And there an end to this nonsense. Now get back to your work.'

'Some of us think we should go,' Cecco said, stiffening.

'And any of you can. I bid you farewell. *Buona fortuna. Arrivederci*.'

'But Cecco is right,' Brighella said contemptuously. 'Most of us are in favour of going.'

'Cecco? Who, per Cristo, is Cecco?'

'I am. I am no longer your apprentice. Either you accept me for who I am or...'

He did not get the opportunity to finish, for Cagnaccio leapt so quickly upon him that it took him completely by surprise. He felt the force of Cagnaccio's punches to his jaw and to his gut so suddenly that, before Cecco realised, he was falling with a searing pain so sharp that he could barely defend himself. Only the actions of the others in pulling Cagnaccio away, him from more anguish.

'Well, well,' Brighella said, starting to applaud, 'finally the real Cagnaccio is here. The one we know only too well. First, he kills Pedrillo; now he's back for mor, he e.'

In his anger, Cagnaccio wrestled himself free from Fidato's hold flung himself on Brighella. Only the actions of Lorenzo and the Capitano that managed to pull him away.

'Go now, Cagnaccio,' Donata said, coming close to him. 'Go and don't come back until you're ready to talk some sense.' She motioned for Lorenzo and Belnaso to escort him to the front door and wait there until he had left.

Turning back, she helped Cecco to his feet.

‘Now, everyone,’ she said, looking around the company, ‘I think we have something to decide...’

[6]

[Thank God, a tavern! I fancy I need a drink. Where did all this lot come from? There—look, there’s a space—we won’t get nearer than that and still be able to hear. Go— before it’s taken. There’s Simonetta at the door. You get the drinks—with all this excitement, I really need a piss.]

‘Did you hear them, Simonetta?’

‘Are you ever going to stop? Basta, already. All the way here, you’ve done nothing but brag. Yes, you were good. Yes, you were exceptional. Yes, the audience loved you. Congratulations. Now, can we put it to rest?’

‘So you admit it was good?’ he said, laughing.

She forced her way through the crowd of drinkers, but as soon as the other patrons realised who she was, they parted the way for her and even cleared a table near the fire for her and her two companions. She called for a caraffa of wine. No, bring two. If good company and wine did not wash away the sadness and the guilt, at least they might toast the boy’s passing.

‘To Pedrillo,’ she said, raising her glass.

‘To Pedrillo,’ Cecco shouted, clinking his glass with hers.

‘A toast to a boy lost far too soon,’ Brighella exclaimed, ‘a boy who died smitten, whose undoing was to love the wrong one.’ He lifted his glass towards hers, but she hastily drew hers away.

‘I swear that I will punch you so hard that you’ll feel it smarting for days. It is not my fault if he loved me. I never led him on.’

‘No more than usual,’ Brighella said, laughing. ‘But really, that’s not saying much.’

‘Stop it, you two,’ Cecco said, taking up the caraffa and refilling everyone’s glass. ‘Please. Let’s try not to argue this evening. Let’s look towards a golden future. It’s what Pedrillo would have wanted.’

Simonetta agreed, or perhaps more correctly, acquiesced; an evening of gaiety and distraction might draw her mind from her guilt. Denial needs little convincing, and soon, from fond memories of happier times, the talk of the three players devolved into sniggers and then to raucous laughter as the wine seeped into their veins.

As her mood lifted, Simonetta felt the desire to move, a dancer constantly restless, her feet unable to stay still. Rising from the bench, she moved from table to table, teasing

her fellow drinkers, her steps lightened by their playfulness as she whirled in the fullness of her skirts to an imagined tune in her head. Seeing her companions' disappointment at being left out, she hauled Brighella to his feet and forced him to dance with her, then called to Cecco to join them until both were charmed by her spell. The temptress of the bars, her audience was always the patrons, as she unshackled their feet from the stocks of their lives and made them step to her tune, dancing until dawn, pausing only to drink to the rising sun. *Come on, Colombina. Dance! Yes, Colombina, Get up on the table so we can all see you.* Then, from one of the tables at the rear: *Ignore them, my sweet, my darling—You come right over here, and I'll let you dance on my cock.*

'What, dance on such an inconsequential thing,' she replied, moving between the tables to find the source of the voice. 'Not likely. I'd rather dance for the wine,' and she leant over to slap the caller so hard across the cheek it was louder than the clamour of his friends, egging the drunkard on.

From a corner, an old woman took off her shoe and began drumming on a table, beating out a regular rhythm. The clinking of goblets followed, then the clapping and stomping of feet. When the innkeeper presented a large caraffa of wine, a gift from a group of young men at the door, Brighella, sensing that if Simonetta did not dance, the crowd would never be calmed, urged her to agree to the crowd's request. Besides, what better way, he reasoned, to throw off the shackles of her guilt than to become the centre of attention, performing for her fans? As much as she resisted, everyone knew she would agree. Brighella leaned across the table, gripped her forearm, and pulled her closer to him. He saw it in her eyes—the fire, the game, the point of saying no—all a tease for a final yes.

'Go on, Simonetta, you want to. Go, show them all who you are.'

He bid her get up on the table and dance, Cecco nodding in encouragement, until the chants of *Co-lom-bina, Co-lom-bina*, echoed around the room, until she could resist no longer, when she took Cecco's outstretched hand and climbed up onto the table.

When Simonetta danced, the world succumbed. To a chorus of entreaties, she lifted the hem of her skirts and climbed up onto the table. Brighella lifted down a lute from the wall, tuned its miserable strings, and picked out the beat for a saltarello to a widespread chorus of cheers. Slowly at first and measured, she taunted her expectant admirers, moving her arms in the air. Lifting her scarf from her shoulders to sway it over her head, she turned in time to the music, her right foot gingerly exploring for the table edge. At her signal to quicken the beat, Brighella broke into song, his nasal tones rasping the boisterous melody, shortly followed by Cecco, who waved his arms in time to the beat to encourage others to join them. As she twisted and turned, she teased the men with her scarf, tossing

her head back wildly as if abandoned to the dance, before snapping her gaze back to her audience to fix on one single man at a time, fixing on him like a viper, luring him with her allure, before rejecting him with a shrug, a shove, or a scowl.

Soon the whole room was at her mercy; men groped for her ankles only to find them jerked as quickly away. Women laughed, seeing the men's foolishness and how reduced to animals they had become—braying like asses, drooling like dogs, trapped in an intoxication they were never likely to satisfy. The drone of a bagpipe wheezed as a local piper was hectored in from the piazza, enticed by the promise of free wine. Stomping and slamming on tables, the dance spread swiftly outside, with the women grabbing their menfolk to seduce them with their own particular charms.

Simonetta motioned for Cecco to help her down, which she accomplished with a leap into his arms before setting off around the tavern, dragging him in tow. Couples danced, lost in the world of their kisses, drowning in the wine and the songs, fondling legs, breasts, and buttocks, lost in the sport of their play.

As the music came to an end, Simonetta collapsed, breathing heavily and howling with laughter. The patrons shouted for more, but no matter how much they begged her, she refused and turned away. As Brighella sounded the last chord, she thrust out her arms and bowed so low that her hair spilled over her feet, then shrieking, she fell backwards into Cecco's arms. As he caught her, her lips came close to him, and prompted by a nudge from Brighella, he kissed her. For a moment, she looked perplexed, then, grabbing Cecco's cheeks in her palms, she kissed him again with such passion that it caused a chorus of cheers. She withdrew, and swung around on the bench, so that her legs could drape across Cecco as she reached again for the wine.

A voice near the barrels was loudly calling her name. Distracted, she looked for its owner, and spying a rugged off-duty guard, she conceded to his beckoning. Swinging her legs back beneath her and pressing down with both palms on the table to accent the fullness of her breasts, she lifted herself to her feet, smiled at her companions, and strolled nonchalantly towards her new prey.

'She's drinking too much, Brighella.'

'Now's your chance, lad. Console her. Grab her before it's too late. I swear she'll fall for someone tonight; make sure that someone is you.'

'Console her from what? She hasn't a care in the world.'

'She's doing what she always does. She's playing the role she likes. But look closer; look behind the bravura. She's desperate for affection.'

'And it looks as if she will get it.' The Apprentice pointed to Simonetta straddling the officer's lap, tousling his short, black beard, while his hand travelled the curve of her thighs, slowly pushing back her skirts.

'She's toying with him. It's an act. Watch, any moment now...' No sooner had he said it than a loud smack echoed around the room, followed by a roar of laughter as Simonetta, unhitching herself from the officer's lap, straightened the layers of her skirts and fought her way back between tables, a smirk upon her face.

'Now. Be there for her,' Brighella whispered as she drew near. 'Be supportive and attentive; let her do the rest.'

Simonetta threw herself down on the bench and, reaching for her goblet, drained the wine in one gulp. Cecco offered her more. She glanced at him, her eyes not as steely as before but tender now, relaxed. She moved closer, propping herself against his shoulder and leaning back to emphasise her curves, each tilt, each pose orchestrated. She did not answer his question but took the jug from his hand, lifting it above her to pour the wine directly into her mouth. Wine ran over her chin, hugging the contours of her bosom, reddening the areas it touched as it streamed in the cleft of her breasts. Brighella, with the slightest flick of the head, motioned for Cecco to kiss her again. Caressing the strands of her hair from her shoulder, Cecco planted a single soft kiss in the valley of the bone. She flung her head back and laughed, and reaching out to clutch his thigh, she gestured for him to follow.

In a gully between buildings, propped against the wall of the taverna, Simonetta feverishly drew up her skirts and pulled Cecco, firmly between her thighs. With every thrust, he watched her expression, eager for her reaction, doubting his prowess, as she, bucking, threw back her head and gasped, her eyes fixed on the heavens as if waiting for snowflakes to fall. Then, as quickly as it had begun, it was over; the primal rite was done. She casually pushed his weight away, nonchalantly adjusted her dress, and without offering a word or reaction, confidently strode off.

She strode across the square with no shame, no wasteful remorse, but as if nothing had happened. Never deviating, hardly blinking, she trod silently, one measured step after another, her heart as sore as her conscience, as if the whole world were judging what she had done.

[7]

[Now we need to find Cagnaccio. Keep your eyes peeled.]

Tired and wet, Cagnaccio pulled his cloak around him to shield him from the wind. Year after year, the cold rattled his bones as if time were marking its passing with notches on his frame. He was growing too old for all this. Too well he knew his calendar of ailments:

every year more biting than the last; the nagging aches of winter that barely eased up in spring before summer irritations took over; the rashes, the bites, and the sweat that gave way to the headaches of autumn before ushering back the winter chills that stiffened a different joint each year. He had no choice but to suffer. Or perhaps he found some certainty in their arrival, as some can with pain, each ache visiting like an unwelcome guest, predictable in their return. The only reassurance was that whatever the discomfort, each ache would soon depart and that, as sure as the seasons cycled on, his life would inevitably change.

Away from the bustle of the piazza, the snow, having fallen for a while, draped the sombre streets, casting grey shadows across the untrodden paths. The north wind sliced its way through the narrow funnels of the streets, funnelling snow into yielding corners and swirling powdery clouds in drifts. A half-empty caraffa in hand, Cagnaccio staggered through the alleys of the upper town, ascending endless steps and navigating twist after turn, driven solely by a desire to escape. He wandered aimlessly, numbed by the wine and the chill, listening only to the wheeze of the wind on the stones and the soft crunch of the snow underfoot.

It was late. It seemed hours since he last saw someone. He was lost. The buildings he passed were as unfamiliar as his own reflection in the bracing water of a trough. He stopped to splash his face to revive him. In vain, he had been trying to piece together the fragments—how he came to this place—how he became the man that he was. Every new road he had taken in his life had brought fresh uncertainties. Caught in a whirlwind of broken memories, of turns right and wrong that had led him to this moment, he found it difficult to come to any answers. The richness of the wine had confused him so much that he was unable to focus on the task, for as soon as one thought occurred to him, it vanished like the snow on his cloak.

Oblivious to where he was headed, or where he had already been, Cagnaccio rounded yet another corner, his hand tracing the wall. He heard voices and, in the distance, a faint light flickering in the gloom.

Ahead, an opening, a peculiar space—more an accident of design than any intentional square. To one side, an unremarkable building with high windows butted against the imposing rear of a palazzo, the two at such an irregular angle that the intervening space made a partly-sheltered enclave. Shielded from the harsh wind and the snow, it had found use as an improvised bar. Several men were drinking—three perched on barrels, another at a makeshift table, others cowering by a small fire, desperate to get warm. As the candles pattered, their tallows, hardly breaking the meniscus of their melted wax, cast flickers over faces. The faint murmur of other voices hinted at a small cantina beyond.

In the half-light, he watched as patrons gathered around a hefty man seated at the table to the front, urging their colleague on, as he offered a coin to a young girl, an urchin, no more than seven or eight years old, her dress more holes than sackcloth, revealing her private parts. Teasing and tempting her with the coin, he enticed her to come closer, bidding her to lift her knees and dance for them, while his other hand drifted towards her intent on fingering the innocent young thing.

Suddenly sober, Cagnaccio threw his carafe against the wall, distracting both the girl and the man. Without hesitation, Cagnaccio launched forward, snatched up the girl in his arms, and yanked her away from the man's hand. He threw his cloak around the poor young thing, who was shivering and simpering with fright.

'Listen to me,' Cagnaccio said softly. 'Run. Run now to your mother. To anyone who cares for you: run as fast as you can.' The girl, terror written on her face, sped off around the corner, jettisoning the cloak into the snow.

As Cagnaccio turned around, the man was upon him. The initial blows winded him—he would vomit, he was sure—but despite the agony in his belly, he knew what he must do. Fumbling within his jerkin, Cagnaccio found the hilt of his blade. He braced himself, tightening his hands around the dagger until, as the man went to launch a second volley, he drew it out with such ferocity that the man at once staggered back.

'Come on, you bastard,' Cagnaccio shouted. 'Let's see if you'll dance for me. And with this shiny little finger here, we'll see what holes we can make.' He had never more wanted anyone to come forward so much that he might administer justice in kind, first this oaf, then the others. He would teach them here and now just what he thought of them.

But Cagnaccio hesitated, suddenly aware of the dagger in his hand. He paused, and seeing his momentary lapse, the men seized their opportunity and fled.

The dagger. His hands. And there before him, there could be no doubt, those eyes, always the eyes, his father's chilling gaze as the pain contorted his face, and the sound of his mother collapsing to the floor, and the sobs and the screams of his sister—all relived in an instant, all as vivid as if real—and the white of his knuckles on the dagger as it thrust into his father's side and the warm blood oozing and spraying out over the back of his hand. And all the time, those eyes, fierce as a basilisk and locked firmly on his. And the plaintive voice behind him, *Go. Go now. Go quickly. Run, Tommaso, run, and never come back. I'll think of you always. God be with you, Tommaso; goodbye, my brother; and good luck.*

He let the dagger fall.

He was not aware of footsteps closing in behind him, nor did he register the shouts of the guards, who had seen him pull the weapon and the other men hurrying away. As they struggled to restrain him, presuming him the aggressor, he protested vehemently at the injustice, and when they dragged him away to the cells, he yelled, cursing at the top of

CAGNACCIO

his voice, denouncing the deviants and guards as the same, bastards all, worse than the shit on his boots.

VI

Imprisoned

[1]

[Here, keep quiet now. Over there, behind those two barrels, that's where we should hide.]

Cagnaccio cradled the bowl of lukewarm soup in his hand, stirring the contents without interest. He could not remember when he had last eaten, and even though the thin broth with an apology of vegetables looked palatable enough, he could find no appetite to eat. He laid down on the stone floor of the cell.

The snow was falling faster now. The stench of stale urine rose and sank with each new gust of wind that poked its fingers through the high-barred windows into fissures and crevices, chilling to the bone. Little of the street was visible beyond the pile of banked-up snow. With only the light of the blazing torches, he could barely see the end of the long room. The cells were not split into separate stone cells but rather a chain of iron cages lining both walls, with a central gangway between. His cell, the first, was close to the only entrance, but as the light fell mostly in pools on the walls, he could barely make out further than a few cells down, let alone any other prisoners. Those cells close to him were empty, but from the gasping between fits of coughing, he knew he was not alone. He thought to shout out to make contact, but what was the point? As he squinted in the flickering light, he could just make out a figure pacing erratically in a cell further down his row.

How long he had been there, he was unsure. An hour, maybe two. It seemed longer. *You'll be here until the magistrate tomorrow*, they said, as if he had any choice.

If there was injustice in his detention, he was no longer troubled by it; instead, he was preoccupied by the events of the day, unable to shake off the audience's reaction. He replayed his performance in his mind, analysing every movement and mimicking gestures in his cell, as if once more he were in rehearsal, desperate to find the clues—the point at which their enthusiasm had dropped—so that he might at least understand why. He was so accustomed to riotous laughter, especially for his Arlecchino, that the polite applause felt like a betrayal. No matter how hard he tried to distract himself, his mind would always lead him back. Like a leash fixed to a pole, whichever direction his thoughts roamed, they would always pull him back. There was no getting away from it; the performance had been poor. Railing against his audience was pointless. He had failed himself, not them, and he must accept the blame.

A prisoner wailed, caught in the torment of a dream. Cagnaccio pulled his cloak around him and drew his knees to his chest. A rat, a scrawny, young thing, scampered across the

floor to disappear in the straw of a broken mattress. In the distant cell the coughing was becoming hacking and threatening to bring up blood.

Times were changing. He belonged to a different age. Soon, skill and technique would count for little, and no matter how vulgar or puerile the performances became, it was fine if the audience laughed. The standards he had held dear, all the discipline and hours in the practice, all disintegrating before his eyes. Make them laugh, take their coin, and run. Maybe they were right—the young ones. Why should the actors care? If the audience got what it came for and the players earned enough to survive, then perhaps that was enough. After all, the audience only saw what they wanted to see. And that had been the story of his life.

At first, he had found it exciting—the cheers and the applause. The adulation sounded like respect. Even a man's life, as distressing and guilty as his own, might find some reassurance in that. They idolised him. No matter what he did offstage, they excused him. As much as he needed them to stop him when his rage burst out with his fists, they did not, but simply found excuses for his behaviour. An artistic temperament, a devotion to an art, the diligence of a trainer. And he had grown to hate them for it. As much as he needed them, he despised them. Why would they not stop him? After all, he had intervened with his own father. He had not made an excuse for the raining down of abuse. With all that was at stake, a small lad protecting his mother from a beating, surely he was right to step in? Then why would they not stop him also? It made little sense. All he knew was that the more they stood silently by, the more he doubted the justice of his actions all those years ago, when in his heart he knew he was right.

He rested his palms on the damp flagstones, brushing away the reeds of straw to feel the solid earth beneath him. Unconsciously, he found himself shepherding together the small stones and chippings from the wall left by the clanging of irons, where a previous prisoner had whiled away their time carving out the mortar from between the stones to pass the dull, long hours. Drawing his collection of shale into two piles at his side, he picked them up one at a time and lobbed them at the cell bars, counting each that sprang back from the grill against those that successfully escaped.

He suddenly felt tired. His thoughts on poor Pedrillo. How different it all might have been...

Exhausted, his limbs aching after the performance, he knew he could not find sleep. Every time his eyelids closed, all he heard were the voices rising again in his head—of conscience, of grief, of regret.

Feeling the walls crowd around him, he drew his knees up to his chest and pulled his cloak around him.

Cowering in the corner of his cell, alone, cold, and dejected, he sobbed...

How badly he had treated them all. The stupid argument with Donata, his suspicions of Fidato—what was the point? The way he had treated his apprentice was unforgivable. The boy had skills, and more than that, he had worked hard to perfect his technique—harder than he had given the lad credit for. He had never been easy on the boy. Yes, he wanted his Apprentice to improve, and yet, with every success, he saw the inevitability of his own demise; one day the boy must surpass him. A waning career against the upsurge of youth. The boy was becoming a man, a man so well equipped and with such potential that, with discipline and luck, he might achieve the pinnacle of their art. It was hard not to feel proud of the boy. It was harder to admit it.

He snatched up a handful from his pile of stones and tossed each one across the divide, listening for them as they jangled against the iron and fell to the ground with a thud.

A laboured breath, high above his head. Two eyes, yellow and intense, flashed out against the shadows. The scarred snout, the drool, and the unforgettable putrid stench—he recognised the wolf immediately.

‘Well, my friend,’ he muttered, ‘we seem to meet again.’ He marvelled at the beast’s resourcefulness. How had it managed to get into the town? Surely not through the gate; the guards would have shot him on sight. He started to ponder the options but was too exhausted to care. He watched as the beast sniffed the ground around the bars until, as swiftly as it had appeared, it was gone.

‘Goodbye, my friend, and good luck.’

Tomorrow, perhaps the next day, he would be released.

He was in no rush to face Donata, at least not so soon after their argument, not while the boy’s death was still raw. They had each spoken out of turn. Words had been said that should never be aired. Each knew the targets of most harm. In time, the argument would lose its impact; they would deliberately brush it aside, but all the time, their relationship had changed. Neither would forget the rift now between them, however deep it was buried. An unforgiveable barrier had been breached, and with it, a possibility now existed, however repugnant it might seem, of using that weapon again. What was worse was the dawning revelation that the outbursts had been growing for months, dismissed as trivial, waiting for that moment—that spark that would cause their relationship to shear to the point where it became irreversible. For so many years, he imagined that they were working towards a common goal, each clear in what the other needed, their vision of the future shared. How wrong he had been. There was no mistaking the way she looked at him or the resentment behind her words.

Ribbons of light flooded the cells and departed as quickly as they arrived as moonlight broke through the scudding clouds. He traced his hands over the rough stone walls, the grime, and the dry-splattered blood—the legacy of prior captives.

He had not expected the boy to die. He knew the wounds were serious, but he had become so focused on the performance that it did not occur to him that the boy would not pull through. What a mess. To lose Pedrillo, so young. What was the point? He had everything going for him; he worked hard; he was one of them; he was adored. So innocent. So young. So much before him... A part of them died that day with Pedrillo, and now the future seemed so much darker and the present so horrifyingly clear.

[2]

Footsteps. Distanced at first, then nearer, with muffled but insistent voices. Keys rattled in the lock of the heavy iron door, and the light from torches threw light across the faces of three guards. They ushered in a prisoner, from his gait, an older man with layers of clothes so loose that they dragged on the door as he passed. It was impossible to make out his features in the shadows; only a long grey hair caught the occasional shard of light. At the neighbouring cell, the first guard stopped to bark a rapid round of instructions to the others. The cell was unlocked, the prisoner pushed inside, and within moments the escort had retreated, the cell and dungeon doors once more locked, to the sound of boots disappearing into the corridors of the castle.

‘Neighbours in crime, it seems.’ The old man struggled down the wall, pulling the edges of his coat tighter around his belly and smoothing down the lapels. As he found a point of comfort propped against the cell wall, he adjusted the position of his cap and teased the hairs on his chin. The voice was unmistakeable.

‘Fidato. I might have guessed.’

‘Cagnaccio?’ The ciarlatano turned towards the voice. ‘And what brings you here, friend?’

‘I might ask you the same.’

‘My story is worthy of telling, yet not one of great worth, a story of deep injustice, of greed, and of the self-interest of one miserable man.’ He told in excruciating detail the series of events that led to the cause of his imprisonment, how after the death of Pedrillo the authorities had been called by a local apothecary, his ears alert for malpractice, or at

least for invading on his territory, setting in motion a chain of actions that would lead to this unfounded and puerile arrest on account of the want of a licence to practice medicine in the town, his own having been regrettably misplaced.

‘That, sir, is how I come to find myself in this drear hole, my coat ripped and soiled, my pride and reputation dented by an overzealous hack that by rights should be here himself. But fate plays cruelly on those who seek to serve, whose quest is but to bring comfort to aching, pain-wracked souls. And you, good man,’ the Fidato asked, ‘what brings you here, those fists of yours, I presume?’

Cagnaccio, half-listening, made no attempt to reply.

‘You were missed. The authorities arrived. Donata did her utmost to quell their curiosity, but their ears were not open for debate. The rest of the company drifted away; most I suspect you would find in the town bathing their sorrows with wine. In any event, the news of the death had reached the office of the Vescovo. The secretary, no doubt with relish, dispatched an edict that the performances must immediately halt, the licence to perform rescinded, and our presence in the town now unwelcome, given forty-eight hours to leave.

The church would have its way. There was nothing extraordinary in that. Companies tussled with the doctrine of papal control, in whichever town they played.

‘In short,’ Fidato said, ‘we’ve got to leave the town.’

‘I should be out of here soon, and then we can be underway.’

‘We’re going to France.’

‘Oh no, we’re not. And I’ll decide what my company does.’

‘Everyone has voted. The decision, although ruminated and digested over some considerable time, reflecting on every conceivable angle, was, for the most part, unanimous. With you or without you, my friend, they are decided on going to France.’

‘They or you? Do you include yourself in this number?’

Fidato said nothing.

‘I’d rather die within this cell than set one foot in France.’

‘Then you are free to make your choice!’

Cagnaccio looked at him askance, and despite the arrogance of the man, he had not the energy for a fight.

‘Oh, and Pedrillo must be buried outside the walls,’ Fidato continued. ‘The Vescovo strictly forbids any rites to be administered within the confines of the town on account of his associations with depraved sinners. That, I suspect, means us. Donata pleaded the poor boy’s case, but it was the official’s moment of glory, and despite her protestations, her words fell on barren ground.’

In the tone of his relating, Cagnaccio sensed an underlying relish, as a tell-tale child will do when excited by the possibilities of another person’s suffering in seeing

whether they might squirm. Although not one of the troupe, the old rogue had wheedled his way in while retaining the ability to stand off, choosing when to move closer or when to withdraw, when to commit or when to detach. Like a wily old fisherman who stands so close to the water's edge that their feet are on shifting sand, Fidato was angling for a reaction before determining his own next move.

'Half a league to the north,' Fidato continued. 'Donata sent word to a cemetery that has consented to bury the boy; the day after tomorrow, if the snow is not deep on the ground. She thought it better to wait until the company was ready to leave.' Fidato adjusted the folds of his cravat and teased the strands of his beard, bringing them back to a point. 'And you, to wait for you, of course. Will you be freed by then?'

Cagnaccio slid his legs beneath him, pulled up the threadbare blanket, and, positioning his hat like a pillow, leant back against the wall. 'Who knows how justice will be served,' he mumbled.

Cagnaccio had slept. Even though it must have been well into the night, it felt warmer than before, the wind abated, and the snow was no longer drifting but thawing as droplets fell into his cell. Fidato was asleep, he surmised, from his slumped posture and open mouth, but as if aware he was being observed, the old man shifted and turned towards him.

'You're awake,' Fidato said, his voice broken and hoarse. 'I wasn't sure you were sleeping; your eyes were closed.'

'Well, my eyes are open now.' The agitation in Cagnaccio's voice suggested that his sleep had been fitful at best.

'And your decision? Are you coming to France?'

Cagnaccio had thought of little else. Over and again, the arguments had tumbled through his mind, and the more he tried to reason, the less he felt convinced. Everything had changed with that boy. Soldier on regardless, that was the obvious choice. Put the past behind him and continue as always. The troupe would rally eventually; he could find a working truce with Donata, enough for them to struggle on as before. He might even accept the rigours of old age, the portents of what would inevitably come, and learn to embrace the aches and torments. His Pantalone was still cherished; he might still count on that, and Pantalone was an old man; how more authentic could he become? So what if his days as Arlecchino were over? There was no surprise in that, save the tinge of pain in his memory of how once he tried and failed. He could learn to live quietly with that.

'We will set off after the funeral,' Cagnaccio said, forming a plan as he spoke. 'We'll head south. We've coin enough until Carnevale. We will do what we have always done. We can find a replacement for Pedrillo. Fate will deal us a good hand.' His tone was one of reconciliation, but the words caught in his throat. What if he was dreaming? Could

life go on as before? The company would show its resilience. Grief would shroud them for a while; tempers would fray and explode, but somehow, they would find their way through. The road always brought them together; the road would save them now.

‘The decision is made, Cagnaccio. Cecco has assumed control.’

‘Cecco? Ungrateful upstart. I will show him his place. If Brighella is behind this, he can be the first one to go.’

‘Cecco is their leader now. The others voted for him. Even Donata has backed him. Won’t you come with us, Cagnaccio? No one doubts your importance—your audience, your troupe, all adore you—but even you cannot deny that this opportunity is nothing short of a gift. Consider the money you will earn, compared to these backwaters of life, the prestige, the honour; you could make your name from this, Cagnaccio; this could be your fame.’

‘I have a name already. A name that demands respect.’

‘You have a name well-known in the towns you frequent, but beyond that? Here is a chance to flourish far and wide. You have earned this opportunity to show your skill without worrying about leading the group. You are the great Cagnaccio. A valued player, a seasoned legend of the troupe. Why on earth would you not grab it? In a few years, you would be so wealthy that you might even retire, take a wife, and live in comfort the rest of your days. By all accounts, the French adore the Italian players; they cannot get enough. The Duke is well connected. This could be the start. You have to admit, the Commedia is not what it was. Be at the front of a new movement—become the dayspring of that change.’

Cagnaccio turned to face him, bringing his face close to the bars. ‘I thank you heartily for your advices, but we will not be travelling to France. Not now. Not ever. And when I get my hands on that Apprentice, I will show you who is the leader. And there an end to it. Never under me and never under this Cecco—we are never going to France.’

Fidato slumped down, frustrated, tugging anxiously at his clothes as if he had forgotten the order of his ritual. ‘What do you have against the French?’

‘All Frenchmen are the devil. Those good-for-nothing scoundrels will smile in your face while stabbing you in the gut. No doubt you would get along there.’

Cagnaccio banged hard with his fist on the bars, the sound echoing the length of the room, the banging rousing the old prisoner from his slumbers, to a chorus of coughs and wheezes, as if anxiety were infectious and creeping its way down the cells. Nothing in Cagnaccio’s stubborn bones would allow him to concede that the opportunity might be a good one. Nor did he feel inclined to explain to the old goat the circumstances of how, when only a youngster, a powder monkey for a band of mercenaries, he had ventured into the south of France only to be caught brawling and find himself at the mercy of the French courts, to hear a pre-ordained verdict for a fault not entirely his own, and how he had

managed through chicanery to break out of gaol, hidden in a barrel of port wine. He vowed he would never return there or trust a Frenchman again. A man may have belongings and may win or lose in life, but without some tenets to live by, he is flotsam cast on the waves. As enticing as the opportunity might appear, Cagnaccio knew in his bones that he was right—nothing good would come from the journey; the company would rue the day they decided to set foot in that land.

‘They will go without you, you know,’ Fidato said tentatively. ‘They have already intimidated so.’

‘Then let the devil take them, for I’ll not lead them there.’

[3]

[Get ready. The guards. When they lead them off, follow. I want to hear what happens in court.]

Perhaps it was already mid-morning, although as silence prolongs time, rendering every minute an hour and every thought a world of its own, Cagnaccio could not tell. The last remnants of the night were gone, swept away by the sunlight streaming through the windows. Dust danced.

The guards arrived early, ordered him and Fidato to their feet, and led them, their wrists fettered, from the dungeons through a maze of corridors and stairs up to the civic floor above. Behind two imposing wooden doors was a large room, severe and undecorated, with two lines of benches before a central desk on a raised dais, at the end of which an attendant sat with his head immersed in a book, his hand shuffling papers, as if unable to locate the appropriate source for his needs.

The guards untied the prisoners and thrust them down on the bench. From the back of the room, a withered old man whom Fidato recognised as the apothecary, dressed as if for mass in a black jerkin, cloak, and small round cap, shuffled into the court, his head cast down, muttering under his breath as if reciting Dante at length, his progress measured by a cane that he tapped across the flagstones. In his right hand, he bore a fabric sack with a strap so long that it almost dragged at his feet. Following instructions from the officers, he muttered his name, then groaned as he lowered himself to a bench in the row behind on the opposite side of the aisle. He dropped the cane to the floor.

They waited. Not once did the official at the head table look up from his work. Cagnaccio stared at the ceiling, counting the beams in the roof. Fidato gazed at the floor. Behind them, the apothecary mumbled on as if deep in conversation with no one to answer him back. Only when the door in the corner opened, to the squeal of a rusty hinge, did the mumbling stop, and all eyes came to focus on the entrance of two men, one

clearly the magistrate from the severity of his expression and the purpose in his stride, the other somewhat flustered, lagging some paces behind. The magistrate pulled back the chair in the centre and sat down, his elbow resting on the arm of the chair to cradle his head in his hand, his face a furnace of frown lines, and his posture slumped and low.

'Well, well. Get on with it. I warn you, today, I have a sore head and little patience.' He looked around the court. 'I recommend we keep this succinct, gentlemen. The first case?'

He looked down the table at the official, who responded without being asked.

'The first case. Of the man they call "Il Fidato" Monsignor, we have no formal record of his name.'

'Then how, pray,' the magistrate interrupted, 'did he come into this world?'

'Monsignor, Auditore Generale,' Fidato answered, raising himself halfway from the bench before being thrust down swiftly by a guard. 'The same way as any man before.' He laughed nervously. The magistrate held his hand to his right temple, his bony fingers teasing frustrated circles as he sighed and closed his eyes.

At the official's nod, the guard prodded Fidato to his feet, pushing him to stand at the table while the indictment was read aloud, the details of the case explained, and although Fidato might have contested the implications, he could not deny the facts.

'And the evidence? Witnesses? Experts?'

The apothecary was brought forward. Flustered, he pulled at the straps of his sack and struggled, without succeeding, on account of his shaking hands, to extract a pile of papers.

The magistrate watched, his fingers drumming on the desk, 'While you might have all day, signore, I am growing wearier by the moment.' Dismissing the medico with his hand, he leant forward to peer at Fidato. 'You. Do you have anything to add to this fiasco?'

Fidato said he certainly had.

He smoothed the lapels of his coat, tugged his waistcoat down, tried to centre his cap that he had not worn for hours but had been dropped in the course of his arrest, tugged a point to his beard, threw back his shoulders, and began.

'The facts, sir, are as you have heard, but the facts are but the bones in this tragic and misplaced justice; there is plenty more flesh to consider.'

'*Dio ci salvi*,' the magistrate muttered, slumping back in the chair, his head tilting back towards heaven, as if seeking inspiration there. Returning his gaze to the prisoner, he sighed in resignation—not that Fidato would have noticed, for once his flow was found, his words spilled out in torrents, each more lavish than before, elaborated with classical sources and a profusion of technical terms. The magistrate, trying hard to follow, but without the will to hear, let most of them pass on the breeze.

'Basta, I tell you, enough!'

If the interruption surprised Fidato, it was the apothecary, who, still standing uneasily at the table, his leg braced against the surface to help him take his weight, looked as if he might fall.

'You,' the magistrate continued. 'Apothecary. You have brought this case. Tell me—and I warn you—simply—what would you have done with this boy who fell from the stage?' The old man thought for a moment and explained that the procedures Fidato had taken were for the most part the same as he, in a similar situation, would administer, save for one or two different herbs. 'And the prognosis? What of the actions of this quack? Did they rob this man, this Pedrillo Bianchi, of his life?'

'The young man was unlikely to survive, Auditore, but now we will never know. Whether the man's last hours might have been made more comfortable by the actions of this man is a point of contention. The issue here is the lack of the licence, the disgracing of my profession, and the abuse of my trade.'

'Sì, sì, basta. I have heard enough.' The magistrate looked up, turning his attention to the defendant. 'Il Signor Fidato, or whatever your real name. Whilst you may be guilty of selling your wares in the town, there is no evidence before me to prove this. Your lack of a licence to treat the boy, whilst evidently illegal, is somewhat mitigated by your desire to assist the ailing boy in his last hours upon this earth. I am minded that your actions added no distress, and therefore, I see little point in punitive action. The apothecary here may have some tentative case, but the facts remain the same; it is unlikely that the boy could be saved. You are fined five scudos for acting without a licence, but you are free to leave the court; my advice is to leave this town without delay. I will brook no further peddling or administration of herbs or medicines, in whatever form they come. Such judgement to include all areas and regions administered by this court, either within the walls or surrounding lands. Failure to comply will find you before me again, when you will not find me so tolerant. Think yourself fortunate, ciarlatano. Now, get out. Guards. Take this old fool away.' The magistrate shifted uneasily in his chair, then rose suddenly to his feet.

'But signore, there is another case,' the official mumbled without looking.

'Not today there isn't. I do not care to continue; my head is pounding to burst with all this nonsense. Throw the other one back into the cells. I'll hear no more today.' He rose and, bristling his way from the dais, disappeared through the door, his attendant following close after.

As the guards dragged Cagnaccio away, Fidato called to him, his voice echoing off the rafters and walls, as if a chorus had joined the refrain, 'Think on about that opportunity, Cagnaccio. It's not too late to change your mind.'

[Careful, he is looking at you. Is he saying something? Wait, I'll ask him. ARE YOU TALKING TO US?]

CAGNACCIO steps forward to stand at the bars of his cell.

No, not I.

(THEN WHO WERE YOU CALLING TO?)

To no one. To anyone. To myself.

(THEN APOLOGIES; DON'T LET US STOP YOU.)

A man might change. But then what is there to change for?
Such a man as I, with nothing to his name but his name.
Such an age to have to start again.

Look at me; what do you see? My height? My hair? My gait?
Tell me, you who made me. Am I what you desired? Did I
play the role you expected? Did I play it well? I don't
hear your resounding applause. Those days, I fear, are
gone. And what will become of me now?

What should you do when your role is erased or cut out of
the outline you serve? What are you left to play with
when all the props are gone? What costume am I supposed
to wear now? I played my role as best I could. Surely you
have to see that?

Here, waiting, watching, in the wings of my life,
listening, yearning for a cue when I have no idea who
will speak it; for whatever role you allot me, you find
me under-rehearsed.

So, please, tell me. How will you have me perform?

Should I step forward briskly, as if nothing really
happened to a new stage in a new country, with a new mask
ready to break in?

Yet, I fear I am too weary; it's too late to start again.
Or should I sound the finale and walk off with a whimper
from the stage?

Tell me, am I real to you, or just possible? Is it that I am, or that I could have been? Might I yet just be? Or a man who once was but now will not be.

One day, fate forces you from the front of the stage to stand aside in the wings and watch how the show plays out. And you realise that the story you believed you were in is not the true story at all, but only your version of it, a version that bends so neatly to your will that it feels reassuringly true, and then you see the folly of your actions, how futile your performance has been, and how it might all have been so, so different, if only...

We love, we live, and we die, like ink fading on a fogging page that turns not at a pace of our choosing but at our authors' behest. Is this my fate, then? To die here, in this stilted sentence on life?

And if this is to be the end of me, would you remember me sometimes and smile?

[5]

The gaoler tried every key in the lock, mounting in frustration as if his spirit rankled in tune with the clanging of the iron together; his life's grievances muttered over every wrong key he found.

'So, you are the great Cagnaccio?' he said, kicking at the bars till they rang.

He thrust through a dish of overcooked polenta, waiting for Cagnaccio to seize it before snatching away the bowl. 'The others tell me you are famous, he said. 'Famous as my arse. They say that you're quite the funny man, but you don't look so funny to me.' Not interested in a response, he continued as if the words were backed up inside him, ready to be unleashed. 'You lot. You're all the same. Miserable wretches, you all end up in here or hanging from the gallows. One way or another. You make me want to heave—useless, the lot of you. Prancing about in some dumb, pathetic show. Where's the point of that? Never done a full day's work in your life. You make me sick. Stick you out in the fields. You'd soon know what hard work feels like.'

The words reverberated in Cagnaccio's mind as if they jangled down across the years—the familiar, rehearsed repertoire of put-downs. How easy it would be to reach through the bars, grab this nobody by the neck, and haul his head into the bars. He

moved as if preparing himself, grabbing the bars and squeezing with all his might. Not one to be intimidated, the gaoler took a step forward.

‘Go on then, player. Play for me. Sirrah Arlecchino. Dance for your master. Dance if you want to eat. Let’s see how worthy you are.’

Cagnaccio released his grip on the bars and stood back. It had come to this. No better than a dancing bear, cavorting for his food. Is that what it all came down to? Drained, Cagnaccio backed away and slumped back down on his paillasse.

‘Oh come on. Won’t you dance for me this time?’

As much as the gaoler tried to provoke him, Cagnaccio would not respond. Clearly disappointed, the warder thrust the bowl of food under the bottom bar with such force that much of its contents spilled out onto the floor. Sniffing loudly, he limped away, slamming the dungeon door.

For the first time, it was quiet. The pacing prisoner had gone, released no doubt, and even the coughing from the end cell had stopped. The weight of silence was deafening. Had it really come to this? Is this how it must end? And what of the man he dreamed to be—the man he thought he was? Was he too old to change and start again, to follow a different track? What did he have to fall back on? What could he hope to achieve with nothing but memories of past applause for a man that no longer existed? For all of his life, he had struggled to win the affection of the crowd, and for what? To see himself as they saw him? To find credit in an invented man? He could no more see himself as he wanted than see what his audience saw.

He reached forward for the bowl of gruel, took up the wooden spoon, and ate. He had been stupid; he realised it now. No matter how much the audience clamoured, there would never be enough applause, not for a man who doubted the value of his success. No cheers could ever satisfy the need he felt in his heart. The audience cared nothing for him, for the man beyond the mask—nothing save Cagnaccio, and the respite he offered from their lives. The man they wanted, they got. And the other man, the man who mattered, where would he find him now? Was there any point in trying?

He had no stomach for polenta. He tossed the cold pulp aside and shifted his weight to look the other way. As he moved his leg, it spasmed. He had been sitting for far too long. Stretching out, he reached down into his breeches. The Arlecchino mask. He thought he had left it in the hall. The leather felt soft in his hands. The bulging cheeks, the high and prominent brows, the wide gape of the eyes—he ran his fingers over the contours. The cracks in the leather resembled wrinkles. Was he good, or was he a trickster, clever, or just a fool? The questions hung as if on a knife edge, and the audience would always decide. How often had he worn that mask, and how often had it worn him? Maybe all

those years ago, when they dubbed him Cagnaccio—the vicious, ugly dog—they had seen the truth within him. But the truth he knew, he had learned over time, was that behind all of our performances, whenever the masks slip down, the only thing remaining is a poor and vulnerable child, alone and sobbing in a corner, begging to be valued, in fear of getting hurt.

Tenderly, he laid the mask aside. Nothing would ever be the same. He might try, of course. He knew the troupe would embrace him, if only through pity and remorse, or he could cast aside his prejudice to lead the group to France, but what would it serve? A few more years as Pantalone, watching the others advance while his own performance deteriorated as his limbs refused to comply? He could do it. It would not be the end of the world; besides, the future looked dismal for the Commedia without the patronage of the rich. He could be another in the army of flunkies to a rich, young, patronising Duke who would look on with mild amusement as he clapped through his silk brocade gloves. It was different for the young ones. They saw the chance to advance, to make their names in a new country away from the coarseness and the grime. Their talents would be lauded as long as they amused. He, with his endless search for perfection, would become the outsider. He, the betrayed, still lingering in the wings while his Apprentice and Donata decided the company's fate. How long could he really stomach that, knowing as much as he knew, before the bile in him erupted and the frustration broke through again?

And what was the alternative? Walk away? Find other work? There were places where his face was not known and where he might find employment in the fields. No more aspiration, no more desires—just working out his days with his hands. Perhaps the gaoler had been right. Head-bent to the furrows, he might finally bury his masks in the earth and set his previous life aside.

At least Pedrillo had found another way out.

Who would care if he too were to die? Would it stop the world in its tracks?

Some might weep by his graveside as his casket was lowered into the ground or wail as the priest chuntered on. If only he could stand and watch them. Unable to resist, he would come right up to their faces, feel the bite of their breath, and remember what it was to have felt alive, to have hoped, and to have lost. Behind their eyes, he would see what they were thinking—whether their show of grief was sincere or just one final performance. Would their eyes sting with sadness as much as for the innocent Pedrillo?

From the street above, he heard the sound of distant laughter. A young girl, perhaps no older than his sister would have been, with the same childish delight, was playing a game with the snow. Unable to make out her words, he followed the rise and fall of her voice as she squealed and giggled with delight.

As if winding a charm around him, it brought back the sound of his sister as she ran barefoot through the streets of Naples, younger than him but faster, her feet too nimble to be caught, her chestnut curls flying wild, with never a care where she was headed. Golden times. Times for just the two of them. Times of honesty and love.

Had she ever forgiven him? She must be old now; her chestnut hair turning grey. Did she ever find the happiness, the thought, that she so truly deserved?

His mother would be long dead. Perhaps his sister also. Even though he had not seen her since that day, that poor girl had been his salvation, a beacon throughout his life—one person at least to be thankful for. And to think she too might now be gone. And what was left for him? What was the point of going on?

He tugged his cloak around him and buried his head in his hands.

VII

Crossroads

[1]

(This is the end of our journey. Stay here and watch if you wish, but I have wasted enough on this nonsense. Goodbye. Arrivederci. God's speed.)

Under the cover of night, more snowfall had fallen—not enough to blanket the ground, but ample to slow a procession of wagons winding their way through the rutted tracks leading away from the town. Heavy clouds, green with the threat of a blizzard, were scudding across the horizon, driven by gusts of the bracing north wind.

Shortly after dawn, the procession emerged from the West Gate, bypassing the usual road to the north, to follow a track leading around the town's walls. Three wagons. The first jostled over the unforgiving terrain as the snow turned quickly into sludge. Empty, save for a simple rustic casket, it was pulled by an obstinate mule that snorted in the chill morning air. To the accompaniment of crows cawing as sentinels, alerted by the clatter of crates, two further loaded wagons jolted over the rock-strewn path.

On the crest of a short incline, the procession came to a halt. Ahead, a modest cemetery with no more than a dozen gravestones and a small stone shrine, enclosed by the remnants of a wall. Standing over a heap of freshly-turned soil at a recently excavated pit, a peasant rested his elbow on a shovel as he wiped the sweat from his brow. The graveyard, inaccessible for carts, meant the final journey must continue on foot.

The priest climbed down from the seat of the leading wagon, soon joined by a small child with a drum and an older man in a cape. A woman, clutching a dark shawl over her head, was helped down from the back of the cart. Immediately, she prompted four men—those attending to the beasts—to take the casket onto their shoulders. Downcast, they formed up behind the priest, who led the way over the snow, the boy marking each unsteady step with a regular, muffled beat.

At the graveside, heads bowed as snow began to fall heavily. The casket was laid beside the deep hole as the priest began to intone. To the sounds of sobbing and the whistle of the wind, the low voice of the priest chanted the Latin valediction, blessing the corpse for its journey on. No one doubted he would go to heaven, for he was one of God's own, but the loss they felt was within them, and reluctant to go into the ground.

After the priest's hasty blessing and the sprinkling of holy water, six of the men from the troupe lowered the casket into its final resting place. A sombre hush, a lingering moment, as handfuls of earth were cast into the grave. With shared nods of recognition, they began their melancholy retreat. Draping her face with a worn shawl, the last to leave was the woman who, hunched and weary with the burden of grief, paused after only a few paces as if a thought had dropped into her mind. Her gaze swept the broad horizon as if

expecting to see something there. Finding nothing, she sighed wearily and resumed her way along the path.

The wagons were redistributed to spread the loads more evenly. The mourners lingered a moment, unwilling to leave the place, but once the canvases were lashed down, the signal was given to leave. One man, alone and confused, stood unsure by the edge of the road, looking around him as if he were lost. He had the face of a fool, a face wracked with guilt and with pain.

On the horizon, he saw what he was expecting—the shadow he hoped he would see—a solitary traveller heading away from the town, riding on the back of a mule. He hesitated, unsure if it was the man that he hoped it would be and whether he should follow where it led. He took a step forward.

‘Belnaso. Come here. Come and sit up with me.’

For a moment, the man looked desperate, unable to choose his path.

‘Quickly, we’re leaving.’

He looked ahead at the figure on the horizon, then back at the loaded carts, but with his decision half-made up, the figure pulled away, and vanished over the brow of a hill.

‘Wait, I’m coming,’ Belnaso shouted, and with a hand up from Donata, he clambered onto the cart.

The priest walked back towards the town alone. When the wagons were ready, with a signal from the young man at the front, they slowly rumbled away to join the road heading off to the north as the bracing wind cut across them, billowing eddies of drifting snow, coating the world in white.

EPILOGUE

Enter a FOOL:

And what happened, you may wonder, to Cagnaccio?

No one can say for sure.

Many years later, it may have been seven or eight, I heard of a man found swinging from a tree, not far from Agnese's walls, a noose around his emaciated neck, his frame frail and wizened, where the crows had pecked flesh from his bones. At his feet, a discarded crate seemingly kicked away. Some said that despite the condition, they imagined they knew the man once, but so haggard was his expression that they admitted that they could not be sure.

One day, a traveller heading southward came upon a well-kept farm. With nowhere to sleep for the evening and being weary and ill at ease, he went to ask for shelter before resuming his journey the next morn. The family welcomed him with vitals and were happy to find him a cot. And as the sun played out at the end of the day, he headed out into the courtyard to gain the last of the warmth. There, an old man was sitting on a barrel, whittling and mumbling to himself, his attention fixed on his blade as he sliced through the slivers of wood. Reluctant to join in a conversation, the man's responses were just mutterings and grunts. Though old, he moved with uncommon agility and a grace not reflective of his age, and his face seemed somehow familiar. The more the traveller looked, the more certain he became.

'I have to ask—are you Cagnaccio?' he said.

I can only tell you that the old man said nothing but laying his whittling aside, rose easily to his feet and silently ambled away.

Was this, then, Cagnaccio?

The only thing that is certain is later, much later, his gaolers found a leather half-mask, such as an actor might

wear, secreted under the straw in his cell. Some say
Cagnaccio died in that prison. Some say he is a prisoner
still, locked into the story he wove.

Or maybe you paid to release him?

Don't tell me; I don't want to know—it is your story
after all, and I have enough of my own.

And so, as I promised you at the beginning:

Of the man, of the real man, they knew little...

The man they created; he was never heard of again.

EXIT FOOL

1. Critical Commentary: Minding the Gaps

1.1 Introduction

“... let there be new forms and stranger.”
— Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*¹

I think it only fair to begin with an admission: almost everything in the novel *Cagnaccio* is contrived. Built on the backs of critical theory, it seeks not to offer any answers, but rather to identify, demonstrate, and explore the reader relationship to the text and the act of reading. As a central theme, it seeks to suggest correlations between readers, spectators, and bystanders and their capacities to participate.

Cagnaccio is not intended to be a historical novel, although some readers may construe it as such, but rather an experiment in exploring the dynamics of a contemporary issue from a reflective, distanced perspective.

While both critical and creative elements exist independently, they share a close connection, with one feeding the other in a close feedback loop. Neither this commentary nor the novel seek to offer a finite solution so much as to open doors to new creative possibilities for writers to explore in managing the reader experience.

1.2 The genesis of the novel

My experience in writing *Cagnaccio* has been far from straightforward; through its many iterations of form and style, it bears little resemblance to what I believed I would write. Perhaps I should not have been surprised at this, given the novel’s long gestation. To claim I had a clear vision from the outset, or that I had some felt-sense of how the novel might appear in its final form, would be an exaggeration. The whole project grew out of curiosity from just a couple of seeds and a sense of their potential.

‘The first of these seeds’ was, fittingly for a writer, a single Italian word read in an exercise while learning Italian, *cagnaccio*. The word, translated best as ‘cur’ or ‘bad dog,’ is formed from the

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*, New edition (London: Vintage Classic, 2016).

noun ‘cane’ (tr. ‘male dog’), and the suffix ‘-accio’ denoting its ugly, brutish features.² The sound of the word and the practice of construing ugliness through the addition of a suffix did not immediately fire my imagination but piqued my interest sufficiently to remember it. Over time, through occasional musings, the seed became a name. I began to wonder about the qualities of a man if, in affection rather than vitriol, he had been given the nickname of Cagnaccio. It was not until a second seed took hold that any rhythm for a novel started to beat.

Following a wave of historical and contemporary celebrity abuse scandals, I became curious as to why people who were unaffected as victims, but who nevertheless had sufficient reservations about the aggressor’s actions, hesitated to intervene directly or raise concerns with appropriate authorities. This led me to a fascination with the behaviour of a bystander as spectator. Much has been published in psychology from both the abuser and the victim perspectives.³ In tandem, a field of study has emerged to investigate the conduct and thinking of spectators of violence and the diffusion of responsibility among groups. While there is agreement among social psychologists on the causes and effects of non-intervention, differences in context and circumstance mean that an individual’s willingness to intervene remains a personal choice, determined by their own assessments of personal liability, threat, and responsibility. This sense of individual judgement and the relationship of the observer to the observed fired my curiosity, particularly in their obvious correlations to the connection between the reader and the text. The novel seemed an appropriate medium to place this before the individual.

Early in my career, I studied as an actor and later at conservatoire as an opera singer. Working with, studying, and observing at close hand some of the leading exponents in the field, both on and off stage, noting particularly their dedication to their art, their technique and its perfection, both in themselves and in others, has built a fascination, not only for performance but also for the rituals and transitional path of ‘the player’ into the character they play. It was inevitable, then, that my research, in seeking to explore differences between spectator and participator, would find ground as a theme based on theatricality and its relevance and resonance to the reader.

From the outset, my intention was that this novel would need to follow the assertion of Cercas:

Literature, and in particular the novel, should not propose anything,
should not transmit certainties or give answers or propose solutions;

² ‘Cagnaccio’, *Oxford-Paravia Italian Dictionary* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³ A good introduction to the complexities of the psychology of violence and abuse can be found in *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil*, ed. by Arthur G. Miller, 2nd edn (New York: The Guilford Press, 2016).

quite the contrary: what it should do is pose questions, transmit doubts and present problems and, the more complex the questions, the more anguished the doubts and more arduous and unsolvable the problems, the better. Authentic literature does not reassure: it worries; it does not simplify reality: it complicates it.⁴

Seeing a similarity between the reader experience of a text as an onlooker of action unfolding before them, I pondered whether, through use of narrative structure and form, I might highlight and contrast their correspondences. Exploring the reader experience led me to consider the spatial dynamics between reader and text and how a writer might use their performative effects, particularly in foregrounding the underlying themes of the fictional storyworld against the context of the reader's real world.

1.3 A strategy

Kroll famously stated that the relationship between the critical and the creative was at best that of 'uneasy bedfellows'.⁵ My personal experience, however, could not have been more different.

The evolution of *Cagnaccio* has been primarily analogical, with the specific developing from a wide span of influences within critical and artistic fields. The creative process was one of a continuous feedback loop, the critical driving the creative, which served as an experimental sandbox for exploring solutions to plot challenges and to highlight critical themes. This creative exploration, in turn, through the questions it raised, fed back into the critical, stimulating curiosity and setting the direction of research.

Rather than challenging pre-existing psychological, sociological, or literary conceptions of the themes that fed into the novel, or adding to their existing well-travelled debates, I sought to explore the potential spaces between research fields in the hope of stimulating new creative impulses, in the manner of Keats' negative capability, holding ideas together to creatively build from the bridges between subjects.⁶

My research stemmed from three questions:

⁴ Javier Cercas, *The Blind Spot: An Essay on the Novel*, trans. by Anne McLean (MacLehose Press, 2018).

⁵ Jeri Kroll, 'Uneasy Bedfellows: Assessing the Creative Thesis and Its Exegesis', *Text*, 3.2 (1999) <doi.org/10.52086/001c.36053>.

⁶ Keats, in a letter of 1818 to his brothers, advocated the state of 'negative capability for poets, 'that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.' John Keats, 'Selections from Keats's Letters', *Poetry Foundation*, 2009 <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69384/selections-from-keatss-letters>> [accessed 14 June 2021].

1. How might the spatial relationships, actual and potential, between a reader and the text affect a novel's performative impact?
2. How might research into the experience of audiences and their relationship to theatrical performances inform our understanding of the relationship of readers to a text?
3. How might the novel's critical themes be foregrounded by leveraging its structure and form to influence reader experience?

What follows, then, is an exploration of the critical and creative questions and solutions that led to *Cagnaccio's* innovative, hybrid form.

2. The hybrid form

From early in the creative process, it became clear that to explore the aims of the project would require an experimental approach. Further, given the setting for the novel, it became increasingly pressing as to how questions of the structure and dramatic aspects might be best resolved. How to render the on-stage/off-stage dynamics? Speech versus dialogue? The wider concepts of bystanding/intervention and how to explore the role of the novel as intervention?

The answer seemed to suggest some conjoining between the elements of a novel and its theatrical counterpoint, the playscript, into an accessible, hybrid form. The Cambridge Dictionary defines hybrid as simply, 'something that is a mixture of two very different things'.⁷ I was keen to achieve a mixture of both elements, translating the playscript conventions as integral to the text of the novel, rather than merely placing the two alongside.⁸ What started as a seed would slowly grow into the hybrid form of *Cagnaccio*.

As important to the structure of the novel, its authenticity also felt important and the decisions around time placement and setting became of my initial concerns.

⁷ 'Hybrid' in Cambridge Dictionary, <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hybrid>> (accessed 23rd May 2023)

⁸ The incorporation of one media into another unchanged (video into a story for example) is often referred to as transmedia. The difference between incorporation and integration led me to prefer the use of hybrid to describe the novel.

3. Bringing the theme to life

The most logical setting for any exploration of the theme of abuse and observer agency would be to situate the narrative in the present day, offering the reader a quasi-simulation of the novel's themes first-hand. While this might appear attractive at first sight, I was led to question whether this immediacy would allow the reader sufficient perspective to reflect on the issues themselves. I was minded by Gaddis, who cautions that in a close experience of events, 'your field of vision extends no further than your immediate senses.'⁹ While a proximity to the issues, offered by the placement of the drama closer to the reader's experience, could make for an entirely pleasurable read, my intention was always to allow a reader space to form their own real-world perspectives on the underlying issues raised. My concern was that by encouraging a visceral connection to the narrative, a reader might consider the issues, but only within the storyworld. To be able to ponder on them in the context of their own lives, I felt, required a more nuanced approach.

After deliberation, setting the novel in the late seventeenth century, in the Italian Papal State, seemed to offer a storyworld of sufficient distance for the reader to reflect upon, while the world of the *Commedia dell'arte*, through the immediacy of its colour and possibility of celebrity, provided an attractive contrast against the background of a rural, destitute community.

3.1 The Early Modern Italian States

In his *Short History of Italy*, Sedgwick calls the late seventeenth century 'dreary' and an 'age of stagnation.'¹⁰ Prior to reunification, the islands and territories formed separate domains largely under local governance but ruled remotely by Phillip II from Madrid through a Council of Italy overseeing policy. The central regions, which included what is now known as Lazio and, at different points in time, portions of what is now Tuscany and Umbria, fell under the jurisdiction of the pontiff.¹¹ The relationship of the Papal State to the crown was at times strained, especially against a background of broader political and religious pressures. In practice, aside from Venice, which remained fiercely independent, local monarchs, nobles, or wealthy merchants controlled most domains, holding a degree of autonomy over their respective lands.

Carpanetto and Ricuperati point to this time as one of broad economic recession, as merchants turned to their country estates to make up losses in returns following a decline in

⁹ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 4.

¹⁰ Henry Dwight Sedgwick, *A Short History of Italy: 1476-1900* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1905), p. 349.

¹¹ In 1679, at the time of the novel, the pontiff was Pope Innocent XI (1611-89).

overseas business ventures and the exclusion of Italian traders from the Atlantic slave routes. This despoiling of the land, through increasing tax burdens and overworking of a land barren from failing harvests, led to a 'refeudalisation of the landscape,' as owners drained profits to pay for luxurious urban expenditures, causing widespread rural impoverishment and peasantry.¹² A severe food crisis was announced across many sections of Italy in 1678, the year before the novel is set, as harvests fell at the mercy of weather or insect infestations.¹³ Similarly, typhus was widespread, and the plague of 1656 left long scars.¹⁴ Desperate, agrarian workers and peasants fled in numbers to the cities, mistakenly believing they would find worthwhile employment there.

By the middle of the century, Sedgwick adds, the *Commedia dell'arte* 'had run its course and become mere vulgar horseplay,'¹⁵ as if echoing this collapse in rural areas. Estévez goes further, adding that its characters had devolved into caricatures of the deft, virtuoso performances of earlier years¹⁶ while players were subject to 'increasingly frequent accusations of ineptitude and disinterest.'¹⁷

This sense of decay permeates *Cagnaccio* and provides a backdrop for the protagonist's personal battle to stem the inevitable fall in fortunes as the foundations he has built his life upon disintegrate and the myth of Cagnaccio dissolves.

3.2 The Commedia dell'Arte

Although its beginnings can be traced back to Roman comedies, the first instances of what we now know as the *Commedia dell'arte*¹⁸ sprang up in Venice as part of the excess of the Shrovetide

¹² Dino Carpanetto and Giuseppe Ricuperati, *Italy in the Age of Reason: 1685 - 1789*, trans. by Caroline Higgitt, Longman History of Italy, 5 (London: Longman, 1987), p. 23.

¹³ Christopher F. Black, *Early Modern Italy: A Social History*, Social History of Europe (London; Routledge, 2001), p. 25.

¹⁴ G. Alfani, 'Plague in Seventeenth-Century Europe and the Decline of Italy: An Epidemiological Hypothesis', *European Review of Economic History*, 17.4 (2013), pp. 408–30 (p. 414) <doi.org/10.1093/ereh/het013>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

¹⁶ Carlos Garcia Estevez, 'The Mask Performance for a Contemporary *Commedia Dell'Arte* Company', in *The Routledge Companion to Commedia Dell'Arte*, ed. by Judith Chaffee and Oliver Crick, (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 131.

¹⁷ Domenico Pietropaolo, 'Commedia Dell'Arte as Grotesque Dance: Decline or Evolution?', in *The Routledge Companion to Commedia Dell'Arte*, ed. by Judith Chaffee and Olly Crick (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 338.

¹⁸ For simplicity, I refer to it throughout as *Commedia*. The *Commedia dell'arte* would not have been called that at that time but is a later addition, attributed to Goldoni. Jordan offers that it was more commonly referred to at the time as *Commedia all'improvviso* (improvised comedy), *Commedia delle maschere* (comedy of the masks), or 'Comédie italienne' by the French. Peter Jordan, 'In Search of Pantalone and the Origins of the *Commedia Dell'Arte*', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 2.252 (2010), 207–32 (pp. 207–32). <[http://muse.jhu.edu/content/crossref/journals/theatre_symposium/v016/16.longman.html] (http://muse.jhu.edu/content/crossref/journals/theatre_symposium/v016/16.longman.html)> [accessed 22 September 2019].

festivals of Carnival. Originally satirical, performances were often a way for the offspring of the wealthy to vent their complaints under the cover of humour. As the custom spread, troupes began to appear all over Italy, some peripatetic, moving between cities and festivals, others resident under the patronage of courts.

During the golden age of the Commedia, the troupes became highly regarded for their ingenuity, improvisation, and acrobatic dexterity,¹⁹ as their lead actors, often highly skilled and educated, achieved a reputation, frequently becoming synonymous with the characters they performed.²⁰

The Commedia had a far-reaching impact. For the first time, women became actors in their own right, and despite a challenging relationship with church authorities, particularly in the Papal State, where women were frequently banned and reinstated, they persisted due to their popularity with audiences. Given the bawdy and often vulgar nature of the stage business, the inclusion of women brought simulation rather than suggestion, bolstering church consternation; their concerns focused on their moral impact on audiences.²¹

In Bakhtin's words, the players were 'heroes of improvisation.'²² As Wilbourne explains, a simple *cannovaccio*, or playing order, pinned to a post backstage, supplied a scant outline for overly complicated plots, with suggested *lazzi*, rehearsed stock business, purely as a map within which actors would bring their prowess, improvising, acting, and reacting with their fellow players to seize each opportunity for comedy and to showcase their individual talents. Direct engagement with the audience was not only paramount but also encouraged.²³

Taviani claims that, over time, we have formed a distorted perception of the Commedia as this 'friendly, childish form of theatre,' shrouding the form's actuality in myth.²⁴ For example, we tend to think of performances as occurring outdoors on hastily-erected trestles. As a performer, I can only agree with Fava that for any professional company, the benefits of playing in a room or theatre would far outweigh the uncertainties of weather and would offer a likelihood of a more

¹⁹ Kenneth Richards, 'The Commedia Dell'Arte Acting Companies', in *The Routledge Companion to Commedia Dell'Arte*, ed. by Judith Chaffee and Oliver Crick (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), pp. 43–52 (p. 45).

²⁰ Emily Wilbourne, 'The Commedia Dell'Arte as Theater', in *Seventeenth-Century Opera and the Sound of the Commedia Dell'Arte* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), pp. 19–50 (p. 31).

²¹ Bernadette Majorana, 'Commedia Dell'Arte and the Church', in *Commedia Dell'Arte in Context*, ed. by Christopher B. Balme, Piermario Vescovo, and Daniele Vianello, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 133–48 <doi.org/10.1017/9781139236331.013>.

²² Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, US: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 36.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁴ Ferdinando Taviani, 'Knots and Doubleness: The Engine of the Commedia Dell'Arte', in *Commedia Dell'Arte in Context*, ed. by Christopher B. Balme, Piermario Vescovo, and Daniele Vianello, (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 17–33 (p. 19) <doi.org/10.1017/9781139236331.002>.

secure, if not better, box office from an audience when monies are taken on the door.²⁵ While performances at the mercy of the elements in piazzas or courtyards may have occurred, surely they would have been a last resort.

Onstage, the characters inhabit a familiar and unchanging world, a community that Longman mischievously terms 'commediatown,' where there is no past, no timeline, and 'no chance of breaking out of patterns of behaviour so ingrained as to repeat themselves in endless variations.'²⁶ To their audiences, performances are entirely predictable, and their denouement is reassuringly the same; wrongs are always righted, and servants triumph over their masters (*i padroni*).

Plots revolved around the servants (*Arlecchino, Brighella, Colombina, Isabella, Pedrolino, Scapino, Truffaldino, Pulcinella*) as they sought to thwart the lecherous advances of their masters (Pantalone, Il Dottore, Magnifico), as they schemed for the affections of a young woman, the innamorata (Rosina, Beatrice, Florinda), she in love with her perfect and gallant young beau, the innamorato (Flavio, Lindoro, Ottavio). Often satirical, the introduction of other characters mocked society; Il Capitano, for example, a Spanish captain, was a self-aggrandised and boastful coward, created to reflect feelings about Spanish rule. Typically, plots revolved around themes of household rebellion and usurpation.²⁷

Characters speak in a range of local dialects, bringing regional stereotypes to their stock nature, or else chatter using *grammelot*, a form of nonsense with inflection idiosyncratic to the Commedia.²⁸ Despite regional variations, stock characters would be instantly recognisable to audiences from their masks, costumes, and accents. The distinctive half-masks were worn by the masters (*i vecchi*) and the servants (*i zanni*) and the captain. Made of leather, they were sacrosanct to the player's art, each bump and characteristic having a meaning readily understood by audiences. Apart from the servant Pedrolino, whose face was powdered white²⁹ all other characters were unmasked, including the saucy servant girl, Colombina.³⁰ As the mask was so

²⁵ As Fava puts it 'No actor dreams of acting in the street.' Antonio Fava, *The Comic Mask in the Commedia Dell'arte: Actor Training, Improvisation, and the Poetics of Survival* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2007), p. 47.

²⁶ Stanley Vincent Longman, 'The Commedia Dell'arte as the Quintessence of Comedy', *Theatre Symposium*, 16.1 (2008), pp. 9–22 (p. 10) <doi.org/10.1353/tsy.2008.0006>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁸ Fava, *The Comic Mask on the Commedia dell'arte*, p. 170.

²⁹ Pedrolino was the forerunner of the characters Pagliacci and Pierrot.

³⁰ John Rudlin, *Commedia Dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 130 <doi.org/10.4324/9780203408193>. Rudlin describes the function of Colombina as 'the still centre of the turning wheel,' benevolent, collusive with the audience and was 'the only lucid, rational person in the Commedia dell'arte.'

synonymous with identity, for a fellow actor to touch another character's mask on stage was deemed an indefensible breach of stage etiquette.³¹

Acting was exaggerated, physical, and bawdy. Hauck suggests that 'without *commedia all'improvviso* slapstick would not exist.'³² Fava offers that the emphasis was never on character development but on the ramifications of social interaction, as a catharsis from 'the suffering and pain that the audience feels in its daily life,'³³ Thus, for the actor, 'being' becomes 'seeming', as 'doing the thing turns into the spectacle of doing the thing.'³⁴ The implication is, therefore, of a double loop: the audience delights in the characters' antics, which, even if exaggeratedly, parodies the audience's own everyday experiences; the audience becomes an accomplice. The masks act as blank canvases upon which the audience places its own feelings, thoughts, and reactions. There was no nuance in the self-deprecation, nor did the audience shy away from it; instead, they accepted the pretence, willingly taking it to heart.

The difference between 'being' and 'seeming' was to become an important consideration in the development of *Cagnaccio*, the difference in perspective, mirroring the duality of the reader experience; the reader 'being' immersed in the narrative or spectating it from a distance. This, in turn, would lead to the representation of the reader within the text: the device of the 'intrusive reader' whose level of participation grows as the novel progresses.

3.3 Sources Used

In sourcing information for the *seicento*,³⁵ there is an intriguing paradox. On the one hand, there are bookshelves full of modern fiction set against the period, but the emphasis is almost entirely on city life, courtly controversy, or the lives of prominent artists. Many authors have been inspired by the rose-tinted perspectives of the splendour and wealth of life in prosperous Venice, Rome, or Naples. The impoverished rural populations are vastly underrepresented by literature.

The same is true for research. Contemporaneous sources provide rare glimpses into rural life, particularly recording regulations, tariffs, taxation, or political detail. While some travellers' diaries are insightful, especially regarding travel and wayside inns, they tend to respond to the

³¹ Ibid., p. 11.

³² Sebastian Hauck, 'The Broken Mirror: From Commedia All'Improvviso to Slapstick Comedy', in *Slapstick: An Interdisciplinary Companion*, ed. by Ervin Malakaj and Alena E. Lyons (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), p. 79 <doi.org/10.1515/9783110571981-202>. Our concept of slapstick originates from Arlecchino's *batoccio*, a baton worn in his belt and used for a variety of comic purposes. Made of two joined thin strips of wood, which slap together to exaggerate the sound of the blow.

³³ Fava, *The Comic Mask on the Commedia dell'arte*, p. 21.

³⁴ Ibid., p.xv.

³⁵ Italians refer to the seventeenth century as the *seicento*.

needs of their intended audiences, focusing on interesting landmarks or places to visit rather than the everyday hardship of rural communities. Chapbooks were popular in marketplaces in this period, but their contents tended towards rehashing traditional tales of valour and romance rather than providing a chronicle of ordinary life.

Culturally, the period, spanning the late embers of the Renaissance to the flowering of the Italian Baroque, produced a plethora of artists, composers, and architects. Opera first emerged in this period, and under the patronage of the wealthy, music and art flourished, while artists such as Bernini and Borromeo enriched visual public life.

To portray the lives of the poor, I found inspiration in genre painting, in the work of Dutch and Flemish painters such as David Tenier the younger, Jan Miel, Pieter Van Laer, and the circle of artists known as *Il Bamboccianti*.



Figure 1 *Commedia dell'arte Troupe on a Wagon in a Town Square* by Jan Miel (1640)³⁶

³⁶ Jan Miel, *Commedia Dell'arte Troupe on a Wagon in a Town Square*, 1640
www.viticodevagamundo.blogspot.com/2011/12/scenes-of-street-life-in-rome-by-jan.html [accessed 13 April 2022]



Figure 2 *Carnival in Rome* by Jan Miel (1653)³⁷



Figure 3 *Peasants Playing Cards in an Interior* – David Tenier (II) (1630-1645)³⁸

³⁷ Jan Miel, *Carnival in Rome*, 1653, Museo del Prado <<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/carnival-in-rome/a2ac0b11-3d19-474a-b42e-3cac5df9a9ad>> [accessed 13 April 2022].

³⁸ David Tenier (II), *Peasants Playing Cards in an Interior*, 1630
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:David_Teniers_\(II\)_-_Peasants_playing_cards_in_an_interior.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:David_Teniers_(II)_-_Peasants_playing_cards_in_an_interior.jpg)> [accessed 13 April 2022].

For music and aural colour, I found further inspiration in the southern Italian folk dances and songs such as salterellos and tarantellas. The music of the composer identified only as ‘// Fasolo,’ provided insight into the raw vitality of the time’s popular music.

3.4 Building the storyworld

3.4.1 The fictional truth

Any writer of fiction faces the awkward question of authenticity, fact, and truth. The extent to which a reader will accommodate the writer’s acceptance of the fictional representation of what they plausibly believe to be true will determine their willingness to read on.

Mantel suggests that:

Facts are not truth, though they are part of it – information is not knowledge. And history is not the past – it is the method we have evolved of organising our ignorance of the past. It’s the record of what’s left on the record [...] To the historian, the reader says, ‘Take this document, object, person – tell me what it means.’ To the novelist he says, ‘Now tell me what else it means.’³⁹

If authenticity is not to be found in the facts themselves but rather in how they are interpreted, then how should we define fictional truth?

Vargas Llosa suggests the truth of a novel is not dependent on its facts:

On what, then, does it depend? On its own persuasive powers, on the sheer communicative strength of its fantasy, on the skill of its magic. Every good novel tells the truth and every bad novel lies. For a novel ‘to tell the truth’ means to make the reader experience an illusion, and ‘to lie’ means to be unable to accomplish that trickery. The novel, thus, is an amoral genre, or rather, its ethic is sui generis, one in which truth and falsehood are exclusively aesthetic concepts.⁴⁰

³⁹ Hilary Mantel, ‘Why I Became a Historical Novelist’, *Guardian* (London, 6 March 2017) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/03/hilary-mantel-why-i-became-a-historical-novelist>> [accessed 16 July 2020].

⁴⁰ Mario Vargas Llosa, ‘Is Fiction the Art of Living?’, *New York Times on the Web*, 1984 <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/06/28/specials/llosa-art.html?_r=1> [accessed 14 May 2022].

The accent on the aesthetic mirrors Mantel's advocacy of subjectivity in response to the facts. Pavel, however, suggests that the search for plausibility may itself be erroneous.

Plausibility cannot be the main – much less the only – aim of fictional world builders. Fictional worlds do use plausibility as props that attract us, entice us, persuade us to get immersed, but immersion is only one side of the game. Fiction's interest in what is memorable, its way of suggesting the distance between our actual world and the fictional one, the out-of-the-ordinary character of the « transport » that takes us there provide the other, equally essential, side of our involvement with fiction.⁴¹

Jauss, in exploring the wider context of the reader relationship, notes that this sense of a relative distance can also occur between a reader's 'horizon of expectations' and their experience of reading, suggesting a hierarchy of reading intentions and marking a distinction in their aesthetic quality: 'to the degree that this distance decreases [...] the closer the work comes to the sphere of 'culinary' or entertainment art.'⁴²

While the debates continue regarding the reader expectations of detail and accuracy, the acceptability of a novel to a prospective reader seems to be driven as much by a desire for an experience as the authenticity of its facts, unless, of course, the reader's expectations are to inhabit an alien world with an accent on education or to test the writer's authority in some kind of unstated status game. For a writer using a historical setting as a backdrop rather than as a closer relation to a creative non-fiction work, the challenge is obvious. Mediating the fictional and the authentic, or plausible at least, may be a determinant in building one body of readers to the detriment of another. My own decision was to focus more on the fictional, albeit with an eye to the accuracy of the setting; my intention was less to provide a colourful representation of the world and more to suggest an appropriate setting for the themes of the novel to be explored.

In doing so, I was reminded of neuroscience findings: our experience of the past is not a replication but a reinterpretation, weaving together fragments of images, emotions, memories,

⁴¹ Thomas Pavel, 'Immersion and Distance in Fictional Worlds', *Itinéraires*, 2010–1, 2010, 99–109 (p. 107) <doi.org/10.4000/itineraires.2183> [accessed 22 May 2023]. The punctuation is the author's.

⁴² Jauss suggests that the reader brings a 'horizon of expectations' to their reading experience, based on expectations of genre norms, social context, and personal beliefs. Hans Robert Jauss, 'Toward an Aesthetic of Reception', trans. by Timothy Bahti, *Theory and History of Literature*, 2 vols (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), II, p. 25.

and invariant personal facts to construct a nuanced and subjective understanding pertinent for the moment of reconstruction.⁴³

As Attwood succinctly offers:

The past no longer belongs only to those who once lived in it; the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today. The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it.⁴⁴

Although focusing specifically on texts from previous eras and their ability to have a hold over us, as if to echo Attwood's theme, Gumbrecht proposes a new perspective on the immediacy of emotional draw of fiction across time, offering in his concept of *stimmung*, that the emotions we feel when reading are not limited to the storyworld but step out of the pages of the novel to strike us as real in our current experience, 'what affects us in the act of reading involves the present of the past in substance—not a sign of the past or its representation.'⁴⁵

Using the only lens accessible to us, therefore, we bring the past into the present, not to debase history but rather to underline its significance to our experience of the here and now.

My sense, therefore, was of a novel's setting, historical or contemporary, as being a space into which an author invites the reader to play, where researched detail and colour offer reassuring, plausible enticements for those readers who seek them while suggesting the novel's own rules of engagement and encouraging Gardener's 'fictive dream'.⁴⁶ In turn, the reader, fully aware that they are reading fiction, assesses the qualities of the worlds into which they are invited, following what Dannenberg, with a deferential nod to Coleridge, termed a 'willing suspension of belief,' mapping them against their own horizon of expectations.⁴⁷ Then, by eliciting cues from the novel's text and paratext provided by the author, the ground rules for the reading experience are set.

⁴³ Antonio R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, 1st ed (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), p. 175.

⁴⁴ Margaret Atwood, 'In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction', *The American Historical Review*, 103.5 (1998), pp. 1503–16 <doi.org/10.2307/2649966>.

⁴⁵ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 14.

⁴⁶ John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*, (New York: A. Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1984), p. 31.

⁴⁷ Hilary P. Dannenberg, 'Cognitive Plotting', in *Coincidence and Counterfactuality*, Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction (University of Nebraska Press, 2008), pp. 19–44 (p. 21) <doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1dgn486.6>.

To read O'Farrell's *Hamnet*, for example, without its prefacing historical note, one could be forgiven for imagining it to be from any number of time settings, were it not for the fact that, from the outset, she establishes the rules of engagement:

In the 1580's, a couple living in Henley Street, Stratford, had three children: Susanna, then Hamnett and Judith, who were twins. The boy, Hamnett died in 1596, aged eleven. Four years or so later, the father wrote a play called Hamlet.⁴⁸

Crace also uses temporal ambiguity as a feature in his prize-winning novel *Harvest*; no specific time setting is mentioned, leaving the reader to intuit its temporal setting through the specificity of everyday life and the looming enclosure of common land, the rules inferring a rural English setting sometime in the sixteenth century.

A gentleman we did not recognise was watching us reduce our barley field to stub; a rare event, exciting and unnerving. We mowed with scythes; he worked with brushes and with quills. He was recording us, he said, or more exactly marking down our land, at Master Kent's request.⁴⁹

The choice of setting within *Cagnaccio* could therefore be said to be more analogous to a stage set design, with the accent less on historical authenticity and more on an evocation of the prevailing cultural environment, distanced for reflection but sufficiently immersive to capture reader attention.

Here, however, we face a dilemma. Setting a narrative at a temporal distance, replete with its alien beliefs and moral codes, can provide space for the reader to reflect, but upon a world they are impotent to change. Immersion also brings its own challenges. The deeper the reader's immersion, the closer the proximity, the more impactful the sensory narrative, and the greater the likelihood the novelist has of delivering Pavel's 'memorable' experience for the reader.⁵⁰ The reader, however, caught up in the flow of the narrative, has little time to reflect.

For the writer, encouraging total immersion as a strategy by focusing on vicarious and vivid sensations to give a sense of 'living it now,' with all the thrill that might promise the reader, may not allow for the 'present in the past' or 'past in the present' that Gumbrecht advocates.⁵¹ The encouragement of the reader to reflect on the questions raised by the novel against the setting of

⁴⁸ Maggie O'Farrell, *Hamnet* (London: Tinder Press, 2020).

⁴⁹ Jim Crace, *Harvest*, Fiction (London: Picador, 2014), p. 4.

⁵⁰ Pavel, 'Immersion and Distance in Fictional Worlds', p. 107.

⁵¹ Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, p. 14.

their real life thus becomes more coincidental; the reader must make the transitional leap themselves, unsupported by the structure or form of the novel.

Gibson summarises the challenge:

A work of imaginative literature trades in aesthetic creation rather than factual representation. It speaks about people made of paper, who inhabit worlds made only of words. And from this it seems quite natural to conclude that literature is therefore essentially and intentionally silent about the way our world is, choosing instead to speak about worlds none of which are quite our own. The tension, then, is a matter of how we might reconcile these two intuitions, these basic visions we have of literature as somehow at once thoroughly our-worldly and otherworldly.⁵²

3.4.2 Finding a stylistic approach

The question of how to create a sense of the ‘otherworldly’ became an important stylistic decision in the writing of *Cagnaccio*. How do we recreate the language and speech of a time in which we have no first-hand experience while remaining accessible and appealing to the expectations of a modern readership? After all, any claim to authenticity could not be validated. Even if documentary evidence were to exist, we would have to concede that there could be an inevitable disparity between the style and formality of scribed sources and the vernacular of the streets. How, then, to express this to a modern audience in a way that it appears sufficiently plausible to our ears while conveying an ‘otherworldly’ sense?

Authors have a broad range of options available to them. Burgess takes a daring approach in *Nothing Like the Sun* to creatively imagine an archaic language, coining words and modifying syntax, its alien nature falling on our ears as sometimes awkward and clumsy, but offering a soundscape we can intuit as imaginatively feasible to a young WS’s Tudor world:⁵³

He pushed himself room on a settle next to an old smocked shepherd who reeked of tar, his nail-ends swart crescents, crying rough speech in this blanketing thick air and noise to one who squinnied, thin, ancient, nodding, chumbling gum and gum (‘And then what dost think a done? A

⁵² John Gibson, *Fiction and the Weave of Life* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 2.

⁵³ Burgess refers to his protagonist, a young William Shakespeare, throughout as WS.

laid all on board and quotha, "A groat an inch in warranty," quotha,
main.')⁵⁴

The style, albeit exciting and wonderfully playful, presents a challenge to reader comprehension and an effect on the pacing of the reading as the reader navigates unfamiliar diction and syntax. Burgess' approach is rich, indulgent even; here, perhaps, the style of the novel is its hero rather than the young WS.

Chevalier takes a much less demonstrative approach, so easy on modern ears that it might be a contemporary setting, in relating the story of a young girl with a famous earring and an artist in Delft in the seventeenth century:

'I see you have separated the whites,' he said, indicating the turnips and onions. 'And then the orange and the purple, they do not sit together. Why is that?' He picked up a shred of cabbage and a piece of carrot and shook them like dice in his hand.

I looked at my mother, who nodded slightly.

'The colours fight when they are side by side, sir.'⁵⁵

Even a cursory glance at the gamut of historical novels, with their disparate styles, reveals, then, that a writer has no shortage of strategies to engage their reader and create the otherworldly perspective Gibson espouses.

In Cagnaccio, I thought long about the novel's stylistic strategy before concluding that a sense of otherworldliness could be achieved not only through lexical or syntactic decisions but also by emphasising the cadence and rhythm of the prose. Balance, rhythm, and the use of rhetorical devices have enabled a wave of writers to focus specifically on the beauty and lyricism of prose, where sentence and paragraph construction add a warming effect of playful and engaging collaboration with the reader.⁵⁶

From the opening of Lee's *Cider with Rosie* for example:

The June grass, amongst which I stood, was taller than I was, and I wept.
I had never been so close to grass before. It towered above me and all
around me, each blade tattooed with tiger-skins of sunlight. It was

⁵⁴ Anthony Burgess, *Nothing like the Sun: A Story of Shakespeare's Love-Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), p. 29 The punctuation is the author's.

⁵⁵ Tracy Chevalier, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Paperback edition (London: The Borough Press, 2014), pp. 5–6.

⁵⁶ Although I chose an excerpt by Laurie Lee, I could have happily chosen any number of examples from Woolf, Dylan Thomas, or Joyce.

knife-edged, dark, and a wicked green, thick as a forest and alive with grasshoppers that chirped and chattered and leapt through the air like monkeys.⁵⁷

Lee's lyricism provides a wistful sense of nostalgia, as of a text from a bygone era, but never so far removed as to be startling to modern ears. It creates an illusion of otherworldliness without disrupting reader flow.

In *Cagnaccio*, rather than replicating a prose style that gave any sense of an Italian seventeenth-century vernacular (especially with the attendant questions of its translation) or succumbing to a contemporary style merely for ease of reading, I felt a more lyrical approach with its emphasis on the tone and lilt of the prose would be pleasant to the ear, different enough to be otherworldly, and yet could be startling in its elegance.

Cagnaccio, for example, recalls stealing a persimmon for his younger sister:

All the while, she would kneel beside him, her hands clasped over her mouth, stifling her gasps of delight. And once the deed was accomplished, she would grasp the fruit in both hands, careful not to crush it, as if holding the rarest of jewels. Then, as if the wind had caught her, she would run for all her might, dodging through alleys and side streets, until, sure that they could not be caught, she would bite and again through its tangy flesh, till the juices ran over her chin.⁵⁸

I was mindful of the need for caution, however. A lyrical approach might address the need to be otherworldly, but I believe that style must reflect the tone of the narrative, in this case, its violence, hardship, and unease. Similarly, lyrical prose, if employed to excess, may have a soporific effect on the reader, so while the balance and cadence of every sentence were considered, lyricism was always pitched against tone.

This search for the otherworldly led me to consider the polarities of the reader experience, how immersion and reflection may operate dynamically to affect the reader response, and how judgements formed in the storyworld might translate to the reader's own world. This exploration of the spatial dynamics of the act of reading and its potentialities was to become fundamental to the decisions taken regarding the narrative structure and scaffolding, as well as its ultimate hybrid form.

⁵⁷ Laurie Lee, *Cider with Rosie* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1959), p. 1.

⁵⁸ *Cagnaccio*, p.60

4. The Reader Experience

The conventional novel structure allows the reader to deduce their own judgements about character behaviour from cues inside the storyworld. If the reader is to consider the implications of a novel's premise beyond those parameters in the context of their actual world, then understanding the factors that determine the efficacy of that transfer may be valuable for a writer when deciding on the structure of the novel.

Rather than focusing on the mechanics of text construction to generate reader engagement, ground that has already been well-trodden by scholars, I wanted to focus more on the spatial dynamics of the reading experience and on exploring creatively how the reader's locus in relation to the work can affect the novel's reception.

In particular, I wanted to question the existence of a polarity between reader immersion and reflection and the notion that the two conditions must exist antagonistically, with the operant of one impeding the capacity of the other. This poses intriguing questions as to whether immersion merely affects reader enjoyment or if it allows sufficient distance to fully consider the issues raised by the narrative. Do we mistakenly conflate immersion with proximity? Can a reader, as Nell suggests, become 'lost in a book' and still retain a reflective distance?⁵⁹ Should the transportability of a reader and their constant immersion in the storyworld be the golden fleece of the author's intent?

4.1 Immersion

According to many textbooks on creative writing, drawing the reader in with visceral content is a major contributor to a novel's overall success. Faster tempo, mimesis rather than diegesis, ease of readability, and the creation of prolific sensory descriptions are common prompts for emerging authors. The popularity of novels emphasising the immediate and the vivid, often using the present tense with a first-person focalisation, adds testimony to this belief. For Gardner, the writers' best reception for their works comes from creating a 'vivid and continuous fictive dream' in the reader's mind free from distraction or jarring.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), Internet Archive.

⁶⁰ John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*, (New York: A. Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1984), p. 31.

In a colourful review of *Wolf Hall*,⁶¹ a novel lauded for its immersive qualities, Greenblatt argues that Mantel offers the reader ‘a powerful hallucination of presence, the vivid sensation’ of life in the Tudor court:⁶²

Felled, dazed, silent, he has fallen; knocked full length on the cobbles of the yard. His head turns sideways; his eyes are turned toward the gate, as if someone might arrive to help him out. One blow, properly placed, could kill him now. Blood from the gash on his head—which was his father’s first effort—is trickling across his face.⁶³

The tactic succeeds; we are hooked as onlookers at the scene from the outset. Mantel has established early the rules of our engagement and our expectations as readers. The question, then, is whether a more distant standpoint could be equally as absorbing.

Later in the same first chapter:

They laugh; they like to see him telling a story. Good talker, one of them says. Before they dock, the most silent of them will stand up and make an oddly formal speech, at which one will nod, and which the other will translate. ‘We are three brothers. This is our street. If ever you visit our town, there is a bed and hearth and food for you’.⁶⁴

As readers, we appear to have taken a step backwards. The use of the proleptic ‘will stand up’ distances us from the sensory intimacy of the earlier viewpoint, but it does not appear to unduly alter our absorption in the narrative. If we take *Wolf Hall* as an example, then, if proximity and immediacy are such necessary conditions for immersion and hence success, we could be justified in questioning where this zone of proximity might end, and a reflective perspective might begin.

Many scholars have found interest in the nature and implications of immersion. Gerrig, for example, uses the metaphor of a voyage to signify the reader’s deictic shift into the characters’ storyworld under the umbrella of what he calls ‘narrative transportation.’⁶⁵ In doing so, he asserts that ‘the only a priori requirement for a means of transportation is that it serve as an invitation to the traveller to abandon the here and now.’

⁶¹ Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010).

⁶² Stephen Greenblatt, ‘How It Must Have Been’, *The New York Review of Books*, 2009, 5/11 edition <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/nov/05/how-it-must-have-been/?pagination=false>> [accessed 18 April 2021].

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.17.

⁶⁵ Richard J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), p. 12.

For theorists in this field, perhaps understandably given the concentration of their research, the prevailing sense of immersion and transportation is not of a fleeting condition but of a state accessed and maintained over time. To establish this, even if only inferred, seems to lose something of the practicality of the reading act, where our minds are more skittish and distracted.

In his reflection on the art of the writer, Pamuk suggests:

Just as in dreams, when we read novels we are sometimes so powerfully struck by the extraordinary nature of the things we encounter that we forget where we are and envision ourselves in the midst of the imaginary events and people we are witnessing. At such times, we feel that the fictional world we encounter and enjoy is more real than the real world itself.⁶⁶

The key words here appear to be ‘at such times.’ By implication, Pamuk acknowledges that our immersion in a storyworld is at best transient, but that when it occurs, immersion may become all-consuming. I find this premise somewhat simplistic. That our immersion in a text is transitory is self-evident; our minds are skilled at processing with such celerity that our leap from immersion to reflection is automatic and instant, but the claim that we entirely abandon our awareness of our physical reading situation, of holding a book or scanning a screen, is debatable.

Any sense of immersion or distance is cognitive. We do not move from our physical position but mediate between cognitive viewpoints, or imagined selves, with differing relative values to the storyworld and the narrative unfolding before us. The possibility that these created cognitive egos can exist simultaneously suddenly seems more feasible, with their potential to be held together in negative capability rather than as poles of an antagonistic system between immersion and distanced reflection.

Green and Brock, following Gerrig’s lead, define transportation as ‘a convergent mental process, where all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narrative,’ as opposed to a divergent process of elaboration necessary for reflective or critical thought.⁶⁷ The inference here is that one of the mental processes to be foregone must be the divergent faculty of critical thought, yet, at the same time, they assert that a feature of transportation is that it has the power to change reader attitudes or beliefs. At first sight, the

⁶⁶ Orhan Pamuk, *The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist: Understanding What Happens When We Write and Read Novels*, trans. by Nazim Dikbaş (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), p. 3.

⁶⁷ Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock, ‘The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives,’ *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79.5 (2000), 701–21 (pp. 701–2) <doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701>.

conjunction of these ideas as congruent seems at odds. Although they do not address the disconnect directly, a solution might be found in their allusion to high- and low-elaboration, implying that the two processes, rather than being antagonistic, exist as variables along a continuum between divergent and convergent thinking, with reader intent determining the appropriate level of elaboration.

4.2 Mapping the continuum

As if to dissolve the boundaries between immersion and reflection, Wolf offers that the relationship is ambivalent rather than antagonistic, describing the interdependency of both characteristics as ‘aesthetic illusion.’⁶⁸ Adopting Ryan’s ‘re-centering’ of the reader,⁶⁹ Wolf suggests that immersive reading ‘always also involves our meta-awareness that we are witnessing a representation or a medial construct only. Even when engrossed in a narrative, we are aware that we are reading, that our eyes are scanning lines of text, and that we are continually turning pages, even if this is not the focus of our attention’.

Willis agrees, perceiving the two polarities not with defined boundaries but as porous:

Fictional worlds breathe real air. Like living organisms they are not self-contained entities, separable from their environment; there is constant and uninterrupted exchange between fictional and real worlds, as we bring our real-world knowledges, competences, orientations and desires to fictional texts, and receive from them real emotional, cognitive, conceptual, and aesthetic experiences, which leave their mark in us and have real consequences, large or small, in the real world.⁷⁰

This view supports Oatley’s hypothesis of reading as a simulation, as a cognitive or embodied co-creational act where the reader actively participates in bridging gaps in the text, building coherence, and creating their own version of the fiction, where reader intention drives reader experience.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Werner Wolf, ‘Aesthetic Illusion’, in *Immersion and Distance: Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media*, ed. by Werner Wolf, Walter Bernhart, and Andreas Mahler, *Studies in Intermediality*, 6 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), pp. 1–63 (p. 16).

⁶⁹ Ryan uses the term ‘imaginative re-centering’ to describe the reader’s capacity to adapt to the world they have been transported into. Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 103.

⁷⁰ Ika Willis, ‘Beyond Immersion: World as Style’, *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 15.2 (2018), 270–84 (p. 279).

⁷¹ Keith Oatley, *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2011), p. 18.

Recent psychological studies into the behaviour of attention tend to support this theory.

Prettyman proposes that two distinct methods of attention are always in play when we consider any object; our attention is selective, dependent on whether it is either focused ('local') or diffuse ('global'), with no psychological difference other than that which is intrinsic in the object selected.⁷² It is not unreasonable, then, to theorise that this could be applied to immersive (local) and reflective (global) states of reading and that both may operate interdependently. It follows, therefore, that while immersion can enhance the reading experience if the writer's goal is to provide an enthralling read, if the intention is other, for example, to challenge, educate, or inspire, a different creative strategy will be required to allow space for reflection and thought.

If anything, this interplay of immersion and reflection, as two extremes of the same spectrum, drew my attention to the possibilities of the space in between. I began to question, early in the novel's creation, how a writer might leverage the potential and dynamism of the reader relationship, managing the reader's position on the continuum, to highlight its premise and themes. Doing so, through the fortuity of divergent creative thinking, I was reminded of Fava's comments on the method of acting in the *Commedia* and how it differed from current practice in that in the *Commedia*, the performers were not 'doing' but delivering 'a spectacle of doing.'⁷³ The correlation between 'doing' as immersion and the 'spectacle of doing' as reflection was not lost on me. Neither were the allusions to the participant who intervenes and the spectator who stands and observes.

This dynamic of reader, spectator, and participant drove the ideation and execution of the *Cagnaccio* and led the direction of research. Examining and demonstrating the potential spaces within the reading act and the experience of the reader led to a consideration of the layers of their interdependency. A guiding question throughout was how the reader's interpretation within a storyworld might be supported in the transportation back into their actual world. These preoccupations ultimately led to the hybrid novel and its experimental structure and form.

4.3 Exploring Potential Spaces

Although originally an incidental observation of the mother-baby dialectic in child development, Winnicott's concept of 'potential space' quickly spread to become one of the twentieth century's most foundational theories in psychoanalysis. Its emphasis on an illusory third space as a zone of creativity and play, separating the 'me' of the child from the 'not me' of the mother in its search

⁷² Adrienne Prettyman, 'What Is Diffuse Attention?', *Mind & Language*, 38.2 (2023) pp 374–93 <doi.org/10.1111/mila.12365>.

⁷³ Fava, *The Comic Mask in the Commedia Dell'arte* p. xiv.

for its own identity, swiftly found relevance for adults, with the assertion that, just as much as children, adults need a safe place for self-reflection and to test the boundaries of their perceived identity. While Winnicott focused little on the artistic implications of potential space, he saw the space as the location of cultural experience as being between the individual and the environment and made many references to it in his work.⁷⁴ Perhaps because of its deliberate ambiguity and its referencing of the space between the experiencer and the experience, the theory was swiftly adopted by other disciplines.⁷⁵

Winnicott defines his concept of potential space as located between ‘the subjective object and the object objectively perceived between me-extensions and not-me.’⁷⁶ Bridging the gap between fantasy and reality, between the internal and external worlds, he goes on to suggest that the potential third space forms an interdependent, intrapsychic safe area for play, within which the subject can experiment creatively.⁷⁷ Ogden, advancing Winnicott’s ideas, identifies the specific forms of potential spaces as ‘the play space, the area of the transitional object and phenomena, the analytic space, the area of cultural experience, and the area of creativity.’⁷⁸ Kuspit, more lyrically, declares that the space sits at ‘the molten core of creativity...the space where mind and heart are one.’⁷⁹ Arzy goes further, locating the space between ‘the experiencing self and the representation of the world as ‘mental-maps’ either physical, temporal or abstract.’⁸⁰

Ambrose and Amado clarify the dynamism of the space:

Potential space is that space, in the minds of those who play, within which they still feel able to exercise freedom to explore in thought and act. It is a space in which their perceptions, imaginations, even illusions can mingle kaleidoscopically, in which new meanings and action possibilities can be stumbled upon almost accidentally, in which

⁷⁴ Donald W. Winnicott, ‘The Location of Cultural Experience’, in *The Collected Works of D. W. Winnicott: Volume 7, 1964 - 1966*, ed. by Lesley Caldwell and Helen Taylor Robinson (Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 429–36 <doi.org/10.1093/med:psych/9780190271398.003.0075>.

⁷⁵ Shahar Arzy, ‘Agency, Ownership and the Potential Space’, *Brain Sciences*, 11.4 (2021), 460 <doi.org/10.3390/brainsci11040460>.

⁷⁶ Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Reprint (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 100.

⁷⁷ Winnicott is clear about his definition of creativity, which is not concerned with the creation of an external artefact (although that may or may not render a similar effect) but with the creative transformation of the self. *Playing and Reality*, p. 50.

⁷⁸ Thomas H. Ogden, ‘On Potential Space’, in *The Winnicott Tradition*, ed. by Margaret Boyle Spelman and Frances Thomson-Salo, (Routledge, 2018), pp. 121–33 (p. 121) <doi.org/10.4324/9780429483769-11>.

⁷⁹ Donald B. Kuspit, *The New Subjectivism: Art in the 1980s* (Ann Arbor London: UMI, 1988), p. 191.

⁸⁰ Arzy, ‘Agency, Ownership and the Potential Space’, p. 3.

quantum leaps can be made, and in which the ownership of ideas—their own or other people's—is not an issue.⁸¹

For Ogden, potential space can be seen not only within the me/not-me accommodation but also, for the reader and writer, within the act of reading. The liminality of the space may be said to allow for the possibility of transformation, but given its protective qualities, its principal benefit lies in its freedom for question and play, distanced from anxiety or commitment.⁸² In this way, the subject may form and interrogate their own opinions for acceptance, modification, or rejection without compromising their sense of self. That the reader is free to immerse or reflect within the act of reading defines the potential of the space, not as two boundaried behaviours but more akin to Wolf's concept of aesthetic illusion, foregrounding the area of overlap and softening the borders between.

Winnicott went further, aligning the duality of the me/not-me dynamic with the necessity of holding together the two polarities (or identities in the case of the child and its mother) as a paradox that resists being solved if the inherent potential is to be preserved.⁸³ There is clearly a resonance here to the polarity of reader and novel, who may use the novel as a transitional object, a tool that they may use to reflect on the experiences of the present without being in their reality. Milner, a long-time friend and associate of Winnicott, agrees: 'To be able to break down the barrier between self and other, yet at the same time be able to maintain it, this seems to be the paradox of creativity.'⁸⁴

Negotiating the paradox between me and not-me is not uncommon for the novelist either, especially in the quasi-potential space between themselves and the characters they create, who can seem to take on a life of their own. Many writers, for instance, have commented that their characters, as they become more fully formed, seem to develop agency over the direction of the narrative.

Fowles, ironically, imposes on the reader's sense of fictionality in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*:

⁸¹ Ambrose, Anthony, and Gilles Amado, *The Transitional Approach to Change* (London: Karnac, 2004), Internet Archive

⁸² Thomas Ogden, 'Playing, Dreaming, and Interpreting Experience: Comments on Potential Space', in *The Facilitating Environment: Clinical Applications of Winnicott's Theory*, ed. by M. G. Fromm and M. Gerard Fromm (Madison, Conn: International Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 255–78.

⁸³ The correspondence to Keats' negative capability is striking. Goldman suggests that much of Winnicott's clinical work shares an undercurrent similar to the 'centre of gravity for the romantic poets; the vital spark or urge toward creative aliveness.' Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p.53.

⁸⁴ Marion Blackett Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint* (Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1983), p. 144, Internet Archive.

You may think novelists always have fixed plans to which they work, so that the future predicted by Chapter One is always inexorably the actuality of Chapter Thirteen. We (novelists) know a world is an organism, not a machine. We also know that a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world (a world that fully reveals its planning) is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live.⁸⁵

The proximity of writers to the storyworld they create is understandable. The agency of characters as predominant over that of the writer would indicate a writer's deep immersion in that world, were it not for Fowles' seeming frustration at his own characters' disobedience begging to dictate their own actions, when clearly the only agency can be the novelist's own choice, highlighting the paradox to which Winnicott alludes. In each case, the unstated appeal is for a juxtaposition of both polarities: the character as created and creator, against the struggle of the author to retain a reflective distance to deliver the intended result.

Part of the novelist's responsibility, I suggest, is to choose not only the reader's points of view, (1st, 2nd, omniscient, direct or indirect etc,) but also direct the metaleptic level they read from, (auditorium, stage wings, on stage) and, therefore, how the space between immersion and reflection is managed, to render the intended performative affect. The provision of a safe environment, where, confined by the rules imposed by the genre and text, the reader has freedom to imagine and reflect and to play creatively (in Winnicott's terms), is a necessary cognitive strategy for the writer. While, for a reader, immersion might induce a roller-coasting, emotive experience, to gain any benefit other than enjoyment or to have an impact on their real-world beliefs and behaviours, a space for the reader to breathe and reflect must also be required. Even if unconsciously, the writer must dance between the polarities.

As Winnicott proposes,

My contribution is to ask for a paradox to be accepted and tolerated and respected, and for it not to be resolved. By flight to split-off intellectual functioning it is possible to resolve the paradox, but the price of this is the loss of the value of the paradox itself.⁸⁶

Conscious management of the aesthetic illusion and the potential space between, therefore, could offer creative possibilities and be a valuable tool for the author in the execution of the

⁸⁵ John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), p. 105. Punctuation is that of the author.

⁸⁶ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. xii.

reader experience, but the potential spaces are not only internal but may similarly exist externally.

While playing, the child may engage with one or more 'not-me's' that may result in a change to the 'me'. The reader, in contrast, is seemingly left alone with their thoughts, the freedom the space invites being 'other' from external distractions. Yet, while it is true that at the point of action, reading is a solitary act, creative expression does not occur in a vacuum and is influenced by its cultural context.⁸⁷ An additional potential space, then, can be found in the dynamic relationship of an individual reader to their environment; our reading interpretation coloured by our personal history, preferences, and social conditioning; and by the context of the world in which we read.⁸⁸

Clearly, the experience of reading is multi-faceted with influences beyond the text, and our motivation to buy (and, by supposition, to read) can be influenced as much by external as internal factors. How, then, to win the curiosity of the reader enough for them to commit? How might a writer provide a meaningful, playful experience with a lingering aftertaste?

4.4 Participation

The key, I suggest, lies in the word 'playful.' Emphasising the importance of play in transforming the self, Winnicott states, 'It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.'⁸⁹ For Winnicott, 'play' is not just to elicit pleasure but is primarily a negotiation of any evoked emotion, which may range from enjoyment to distress.

As if supporting Winnicott's statement that 'playing is doing,'⁹⁰ in his six conditions for effective play, Caillois advocates the creation of a free, uncertain, and separate place, without intended output but governed by rules, distinct as a space for make-believe in the knowledge of its fictionality, offering the player the lassitude to engage creatively at will.⁹¹ Arzy emphasises the importance of the player's agency, 'the sense that I am the one who is undergoing the playing

⁸⁷ Monica A. Grandy and Steven Tuber, 'Entry into Imaginary Space: Metaphors of Transition and Variations in the Affective Quality of Potential Space in Children's Literature.', *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 26.3 (2009), pp.274–89 (p. 275) <doi.org/10.1037/a0016446>.

⁸⁸ The influence of the social and cultural context of the reader was a mainstay in Reception Theory, in particular through the work of Jauss, who coined the phrase 'horizon of expectations' noting that as external circumstances change, so might the reader's experience of the novel, particularly in re-readings. For a more in-depth exploration, see Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, p. II.

⁸⁹ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 54. Again, the use of 'creative' here reflects a development of self rather than the production of art.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁹¹ Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. by Meyer Barash (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp. 9–10.

experience,’ as a fundamental aspect of play.⁹² When playing, our instinct is not to sit passively by but to be active participants with control over what we do.

Ranciere, in his exploration of the spectator’s role in art and theatre, urges the ‘emancipation’ of the spectator from the traditional perception of that of a passive observer:

Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting [...] The spectator also acts, [...] She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way, [...] Thus they are both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them.⁹³

The question of the spectator as co-creator has implications for the structure of a novel: how might a writer invite a sufficient level of participation for the reader to become fully engaged and yet retain a reflexive stance?

Iser’s assertion that ‘no tale can ever be told in its entirety’ might point the way to a solution.⁹⁴ Regardless of how hard a writer works to explain the motives and behaviours of their characters, it is within the gaps left by the writer that the reader is free to play, to form opinions and judgements, and to interpret the storyworld and a narrative they prefer. Iser proposes that the reader fills the indeterminacies in the search for a coherent narrative and consistent schemata of the storyworld by reference to their actual world, importing their own experiences, preferences, and perceptions to build their own interpretation. Too few opportunities for participation, where all is laid out before the reader, Iser cautions, leads to a tedious read and hence poor engagement, while too much indeterminacy can lead to confusion, disorientation, or disinterest.⁹⁵

⁹² Arzy, ‘Agency, Ownership and the Potential Space’, p. 4.

⁹³ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London New York: Verso, 2009), p. 13, Internet Archive.

⁹⁴ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 55, Internet Archive.

⁹⁵ Wolfgang Iser, ‘Indeterminacy and the Reader’s Response in Prose Fiction’, in *Aspects of Narrative: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. by J. Hillis Miller (New York; London: Columbia University Press, 1971), pp. 1–46 <<https://archive.org/details/aspectsofnarrati0000engl/page/n15/mode/2up>> [accessed 19 June 2022].

As readers, if we have agency to supply the indeterminacies and create the storyworld at will, it begs the question: why do we choose to confine our attention to the lens provided by the narrator, and hence, through the selection of content, by the writer?

How many times, for example, would a reader follow the recommendation of the narrator if presented with a choice of three closed doors? Who might be tempted in their imagination to leave the track of the narrative to investigate what lay behind the ones not chosen by the narrator? If we have the agency and freedom to create, why is it that we blindly follow through the suggested door, leaving the others and their mysteries behind?

While we have the freedom to do so, it is a freedom we rarely exercise. Within the framework of the story, regardless of whether the narrator seems reliable or not, we tend to assume that following the narrative arc laid out for us is the best one for our reading experience. In this way, although many scholars propose that there may be as many individual interpretations as there are readers of the same text, in practice, we self-restrict our options. Perhaps the answer is, as Iser contends, that successful communication relies on the creativity of the reader as regulated by the controls within the text. Our trust is always in the rules.⁹⁶

The idea of alluding to this potential play space, set outside the narrative, appears throughout *Cagnaccio*, playfully taunting the reader to notice the world beyond but not explored. When Cagnaccio, standing at the battlements, looks blankly without seeing, the world is described in the conditional tense, a world for the reader alone to imagine:

Had he been attentive, he might have traced the shifting shadows of the dark clouds as they raced across the horizon, carried closer by the gathering wind, or traced the outlines of the fields, forests, and hills etched out as contours breaking through the gloom. The sight of a wing of rooks struggling to hold to their course amid the eddies and swirls might have captivated him. The marvel of how they adapted as they battled the currents of air—all these things and more might have held his attention—were he not so inwardly absorbed.⁹⁷

Similarly, in the piazza, the guide tempts the intrusive reader:

*Keep up, will you? Come over here. What are you looking at? Eh? Oh, don't bother—whatever it is, I'm not interested. Our story's over here. Do try to keep up.*⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, p. 112.

⁹⁷ *Cagnaccio*, p.131.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.96.

The reader is left to decide whether they resolve the unexplored narratives or disregard them, but, in each case, attention is drawn to the possibilities beyond the text. The intention here is twofold: to convey a sense of playfulness, but also to underline the implicit rules of fiction and the self-limiting agency of the reader.

4.4.1 Wandering Viewpoint

Iser contends that in order to develop meaning and create their own interpretation of the text, as if to complete the book begun by the writer, the reader must constantly alter their viewpoint inside the storyworld. He sees this achieved through the imaginative insertion into the text of an internal reader, a dynamic dissimilar from the relationship between observer and object, where the viewpoint is always external to the object, because as readers, we 'always stand outside the given object, whereas we are situated within the literary text.'⁹⁹ That a reader is continually shifting viewpoints between a 'multiplicity of interconnecting perspectives,' he terms a 'wandering viewpoint,' which forms 'the intersubjective structure of the process through which a text is transferred and translated' into the reader's real world.¹⁰⁰

It is clear that our experience of a narrative and the storyworld in which it is set make demands on the reader. In the act of co-creating a personal interpretation of the novel, the cognitive action of creating imagery from a text, as Iser contends, implies a continually shifting viewpoint, but whether this suggests a dissimilarity to the dynamics of object relations, I feel, is less robust.

The inference from Iser's contention is that in object relations, our perspective is always external, whereas in reading, it is not static but shifts laterally within the narrative storyworld. This appears to be a concatenation of two points: the viewpoint in object relations as always external, and that our viewpoint is always located as 'wandering' inside the text-world when reading. This seems to negate the possibility of an external viewpoint on the text or the reader's potential to step back from a text to analyse or consider it in terms of any socio-cultural context, or consider the physical implications of reading, of holding a book, or of turning a page. Similarly, it is contestable that an object can only be viewed externally, when it is surely at least feasible that in our imagination we might intuit ourselves as objects and, as it were, see the world through the object's eyes.

The questions to ask, perhaps, are those Winnicott poses in *Playing and Reality*:

⁹⁹ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 109.

¹⁰⁰ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 108.

What, for instance, are we doing when we are listening to a Beethoven symphony or making a pilgrimage to a picture or reading *Troilus and Cressida* in bed or playing tennis? [...]

It is not only: what are we doing? The question also needs to be posed: Where are we (if anywhere at all)?¹⁰¹

This question of the location of perspective and its propensity to shift became fundamental in the writing of *Cagnaccio*. Consideration of the passivity or activity of the spectator, an idea so closely aligned to the novel's theme of intervention, along with the reader's need for agency and ownership and the implications of the wandering viewpoint, both internally and externally, led me directly to experiment creatively with how this might be structurally represented.

The idea of the wandering viewpoint, in particular, inspired the construction of the novel's metaleptical 'intrusive reader. Given its value in experimenting with asking the question of whether a witness can ever not be involved in what they observe, one of the aims for the research, the possibilities of using the device of a 'living wandering reader viewpoint' situated within the text, observed and interpreted at the same time by the external reader, were too intriguing to ignore.

As if to echo Caillois' demands, the intrusive reader occupies a potential space between the external reader and the text, offering agency, otherness, and the freedom to wander and experience the text as playful, and hence potentially transitional, whilst retaining a safe, overarching external perspective. As the novel progresses, so too does the intrusive reader's engagement in the narrative, the gradual shift from observer to participant mirroring the dilemma of the bystander in their decision to intervene at the sight of an incident of abuse.

The relationship between an internal and external reader led me to reflect on that of the audience to the actor in the theatre, not only in the dynamics of performing spaces but also in the question of performance both on- and offstage.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 105.

¹⁰² Although a broad discussion of Foucault's heterotopia is outside the remit of this research, it would make interesting future study, given the interesting parallels and resonances with the concept, particularly in regard not only to the relationship between reader and stage, but also those between on- and off-stage spaces, and the simultaneity of intrusive reader and the distanced reader. A good introduction to Foucault's work in this area can be found in Tim Hutchings, and Jason Giardino. 'Foucault's Heterotopias as Play Spaces.' *International Journal of Role-Playing*, 7 (2016) pp. 10-14.

<<https://journals.uu.se/IJRP/article/view/252/228>> [Accessed 23rd June 2023]

5. Performance

5.1 ‘Performance as’

In recent decades, our understanding of performance as it pertains to the construction of identity has changed significantly, particularly in relation to the study of gender, to embrace the notion of ‘performance as’ and agency of the self, not to be defined by socially imposed constructs but to present socially according to the individual’s repeated behaviour.

Much has been written about Goffman’s persuasive metaphor of the presentation of the self, proposing that individuals, motivated by a variety of personal interests, purposefully form impressions for others, as prospective audiences, to interpret. This was a subject I was interested to explore, especially given its on- and off-stage relevance.¹⁰³

The themes of socially constructed identity and self-presentation run like a spine through *Cagnaccio*, propelling the plot forward. The causes and consequences of the protagonist’s ‘performance as’ Cagnaccio, the myth (and, to a lesser degree, as the theatrical characters he portrays), and the extent to which it has dissolved the identity of the man beneath the mask are important elements driving his character arc. Cagnaccio’s nurturing of the myth (and mask) is motivated by the need for external validation of his inner insecurities, which subsume his sense of self. The growing friction created between the authentic and the adopted mask builds the psychological frustration that underlines his anger and brutality.

5.2 Performance as character

The decline of the myth of Cagnaccio is mirrored by the ascendance of his apprentice. The refusal to acknowledge the young man’s name, referring to him only as ‘my boy’ or ‘my apprentice’, is a deliberate act on Cagnaccio’s part to reduce the player to no more than his role until the pivotal meeting when the Apprentice seizes leadership of the company, declaring that henceforth only his real name will be used. This symbolically marks the nadir of the power Cagnaccio holds over the troupe and marks the end of the Apprentice’s rite of passage and the promise of a new direction for the group.

¹⁰³ Goffman defines performance as ‘all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers.’ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 22.

The naming of the novel's characters, given their dual identities as characters and onstage roles, presented a particular challenge. Asking the reader to maintain both on-stage and off-stage names was always likely to be confusing. However, in the *Commedia*, it was common for players to become associated with the roles they performed. Using onstage names, then, at least for some characters, relieved the reader's cognitive load and improved the flow of the text while providing the opportunity to explore the difference between their on- and off-stage personas.

Fava suggests that in the *Commedia*, the personality, history, and agency of the characters were denied; characters have functions collectively becoming instruments of action and response in the present.¹⁰⁴ We tend to think of an actor as adopting a role, as if donning a costume or building a character around them. I was interested in considering a reversal of this, in that as the players arrive on stage, passing through the wings as the liminal space between offstage and on, they transform, not in the adoption of new characteristics but in shedding some of their own, as if reducing character to its essence. On exit, in reversal, they return to assume the trappings of their fuller, richer character. In doing so, I was reminded of Forster's claims regarding characterisation, with onstage characters being flat while offstage they became more rounded.¹⁰⁵

This distinction between 'performance for' (onstage) and 'performance as' (offstage) offers another potential space for the novelist to playfully engage the reader. In the light of the novel's setting, the implications of socially constructed identities prompted me to investigate theatrical relationships, particularly between performer, performance, and audience, to see if they might offer a different perspective that could shed light on the reading experience.

5.3 The Reader as Performer

At first glance, the experience of a theatrical performance appears to be distinct from that of a fiction reader, but upon closer examination, several parallels can be seen, which for a writer could offer a new perspective on the role and experience of readers as well as the spatial dynamics of the act of reading.

Kivy presents a compelling argument in favour of the claim that all reading is a performance, even when it is done for oneself. He proposes that, through subvocalisation,¹⁰⁶ the

¹⁰⁴ Fava, *The Comic Mask on the Commedia dell'arte* pp. 17–20.

¹⁰⁵ Forster divides characterisation into flat and round; flat as simply constructed around one idea, while round embody a greater depth of character. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, ed. by Oliver Stallybrass, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 72–81.

¹⁰⁶ The importance of subvocalisation to the reading experience is well outlined by Aliyev. Alexey Aliyev, 'The Novel as a Performing Art', *Philosophia*, 49.3 (2021), pp.941–55 <doi.org/10.1007/s11406-020-00277-4>.

reader is always performing to oneself, even while reading silently.¹⁰⁷ This idea seems plausible; we are trained to read aloud as children, and as our skill grows, our ‘performances’ become internalised. As if to corroborate this point, typical advice to writers suggests reading aloud passages as part of the editing process, with the implication that doing so allows us to better hear the prosody of the text.¹⁰⁸

Stierle disagrees with Kivy, claiming there is a distinction between reading silently and performing aloud and that ‘while a quiet reading relies solely on written language, reading aloud adds a certain stress and intonation,’¹⁰⁹ a view not shared by McConachie and Hart, who, in acknowledging a distinction between reader and spectator¹¹⁰, propose that in the process of reading, ‘we imagine the intonation of the dialogue; we regulate the rhythm of the prose,’ the difference, they add, is that the reader is fundamentally different from the audience experience at the theatre, where ‘Everyone looking at an actor on stage is seeing and hearing almost exactly the ‘same’ thing.’¹¹¹ This conjecture, however, is arguable. While visually this may be the case, the meaning attached to what is seen is formed by the subjective interpretation of the audience members, much in the way a reader attributes meaning to a text. That discussion as to the meaning of a play often occurs between spectators post-performance seems to support my claim.

As if to also contest the universal element in McConachie and Hart’s contention, Elam observes that in modern theatre, ‘the spectator has his own well-marked, private space, individual seat [...] to emphasise the personal rather than the social perception and response.’¹¹² The tension between the spectator as an individual and as a social member of an audience is also noted by Goffman, who suggests that a shared audience experience may equate to that of a readership, of which the reader is one part.¹¹³ Perhaps a more persuasive argument for the distinction between a reading and a theatrical experience might be made in terms of time. As Bennett indicates, ‘Unlike the printed text, a theatrical performance is available for its audience

¹⁰⁷ Peter Kivy, *The Performance of Reading: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature*, New Directions in Aesthetics, 3 (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Pub, 2006).

¹⁰⁸ Cowan, for example, offers this as a solution to writer absorption in that it allows a distanced perspective, bringing balance and cohesion. Andrew Cowan, *The Art of Writing Fiction* (Harlow, England; New York: Longman, 2011), p. 158.

¹⁰⁹ Karlheinz Stierle, ‘The Reading of Fictional Texts’, in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. by Susan Rubin Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 99 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7zv3jc.4>> [accessed 27 January 2019].

¹¹⁰ For consistency, I use the terms *spectator* to represent an individual member of a community *audience* and *participant* to reflect a performer or interpreter.

¹¹¹ Bruce A. McConachie and Faith Elizabeth Hart, *Performance and Cognition: Theatre Studies and the Cognitive Turn*, (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 195.

¹¹² Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, New Accents (London New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 64.

¹¹³ Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Northeastern University Press ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), p. 131.

only in a fixed time period.’¹¹⁴ A reader, on the other hand, may set aside the novel to return to at a later time and resume reading from the same point of departure. In practice, this too is a reasonable comment, but if we accept that every return to the performance, whether printed or observed, will differ depending on the prevailing circumstances at the moment, then the argument fails; each new visit would be a unique experience, even if connected. The argument advanced on the durability of the material artefact, the book in print, as opposed to the transient performance of actors ‘in the moment’ suffers under the same scrutiny. Unless entirely improvised (and even then, performances likely follow a structure, such as in the *Commedia*), the playscript, like a book to a reader, serves as a material artefact to be interpreted, albeit in a different form.

One difference between reader and spectator that is persuasive, however, is the degree of awareness of the participant in each discipline. The reader, unless re-reading, may intuit the outcome of the narrative but will not know it for certain, unlike the actor, who has prepared a role to perform the character arc in full knowledge of the playwright’s intended destination. While the writer, it might be argued, fulfils the playwright’s role and provides the outcome for the reader as performer, for the most part, the reader progresses blindly through the narrative.

Clearly, a theatrical performance is not a reading experience. However, what is also evident is that the relationships shared between literary and theatrical audiences have parallels that might shed light on the writing possibilities. The value, therefore, seems not to be in highlighting the differences, nor in arguing against or for the reader as a performer, but in focusing on their similarities. Exploring the nature of the interaction between the theatrical audience and the reader may be an intriguing and rich path to pursue.

5.4 The Nature of Performance

Performance is defined by Goffman as ‘all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.’¹¹⁵ This specification of performance as solely an action of transmission is not shared by all. Grotowski suggests that the possible definitions of performance are myriad, ultimately reducing to ‘what takes place between spectator and actor’ with all other elements (text, set, lights, costumes) being supplemental to that interaction.¹¹⁶ Heim also emphasises the duality of influence of both parties, stating that in the theatre, the two ‘troupes’ (audience and actors) merge to form a co-dependent union:

¹¹⁴ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 118.

¹¹⁵ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, p. 15.

¹¹⁶ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, ed. by Eugenio Barba, (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 32.

'Meeting across the footlights, the two troupes watch, listen to, perform for and appraise each other,'¹¹⁷ an interdependency, Fischer-Lichte terms 'autopoietic feedback loop.'¹¹⁸

I was drawn to the possibilities of this loop as a potential space, with its 'me/not me' dynamic, and how the degree of passivity and participation of a spectator may impact the audience's (and hence the reader's) experience. Pelias and VanOosting describe a spectator's degree of active participation as a 'continuum from inactive to proactive,' where passive reception aligns with traditional audience rules and active involvement invites the spectator to extract their own interpretation and meaning from the acted cues. As participation increases towards proactive involvement, the distinction between spectators begins to blur.¹¹⁹

Saltz suggests that an audience viewing a theatrical performance 'looks at the stage in order to look beyond the stage. In performance, actors cease to exist as or for themselves and become the stand-in for an absent and perhaps non-existent other.'¹²⁰ McConachie goes further to offer that if we wish to understand audiences, we must negotiate the 'doubleness' of the performer: 'the fact that a single body on stage can be an actor and a character, simultaneously existing in both real and simulated time-space.'¹²¹ While Carlson, referencing Schechner, suggests that this doubleness is not only noted by the audience but also perceived by the performer:

Within the play frame a performer is not herself (because of the operations of illusion) but she is also not not herself (because of the operations of reality). Performer and audience alike operate in a world of double consciousness.¹²²

This 'me/not-me' double consciousness echoes Winnicott's theories and is akin to reader response, as the book (as the operation of reality) and the novel (as the operation of illusion) cast the reader as the performer, who, led by the author's cues, moves to possess the text for themselves, sequestering it for their own meaning. The reader is aware, even if not consciously, of

¹¹⁷ Caroline Heim, *Audience as Performer: The Changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the Twenty-First Century* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015), p. 19.

¹¹⁸ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, ed. by Ramona Mosse and Minou Arjomand, trans. by Minou Arjomand, (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), p. 20.

¹¹⁹ Ronald J Pelias and James VanOosting, 'A Paradigm for Performance Studies', in *Performance: Pt. 1. Foundations and Definitions*, ed. by P. Auslander, Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies (Routledge, 2003), pp. 215–27 (p. 224) <<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=CyywmXnHXg4C>>.

¹²⁰ David Z. Saltz, 'Infiction and Outfiction: The Role of Fiction in Theatrical Performance', in *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance, and Philosophy*, ed. by David Krasner and David Z. Saltz, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), p. 204.

¹²¹ Bruce A. McConachie, *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*, Cognitive Studies in Literature and Performance (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 7.

¹²² Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 46.

a similar doubleness, of the potential duality of the reading experience to immerse or reflect, and of their internal (through the unavoidable wandering viewpoint with the narrative) and external (or physical) relationships to the novel.

The concept of a 'not herself...but not not herself' reader and the potential of the 'continuum' of active participation found form in *Cagnaccio* through the inclusion of the device of "intrusive reader." The device allows the reader to become a spectator of their own 'not not' me actions, blurring the distinction between reader as performer and reader as spectator. It alludes to aesthetic illusion: the intrusive reader is absorbed within the narrative, while the external reader has distance enough to reflect on the implications of the narrative for their own external lives.

For some readers, I was aware that this device could be confusing, distracting, or simply discouraging. My hope was that by creating a playful experience, the reader might suspend disbelief enough to acclimatise to the form and that this, in turn, would encourage a broad readership; those seeking a strong narrative drive will find it in the structure of the plot, while those who seek to explore deeper and consider it a literary experiment may find interest in the treatments used.

Part of the attractiveness of the intrusive reader was its resonance with the novel's themes as intervention; the extent to which a bystander might also be said to stand on a 'continuum' between passive observation and participatory intervention. My intention was to explore how through using a broader toolkit; the intrusive reader, the otherworldliness of the monologues, the narratorial insertions, the use of differing metaleptic levels, the ambiguity around the identity of the fool, all disturb the way the novel is experienced. This is mimicked within the structure of the novel and evidenced in the plot, with the reader following the path of the continuum as their internal representation is drawn further into the narrative action.

This consideration of the novel's layered experience led me to examine theatrical spatial dynamics and, in particular, innovations in manipulating the audience's perspective and function within post-modern theatre.

5.5 Spatial Dynamics in the theatre

5.5.1 Uses of spatial dynamics

Since the work of Hermann and Matthews in the early twentieth century, the realisation of a text, or script, into a three-dimensional performance has led to investigations of the context and spatial dynamics of that transition. Although attention initially fell on the characteristics and

potential of the physical performing space, Carlson notes that ‘theatre has always involved a great many other spaces, some physical, some imaginary.’¹²³

Throughout the history of theatre, playwrights and directors have capitalised on the diversity of performance spaces to highlight the relationship of the audience to the drama performed. As Fischer-Lichte explains:

The layout of the architectural space and its division of space between the stage and audience opens particular possibilities for—and even organizes and structures—the movement of actors on stage as well as the perception of the spectators, affecting the relationship between actors and spectators. Whatever is made of these possibilities, how they are used, realized, avoided, or thwarted constitutes the performance space.¹²⁴

Many experiments have been conducted about the possibilities of the stage space that delineates the fictional from the real world: the performance space, which may encroach into the auditorium, blurring the fictional and real world; and the broader theatrical spaces, which include the liminal wings, the green rooms, and preparation spaces backstage. Whether through the frame of a proscenium arch, which purposefully limits spectator physical participation, or through the implied invitation of thrust stages or theatre in the round, the audience’s relative distance and immersion become a crucial component in the transmission of dramatic meaning.

The practice of blurring these boundaries has been a part of western theatrical tradition for as long as drama itself. For instance, Fischer-Lichte reports that aristocrats in the seventeenth-century French theatre sat on the stage, causing mayhem by impeding the performers’ movement.¹²⁵ More recently, there has been a trend in post-modern and post-dramatic theatre to draw inspiration from literary criticism, specifically from reader response theories, to deliver projects that emphasise the role and participation of the spectator, as if to reiterate Winnicott’s questions of where we are and where we stand.

The exploration of perspective has been addressed directly in projects such as those by the Punchdrunk company, where the audience promenades at will through the performance, sharing the performing space with the actors.¹²⁶ Although the term ‘immersive theatre’ is used, as Carlson

¹²³ Marvin Carlson, ‘Space and Theatre’, in *Focus: Papers in English Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Mária Kurdi (Pécs: Institute of English Studies, University of Pécs, 2012), pp. 13–23 (p. 14) <<https://istr.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Molnar-Focus-2012.pdf#page=13>> [accessed 16 April 2021].

¹²⁴ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies* p. 23.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹²⁶ Further details of Punchdrunk performances can be found at www.punchdrunk.com

points out, the spectator's role primarily remains that of a passive observer, with minimal interaction, as they choose to wander through a non-linear performance, in a literal rendering of Lser's wandering perspective.¹²⁷

Immersion theatre is not the only form that blurs the lines between audience and performer, but it does it in a unique way. For instance, Brecht's intentional alienation (the *Verfremdungseffekt*) of the audience is consonant with Wolf's aesthetic illusion; although the audience feels emotionally detached from the performers, Brecht's purpose is to promote an introspective, intellectual immersion that focuses on the social issues of the spectator's real world.¹²⁸ Interestingly, there is a discernible synergy between Brecht's insistence that actors demonstrate their roles rather than embody them and Fava's theory that the performing style employed in the Commedia was similarly one of not 'doing' but being a 'spectacle of doing'.¹²⁹

Pirandello seizes upon a different locus of the relationship, turning his attention to the question of narrative identity as he blurs the impression of fiction and reality. From the outset of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the audience is met with a challenge to expectations. The opening stage directions:

Upon entering the theater, the audience will find the curtain raised and the stage as it is during the day, without wings or scenery, almost dark and empty. From the start they should have the impression that this show has not been rehearsed.¹³⁰

Six strangers enter the busy rehearsal area as if intervening, each with their own narrative as valid as the playwright's and deserving of performance. As an audience, we identify with these outsiders and with a universal yearning to be heard and to be taken seriously by the 'characters' on the stage. The effect is not to break the fourth wall so much as sneak around it; we are aware that the outsiders are invented by Pirandello, their entries and exits ordained, and their words and actions, however spontaneous they appear, are predetermined. The effect could be said to mimic Pelias and VanOosting's continuum in that we, the inactive audience, watch the characters, the active participants, as they intervene to alter the course of the play.¹³¹

¹²⁷ Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, p. 148.

¹²⁸ An interesting perspective on Brechtian alienation, its impact, and its demands on performance can be found in Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Touchstone Publishers, 1996), pp. 86–89.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. xv.

¹³⁰ Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author: A Play to Be Made*, trans. by Mary Ann Frese Witt (New York: Italica Press, 2013), p. 30.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 224.

Heavily inspired by the tradition of the *Commedia*, Pirandello explores the fluidity and tension between the imposition of socially-determined masks and the suffering, authentic identity, through the symbolism of visible and non-visible masks.

Again, from *Six Characters in Search of an Author*:

FATHER For me, the whole drama lies in this, sir, in my awareness—in everyone’s awareness, you see - of being ‘one’ when in truth we are ‘many’—‘many’ according to the possibilities that lie within us. One with this person, one with that person, completely different! Yet we have the illusion of always being ‘one for all’ and always ‘the one we believe ourselves to be in all our actions.’¹³²

This statement of the multi-masked persona and our perceptions of an authentic self, with its inherent frustrations and tensions, is common in drama and literature. In *Cagnaccio* it is somewhat distilled, more in line with the treatment in the *Commedia*, to the relationship between the protagonist’s physical mask, his projected mask as Cagnaccio, and his perceived, authentic self.

5.6 The onstage/offstage dynamic

The use of the external world, whether physical or fictional, to affect the performance onstage is a common feature in drama, for innovative or logistical reasons or merely in the name of good taste. Characters are killed, wars are fought, and events occur offstage to impact the characters onstage, often exerting an urgency where ‘the “unseen” parts of a play (i.e., the offstage) are equally, if not more, important than the “seen” in driving the action of a drama. Many of Pinter’s plays, for example, create an atmosphere of containment and external pressure to create an unsettling and foreboding mood for the characters’ predicaments to unfold.

Nowhere is the relationship between onstage and offstage action more apparent than in Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, where the stage space becomes the other world of a retelling of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, interspersing lines from the Shakespeare play.¹³³ Focused on the agency of minor characters while waiting for their entrance, Stoppard uses the characters’ real world, not a theatrical setting, to dramatise their confinement at the mercy of the action around them.

Ros It’s allowed.

¹³² Ibid., p. 50.

¹³³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Stanley Wells and T.J.B. Taylor, (London: Penguin, 2015)

Guil Allowed, yes, We are not restricted. No boundaries have been defined, no inhibitions imposed. We have, for the while, secured, or blundered into, our release, for the while. Spontaneity and whim are the order of the day. Other wheels are turning but they are not our concern. We can breathe. We can relax. We can do what we like and say what we like to whomever we like, without restriction.

Ros Within limits, of course.

Guil Certainly within limits.¹³⁴

Stoppard, like Pirandello, highlights the ambiguity of offstage space as he raises questions over the location of performance. The liminality of this threshold and the relationship between the backstage and the visible performing space offer an intriguing potential space for the theatrical director (and novelist).

The stage's wings form a unique intermediary space between reality and fiction. In *Cagnaccio*, I sought to exploit the highly charged potential of this transitional space, a place of nervousness and anticipation where a character is neither wholly themselves nor entirely their role; arguments that develop here fester and quickly escalate. For example, it is in this space while a performance is occurring onstage that Cagnaccio's reactions to the first signs of audience disfavour are initially felt as insecurities that soon become the unavoidable triggers of an existential crisis.

Carlson claims that while Castorf was the first theatre director to relay offstage and offstage activity concurrently through a large-screen video link, Mitchell's 2007 adaptation of Woolf's *The Waves* was one of the most innovative on the British stage. He describes the differences in approach between Mitchell and Castorf:

When actors are not on camera, we see them moving about out of character, resting or preparing to enter the performance area. How this differs from Castorf is that Castorf never attempted to create a realistic through-line of performance in his videos (though he did sometimes have extended such sequences), but used them primarily to keep providing the audience with alternative perspectives.¹³⁵

Does the knowledge of being watched, however, alter the behaviour of the viewed? We might argue that the knowledge of having an audience, even if it is not visible, and however much we choose to ignore it, could lead to an alteration of behaviour; that at least, at some level, could be

¹³⁴ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), III p.107-108.

¹³⁵ Marvin Carlson, 'Postdramatic Theatre and Postdramatic Performance', *Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Presença*, 5.3 (2015), 577–95 (p. 584) <doi.org/10.1590/2237-266053731>.

construed, as Goffman defined it, as an action delivered to be observed. If the streaming of live offstage spaces allows us to watch the actors in a different mode of performance, in that they are neither the onstage character nor the offstage self, but in some sense an alternative performance, the doubleness of the actor's position is heightened. Not only do they represent different identities, but potentially also different representations of time.

I found this offstage-onstage dynamic and the question of performance to be especially fruitful, not only in creating the narrative content for *Cagnaccio*, but also in its form. Having decided to place the reader onstage and offstage simultaneously through adopting different layers within the form, I wanted to revisit Winnicott's questioning of where we stand. It became increasingly interesting for me to explore the potential of the peritext, using the prologue, epilogue, and monologues to disturb the simple interior-exterior dynamic. Whether delivered by the Fool (a person with no identity and clearly not of that time) or by a character of the storyworld, these interstitial elements do not exist on the same layer as the storyworld. They step aside from the action, perhaps also in time, emphasising the doubleness in fiction: the effect of a person standing just offstage directly addressing the audience, related to, but not in that moment, involved in the onstage action.

5.6.1 Where does the audience stand?

In discussing the spatial dynamics of a theatrical performance, Longman proposes two points of audience contact: the *locus* and the *sensation*. The locus forms the bridging space between the observed activity and the spectator's imagination; the more realistic the performance, the less the audience must work and the closer the locus is to the stage, while more conceptual productions invite greater audience imagination as the locus is more distanced. The second point of contact, the sensation, is 'the effect aroused in the audience as the play's experience produces a correlation between its inner life and reality' The correspondence between the proximity and reflection of the reader experience is evident.¹³⁶

In a dramatic exploration of the distinction between spectator and participant, and in particular the willingness of a spectator to intervene when faced with morally reprehensible behaviour, Tim Crouch's play, *The Author*¹³⁷ explores what he sees as a 'lost thread of responsibility for what we look at' and 'the connection between what we see and what we do.'¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Stanley Vincent Longman, 'The Spatial Dimension of Theatre', *Theatre Journal*, 33.1 (1981), 46–59 (p. 49) <doi.org/10.2307/3207487>.

¹³⁷ Tim Crouch, *The Author*, Oberon Modern Plays (London: Oberon Books, 2009).

¹³⁸ Tim Crouch, 'The Author: About the Play: An Article', *Tim Crouch Theatre* <<http://www.timcrouchtheatre.co.uk/shows-2/the-author/the-author>> [accessed 14 May 2023].

The Author is a disturbing play about abuse and brutality, asking difficult questions of the audience, particularly regarding sexual violence and paedophilia, from which audience members frequently leave midway. The action is that of a continual dialogue between four actors and the audience; violence is neither shown nor graphically related, but the psychological scars of experiencing or witnessing it are laid bare for the audience to respond.

In a note prefacing the script, Crouch offers the stage directions:

This is a play that happens inside its audience. As the audience enter the space, they encounter two banks of seating, facing each other, comfortably spaced apart but with no 'stage' in between. This must not be a confrontational configuration. The request the play makes is for us to be okay about ourselves, to gently see ourselves and ourselves seeing.¹³⁹

The audience relationship here is participatory. As the audience assembles, actors, sitting amongst them, try to elicit the names of neighbours in casual conversation who are addressed directly throughout the performance and encouraged to respond. From early in the play:

I'm Chris. I'm Chris and you are? Hello! What's your name? Do you love this, _ Our knees touching! Don't you? Who'll you be next to! I'm next to you!! What's your name? That's beautiful. You're beautiful. Isn't _ beautiful? Everyone? I'll shut up. I'll stop.¹⁴⁰

Crouch breaks the rules of engagement for the spectator, placing them front and centre in the performance. His aim is directed squarely at the role of the spectator and their willingness to passively conform rather than break the traditional audience rules and participate fully. Spectators are encouraged to share their own life experiences and opinions, and actors, although following a guiding script, have no costumes, and their characters share the actor's forenames, blurring the boundaries further between fiction and reality. The uncomfortable proximity of the spectator to the drama playing out around them leaves them feeling confused about what is expected of their participation and awkward about being singled out to respond. As a result, performances are often controversial and frequently result in vehement responses. This may, of course, have been what Crouch intended, as in responding to a letter from an angry audience member, he explains that one premise of the play was that 'a representation of an act of violence

¹³⁹ Tim Crouch, *The Author*. p. 'Note'

¹⁴⁰ The underscore, inserted by the playwright stands as a marker for the inserted audience names.

is, on some level, still an act of violence.’¹⁴¹ One implication of the play, however, is that, rather than foregrounding any dialectic between the spectator and the offence, it draws attention to the relationship between the spectator and participant and the causes and implications of the shift from one state to the other.

Despite its shocking and dynamic qualities, as an influence for a novel on intervention, I found myself questioning to what extent a spectator of *The Author* would reflect on the issues the actors raise. More probable, I speculate, is that the reaction would focus more on the assault on the spectator’s sensibilities than the subject matter of the play.

Nonetheless, the parallels between the themes of *The Author* and those in *Cagnaccio* are thought-provoking and caused me to consider how violence should be treated in the novel. In *Cagnaccio*, the brutality is descriptively shown, but equal weight is given to its justification and the responses it provokes. Although character likeability may have a role in reader engagement, it is ultimately left to the reader to determine whether or not they find *Cagnaccio* repugnant. My only concession is in the selective timing of its presentation; as the novel progresses, the possible justifications for *Cagnaccio*’s delinquency become clearer. The reader’s first impressions may be altered by this feed of information, but it is always kept uncertain as to who is the real victim, a judgement left for the reader to construe.

My investigation into the playwright’s relationship to the play and the play’s relationship to the spectator was both inspiring and intriguing. Ultimately, it was to point the way to my own breaking of conventional genre rules and consideration of the function and format of the playscript as mediator and catalyst, which was to be the revelation that led to the final structure and format of *Cagnaccio* as a hybrid, experimental novel.

5.7 Playscripts - more than just instructions?

Our tendency is to consider the playscript as an interface, a record of a playwright’s intentions for the performers, directors, and creative teams responsible for producing a play. However, as Carlson indicates, stage directions can include narrative elements ostensibly intended for a reader rather than a performer when their purpose is more complex than just a basic instruction.¹⁴²

In attempting to explain this complication, Feng and Shen propose that the writer-reader relationship in drama is complicated by the range of functions it must perform: ‘a play text is

¹⁴¹ ‘The Author: Response and Responsibility’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 21.4 (2011), pp. 416–22 <doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2011.610312>.

¹⁴² Marvin Carlson, ‘The Status of Stage Directions’, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 24.2 (1991), 37–48 (p. 37).

utilitarian in the theatrical circle but fictional in the literary circle, and what is imperative for one type of reader is purely descriptive and narrative for another.¹⁴³

As a literary artefact, playscripts, particularly through their stage directions and descriptions, serve as a vivid prompt to the reader to mentally construct a visualisation of the scene and setting, the reader constructing schemata from the written clues using 'real world communications about fictional world communications' to furnish a cohesive understanding of what would be represented on stage.¹⁴⁴ In Iser's terms, this indeterminacy serves, then, as supplemental background information to help the reader bridge the gaps in the text to elicit the playwright's desires.

The famous closing directions of Shaw's *Candida*, for example, are plainly intended to be read rather than performed: 'They embrace. But they do not know the secret in the poet's heart.'¹⁴⁵

Ionesco, a prolific user of detailed stage directions in all his works, provides information that is redundant for performance but serves as an indicator of mood and style. From his directions in the one-act play, *The Bald Soprano*:

A middle-class English interior, with English armchairs. An English evening. Mr. Smith, an Englishman, seated in his English armchair and wearing English slippers, is smoking his English pipe and reading an English newspaper, near an English fire. He is wearing English spectacles and a small gray English mustache. Beside him, in another English armchair, Mrs. Smith, an Englishwoman, is darning some English socks. A long moment of English silence. The English clock strikes 17 English strokes.¹⁴⁶

The goal of a script is plainly to indicate the playwright's intention, yet directors may view scripts as more suggestive than finite. Comparing the experience of the theatregoer with that of the script reader, Feng and Shen remind us that:

¹⁴³ Zongxin Feng and Dan Shen, 'The Play off the Stage: The Writer-Reader Relationship in Drama', *Language and Literature: International Journal of Stylistics*, 10.1 (2001), pp. 79–93 (p. 79) <doi.org/10.1177/0963-9470-20011001-05>.

¹⁴⁴ Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* p. 80.

¹⁴⁵ George Bernard Shaw, 'Candida', in *Plays Pleasant*, Penguin Classics (London; New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 91–160 (p. 160).

¹⁴⁶ Eugène Ionesco, 'The Bald Soprano', in *The Bald Soprano, and Other Plays*, trans. by Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 2007), pp. 7–42 (p. 8).

Only when the audience choose to become ordinary readers of the text can they experience the play in the truer sense, enjoying it in a different way and hearing the playwright ‘speak’ to people for both theatrical and literary purposes.¹⁴⁷

This comment motivated me to consider the nature of the playscript in terms of the breadth of its opportunities as a bridge between forms and was instrumental in my ambition to explore whether a complementary hybrid might be possible to sit between the playscript and the novel. My curiosity was whether such a form might offer a playful, transitional experience by encouraging the reader to perform the text for themselves and, through its layering, reflect upon its themes.

Cagnaccio, then, would best be expressed as an experimental novel exploring the possibilities of this hybrid form.

6. Cagnaccio: building a hybrid novel

The decision to write a hybrid, experimental novel did not occur overnight. The majority of the novel’s features emerged as solutions to specific challenges, with its form and construction progressively deviating from conventional norms until it became clear that only a hybrid form would bring the threads together. If there was a surprise, it was how effectively the intuitive responses to challenges throughout its long creation matched the insights gleaned from the critical research, meshing to build a unique structure and form that held together logically and coherently while not offering the reader an overtly radical read.

6.1 Mapping the hybrid form

6.1.1 The blank page

The possibilities that the visual features of a novel can offer to the reader have fascinated writers throughout the novel’s history. The blank chapter, ‘Kumogakura’ in the eleventh-century Japanese classic *The Tale of Genji*, for example, emphasises Genji’s ascent to the village hidden by the clouds.¹⁴⁸ The black page and empty chapter in *Tristram Shandy* prompt reader reflection and

¹⁴⁷ Zongxin, and Shen, ‘The Play off the Stage’, p. 84.

¹⁴⁸ Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. by Edward G. Seidensticker (New York, N.Y: Knopf, 1980).

imagination,¹⁴⁹ and publishers have traditionally placed a blank page after Joyce's story *The Dead*¹⁵⁰ to heighten its emotive effect.

In Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* two white pages were inserted in its first edition by its publisher, Bloomsbury, after the nuclear devastation of Nagasaki in 1945, offering the reader pause to consider the magnitude of the event. A watermark of three cranes runs through the book, representing those burned onto the protagonist's back from her wedding kimono on that day.¹⁵¹

In *Cagnaccio*, I wanted to use the visual possibilities of the playscript, not only in the differentiation of speech from dialogue or to delineate on- and off-stage locations, but also to evoke reader reflection and pace of reading. Cagnaccio's confinement in a cell at the climax of the narrative is matched visually by the insertion of a blank page in the text; the space is deliberate to offer greater weight to the depth of emotion and simplicity of the prose and disturb the pace of reading.¹⁵²

6.1.2 Speech and Dialogue

The challenges of writing dialogue for historical fiction have been cited earlier, as has my stylistic strategy in response. To infuse an Italianate flavour without undermining comprehension, however, I occasionally inserted Italian expressions into the dialogue, their meaning easily discernible by context, even for non-speakers. More challenging was to convey an Italian lilt and phonation without seeming comical. The chosen dialogue was first written in English, then translated into modern vernacular Italian, from which I retranslated each word verbatim, being careful not to adjust the Italian syntax. The effect mimics a level of authenticity that is at least sufficient to be persuasive.

'Imbecile. You are a crazy boy; sei pazzo, un vero cretino!' she screamed.

*'Why always do you do this? What is it? You do not understand the word "no," eh? Perhaps I should be the one to teach you, yes?'*¹⁵³

Using the hybrid form also allowed for greater flexibility in the presentation of dialogue. I was keen to explore the relationship between speech on- and off-stage and dialogue. The freedom of

¹⁴⁹ Laurence Sterne, Melvyn New, and Joan New, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, (London; New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

¹⁵⁰ James Joyce, 'The Dead', in *Dubliners*, ed. by Seamus Deane, (New York: Penguin Classics, 2014), pp. 151–94.

¹⁵¹ Kamila Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), pp. 23–25.

¹⁵² *Cagnaccio*, p.193

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.71

formatting helped support this distinction. In doing so, I was reminded of George Saunders' treatment of character interjections in *Lincoln in the Bardo*:

The girl was silent. The door of the furnace she was at that moment only opened, then closed, affording us a brief glimpse of the terrible orange place of heat within.

roger bevins iii

She rapidly transmuted into the fallen bridge, the vulture, the large dog, the terrible hag gorging on black cake, the stand of flood-ravaged corn, the umbrella ripped open by a wind we could not feel.

the reverend everly thomas

Our earnest pleadings did no good. The girl would not talk.

hans vollman

Figure 4: Dialogue attribution in *Lincoln in the Bardo*¹⁵⁴

While I found Saunders' formatting arresting, particularly in highlighting the polyphonic themes of the novel, it does inadvertently present a break to the reading flow. Although many critics commented on the diversity of the voicing of the characters, as the example in Fig. 4 shows, the difference is not marked. The placement of the attribution following the dialogue, however, leaves the reader guessing who is speaking until they have read what was said. The effect somewhat undermines the importance of the characterisation as it is challenging for the reader to elicit a cohesive character for each voice without having to refer back.

After reflection, for speech, I decided to adopt the US standard manuscript formatting for playscripts, with centralised speech in a courier font, with the attribution before for reader ease, although I still maintained the conventional novel layout for dialogue. This has the effect of asking the reader to reflect on the distinction between the elements.

Hence:

¹⁵⁴ George Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, (New York: Random House, 2017), p. 37.

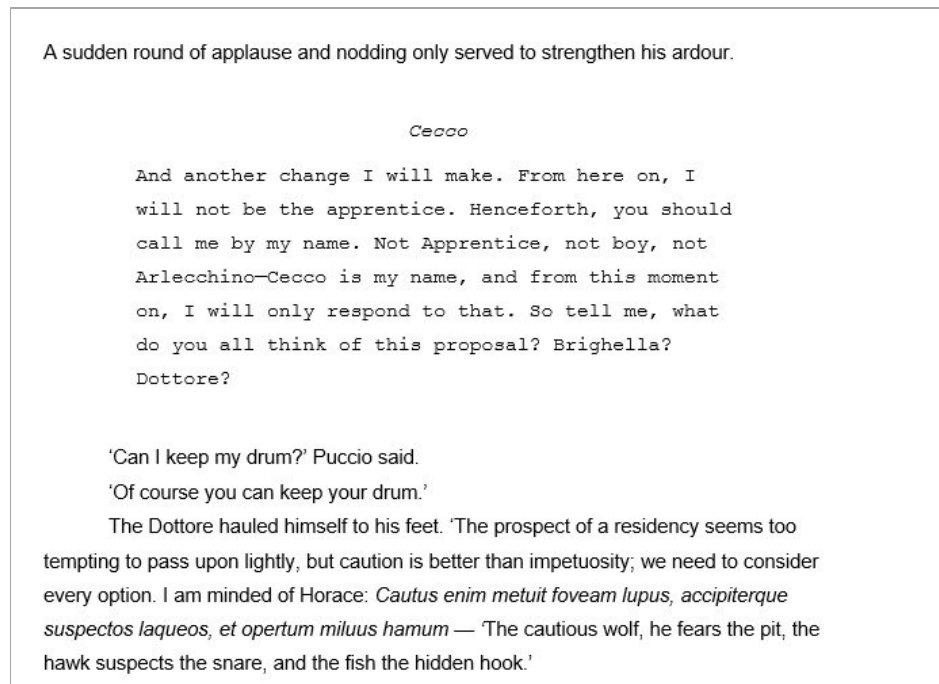


Figure 5: *Cagnaccio*: Typesetting dialogue and speech¹⁵⁵

6.1.3 Typesetting and the hybrid form

Stage directions were written in the present tense, borrowing from playscript formatting standards, to document basic actions and to create a sense of urgency for the reader. The occasional integration of these on-stage instructions into the off-stage body of the text was intended to suggest a blurring of the boundaries between the two. The juxtaposition of the present tense of the directions in the past tense of the narrative also has the effect of drawing the reader closer momentarily to the text. Using the reader's intuitive sense that stage directions are secondary to dialogue allowed me to push back necessary but less important actions, freeing me to foreground the areas I wish to highlight.

Continuing the theatrical allusion, where action takes place onstage and offstage at the same time, I adhered to playscript conventions by using columnar formatting to represent simultaneous speech. For performers, with the benefit of rehearsal, this might work effectively, but for readers, it is less so, as the reader cannot 'perform' both speeches concurrently; whichever the reader chooses, one must follow the other. My solution was to use a staggered columnar approach as an indication of onstage and offstage action visually, while not disturbing the reader's tracking of the narrative. The slight overlap in the columns is deliberate, although nuanced, to suggest their simultaneity.

¹⁵⁵ *Cagnaccio*, p.179.

The use of theatrical devices, and in particular the playscript, is rare in novels, but in his National Book Award-winning novel *Interior Chinatown*, Yu adopts the format of a movie screenplay, using courier fonts throughout and screenplay rules to reflect the film industry setting.¹⁵⁶ The novel is well served by the format; a major theme focuses on the roles we are forced to play, as the use of the second-person viewpoint invites the reader to take on the role of Willie Wu, the guy always in the background, as he strives to become the ‘Kung Fu Guy’ of his dreams. Even from the opening, the visual and literary rules are clear for the reader:

INT. GOLDEN PALACE

Ever since you were a boy, you’ve dreamt of being
Kung Fu Guy.

You are not Kung Fu Guy.

You are currently Background Oriental Male, but
you’ve been practicing.

Maybe tomorrow will be the day.

Figure 6: *Interior Chinatown*: example of typesetting¹⁵⁷

In an interview, Yu explained his intention:

The narrative style is, at times, I’d say, confusing—intentionally so. It was a kind of intuitive sense of, OK, there’s a kind of rule at the beginning and then very quickly kind of starting to bend or even break the rules, even internally.¹⁵⁸

The result is a playful and sardonic experimental novel that is as enchanting as it is thought provoking. The visual aspects add considerably to the reader’s entertainment and immersion, but without losing the sense of distance required for the prose to be meaningful beyond the body of the text. While the rules may vary as the novel progresses, they are clearly delineated, and Yu is careful to only borrow the format of a screenplay where necessary rather than purporting to be one. At times, within the screenplay formatting, therefore, the insertion of expository prose confirms its form to the reader as a novel.

¹⁵⁶ Charles Yu, *Interior Chinatown*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2020).

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ Anne Brice, ‘Author Charles Yu: “Interior Chinatown” is about Roles and How We Play Them,’ <<https://news.berkeley.edu/2022/08/24/on-the-same-page-interior-chinatown>> [accessed 18 June 2023].

Even though I only stumbled on *Interior Chinatown* a considerable way into my research, it did validate my beliefs about what might be achieved from a hybrid form and gave me confidence in my own methodology.

6.1.4 Framing and the Peritextual elements

To reinforce the sense of the theatrical, the *dramatis personae* and the initial prologue not only set the scene but also introduce the rules of reading and the emphasis on the novel's layered approach. Breaking the fourth wall, the prologue's direct address introduces an interstitial element that recurs at the beginning of each part. The fool could be any fool; he is of the narrative yet not within it. The intention here was to suggest the reader's real world beyond the narrative world; the use of a rucksack emphasises a difference in time. Some of the intervening monologues are delivered by characters stepping out of the narrative, for example, the lecture from Il Dottore or Cagnaccio's final soliloquy; others are from an anachronistic fool whose relationship to the narrative (or the reader) is deliberately unexplained, left for the reader to resolve.

Aside from these interstitial sections, the novel uses several other framing devices. The opening words of the fool's prologue are reiterated as the last line of the epilogue, bracketing the text and marking the space between the myth and the reality.

Of the man, of the real man, they knew little...
The man they created; he was never heard of again.¹⁵⁹

The fool is the first person we meet in the prologue and the last person we see in the epilogue, and the plot is framed like life, beginning with a screaming boy and ending with a funeral cortege.

This sense of containment helps to serve the idea that there is neither a future nor a past for Cagnaccio beyond the scope of the novel, but rather the novel stands as a performance of these events in time, akin to a theatrical production that could, of course, be repeated, but ultimately exists only as a fictional artefact with the potential to become a transformational object for the reader. Only the fate of the protagonist, the 'real man' is open-ended for the reader to construe as they will, emphasising the doubleness of his performance, as the myth and his mask are discarded, much as an actor divests of their role.

The overriding idea I had throughout the construction of the novel was that of the reader sitting in an auditorium, spectating not only the unfolding action but also, through the intrusive

¹⁵⁹ *Cagnaccio*, p.210. See also p.14.

reader, seeing themselves and the actors/characters as they perform, as their involvement shifts gradually from spectator to participant.

The choices of tense used for each level is deliberate; the present tense (and its reliance on the imperative mood) is used throughout to reflect to the direct involvement and immediacy of the intrusive reader and guide—as if seeing and occasionally being drawn into—the events playing out around them. The same strategy applies to for the onstage work, and stage directions, to suggest their occurrence in story time. Past tenses are used for the more omniscient narrative sections, to encourage a more remote reading. The differing tenses, while sometimes jarring, are helpful in preserving the layers and the metaleptic effect of the intrusive reader.¹⁶⁰ The intention is then to suggest the experience of the reader, as if sitting in the auditorium simultaneously watching themselves in their guise of intrusive reader becoming involved on- or off-stage more directly. My intention in doing so is to draw attention to the reading process: that we are never fully transported into the storyworld, but are always, at some level, still sitting, as if remotely in an auditorium, aware of the actual world around us, no matter how much we might try to block it out.

While the use of narrative metalepsis, and hence metafiction, is widespread, particularly in post-modern fiction, it is typically the narrator or a character that transgresses the narrative layers. I found few works where the reader themselves becomes embroiled in the action. It could be argued that the unique use of the reader in Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* offers a metaleptic experience for the reader as they become instrumental in unravelling the layers of narrative in search of a cohesive theme,¹⁶¹ and while Cortázar in his short story *Continuity of Parks* offers a fictional reader as protagonist, who, while reading a murder story, becomes the victim he is reading about, neither makes the metaleptic shift of the actual reader into the prose.¹⁶²

The use of the intrusive reader in *Cagnaccio* offered other benefits, allowing me to explore the concept of aesthetic illusion and the continuum of immersion and reflexivity. On a thematic level, it demonstrates the role of spectator to participant (or bystander to intervener). Through its use of tense, voice, and register, it adds an additional two layers to the reader experience and explores the potential space between text and reader experience, a playful zone where the reader

¹⁶⁰ Simplifying Genette's original use of the term, Feyersinger defines metalepsis as 'the transgression of narrative levels.' Erwin Feyersinger, 'The Conceptual Integration Network of Metalepsis', in *Blending and the Study of Narrative*, ed. by Ralf Schneider and Marcus Hartner (DE GRUYTER, 2012), pp. 173–98 (p. 173) <doi.org/10.1515/9783110291230.173>.

¹⁶¹ Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (London: Vintage Books, 1998).

¹⁶² Julio Cortázar, 'A Continuity of Parks', in *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, ed. by R. V. Cassill and Richard Bausch, trans. by Paul Blackburn, 7th ed (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), pp. 371–72.

may reflect on the undercurrents of the narrative and draw references to their actual world and social context.

7. Conclusions: a space to reflect

7.1 The past, the presentation, and the future

Is the final novel successful?

I have to confess that my response to the question is mixed. Overall, I believe it works well as an innovative read that experiments with some of the potential spaces available to the author that can have a performative effect on the reader experience. The novel delivers the sense of the 'otherworldliness' required of a historical setting and plays with the aesthetic illusion of immersion and reflection and their interconnectedness. The adoption of the intrusive reader adds a metaleptical effect that not only reveals some of the layers of fiction available to a writer but also supports its potential to be used as a transitional me/not-me object. Through a consideration of the relationship between spectator, audience, and performer in the theatre on- and off-stage and the doubleness of the actor and their roles, the narrative and structure help to draw attention, by inference, to the implications facing a spectator when deciding whether or not to participate or intervene.

My concern was always whether the novel's substance would be overshadowed by its style if it either followed a critical path to achieve a creative outcome or took too distant an innovative step, such that it became more of an enticing literary exercise than a pleasurable, stimulating read. Finding the mediations between reader accessibility, pace, and readability while honouring the novel's critical grounding has been a challenge, but in developing a hybrid form, it has been illustrative and personally inspiring. It is not without faults, but perhaps it is always the space between expectation and execution that spurs the writer on to try again.

For a writer, a novel's success ultimately comes down to how effectively it achieves its intended purpose. If a single reader pauses to consider their own relationship to the text or reflects on their own choices as a spectator or participant, then it will validate my reason for the novel's creation. That is beyond my control. My hope is that there is enough in the novel to be of interest to a wide readership with varying expectations. A strong narrative structure gives a healthy basis for a simple, pleasurable read, but I hope that those who are familiar with the novel's underlying references and allusions will find plenty to investigate and ponder, and that the correspondences will fire imaginations.

To other writers, my proposition is simple: a wealth of creative opportunity may be found by experimenting with a novel's myriad potential spaces. With competition ever-increasing for attention from digital alternatives, mapping the reader experience could offer exciting participatory adventures for the writer to explore.

As a personal experience, perhaps I am most proud that I gave myself permission to break out beyond the conventions of the 'traditional novel' and, in doing so, explore a new form, a hybrid between theatre and literature, combining elements of both. This has undoubtedly fuelled my creativity, and from the embers of this project, the sparks of new ideas are already emerging. Perhaps at times the novel is clumsy; perhaps a smoother transition between the levels might be better achieved. Perhaps I could have gone further; the format might support a more invasive metaleptic effect, relying on the device more significantly. What is evident, at least, is the potential of the dynamic spaces between reader and text and the range of possibilities therein for any writer to deliver a playful, creative, and transformative experience for the reader.

That the writing of *Cagnaccio* has surprised and challenged me at every turn has led me to the conclusion that the project, as a transformational space of my own, has acted liminally, if often unconsciously, as a vehicle for my own development.

Appendix A **Cagnaccio: A short synopsis**

After a traumatic incident in which, to protect his mother and younger sister, a ten-year-old boy stabs his drunken, violent father, his life becomes a quest for approval. Rising from obscurity, through patience, dedication, and hard work, he becomes the legendary CAGNACCIO, the star of a touring Commedia dell'arte troupe in a time of destitution and misery. Struggling to survive, the fate of the group hinges on successful performances at the Saint's Day festival in the hilltop town of Agnese.

In the depths of winter, the troupe seeks refuge at a roadside tavern, where they encounter the opportunist FIDATO, an itinerant potion seller. Charismatic and cunning, Fidato ingratiates himself with DONATA, the backbone of the company, whose steadfast organisation keeps the troupe on the road. A chance meeting leads to an offer for the troupe to perform at the court of a wealthy French Duke, but Cagnaccio declines the opportunity. Fidato sees its value and, accepting the letter of introduction, conceals it.

In Agnese, all goes well until, during the first performance, PEDRILLO, playing Pedrolino, falls, incurring a severe head injury. Blaming Cagnaccio for his brutal and bullying ways, the APPRENTICE and fellow actor, BRIGHELLA, stir discontent in the troupe. As Pedrillo's condition becomes grave, suspicions of rebellion grow. The show must go on. In a hurriedly staged performance, Cagnaccio reprises his role as Arlecchino, while Fidato grudgingly performs *Magnifico*, and The Apprentice acts the role of Pedrolino. Despite the overwhelming cheers for Fidato and the Apprentice, Cagnaccio's reception is lukewarm. Signs of age show in his performance, as does his mounting frustration and anger.

Pedrillo's death fractures the group. At a meeting, a majority of the troupe vote to accept the French invitation. Furious, Cagnaccio storms off into the night. Rounding a corner, he witnesses a sexual assault on a young girl by a huddle of inebriated old men. Cagnaccio reaches for his dagger. He hesitates, reminded of stabbing his father. He drops the blade, is apprehended, and is thrown into a cell. Later that night, Fidato, himself jailed for administering potions without a licence, explains the consequences of the vote: the Apprentice has seized power and the troupe will depart for France. Fidato suggests that Cagnaccio should accompany them but no longer as leader. At a hearing, the magistrate fines Fidato and orders him to leave Agnese. Irritated, he postpones Cagnaccio's hearing.

Alone in his cell, Cagnaccio is a broken man. The legend of Cagnaccio is dead, abandoned by both his audience and troupe. But what is he to do now? His future, so uncertain, with only a waning reputation to support him, he questions the point of going on.

In the crisp dawn air, a funeral cortege moves slowly to a graveyard outside the walls of the town. On the horizon, a shadowy figure on horseback can be seen.

What became of Cagnaccio? No one knows. For certain, the myth died that night in the cell, but of the real man; what happened thereafter is open to speculation.

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