

MICHAEL DANTE DIMARTINO

WARRIOR  
GENIUS



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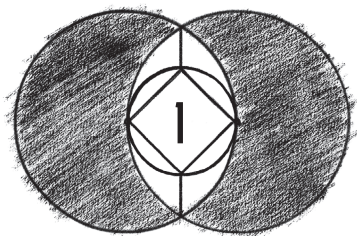
*For Hawk and Opal*

*Though the physical demands of this journey have pushed my body to the limit, it is my soul that has endured the worst suffering. For I have discovered a world that is fraught with all manner of bizarre creatures, once thought only to be myth. They stalk this physical plane, spreading fear and terror wherever they roam.*

*I admit, there is part of me that is desperate to turn back and return to the comforts of my former life. Yet having glimpsed the world beyond Virenzia's walls, my other half yearns to press on and confront the monsters that await me. Am I mad? Or simply impelled by a greater force to see this quest to its end?*

*Tonight, I lie under the glimmering heavens and pray to the Creator once again to watch over me, so that I may see another dawn.*

—Poggio Garrulous  
(975, age of the pentad)



## THE COUNCIL OF TEN

**Giacomo Ghiberti was not long for this world.**

From her throne's perch in the Salon dei Guerra, Supreme Creator Nerezza gazed down at the cloaked figures of the Council of Ten and demanded that one of her ministers explain how a twelve-year-old Tulpa, a man-made being, could have been living in Virenzia all these years without her knowing it. None of them could provide an adequate answer.

The young Tulpa had brought chaos to her city, brazenly defied her, and fled. Soon, Nerezza would make him pay for his rebelliousness. But for now, she needed to create the perception in the minds of her citizens that last night's violence had been quelled.

"Minister Monti, do you have the statement prepared?"

The Minister of Information, a woman half Nerezza's age with a frog-like face, nodded and began to read from a piece of parchment. "Loyal subjects of Supreme Creator Nerezza, let it be known that the treasonous artist Ugalino Vigano and his Tulpa,

Zanobius, returned from exile and attempted to assassinate your beloved leader. They were aided by a new Tulpa, but—”

“Stop,” Nerezza interrupted. “Make no mention of the second Tulpa. We need to calm the masses, not send them into a panic.”

The minister nodded and went back to her parchment. “‘But with the power of her Genius, the Supreme Creator repelled the attack.’”

Nerezza’s Genius was curled up on the dais, her massive body safeguarding the throne. Nerezza reached a bony hand from under her robe to run her fingers along Victoria’s long, gnarled beak, then scratched behind one of her large, pointed ears. The Genius raised her head and acknowledged her master with a groggy grumble.

“‘Once again, our great city is safe thanks to the leadership of Her Eminence,’” Monti continued. “‘The traitor Ugalino is dead.’”

*And plans are already in place to deal with Zanobius,* Nerezza thought.

“‘But make no mistake, it is a time of great strife in the Zizzolan Empire, and enemies both foreign and domestic seek our annihilation . . .’”

As Minister Monti laid out the present-day dangers facing the Zizzolan people, Nerezza turned her attention to past threats, immortalized in the frescoes lining the Salon dei Guerra.

The paintings portrayed Zizzolan forces triumphing over Rachanan warriors through the ages. Some depicted ground battles with swords and spears crisscrossing amid thrashing bodies. Others showed clashes in the sky between bird-Geniuses and winged horse-Geniuses. Artists wielding brushes and pencils

soared on the backs of giant bejeweled crows, eagles, and falcons, launching patterns of light from the gems in their Geniuses' crowns. Mounted warriors wielding large daggers countered with their own sacred geometry attacks, which radiated from gems on the horse-Geniuses' faceplates. The frescoes served as a reminder that Zizzola was—and needed to remain—the dominant force in the world. Nerezza wasn't about to let Giacomo and his friends threaten her supremacy.

“... And in trying times like these, we must remain strong, vigilant, and fearless.” Minister Monti looked up from her parchment.

“Good,” Nerezza said. “Now go deliver the message to the people.”

The minister hesitated. “But we must also address the matter of the Geniuses, Your Eminence. There may have been witnesses to the battle. What if word spreads that there is a new generation of children with Geniuses?” Monti cleared her throat, then added, “Not to mention the reemergence of Pietro Vasari and his Genius.”

Nerezza's face twisted with annoyance at the mention of Pietro. She had stuffed her memories of him into a mental coffer that she kept locked, even to herself. *Especially* to herself.

“It's your job to make sure word *doesn't* spread,” Nerezza ordered.

Monti bowed her head. “Yes, Your Eminence.”

On one side of the vast hall, a door opened, and two armed guards entered, pulling a shackled man behind them. The rattling chains echoed through the chamber. “Here's the mercenary who was detained last night, as you requested,” one of the guards said.

Ozo Mori's feet shuffled along the shiny marble and his head hung forward. Long black hair, matted with blood, covered half his face. On the other half, a scar ran from temple to jowl. As the mercenary passed the Minister of Culture, Baldassare Barrolo, the two men scowled, casting blame upon each other. Both had failed miserably in their mission to help Nerezza obtain the first Sacred Tool. But Barrolo had always been a loyal, if disagreeable, servant. The brunt of Nerezza's punishment would fall on Ozo.

"For allowing the Tulpas to escape with the Creator's Compass, it is the decision of this Council that you shall be executed," Nerezza declared. "Perhaps I shall feed you to Victoria." With a long metal hook, Nerezza stabbed a piece of raw meat that had been laid out on a platter near her feet. Blood splattered across the dais as she flung the slab to her Genius. With a snap of her fangs, Victoria devoured the meal, then let out a satisfied snort.

Nerezza expected the mercenary to plead for his life, but instead, Ozo met her with an icy stare.

Barrolo strode over to Ozo and leaned in close. "You had better pray the Creator takes mercy on your soul."

Ozo let out a wolfish growl, exposing some missing teeth. Barrolo flinched.

"That's enough, Minister Barrolo," Nerezza commanded. "I'll decide who gets mercy. The Creator has no say in the matter."

Barrolo stepped back in line with the other ministers. "My apologies, Your Eminence."

"If you kill me, what I know about Giacomo dies too," Ozo remarked.



“And what is that?” Nerezza asked.

Ozo glanced at Victoria. “I’ll tell you, but only if you promise I won’t become your Genius’s next meal.”

“Very well,” Nerezza said. “I don’t think she has a taste for Rachanans anyway.”

“Ugalino’s Tulpa isn’t the one you want,” Ozo said. “Zanobius tried to take the Creator’s Compass and failed, but Giacomo alone was able to remove it from the site.”

*Impossible*, Nerezza thought. *How could this new Tulpa possess powers even greater than Zanobius’s?*

Her Minister of War, Carlo Strozzi, stepped forward. He carried his burly frame with the confidence of a man who had survived many harrowing battles. “Don’t believe a word he says, Your Eminence. He’s only trying to stave off his execution. My soldiers witnessed Ugalino and Zanobius in the piazza with the Creator’s Compass.”

“Because they took it from Giacomo,” Ozo rebutted.

Nerezza stared into Ozo’s eyes, trying to discern if the mercenary was lying, then turned to her Minister of the Occult. “What do you make of this, Minister Xiomar?”

As the hunchbacked man lurched forward, his fellow Council members eyed him with long-standing distrust. At 140, he had become the oldest man in Zizzola’s history. Though his bizarre regimen of imbibing foul-smelling elixirs had caused an enormous fleshy hump to grow on his back, the fact that he was still alive proved his methods were effective.

“While much has been written about the creation of Tulpas,” Xiomar began, speaking between labored breaths, “very little is known about how their power manifests, or why one Tulpa differs

from another. It is believed that the intention of the Tulpa's creator is somehow infused into its being."

"But is it possible Giacomo could have obtained the Compass alone?" Nerezza said, growing impatient.

"Certainly," Xiomar replied.

Nerezza clacked her red-tipped nails on the throne's golden arm. Giacomo did have a Genius, she reminded herself—impossible for a Tulpa, or so she had thought. And according to Barrolo, the young Tulpa also had been able to access the Wellspring. Clearly, Giacomo possessed great abilities. Maybe it wasn't so far-fetched to believe he was the only soul capable of acquiring the Sacred Tools. Together, the Compass, the Straightedge, and the Pencil held untold power—power that rightfully belonged to her.

Nerezza turned to her Minister of War. "Ready one of the new ships, Minister Strozzi. And assemble a crew. I want Giacomo captured—unharméd."

"As you wish," Strozzi replied. "And the prisoner? What do you want to do with him?"

"Free me and I'll help you track down Giacomo," the mercenary offered. There was a flicker of desperation in his eyes.

"The Supreme Creator already let you live; don't get greedy," Strozzi said, puffing out his chest. "My soldiers are more than capable of capturing a few children on the run."

"They'll be hard to capture with a vicious Tulpa protecting them," Ozo countered. "And from what I saw, your soldiers didn't fare very well against Zanobius. At least I was able to take one of his arms. I know his weaknesses better than anyone." Ozo turned to Nerezza. "I'm offering you my services, free of charge this time."

"What assurances do I have that you won't abandon the mission and flee to Rachana?" Nerezza asked.

“Rachana hasn’t been my home since I was a boy,” Ozo said. “The last thing I want is to go back there.”

Nerezza considered Ozo’s offer. He had provided her with vital information about Giacomo, and the reason she and Barrolo had hired him to escort the children to find the Compass in the first place was because of his reputation as a tracker. As a mercenary, he had worked for dukes and merchants throughout the empire, so he knew the lay of the land even better than Strozzi did.

“Remove his shackles,” Nerezza ordered the guards.

Ozo’s chains clattered on the marble, and he rubbed his wrists. “You won’t regret this, Supreme Creator.”

“I’d better not,” Nerezza grumbled.

Barrolo stepped forward. “Your Eminence, I’d also like to join the mission. I want to bring my son, Enzo, back home.”

“Very well,” Nerezza said.

Ozo and Barrolo nodded begrudgingly at each other.

“We do have one problem,” Ozo said. “I’ve never tracked anyone who had a magic Compass that can take him anywhere he wants to go.”

“Not anywhere,” Barrolo corrected. “The Creator’s Compass will allow the user to travel only to places they’ve been before.”

“Perfect,” Ozo said. “We’ll search the route I took the children on.”

Barrolo shook his head. “Pietro is with them and can call upon his own memories. He’s too smart to tread recent ground.”

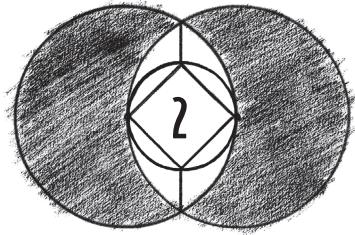
“Then where do you suggest we look?” Ozo challenged.

The Minister of Intelligence, a tall, slender man with an arrogant look about him, stepped forward. “I will send word to my spies. If anyone has seen Giacomo or his friends, we’ll soon know.”

“In the meantime, I’m going to contact some of my dealers in

the black market,” Barrolo said. “Pietro may try to seek refuge with one of them.”

“Wherever Giacomo is hiding, let’s find him quickly,” Nerezza urged. Her heart, which usually beat weakly, began to thump. The hunt was on.



## REFUGE

**Zanobius stepped into the portal and surrendered to the streaming light.** As his body sped through space, his mind drifted toward a brighter future, one full of possibility. Warmth enveloped him, relieving his tense muscles. Knowing the serenity would be short-lived, Zanobius allowed himself to enjoy the peace.

Recently, his life had been the opposite. His master had died, a vengeful mercenary had severed one of his four arms, and he had nearly been ripped apart by Supreme Creator Nerezza's Genius. He'd helped Giacomo and his friends flee Virenzia, and since then, the group had been searching for food, supplies, and somewhere to hide that was out of sight of Nerezza and her minions. On top of that, Ugalino's most recent mind wipe had left Zanobius's memory still full of holes.

Pietro Vasari, the children's teacher, was the best traveled, so he had used the Creator's Compass to take them to places he had once visited. Though he was blind, the old master's powers of

recall were still sharp. But Pietro was dismayed to learn that Ziz-zola had changed much in the decades since he had last journeyed through it. Villages stood where once there were empty fields; soldiers on horseback patrolled even the empire's farthest borders.

Zanobius had offered to take everyone to an uninhabited island where he and Ugalino had lived for a few months during their exile, but Pietro had informed him that to wield the Compass, you need a Genius. They had forged onward.

It wasn't the relentless travel that wore on Zanobius, but his mental struggle. Ugalino's death had freed Zanobius's mind, causing agonizing memories to return. Long-forgotten victims surfaced from the past, shouting at Zanobius that he was a killer. Ugalino might have given the violent orders, but Zanobius was far from blameless. He could never erase the deaths of so many people at his hands.

Zanobius was jettisoned back to reality. He flew from the portal and slammed into a stone wall. He went down on one knee, recovering as he waited for the others.

Savino appeared out of the light first, followed a moment later by his falcon Genius, Nero. Though he was only fourteen, Savino had become the group's de facto leader throughout its journey, a role that seemed to fit his brash personality. "Any signs of trouble?" he asked.

Zanobius scanned their surroundings. He realized he hadn't hit a wall, but a massive rock jutting out of the earth. Dozens more stood all around. His eyes tracked the monoliths up a slope to the top of the hill, where they ringed a crumbling stone villa. In the distance, a ribbon of mountains glowed pink in the morning sun. Wind gusted up from a wide valley.

“The coast looks clear,” Zanobius answered, and Savino sent Nero back into the portal to signal to everyone that it was safe to come through.

One by one, the rest of the group emerged. Next came Pietro, riding his owl Genius, Tito. Pietro eased himself off his Genius’s neck and pulled the large Creator’s Compass down after him. With a dissatisfied hoot, Tito shook, jangling his earrings and sloughing off gray feathers.

“I don’t think Tito is ever going to get used to portal travel,” Pietro said, catching his breath. “I’m not sure I will, either.” He felt the ground with a walking stick until it tapped the side of a rock. With a groan, he eased himself down.

“Let me help you.” Zanobius reached for Pietro, but the old man waved him off and took a seat on the rock.

“I’m . . . I’m fine. Leave me be.”

Zanobius backed away, not wanting to test Pietro’s tolerance or seem the least bit threatening. He was still the outsider, tied to the group by only the tenuous thread of Giacomo’s kindness. Pietro had the power to cut that thread at any moment.

Milena jumped nimbly from the light, accompanied by her crane Genius, Gaia, who cut a graceful curve through the air and landed on her shoulder. As soon as Milena noticed her teacher sitting hunched on the rock, she went to check on him. “Master Pietro, are you all right?” she said, her face full of concern.

“I’m used to spending my days in a cellar, not traveling the empire,” Pietro complained. “But really, it’s nothing to worry about.”

Aaminah—the youngest of the group, and the only musician—sprang out next, joined by her robin Genius, Luna, who chirped

excitedly. Milena called them over and asked Aaminah to help ease their teacher's aches. Aaminah pulled out a small flute and played a bright tune. Circles of yellow light leaped from her Genius's gem and danced over Pietro, whose grumpy expression started to soften.

The portal spat out Enzo, the only one of the children without a Genius. Even though Ugalino had taken him from his home and nearly killed him, Enzo and Zanobius had forged a friendship.

Last, Giacomo appeared, along with his hummingbird Genius, Mico. Since learning that Giacomo was a Tulpa, Zanobius had felt a deep connection with the boy.

With everyone accounted for, Giacomo took the Compass from Pietro and held it up to the portal, then spun its legs. The circle of light shrank, and with a *pop*, it vanished. Giacomo slid the Compass into the leather holster that Savino had fashioned from an old sword scabbard and slung it across his back. He took in their new location, his shaggy brown hair blowing in the wind. "Pietro, where are we?"

"Northern Rapallicci," Pietro said, sounding more energetic. He pushed himself up with his walking stick.

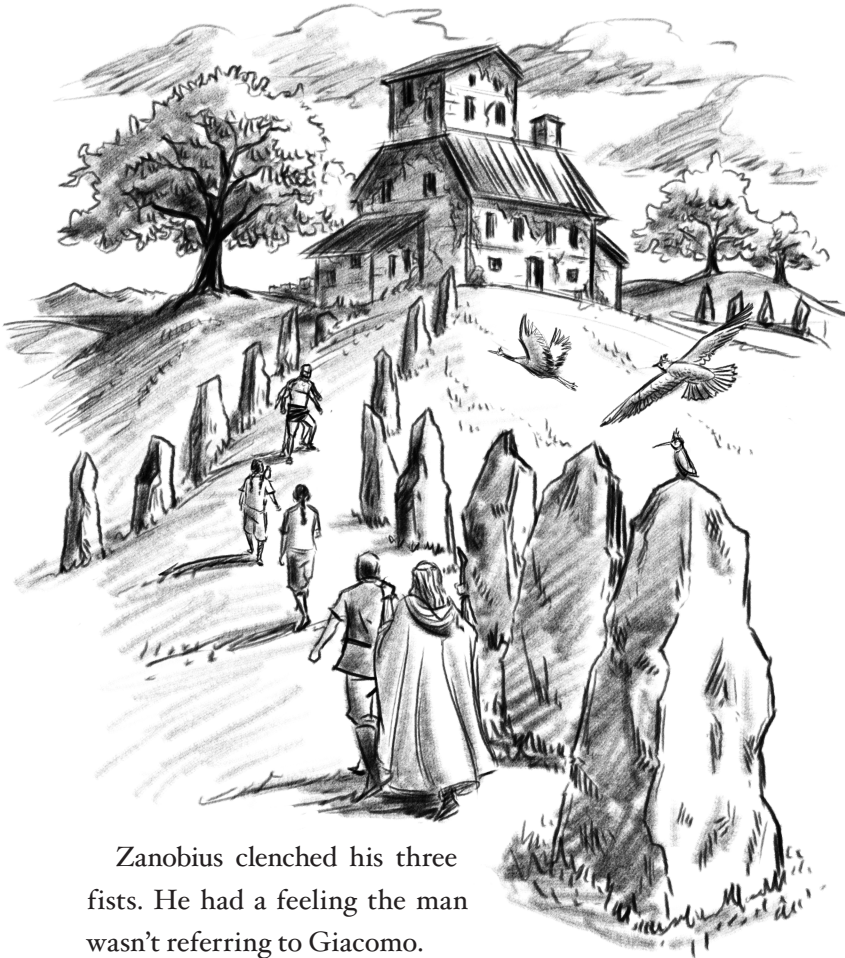
Milena gazed up the hill. "There's a villa covered in ivy and moss that looks centuries old. Pietro, whose house is that?"

"It belonged to one of my former students . . ." Pietro hung his head. "Before Nerezza killed him."

Everyone fell silent, and Zanobius felt a pang of guilt. It wasn't a coincidence that Nerezza had begun wiping out artists and their Geniuses shortly after Ugalino had created Zanobius.

With Zanobius leading, the group crested the hill and approached the villa. To everyone's shock, a man's voice shouted from inside. "You better get lost, Tulpa, before I make you get lost!"





Zanobius clenched his three fists. He had a feeling the man wasn't referring to Giacomo.

"I thought this place was supposed to be abandoned," Savino complained.

"Me too," Pietro said.

Zanobius looked up at a broken window on the second floor where the sunlight glistened off a long, tubular barrel. He ushered the children back. "Get away, he has a gun!"

*BLAM!*

Smoke billowed from the window. The bullet hit Zanolius in the shoulder. He recoiled but held his ground. The children screamed, and their Geniuses squawked and scattered.

Zanolius dug his fingers into his wound, which oozed gray liquid. He pulled out a round metal ball and tossed it into the grass. His skin began to grow back almost immediately.

The man with the gun poked his head out the window, his eyes wide with fury. He had long, stringy hair and a scraggly beard. "I warned you, Tulpa! I don't want any trouble. Now, turn around and leave." He packed the gun barrel with powder, preparing his next shot.

"Time to go!" Giacomo said, holding the Compass at the ready.

"Wait! Not yet." Pietro strode past Giacomo and Zanolius and approached the villa.

The bearded man raised his gun again. "Hold it right there, old man!"

"Niccolo? I thought I recognized your voice," Pietro said. "Is that really you?"

"Depends who's asking," the man hollered back.

"It's Pietro Vasari."

The man slowly lowered his weapon and scrutinized Pietro. "Impossible . . ."

"I thought you were dead!" Pietro said, sounding elated.

"I thought you were dead too!" Niccolo erupted.

"Now, stop being a fool and put that gun away!" Pietro ordered.

"Yes, of course! Hold on, I'll be right down!" Niccolo disappeared from the window.

"Uh . . . what's going on?" Giacomo said. "Who is that guy?"

Pietro turned to face the group. "Niccolo is the former student

I was telling you about. He and his Genius must have escaped Nerezza somehow.”

Zanobius looked to the rooftop, but didn't see any sign of Niccolò's Genius. He probably kept it inside for its safety, Zanobius reasoned at first. But if that were the case, why had Niccolò fired at him with a gun and not sacred geometry?

The front door burst open, and Niccolò rushed to Pietro, embracing him. “Where have you been hiding all these years?” Niccolò said, holding Pietro at arm's length. Some of his teeth were missing, and those remaining were rotting. Dark rings hung under his eyes.

“Long story,” Pietro said.

“Your irises are cloudy . . .” Niccolò said in a hushed voice, then looked over at Pietro's Genius, who had two holes in place of eyes. “You and your Genius are both blind?”

“For many years now,” Pietro said. “But our connection is stronger than ever.”

“Are you able to perform sacred geometry anymore?” Niccolò asked.

“Oh yes, and Tito still loves to fly when he gets the chance.”

Zanobius had witnessed the old master and his Genius in action and had been astounded by how well they functioned together. Pietro explained to Niccolò that Tito's gem emitted a vibrational signal that helped him navigate the world. It was also what allowed him to sense other bird-Geniuses nearby.

“But enough about that,” Pietro said. “We need your help. We're on the run from Nerezza, and we've been trying to find somewhere to hide out.”

Niccolò's friendly demeanor turned sour and his bloodshot eyes locked on Zanobius. One pupil was a large black orb, the other a

speck. The man's unbalanced stare put Zanobius on edge. "I'm sorry, Pietro, but you can't stay if you're keeping company with this abomination."

Zanobius tensed. He'd been called that before. And worse. But the names still pricked.

"Zanobius isn't dangerous," Giacomo insisted, stepping forward. "He helped us get away from Nerezza."

"And he helped save my life," Enzo added.

Niccolo cocked an eyebrow, looking dubious. He studied the pattern emblazoned on Zanobius's chest, then pointed at his amputated arm. "What happened there?"

Zanobius crossed his arms, covering his injury. "A mercenary cut it off."

Niccolo scratched his cheek, shedding flakes of gray skin. "And why hasn't your loathsome master fixed it yet?"

"Because Ugalino is dead," Zanobius said. "He doesn't control me anymore. I'm no threat to you."

"I doubt that," Niccolo snarled. "You need to go."

"Go where?" Zanobius said sharply. "I'm a walking target, as you well know. I made a promise to help Giacomo. I'm not going to abandon him and his friends now."

Niccolo's gaze darted to Giacomo. "And what's so special about you?"

Giacomo looked up at Zanobius and gave him a committed nod that said, *We're in this together*. He turned back to Niccolo. "I'm also a Tulpa."

Niccolo scrutinized Giacomo. "You look pretty human to me. Did Ugalino create you too?"

"No, my parents did," Giacomo replied.

Niccolo looked surprised. “What were their names?”

“Orsino and Amera Ghiberti,” Giacomo said proudly. Then his voice lowered. “But they’re gone now . . .”

Niccolo seemed like he was about to say something, but he stopped himself and let out a frustrated groan instead. He scratched the back of his neck and looked off toward the horizon. “You know how risky it is if I let you stay here?”

“Please, Niccolo. We need your help,” Pietro said.

“If Nerezza finds us, she’ll kill our Geniuses and turn us all into Lost Souls,” Giacomo said.

As he pondered Giacomo’s request, Niccolo reached up and touched the chain of a necklace he wore, running his fingers down its links.

“And we have something that might be of great interest to you,” Pietro added.

Niccolo looked intrigued. “What’s that?”

Pietro nudged Giacomo. “Go ahead, show him. We can trust him.”

Giacomo pulled the Compass from its sheath; it glimmered in the sunlight.

Niccolo’s eyes widened in awe. “The Creator’s Compass . . . Then it’s true, the Sacred Tools *are* real.”

“After all these years, we finally have the means of removing Nerezza from power,” Pietro said.

From his time with Ugalino, Zanobius understood that an artist who controlled the Sacred Tools held the power to shape the course of history, for good or ill. In the hands of a tyrant, their combined energy had the potential to destroy an empire, so it was crucial to find them before Nerezza could.

Niccolo looked around the group. “Do you have the Straight-edge and the Pencil as well?”

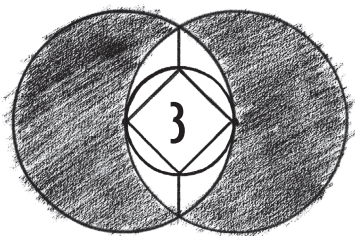
“Not yet, but I think I can find them,” Giacomo said. “That’s why we need somewhere to lie low for a while. Please, signor. If you and your Genius were able to escape Nerezza, then you must understand what we’re going through.”

“You’re right, I don’t have any love for the so-called Supreme Creator,” Niccolo said.

“Does that mean you’ll let all of us stay?” Giacomo asked hopefully.

Niccolo swung open the door to his villa and waved everyone in. “Come on.”

Once everyone was inside, Niccolo slammed the door and latched it. His hand reached down the front of his stained tunic and rubbed what appeared to be his necklace’s pendant. To Zanobius’s surprise, a faint purple glow appeared.



## A STRANGE HOST

**Giacomo crossed the threshold into the dank villa and eyed** Niccolo's gun leaning against the wall. Its vented metal barrel was attached to a long wooden handle, similar to the gun that one of Ozo's mercenaries had carried.

Niccolo slung the weapon over his shoulder, then reached for the Compass Giacomo carried under his arm. "If you want, I can lock that in a cabinet where it'll be nice and safe."

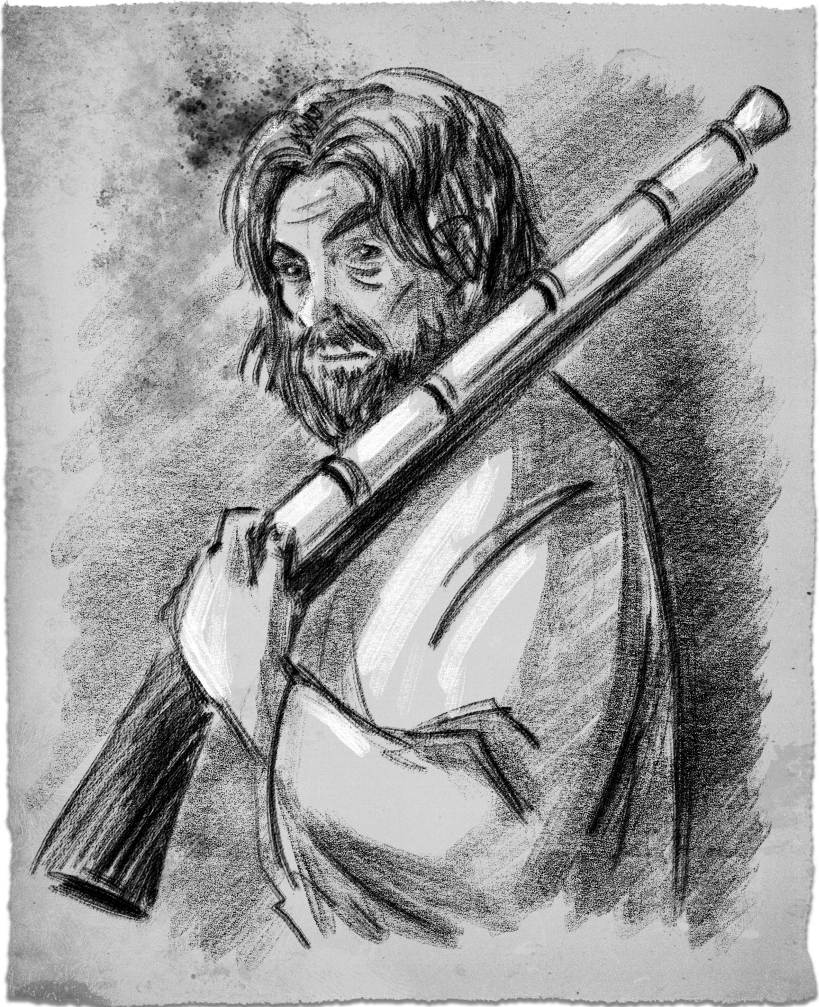
"Uh . . . that's all right, I'll keep it with me," Giacomo said, clutching the Compass close. He had nearly died finding it, and he wasn't about to turn it over to a man he'd just met.

The villa was packed with antiques, floor to rafters, and the only way to move through the house was to navigate the narrow passages that Niccolo had kept clear. Giacomo followed his friends through a labyrinth of tables, chairs, mirrors, chandeliers, vases, and armoires. Mixed in with the furnishings were countless decorative items: sculptures, bowls, carvings, stuffed animal heads,

and piles and piles of books. There were enough suits of armor, shields, swords, and spears to equip a small army.

“Why do you have all this stuff?” Giacomo asked.

“Several of my family members were enthusiastic collectors,” Niccolo said brusquely, then disappeared behind a dark cherry cabinet and into another room.





Giacomo thought he noticed a strange expression cross Pietro's face, but he wasn't sure. Right now, he was more concerned about Mico. His hummingbird and the other Geniuses were circling overhead, letting out a chorus of distressed squawks.

"Think they're trying to tell us something?" Giacomo whispered to Savino, who looked around warily.

"Maybe coming here was a mistake," Savino said. "Do you think we can really trust this guy?"

"I'm not sure yet," Giacomo admitted, dread creeping over him. "But it's not like we have anywhere else to go."

"Just keep your guard up."

Niccolo reappeared, dragging an old trunk. He dropped it with a *thud* and opened the top, revealing dozens of pencils, brushes, inks, and sketchbooks. "You're welcome to whatever's in here. It's not doing me any good."

Giacomo snatched up a leather-bound sketchbook and a pencil. After two weeks without any art supplies, he was eager to draw again and resume his sacred geometry lessons.

"I don't suppose you have any clean clothes we could wear?" Savino asked. "I'm getting pretty tired of my own stench."

"One of those should have some garments that might fit you all," Niccolo said, gesturing to a row of armoires at the back of the room.

"Where's your Genius?" Aaminah called out to Niccolo. "I'm sure our Geniuses would love to meet it."

"Yes, how is Furio?" Pietro said. "He must be nearly as big as Tito by now."

Niccolo turned away and busied himself opening and closing some drawers. "Oh, Furio is probably outside hiding in a tree."

“Come on, Luna. Let’s go find him!” Aminah exclaimed. Her purple-and-orange-plumed robin Genius swooped to her shoulder, and they headed for the door. “Luna’s still learning to track other Geniuses, but she found Giacomo’s Genius and—”

“No, stay in here!” Niccolo snapped.

Luna let out a startled squeak. Aminah froze. “I’m sorry . . . Did I say something wrong?”

“Furio doesn’t like to be bothered, is all,” Niccolo said, then quickly changed the subject. “Anyone care for some roasted-barley tea?” He kicked aside some wooden crates to reveal a hearth, then wound his way toward what appeared to be a kitchen. “I know I have some cups around here somewhere . . .”

“I’ll look for some kindling,” Zanobius offered. Then he added, “I’ll be sure not to disturb Furio.”

Enzio followed Zanobius. “Let me help.”

Pietro used his walking stick to make his way around the furniture. Aminah helped him into a seat at a large table near the fireplace. “I don’t suppose you have any food, Niccolo?” Pietro called after their host. “We’ve been eating nothing but berries and squirrels.”

While Niccolo was out of sight, Giacomo huddled with Milena and Savino. “Anyone else get the sense that Niccolo’s not giving us the whole story?” he whispered.

Milena nodded. “There’s definitely something off about him.”

“*Way* off,” Savino added. “What if he’s actually working for Nerezza?” He cast a furtive glance around the room. “I mean, maybe his ‘family of collectors’ doesn’t even exist and he actually stole all this stuff from artists after he turned them over to Nerezza.”

Giacomo shivered. “You think that might be true?”

“That’s just Savino’s paranoia talking,” Milena said.

“You have to admit, after what happened with Signor Barrolo, Pietro might not be the best judge of character,” Savino argued.

“What are you three whispering about?” Pietro said.

“Nothing!” With a glare, Milena signaled to Giacomo and Savino that their conversation was over. “We were just admiring Niccolo’s collection. It’s very impressive.”

“So, so impressive,” Savino parroted.

The clatter died down in the next room, and Niccolo emerged with a stack of cups and a teakettle, along with a plate of crackers and moldy cheeses. “This should stave off the hunger. I wasn’t expecting guests, so my stores are a little low. While you all get settled in, I’ll head into town to stock up.”

Giacomo and Savino shot each other worried looks. If Niccolo went into the village alone, there was a chance he’d inform on them.

“Maybe Savino and I could go with you,” Giacomo suggested.

Niccolo pulled a key from his pocket and unlocked one of the cabinets. “It’s safer if I go alone.” He took a handful of gold *impronta* from a chest, locked the cabinet, and turned to leave. “If I show up at the market with a couple of travel companions, people are going to start talking. And we don’t want that.”

Savino grabbed Giacomo’s arm and pulled him down the hall. “Come on, we can’t let him leave.”

“Where are you boys going?” Pietro hollered, but they were already at the back door.

Outside, Niccolo was hitching two horses up to a decrepit covered wagon. Once he finished, he took a seat on the cart and grabbed the reins.

Savino and Giacomo skirted the horses and climbed onto

the bench next to Niccolo. Nero landed on Savino's shoulder while Mico circled overhead, chirping worriedly. "You're probably going to need an extra pair of hands to carry all that food," Savino said.

"Or two," Giacomo added.

Niccolo glared at the boys. "I can handle it fine on my own. Now, leave me be."

Mico flitted around Niccolo, his chirps turning to angry squawks. "Shoo!" Niccolo swatted Mico away, but Giacomo's Genius darted closer, jabbing his beak at Niccolo's chest, where the outline of a round pendant was visible under his dingy tunic. Niccolo swiped again, but Mico avoided the strike and dove down the front of Niccolo's tunic, sending the man into a violent squirming fit. "Ah! Get out, you meddling miscreant! It's not safe!"

"Mico, that's enough!" Giacomo patted down Niccolo's tunic, trying to grab Mico.

"Hands off!" Niccolo shoved him away, and Giacomo fell backward off the cart, slamming to the ground with a *thud*.

Zanobius was still collecting firewood with Enzo a little way from the house, but upon seeing the sudden violence, they both came running up the path.

Mico shot out of Niccolo's collar, his talons yanking the necklace's chain. The clasp snapped, and Mico flew away with a black pendant trailing behind him.

Niccolo scrambled out of the cart and fell to his knees. "Give that back!"

The rest of the group ran outside to see what all the commotion was about.

"What's going on?" Pietro asked.

Niccolo gasped for air. “Help . . .”

Pietro looked concerned. “Niccolo? What’s wrong?”

Aaminah went to Niccolo, flute in hand. “You’re going to be all right,” she told him as Luna fluttered onto her head, ready to assist. “Try to take deep breaths.”

Niccolo pointed at Mico, his voice weak. “My necklace . . . I need it back . . .”

“Mico! Drop it! Now!” Giacomo whistled, and Mico finally released the pendant. It fell into the grass with a soft *thump*. As Giacomo picked it up, his breath caught. At first glance, the pendant had looked like a polished octagonal stone, nearly the size of Giacomo’s palm. But on closer inspection, Giacomo noticed a pale glimmer emanating from within.

Giacomo’s stomach fell. “Is this . . . ?”

“Give it here!” Niccolo wrested the gem from Giacomo’s grasp and frantically fastened the necklace back on. He rubbed the gem, which glowed purple.

“How could you?” Giacomo said, disgusted. “You took your Genius’s gem off its crown?”

“No wonder you were lying about Furio,” Zanobius said, dropping the sticks he had gathered. “You’re just as bad as Ugalino!”

“You two don’t know what you’re talking about,” Niccolo shot back, still catching his breath.

“Niccolo, why are you keeping your Genius’s gem tied around your neck?” Pietro demanded. “Tell me. This instant.”

Niccolo let out a heavy sigh. “I was able to escape Nerezza. But Furio didn’t. All I have left of him is his gem.”

An icy chill shot through Giacomo. “You’re . . . you’re a Lost Soul.”

Niccolo nodded and the others fell silent, shock visible on their faces.

“I’m so sorry, Niccolo,” Pietro said. “I didn’t realize . . .”

The last time Giacomo had encountered a Lost Soul, the man had stabbed him and left him for dead. Giacomo slowly backed away from Niccolo.

“How long ago did your Genius die?” Aaminah asked.

“Fifteen years,” Niccolo said softly. “Furio’s gem is the only thing that’s kept me from meeting the Creator all this time. When I touch it, I’m able to regenerate myself a little. But the gem is highly volatile.” He looked at Giacomo. “That’s why I didn’t want your Genius near it. One crack, and the remaining energy could escape.”

Pietro put a hand on Niccolo’s shoulder. “Why did you lie about Furio? You should’ve told us.”

“Because the practice of keeping your Genius’s gem after its death has always been frowned upon. And in this empire, the only beings more feared than Tulpas are Lost Souls.” Niccolo brushed away Pietro’s hand and climbed back onto his cart.

Niccolo was right. His whole life, Giacomo had been terrified of Lost Souls. It had started with his mother and father. They had never been violent toward him, but when they lost their Geniuses and their loving gazes had withered into vacant expressions, it had been as painful as a slap across the face. At the time, Giacomo had thought that some evil sickness had taken hold of his parents and sucked the love out of them.

Niccolo flicked the reins, and the horses whinnied. “I’ll be back by nightfall,” he said as the cart pulled away. The horses trotted down the hill, kicking up a cloud of dust behind them.



Pietro wagged a disapproving finger at Giacomo and Savino. “When Niccolo gets back, you both owe him an apology.”

Savino protested. “But, Master Pietro, we thought—”

“That I was foolish enough to lead you all into Nerezza’s hands again?” Pietro sounded on edge.

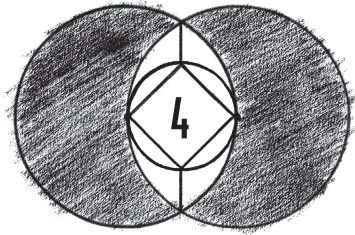
Giacomo and Savino traded guilty looks. “No,” Giacomo said. “Of course not.”

“Niccolo is a trustworthy man,” Pietro assured them. “He was one of my brightest students, a rare artist who excelled at both painting and sculpture.”

“You thought you could trust Baldassare too,” Savino reminded him.

“Baldassare Barrolo hasn’t suffered at the hands of Nerezza. Niccolo has,” Pietro insisted. “A man never forgets that kind of pain.” Their teacher hobbled back toward the house, his head hanging heavier than usual.





# GARRULOUS'S JOURNALS

**With Niccolo gone for the day, Milena and her friends headed** back inside to go through the items he'd offered them. Milena was looking forward to a change of clothes, but she was most excited about the trunk of art supplies.

She chose a brush with a long black handle and bristles that tapered to a fine point. From Milena's shoulder, Gaia stretched her neck down to inspect it and sang her approval. Milena arced the brush through the air, and an intricate spiral pattern radiated from her Genius's gem, filling the villa with a viridescent light. Relief washed through Milena now that she and her Genius had reestablished their connection. She couldn't help but smile.

The floor creaked, and Milena turned to find Zanobius standing next to her. "It's stunning," he said.

"You must have seen Ugalino create patterns much more complex than this," Milena said.

"Yes. But you have a much finer, delicate touch."

“Thank you.”

Savino entered and grabbed a carving tool from the trunk. With a steely look, he aimed the tool’s curved blade at Zanobius. “Everything all right in here?” Nero ruffled his feathers and squawked.

“We’re fine,” Milena said. “Point that somewhere else, will you?”

Savino lowered the carving tool, but his glare held firm.

“I’m sorry if I disturbed you,” Zanobius said, backing out of the room.

“You don’t have to leave,” Milena said, but Zanobius was already gone. She erased her pattern and turned to Savino. “Why’d you have to go and do that?”

“Do what?” Savino said, feigning innocence.

“Make Zanobius feel so unwelcome.”

“You had second thoughts about his joining our group, same as I did,” Savino argued.

“I know, but I’ve been observing him. He’s much more intelligent and perceptive than we gave him credit for.”

“Still, none of us should be alone with him,” Savino said, then relaxed his hardened expression into a soft smile. “I was only looking out for you.”

“Thanks,” Milena said, appreciating Savino’s intent. “But you don’t need to keep your guard up all the time. Not everyone’s out to get you.” She gently touched Savino’s arm, but he immediately stepped out of reach and began rifling through the trunk.

“I wonder if there are more carving tools in here,” he muttered.

“Anyway . . .” Milena said, her jaw tightening. “Good talking to you.”

She left the room, and as soon as she turned the corner, she collided with Giacomo, who was crouched over. With yelps of surprise, they fell into shelves full of small glass sculptures. One bobbed and rolled onto the floor, shattering.

“Sorry!” Milena said.

Giacomo righted himself, and they both stared down at the glittering shards.

“Should we tell Niccolo?” Milena asked.

With a sweep of his foot, Giacomo kicked the broken pieces under the shelf. “I doubt he’ll notice if one tiny sculpture is missing.”

“What were you looking for, anyway?”

“A globe. I figured Niccolo must have one hiding here somewhere.”

“Giacomo . . .” Milena said, not hiding her disapproval.

“What? I need to figure out where the next Sacred Tool is hiding. Using a globe in combination with the Wellspring worked last time.”

“Not exactly,” Milena argued, reminding Giacomo that the looking device he had made to find the Compass had pointed them in the wrong direction. “And now that we’re wanted fugitives, we can’t risk wandering around Zizzola without knowing exactly where we’re headed.”

“Good point,” Giacomo conceded. “But then how do we get a lead on the other Sacred Tools?”

Milena pointed to a room across the hall that was cluttered with towers of books. “That looks like a good place to start.”

But she hadn’t been prepared for the disorder that plagued Niccolo’s library. The books weren’t sorted by subject or author. Treatises on perspective were lumped in with volumes on herbal

remedies. Cosmological theories were intermixed with anatomical studies. Before she could even hope to determine what books might be of value, Milena realized that she would have to reorganize.

Every so often, one of her friends would pass by, showing off their latest find from Niccolo's trove. Savino appeared in a black leather jacket and brown pants that he'd discovered, prompting Giacomo to run off and search the armoire. He returned a few minutes later in a pristine red tunic, looking thrilled to be rid of his dirty, tattered one.

Enzio stomped down the hall with a longbow and a quiver of arrows slung across his shoulder, hollering about doing some target practice outside.

Aaminah ran in, excitedly showing off a lute she'd rescued from a dusty old chest full of musical instruments. It wasn't long before she had tuned the lute's strings and was strumming a lively melody. Luna flitted around the villa, yellow shapes cascading from the gem in her crown.

Finally, just as Milena was beginning to lose hope of finding any useful information, she chanced upon a stack of ten small volumes tucked away on a shelf, hidden behind a clutter of other books. The spine of each volume was embossed with the letters *P.G.*

Milena knew those initials. Tingling with anticipation, she opened the first volume and found an inscription:

*I set out on my journey tomorrow, anxious about what lies before me. The lands of Zizzola are full of innumerable mysteries and strange wonders. May these journals stand as my*

*humble attempt to chronicle the unknown and  
unlock the secrets of our world.*

It was signed:

*Poggio Garrulous*

Milena grabbed the rest of the volumes. “I think I found something!”

Bleary-eyed, Giacomo looked up from a thick tome about ancient navigation methods. “I hope it’s more enlightening than what I’m reading.”

Milena laid out the journals on the floor in a neat row. “These are Poggio Garrulous’s journals, written when he explored the world.”

“Haven’t you already studied his writings? I thought Signor Barrolo had lots of books about him.”

“I’ve read descriptions of Garrulous’s travels—it’s where I first heard the Sacred Tools mentioned—but they were always second- or thirdhand accounts. These are the originals!” Milena flipped through the pages, her heartbeat quickening. “Signor Barrolo had tried to obtain the journals, but not even his black-market connections could track them down.”

“If they’re so valuable, why are they in Niccolo’s library collecting dust?” Giacomo asked.

“You’ve seen how he keeps this place. I bet he doesn’t even know they’re here.” Milena passed Giacomo the second volume. “This might be the break we need to find the other Sacred Tools. Start reading.”



After a few minutes Giacomo said, “Uh . . . Garrulous really liked writing about moss and mushrooms.”

“It’s fascinating, isn’t it?” Milena said, her eyes fixed on the page. “He really had a talent.”

Giacomo yawned. “A talent for boring people to death. Where are all the tales of adventure? For a guy who explored the world, Garrulous seems pretty dull.”

Milena bristled. “I think his mind was quite brilliant.”

Giacomo shrugged and tossed aside volume two, then picked up a journal farther down the row, cracked it open, and flipped through the pages. Suddenly, his eyes went wide. “Look, it’s the Straightedge!”

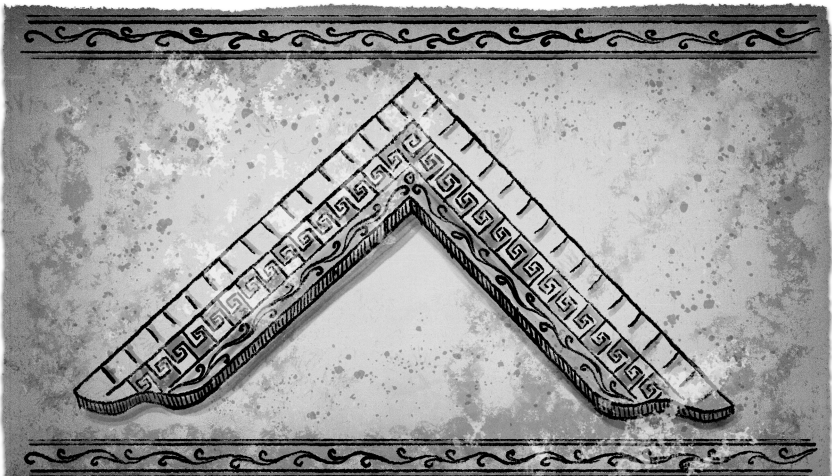
“Let me see.” Milena grabbed the journal out of Giacomo’s hand. Garrulous had drawn the Straightedge and described how it could amplify a Genius’s power a hundred times over. She’d encountered similar claims in other writings about the Sacred Tools.

She read on, then stopped. “Wait, that can’t be right . . .”

“What is it?” Giacomo asked.

Milena flipped to the first page to check the inscription, then glanced up at Giacomo. “This volume was written when Garrulous traveled through Rachana.”

Giacomo stared back, dumbfounded. “Rachana?”



Milena gathered her friends around the table by the crackling fire to show them Garrulous’s journals. She explained her theory that the Creator’s Straightedge might be in Rachana.

“You must have read it wrong,” Savino said dubiously. “Everyone knows the Creator used the Tools to bring the world into being, starting with Zizzola. Why would one of the Sacred Tools be in enemy territory?”

“When the world was first created, the three empires didn’t exist,” Pietro said, scratching his tangled beard. “States and borders came much later, when clans began to lay claim to different territories.”

“That’s right,” Milena said, following her teacher’s logic. “When the Creator finished his work, he could’ve scattered the Sacred Tools around the world, long before there was a Rachana.”

Giacomo’s doubtful expression matched Savino’s. “Did Garrulous write anything about where it would be found? Did he actually see the Straightedge?”

Milena deflated. “Not as far as I can tell. I think he was transcribing legends he had heard during his travels.” She looked to Zanobius, who stood leaning against the wall. She was aware that his memory was still hazy, but he might know something. “Ugalino searched for the Sacred Tools for years. Did he ever question whether they might be somewhere besides Zizzola?”

Zanobius stared into the fire for a moment. “Now that you mention it, I think that’s why he took us to Katunga. He suspected we might find some clues about the Tools there. Sorry, I can’t recall much beyond that.”

Enzio leaned back in his chair. “But if the Straightedge really is in Rachana, don’t you think the Rachanans would have used it against Zizzola by now?”

“Not if they haven’t found it,” Milena argued.



“And there’s the peace treaty,” Aaminah added. “Even if they did have it, they’re not allowed to start a war.”

“Hasn’t stopped them in the past,” Savino said. “Rachanans can’t keep their word. All they want to do is fight, conquer, and pillage.”

Aaminah gave him a disapproving look. “But they haven’t done any of that for a long time. Maybe they’ve changed.”

“People don’t change,” Savino insisted.

“Some people can,” Zanobius said quietly.

“I’m sure Savino wasn’t referring to you,” Giacomo said, casting a glare in Savino’s direction. “Your situation is completely different.”

“Sadly, all great civilizations have been built on blood,” Pietro interjected. “Rachana is no exception. Neither is Zizzola. But I found Samraat Jagesh to be an honorable leader who genuinely wanted to put an end to war between our two empires.”

“Hold on,” Milena said. “You met the samraat of Rachana? When?”

“A long time ago. I wasn’t much older than you are now. As the empire’s official court artist, I had the privilege of accompanying Emperor Callisto and his Council to the historic signing of the fifteenth armistice.”

Milena couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “So you’ve been to the samraat’s palace?”

“I have.” Pietro cracked a smile. “And it makes Nerezza’s palace look like a hovel.”

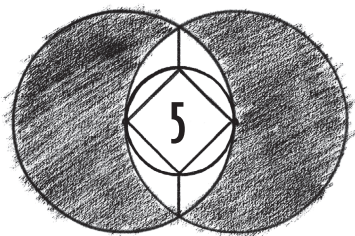
From outside came the sound of a rattling cart and horses neighing.

“Food’s here!” Giacomo bolted from the room. The group filed out to meet Niccolo, leaving Milena and Pietro alone.

Milena sighed and stacked the journals. “I don’t know . . . Maybe Savino and Giacomo are right. These probably won’t lead anywhere.”

“Ignore the naysayers,” Pietro offered. “Follow your spark of inspiration and see where it leads you.”

Heartened, Milena picked up the journals. “Thank you, Master Pietro. I will.”



## LAW OF CONTAGION

**That night, Giacomo and his friends crowded around the table** while Niccolo prepared dinner. Milena was still off in the library combing through Garrulous's journals and had yet to join them.

After what felt like an eternity, Niccolo finally emerged from the kitchen with two platters of food. One held a pile of burned meat, the other a heap of noodles covered in a pungent brown sauce. "I probably should have warned you. I'm not much of a cook."

Normally, Giacomo might have been picky, but he was so hungry he devoured his food without a second thought.

"Now, I only bought enough food to last you all a couple of weeks, maybe three, if you ration," Niccolo said. "I got a few shifty looks today, so I told folks I was stocking up for winter."

"But it's spring," Savino pointed out.

"You think I don't know it's spring?" Niccolo said defensively. "Most folks think I'm out of my mind anyway, so they won't give

it a second thought. But if I use the same excuse twice, people will start getting nosy.”

Niccolo took a seat at the head of the table and nibbled on a piece of bread. Even though living as a Lost Soul had blunted his taste for food, Niccolo’s appetite for wine hadn’t abated. He and Pietro took turns filling each other’s jeweled goblets while Pietro told Niccolo how he had found refuge with one of Nerezza’s Council members, then fallen back into teaching when Savino and Milena came into his life, and now felt anger and guilt at Baldasare’s betrayal.

“And he’s the one who lied to you about my being dead?” Niccolo asked. “Why?”

“He probably didn’t want me to try to find you,” Pietro reasoned. “Turned out, he kept me in the dark about a lot of things.”

“I see . . . But there’s still one thing I don’t understand. If Nerezza knew where you were hiding all these years, how come she never went after you? She’s hardly a merciful woman.”

“No, but she is a cunning one.” Pietro brooded, swirling the wine in his goblet. “After eliminating so many Geniuses, she didn’t exactly have any artists left to help her. She used me as an unwitting ally to find and train a new generation, all so she could get her hands on the Sacred Tools.”

Giacomo waited for Pietro to finish, then asked, “So, Niccolo, how can you afford all this stuff, anyway?”

“Don’t be rude, Giacomo,” Pietro scolded.

“I’m just curious.”

“It’s all right, Pietro. My family history was bound to come up sooner or later.” Niccolo turned back to the group and grinned. “My last name is Abbate.”

Giacomo's jaw hung slack. Everyone in Virenzia knew of the Abbates—generations of wealthy merchants and bankers who had once been generous patrons of the arts. “As in the richest family in the empire?”

“It was. Until I tarnished the name,” Niccolo said heavily.

“Because you stood up to Nerezza?”

“That's right.” Niccolo downed the rest of his wine and stared into the empty goblet.

“What happened? Was there a big fight? Did Nerezza attack you herself, or did she send her army? How did you get away and end up here?”

“Leave it be,” Pietro said, cutting off Giacomo's flurry of questions. “No use dredging up painful memories when the past can't be changed.”

“The future, however, has yet to be shaped,” Niccolo looked across the children's faces. “Under Pietro's tutelage, you all could play a crucial part in creating what lies ahead.”

“If I'm creating it, then I want Zizzola to be free. I want to stop Nerezza from hurting anyone again,” Giacomo said defiantly.

“It's a noble goal,” Niccolo said. “How do you plan on achieving it?”

“Well, we've already got the Compass. Next, we find the Straightedge. Mico is too weak to fight Nerezza's Genius now, but if his power were amplified, I might have a shot at taking her down.”

“The Straightedge isn't meant to be a weapon of destruction,” Pietro cautioned. “Its true power is creative. According to legend, the Creator used it to grow crops in drought-stricken lands, hold back flooding rivers, even cure the ill.”

Aaminah leaned in. "Is that really true?"

Giacomo guessed Aaminah was thinking of her mother, whom she hadn't been able to save. In the hands of a great healer like Aaminah, the Straightedge could help so many others.

"Do you have any leads yet?" Niccolo asked.

Giacomo was about to tell him about Garrulous's journals when Milena entered.

"I think I might." All eyes turned to her as she walked in front of the hearth.

Niccolo glanced at the book in her hand. "What do you have there?"

"You don't recognize it? It's one of Poggio Garrulous's journals," Milena said.

"Didn't one of your ancestors fund Garrulous's journey?" Pietro asked.

"Ludovico Abbate," Niccolo confirmed. "I knew the journals were part of my family's collection, but I never realized they'd ended up here."

"Listen to this," Milena said, then began reading. "'The Creator's Compass is believed to be a powerful tool that allows the artist to create a portal of light through which he or she might travel great distances in the blink of an eye.'"

Giacomo fidgeted in his chair. "We already know that. What about the Straightedge?"

"I'm getting to that," Milena said crossly, then kept reading. "'However, I have encountered a few mystics during my travels who claim that the Compass may also be able to create a portal to the sacred.'"

Giacomo glanced down at the Compass leaning against his

chair, the firelight glinting off its golden handle. “Portal to the *sacred*? What does that mean?”

“As in the Sacred Tools,” Milena said. “What if the Compass could create a portal to the Straightedge and the Pencil?”

Giacomo’s heart jumped. “Master Pietro, do you think that’s possible?”

“I suppose Garrulous could be referring to the Law of Contagion,” Pietro said. “What do you make of it, Niccolo?”

“My thoughts exactly,” Niccolo said.

“I don’t remember reading about that law in any of Baldassare’s books,” Milena said. “What is it?”

“A very ancient belief that once two objects, or people, have been in contact, an energetic bond is formed between them,” Pietro said.

In a flash, Giacomo returned to the moment when he had realized he was a Tulpa and pulled the Creator’s Compass from its sacred geometry shield. “Could the Law of Contagion explain why I seem to have a connection with the Sacred Tools?” he asked. It might also account for the bond he felt with Zanobius, despite having known him for only a short time.

“Possibly,” Pietro said. “Tulpas are sacred geometry incarnate. Your parents created you by tapping into the same energetic forces that run through the Sacred Tools.”

“So if this Law of Contagion thing really works, I could use the Compass like a divining rod to home in on the Straightedge.”

“But it’s probably thousands of miles away,” Milena pointed out. “Even if there is some kind of energetic bond between the Tools, it would be really weak.”

*There’s another way, Giacomo thought. But it’ll be risky.*

“I’m not talking about tracking it down on foot,” Giacomo said. “I know a shortcut: through the Wellspring.”

**Nerezza found Giacomo in his dreams that night, as she had each night since he’d fled Virenzia.** This time she chased him through Niccolo’s packed villa and out the back door, where Victoria was waiting for him. The bird-Genius gripped Giacomo’s friends in her talons. They shouted for help and Giacomo tried to go to them, but Victoria’s gem blazed violet, then fired. The beam consumed him.

Giacomo shot up in his bed and caught his breath, telling himself that he and his friends were safe, that Nerezza wasn’t going to find them. But reassuring himself didn’t help much, and he lay awake the rest of the night.

When night finally waned, Giacomo went from room to room, rousing everyone from bed. With the Compass slung over his shoulder, he led them up and down the rolling hills until he found a clearing far away from the villa. Flitting joyfully alongside the other Geniuses, Mico chattered at the oncoming dawn. Giacomo wished he felt as carefree as his Genius.

Giacomo recalled the other times he’d summoned the Wellspring’s devastating power—Milena screaming as she was burned by its intense heat, Ugalino vanishing into its whipping winds . . . He had gone over his decision hundreds of times in his head—either Ugalino perished or thousands of Zizzolans did. Still . . .

He shook off the guilty memories and focused on the task at hand.

The night before, Giacomo had laid out his plan. He had reminded everyone that when he had been trapped in Duke



Oberto's camera obscura, the Wellspring had opened, allowing him to see across physical space to the Cave of Alessio. Giacomo believed he could use the Creator's Compass to guide him through the Wellspring again—this time to glimpse wherever the Straight-edge was.

While Zanobius and the other children retreated a safe distance down the slope, Pietro remained on the hilltop with Giacomo and their Geniuses. Mico fluttered around Tito's head while the lumbering owl Genius hooted his annoyance.

"Ready when you are," Pietro said, raising his brush.

Giacomo took a deep breath and gripped his pencil tightly.

Pietro arced his brush in front of him; the square gem in Tito's crown lit up, and the great Genius beat his wings once, thrusting his head forward. A beam of orange light shot out from the gem and formed a large circle that hovered several feet away, its edges shimmering.

Giacomo mimicked his teacher's actions, drawing a ring in the air. Mico chirped, and his tiny gem cast a glimmering red circle. With a wave of his arm, Giacomo moved his circle closer to Pietro's, as he'd been taught to. When the two circles collided, the combined energy released a shower of sparks, followed by a low hum. Then, as the circles overlapped, forming the almond-shaped eye of the mandorla, bright beams shot out and a rush of hot wind slammed into Giacomo, nearly toppling him.

Squinting, Giacomo stared into the familiar light storm of the Wellspring and unsheathed the Compass. "I'm going in."

"Be careful," Pietro said.

"I'll be all right," Giacomo assured his teacher, despite his own shaky confidence.

While Pietro kept his Genius's beam fixed on the mandorla so the Wellspring stayed open, Mico hovered above Giacomo and projected a latticed sphere around them both to act as a shield. Then, with the Compass pointed in front of him, Giacomo stepped through the radiant eye of the mandorla and into the maelstrom.

The winds crashed against the glowing shield, but Mico's barrier held. Giacomo glanced back, but he'd already lost sight of Pietro through the veil of colors. He peered forward, through the undulating swaths of greens, reds, and blues, but there was no sign of the Straightedge, either.

*Maybe I'm not as connected to the Sacred Tools as I thought.*

And now, unmoored from the physical world, dizziness overcame him, and Giacomo began to fear he might never find his way back. He gripped the Compass's handle tighter and closed his eyes, trying to block out the howling gale.

To Giacomo's surprise, the Compass began to vibrate, and when he opened his eyes, the circular pattern on the handle was lit up. The tip of the Compass bobbed up and down, tugging at him like it was animated by an unseen force.

"Mico, I think it's working!"

His Genius chirped excitedly. Giacomo relaxed his grip, letting the Compass guide him deeper into the storm.

Out of the cacophony came a voice. It began as a whisper that Giacomo couldn't quite make out, but gradually it grew louder, until Giacomo could understand it.

*I was trying to help you, Giacomo. And you left me to die in here!*

Giacomo's entire body went cold. The voice unmistakably belonged to Ugalino.

*Soon, you will become a Lost Soul, like me!*

Giacomo wheeled around, expecting Ugalino to appear, but all he saw were the waves of color crashing around Mico's shield. The voice faded back into the storm.

*Ugalino's gone, Giacomo told himself. He can't hurt me.*

The Compass began to shake violently. It jerked left, dragging Giacomo with it. Suddenly, the storm was swept away, and he found himself inside a strange tunnel that glowed red from rivulets of lava trickling down the rocky walls.

Mico's gem dimmed, and the lattice shield he'd created scattered into specks of light.

"Where are we?" Giacomo said, his muscles tensing. Mico hovered close, trilling warily.

The Compass jolted again, pulling Giacomo through the tunnel and into a triangular cavern full of sharp black rocks that jutted from the floor and ceiling like fangs. In the shadows, the light glinted off a shiny surface. Giacomo made out the L shape of the Straightedge.

He gasped. "Mico, we found it . . ."

But Giacomo still had no idea where in the world he was. He'd have to make his way out of the tunnel and try to get his bearings so he could find this place again in the physical world. Before he could turn to go, a new voice echoed through the chamber. It sounded hoarse and strangled, though, and Giacomo couldn't make out what it was saying.

Then, out of the darkness, a figure—more skeleton than man—emerged. He had stringy gray hair, sunken cheeks, and sallow skin. His neck was as thin as a finger, and his teeth were rotted and yellow. His black eyes stared out like two

immense voids. And he was clutching the Straightedge in his bony hand.

The skeletal man shrieked, raising the Tool like a sword, and Giacomo was suddenly overwhelmed by intense agony. The man started to bring down the Straightedge, aiming to strike Giacomo's skull, and Giacomo was powerless to stop it. He was frozen



in his anguish until, at the last moment, Mico's screech moved him to action. He lifted the Compass to block the blow, and the Sacred Tools collided, setting off a blinding blast of energy that hurled Giacomo from the cavern and back into the Wellspring's maelstrom.

He clutched the Compass close, stumbling through the murky mess of colors. Somewhere, Mico called to him with a frantic song, but Giacomo could no longer see his Genius. The winds were scorching now. Tulpas could survive in the Wellspring, but not for long. "Pietro! Help!" Giacomo screamed, but the raging storm swallowed his voice. He tucked his body into a ball and braced for the end.

Then, out of nowhere, two huge hands reached under Giacomo's arms and picked him up.

"I've got you!" Zanobius shouted. He hugged Giacomo close, shielding him from the tempest.

"I can't leave without Mico!"

The last thing Giacomo remembered hearing was, "Don't worry, he's safe . . ."

**When Giacomo came to, he was on his back and staring up at** clouds floating through the sky. One by one, his friends' concerned faces popped into view.

Zanobius helped him sit up, and Giacomo grimaced. His head throbbed.

"Are you all right?" Aaminah said.

"I think so . . ."

Mico landed on his hand, chittering with relief, and Giacomo looked around. The grass had been scorched. Zanobius's naked

chest was covered with welts and scrapes, and Giacomo could feel the burns on his own skin where the wind had whipped him. Once again, the Wellspring had done its damage. But fortunately, everyone was all right.

“Thank you, Zanobius.”

“You should thank your Genius,” Zanobius said. “Mico shot out of the Wellspring, screeching like mad. I knew you were in trouble.”

“What happened in there?” Pietro said.

“I saw someone . . .” Giacomo said, still shaken. “He attacked me with the Straightedge.”

“Who was this man?” Pietro asked.

“I got the feeling he was a Lost Soul, only much worse.” Giacomo described the man’s disturbing appearance. “I could feel his torment in my bones.”

Milena looked troubled. “Then this Lost Soul has already found the Straightedge?”

“That’s what it looked like,” Giacomo said. “And he definitely didn’t seem willing to part with it.”

“Where’s the Lost Soul keeping it?” Savino asked.

“I . . . I’m not sure. In a cave somewhere.”

“What is it with Sacred Tools and caves?” Savino grumbled.

“At least we know what’s waiting for us out there,” Milena said. “We can start preparing.”

“If I’m going anywhere near that Lost Soul, I need to get back to my sacred geometry lessons,” Giacomo said.

Pietro nodded. “I was about to suggest the same thing.”