Left Arcana

Beeing the Account of Ladye Isabel Arundel, wherein she describes her visit to a tower in Italie, &c.

[*Incipit*]

Verelie, the Cera Marcellus Tower in Ravenna was a perversion of Ostrogothic architexture, but I would saie that there is not a thing left nowadays that has not been turned inside out, wrung drie and left unsweete much as this tower had been. The tower once merely guarded the bend of a quiet river, then it was–off and again–a lighthouse, a reliquary, a windmill with sails spinning freely; and now, finally, its hollow spaces had been converted into a studio filled with motes of sawdust and sunlit ideas, sketched plans and the occasional autumn leaf. This stone tower was many things, none of which I felt eager to enter. I shivered and stood on the path by the gate, watching the honey-coloured sails tilt. The cap of the tower turned a little as the wind shifted, making a terrible crackling noise, unlike the mills–thatched and silent–I had seen in my youth when I was in my lovelie *England*, from whence I had come, in the south, among the rolling Downes, those gentle hills which they say are made of the shells of snails and sea creatures. My lovelie Angleland, being what it was, *hostile*, windmills or no, was no place for me to pursue my–what do I call it?–study of *veneficerie*, which I chose to continue in *Italie*. I had come to Ravenna to learn the art of translation, for my own attempts at such had failed, failed, *failed*. I needed to thieve certain books, such books as I had heard were kept at the Cera Marcellus Tower. I had brought with me (hidden in the folds of my cloak) a piece of string and a useful piece of wax-soaked paper. They would be all I would need.

The time was nearlie four of the clock. A gruff, whiskered guard met me at the gate. I explained myself over the noise of some people pulling a wagon along the road. The guard scowled at my request and seemed unwilling to grant me entrance. He kept

his hand firmly on the faded wood of the gate. “They don’t like visitors, my ladye. They are secretive people.”

From inside my gray cloak I produced my piece of paper. “This should dispell your concerns,” I said, handing the folded square to the guard. The guard peered at this paper, examining its red seal, then opened it. After a moment he held it back out to me. “I can’t read this,” he said. He waved the paper at me, saying: “We do not like visitors here, my ladye.”

“But you cannot read Etruscan?” I scoffed. “This is Etruscia. You yourself almost have the look of an Etruscan about you. Very handsome.” The guard nodded, vaguely considering this, and examined the page a second time. His eyes scanned imaginary lines of writing. Dried leaves played at the foot of the gate, and I thought about crushing them with my foot, my foot that was cold and numb like my fingers were. The gloves I wore were not warm enough, even though I had made them myself. I reached out in caution, saying “Please bee gentle with that,” for he was bending the corners, and I haven’t manie such papers. “See here?” I reached over the gate and pointed an awkward finger at the empty page. “This says that I am here to observe and measure this tower.”

“Measure?”

“Yes, I am here to observe and measure the tower.”

“The entire thing? Inside and out?”

“Top to bottom.”

He looked back over his shoulder at the tower, perhaps to see if it was still there, then looked back at me, a bit suspicious.

“You are going to measure the tower by yourself, without tools?”

“Not in a single day, of course.” A woman’s angry voice drifted from the windmill, through the noise of the creaking sails. I looked over at the tower, and saw men pulleying up to the top a sloshing bucket of water. What should I say? I wondered. I had hoped the paper would take care of this matter for me. “All this is written right there. See?” I poked at a crease on the page. The guard folded the paper and handed it back to me.

“You did not think to measure the entire tower by yourself, now?”

“No, of course not. I have some companions. They will be here shortly.”

"I see. Whether you may stay or not, I don't know. In any case, you have chosen a bad day. Today is the cleaning of the tower." He unlatched the gate, fumbling, and let me in. "I will show your paper to a translator here. She will read this for me. Then we shall decide if you and your companions can stay or not. Too many people are here already." He shut the gate behind us. "My eyes are poor today," he said, and led me to the tower.

All of the Cera Marcellus tower was divided into three parts: the hollow turret, the gallery which served as the studio, and the housing for the windmill machinery, upon the roof of the gallery. We entered first the ground floor, where the living quarters were; above this was the great hollow space of the tower. As the guard and I climbed the spiraling stairs (he first, myself a pace behind) I saw that each step was slick with streams of hot water that gave off steam and soaked my felt shoes. Across the expanse of the tower I could see the water dripping off the stairs; each stone step had a little wooden ledge to keep the water from falling into the interior of the tower, so that the water would cascade along the path of the stairs, cleansing them. The interior of the tower was dim, lit only by the afternoon sunlight pouring in through slotted windows each set two feet into the thick walls. The walls themselves were unadorned, although in places I could see that they had been painted over, once, with an interlaced pattern.

From the outside the stone-tiled cap with its broken sails was like a plumed bird roosting atop the tower. From the inside, the machinerie seemeth more fearsome, in sound and in sight. Great timbers led from the highest point of the tower, through the center of the studio (holes were cut in both ceiling and floor), and halfway down into the tower, where they ended in midair, splintered and pale like a shattered blade. At the bottom of the tower floor, millstones and wooden gears lay scattered about, covered with hay and straw.

"Wait here," the guard said, and asked for the paper, and went the rest of the way up to the studio. Left alone, I looked about and decided that the tower seemed to me a gruesome place to live in. Too cold, for one thing. I my selfe have knowne that one must always sleep in the hottest part of the house, preferably on the southern side of the house, especially in the autumn, when the winds are changing. That way you can sleep

naked. Your skin gives off thin vapours when you sleep. That is how the morning mists are created: by sleeping people and sleeping beestes. This is a fact that anyone properlie educated will tell you.

After a minute of waiting, I crept up the rest of the way to the studio, keeping close to the left side, away from the precipice, which frightened me. I knelt on the dry stone and put my eere to the door, and I could hear, clearlie, what was beeing saied. I heard splashing, as if they were playing in the mineral baths. There was much shouting, above the splashing, and behind all this noise was the constant grinding of the windsails and the dripping of water. Each noise echo'd in the chamber below. Wherefore the ceaseless screeching of the sails? Couldn't someone have the curst noise fixt? This disturbed me. I pushed the door slightly ajar and saw that the recessed floor was covered with several inches of water. Someone, hairy-legged, was sweeping the floor, creating waves that spread out in circles from his moving legs, bouncing off the walls, crossing one another. I could not see the guard; I could see only another person on my right, a woman, thin and small, standing on a boxe, her face flushed with anger, poor woman.

She was shouting as she busied herself, covering some books with cloth: "The journals! These vapours are going to destroy the journals!"

"Those journals lasted three hundred years. They survived worse things than a little steam. The Marcellus family wants the tower to be kept cleane. " This was a man's voice. I think I saw his hand waving. The woman quickly tucked the cloth over the books, as if she were tending to a slumbering childe.

"Do you think steam can destroy the journals?" Asked someone, much older.

"Do you think clouds are made of steam?" Someone younger.

"Pehaps, but do you think people are made of clouds?" The hand-waver waved.

"Well, some people are obviously made of steam." (The younger? Or someone else?)

"Those books are why you are all here," cried the woman.

"Which reminds me. We should adjourn for food and drink."

"Good idea." (I forget who saith what.)

I heard someone sloshing towards the door, and so I scampered back down a half circle of stairs. It was the guard, with a flummoxed look on his face. He returned my paper to me (it was now damp and dewy) and sighed. "My ladye, perhaps you and your companions should return some later time. Now is not a good time to be working at this tower."

I was trying to rubbe the pricklie kneezings out of my knee. "Did I hear a woman's voice, when you opened the door?"

"Yes, that is Margarite, the translator. She is a kind woman." He leaned a little closer. "But I think she has gipsie bloude in hir."

"How about me? Do I look like a gipsie?" I asked loudly.

"No, my ladye."

"I have dark haire, like a gipsie–"

"No, my ladye, even with your dark hair, I know you are not. Your face is too rounde, for one thing."

"You mean I am too rounde."

"No, no! Only that you speake in the manner of someone from England, or Scotsland, perhaps. You are neither Italian nor gipsie. Yes, you are certainlie from England." He held up his hands in resignation. I stared at them, and curled my own fingers, inside my cloak.

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We once lied side by side, my housbande and I, upon the south Downes, those lovely hills, I flung grass at him and he smiled and flung grass back at me. That first spring I knew I wanted to marry (and he said he would, he kissed me) when I saw his hair, long and unshorn, a distracted look in his eyes, distracted, I thought, from the noises of humblebees. I saw the bees and his eyes and I knew that he would be safe on his journey and he would return, as he promised, after the spanne of a yeere, to me, and we would be happy. I thought he was so beautiful lying beside me–the bees buzzing around his head, the damp of a flower's petals, the striations of its stem, its roots, the color of his eyes. When I first saw into his eyes I thought, I want to spend my life with

this man, I want to have his child, and so we married, and he left me for a year to travel, and he came back, and he left for another year, and my wish for a child perished, and he left for two years, and when he came back, we went back to that field where he said we first loved one another, and again I looked into his eyes and I saw that where my eyes were transparent and I could see everything, his eyes were opaque and through them I could see nothing, and I realized that I did not want him, I wanted to be him, I wanted to be that man with opaque eyes that had the option of looking or not looking at me. I was naive and nineteen and intent on singular purposes and so I left him to his journeys and set to learning the ways of *veneficerie* and by the time he returned, in two years, I mixed some herbes and some honey into his tea and put him into a deep sleep. My lovely housbande.

To calle it mourdre (as has been saied) woulde be the truthe if I had taken a blade to his throate like he was an animal; but rather I chose something that would show kindnesse to both of us. I would perish in body and he would perish in mind--who would notice? Who would care? A lonely woman dead. I would see again, through opaque eyes.

The receipt I had learnt (from an olde, olde book) was *falselie translated*, woefully. And so I discovred that I did not succeed, and that my housbande lost his mind. (As a candle-flame without heat perishes, his body needed the dull warmth afforded him by his mind, and he died soon thereafter; I gave his remains to fire.) But I found that something in me did change: my knuckles can curl backwards and forwards now, and do so seemingly of their own volition. This hand I keepe hidden at all times, for with each successive translation I acquire another swivel joint in a finger, so that I may bend my hand into a fist both backwards and forwards, almost, as tentacles of an Octopus, an alarming sight indeede. This I attributed to the false addition of a 'swive' joint when I think what was mean was a 'swine' joint and so mie joints swiveled any which direction. Knowest thou that the bones of frogges are suspect elements in these sorts of receipts. The bones from the left (sinister) side of a frogge will cause damage to the one who would cast it into veneficery too quickly. Odd fingers or no, it was not long that my

husbande was sought after, and in witnessing his death, others tourned to mee and cried of my supposed sorcerie. I fled, across the foamy sea.

In mie flight, by boote and bie wagon to Italie, I saw the land change and I saw my bodie change and I saw the illness in my knuckles taking root over the rest of my hande and even over my wriste. My body was suffused with another mind, with a vision of itself different from my own. I could see it in the mirrors. I would turn, and look to see, and there my fingers would curl backwards in fright, almost as if in emotion. I did not move in such a way. I did not understand what was happening.

Each time I attempt the spell, another joint becomes double-jointed. The next time it will not be my hand, but my throat, and I shall walk about as if backwards, always wondering where I am going. But the more I try, the more I want to try, for the more I want to escape this deformed bodie, this aging bodie that is bound to hearth and earth. I certainlie hoped that the books at the Cera Marcellus tower could help.

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At first I was worried about finding some 'companions' to help me 'measure' the tower. My piece of wax paper behaves with my best interests in mind, but I think that sometimes it grows weary of good ideas. Still, I realised I now had reason to return to the tower, and I took to thought how I might appreciate the help of others. With my hands I would not be able to carry any books of learning away from there. I worried about finding useful people to help out. Choose your friends carefully, I saie. So I walked about in the city, keeping mostlie to the shadows to avoid odd questions. I ventured to ask a few people, with poor results, until finally I met a man who said he knew of two good candidates, who were already trained, and very faithful. "Wonderful!" I cried, and we struck a deal. The man saied they woulde be of use to a woman who would travel alone. O really now.

Some time later, around nine of the clocke, I headed back to the Cera Marcellus tower, following the path beside the river. Along the way I had time to try to instruct my new companions, two slender young boies, very quiet, a little underfed. I found them

some good clothes, and explained to them the details of my plan. They were eager to listen, but I wasn't sure if they quite understood. One seemed sullen, and kept close to me. I gave this one my measure of red string. The other became quickly jealous of this, and these traits became useful for distinguishing them from eeche other. You would not believe the beestlie habits they had. The one kept smelling me in an odd fashion; I wondered what he learned from this. I had to do all that I could to keep them from crawling about on all fours. Beestes, I saie.

At the gate, the same guard met us.

"Who are these two?" He pointed at the boies, holding up a lantern. I noticed then that their clothes didn't quite fit correctly. No matter. I pointed at the man's arm, and barked "measure!" One boie produced the red string and measured the guard's arm. He then brought the string to my eye's level.

"Yard, " I saied to the other boie, "Arm of guard." The boie jotted these facts down on a pad with a stylus I'd thieved. The guard looked over at the boie's scribbles and shrugged.

"This is an odd hour, my ladye."

"I was told to come back some other time. Is not this another time?"

He seemed too tired to argue; and the boy's incomprehensible scribbling somehow sapped him of any argument he was about to put up. He let me and the boies in.

"If you go upstairs, Margarite will have a word with you."

"She's the translator?"

"That's right." The guard led us to the tower's doors.

Inside, it was dark. People were sleeping on the floor. I pulled the two boies past them, stepping over inert bodies, towards the stairs. One boie sniffed the air and looked at me, uncertain. I pushed them both ahead. One man raised a sleepy head at us, and turned over on his other side, and went back to sleep. We climbed the stairs, I first, the boys following.

The studio was lit by the light from candles and lanterns. Outside it was quite dark, and the river reflected the lamp-light from a tavern on the opposite bank. Three

young men, my age, almost, sat around a table on the other side of the room. Near to my right was Margarite, slouched over some papers, carefully writing with a quill and ink. Above her were two shelves, each abreast of the other, with the journals covered by sheets. She looked up and one corner of her mouth rose in a faint smile. I wondered which half of her mouth was sincere. The boies bumped into a table. "Careful," I warned them. "Be still." The occasional shrieks of the sails made them a little excited, as I was, as well. The room seemed familiar to me, though. I had just seen it that afternoone, true, yet it reminded me of my home (up in the Downes), with a lot of windows and a high ceiling, and lots of warm, strange things that my housbande would bring home from his travels, things that would become comforts for me once I got used to their curious appearances and smells. This room seemed not much different. Of course, the stone floor was covered with fresh sawdust, and a great thick wooden beam punctured the ceiling and the floor, and the room was filled not with brass urns and skulls, but with a fanciful display of unusual inventions. Six were sized so that one could easily pick them up and carry them like infants; another was very large and crouched in the center of the hexagonal room, close to the wooden beam. There were many small, small items, toys they seemed, that one could wind up and watch hop about like rabbits or such. There were real animals in the room, as well. A peregrine sat on a perch, its talons tied to the post, and a hood kept over its head. Someone must have been sketching its wings; I saw drawings on one of the tables. And a maiorcan cat wearing a bow sat in one of the windows, watching me and the boies from the shadows.

The men had gotten up, and were staring at me as well.

"Who are you?" asked one, a particularlie ouglie fellow. I wasn't sure how to answer. He was very ouglie.

My two boies were of no help, staring fixedly back at the cat in the window. I slid my left hand from out of my cloak and pointed a finger directly at the largest of the men (he was like in stature to my curst King Henrie). "Measure!" I said, loudly. At this the two boys came to life. One boie, Jealousie methinks, rushed over to the largest man, knelt at his feet and drew a string from the floor to the top of the man's head. He returned to me and showed me the string. I guessed and said "Height, five cubits! Fat

man!" The other boie, Silence, scribbled his nonsense into a pad. The first boy rushed back over to the man and measured his waist "Girth, three cubits! Fat man!"

The men laughed, ha ha ha, and I showed them my papers which they could read easily as if it had been written in common Italian. Which, to them, it was.

"Ah! The goode Bartolomeo has taken interest in our work again! Of course, my ladye, you have the keys to our workplace here. And may I forward my admiration to our former patron, for his fine penmanship, as well as his acute business sense. And he will be pleased, for we are at the edge of a great creation!"

"Please," he continued, "feel free to stay here, tonight. Margarite! Look at this letter. Now why can't you write like this?"

Margarite hadn't been listening. She looked up as the man dropped my paper on her desk. She ignored it.

I set about to measure a few more things, for to shew that I was sincere.

"Table! Height! Four feet!" The boies scurried about, eagerlie. Seemeth to them a game, like fetching stickes, or such.

"Window! Depth! Two feet!"

The men grew used to my shouting (as men in committees do, I presume) and resumed their own conversation. They were gathered around one of the smaller machines. I had the boys record it. I think it was a foot high.

"This is a ridiculous endeavor," quoth the short man. "This machine is useless."

"Not entirely."

"Useless, utterly useless," saied the tall man.

"Why don't you throw it out the window, then," suggested the ouglie one.

"I should. I trulie shoulde!"

"Why don't you throw yourself out the window as well? Then we could see which would land first."

The man grew silent. He thought about this.

"The device operates by pushing air around, correct?"

"As does this windmill."

"Thus," the tall man declared, "does the earth attract things unto it."

"Yes? Yes?"

"When you place an object in the air without support, you displace air. The air gathers around the object at the top, and pushes downwards upon it, displacing more air, until the object again meets the ground. It is exactly the reverse of this windmill!"

All this was meere follie, of course. Microbius, whom scholars hold in grave esteem, saith that the attraction between objects in descent and the earth is akin to that between a childe and its mother or a cub and a lionesse, to wit, that these small things, being so tiny compared to the ground, can never escape her embrace. I think this is an equally foolish opinion; it is (and if you think about it, you will know it to be true) the result of the sun's trajectorie over the ground. In the summer, if one lies in the sun, one can feel the weight of the light pushing downe on her eyelashes, making her sleepie, drowsie, as if she'd chewed by accidente the young seeds of a yethement plant. It is the sun, pushing us away from it, that drives us to the ground; think of Icarus, and his wax wings that one day waneth.

Margarite, the translator, was in spirit somewhere, I am sure of it, but where-ever it was, it was not in this room with three men (who were gathering their things to leave), the two boies and myself. She seemed entranced by the solitary candlestick on hir desk, a fancie candlesticke with a large crystal, and a honeycombe candle set into it. She was letting her finger ride through the flame of the candle, quickly, so that it would not get burned. I know that tricke as well. I let the boies rest by a fireplace, and they were glad, and warm. I walked about, measuring things myself, (I did worrie that someone would take notice of my gloved hands) listening to the foolishness of the men, keeping my eyes on the small, curious woman. By and by, Margarite finally noticed the wax paper on her desk. She looked at it, and her eyes lit up. She pulled it near her, surprised by something. After reading this, she was so in awe of the letter that she was afraid to touch it. I did say it was a useful paper. I've seen this reaction before. I never quite know what to do. I just wish I knew what it said to people sometimes. There's no controlling these things. Margarite got up and rushed over, holding the note carefully.

"Where did you get this?" She asked, happily. "Did you write this?"

"Yes, but I am not always suche a good speller."

"Would you look at this!" She seemed so happy. "I didn't know you knew olde Volscian!" She read a little further. "You know Oscan as well? Please! What is your name?"

"Isabel Arundel. Ladye Arundel." I sighed.

"You are English! I've never been to England," she said, in English. She tugged at my cloak and hastily pulled a book out from inside the desk, and turned to a page. Some scrap of paper had been glued inside.

"Look! This is a rubbing I made of one of the Iguvine tablets! See how similar the alphabets are!" She pointed from one to another. "Yes, how interesting." Margarite was peering closelie at my blank page.

"May I ask what you are translating now?" I asked, a bit impatiently, in Italian.

Margarite motioned as if to touch the candlestick as she spoke of this and that, but at length did not actually touch it. She told me about problems with translation (these I know verie well), and how the similarities between the language she was translating to Latin had caused manie difficulties. The journals, which had belonged to a man of the fourteenth centurie, by the name of Cera Marcellus, were written in a long-forgotten language, like the hierogliphs of Egiptia, which are still to all a rosie misterie. Oscan-Umbrian, she called it. She had studied in Alexandria, and had learnt there from rare tablets the key to translating this language. She had translated Boethius when she was fifteen, and by the time she was twenty-sixe, she knew half as many languages as her age. I kept nodding at all this. I noticed her smile was now in fool bloom. A letter, sent by the Marcellus familie to the librarie of the Universitie of Padua, where Margarite was working, requested someone who had a knowledge of ancient Italian languages, and enclosed a sample of the text. Margarite rushed to Ravenna, and set to work on the translations.

"What was the nature of the journals, Margarite?"

"Please, call me Marga." She seemed to have so few people to talk to.

The three men had left, and the boies were half-asleepe. So lazy, those things. Would never recommend them as companions. Perhaps it is something in their diet that

makes their eies gogle. Margarite was speking to me of the discoverie of the journals, which I retell to you in my own words, because she kept interrupting and telling me all sorts of useless things, about this word being similar to that word, how these people spoke in such a way but this person did not, the excitement she felt at having the first attempt at translating these important works, etketera, like a small bird incessantly singing. I know a good antidote for people who talk too much.

The bookes upon the shelves on the wall (and here Marga climbed on a stool and removed the cloth to reveal olde, olde bookes each held together with string) had been discovered ninety years ago, some two hundred years after the inventor Cera Marcellus had died. Room had to be made in the crowded cemetary of Ravenna for more important persons than the medieval inventor Cera Marcellus, and so a group of men set out to the tomb to remove him, to return his remains to his family before the tomb was destroyed.

Cera Marcellus' descendants, traders and merchants, petitioned to sway these intentions, but to no avail. One cold winter evening, a group of men set forth to the cemetary, armed with axes and picks, followed by the Marcellis, who pleaded with them to delay, just for a little while, perhaps for a week more. The Marcellis begged these men to not desecrate their ancestor's tomb: for the Marcellis knew that they were fighting for their own name. The workers ignored them and made their way through the cemetary paths (Marga traced it on the dust of her desk with her small finger) until they reached the Marcellus tomb. They cleared the thick brush growing in front and broke through the rusting bronze door. Light shone in on Cera Marcellus for the first time in two hundred years.

Inside, the tomb still bore the painting of Orpheus on one side, and a lyre on the other, separated in the center by a great stone sarcophagus. Sculpted on the sarcophagus was a verdegrece blanket, seeming to fall off onto the floor, revealing the corrosive activities of beetles and such on the wood of a coffin. This lid was removed, and the true coffin therein carefully lifted out. Made of teak, the coffin had remained intact, and, being a heavy wood, it required the efforts of four men present to lift it out of the sarcophagus and out of the tomb.

By then the Marcellus family had fallen quiet, and proceeded behind their jostled ancestor in his coffin. As this sacriligious procession made its way through the wintry cemetary, the weight of the coffin grew burdensome, and the men bearing the coffin grumbled that it seemed not right that the coffin would remain so heavy after so manie yeeres. Thus they set it down and set to open it. The Marcelli were horrified but were eventually unable to stop it. The coffin lid was removed, and the coffin's weight was swiftly explained. There, in the coffin, were not one but two skeletons, and beneath them were all his journals, each wrapped in leather, sixty-two of them, lying at the bottom.

"That is how the journals were discovered," Margarite said, pulling out a marbled volume. She cradled it in her arms as she sat down once again. While turning the leeves of the book, Margarite broke a peece of it off in her fingers by accident, a small triangular shape. I peered over at it; I could not read the symbols.

"What of the other bodie?" I asked. "Was that his wife?" That would be sweete, I thought.

"No, that's another story..." She looked up at me, then glanced away. "I haven't spoken to anyone interested in translation in so long," Marga said. "These men are fools." She tugged at a lock of hair and looked to me for agreement.

"Yes, I know, I herd them. I have an idea. But tell me first, what was Marcellus working on, that is recorded in these journals?"

"No, let me first tell you about the other body."

Margarite eagerly continued her tale. The second body, she said, was something of a mystery. The Marcellis had no idea whom it might be. All of their other ancestors were peacefully slumbering in other graves. Cera and this stranger were lying head-to-foot, so that it seemed as though (because, perhaps, of the jostling of the coffin) that the stranger was kicking Cera in the head; and a toe had gotten lodged in the cavity where the nose once was. One of the coffin-bearers peeled away the wax-coated tunic that wrapped the stranger's torso, and there they found red velvet and bay leaves and a gold medallion of some sort. The stranger was of noble birth; perhaps a Sforza or a Medici. In anie case they would have to take him away to bee examined. These two squabbling

skeletons were separated into separate bags; Cera's body was returned to the family. The stranger's toe was quite firmly stuck in his skull and so the Marcelli familie inherited that as well.

After a year, the now humiliated Marcellis learned (from a letter sent by the regents of the city) that the other skeleton was that of none other than the poet Dante Aligheri. This was confirmed when Dante's tomb, not far from Marcellus' tomb, was discovered to be empty. To avoid a scandal that would be an embarassment to all, the letter insisted, the Marcellis ought to leave the city as soon as possible.

The Marcellis stayed in Ravenna. The poet's toe became a symbol of the Marcellus family's determined attempts to regain their pride and status. The metatarsal that set foot in paradise was made into a relic. The Marcellis had it wrapped in fine linen, then set into a hollow crystal at the throat of a candlestick that many (would-be poets and pilgrims) travelled far to visit; the Marcellus tower served as a reliquary. The city regents did not confront the Marcellis' claim that this was indeed the poet's toe, for fear that the truth about Dante's empty tomb would become known. The interest in the toe subsided after the Vatican auctioned off all its relics. Now every good family has one in their home.

By then it did not matter. After several generations, the Marcellus family regained their wealth and their tower and set about regaining their name. The easiest way, they decided, was to recover Cera's status as a great inventor, the Leonardo of Ravenna. Thus they invited knowledgable men to sort through the notes and so on that had been found in the coffin. The wiry diagrams were intriguing; but the entirety of it was handwritten in some forgotten tongue. Thus the Marcellis asked for a good translator, and Margarite was brought in to work. They gave her the toe as a gift. This was the candlestick that now sat on Marga's desk, beside a stack of vellum sheets and a clay inkwell. As she translated the journals, men of erudition sat down to interpret these works, and artisans and craftsmen set out to recreate the intricate machines whose depictions were contained in the books.

"I discovered," Marga said, "that Marcellus was frustrated he couldn't finish his work; he wanted to return and complete some projects he was working on. He left the

plans for a machine that would transfer his mind into another body in his journals. When Cera Marcellus died–"

"Transfer? "

"Yes, let me finish!" Upon Cera Marcellus' death, Cera's son Cesare had stolen Dante Aligheri's bones as per his father's instructions; Cera Marcellus felt he would need a knowledgable guide in his *temporary* visit to the otherworld, while his son built the machine that would return him to this world. Cesare, however, contracted the pox and never even began work on the machine.

"That machine would be a marvel to beholde."

"No, it is not much, actually. In fact, it is right here, if you want to see it," she said.

I was astounded. I barely listened as Marga finished her story. Very few people knew, she informed me, that Dante had ever disappeared. Once the city of Florents tried to have the poet, their native son, returned to his place of birth. Messengers returned from Ravenna, bringing back the startling news that the tomb was empty, and that the translation that had been requested could not take place–no one knew that at this time Dante was sharing Cera's crowded coffin. Pope Leo X waved this mysterie away saying that as Dante had visited in his lifetime heaven and hell in both body and soul, then in death it should follow, certainlie, that he should be taken both body and soul into one or the other of those realms.

Marga sat by the candlestick and peered at the linen-wrapped toe. I, too, stared at it.

"Are all these machines involved with this endeavor? Transferring bodies back and forth, and so on?"

"This is all a jest to you," she said.

"No! I'm very interested in this work of yours."

"These journals saie that he was trying different experiments with the human bodie. Most of the smaller machines you see over on that wall" (she pointed to her right) "are simply to better understand the human body. One actually works, I think. That cat-shaped machine, it is supposed to put people to sleep. There is another for seeing into

the cavity of a person without hurting them." She held a hand behind a sheet of vellum and held it up against the candle. I saw a silhouette. "That's all that it does. There is a machine that is saide to change lead into golde, but the notes require some stone called vermaltice and no one knows what it is.

"The largest one is the most frightening," she saied, referring to the large machine in the centre of the room. "That is the one meant to place the spirit of a person into the body of another. We have worked hardest on this machine. Think of the possibility of having the very author of these words return to us, to breathe life into these very words!" She waved a fragment of vellum. "I would be so happy."

"You may be sure the machine doesn't work," I saied, baiting her. The two boies had woken up, hearing my voice.

"No, it does not, but I think it is my fault. I did not translate the journals correctly."

"Which journals are those?"

"These five right here, with the red binding."

* * * * * *

So the rumours, I learnt, were true. The books I had come for were here. I had Marga show me the translation machine. She pointed to springs and wires, telling me their names, telling me the history of the names, telling me the history of other names, telling me about this word and that word. I could not see what she saw when she looked at Marcellus' machine. When I looked at the machine I saw fresh sawdust and failure; when she looked at it, she heard the sounds of words long forgotten. The boies came cautiously towards us. One boie paused, cocked a head and listened. He then went back to pacing around the room.

"What is this, this small lens here?" Marga did not know. She rushed back to her desk and leafed through her translations. "*Miecielum*," she remembered, suddenly. She leaned back against the wall. One of the boies was standing nearby. I told him to measure Marga's leg. He knelt by her foot and drew out the red string. He stared at the white stocking of her foot for a moment, puzzled over the lace hem of her skirt,

wondering where the rest of the leg disappeared to after the ankle. Marga laughed nervously and pushed him away. The boie looked back at me, hurt.

* * * * * *

After we talked for some time, I grew anxious and convinced Marga to come with me for a walk. I said she could tell me anything she wanted.

I told the boies to wait for us, in a loud voice; then softly, I instructed them as to what to take. I wondered if they remembered the plan: take the books, hide them in their clothes (which, by coincidence, were too large for them anyway), and take them out of the tower.

She smiled at me, as we walked along the river. I kept hoping the boies had remembered what I had told them. I asked her to tell me more about her problems with translation. Did she remember what problems she had with those special journals? How interesting it must be to recreate someone's life! If only in words.

"What if I told you," Marga said, smiling, "that I was mistranslating the journals on purpose? What would you think?"

I paused, for a moment, then carefully replied: "How clever that would be. Look! You can see the stars clearlie now." Marga looked up, and saw the constellation that looks like a cat's thirstie tongue. I told her about lightening, and how it comes from friction between the celestial spheres. I told her about the significance of bleeding during the ascension of the planets. I described several methods for determining one's direction of travel from the position of the stars. I told her about many sinister things that she would never read in a booke. She in turn talked at me for an hour, as we walked further and further away from the tower.

But in the distance I could hear the fearsome barking of dogs. Or it seemed like barking, only the sound was higher in pitch, like the sounds of men barking. I am not afraid of dogges–if you make a paste from the powdered armoniake, that will prevent any dogge from biting you. But I was afraid, for I sensed something was wrong.

I told Margarite that I thought we should head back to the tower. It was another half hour before I saw the fire, from a distance.

Marga didn't say anything. She watched, as we walked, no faster than before. By the time we reached the tower, she was shaking, badly. I reached out–but she withdrew from me. I saw from the top floor of the tower that the window frames themselves were on fire. Sparks fell from them, growing dim as they fell. Men carried water from a nearby well in wooden pails.

I saw, as she and I stood by the gate outside the courtyard of the tower, that Margarite's fingers were clenched, my fingers were clenched, and that we both shook, and refused to look at each other.

By the end of that night, the fire had spread to the windmill. By dawn the top of the tower had fallen into the courtyard. Nothing that could burn had survived.

I guessed that my boies had knocked over a candle–flame or a tinder from the fireplace. Perhaps they did not like being left alone. Perhaps they liked being left alone too much. The stricter you are with dogges–for these boies, they were dogges– the more spirited they become in their few moments of freedom. Why did I trust these boies to do anything, I wondered. Why didn't I take care of it myself? I thought perhaps dogges were a good choice for companiouns. They make simple people, albeit people with long tongues and an eagerness to please. I would not advise the reader to try, instead, a hyrax or a peregrine or some sort of dumb animal. This sort of transformation is the only sort of translation that works with people and intelligent animals. People can be turned into animals, or vise versa. Changing people into other people does not work, as my housbande, poor, stupid man, could serve to witness.

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I returned the next afternoon, to see if there was any hope of recovering some of the journals.

Verdigris plates blackened around the edges sat among the ashes. The windmill timber was charred black and had bent and warped like the flesh of cooked fish. The wooden devices were now toothpicks and dust. Springs and wires were gathered in the corner, where the men had sorted through most of the salvagable remnants of the fire.

Part of the desk remained; the candlestick, too, was blacke with soote, but intact, bone, crystal and all. Marga was kneeling among the rubble. She and a strange man I had never seen before were sorting through what had been Cera Marcellus' journals. Some words remained, here and there, and she would cry out in recognition of the strange, forren symbols. Her translation was nowhere to be found. Marga saw me and turned away. As if I had been responsible. No one knew what happened to my poor, clumsie boies, though I loudlie asked. No-one had seen them leeve. Some bones were found by the windows, however, but they were the bones and skulls of dogges. Marga was not interested in these bones, though they were far more mysterious (I could tell her) than her footless toe.

Marga now had no smile at all, not even half of one, nor tears, nor rent dresses. She simply set about finding what she could that was still intelligible, and explaining what she could remember (alas, her memory is, like mine, weak) to a young man, perhaps bearing in him some distillation of Cera Marcellus' blood.

Eight men had gathered, while I watched from a corner. I feebly measured a doorway, whenever someone looked over.

"Gentlemen! Corioso has arrived. We can reconvene our meeting."

"Why? There's nothing left," said Corioso.

"What? Has anything changed?"

"I don't know what he is saying! Come, Corioso, have a seat."

"There is no seat. My machine is destroyed!" cried Corioso, miserable.

"Nonsense, it is right here."

"But we will have to conduct our meetings elsewhere. It is too breezy in here."

He was right. The wind had picked up a little, brushing some of the ashes out into the open air, where the wooden frame of the windows had once been. One of the men stood near the edge of the precipice and looked down at the wreckage of the windtower down below. He stepped back, suddenly dizzy, experiencing vertego, cursing all the while.

Marga had stopped and was holding a single fragment in her hands. The stranger came up to her and, speaking the Italian spoken in Rome, asked her what she was looking at. Marga looked up, and then back at the small thing in her left hand. She

read the words aloud in a dull mutter: *foied uino pipato cra carefo.* After a moment she added, "I can't remember what that meant."

I stood by the wall where Marga's wax-stained desk once was. The strange man had come over to me, and to my surprise, placed his hand over mine as I kept my balance against the wall. I stared him in the eyes but his gaze did not shift and the faintest flicker of a smile crept into the corner of his mouthe. I stared deep into his eyes and saw in their brown colour the same canine look my boies had shared and I saw the way his vision worked, slow, static, stuck on one detail, my mouth now, as if painting it in his head with red wax and honey–I didn't move–his eyes returned to mine and there they stayed, locked in my gaze as my fingers slowly bent backwards like tentacles and clasped his hand in a fist. He looked down and saw the hand and jumped away from me. "What is that!" he cried, as I spoke a few words, *ailif, casul, hit mel,* and was gone, leaving behind my little piece of paper.