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*Le cose proibite sono le più saporite.
Forbidden things are the tastiest.*

Raffi entered the kitchen to shouts of ‘Zeppelins in the fog!’ as a plate of sausages and potatoes floated past him. ‘Mike and Ike!’ A tossed set of salt and pepper shakers barely missed his head. ‘Mystery in the alley!’ He started to get the hang of it—hash on the side. ‘Flop two, over hard, and drag it through the garden! Where’s my shad roe?’

‘Down here.’ Stanley the bellhop, nearly Raffi’s height, beckoned as if they were descending to a slimy *sotteranea* in the seventh circle of the hospitality industry.

They ducked the divide and went down a final set of stairs until they came to an embrasure at the end of a shotgun corridor. A half dozen dishwashers in stiff aprons sputtered steaming water at stacks of serviceware emblazoned with a hound, all rib cage and jaws, perpetually disturbing two antlered ruminants above the motto ‘To The Faithful, There Is Just Reward.’ Raffi thought of the wolves in the Colosseum.

‘Heads up. Oncoming,’ the bellhop shouted over the din. He held a swinging door open and pointed across the room. ‘Victor there will give you the lowdown.’ He turned back. ‘What do you go by?’

‘My name is Rafaele Delfino Lorenzino de Medici Peach,’ Raffi said. ‘I’m pleased to meet you.’

‘Oh, God, not another cake eater,’ the bellhop coughed under his breath. He shook his head and left.

‘Come again?’ Victor said across the room.

‘I’m sorr—Raffi Peach, at your service, sir!’

‘Well, there’s no need to shout it,’ Victor grinned. ‘For every peach, there’s a fly.’

Raffi sensed a kindred spirit. Victor was mulatto—a *bokor*, as

Opportunity Knox would say. Natty and well formed, he had a neatly trimmed beard and arrestingly clouded, unfocused eyes. Apparently he didn't have to have sight to see through people.

'If you're hoping to wash dishes, you've come to the right place,' Victor said. 'If not, abandon hope all ye who enter here.'

'Ah, Dante!' Raffi said. "'Happy the man who's been able to learn the causes of things'!"

'Virgil quit last Tuesday. You're my assistant now.' Dressed in a white smock with matching baker's hat monogrammed with a florid PH, Victor stopped polishing a silver salver as though posing for a photograph and leaned his head toward the sound of the bellhop's footsteps growing quiet with his departure. 'Goodbye, Stan.'

'Goodbye, Victor,' the faraway voice said.

All of a sudden, Victor had an Egyptian Prettiest in his mouth, puffing. Raffi hadn't seen him light it. 'Want one?'

Raffi shook his head no before catching himself. 'No, thank you.'

'Do you mind my asking you, exactly how tall are you?'

Raffi smiled. 'Yes, I do mind.'

Victor stuck out his hand. 'Victor White.' After Raffi shook it, Victor said, 'I suspected I wasn't the only freak in Boston.'

'A mistaken impression now corrected.' Even though Victor couldn't see him, Raffi knew his measure was being taken.

'Ah, the ghost of *Peer Gynt*. If anyone else asks you, you're six and a half feet tall,' Victor said. 'And you should take off those street clothes.'

'How do you know what I'm wearing?'

'Cotton scrapes, silk whispers. But cashmere enters the room quiet as a cat. Where was your last assignment?'

'At the Hotel Forum in Rome, but I was born in Naples.'

'Funny,' Victor said. 'I picked up a hint of the Bronx in your speech.'

'This isn't my first trip to America,' Raffi said.

'Everybody's got a cover story. Your English is excellent. How'd you get to be so well-read?'

'The Forum is close to the embassies, so we kept a collection of international bestsellers for guests.'

'Let me get this straight,' Victor said. 'So here's the U.S. delegation, in the land of Dante, reading *Huckleberry Finn*? Mark Twain was a frequent guest here, you know.'

‘There’s a raft in both stories,’ Raffi said. ‘Though the Mississippi isn’t the destination attraction the Styx is.’

‘I’ll match the Parker House’s popularity against your Hotel Forum’s any day. We’ve had to call the police when Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, and the rest of the Saturday Club got too rowdy; Edith Wharton tiddled here; and the playwright Ho Chi Minh worked in our bakery.’

A white-haired kitchen assistant entered quickly, heels clicking, shaking her head. ‘Hot and cold running waiters.’

‘Never a dull moment,’ Victor said.

‘Easy for you to say,’ the woman said. ‘Twelve new tables to inspect for one turn, monsieur *tableur*. On top of everything else, Miss Lowell and Mrs. Russell are expected, and you know what that means.’

‘Just so,’ Victor said. ‘Luckily we’ve got backup. Jeanne, this is our new friend Rafaele. Rafaele, you’ll take Miss Lowell’s table.’

‘How do you do?’ Raffi said, sweeping up her hand for a kiss.

‘You’ll do,’ Jeanne said and left.

‘So I hope your library prepared you for Amy Lowell,’ Victor said. ‘She and Mrs. Russell are the Yankee Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. Except prickly.’

Raffi waited.

‘But enough gossip from you. We need to go upstairs and check the tables. Just a last run-through before we provide a tea service for the Occidental Club,’ Victor said. ‘You can take in the show, Rafaele. Or rather, you are the show, as we’ve had two no-shows in the wait staff today and those still here are spent from brunch. There’s only Havelock to help you.’ He pointed to a darkened room on the other side of the polishing tables, where a pair of black shoes was visible, extended from the ends of a dilapidated couch. Slowly, they were pulled out of view.

‘It will be my honor,’ Raffi said.

‘Go ahead and get a uniform out of the locker,’ Victor said. ‘Something in there should fit you. Jeanne can show you.’

As though she’d been listening through the wall, Jeanne reappeared and ushered Raffi to the servers’ armoire.

‘What exactly is a *tableur*?’ Raffi asked her.

She snorted. ‘Victor’s the world’s one and only. He’s a *maître d’* with unmatched vision.’ Her voice had a tender depth.

‘I see,’ Raffi said.

‘Make no mistake—he can though he can’t.’ She smothered a smile. ‘Follow along when our crew goes into action, including sleeping beauty here.’ She gestured to Havelock.

Upstairs in a private dining room with coffered ceilings, french doors, and a faux Norman fireplace, the troops assembled. ‘Ready on the right?’ Victor asked.

‘Yes,’ Havelock whispered. ‘Sir.’

‘Ready on the left?’

Jeanne pinched Raffi’s elbow and lifted her head.

‘Yes, sir,’ Raffi said.

‘Ready on the firing line? Let’s have a look, then,’ Victor said. With a brisk, economical step, he approached the first table and drew an ebony baton from his pocket, tapping each piece of silver cutlery into place, setting by setting, as lightly and familiarly as Paderewski might have executed Scarlatti on the pianoforte. To assure the tapers were lit, he deftly opened the palms of his kid-gloved hands to feel the warmth, glow by glow. ‘Very nice,’ he said. ‘Fresh linens, newly fold—’ He stopped, smiled, and shook out a napkin, reshaping it and gently putting it back in place. ‘Salad fork, dinner fork, dessert fork, there’s the cucumber server, nut picks, demitasse, and then the bouillon spoons. We’ll have the tureens on the sideboard, brought out just before serving so they’ll be steaming hot. The menu today will be simple. Haunch of Venison carved on the station.’ He whirled to Raffi. ‘You’ll promenade with a gueridon with gas jets, serving each table in turn with Lobster Thermidor and bullet ramekins of béarnaise. And be careful. Nothing ruins a tea like the immolation of wait staff.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Raffi said.

‘Don’t call me sir.’ Now Victor walked more rapidly, touching individual pieces of silver at each table with a blur so fantastic it seemed like the silent buzz of a moth’s wings. ‘Interesting,’ he said as he took a little sniff in the air. ‘Let’s get another fish server. This one’s too tarnished for service.’ He ventured the smallest of smiles. ‘Miss Lowell makes a point of noticing everything. Make sure there are sixteen cubes of sugar in the bowl by her teacup. Her ice-water glass must be kept full.’

Raffi marveled at the masterful performance. Victor was careful to lay his hands on the objects as little as possible, to ensure his braille

remained sanitary. How intimately he conducted the unseen. Fairly dancing with a deeply private familiarity, the *tableur* checked the chairs with the toe of his shiny shoe so each was equidistant from the six round tables. Except at the best table, the one centered in the bay window, Raffi saw him pull one chair a jot farther back.

‘What time is it?’ Victor asked Raffi and Jeanne.

‘Two-thirty five.’

‘Jeanne, has that soiled section of wallpaper been attended to?’

She squinted. ‘Yes.’

‘Then do you suppose the crew can take that ladder downstairs?’

At the far end of the room, a ladder lay quietly along the floor against the baseboard trim.

‘You never cease to amaze me,’ Jeanne said.

‘And you never cease to abuse me.’ Victor continued checking the tables with his spatial whisking. He occasionally talked to himself with his rhythmic, nodding motion. ‘The bone vise is still missing, Jeanne. You say it’s on the way?’

‘With the venison. The steward chose to launch it in the kitchen.’

‘All right, aperitifs are served at three. Don’t worry,’ Victor said when he reached Raffi’s side. ‘This’ll be something. I’ll pull the strings from behind the curtain.’

A few minutes later, the chatty dowagers of the Occidental Club breezed in, all dusty tube rose, a clatter of silver-tipped canes.

New brothers, Victor squeezed Raffi’s wrist to let him know the show was about to begin. Before the smoke could issue from the lip of the starter’s pistol, Raffi was off. Having studied the layout, he brought the soup course to the tables most distant from the kitchen first so he might create the perception that his service was moving ever faster, though in reality his circuits were simply ever closer.

When he reached the table with the chair aired out for relaxed sitting, he found an enormous woman with pixie bangs accompanied by her paramour, who scowled as though she’d just been poked with a pin. The queenly one was upholstered in slacks and a tunic of iris jacquard. The dark circles around her great hazel eyes struck Raffi with their resemblance to Moreschi’s portrait that Diletti had seduced him with so many lifetimes ago.

‘I’d like—’



‘Two White Ladies nonpareil,’ Raffi smiled, producing the frosty intoxicants in mid-spin while Victor appeared at his side.

‘Charming.’ She took a sip and smacked her lips. ‘To the Volstead Act. It keeps alcohol out of the wrong hands. Well, well, Victor. Looks like we’ve got a new friend!’

‘Miss Lowell, this is Rafaele Peach, new to our employ. This is his maiden voyage here, but he comes to us direct from Italy, where he’s had a distinguished career.’

She raised her lorgnette and caught Raffi with an appraisal so warm it was as though the sun had come out from behind a little cloud. When Raffi looked at her sad eyes again, he sensed the youthful spirit behind her knowing gaze.

‘Ah, bella Italia. Some of my fondest memories are there,’ she said.

‘*Sei molto affascinante*, Miss Lowell,’ Raffi said, bowing. ‘I trust you are enjoying your afternoon here in beautiful Boston.’

‘This is much more like it, Victor,’ she said. ‘Of course, you’ll bring him around tonight.’

Now it was Victor’s turn to bow.

Miss Lowell’s companion eyed Raffi, then cleared her throat dramatically:

*‘And this is good old Boston
The home of the bean and the cod,
Where the Lowells talk only to Cabots
And the Cabots talk only to God...
—Except, of course, the Lowell ladies
Who chat up waiters.’*

The Occidental Club ushered out, and the linens replaced, Raffi joined the rest of the wait staff in serving dinner. So immediately popular was he with his sections, and so smooth was he in his delivery, there were grumblings of jealous disdain from his peers, quelled only by the generous tips they were happy to help clear from the tables along with the dishes. It was money in the bank to overlook such misdemeanors. As the busboys finished, Raffi followed Victor into the scullery.

‘The dishes and cutlery will be washed first. That leaves the Baccarat. I like to care for that last, when things have quieted down,’



Victor said to Raffi, Jeanne, and nearly a dozen Chinese, who whistled and clucked and worked with a will that far surpassed the energy of the wait staff, the last of whom had slunk off to the smoking lounge. 'Not that they care,' Victor said upon hearing the door click.

'I can see why you enjoy the quiet,' Raffi said.

Victor pulled a rolling bus tray of crystal beside one of the long, low sinks next to a Cantonese scholar-bureaucrat with a white beard like an ermine's tail. They each donned a pair of white gloves. 'Jeanne, the champagne glasses first. She'll hand them to you, Rafaele.'

'Please call me Raffi.'

'Very well, Raffi,' Victor said. 'Let's put these two clean ones aside over here. Then dip the others into the soap solution, but the water can't be too hot or it'll cause clouding. Have you got it?'

'Check.'

'All right. Ladies and gentlemen, ring the stemware.'

Raffi kept an eye on Victor as he picked one piece of glass after another without a fumble and made it gleam. The tableur worked easily alongside the dishwashers and even murmured a word or two with them in Cantonese, polishing every centimeter so not a smudge remained.

But Victor didn't say anything—really say anything—until everyone was gone at shift's end, after he'd inclined his head and listened to the scrape of Jeanne's tread as she climbed the stairs to a dream of cool night air. 'Where are you staying?'

Raffi hesitated. 'Nowhere, yet.'

'I have an idea,' Victor said. 'If you need a place to bunk out, there's a way we can discuss dirty dishes twenty-four hours a day.'

'Well, that's very kind of you,' Raffi said. 'Is it far from here? What does it cost?'

'Nothing in gold, but plenty in amelite fittings.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Elbow grease. I'll show you after dinner.' Victor moved an old hotel sign that had been discarded on its side, 'No Jews, Please,' that he'd been using to conceal a hole in the wall. In its grinning indifference, the sign's calligraphic lettering was remarkably similar to the *Qui si castrano ragazzi* sign in the Naples butcher shop. 'My vault,' Victor said of his hiding place. He pulled out a covered dish and set it beside

Raffi. Replacing the sign, he set out two plates, two forks, two knives. 'Jeanne told me she was impressed with your work tonight. Me, I wasn't at all surprised. I don't need to tell you to keep an eye on the rest of the wait staff. They're likely to be a bit jealous, but you can handle it. Can I serve you a little something?' He lifted the lid.

'Escargot,' Raffi said. "'Where you work, you eat.'"

'Okay, now this one.'

'Lobster. I'm beginning to like this job.'

'Have a seat now, Raffi,' Victor said, 'and tell me how it is you've ended up here, in the bottom of the Hub, a Peach in the very pit of New England society.'

'What version of my story would you like?' Raffi said.

'Let's start with the lie,' Victor said. 'That way, I'll believe you. But first, take a few bites of supper, along with this champagne.' He held out a magnum of Berlioz 440 and reached for the pair of glasses Raffi had set aside. 'Nine dollars a bottle on the menu. They asked for it to be removed still half full.'

'I saw it but didn't dare lay claim to it,' Raffi said.

'As I'm the host, I'll do the toast: to who we are and who we might have been. You know, this goes tolerably well with cold snails and lobster, eh, pardner?'

'When I was a young lad, I was born in Arabia,' Raffi said, 'the son of the great sultan Osman. But he died and left me as an orphan in the streets. My evil uncle, the vizier, brought me up, but soon he sold me into slavery.'

'Let's hurry through this material and get right to the castration,' Victor said.

'You know,' Raffi said.

'I'm not obstructed by sight. You're very tall, and you're not exactly a basso profundo, which means you "lost your eyes" before puberty. You're well read and frankly brave to travel alone, though I suspect something beyond adventure has inspired you to wander so far.'

'I was going to tell you I was injured in the war,' Raffi said, 'but it's more a case of pretty larceny. Someday I'll tell you a taller tale.'

'Oh, I see, you're a work of art!' Victor said. 'So am I. Do I entertain you with my fumbling around?'

'Enormously.'

‘Had enough?’

‘You haven’t offered the famous Parker House Boston cream pie,’ Raffi said. The lobby cards were everywhere.

‘Some things are too precious to be shared,’ Victor said and stood up. ‘Besides, it’s time to go.’ He speared the lobster carcasses with his sword cane and with a relaxed motion flung them through the air into a waxed bag.

Raffi took the glasses and plates to the sink and rinsed them off. ‘Where are you taking me?’

‘To a place in Brookline.’

‘Your house?’

‘Yes, all blind men are issued houses in the suburbs by the government.’

‘What I mean is, have you lived there long?’

‘For three years, I’ve shoveled coal there at night in trade for a place to sleep when I’m not staying in my room here. Your admirer Miss Lowell is a dangerous lady who will help you. You want to talk about a slice of cold-roast Boston. She lives in a soggy French pile her family built just after the Civil War. *Entre nous*, it’ll be up to you to work out the details about what she’ll expect from you in return.’

‘I wouldn’t expect quarters to be free,’ Raffi said.

‘She’s a collector of oddities. She’s already nicked an ashtray from the lobby. You’ll make a perfect souvenir. You go up ahead. I’ll turn off all the lights down here on my way out.’