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Two men remained in the ruins of the burned church. One was a lower sort of knight in a blue coat trimmed with sable fur and bearing three golden polecats.

‘What were they talking about Bardi? He kept glancing at me as though he wanted to borrow more money.’ The knight spoke. ‘The cancellation of the French crusade, I should guess.’

Bardi was a head shorter than his companion and not nearly as portly. He had a thick accent and was dressed in a rich high-collared black tunic studded with sapphires. At his neck was a fine gold chain which bore a small green bottle, held by a tiny casket of gold and silver. He wore a black beaverskin hat, to which was pinned a cockleshell, worked in silver. It was a sign he had made a pilgrimage to the tomb of St James at Compostela.

‘Christ’s cullions! When did you hear about that.’

‘I learned of the Pope’s decision a week ago.’

‘And you didn’t tell the king?’

‘To what purpose, Sir De La Pole?’

‘The defence of our lands.’

‘I am, as you may have noticed, of Florence, not London. These are not my lands. I think rather of the defence of my family’s money. While he awaited news he did nothing. Now he has it, you see what happens.’

‘You don’t need to worry about money. You bankers are as rich as Croesus.’

‘We were, until we gave our money to the king. Things are tighter now, believe me. My family needs to recoup its money, I say that to you because you are a man who understands such things. And the importance of keeping them confidential.’

Pole blew like a puffed-out hunting dog. 'I'm into him for one hundred thousand, myself.'

'I know. Can you afford that?'

Pole drew himself up, pulling at the heavy rings on his fingers. 'Don't ask me what I can and cannot afford, Bardi. I am a Norman, born in high estate in Hull, recognised in law as a high man above the common English herd, a master of this land. You are a foreigner and a base born man, lower than an Englishman here. Remember that when you speak to me.'

The Florentine shrugged but his expression showed he knew Pole couldn't afford to lose that sort of sum. No one could.

'Well,' said Bardi, 'there's clearly more money in wool than I thought.'

'There's plenty of money in wool,' said Pole.

'But you need the king to pay you?'

'Yes. And if he goes to France and fails, as he will fail ...'

'Bankrupt?' said Bardi, rolling the English word around his mouth like a sugared plum.

'Yes. No hope of angels yet?'

'Why ask me?'

'You seem to keep your ear to the ground.'

'I let others do that. In Italy, keeping your ear to the ground is a good way to have a cart run over your head. As I guess it is here. But I hear things.'

'What?'

'The king has lost his contact with the divine entirely. The angel of St Paul's will not speak.'

'Not even speak? We have had no angels in battle since the King's father defeated Lancaster at Boroughbridge, but everyone knows they're harder to coax out than a prioress's tits. Not even speak?'

'No.'

'Since when?'

'Since ever. The angel of Westminster never appeared to him at his coronation, so I hear. His father was the last king to have such contact.'

'My God, it's worse than I thought. Mind you, a fat lot of good they did old king Ted when his dear wife had Mortimer's men ram that red hot poker up his arse.'

Bardi shrugged. 'A curious death for sure. A curious time when kings were thrown down by their wives. How could God have allowed it to happen, I wonder?'

'What?' said Pole. 'Do you know something I don't, Bardi?'

'My lord, I would never presume to say that.' Bardi put his hand to his chest in a way that made Pole wonder if he was mocking him. 'Young Edward came to the throne in revolution. He was a puppet. He overthrew his usurping mother and her lover, who had used him as their instrument, as soon as he could, but nevertheless, he benefited from rebellion. Perhaps God has closed his account. He will extend him no more credit.'

'God is a banker. I like that, Bardi. It would take an Italian to come up with such a heresy.'

'Tell me, Pole, as you are a merchant – if you seek to raise funds from one bank and are refused, what would you do?'

'Go to another.'

'We will not get our money back if Edward dies.'

'No.'

There was a long pause. Somewhere in the night's distance a dog barked.

'So what do we do?' said Pole.

'Edward needs help, from somewhere.'

'But from where? All his alliances combined can't face a French army flying the Oriflamme and backed by angels.'

'I have this,' said Bardi. He took a small velvet pouch from inside his tunic. It was secured by a cord about his neck. He teased open the drawstring at its mouth and shook something out into his hand. A small box in dark wood.

'A ring?' said Pole. 'It'd better be a rare one if it's to cover your debts, Bardi.'

'Not a ring.'

Bardi took great care in opening the lid. Pole strained forward to see. On a tiny velvet cushion lay something that looked almost like a scrap of paper – a yellow, almost translucent thing shaped like a key.

'What is it?' said Pole.

'Something given in collateral to my family many years ago. It is a key.'

‘To what?’

‘To Hell,’ said Bardi.

Pole crossed himself. ‘Where did you get that? From a marketplace conjurer?’

‘This is a true relic, not a carved sheep’s bone. It has been identified by one who would know. I have met him.’

‘Who?’

‘The ambassador. Satan’s emissary. He has been summoned and contained at St Olave’s in London.’

‘I will not have truck with devils.’

‘Then the king will be vanquished. Your investments will fail. Poverty would not suit you, Pole. This way we might find the reason England is missing its angels.’

‘How would Hell know that?’

‘The ambassador tells me that there are those there who might know.’

‘Devils?’

‘Demons.’

‘What’s the difference?’

‘Devils are the gaolers of Hell. Demons are their prisoners. So the ambassador says, though he may be lying. My priest who summoned him believes he tells the truth. It tallies with things I’ve heard before.’

‘Heard where?’

‘The highest circles of the church.’

‘That contradicts all holy teaching.’

‘Not really. God rightly threw Lucifer into Hell. He needed someone to keep him there.’

Pole waved his hand in dismissal. ‘Sounds like rubbish. I never heard of that in Hull, and if it means nowt to Hull it means nowt to me.’

‘The ambassador maintains that Edward has an association with demons. He is not sure what that association may be.’

Again Pole crossed himself, this time uttering a Hail Mary under his breath.

‘Our king is put there by God. He doesn’t go trawling Hell for help. He asks Heaven.’

‘What if Heaven doesn’t listen?’

‘Then he asks Hull!’ said Pole, touching his chest. ‘Demons and devils. Is this why you brought me here, Bardi? What’s this to me? Why are you showing me this?’

‘Contact with such creatures often requires further investigation. Our interests are similar. You can pull strings that I cannot. You can ask questions, look places I cannot. And besides, I may need more money.’

‘You’ve got plenty.’

‘On paper. In debts and promises. You have access to ready cash.’ Bardi did not say it, would not say it, but Pole caught the implication. The Florentine bankers had extended themselves too far, lent on uncertain projects.

‘A successful war in France would reap a lot of money for Edward and enable him to repay his debts to us. An unsuccessful one, well. Have you ever tasted the gritty bread the paupers eat? It would not suit you, said Bardi.’

‘How did you come by this key?’

‘Everyone needs money eventually,’ said Bardi, ‘even the holy.’

‘It doesn’t look strong enough to open a mouse’s larder – what’s it made of?’

‘The bone of the finger of Judas Iscariot,’ said Bardi, ‘from the hand that took the thirty pieces of silver.’

Pole swallowed audibly and crossed himself a third time. He became aware of a presence to his left. Someone was standing in the shadows watching him. Pole drew his sword. ‘Who’s there? Show yourself or I’ll come over and run you through.’

A man-at-arms stepped forward, not tall but weatherbeaten and muscular, his dark padded coat bearing a tear at the shoulder that no moth put in it. He was a low-born man but he had a presence that unsettled Pole. He knew his sort, a fighter, a brawler, maybe a killer. Pole stepped back, it being apparent that such a man would take some running through.

‘Condottiere Orsino. A mercenary captain. My man who does,’ said Bardi. ‘A useful fellow, if you don’t mind his manners.’ Bardi was slightly self-conscious. Orsino wasn’t the sort he normally introduced to company of quality. With his torn ear and battle-patched coat he looked like an ageing tom cat more than a noble’s retainer.

‘You brought him, Orsino? Is he far?’

‘Arigo has him. Not far. I’ll get him now.’ The man’s accent was like Bardi’s but rougher, deeper.

‘What are you up to Bardi?’ said Pole.

‘The captain has been on a long errand for me.’

‘How did he know to meet you here? We’ve only been here a day.’

‘The French are raiding all along this coast. I had him await my word at Dorchester and travel down the road from there when I was sure there was a raid. I didn’t expect to be with the king.’

‘Why wait for the French?’

‘Because what we are about to do requires a burned church. And I thought the French would be most helpful in providing one.’

Pole crossed himself again.

‘That is sacrilege.’

‘Yes,’ said Bardi. ‘Rather the point. There are worse alternatives, believe me.’

Horses stirred outside the church and a mule brayed.

Orsino returned, and Pole gave a start. Behind Orsino, floating in the darkness, was the head of an ape, he was sure. Then the figure came towards him and he saw it was not an ape but a very small man, so thin that his face was little more than a skull. He wore a priest’s cassock, though on his head was a good beaver fur hat. A man who could afford a hat like that could afford to eat, thought Pole. He’d seen healthier looking types emerge from a year’s confinement in a dungeon.

Behind the parson another of Bardi’s men had a rope, on which he led a boy tied by the hands. The child was around thirteen years old, wearing a pair of rough woollen braies that reached to his knee and a ragged tunic, open at the front. Incongruously, he had a hood on his head and wore a good cloak many sizes too big for him, which he was forced to hold to prevent it dragging on the muddy ground. His feet were bare, he was filthy and the right side of his face was swollen and bruised as though he had taken a good blow. But it was his bare chest that took Pole’s attention. It bore a terrible puffy burn, fresh and livid, even under the torchlight. Pole knew what it was. A thief’s brand. He let out a loud whistle of disapproval. He’d thought the Saxon practice of branding thieves had disappeared when he was a boy. Fellows like that laughed at such punishments. There should be only one penalty for thievery – the gallows. The world, thought the merchant, was going soft.

‘Did you do that to him?’ said Bardi. ‘I wanted him unharmed.’ He spoke in English so as not to annoy Pole.

‘He’d been caught by the priest. Second time. I stopped them hanging him. The burn was a compromise,’ said Orsino.

‘You met trouble?’

‘Yes. His people came for him. I lost two men. You will compensate me and I will pass the money to their families.’

‘You’ll pocket it yourself!’ said Pole.

Orsino turned his slow gaze to the merchant.

‘Am I a liar?’ said Orsino. Pole felt an urge to change the subject.

‘Who’s this?’ said Pole, nodding towards the thin man.

‘This is Father Edwin of St Olave’s Towards the Tower,’ said Bardi.

‘A long way to come for a sermon, father.’

The priest said nothing.

‘Who’s the boy?’ asked Pole.

‘He answers to the name of Dowzabel,’ said Father Edwin, ‘or rather he doesn’t answer. He says nothing.’

‘Sounds like a devil’s name.’

‘I think it is. The outlaws of the West Country forswear their real names when they band together. They take on those of demons.’

Pole shrugged and said, ‘I’ve never heard of that,’ as if the fact rendered the information completely worthless.

‘They are of a different faith from us,’ said Edwin. ‘Or rather, their faith is differently put. The boy is a Luciferian. He believes it is Lucifer who was betrayed by God, that God is the usurper. Satan, he would say, is God’s servant – a gaoler charged with keeping Lucifer locked away.’

‘The Devil is two people?’ said Pole. ‘This is too much for my Yorkshire head.’

‘They say so,’ said Edwin. ‘It’s up to you if you believe them.’

‘Damned right it’s up to me. A thief and a devil worshipper?’ said Pole, ‘and we suffer him to live?’

‘For the moment,’ said Edwin.

The boy’s eyes moved from face to face. He was shivering, beaten and was half starved but he was not cowed. He held his head up.

Pole walked closer to the boy and studied him. Small and very slightly built, he had a clever face which bore an expression of

fearful insolence. Pole knew his sort. He had whipped enough boys like that for their presumption. 'Bow, boy, in deference to my nobility.' Pole spoke in English.

'He doesn't understand English too well,' said Edwin. 'If you use big words you'll lose him.'

'What does he understand then? French? Don't tell me he's a courtier down there in the West!' Pole laughed, but his laughter was like a spark to wet grass and it died where it had begun.

'Cornish,' said Edwin, 'as they do in Cornwall.'

Pole detected a touch of condescension in the priest's voice. He knew men like Edwin as well – men who supposed their cleverness placed them above those who had been born their betters. He'd whipped enough men like that too.

'Make him bow. Doesn't he bow when he greets his superiors?'

'I should imagine he guts them when he gets the chance,' said Edwin. 'Luciferism is a religion of revolution. He would upend God's order, place poor men above kings.'

'Then you should take him from here and have him hanged,' said Pole.

'That would bring all our schemes to nothing,' said Bardi.

'Why so?'

'Because,' said Edwin, 'while I can wheedle devils through the postern gates of Hell, or call spirits who were trapped in this realm at The Fall, he can open the main gates.'

'And what does that mean, Bardi?'

'The enemy of my friend is my friend, dear Pole.'

'What?'

'If you want to know how to deal with angels ask someone with experience of fighting them. We're going to talk to a demon.'