

IRENICON by Aidan Harte

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The Sala dei Notari, a lofty chamber of wood-carved dignity, had been built on an inhuman scale, with everything a few inches too high, all a little too large for the stony-faced Signoria, men who faded beside the decorative banners, shields and ribbons covering the walls. John Acuto and his colleagues felt, as was intended, out of place and inferior, like petitioners begging for debt-relief rather than the city's saviours.

The general's massive frame perched awkwardly on a small stool. He assumed his discomfort, like the other slights, was intentional. Well, let them play their games. The foundation townsmen built their courage upon was ignorance – ignorance of how easily buildings burned, how little strength it took to tumble walls and how much could be lost in a moment. So let them have their pride, so long as in the end he had their money.

The Moorish notary brusquely called the session to order and the general rose to speak. 'My Lords, long has Ariminum been famous for pride and prudence and wealth; I must now add hospitality to that list. Today, the urgent need of Ariminum and the talents of my famous Company meet harmoniously. Let us make haste then to sign our Contract and begin what will undoubtedly be a bond of mutual advantage.'

Levi caught the general's eye as he sat down. If they had been on winking terms, he was certain he would have got one now. The old bull had been negotiating Contracts for decades. Whether the townsmen were deaf to sarcasm remained to be seen.

After a protracted silence, long enough to be rude, the doge glared with bare hostility at the condottieri. 'We deigned invite you inside our walls, John Acuto, but you were not invited to

speak. Ariminum has traditions that were old long before you stole into this country. We begin Signoria meetings with prayer, not vacuous pleasantries.’ He made the sign of the sword and stood. ‘On this, the day of Saint Francis, we pray he will protect us as he protected the people of Gubbio.’

The doge suddenly interrupted his pious drone to ask, ‘You’ve heard of this miracle, John Acuto?’

Acuto’s smile didn’t falter. ‘I know the town.’

The doge continued, ‘Oh? Perhaps you are familiar with its recent history, but once, long ago, it was terrorised by a Wolf. The Saint came and called the Wolf from the forest. “Brother Wolf,” he said, “if these townsmen feed you, will you promise not to kill them?” Naturally, the townsmen’s lives were incomprehensible to the beast, but it understood a free meal. Without the gift of speech, it could only twist its emaciated body – it was starving too – in such an unnatural way that everyone understood it agreed to the Contract. Saint Francis piously went on his way and the Wolf lived in peace with the townsfolk ever after.’

‘Charming story,’ Acuto said, hiding his impatience.

‘You were not invited to speak!’ the doge shouted.

‘When the Wolf died, the townsfolk mourned it and buried it in holy ground, just like a citizen. You see, they’d forgotten that it was a beast. But a beast remains a beast, no matter how it learns to twist. You will not be given quarters inside our walls, John Acuto. You will remain outside with your mercenaries. Expect a lengthy stay. All Etruria knows the only language condottieri speak well is Contract-law, so we will not make haste; we will deliberate, we will parse, and if you don’t like it—’

‘My Lord, this hostility is—’

‘—all you can expect! If it does not please you, break camp, and we will find a company with less vanity and more respect. The scavengers that remain in Etruria would be happy for the work. This marriage of convenience will be brief, so speak of no “shared interests” – you would not be here if your private war with Concord had not beggared you, and we would not be reduced to hiring you, the cancer of Etruria, if Concord did not covet our wealth.’

‘You speak candidly, my Lord,’ said John Acuto.

‘If you prefer the dung of hypocrisy, leave our contato, Brother Wolf. Go to the poor wretched towns that are left, if you haven’t already raped them of every soldi.’

John Acuto stood. ‘Candour suits me entirely, Doge. You talk of war and drape your walls with ribbons, but they are not combat banners and you are not soldiers. You think you have me at a disadvantage because bargaining is your profession? I advise you to remember my profession. If the Contract is not signed within a month and a day, I will break camp, but first I’ll break your walls and burn your towers. Then you’ll be the starving dogs!’

He kicked aside his stool and strode out. The three wise men looked aghast, then scrambled to follow.

Excerpt from Aidan Harte’s IRENICON

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