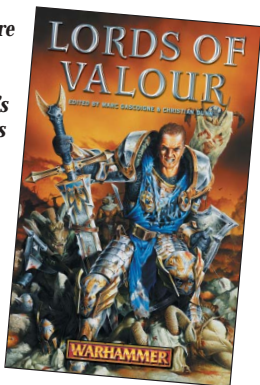


# LORDS OF VALOUR

## Warhammer Fantasy Short Stories

**THE CREATURE THAT** *only moments before had been Johannes Verfallen let out a neighing cry like a slaughtered horse. A guttural roar that issued from the creature's stomach echoed the howl. Where Verfallen's gut had torn open, sharp teeth now lined the ragged, bleeding edges of a monstrous second mouth. With a roar that was as much to boost his own resolve as to terrify the enemy, Torben charged at the aberrant beast.* – from *The Plague Pit* by Jonathan Green



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## PORTRAIT OF MY UNDYING LADY

By Gordon Rennie

‘A COMMISSION, YOU say? What kind of commission?’ Giovanni Gottio leaned across the table, wine slopping from the cheap copper goblet in his hand. It would soon be replenished, he knew, in just the same way as his new-found friend sitting opposite had been steadily refilling Giovanni’s goblet all night.

‘A portrait,’ answered his new-found friend. ‘In oils. My employer will pay you well for your time.’

Giovanni snorted, spilling more wine. Absent-mindedly he dabbed one grimy finger in the spilled mess, painting imaginary brush strokes on the rough surface of the bar table. Faces. Faces had always been his speciality. Strangely, though, he had been sitting with the man for hours, drinking his wine and spending his money, but if the stranger got up and left this minute, Giovanni would have been unable to say what exactly he looked like. His was more a blurred impressionistic sketch of a face - eyes cold and cruel, mouth weak and arrogant - than any kind of finished work. The most memorable thing about him in Giovanni’s mind was the way the emerald ring on his finger caught and held even the dim candlelight of this grimy back street taverna.

‘Haven’t you heard?’ Giovanni slurred, becoming gradually aware that he was far more drunk than he should be this early in the night, even after those three pitchers of wine the stranger had bought for him. ‘The great Gottio doesn’t do portraits any more. He is an artist, and artists are supposed

to show truth in their work. The trouble is, people don't want the truth. They don't like it. That fool Lorenzo Lupo certainly didn't, when he commissioned the great Gottio to paint a portrait of his wife.'

Giovanni realised he was shouting now, that he was drawing sniggering glances from the other regular patrons of the taverna. Not caring, he reached out to angrily refill his goblet once more.

'Did you see it, my portrait of that famed beauty, the wife of the Merchant Prince of Luccini? Not many people did, for her husband had it destroyed as quickly as he could. Still, those few that did see it said that it captured the woman perfectly, not just in its reflection of her exquisite beauty but even more so in the way it brought out all the charm, grace and personality of the hungry mountain wolf that lurked beneath that fair skin.'

Giovanni drained his goblet and slammed it down, stumbling as he got up to leave. This drunk after only three pitchers, he thought. The great Gottio truly has lost his touch...

'So, thank you for your hospitality, sir, but the great Gottio no longer paints portraits any more. He paints only the truth, a quality which would sadly seem to be in little fashion amongst this world's lords and masters.'

Mocking laughter followed him out of the taverna. Outside, he staggered along the alleyway, leaning against a wall for support. Shallya's mercy. That cheap Pavonan wine certainly had a kick to it!

A welcome night breeze sprang up, carrying with it the strong scent of the fruit orchards that grew on the slopes of the Trantine Hills overlooking the city, and Giovanni took several deep breaths, trying to clear his head. From behind, he heard quick, decisive footsteps following him out of the taverna; clearly his new-found friend wasn't a man prepared to take 'no' for an answer.

Giovanni turned to greet his persistent new friend for the night, but instead of the ingratiating smile he expected, he saw a snarl of anger. A hand reached out, grasping him by the throat and lifting him off his feet. Claws sprang out where there had only been fingernails before, and Giovanni

felt their sharp edges dig into the skin of his exposed throat. The hand held him there for long seconds as he struggled, unable to draw breath, never mind cry for help. And then it suddenly released him. Senses dimming, Giovanni fell to the ground, only half-conscious as his supposed friend effortlessly dragged him through the shadows towards a nearby waiting coach. There was the sound of a coach door opening, and a face as bright and terrible in its unearthly beauty as that of the Chaos moon of Morrslieb looked down at him as Giovanni finally slipped into uncon-sciousness.

‘No matter, Mariato,’ he heard it speak in a voice as cold as glacial ice. “This way will do just as well...”

Giovanni awakened, immediately recognising in the pain throbbing behind his eyes the all-too-familiar signs of the previous night’s excesses. Mind still numbed by the copious quantities of wine he had no doubt cheerfully downed, it took him several seconds to register the fact that this was not the hovel-like garret that the recent downturn in his fortunes had reduced him to calling home. Nor were his clothes - a shirt of finest Cathay silk and breeches of pure Estalian calfskin - the same threadbare and patchy garments that he had put on the previous morning.

Previous morning? he thought suddenly realising that it was still night, a silver sliver of the waxing Morrslieb moon visible through the barred window above his bed. He ran a hand to his face, feeling the rough stubble of what felt like two days’ beard growth that had not been there earlier. Shallya’s mercy. How long had he been unconscious?

There was a rattle of keys at the only door into the room. Giovanni tensed, ready to... what, he wondered. Fight? Overpower his gaolers and try to escape? Half a head smaller than his average countryman - the stature, or more precisely lack of it, of the inhabitants of the Tilean peninsula was the basis of many jokes amongst the other nations of the Old World - and with something of a paunch that the long months of penury since his fall from grace had still so far mostly failed to diminish. Giovanni knew that he was hardly the stuff that dashing dogs of war mercenary hero legends were made of. The only wound he had ever suffered was a

broken nose inflicted during a heated taverna dispute with some fop of a Bretonnian poet over the favours of young and curvaceous follower of the arts. The only blade he had ever wielded was a small knife used to sharpen the charcoal pencil nubs he sketched with.

The heavy door swung open, revealing two black-robed figures standing in the corridor outside. Faceless under their hooded robes, it was impossible to determine anything about them. A hand, pale and skeletal thin, appeared from within the folds of one of the robes, gesturing for the artist to rise and come with them. Shrugging with an attempted air of casual nonchalance that he wished he truly felt, Giovanni did as commanded.

He found himself in a wide, stone-walled corridor, falling into step between his faceless gaolers. Stars shone through breaks in the wood-raftered ceiling, and, glancing up, Giovanni saw the shattered ruins of a burned-out upper storey above him. The floor at his feet had been hurriedly swept clean, with piles of rubble and ancient fire debris piled up at its sides, and Giovanni could just make out blackened and faded frescoes under the grime and soot on the corridor walls. They showed nymphs and satyrs at play and were of a pastoral style that went out of fashion over a century ago. The night breeze drifted in through the breaks in the ruined ceiling, and Giovanni caught the faint but familiar scent of distant fruit groves.

With a shock of recognition, he realised that he was probably in one of the abandoned villas that dotted the countryside hills above Trantio. There were many such ruins, Giovanni knew, for in safer and more prosperous times it had been the fashion amongst the city's wealthy merchant families to build such palaces in the surrounding countryside, as both an ostentatious display of wealth and a retreat from the squalor of the city. A downturn in mercantile fortunes and the steadily increasing numbers of greenskin savages stealing over the Apuccini Mountains had brought an abrupt end to the such rural idylls, and the survivors abandoned their countryside retreats and fled back to the comfort of their counting houses and the safety of high and

well-guarded city walls. Since then, the abandoned villas had become notorious as lairs for the predators that hid out in the wilderness areas beyond the limits of the Trantine city guard's horseback patrols.

Predators such as bandit gangs or orc warbands, or-

Or what? Giovanni wondered with a shudder, his lively artist's imagination painting a series of vivid nightmare images of all the things bad enough to scare bandits and even orcs away from such a place.

Something rustled at Giovanni's feet and he jumped back as a large rat scampered out of a hole in the floor and ran across the corridor, running right over the top of his booted feet. There was a blur of movement from behind him, followed instantly by a harsh squeal of pain and an abrupt wet tearing sound.

Giovanni turned, catching a glimpse of the scene beneath the hooded cloaks behind him - long skeletal fingers crammed something squealing and still alive between jaws distended horribly wide open - before a warning hiss from his other gaoler urged him to keep moving. Suitably inspired, Giovanni's imagination mentally erased the previous portfolio of nightmare images and began work on a new gallery of even greater horrors.

The corridor ended in an open doorway, soft light spilling out from the open doorway there. Urged on by a low angry grunt from one of the gaoler creatures, Giovanni gingerly stepped forward into the room beyond.

The chamber was how he imagined the villa would have looked in its heyday. It was opulently furnished, and his gaze passed over a tempting-looking platter of fruit and a crystal decanter of wine laid out on a nearby table - did his captors seek to trick him into poisoning himself after having him at their mercy for at least a day as he lay insensible in his cell, he wondered? - and also the oddly disquieting sight of a painting easel with a blank canvas upon it. But it was the paintings on the walls all around that drew his immediate attention.

There were a full dozen of them, and they were by far the greatest collection of art that Giovanni had ever seen.

There he recognised the brushwork of the legendary da Venzio, whose monumental frescoes decorating the ceiling of the great Temple of Shallya in Remas were still one of the great wonders of the Old World. And beside it was a canvas bearing the distinctive Chaos-tainted style of the mad Estalian genius Dari, whose work had been condemned as heretical two hundred years ago and was still banned throughout the Empire to this day. Hanging on the wall opposite the Dari was a work bearing all the hallmarks of the work of Fra' Litti. There were only eight known Litti paintings still in existence, all of them in the possession of the richest merchant princes of Tilea who competed with each other in bitterly-fought bidding wars to purchase only the rarest and most exquisite works of art. If this really was a ninth and until-now unknown Litti, then its potential value was truly incalculable.

Giovanni's senses continued to reel at the wealth of artistic riches that surrounded him. Over here a work by Bardovo, whose epic depiction of Marco Columbo's discovery of Lustria spawned a whole school of lesser talented imitators. Beside it hung a canvas bearing the disturbing scratch-mark signature of the mysterious Il Ratzo, who some historians now whispered may not even have been fully human.

It was only then, as he reached out to touch the da Venzio canvas, his fingers reverently tracing the maestro's brush-stroke patterns, that an even greater and more profound realisation about all the paintings collected here occurred to him.

They were all portraits, and they were all of the same subject: an alabaster-skinned noblewoman of striking but glacial beauty.

Giovanni gazed from portrait to portrait, his eyes confirming what his mind would not yet accept. No matter the artist, no matter the difference in their individual styles, each had painted the same subject, and from life too, if the telltale details in each painting were to be believed. Here he saw the same glint of forbidden promise in the dark pools of her eyes, there the same hint of unspoken secrets behind the faint mocking smile on her lips. But while each artist had

found the same qualities in their subject, each also found in her something different. In da Venzio's portrait she was a beguiling angel of darkness, his painting a blasphemous twin piece to the images of the blessed goddess of mercy on the temple ceiling in Remas. Bardovo's work showed her as a lonely spectral figure standing against a backdrop of a corpse-strewn battlefield.

How could this be? Giovanni wondered. Da Venzio had lived three hundred years ago, Bardovo more than a thousand and Fra' Litti and one or two others even longer than that...

A faint breeze passed through the air of the room, sending flickering shadows over the faces of the portraits as it disturbed the flames of the many candles which lit the chamber.

'How could artists that lived centuries apart all come to have painted the same subject?' said a voice from somewhere close behind Giovanni, completing the thought that his mind dared not yet ask itself.

He turned to face the figure reclining on the couch behind him, a figure who had not been there moments ago, he was sure. She was even more beautiful in person, he thought. More beautiful and more terrible than any portrait - even one by the great da Venzio himself - could ever do full justice to. Her eyes were endless pools of mystery that drank in everything, surrendering nothing in return. Her blood-red lips were full and of the same colour as the burning scarlet rubies which hung at her plunging neckline, revealing flawless skin that glowed like soft moonlight, skin that had not felt the kiss of sunlight in centuries.

'I am the Lady Khemalla of Lahmia,' she said in a voice that whispered like the shifting desert sands of her long-dead homeland. 'I bid you welcome to my home.'

'Then I am not a prisoner here?' asked Giovanni, surprised at his directness of his own question.

'You are my guest,' she smiled. 'And, while you are my guest, it pleases me for you to paint my portrait.' She gestured at the paintings around them. 'As you can see, I have a taste for art. And occasionally for artists too.'



She smiled at this last comment, blood-red lips curling back to show the subtle points of concealed fangs.

‘Why me?’ asked Giovanni, pouring himself a generous measure of wine from the decanter. Doomed as he was, he saw no need to deny himself a few final pleasures.

‘If you know what I am, then you must understand that it has been many years since I have gazed upon my own face in the glass of any mirror. To never again see the features of your reflection, to live so long that you perhaps forget the image of your own face, can you begin to imagine what that might be like, mortal? Is it any wonder that so many of my kind give themselves fully over to madness and cruelty when they have nothing left to remind them of their own humanity? I can only see myself through the eyes of others, and so I choose to do so only through the eyes of the greatest artists of each age.’

She paused, favouring him with a look from the deep desert oases of her eyes as she again gestured at the paintings hanging on the walls around them. ‘You should be honoured, little mortal. After all, consider the company I am including you in here.’

‘You know that I have a reputation for only painting the truth as I see it.’ Nervous, he reached to refill his already empty glass, concentrating hard to quell the involuntary tremor in his hands.

‘It is a trait of mine that found little favour with my previous patrons. I have discovered to my cost that people wish only to have their own flattering self-image of themselves reflected back at them.’

She smiled at his show of bravado. ‘I chose you because of your reputation. You say you only paint the truth, the true soul of your subject. Very well, then that is what I want, brave little mortal. The truth. Look at me and paint what you see. To try and capture on canvas the soul of one of my kind; what greater challenge could there be for an artist?’

‘And afterwards, when the work is complete? You will let me leave?’

‘You will be free to refuse my hospitality when you have gifted me something that I deem worthy of your talents. If

your work pleases me you will be well rewarded for your troubles, I promise you.'

'And if it does not, what then?'

The question hung unanswered in the air between them.

Giovanni set down his goblet and went over to the easel and blank canvas set up nearby. As he had expected, there was a palette there of every imaginable kind of artists materials. He rummaged amongst them, selecting a charcoal pencil for sketching and a knife to sharpen it with. A challenge, she had called it, and so it was. To paint the soul of a creature of the darkness, an age-old liche-thing, and yet to paint only the truth of what lay beneath that perfect ageless skin while still producing something that would please this most demanding of patrons. This would either be the greatest work of his life, he thought, or merely his last.

He turned back to his waiting subject, his practised eye seeing her at this earliest stage as merely a vexing collection of surfaces, angles, lines and subtle blends of light and shadow. The fine detail, in which lay those crucial insubstantial elements that would determine whether he lived or died here, would come later.

'Shall we begin?' he said.

LIKE THE VILLA'S other inhabitants, he worked only at night now and slept by day. Each night after sundown they came for him, and each night she sat for him. She talked while he worked - he always encouraged his subjects to talk, the better to understand them and their lives, for a portrait should speak of far more than its subject's mere outward physical appearance - and as he worked he heard tales of her homeland. Tales of gods, heroes and villains whose names and deeds are remembered now by none other than those of her kind; tales of mighty cities and impregnable fortresses now reduced to a few ancient crumbling ruins buried and forgotten beneath the desert sands.

Some nights they did not come for him. On those nights, she sent apologies for her absence, and gifts of fine wines and food, and books to let him pass the time in his cell more easily. The books, usually works of history or philosophy,

fascinated him. Several of them were written in languages completely unknown to Giovanni - the languages of legendary and far-distant Cathay or Nippon, he thought - while one was composed of thin leafs of hammer-beaten copper and inlaid with a queer hieroglyphic script which he doubted was even human in origin.

He knew that there were other occupants of the villa, although besides his silent faceless gaolers and his patron herself he had seen none of them. But as he lay in his cell reading on those work-free nights, he heard much activity going on around him. Each night brought visitors to the place. He heard the clatter of rider's hooves and the rumble of coach wheels and the jangle of pack team harnesses, and once he thought he heard the beating of heavy leather wings and perhaps even saw the fleeting shadow of something vast and bat-like momentarily blotting out the moonlit window above his bed.

There were other sounds too - screams and sobs and once the unmistakable cry of an infant child - from the cellars deep beneath his feet. At such times Giovanni buried his face into the mattress of his bedding or read aloud from the book in his hand until either the sounds had ceased or he had convinced himself that he could no longer hear them.

ONE NIGHT HE awoke in his room. The sitting had been cut short that night. One of the black-cloaked servant things had entered and fearfully handed its mistress a sealed scroll tube. As she read it her face had changed - transformed, Giovanni thought - and for a second he saw something of the savage and cruel creature of darkness that lay beneath the human mask she presented to him.

The news was both urgent and unwelcome and she had abruptly ended the night's session, issuing curt orders for him to be escorted back to his room. He had fallen asleep as soon as he lay down on the bedding, exhausted by the continued effort of keeping up with the night-time schedule of his new employer.

Again, he heard the sound that had awoken him. There was someone in the room with him.

A face detached itself from the shadowy gloom of the cell, leaning over the bed and glared angrily down angrily at him. Jagged teeth, too many of them for any human mouth, crowded out from snarling lips. It was her servant, Mariato, the one that had approached him in the tavern that night. He had obviously just fed, and his breath was thick with the slaughterhouse reek of blood.

‘Scheherazade. That is what I shall call you,’ the vampire growled, glaring down at him with eyes full of hate and the madness of bloodlust. ‘Do you know the name, little painter? It is a name from her homeland, a storyteller who prolonged her life for a thousand and one nights by entertaining her master with tales and fables.’

The vampire raised one bristle-covered hand, pointing at the half-face of Mannslieb in the sky above. The ring on his finger flashed green in the moonlight.

‘How many nights do you think you have left, my Scheherazade? Her enemies are close, and by the time Mannslieb’s face shines full again, we will be gone from here. Will your precious painting be finished by then? I think not, for such things take great time and care, do they not?’

He paused, leaning in closer, hissing into Giovanni’s face, stifling him with the sour reek of his carrion breath.

‘She will not take you with us, and she cannot leave you here alive for our enemies to find. So what is she to do with you then, my Scheherazade?’

The vampire melted back into the shadows, its voice a whispering promise from out of the darkness.

‘When Mannslieb’s face shines full again, then you will be mine.’

‘YOUR SERVANT MARIATO, he doesn’t like me.’ She looked up with interest. This was the first time he had dared speak to her without permission. She lay reclining on the couch in the position that he had first seen her in. A bowl of strange dark-skinned fruit lay on the floor before her. The main composition of the piece was complete, and all he needed to concentrate on now was the detail of the face.

'He is jealous,' she answered. 'He is afraid that I will grow bored with him and seek to make another my favourite in his stead.' She looked at him sharply. 'Has he disturbed you? Has he said or done anything to interrupt your work?'

Giovanni kept his eyes on his work, unwilling to meet her keen gaze. 'Has he a right to be jealous?'

She smiled, favouring him with a look of secret amusement. 'Perhaps,' she mused. 'His kind always have their place at my side, but they are always dull and unimaginative. Perhaps I will take a new consort, not a warrior or a nobleman this time. Perhaps this time an artist? What do you think, little mortal? Shall I make you my new paramour and grant you the gift of eternal life in darkness?'

She laughed, picking up a fruit from the bowl and biting deep into it, enjoying the taste of his fear. Thick juice, obscenely scarlet in colour, bled out of the fruit as she ate it.

Giovanni studied the lines and contours of the painted face on the canvas in front of him. A few brush-strokes, a subtle touch of shading, and he had added an extra element of sardonic cruelty to the line of her smile.

THE NEXT NIGHT he returned to his cell at dawn to find a small tied leather pouch sitting on his bed. He opened it, pouring out a quantity of powdered ash. Puzzled, Giovanni ran his fingers through the stuff, finding it strangely unpleasant to the touch. There was something amongst it. Giovanni gingerly picked it up, discovering it to be a ring. He held it up, the light of the rising sun catching the familiar emerald stone set upon it. It seemed that Mariato no longer occupied the same position amongst his mistress's favours as he had once done.

GIOVANNI KNEW THAT their time together was coming to an end. Mannslieb hung high in the night sky, almost full, and for the last few nights there had been more activity than usual in the villa. He heard the sound of heavy boxes - earth-filled coffins, he supposed - being dragged up from the cellars and loaded into wagons. He worked in daylight hours too now; foregoing sleep and working on the painting alone in his cell, making changes so subtle that he doubted anyone

other than he would notice the difference. Adding new details and taking away others. Revising. Reworking. Perfecting. He was haggard and gaunt, exhausted from too little food and sleep, looking more like one of her pale ghoulish servants than the portly florid-faced drunk who had been brought here just scant weeks ago.

All that mattered now was the painting itself. The greatest work of his life, that is what he had said he would have to produce, and that is what he had done. After that, he discovered to his surprise, nothing else really mattered.

SHE SENT FOR him the next night, with Mannslieb shining full-faced in the night sky. The painting too, was now complete. She stood looking at it. The room had been stripped almost bare, and the easel that the canvas stood on was the most significant item left in it. There were faint outlines on the walls where her portraits had hung.

'You are leaving?' he said, more in statement than question.

'We have many enemies, my kind. Not just the witch hunters with their silver and fire. We wage war amongst ourselves, fighting over sovereignty of the night. It has become too dangerous to remain here.'

She gestured towards the painting. 'It is beautiful, master Gottio. I thank you for your gift. What do you call it?'

'Unchanging Beauty,' he answered, joining her to look at his masterpiece. It showed her standing regally against a backdrop of palatial splendour. Giovanni's talent had captured all her cruel and terrible beauty as the others before him had also done, but the real artistry was in the detail of the trappings around her. Look closer and the eye was drawn to the tarnished gold of the throne behind her, the subtle patterns of mildew creeping across the wall tapestries, the broken pinnacles of the palace towers seen through the window in the far background. It was a world where everything other than her was subject to change and decay. Only she was unchanging. Only she was forever.

'Then my task here is done. I am free to leave now?' He looked at her, half in hope, half in dread.

'I had thought to keep you here with me as an new diversion to replace poor Mariato.' She looked at him, trying to gauge his reaction, toying with him yet again.

'But, no, you would make a poor vampire, master Gottio,' she reassured him, relishing one last taste of his fear. 'There is something in our nature that destroys any creative ability we may have had in our mortal lives, and I would not deny the world the great works still within you. So, yes, you are free to go.'

'And my reward?'

She gestured towards a small open casket nearby. Giovanni glanced at it, silently toting up the value of the gold and precious stones it contained and coming to a figure comparable with a minor merchant prince's ransom. When he looked back, she was holding a goblet of wine out to him.

'What is it?' he asked, suspecting one final cruel jest.

'A little wine mixed with a sleeping draught, the same one that Mariato tried to lull you with. Call it a final precaution, for your own safety. When you awaken, you will be safe and in familiar surroundings, I promise you. I could compel you to drink it, but this way is easier.'

He took it, raising it to his lips and drinking. She watched him intently as he did so. The wine was excellent, as he expected, but mixed in with it, the taste of something else, not any kind of potion or sleeping draught. Something dark and rich, something that rose up to overwhelm his senses.

'An extra gift,' she said, seeing the reaction in his eyes. 'With your painting, you have given me a part of yourself. It only seemed fair that I give you something equally valuable in return. Farewell, little mortal, I look forward to seeing what uses you will put my gift to.'

She reached out with preternatural reflexes to catch him as he fell, as the darkness rushed in to envelop his numbed senses...

HE AWOKE IN blinding daylight, crying out in pain as the unaccustomed sunlight stabbed into his eyes. When he recovered, he realised that he was in the pauper's attic garret he called home. The precious casket lay on the floor beside him.

It took him several hours to realise the nature of the additional gift she had given him.

He sat inspecting his reflection in the small cracked looking glass he had finally managed to find amongst the jumble of his possessions. Days ago he had been a haggard wreck, now there was not a trace of the ordeal left upon him, none of the exhaustion of the last few weeks. He looked and felt better than he had in years. In fact...

Shallya's mercy, he thought, studying the reflection of his face in the mirror. I look ten years younger! He thought of certain legends about her kind, about the gifts they granted to their loyal mortal servants and about the restorative powers of...

Of vampire blood. Only the smallest portion, but he could feel it flowing in his veins, feel her inside him. Her life-force added to his own. Had she done this with the others, he wondered, and then he remembered that the da Venzio had been reputed to have lived to over a century in age - blessed by the mercy goddess, they said, in reward for the work he had done in her great temple in Remas - and of how Bardovo had lived long enough to paint not just the portrait of the Marco Columbo but also that of the legendary explorer's merchant prince great-grandson.

He wondered how long he, Giovanni Gottio, had, and about how he would put his time to best use.

He looked around his squalid attic, seeing only the detritus of his former miserable life: smashed wine bottles and pieces of cheap parchment torn up in anger and thrown in crumpled balls across the room. He picked one up, smoothing it out and recognising it as the abandoned portrait sketch of a local tavern girl. The workmanship was poor and he could see why he had so quickly abandoned the piece, but looking at it with fresh vision he could see possibilities in its line and form that had not been there to him before.

He found his drawing board and pinned the parchment to it, sitting looking at it in quiet contemplation. After a while, he searched amongst the debris on the floor and found the broken end of a charcoal pencil.

And with it, he began to draw.



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